

## ***Reaching Young People: Susanne Gervay OAM***

**Author Susanne Gervay's cutting edge writing takes story journeys into confronting areas. She tackles sensitive issues such as divorce, bullying, burns, male youth culture, feminism, cancer and events that have touched her, creating memorable characters and stories that transcend the page.**

Standing up for and advancing the cause of survivors has played an integral role in author Susanne Gervay's life. As the child of émigré Hungarian parents, she recalls boisterously happy family occasions, tinged with sadness, when father Zoltan's eyes would mist over as he recounted the fate of his family and friends under the Nazi and later Soviet occupation. Mother Veronka's violin playing also carried a certain wistful longing for the rich Eastern European heritage lost forever and the victims in its wake.

At secondary school, where she excelled, Susanne was always one to stand up for the underdog, and after university, she initially taught, where her role as mediator continued to develop. Gaining a Master of Education and then an M.A. in Creative Writing (UTS), Gervay began presenting papers at major literature, literacy, education and professional conferences, taking up causes which reflected her passion for social justice.

Little wonder that when she immersed herself in the literary world as a writer of books for adolescents, building upon her special interest of child growth and development, there was always an underlying message – of hope for the oppressed, the bullied, those facing challenges.

Referring to Gervay's literary style at the UTS Alumni Awards, UTS academic, editor and author Sharon Rundle said it was about "bringing the reality of growing up, loss, family relationships and meeting challenges to readers. Susanne's books provide a way in which readers gain insight and develop their own strategies for conflict resolution helping particularly young people, enabling them to make positive choices for their lives."

In short, Gervay's award-winning books have made a difference to the way children and young adolescent readers feel about themselves in times of trouble – and organizations dealing with such problems have been eager to recognize their value. *I Am Jack*, has become a core study in schools, written for her son when he was bullied, was endorsed by Life Education Australia, stating: "In the context of family and school life, *I Am Jack* sensitively explores how bullying attacks the very basis of a child's self esteem. Bullying isolates and victimises children. *I Am Jack* shows them that they are not alone and that they can win against bullying." The book continues to be used extensively in anti-bullying programs and this rite-of-passage fiction on school bullying has now successfully been adapted into a play by theatre company Monkey Baa and is now part of growing up in Australia.

Similarly *Butterflies* [2001], which explores the impact of burns on a family, was awarded Outstanding Youth Literature on Disability by IBBY, under the auspices of the United Nations, and endorsed by the Burn Unit at The New Children's Hospital Westmead and Louise Sauvage, the Sportsperson of the World for Disability. Praising the

book, which is not only about burns, but also about family, meeting challenges, fulfilling hopes and dreams, Sauvage said: “Challenges are faced by each of us every day of our life. Those ‘challenges’ are greater for some than others. *Butterflies* explores growing up and ultimately celebrates dealing with life.”

Dr Hugh Martin OAM, former President of the Australian and New Zealand Burn Association and then Head of the Burns Unit at The Children’s Hospital endorsed *Butterflies*, saying it traced the development of the personality from insecurity and relative isolation to a healthier level of self esteem... and showed how the inner person can triumph over a preoccupation with surface scars and know that basic values of commitment, caring and trust are more important than the texture of the skin.”

Dr Martin went on to state: “*Butterflies* has relevance outside the narrow circle of burn survivors and their families. It shows the ebb and flow of emotions that affect us all, particularly in the transition between childhood and adulthood, and how parenting and family life make these bearable... Those of us who are involved in the world of burns know how survivors need help from time to time, but slowly develop a depth of character and an inner strength which is rarely seen in others. Like tempering steel, the process of passing through the fire helps make a person of exceptional quality. *Butterflies* captures these subtleties for the reader, and gives a stunning insight into a difficult topic.”

Gervay was flown to New York by the New York-Presbyterian Hospital, Weill Cornell Medical College, and the New York Firefighters Burn Foundation to address the World Burn Congress an international conference that brings together more than 650 burn survivors, their families, care givers, burn care professionals, and firefighters. Kaitlin Baggott, World Burn Congress Planning Committee, New York-Presbyterian Hospital said, ‘We would love to have you as our speaker because your writing really uncovers the emotional and social difficulties that burn survivors face from the hospital throughout recovery. Our survivors need a speaker who will inspire them to maintain hope and share their own stories of survival and growth. We believe that the creative and moving descriptions of Katherine's (from ‘*Butterflies*’ by Susanne Gervay) experiences will inspire them to do just that.’

In her young adult novel, *The Cave*, Gervay ventured bravely into the world of adolescent males, exploring mateship, courage, violence set against the backdrop of youth male culture and Australian wilderness. Her cross media novel *That’s Why I Wrote This Song* which is a collaboration of music, film and prose written with her songwriter daughter Tory, is, she says, a testament to mother-daughter relationships. Set against the background of youth music in a unique combination of text and music, it has been endorsed by WAYS youth outreach.

Gervay’s writing is emotionally honest - and reveals herself – her two (now grown-up) children, divorce, being a sole parent, her refugee parents from post-war Europe and her passion for literature and heritage. This honesty has been recognised internationally through being invited to speak at conferences from Beijing, Hong Kong, Bologna Books

Fair to India. DFAT funded Susanne to speak about her books at the IASA Australian-Indian Conference earlier this year about: 'Youth Literature: A Global Strategy for Social Justice'. It has been also recognized nationally through her speaking on social justice for the Edmund Rice Centre.

Susanne Gervay achieves another literary triumph, with the publication of her companion novels by HarperCollins to *I Am Jack*. *Super Jack* addresses divorce and blended families. *Always Jack* is deeply personal having to overcome three recurrences of breast cancer. She says with deep commitment that she wanted to open pathways of hope to those touched by cancer – and she has been hugely successful - it is the first time the Cancer Council nationally and the National Breast & Ovarian Cancer Centre have endorsed youth fiction.

She tackles sensitive issues head on. "Breast cancer is not a Mum-only issue - parental illness threatens kids' security making the world scary and traumatising them and parents desperately want to reach out to their kids and reassure them, amid a community that wants to become part of the caring," she says. In reviewing the book, *The Age* praised her: "Susanne Gervay is rare in her ability to place common problems for children within the spectrum of normal family life...she makes it OK for children to talk about them." The Cancer Council recognizes that *Always Jack* as bringing warmth, humour, love, communication and healing to kids, parents, community touched by cancer.

Finally *Being Jack* addresses a key issues facing young people today, cyber bullying and inclusion in a way young people can understand and address.

The literary world recognises that Gervay writes multi level books that reach both adults and youth, thereby increasing the recognition of the importance of children's and young adult writing. She describes her passion for youth literature as "Youth books that express powerful questions including sexuality, leadership, peer group, courage, relationships, violence, religion, in a world that is increasingly volatile with terrorism, poverty, climate change. Younger readers are different to adult readers. If a book reaches them, they will read and re-read that book, testing, massaging and developing their values. Often when you ask someone what is their favourite book, it will be one read in youth - books like *To Kill A Mockingbird* and CS Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* which challenge concepts of racism, courage and leadership."

Gervay's fans are now worldwide - after *I Am Jack* achieved best seller status in Australia, it was published in USA, Bahasa, Slovenia, South Korea, Indonesia. In education and counselling fields, her books have been recognised as significant literature. *Butterflies* was awarded Outstanding Youth Literature on Disability by IBBY (under the auspices of the United Nations) and was part of an international travelling exhibition with other acclaimed works. In Australia, her books have been recognised by the Family Therapy Association for counselling, the National Coalition Against School Bullying and are part of numerous curricula programs. Her article "Butterflies: Youth Literature as a Powerful Tool in Understanding Disability" [Disability Studies Quarterly: Winter 2004]

is highly regarded and award winning *I Am Jack* has become invaluable in dealing with school bullying in classroom practice.

Beyond her persona as a novelist for young adolescents is Gervay's extensive literary influence. She is widely published in Australian literary journals and anthologies including *Quadrant, Southerly and Westerly*. Her story 'Days of Thailand' is included in the recent Picador Indian-Australian anthology *The Fear Factor, Terror Incognito* which includes the works of Sir Salman Rushdie, David Malouf, Thomas Keneally and other famous authors.

She was part of the Kiribati Pacific Calling fact finding delegation to the atoll islands with documentary film makers and leading social justice advocates including Patrick Dodson, former chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Her story, "To East Timor – with love from Australia", is Australia's contribution to a United Nations-illustrated anthology *Peace Story* that includes 22 countries, 22 authors and 22 illustrators.

With *Butterflies* recognized as Outstanding Youth Literature on Disability by the United Nations, she was flown to New York to speak at the World Burns Congress with Kim Phoc, UN Peace Ambassador and founder of the Kim Foundation for child survivors of war. Kim Phoc, a young Vietnamese girl in 1972, was the subject of the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph by Nick Ut, as she ran from a napalm blast.

The promotion of literature remains high on her agenda. Gervay is head of the Society of Children's Book writers and Illustrators Australia East and New Zealand. She was the Chair of the board of Writing NSW, is Patron of Monkey Baa Theatre, Ambassador for organisations including Room to Read, Books in Homes, Australia Day, many literacy campaigns. She has been awarded an Order of Australia, the Lifetime Social Justice Literature Award for her body of work by the International Literacy Association, University of Technology Sydney Outstanding Professional Achievement Award and The Lady Cutler Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature.

Whether she is raising the profile of Australian children's literature at the Bologna Book Fair or speaking to remote area children on Radio of the Air in Kalgoorlie, Susanne Gervay displays that same passion and determination to connect with young readers honestly. Even recurrences of breast cancer fail to dampen her spirit – in fact, they seem only to heighten her sense of urgency to spread a positive message to her young readers who identify strongly with her books, as well as to raise the consciousness of the value of youth literature. Despite battling her own demons, she always manages to fight on, determined to complete books that engage and strengthen young people of all ages. While her endless interests and pursuits would leave most others exhausted, she perseveres, never a victim herself yet always fighting for the rights of young people who may be.

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