I started writing simply for the pleasure of writing. I love words. I love the rhythms that can be created in sentences or making words into music which Amis Oz speaks about in his new novel, The Same Sea.

I grew up with stories from my family, especially those told by my grandmother. When I was a child I spent a lot of time with her and she remained very important to me throughout my life. I would like to think she was the greatest influence on my life. She had stories to explain everything—who we are, who each of us were, and the place on our traditional country that was very deep and special to her. She was our memory. She was what not forgetting was all about. It was through her that I learnt to imagine. Imagine what had been stolen from us. I also learnt from the images she gave us of our country.

The other thing she had encouraged me to do was to listen. I also learnt how to be silent through all of the times we walked around the bush together. Also, to be silent when other people spoke and told stories at night. I probably asked questions, I don't remember, however, I do remember I spent a lot of time imagining what I had been told. This is how I went off to bed at night.

I also learnt to imagine the facts about our family. There were things that happened in our family when the white cattle men came to our traditional lands that were never explained. We in fact have a saying in our family—Don't tell anybody. So I learnt to imagine the things that were never explained to me—the haunting memories of the impossible and frightening silence of family members. Throughout my life, I have learnt how to piece the mysteries together with gathered facts from historical records that have been revealed through anthropological, historical and family research. I can only now feel I can tell the story of our family revealing the voices of loved ones who never, ever told a story that they felt was too shameful to tell.

When I was in my early twenties I was dragged into working for our political movements in Mount Isa and throughout north west Queens-
land, including the Gulf of Carpentaria. I lived on Mornington Island for a year when the Queensland government, under Bjelke Petersen, wanted the state to control the island when the Uniting Church mission withdrew and the Lardil people wanted self determination and worked against the government. I acted as the Aboriginal legal service rep on Mornington Island through that crisis. Things went on from there and I am still involved in campaigns for our rights. I am indebted to the generous spirit and dignity of the men and women of great wisdom and knowledge who were our guides and taught us the art of patience. In a way they gave me the tool of writing.

In most of my early work in Aboriginal organisations I was simply thrown into the deep end and it was either sink or swim. This is where I got the gift of learning and an education I never received as a child in the backwaters of small town bigotry, and stereotyping Aboriginal children to become failures right from the moment we first walked into the classroom.

When I finally decided I wanted to become a writer, I studied media studies and creative writing at RMIT in Melbourne.

I also read. I already had a solid background in reading, firstly through my work from the late sixties onwards. I read the Rowleys, Colin Tatzs, Berndts, Lorna Lippman, Big Bill Neidjie’s *Story About Feeling*, Kevin Gilbert’s *Because A Whiteman’ll Never Do It*, and dozens of other writings over the 1970s through to the present time like constitutional issues, issues of racism—you name it, I have probably read it. I read these books because I believed they would help me to understand the issues better, to help define myself, the concerns and what should be our concerns in my own traditional areas in the Gulf. All of my work in Central Australia, particularly while co-ordinating the constitutional conventions of 1993 in Tennant Creek and in 1998 in Kalkaringi, required a ton of reading and trying to give that knowledge in very layman’s terms to other people.

Over the last twenty years I have also read the literature of Indigenous writers of other countries. I read Keri Hulme the Maori writer, South American writers and poets—Fuentes, Marquez. Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan writer, Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, Mexican poet Octavio Paz, Salman Rushie the Indian writer. I read Irish writers, African writers, Gunter Grass the German writer. Holocaust writer Elie Wiesel, Black American writers such as Ralph Ellingson’s *Invisible Man*, James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker. Amis Oz, the Israeli writer, the
Martinique writer Frantz Fanon’s work on black identity and many others. I wanted somebody to speak to me because I could not find the words I was searching for in Australian literature.

I was interested in how other people survived horror, who lived in horror and wrote about themselves. Carlo Fuentes called it “Wrestling words from silence and ideas from obscurity”. I was mostly interested in people with ancient ties with their land, Indigenous peoples of other countries, people who had been colonised, people who had suffered at the hands of other people. I wanted to know how you could write about our lives, our lands, and the agelessness of our culture.

I once saw Eduardo Galeano speak in Australia. I was absolutely amazed as I had never seen anyone speak about his country with so much passion and love and with the absolute knowing how he was connected in the long history of his land. He was an inspiration. He wrote the trilogy of fire, a history of the Americas from the beginning of time. Yet he did not call himself a historian or any other kind of academic. What he looked for in all of his research for writing the trilogy, was what makes a people. He told a story of how he had ploughed through the work of an anthropologist who had spent twenty years living in the jungle with a group of people who had become extinct. He said there were volumes and volumes to read of this man’s writings but in all of it, he found only two lines that told him who those people really were.

By the time I had come to making the decision to write a novel in the 1990s, I guess it was at a time of deep inner personal crisis I was experiencing about everything I had ever believed in about our rights as people. I was questioning the failures of our hopes for just about everything we fought for. Every idea and goal was overtaken by others. Governments found new ways of making our lives harder. We did not seem to gel as a political movement at either the national, state or regional level. As individuals, as communities, as peoples with Indigenous rights, everything we did to accomplish anything seems to be a meaningless exercise because the force of ingrained, inherited racism stood against us.

I wrote Plains of Promise to deal with my inner crisis and loneliness of the soul. Writing was a way of consoling myself in this crisis of the mind to the very real threat we were facing as Waanyi people. I had hoped to achieve some recognition for our land. I was interested in the notion of what it meant to be ostracised. Over many years in my work, I had seen people who had been on the outside of life, not only from
mainstream society but within Aboriginal society as well. Nobody knew their story. These are the people who don’t talk and are treated like they don’t exist. I was concerned about how this could happen and what it meant to be a person who falls outside of life. In a way the story wrote itself and as much as it is a story about the main characters, it is a story about land and the powers that tie people to land.

I wanted other people to see this. I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth—not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell. In being an Aboriginal person, we can feel constrained by cultural values on some issues. We can also feel constrained by our own families or the communities in which we live. This is to do with safeguarding all kinds of interests of the individual, the family, community, or Aboriginal people as a whole—and sometimes, rightly so. I have protected my family’s interest. I also know we as a family have suffered through each successive generation from the things that happened in the past which our families will not talk about. I call this the massacre of our voices which continues to this day. We have thousands of people who have no voice at all in today’s Australia. I wonder how we are going to heal ourselves if we cannot speak about the pain of who we are?

I may be wrong, but for all of these constraints, and libel laws, I use literature to try and create a truer replica of reality. (I faced constraints writing Grog War with licencees and community fears of retaliation, and in the writing of Carpentaria.) I don’t want to be balanced. I am not an academic.

To me, fiction penetrates more than the surface layers, and probes deep into the inner workings of reality. I also believe all life is sacred and this belief is the ethical responsibility I wanted to uphold foremost as a writer who had anything worthwhile to say to the world. With these thoughts in mind, I felt fiction would allow me to create some kind of testament, not the actual truth, but a good portrayal of truth which I see, and that is the living hell of the lives of many Aboriginal people.

Literature is a very good tool for speaking out about the pain of humanity for Aboriginal people in this country. Literature gets to the very personal. It invites the reader to fully experience our stories—the living hell—in a way that is real. So I think, to me, there are many truths and ways of writing the truth. This is what I believe humanity is all about.

In writing my novel, Plains of Promise, and again in writing my new novel Carpentaria, I have asked for help from my own people to
protect their interests in my writing. I tell them what I am capable of, and what I am not able to do because of my limitations to do non-fictional work. I am pleased that people in the Gulf have read the novel when I sent it home. I only really care about their concerns when I am writing. I talk to people from home and they help me to see many things I would not even be able to dream about.

Recently I read a speech by the French Algerian writer Albert Camus, whose work I truly love. I wanted some reaffirmation of the reason why I write, having felt I had lost my way a bit with my new work, as I have been the only judge of it for the past few years, and because of this I was questioning my reason to write. Albert Camus said this of himself: he was a writer who was only rich in doubt. This I can understand. He said the two reasons for being a writer are one, refusing to lie about what one knows, and two, refusing to lie about the existence of oppression. This just about sums up the reasons why I write. Solzhenitsyn believed he had a duty to write for all those who would never be heard—an obligation to the people who did not survive, and because he believed that writers and artists could conquer falsehoods. He thought that literature could succeed in imprinting upon a bigoted, stubborn human creature the distant joy and grief of others.

Another great writer, Günter Grass said, a writer is someone who writes against the currents of time. We too have had history and must write against the currents of our times. For example, who in Australia wants to read our sad stories when we now have academics writing that the cause of our disadvantage is our own culture and traditions? We have a total colonial history of genocidal acts which spurs on our desperate need to write to give this country a memory. I have recently read essays written by the right wing of Australia, the John Howard and Pauline Hansen supporters, who dispute the intensity of the acts of past atrocities against our people.

In the conversation Australia is having with itself at the moment, again with the exclusion of the work or voice of Aboriginal people, they have invented new words to attack our culture and traditional roots, to excuse racism in a pathetic attempt to strangle Aboriginal concerns in this country. Their words are being spread through the mass media to describe us. Our communities are called socio-pathic ruins, caused by a “culture cult”, created by a designer tribalism of romantic primitivism. Yet, strangely absent from this barrage of words describing what is happening in our lives, and how we are to be blamed for it, there is no mention about the failure of State and Terri-
tory governments, in particular, to carry out their responsibilities to deliver adequate essential services to Aboriginal communities in 25 years of the policy of Aboriginal self determination.

All kinds of excuses are being made to forget Aboriginal history and not only that, to insist that Aboriginal history does not exist. For example, I have read major essays in the Australian newspapers that Henry Reynolds diddled the figures on the numbers of people killed in the massacres. Another major essay insists that the treatment of Aboriginal people on pastoral properties was not so bad. So nobody needs to worry. Racism is strong in this country, make no mistake about it. And it will remain that way as long as it promotes the notion that there can be only one Australia. This country too, just as did Germany after the war, wants to forget the past, scrub it from the history books. Or, taking another example, just like Stalin did in Russia when he masterminded the killing of millions, and was so powerful he could, at will, arbitrate the removal of a person’s existence from the face of the planet.

I see similar processes happening today where words are being used as weapons to flog Aboriginal people—words like “practical reconciliation”, “mutual responsibility”, “incremental improvement”, “assimilation”—in the denial of Indigenous rights, denial of history, and decades of denial of essential services for our communities. All of these actions convert into cutting the wound deeper in the present day wretched reality of the lives of our people, which translates into a continuation of the massacre of Aboriginal people by ensuring that they continue living unhealthy, sad and degraded lives, and go to an early grave.

This is the price we pay for being un-Australian, for wanting recognition of words like multi-culturalism, stolen generations, treaties, Aboriginal government, Aboriginal sovereignty, Aboriginal self determination. So let’s look at the word “sovereignty”. What law gives the right of sovereignty to Australia? There is no legal agreement with the Indigenous people of this country. What is more, how valid is sovereignty if Australian governments do not govern, or do not govern well, for Indigenous people?

These are the problems of unresolved guilt and debt. The debt is huge. Sometimes I feel that forgiveness is almost unimaginable. There is no healing road of reconciliation for many thousands of Aboriginal people. How can there be? The Indigenous people of this country are still on the road of genocide at the hands of Australian governments. So who in this country should speak loudest about sovereignty?
Where are the voices of Aboriginal people demanding that Australia gives up its claims of sovereignty because they are undeserving to call themselves a nation state? We all need to listen well, for the voices of Australia that speak, the voices that should speak softly, have no qualms in telling us to give up our culture and assimilate—assimilate to western values or liberal values of a globally distributed type of industrialised democratic society regardless of the appearance and ethnic origins of its members.

Soon we will have new words to deal with, such as “rethinking culture”, “cultural redevelopment”, and “cultural self-reassessment”. These are the words being invented by anthropologists looking for a new, lucrative home in future government policy which will suit the new, global Australia which is looking to blame the victim in the ways that we socialise and organise our culture, and to excuse lack of responsibility for the distress of dispossession, oppression and poverty of Aboriginal peoples.

I would like to know what gives Australians the right to dictate that we should assimilate when all they have done is stolen our lands and lorded over Aboriginal suffering in either full intent or total ignorance—both sinister because everyone knows the results. Are these the type of people Aboriginal people need to become?

This week I heard on the news that Aboriginal health is worse than ever even though there is supposed to be more spending on our health. In the Northern Territory, the hospital in Darwin, in the same news report, quoted extraordinarily high statistics of Aboriginal children being in hospital with diseases that could be avoided, and high rates of malnutrition and dehydration. Do you know what the Northern Territory government has decided to do in response to this report? They decided to implement more maternal care programs and some other piecemeal solutions to throw at our enormous tragedy of trans-generational poverty, neglect and dispossession. I wonder, as a writer, what words I could use to speak of the wretchedness of their lives and communities, to speak for the people who have died needlessly because of this ongoing tragedy, and for the countless others more deserving than me. Could it be sufficient to call civilised Australia evil for ignoring the plight of the Indigenous future of this country?

Nor do we need ignorance finding solutions for us. We often speak about our own solutions but it is hard to be heard when your rights are not recognised. And yet even though it is very difficult, because of the problems we have to face on a daily basis, we still have the will
and the strength to develop our communities and lands. In Northern Australia, we have Aboriginal people who are involved in dozens of land use agreements and commercial developments on their lands. We have thousands of people fighting for the survival of their traditions, lands and communities. We have hope in the pockets of people who are carving out a real future for their groups. It gives us hope when even the loudest opponents of the closing of the climb on Uluru, when a very senior traditional owner passed away, were made to look stupid by most other people, if not Australians, but visitors from overseas who knew how to respect another's culture.

It is imperative that we must be given the space to be able to look squarely at our situation with all of our concerns put on the table of our decision makers. The decision makers I am talking about are the Aboriginal communities themselves, in their own chosen groups, the people who actually live there and know what they are talking about.

Aboriginal people need the space free from the struggle of bare existence to be able to fully examine their own lives, that of their homelands, and the lives of their children to plan what will or won't make our places viable to live on in the future. We need to examine what is under every rock.

We need to take stock of all our times, past, present, and the options we see for the future. Like any other culture in the world, we need to be able to take everything into account about ourselves, and to be able to plan for the future, and to be able to evolve in the way that we think is proper and viable for our particular family, clan, community or Aboriginal nation.

This means, if we are to be able to heal ourselves of the colonial past and the failure of government policies, or free ourselves from being the fierce protectors of the small gains we have made in terms of our rights, we must become the gatekeepers of what is flowing in and out of our communities. This is the full meaning of the right of self determination and self management. Treaty arrangements and constitutional inclusions which will safeguard our rights will help us all to move forward.

Amis Oz, Israel's most celebrated modern novelist, in the 1970s, raised many questions about the achievements of the aspirations of Zionism after three or four generations of the Jewish people in Israel. However, he has said some things which are of relevance here, although we, as Aboriginal people stand on our land as an unparalleled ancient right. Oz said, not only did Zionism achieve territory and a defence system, but something else: We have achieved a greater
degree of responsibility for our own fate, and we have begun the process of curing the Jewish sickness. These aspirations of self determination are our aims, alongside our rights agenda, and the truth is, if we cannot start to work these things out for ourselves, many of our communities and their cultures will not evolve in the future but will die.

So our history spurs me to write, just as much as our present day realities. I am grateful that I can pick up the pen and use it when so many of our people cannot because the education systems of Australian governments continue to fail them. I want to use the pen to the best of my ability for the mob where, everyday, we continue to lose too many people to the grave with our histories. We sit in hospitals watching our cultural knowledge sliding away from us, which the rest of Australia are glad to see buried, while they hurry to the beach with their light-hearted reading, about similar lives to themselves. Books that say nothing are taught in schools in a dulling down exercise, teaching children not how to think, but what to think. It is no wonder outdated politicians and their political structures can continue to control the country. Someone said to me the other day that ignorance is the weapon used now to kill Aboriginal people, instead of guns.

What I read into the criticisms and avoidance of Aboriginal literary works is that Australians still prefer to distance other peoples’ misfortunes from themselves to places on the other side of the world—to India, Pakistan, Russia, Istanbul, China, or early European development—to elsewhere, anywhere except at home in Australia today, where our books will force them to see what they have refused to see in two hundred years: the very existence of Aboriginal people. This is the core of the problem about guilt. They refuse to be implicated.

In my eyes, most Australians are not interested that we are fighting a war just for our very survival. Or that we have become the fierce defenders of what seems to me to be a losing battle just to maintain minimal standards in every Aboriginal community across Australia. If the rest of Australia were really interested, then real change would already be happening.

To me, writing is like taking the snake out of the hole. The snake that has killed, maimed and stolen. The snake that still lives down his burrow and will not come out and account for what he has done because he is too busy thinking of new, more sneaky ways to kill. Writing is about crawling down the hole to see what we have all inherited. It is about dragging our memories, realities and losses back up to the surface and letting the whole world see them in the full,
glaring light of day. This is what Günter Grass also said is the reason for writers such as himself who grew out of Nazi Germany. He said, our work will become memory, preventing the past from coming to an end. For only then can the wound be kept open and the much desired and prescribed forgetting be reversed with a steadfast telling of the truth which begins with the words “Once upon a time”.

Or, as Eduardo Galeano said in describing the use of Latin American literature: “I think that a primordial function of Latin American literature today is the rescue of the word, frequently used and abused with impunity for the purpose of hampering and betraying communication”. He was speaking about how the dominant society creates a consumption of fantasy in the mass media with the use of words like “freedom”, “democracy”, “love”, “glory”, “happiness”, or “a peaceful country”. Illusions of wealth are sold to the poor, illusions of freedom to the oppressed, dreams of victory to the defeated and of power to the weak. Think about how these words and others are used in this country to deny, squash and destroy the relevance of our real voice. The huge promotion of Roger Sandall’s Culture Cult throughout the mass media, is a damning indictment of this kind of betrayal, of muddying the waters of communication. The role of Aboriginal writers is to put the true name to the testimonies and times of our people with our use of language, our visions, our imaginations, our facts. Or, as Galeano had put it so well, in the words of the poet, “The true name of all things.”

When I write fictional books I am only dealing with myself as the sole reader of my work. I do not think of other people as readers of my book outside of my own community. As I already said, it is very important to me that my community accepts my work. Even so, in the back of my mind, there are other main goals of being a writer, particularly as an Aboriginal writer, such as the goal of publication, and as many people as possible reading your work. The ambition I have for my work is to be published, to be read in Australia, to be read overseas. For the whole world to read it.

In all of my fictional writing I want to conjure up my homeland. I want to explore the gift of our true inheritances by disallowing memories of times passed to sink into oblivion. I am interested in the reality of our social, political, economic and cultural position in today’s Australia as a consequence of the continuing invasion and our ongoing war against genocide. However, I am also interested in our lives before the invasion, our culture in spite of the invasion, and I’m searching for the corners of the soul where joy can be found.
All times are important to us. No time has ended and all worlds are possible. All of this means that in my work, I like to examine different circumstances—the what ifs. I like to go down all fields—centre, right and left. The world I try to inhabit in my writing is like looking at the ancestral tracks spanning our traditional country which, if I look at the land, combines all stories, all realities from the ancient to the new, and makes it one—like all the strands in a long rope. Our stories are like the music which feeds the soul and the heart, which sometimes flies above the bitterness of pure logic and rational thought and soars like an eagle, as a friend of mine would say, above the turkeys below.

I also think that it is an obsession of the writer to search every layer with the space for being open minded about what you find hidden in your mind.

I have particularly tried to achieve all of these beliefs in Carpentaria, my new novel. In my work I like to take the voice of the people, not an Aboriginal political or community leader, chairman of the council. The most interesting voice to me is the voice I have to search for. The voice that is silent or elusive. You may only hear this voice sometimes, and sometimes you have to travel all day and night to find the voices for your work. These are the characters I am interested in writing into a novel, because this to me is the true face of where we are. Or, the pulse—as we say in the Gulf of Carpentaria—the pulse of our heartbeat.

I want to know how this person sees the world in which he or she is living. So, I am not saying this is this, and that is that when I write. I try to balance up my characters with the good the bad and the ugly, which is the make-up of all human beings. If you are down to thinking that there is total chaos in mankind, in all of the things you see happening around you (as I often am), then as Albert Camus said, when you are examining this chaos, you may as well examine the chaos in yourself. And I guess what I find in myself and others is fear for our hopes.

But in the end—and you must keep the end in mind when you are writing—I have to remember the power of words. Our words are weapons too. Our books are time bombs and already are breaking down many barriers on their way across the world. It is just like Solzhenitsyn said: “Falsehood can hold out against much in this world, but not against art—the art of literature”. All we have to do is wait for a delayed reaction. We only have to wait and one day we will see change. This is the hope of writing. Believing the unbelievable.

This paper was originally given as an address at Message Sticks, Sydney Opera House, May, 2001.
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