“Telling the Migrant Story”

Northam Multicultural Arts Festival

Venue: TAFE College Hutt St Northam

Global Room

9am – 13.00pm

Sunday 27 October 2024

The Northam Army Camp Heritage Association (NACHA) in collaboration with the WA Migrant Research Network (MRN) and Tracs at Edith Cowan University (ECU) are proud to present the inaugural ‘Migration Writers, Readers & Digital Storytelling Literary Festival, as part of the Northam Multicultural Festival on Sunday 27 October 2024.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The proposed venue for this event, the TAFE College, Hutt Street Northam is poignant. Located on the site of the former Military hospital, it has a reputation of providing innovative treatments, for the many severely injured Australian troops from conflict zones in the Asia Pacific Region during WWII. However, in 1948, it was hastily refurbished to become the Department of Immigration Holden Immigration Reception Centre. Its first residents were displaced persons disembarked from the *MS Mozaffari* ship directed to prepare the Northam Army Camp (NAC) to receive batches of Displaced Persons starting in August 1949 until 1954. Having to conform to the principles of the 1937 Assimilation Policy conceptualised to Britainise Aboriginal Australians, thus –abandon your culture and language– their stories are hardly known. It was then extended to “new” Australians including Displaced Persons (DPs). What better way to tell any story of migration than a writers and readers festival!

The popularity and diversity of writers’ festivals is growing around the world because they bring us together to address vital questions. Perth hosts a writer’s festival as an annual event during the Perth Festival in February. It attracts a diversity of writers. The proposed Northam writers and readers festival is set to attract contemporary Western Australian writers and reader to a new philosophical and actual place where they can share ideas about poignant personal, family, community, national and international issues around forced and voluntary diaspora and its long-term (inter)generational impact on individuals and communities in home and host-lands. Kel Butler (**Write4Festival**) notes how,

“Writing festivals are a reflection on where our country is at any given moment. They put a megaphone to the national and global social issues that our governments are either creating, exacerbating or ignoring completely. They provide a safe space for those effected and marginalised by the masses. A space to speak freely and offer an alternative experience of the world, in the hope it may trigger the right kind of empathy in enough people, to create real, systemic change towards greater global security.”

As migrant crises unfold all over the world, it is critical that we understand the impact of geopolitical upheavals from the perspective of the people whose lives they disrupt and that we understand their diverse histories.

We have invited our established, lauded and emerging writers of migrant issues to present their perspective, on the plight of refugees, and the need for compassion in our volatile world. These are an integral part of the important cultural and political conversations we should be having. But they are conversations everyone should be hearing not just the creatives amongst us.”[[2]](#endnote-2) While we hope to attract a broad base of presenters and readers, we hope also to attract listeners with a range of perspectives to contribute to panels, book discussions that deconstruct subjects like race, equality, gender, sexuality, colonialism and the treatment of First Nations Australians. Thus, one panel discussion we intend to have is how to bridge the gap between attracting only like-minded people to more general audiences struggling with issues and wanting to hear various perspectives on contentious topics such as the wars, revolutions, violence, that engender large population shifts in our past and present world.

In acknowledging the emotions of the past, preserving the present and imagining the future our writer’s festival seeks to provide a vital space for community and critical discussion on the issues that matter to us most. To raise awareness of the lens through which judgements are made; how we ‘other’ newcomers in our midst and how words shape our worlds. Our authors will expose the power of storytelling and ideas that embrace and understand that the future is in the hands of the present, which we look at with open eyes and a sense of joy and hope.[[3]](#endnote-3)

As Anthony Lowenstein, writing about the Byron Bay writers’ festival notes, “the strength of any cultural institution is its willingness to build an audience, make them feel at home, provoke them, and bring them enjoyment. Reflecting on the politics of the time is surely a pre-requisite for remaining relevant and topical, and yet there often remains a curious lack of diverse voices arguing over the issues of the day.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

     An additional aim of the inaugural literary festival event is to relaunch the WA Migration Research Network and introduce our audience to the varied approaches possible of telling the migration story: books, children’s books (general public and academic), short stories, poetry, artworks, digital/documentary style, exhibitions, podcast, music, and standup comedy. We will have a panel discussion on the various methods and seek the audience participation about their response to these methods and why they considered effective.

  Our inaugural/pilot festival panellists will include known and established and award-winning authors, digital storytellers, artists, poets, curators and comedians. My aim is to invite 6 presenters from the various genres noted above to elaborate on their way of telling the migration story.

The program would include a 15-minute introduction to launch the WA MRN, 25 minutes for each presenter, a 15-minute break for morning tea and 30-minute audience question time.

**PROPOSED PROGRAM**

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| name | Affiliation & awards | Ways of telling the migrant story |
| Loretta  Baldassar  Distinguished Professor ECU | NSW Premier’s Literary Award | MC and Chair |
| Matt Dyktynski | Comedian, actor (NIDA), radio announcer father was a Polish DP at Northam Army Camp. | Standup Comedy |
| Susanna Iulliano | WA Premier’s Literary Award (book). | Italian migration story |
| Verena Thomas | Beth’s story | Digital storytelling  (indigenous) |
|  | MORNING TEA |  |
| Lesa Melnyczuk | International book award | Children’s migration stories books (Ukrainian) DP Northam Army Camp |
| Manonita Gosh (ECU)  Simone Marino (ECU) | Music and migrant health | Telling the multicultural migration story  via  music |
| Nonja Peters  ECU | Displaced Persons Stories  Shorted-listed Premier’s literary awards WA, NSW & QLD (ECU) | Museum exhibitions  Dutch, Displaced Persons, Italians, Vietnamese, Greeks. |

1. <https://annafeatherstone.com/writing-resources/list-of-australian-writers-festivals-2024/>: What Writers Festivals are on in Australia in 2024? Bookmark this page for a list of some of the writers’ festivals bringing authors, readers, book lovers, the writing community and the publishing industry together. There are a huge number of literary festivals and events in the first half of the year, and less so in the second, so start planning now. Will update dates as they come to hand for 2024. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.writes4women.com/blog/the-true-power-of-writing-festivals [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://power-of-storytelling.com/storytelling-quotes/ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/07/writers-festivals-are-a-place-to-connect-during-a-time-of-global-insecurity [↑](#endnote-ref-4)