

Writer's Life

IF NOT ME? WHO?

IF NOT NOW? WHEN?

SUSANNE GERVAY's parents were refugees who escaped from war, communism and terrorism in Hungary. They hoped to be accepted by a democratic country. Australia offered them a new home. Susanne's life has been very difficult at times but enormously rewarding. Her writing has collected a plethora of awards and her enormous contribution to the literary landscape saw her awarded an OAM for services to children's literature. As she is facing a recovery from surgery Susanne shares with us some of her life's and writing journey.

At the World Holocaust Forum Prince Charles said 'The lessons of the Holocaust are searingly relevant to this day. (Over) 75 years after the Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, hatred and intolerance still lurk in the human heart, still tell new lies, adopt new disguises, and still seek new victims.'

I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp in Poland, just before COVID changed the world. At its entrance, I walked under the terrifying sign 'Arbeit Macht Frei', which translates to 'work sets you free'. Over 1.1 million women, men and children were killed there. My grandmother and family died in this place of horror. The last remnants of humanity are the thousands of shoes. It left me with a burning memory. Shoes are at the heart of *Heroes of the Secret Underground*, a novel that I have been writing all my life. I just didn't know it. I do now. *Heroes of the Secret Underground* is dedicated to my parents. Today, it is dedicated to Ukraine. It shares the deepest part of my life, within the context of global justice.

I was honoured when two of our most respected international authors and Laureates, Ursula Dubosarsky and Jackie French, endorsed *Heroes of the Secret Underground*. Ursula wrote that it is 'a story of light and love and exceptional courage.' Jackie said, 'Impossible to stop reading.'

I was born after the war, but the inhumanity of the past lives with me, then and always. My parents taught me that whatever evils beset us, we must keep our belief in the heroes of humankind. We must be courageous and stand for right. That is the ethos underlying all of my writing. So, I know now, why I write:

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Writing has become an erratic compulsion. It can be a great joy at times. I read a piece and wonder how I wrote it. Are they truly my words? Those are the good times. But there are bad times. My mind is a block. I have no ideas or ways to go forward. Why am I a writer at all? I hate the lows. But the highs are addictive, exhilarating, wildly euphoric. The passages I write change my DNA. They push me to find the answers to existence, like in *The Edge of Limits*.

'A shadow makes me look up curiously. A hawk glides in the air currents before disappearing between mountains. Wish I was a hawk or an eagle. They don't have to climb the Chimney to see the world. I look down at everyone from my boulder. It's a strange feeling. We're like ants on a tiny mountain top, with all those monumental gullies and landscapes behind. How long would it have taken rivers to cut away those mountains? Millions and millions of years. There is this life here and it's not us. Eagles, wallabies, echidnas, possums, spiders ... and bush. Amazing bush. Aborigines wandered through this landscape. But this is more than them, more than human beings. It just is. I don't get why we matter, why I matter. Why I feel important sometimes and at other times, like nothing. I don't understand why we feel so much and do what we do. Grandpa said we're part of it

and that's why. God's plan. I try not to think of the big picture because I get lost. I try to understand the little picture so that I can find my way.'

Nothing is taboo now. You'll find me planting 3000 mangroves in Kiribati with students and revealing story to teachers; in Istanbul speaking to 1000s of kids about NO bullying; in remote indigenous schools bringing literacy to kids; in a juvenile detention centre sharing books with girls who deserve a future; from pre-schoolers to young adults across Australia and internationally.

Despite rejections of my 'I Am Jack' books, I held onto the belief in them. Many criticised me for using my son Jamie's (also known as Jack) in the story. My amazing son who was bullied at school, said 'It will help kids. Parents. Teachers too. Do it.' I receive emails and letters for JACK all the time.

Eleven-year-old Lowana wrote to me. 'I am writing about a current book I have bought and read, *I am Jack*. I get bullied at school almost every day and it makes me sick. I just didn't feel like going to school. I pretended to be sick and stay home for the day. I've talked to the School Counsellor, I've tried to tell my mum, I've thought of getting back at the bullies, but all these things don't seem to work. But *I am Jack* inspired me to tell everyone that I am being bullied. It makes me feel great and today I treated my mother with respect (I wasn't doing that).'

A teacher, Rita, wrote to me, 'The cemetery scene really resonated with Maisam as both his parents died in Afghanistan. He is comforted by the thought that they are watching over him and that he can talk to them at any time, just like Nanna and Jack do with Grandad.'

Bullying is deeply personal. My parents were refugees who went through war, communism, the ultimate in power abuse. They were targets, bullied, not registering as human. We know about the Cambodian Killing Fields, Armenian genocide, Rwandan genocide, the Holocaust.

How can we comprehend these huge atrocities? These stories of victimisation are too foreign, make us turn away as we go about our lives. But there's a way to relate, to engage, to get under the skin of everyone. It's through the small stories of ordinary lives. My son was one of those small stories.

I'm a great fighter for truth. I tackle feminism in *Shadows of Olive Trees*; war and peace in *Heroes of the Secret Underground*; disability in *Butterflies*; consent in *The Edge of Limits*. In my picture books, I share the great philosophies with young people.

Writing what matters, can change perceptions and who we are. I wanted to write a story where disability is part of the fabric of life, but not life itself. With my book *Butterflies* I decided my character, Katherine, would be burnt but never be a one-dimensional stereotype. Katherine would be complex like all human beings with a real family, background and personality that would reach from the page into the lives of readers. Katherine's life would show that disability does not separate burn survivors from the community but unites them in the common bond of humanity. I cried when I read the endorsement from The Children's Hospital when Dr Hugh Martin OAM wrote, 'Like tempering steel, the process of passing through the fire helps make a person of exceptional quality.'

Recently my world came crashing down. I was diagnosed with a brain tumour. I thought – no-more – three breast cancers, staph infection with a pic in the heart for three months, massive pelvic tumour, anaphylaxis many times, rheumatoid arthritis, endless catastrophes. This has been my life since I was two. I can't have a brain tumour.

My father was diagnosed with a brain tumour at 67. He was left crippled, confused, with aphasia and the inability to communicate. It was like a lobotomy. I was inconsolable at his funeral. My heart broke. My father is in so much that I write. How could I go on?

Just before the operation, I asked that no-one send flowers. Instead, I invited donations to the Ukraine. This was my last act of altruism. Well, I hope it was not that. The donations generously came from Australia, Europe, USA, UK and more. I was ready for the operation.

Brain surgery was traumatic. Waking up in the Intensive Care Unit, with a nose tube, aphasia, stroke, head swollen, black eyes, inability to function was totally frightening. I couldn't speak or read or write. That's when the incredible support of so many people from Australia and across the globe comforted me. My children, the creative, reading, teaching, literature community

and advocates sent thousands and thousands of messages, which were shared and shared and shared.

My brain tumour has slowed me down, but I am not out. The incredible love by so many, is willing me to get better. I continue on my mission. IF NOT ME? WHO? IF NOT NOW? WHEN?

You can find out more about Susanne Gervay OAM and her books on our website or visit at <https://sgervay.com> Article in Good Reading Magazine.