



PERTH WRITERS FESTIVAL

The Perth Writers Festival is on at the University of Western Australia from Saturday, February 28, to Monday, March 2. For information on events, head to perthfestival.com.au(.)

A mountain of unread books and tickets to some of the best literary events in the world: it's a bookworm's dream, and for Katherine Dorrington, program manager of the *Perth Writers Festival*, it's all part of the job.

"There are so many fantastic books that are published each year and I look at the huge amount of reading that I have to do and wonder how I can possibly get through it all. However, that's actually one of the most enjoyable parts of my job as well, so I can't complain," she says.

"I'm also incredibly lucky to be able to travel quite regularly, and often manage to see a lot of authors in action at international festivals. This is a really great way to discover new talent that might not be known in Australia."

It was at one of these overseas events – the celebrated *Hay Festival* in Wales – that Katherine came across Alan Weisman, one of the number of exciting international authors on the *Writers Festival's* eclectic program for 2009.

"Alan was an electric speaker, and really blew me away," Dorrington says. "He was discussing his book *The World Without Us*, in which he asks us to imagine what the world would be like without humans, and whether it could recover from the damage we've inflicted on it."

"The audience gave him a standing ovation and luckily after the event I had the chance to meet him and invite him to Perth this year – which he accepted!"

While Katherine says that "beautiful, inspiring fiction" is always the cornerstone of the *Writers Festival*, she attempts to produce a balanced program that caters for varying tastes and is engaged with current affairs.

"Some years there are leanings in one direction more than another and that depends on what topics are making the headlines at the time," she explains. "For example, this year we have a number of environmental discussions taking place, which is the result of new governments in both Australia and the United States."

Katherine describes the festival as a space for discussion, and has invited a number of authors whose books tackle meaty social and political issues, such as Australian writers Jane Caro and Monica Dux, who will both be discussing the state of contemporary feminism, and ex-CIA operative Robert Bauer, author of *The Devil We Know: Dealing With The New Iranian Superpower*.

"I think that a writers festival is a very real opportunity to stimulate debate and to get people talking about issues that affect them, or to enlighten them about issues that

they don't know much about but may have an interest in contributing to," Katherine explains.

Other festival highlights include Australian actor and writer Graeme Blundell presenting his memoir, *The Naked Truth: A Life In Parts*, appearances by renowned local novelist Joan London, and academic Brian Dibble discussing his biography of the late Elizabeth Jolley. Easily recognisable names such as Kate Grenville, Robert Drewe, and James McBride appear alongside less well-known writers spanning a diverse range of genres, from poetry and literary fiction, to thrillers and food writing.

According to Dorrington, this diversity amongst the visiting authors, coupled with the fact that 75 per cent of the sessions are free, is intended to present the festival as an inclusive, welcoming event, thereby encouraging anyone who loves reading to attend.

"For example, someone who is interested in travel writing can have a wide range of experiences within that genre at the festival, from hilarious stories of Elvis impersonator sightings by former *Ralph Editor* Mark Dapin, to the beautiful, polished and erudite writing of Robert Dessaix, who contemplates the very reason why we travel," she says. "They are both wonderful writers but very different in style and will appeal to different audiences."

Writers for children and young adults – including the eminent (and lately controversial) picture book author Mem Fox – also feature prominently on the program and will be showcased during the Family Day on Sunday, March 1. A new initiative at last year's festival, the Family Day includes activities such as author talks, readings, and illustration workshops, as well as a street theatre and a variety of interactive sessions.

Also returning due to popular demand is *The Moth*, a storytelling collective from New York who invite authors, actors and everyday people to their monthly events to tell a ten-minute true story drawn from their own experiences. *The Moth* will run over two nights and feature festival guests Imran Ahmad, James McBride, Alan Weisman, and Sullivan McLeod, as well as local personalities including lawyer and social page regular Patti Chong, and United Nations lawyer turned politician Melissa Parke.

"The interesting part about the show is that there are no scripts, prompts or staging, it is just the storyteller on stage connecting with the audience," Dorrington says. "It is really going back to old school campfire tales and can be quite confronting for the teller, which makes for an amazing show for the audience."

"I think this is one of those events that you'll be kicking yourself if you miss it!"

GEMMA NISBET

