

**Nam Le**

**2009 Prime Minister's Literary Award acceptance speech**

If you're listening to this, then right now I'm cruising at 10,000 metres above the Indian Ocean, two-thirds of the way through my 34 hour trip, and completely oblivious to the fact that I'm actually completely gobsmacked. Come to think of it, that's probably not the worst way to be gobsmacked.

I'm really not sure what to say. It seems bad maths and bad brainwork – not to mention bad manners and bad voodoo – to write a speech for an award I have no expectation of getting. So it should be stated for the record that the man standing before you now, and his many means of gentle persuasion, are to blame.

In any case, I'm tremendously sorry not to be there. There are friends there whom I miss, and people who have brought my book to its incredible luck, and readers, the whole reason of all this. A big roomful of book lovers is a rare thing—an extravagant, perhaps obsolescing thing—and I wish I were there to share in it with you. I'm sorry, most of all, to miss the company of writers I've read, admired, envied and adored for so long; it seems barely credible to see my name among theirs, and I'm conscious always of the privilege and provisionality of it.

Thank you to the government and relevant department for their support, Prime Minister Rudd and Minister Garrett for theirs, for affirming the value of literature to this country's life. It's an anodyne thing to say but maybe it needs to be said, and said again and again: that books matter, that they are the truest means of telling and showing us to ourselves, that they do a strange, unaccountable, irreplaceable work that the loose, baggy monsters of film, TV, and internet cannot. Part of that work is the faith to put readers to work: to invite readers to share an act of imagination with the work, to seek out complexities in the friction zone of consciousness and reality, to encourage readers, in that act of imaginative completion, to convince themselves that the concerns of the book in their hands are their concerns as well. This, for me, is the beginning of real community. Other media – in their unilateralism, their lowest common denominator appeal, their stimulus-gratification approach and visual-realist imperatives – are less capable of achieving such engagement.

I'd like to thank the judges, and Penguin, who chucked their weight behind a collection of unlinked short stories from an ex-lawyer. For their energy, faith, and advocacy, I'd particularly like to thank Ben Ball, Jo Rosenberg, Meredith Rose, Sally Bateman and Shelley McCuaig.

So if you really are listening to this and it isn't all some sick jetlag joke – I've got to say that I feel like a petty thief on murderers' row. Bail, Brooks, Flanagan, Goldsworthy, Laguna, London – these have long been heavy hitters in my world, writers who represent our best defence against the onslaught of the screen, writers who privilege knowledge over information, meaning over gesture, specificity over abstraction, without shying from universal assertion; writers who fuse character and milieu, looking always for nodes of common perception and experience, looking always to enact connection; writers who engage language vertically – syllable by syllable, sound by sound, who ask us to see and think and feel and act in private as well as public spheres, who reflect the news which stays news, who embrace the

necessary mess, the due measure of clarity and confusion – writers in whose company I feel honoured and proud and more than a little wary to intrude. For letting me do so, from the bottom of my ex-lawyer's heart, I thank you.