

Emerging Writers' Festival 2019 Program Launch: The Awkward Stage

The 2019 Emerging Writers' Festival launches with a night of readings. What, exactly, is an 'emerging' writer? At what point do you come out of the chrysalis?

At this special opening-night event, hear from Kat Clarke, Vidya Rajan, Sumudu Samarawickrama and Ahmed Yussuf, as they each tell us about the first time they considered themselves a writer. Hosted by the Artistic Director of the Emerging Writers' Festival, Izzy Roberts-Orr, and Program Coordinator Aisha Trambas.

Presented in partnership with the Wheeler Centre.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: We're gathered here tonight on the unseeded lands of the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge the first nations, first storytellers and traditional owners of these lands. We acknowledge that no treaty was ever signed and that sovereignty was never seeded, but this always and always will be Aboriginal land. Well may we remember we are guests here. I pay my deep respects to the elders past and present and emerging, and extend that respect to elders from communities further a field who we're privileged to learn from if we listen.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Good evening, I'm Izzy Roberts-Orr. I'm the artistic Director here at the Emerging Writers Festival. It is my pleasure to welcome you to our 2019 program launch. I kind of can't believe how quickly that came around, but it's really wonderful to be joined by you all here tonight. We have a really fantastic line up of speakers for you and I will introduce them as we go throughout the night. Before I do, I just wanted to speak a little to some of the themes that they'll be exploring tonight.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Within this event we looked back at the question of what it means to be a writer, and whether or not people feel

comfortable calling themselves one. If so, when was the moment that they thought, "Yes, I'm a writer, that's how I identify myself." I'm interested in this label because I think it's one that can sometimes be a bit ivory towered. It's not something that everyone feels comfortable calling themselves. It's not something everyone feels comfortable to claim. I guess I want us to talk through that, to interrogate the label itself a little tonight. I also want to invite everyone here in this room to take on that label if it is something that you're interested in. To think of yourself as storytellers, because that's part of what the Emerging Writers Festival is here for.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: We used to have a slogan, the festival for writers and the for was italicized, because we really drew that out as a point for difference for ourselves. That we were a festival that was not only celebrating and putting writers on stage to talk to an audience of perhaps readers, but very much acknowledging that the people within the room, that the audience were peers and people who had something to say as well. I hope that this year's program will do that for you as well. Yeah, I guess we're going to get into it, so exciting.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: As we go throughout the night I'll amuse a little on the program itself, I wanted to show you the artwork because it's great. Just so that you're all sitting here for the next hour like really wanting to get your mitts on a copy of this, this is what it looks like, you can have one at the end.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: First up for you I'm really thrilled to introduce Aïsha Trambas, who is an Afro-Greek arts worker based on Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung lands. She's also our Program Coordinator. She's probably made of sunshine, she's freaking fantastic and she's going to speak to you a little bit about our program tonight. Please welcome her to the stage.

Aïsha Trambas: Good evening everyone, it's so beautiful to see so many like glowing faces. I can literally see people beaming at me, and it's

just beautiful. As Izzy mentioned thank you for the beautiful introduction. My name's Aïsha and I've had the enormous privilege of being the Program Coordinator here at EWF and attempting to fill the very big shoes of my colleague Lin Yuan, who I watched on this very stage at this very time last year. I'm very pleased to report that I'm as excited and also incredulous as last year at the breadth and depth of what our team are about to offer you this year.

Aïsha Trambas: Before I go any further, I'd also like to acknowledge the land that we work on and that the festival happens across the land of the Wurundjeri people that we're in now. Also to the south east of the city and further the lands of the Boonwurrung people. I pay my humble respects to the elders of both these nations, past, present and future and who continue to carry the stories of this land. Of the survival and creativity of first nations people, even in the face of the threat and violence that settlers society continues to inflict. I urge all of us if you're a settler here tonight to pay close attention to indigenous stories. To learn not just our ears and our eyes for consuming those stories and our words for talking at stake acknowledgements at times like right now. Also our resources, like actual resources and hands for material contributions and tangible support in whatever way that we can.

Aïsha Trambas: I've been thinking a lot about bios, like Insta bios, Twitter bios, the link is in my bio. There is a link in my bio at the moment. Add us bios like a short enigmatic bio versus like a long winded highfalutin bio, a collective bio. The bio I submitted for this event. Beyond social media in general, I don't think there's anything that better encapsulates the millennial your pro obsession with self curation than the bio. What a succinct vessel to carry all of the contradictions and insecurities that we have around self definition and career progression. To carry the traces of the awkward stage that this event is named after and that these wonderful four writers are here to talk about tonight.

Aïsha Trambas: I ask myself, "When was the first time I considered myself a programmer?" The honest answer is I really don't consider myself a programmer and yet I'm standing before you in this role and yet it is in my bio. At this awkward stage of my life, I change my bio honestly depending on the event and depending on who I think will read it and what those eyes deserve or need to know about me depending on the context. Virginia Woolf when problematic faith, when asked about advice for young writers once said, "For heaven's sake publish nothing before you are 30." As a young arts workers I obviously disagree working for the Emerging Writers Festival. Despite the ageism there is something though that attracts me about this sentiment. I think what it is, is the offering to consider the value of process rather than outcome. The value of honing your craft for yourself in private, allowing yourself the messy time consuming task of development before considering putting something into the world. On the other hand we also know that without peer exchange, without dialogue, without community we're bound not to develop anything at all in any professional practice.

Aïsha Trambas: Here at the Emerging Writers Festival I really like to think that we can hold both the rapid fire millennial bio phenomenon that updates like biannually from novice to expert and then onto like a different field entirely in a few years. Also, Woolf's encouragement to build commitment and self assuredness before public reception of one's work. What better testing ground for emerging writers of all ages to experiment, perform, listen, exchange, learn and dare I say make a few solid mistakes than the warm embrace EWF provides each year.

Aïsha Trambas: For now what I'm going to share with you is my excitement for the 11 days, 73 events and 22 venues that we invite you to share with us from the 19th to the 29th of June. I hope you'll come visit us in a range of places at our new opening night venue, the Australian Center for Contemporary Art in

Southbank for an evening of first nations women speaking truth to power as they always are. Around the fire again at Footscray Community Arts Center for closer to the moon, which is a celebration of the mystical orb who watches over us, and the cycles of transformation that she represents. If you know me personally you know I forced a moon event into this program this year. I hope you'll see us in our cities local libraries for hands on workshops in poetry, zen making, historical fiction and more. I hope you'll come visit at Loop Project Space & Bar just up in the city here for our inaugural EWF X events. It's a performance series, four nights of events produced in collaboration with emerging producers to spotlight the collectives and communities that they serve. I'm really thrilled to present events in collaboration with The Waiting Room Arts Company, Lumino Magazine, I see you and collective hot tip. I recommend buying an EWF X pass, which means that you can attend all four of those nights for the price of just three.

Aïsha Trambas: I hope that you will join us online for our annual festival exhibition titled Future Truths. Alongside an engaging suite of digital programming led by our fantastic Digital Producer. The digital program will be live online after this event. It's just got a short little blurb in the program so find it online. You can browse a range of interactive projects with artists from across this continent and also the globe. Because it's 2019, and you cannot do a single thing without one, there will be a podcast.

Aïsha Trambas: In under an hour as Izzy mentioned you'll receive this little purple booklet to guide you through all of these events and much more in finer detail. The future may strike you as a looming presence in our thinking across many facets of the program. A concept that we're clearly wrestling with as a species as we continue to decrease our collective lifespan and the longevity of life itself, considering our dire political climate. It's very dire. Sometimes it doesn't feel dire when you're in this office five days a week, but it is very, very dire. The resurgence

of the populous right turn out to vote this Saturday please. The precocity of the livelihoods of so many ordinary folks and the urgency whether it's falsely conjured or genuine that so many of us operate within. It's really no wonder why we feel these conversations about the future so necessary.

Aïsha Trambas: I hope the events that we have in store encourage reflection on our individual and collective responsibilities. As well as the imperative to be intentional, thoughtful and ethical in our approaches to our crafts as well as each other, and in imagining something greater. In the words of Adrienne Maree Brown who I'm silently in love with from across the globe, it is imagination that gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of ability. I often feel I am trapped in someone else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free.

Aïsha Trambas: I hope the festival gives you a chance to engage your imagination. It's my absolute pleasure to be part of programming. Thank you all again for being here, and I can't wait to hear your feedback on the festival via our audience surveys at the end of June. Have a beautiful night and thank you again.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Thank you so much beautiful Aïsha for giving us that insight into this year's program. I wanted to draw something out that Aïsha mentioned with that Virginia Woolf quote, which is something that comes out often. We get asked a lot what it means to be emerging and I'll tell you now I always answer, "That's largely self defined." I guess there's a Venn diagram of young writers and emerging writers that does intersect quite a lot. Not all emerging writers are young. We're well aware of this fact. As part of that we've got a specific event as part of this year's festival where we wanted to celebrate some of the elders in our community. Some people who have seen a bit more than some of the other emerging writers within our community. It's called radical, and it's looking back at some

histories of social movements and having people speak to them. I hope that whilst a lot of the program a lot of the people that engage in this festival are young, that people are aware that there are space folks who are older as well. If that's something that you want to talk to me about, please do also.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Equally, Aisha mentioned the podcast. If you're curious about our programming process which is always something we're eager to involve people into. Show you what goes on behind the scenes of the festival, please subscribe to the podcast to hear Aisha in discussion with myself and the rest of our programming team. In an episode that we'll release as part of the digital stream when the festival launches on the 19th of June.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Now, next up for you it's my absolute pleasure to introduce Kat Clarke who is a writer, artist and indigenous consultant. Being a proud Wotjobaluk woman from the Wimmera, Kat gradually developed her craft by combining her skills and knowledge and community engagement, mentoring music, the arts, screen and education. Please make her very welcome.

Kat Clarke: Wow, I'd like to say thank you for allowing me to be here. I'd like to thank Emerging Writers Festival as well as the team for inviting me to be here and speak tonight for this amazing launch. I've known the guys for a few years now and so it's been a great journey just to grow and to emerge as we're saying, I like to say evolve. That we're constantly growing and I think we've only got a great outlook in the future ahead.

Kat Clarke: I'd like to first start by my own acknowledgment of country. Being an indigenous woman or I really should say Wotjobaluk woman, from the Wimmera, I too I'm a guest on country here and being away from home. Home is only three hours away, but it still feels like it could be across waters. I'd first like to start by paying my respects to the Kulin Nation especially the

Wurundjeri and the Boonwurrung outers and tradition owners who are both young and old, past and present.

Kat Clarke: I'd like to acknowledge the future generations who are leading in the way and making this city what it is today. They're working to keep our culture alive within our urban environment and like everyone else here, I'd like us to acknowledge that time that they are making to do this. They don't really have to do it, but they are advocates for their people. You are as well advocates for everything that you guys are passionate about. For traditional owners of this country, it's about respecting that they don't need to do this, but we do it anyway because we're passionate and we're proud.

Kat Clarke: I would like to also being a woman from the Wimmera, if you're familiar with the words and Grampians that is home for me. In turn, I acknowledge my own ancestors and your own as none of us would be here today if it weren't for them making those journeys and starting those footprints that have led us to be here today. I did have a presentation set up, but at the same time I've decided to now just open with a poem. I do apologize to our Auslan who weren't prepared for this.

Kat Clarke: Daydreamer, shake those thoughts and feelings free from the tangles of your curls. Let them drift off your shoulders and flow naturally along your curves. Allow the words to drip from the rogue of your lips and stay in the pages. Tattooed beautifully raw so others may read the depths of your soul and be inspired.

Kat Clarke: You see when I was born, I was born here in Melbourne, but grew up traveling between towns that led you straight from Ballarat to Dimboola along the Wimmera River. My childhood was the beginning of a desire to learn because let's be honest, in the 90s most country towns including Ballarat had their fair share of racism. I was a fighter. I grew up learning to hit first and talk later, because who would believe a black fella. You

think you have a thick skin back then, but it wasn't until the kids started teasing me because I didn't know how to spell my name. Or I didn't spell my name with an E in the middle of Katherine and tried to say my parents were the idiots who had got it wrong because they couldn't spell, so I must be just as dumb as them. That's the reality. That stuff sticks with you, especially when they do that and also beat the crap out of you. That confidence of making any social interaction is actually unlikely. It even made me question my own birth certificate.

Kat Clarke: Mum thought I was joking and when she realized I wasn't, her and dad both worked with me each night. I was obsessed with being called an A, B, C who was dumb and illiterate. For those that don't know what A, B, C is, I'm not going to say it today, but I'm sure if you were to find out you'd just be as appalled.

Kat Clarke: Those first three years of my schooling were traumatizing and so to avoid the pain and beatings, it didn't even matter. It was one of those things where I would look for solace in an imagination. It didn't matter if I had a Maltese granddad that also couldn't read and write, but had been a truck driver for the majority of his life and got along fine without the English language. All they saw was my blackness.

Kat Clarke: One of the things I am thankful for in this time is that it gave me the strength to at least imagine. Imagine a better world and imagine a hope where kids like myself could be seen. To avoid it all I would write stories. I could play on my own or with my brother and we would act them out. I was determined to prove them wrong and made sure I read books and practiced writing my name over and over again until it was readable and neat enough. It didn't stop the bullies from tormenting me and making my life a living hell. Right up until mum moved me to another school and I had cousins that were able to grow up with me, but by then I was already a bookworm. You couldn't really get me out of there.

Kat Clarke: In 2001, I was in year eight and death was something that was becoming desensitized to. When you're 13 you're on the edge of everything not old enough to know, but not young enough to act like a kid anymore. Death can play a part in that, a part in making you see life differently. I was tired of seeing the community, a love torn constantly by sorry business and I was sick of fighting girls and boys over the color of my skin. Counselors weren't half black then either and so I began to write poetry to help myself heal.

Kat Clarke: Then with the poetry I'd read them at the funerals, so the community could heal too, or at least I hoped. That year in my 13 I lost my grandfather on my father's side. He was the first poem I had written and had read the day of his funeral. Since then, I've done this at nearly everyone. It's become a thing now where it's in the family now, so it's like, "Kat's going to be able to at least say something." I'm proud of that because in a way that's how my community see me. When I lost my grandparents early and many of our knowledge keepers had passed by this time, I searched that I had searched for them in others to teach the value of wisdom, family, culture and listening. That's how I learned. If you were not listening then we're not really seeing. If this is the case then how can we even begin to retell the stories the old ones speak? How can we even begin to speak for the present and our future? You can't help the life you're born into, but you can make the most out of it and try to understand and make change and amends from past histories. That is why we are all unique and we are all storytellers, some of us better than others. Some of us may not even have the words.

Kat Clarke: By the time I was 17 I found myself faced with friends who had suicided including family young and old. Mental health and depression was sinking in where I too began to self harm. The only savior at the time was my brother and music. Along with the poetry, I then adapted and evolved again into songwriting and this stopped myself from sinking deeper. I had to rebuild

confidence in the world and myself, singing and rapping was one of the ways that was a form of expressing us group of misfits in a way.

Kat Clarke: You see, death is different for us black fellas. It doesn't affect one person, family and relatives. It sends a ripple along the grapevine and can affect a number of towns and communities where mobs are affected by just one death, because that person who was so connected and known. Some funerals I couldn't make at that age and throughout my early 20s because of the struggle we all go through in life when we take on certain responsibilities and deal with the struggle of disconnection. From sorry business to living further from community with less visits, I turned to writing to guide me.

Kat Clarke: I guess the point of this whole talk is to really encourage you to look beyond your doubts and believe that your story's just as unique and should be heard. Your story and your history and life struggle is a story in itself. Like me, you can turn it into something that makes you a better and much more humbled person. It ages your mind much further than your reality and body, but it is a way of communicating at the hardest of times.

Kat Clarke: If anything I have my family, my brother, my sisters and my brothers in community who ground me to this day. The multiple communities to thank for making me take leaps and to continue writing. If it wasn't for them pushing me to see beyond the stereotypical lens that said, "You weren't good enough because you were black," I probably would not have gone to uni. I probably would not be standing here in front of you right now. You see, the people that I was going to show tonight in the photos that was a part of my presentation they are the characters of my stories. They are the people I write about. These stories are just as much theirs as they are mine, I don't take agency over them. I write, but I am not a writer. It's just something I've done all my life. Tell stories in no matter

what form it is, whether it's poetry, nonfiction or screen, I'm still just telling the stories of what my people share.

Kat Clarke:

It means more to me than just words on a paper or to entertain and to get carried away with. Writing is a lifesaver, it's a part of who I am and it is a spiritual practice for me. People aren't sure how to interpret that, but it is what it is. I'm no different to anyone else, I am determined. I am passionate and I love my culture and I wouldn't change a thing. I am many things for I write, do art, act, sing, I curate exhibitions, but at the end of the day if anything I'm just me. A black fella who's trying to understand this crazy world as much as all of you are. Seek ways that are different from our usual and outside the norm to express that. I follow my culture and seek guidance from the elders, and trust that everyday in everyway I'm always getting better. I know we are constantly learning and I'm not finished proving to the world that black fellas are more than just what you think we are.

Kat Clarke:

I believe that in order to be a writer you need to first start understanding who you are as a person even to be able to write it. Some people don't know how to write their stories down and I think that's something where we find it seems to be the most daunting thing. I've got so much to say, but I don't have the words to actually say it. I feel that's where we come in. We come in to just give that guiding hand. We come in to be able to shower some words. We come in to at least share and express a connection that we understand. I hope tonight that's what you see in all of us and us writers and in yourselves tonight. That you've all got a story to tell. Whether you don't have the words or not, it's just about finding a space where you can actually get a chance to say, "Okay what is it that I do want to say? Who I'm I really speaking to? Is it something that I can say? Do I need someone else to do it for me?" Like my grandfather who can't read and write, I write for him. I write for people who need it and I write it for people who can connect with me. I also write because it's a lifesaver.

Kat Clarke: [music] that song will always be remaining with me. It's called fade away, it was written by a brother boy who suicided. It's something that I had wrote with him. It's one thing that keeps me strong, it keeps me going, but it's a reminder that I'm here and I'm making a difference. That's all that matters, is you're here, you're making a difference. I hope again tonight that you do find within all of us tonight a little bit of yourselves and that you get inspired to be able to share your own stories. Thank you for having me tonight.

Izzy Roberts-Or: Thank you Kat and for reminding us of the connecting power that storytelling can have. That when we talk about literature we mean storytelling in a much broader sense as well. Kat will be appearing in Bogong Spoken Word Blacktivism presented in partnership with Black & Bright Victorian Indigenous Literary Festival on Monday the 24th of June 9 PM at Loop. She'll also be reading at this year's Amazing Babes which is on Tuesday the 25th of June 7 PM at Melba Spiegeltent.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: I keep telling you things that are in the program and you don't have a copy yet, so I hope you can all remember what I've said. There will be a test at the end. Now I'm pleased to introduce you to Sumudu Samarawickramackrama who is from Werribee. Her work has appeared in Boston Review like wow, Overland, Meanjin and the Lifted Brow also like wow. She's co-produced Sidekicked which won 2017 Melbourne Fringe Category Award Best Words and Ideas, really mangled that words and ideas bit. She's fascinated with the structures that underpin our society and how to use art to powerfully change the status quo. As part of FCAC's West Writers Group she's interested in how anger can be a tool toward community. Please make her very welcome.

Sumudu Samarawickramackrama: Hello, thank you very much EWF for the opportunity to do this. Thank you very much Kat Clarke for that beautiful opening. When did I first know I was a writer? I knew it when I realized I was lying. On a visit to Sri Lanka when

I was five years old, I told my aunts that back in Zambia we lived in a house with a dolphin pool. Not a pool shaped like a dolphin, but a pool full of dolphins. Then I had trained these dolphins to jump through hoops of bright, pink bougainvillea. The next day she asked me whether I was telling the truth. I hotly affirmed the truth of the story, though I knew the story had no basis. In fact, we didn't even own a pool, though there was a hedge of bright pink bougainvillea and I had been watching Flipper on TV.

Sumudu Samarawickramackrama: Later that same year in school a friend of mine told me that she had a whole family of tiny little people who lived at her house in the 70s glass fitting. The light fitting in their front room and that they flew propeller planes around the house. I asked her whether she would give me some to keep, and as the weeks went on and no tiny, little people appeared, I realized she was telling the truth in the same way that I had told the truth. Months after I had stopped asking her even for those tiny, little people, I would still think about them flying around her house in the mornings and landing at the breakfast table where they would eat the crumbs from her plate. There's a power in that. There is a truth in that.

Sumudu Samarawickrama: It was around this time of my life when I started to realize the world inside my own self, and I would spend hours. I feel like it was hours, it probably wasn't, watching the clouds. Looking up at the clouds of Zambia at the daily majesty this weird un-localized ache would rise in me. I would imagine flying up into the stratosphere and bouncing on the fluffy cumulus or darting in around the massive nimbus, gray and rippling. I would imagine a different circumstance of birth one where I was a creature of the air and not the earth.

Sumudu Samarawickrama: All this lying, all this early writing was never actually written down. It was taking the world and imagining a different set of rules for it. Or it was imagining a different circumstance with the same set of rules. There was always a

moment inside the making when I was sure I was making something. There was always a moment after when I was unsure what I had done. If this was a narrative it would lead you to believe that this was something I grew out of.

Sumudu Samarawickrama: When we moved to Australia I have spent the first few years here deeply unhappy. I wrote a lot in my journals. Mostly looking back I was writing as a performance because I was wondering how and what it would feel like if someone ever read my work. There's something about being a migrant that demands that you become a writer. If of nothing else, but then your identity. It took me only two months to gain an Australian accent, to learn to say texters instead of felted pens. Writing in those teenage journals was similar, Australia and adolescence had made me insecure about my place in the English canon in the Commonwealth. 14 year old me would read Somerset Mum and Hemingway, Aldous Huxley like what and Daphne du Maurier. To this day I'm still waiting for some old guy with a huge house to come and sweep me away. I try to write like them. I know now that that little girl she was trying to be white. She was trying to write into herself what was properly western and trying to cover up what wasn't.

Sumudu Samarawickrama: I am beyond relieved to find now that she failed, but at the same time I have to admit that a lot of the work of coverup, that was done for her. It was done without her even realizing. Even then, engaging in the most ambitious project of fiction, I never really felt like a writer away from the actual writing. In high school an assignment I had for literature was to write a creative respond to Cloud Street, that myth of the white Australia. In my story I had an elderly dying quick, watching his young grandchildren playing under the sprinkler. Remembering the time he fished a drowned child out of the river. I wrote the line quick, knew the pain was on credit, he'd pay for it later.

Sumudu Samarawickrama: Every time I read that line, a peculiar thrill would run through me. With that line I felt on level with Winton and I knew he was a writer. Distanced from the making of that line, I didn't know what it meant. Two years ago a poem came to me as if it was inevitable, each line was opening the door onto the next. As I sat there and caught each collection of words, I felt that intangible ache inside me again, W.S Mowan's collection the lights was open in front of me, and I felt for those minutes finally connected to something.

Sumudu Samarawickrama: In the months that followed, all I felt was an insecurity that such an outpouring would never again happen. Related to that insecurity is the short story, I spent 13 months writing, deliberating its language, its plots, its characters, eating out the bones, the flesh and the clothes for it. When I finished, figurative sweat on my brow I knew the solid release of making something and making something hard and making that thing work. What I'm trying to say is that, I feel like a writer for the first time every time I write something. It seems to be a point of regeneration, a newness that is always present. It comes with doubt and insecurity, but it also comes with an openness and a wonder.

Sumudu Samarawickrama: As an emerging writer I feel that there is a strength in this state of dynamic stasis. I can still look at each piece of hard one writing as the pinnacle, and I can forget that each time I have to make the climb a new. When does a writer feel like a writer? What kind of writer feels like a writer? What does feeling like a writer feel like? What are the real world circumstances contribute to a person feeling like a writer?

Sumudu Samarawickrama: I hope I am always asking myself these questions. As an emerging writer, unsettled on this stolen land, I see the privilege of feeling like a writer. Of having the English that I have, the access that I have, I watch myself, and I listen to remember the power of story and the power of the storyteller. Thank you so much.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Thank you so much Sumudu. I'm going to share something which is quite silly but related to dolphins. Folks in this room may or may not know that I'm a writer myself. As part of that I used to do a lot of spoken word in my ever so slightly younger years than now. Once upon a time I wrote a poem for someone I loved very dearly. The highest esteem of the way that I wanted to tell them that I loved them was, I have to do a serious pose of this. I want to give you a dolphin army for your birthday and then it continued. Yeah, dolphins amazing, important part of storytelling.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Sumudu is featuring at a number of events as part of the festival. One of which is Lunchtime Lit Reading Poetry 101. This event is very much about trying to break down the idea the poetry is elitist and only for certain people to engage with, so we've got some freaking amazing poets on that. Sumudu will be hosting, Tayi Tibble is coming from Aotearoa and Ray White is coming down from Queensland, so that's going to be sick. That will be at Reading State Library. She's also hosting Double Books club right here on this stage. We're doing a special edition with the Wheeler Center on Friday the 28th of June. She'll be in conversation with Jamie Marina Lau and Sreedhevi Iyer. That's really great too. Thank you Sumudu.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Now I'm going to introduce to you Ahmed Yussuf, who is a writer and a journalist. I like that. See, you've got it straight up in your bio, no doubts. He co-edited Growing Up African In Australia, which I highly encourage you to get your hands on a copy of. The first non-fiction anthology of African-diaspora stories in Australia. His work has featured in Acclaim Magazine, The Guardian, TRT-World and Jalada Africa. He was also an artist in the 2018 Digital Writers Festival. Please make him very welcome.

Ahmed Yussuf: Professional speech sounding and a drink of glass of water have a cough. Can I just say, if I'm just going to be in with dolphins, they are evil. I hope everyone has seen that

Simpsons episode where dolphins take over, the apocalypse happens and we all die. Okay. It is very hard for me to consider myself a writer despite my bio. It is something I struggle to call myself outside of a Twitter bio. It feels strangely boastful, maybe that's because I never really thought I'd be a writer. I wasn't particularly good at writing when I was at school. I wasn't even a good reader. Probably I read about one book cover to cover in my 13 years of schooling. It was 1984, very bleak. I'm pretty sure if my grade six teacher was in the audience right now, she'd be shocked to see me standing in front of you all tonight. Miss Nermin are you here? I guess she's not.

Ahmed Yussuf: When I hear other writers say, "I just used to snuggle in the library like it was my second home." Or talk about all the books from their childhood that and I get this sinking feeling, "I'm I an imposter?" It just races through my head because I don't remember reading these childhood defining books. It wasn't a book, it was a teacher that opened me to the possibility of being a writer. My humanities teachers Mr. Hassan would compliment my vocabulary. It was small but meaningful. He'd make a concerted effort to make me feel like I was actually good at something.

Ahmed Yussuf: I'm not just some quiet kid at the back of the class, but also good with words. What I'm trying to say is no one becomes a writer without a teacher, no one becomes anything without a teacher. The teacher can take many different forms. The teacher in this sense is just a catch old term for someone who believes in you, who sees your self worth when you don't, especially when you don't. I cannot express how meaningful those comments were to me. It allowed me to believe in myself, that I could actually do something.

Ahmed Yussuf: Carry on the theme of teachers, my teachers now are the writers I adore. The Ocean Vuong, Claudia Rankine, Warsan Shire, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Sharon Olds, Padraig O'Tuama and

these are just the cliff notes. Yes I did start reading after school. The lessons I learned from them make me feel like I'm on my way to being a writer, to find the language to express my writing through Claudia Rankine, to learn how to explore honesty and vulnerability through Padraig O'Tuama. To be grounded by the integrity Ta-Nehisi Coates outlines in his work. If not for Claudia Rankine these collections, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*, I wouldn't have been able to write my story in *Growing Up African in Australia*. As I said she gave me the language to express myself, to be able to write about the body. To describe it, to define it, to evoke its importance. It was almost as if before reading her work I was only half present. I was meandering without any sense of direction. I was operating with old software in need of a dire update.

Ahmed Yussuf: To read something so nourishing and then to be able to put into practice into that language I learned. It made me feel like I wasn't some bluffer. My story was only being accepted because I co-edited the book. It made me feel like I belonged. I'm going to read a section of the poem from *Citizen*, but please everyone if you enjoy your life and I say this very seriously, buy Claudia Rankine's work, she is incredible.

Ahmed Yussuf: When you lay your body in the body, entered as of skin and bone with public places, when you lay your body in the body, entered as if you're the ground you walk on, you know no memory should live in these memories becoming the body of you.

Ahmed Yussuf: In a little writing I tried to do, I'm trying to better understand myself and the world around me. To explore, to find answers to questions I have or wrestle with the unanswerable. I remember first reading Padraig O'Tuama's collection, reading from the book of *Exile*. I couldn't put the book down. It was so raw and vulnerable and unafraid. I'm going to read this from him because it taught me a valuable lesson about meaning, making and writing. It's called narrative theology.

- Ahmed Yussuf: And I said to him, "Are there answers to all of this?" He said, "The answer is in the story and the story is being told." I said, "There's so much pain," and she answered plainly, "Pain will happen." Then I said, "Will I ever find meaning?" They said, "You will find meaning when you give meaning, the answer is in the story and the story isn't finished."
- Ahmed Yussuf: I also learned something so important when I read Ta-Nehisi Coates' 'We Were Eight Years in Power'. It dispelled every stupid notion writing is some sort of romantic pursuit. In the notes sections it showed the working out. The labor, the grind, showed us the behind the scenes of what it goes into making these tremendous works. More importantly taught me what not to be. This ultimately what I've come to believe good art by extension good writing does. This is a quote from a book that illustrates this so beautifully.
- Ahmed Yussuf: Art was not an art school special, art was not motivational speaking. Art was not sentimental, had no responsibility to be hopeful, optimistic or make anyone feel more better about the world. It must reflect the world in all it's brutality and beauty, not bring hopes of changing it, but the mean and selfish desire to be enrolled, to not to be enrolled in its lie. To not be co-opted by television dreams, to not ignore the great crimes all around us.
- Ahmed Yussuf: Another reason why I feel strange about calling myself a writer is because for me I think it's an inherently selfish pursuit. What does a room of maybe 100 people need to hear from me? What is so important about my take or my work or any of it? When I was writing this speech I was sitting at home thinking, "What do I have to say about being a writer? Why would anyone listen to me?" Because as I stand here reading from this piece of paper, I was fooling enough with myself to have decided that maybe there are people who might be interested.

Ahmed Yussuf: The notion of your voice being unique or special and I've decided to do all of this, I think it needs to be called for what it is. I think when that happens better writing will come out of that recognition because who gets to think that? Some might say, "Well you know writing was my calling since I was young. I used to snuggle around the library and read for hours." Even that very line is set in luxury, to have that comfort and space to have a calling. To imagine yourself in this space, I could never. I don't think age care or family daycare were callings from my mother, they were jobs and means to an end. The notion of access is at the heart of why the real space is the way it is. It is no wonder the good people at Lumino Magazine found the porosity of first nation writers and writers of color and they're starting to publish in Australia.

Ahmed Yussuf: What kind of access do people have to writing, to art? First hoping to my tortoise and get back in time to my school in [inaudible 00:52:08]. I told everyone in my class, "I'm going to be a writer." They'd all laugh in my face. I don't think that happened at Xavier colleges, so I mean that's why I don't quite feel like a writer, because [inaudible 00:52:22] one of the poorest subs in Victoria. The space doesn't lend itself with luxury, doesn't have the space to have a calling unsustainable as writing, but nonetheless, I'm here. Thank you.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: That was beautiful, thank you Ahmed and a lot to think about too, especially in relation to I think always and a festival is particularly an important space I feel to have these conversations about who is speaking and to whom and what are the ways they're doing it. You'll be able to see Ahmed hosting a panel discussion as part of this year's National Writers Conference, which is the perfect space to have those sorts of discussions. He'll be hosting writing new masculinities, which I'm particularly excited about. It's on a Sunday at the National Writers Conference which will be at State Library Victoria in the conference center.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Now I'm thrilled to introduce you to our final speaker for this evening. Vidya Rajan who is an award-winning writer, comic and performance maker working across stage, screen and page. She's trained and performed extensively in improvisation and sketch in Australia and the United States. She's recently worked with Queensland Poetry Festival, Melbourne Festival Director's Lab, ABC Comedy, Theatreworks and as of 2018 recipient of Screen Australia's Developing the Developer Initiative. She's a current writer in residence at the Malthouse Theatre. Please make her very welcome.

Vidya Rajan: Hi everyone. Hope you're having as amazing a night as I am. Thank you Izzy for that introduction. As Izzy said my name is Vidya Rajan and I am a writer and performer. I work in quite different art forms from the other speakers on the lineup today. These wonderful writers of the high arts of poetry and prose and all the sublime stuff in between. Unlike them I write for and work mainly in the gremlin art forms of theatre and television. The writers in those fields are a little bit different from the beautiful dolphins creatures we have just experienced.

Vidya Rajan: TV and theatre are fields of work that are best suited to writers who do not have the emotional capacity to actually be alone with their thoughts. Who require the constant validation of large groups of people. Who have no patience for anything that doesn't resemble immediate preferably positive feedback. I'm trying to admit that I was craving an applause break there, but it's okay, it's okay. Even I can recognize that it's too early and completely undeserving.

Vidya Rajan: Now look if the kind of person, if the kind of writer I've just described is then seems to you pretty horrible, and like some kind of malfunctional high octan idiot, I'm really hoping that in the next 10 minutes we share together. I can take that impression and just probably cement it, cement it further. I'm

not going to lie, I don't want to start this relationship with a lie that's probably what's going to happen.

Vidya Rajan:

I do want to say though before going further, what a tremendous delight it is to be on this stage tonight. I do want to say that. I want to say that, I do want to say that, but I can't because it will be lying. It's only lying because delight tremendous or otherwise is not the dominant emotion I am experiencing right now. Instead it's, how do I say this, fear, yeah fear. Don't get me wrong, it's not fear of speaking to all of you here today. You all seem very friendly. I'm not afraid of you. There was a woman I saw coming in who was wearing one of those Gertrude street sack dresses with the raisin necklace and she had like silver hair, it was very intimidating. She looked like one of those older women who are cross between like an art curator and a bird and could kill you at any moment. Yeah, so I am afraid of her. Ma'am wherever you are, please adopt me. I want to be you. Yeah. Apart from her though all of you, no fear there.

Vidya Rajan:

The fear that I'm speaking about though is my fear that by doing this incredibly public event at the launch of the Emerging Writers Festival, everyone will know that in the year of our lord Janelle Monae 2019 I was an emerging writer. Specifically funding bodies will be able to date this point in the year of our lord Lupita Nyong'o 2019 to me being an emerging writer. See, funding bodies in my field of work at least defining an emerging writer as someone who is in the first five years of their practice. The clock on that starts when you've had an outcome like a publication or a performance in an established venue. Or if your peers recognize you in an established venue, like the Wheeler Center. It's terrifying because you see past the warm, gooey placental embrace that is emerging, lies the mid career. Who amongst us has not seen a mid career artist? You may recognize them from their chapped lips, from their time in the desert, sunken eyes, [inaudible 00:58:50] growls, a whiff of the apocalypse about them.

Vidya Rajan: I watched Mad Max: Fury Road this week again so maybe that sort of sipped into that. From what I hear it's all a bit grim, you know the grants die up, sense of cultural relevance out the window. Prices and opportunities too and I swear I wrote this bit before the whole Vogel prize thing. This is not shade, but also why not? Yes, that's why it's kind of scary to stand here right now and affirm and have it evidenced in digital proof because I think this is being recorded that I am emerging. That I'm quite emerged, that I have maybe what, two, 2.5, 2.8, you know what we're amongst friends three years. Three years more before that sweet emerging support dies out.

Vidya Rajan: Look, this isn't all about money, it's also about good looks. By which I mean culture loves youth. It loves the new and novel, the just beginning, the next brilliant thing. You're safe if you're emerging because you're shiny and thus it's only a matter of time before I too must corrin towards cultural irrelevance. Like Gandalf and Frodo and so many elves before me, I must leave middle earth and fade into the gray heavens. I also watch the Lord of the Rings trilogy this week. Look, it's been a time, but my life is full and rich and busy and I have lots of friends and stuff.

Vidya Rajan: Anyway, in talking about all this, I am reminded of what a wise caption on an 18 year old skincare influencers Instagram account once said to me. Don't be afraid, be free, cleanse deeper. She's so right. I don't enjoy this fearful impulse and I would quite like to be free of it. When EWF sent us the brief for this event, they asked us to think about when we felt emerging, when we first defined ourselves as a writer. Not when that was done for us. They asked us to cleanse deeper if you will. If you won't, it's okay I just did it anyway.

Vidya Rajan: In responding to this brief, in truly flashing out my pores and my memories, I realized something that I'd actually forgotten. That this self definition of being a writer, of emerging was actually something that happened quite early for me. I was a

slightly odd child, [inaudible 01:01:33] who spent a lot of time, you don't have to laugh that hard. Who spent a lot of time moving cities and being alone. Actually the whole inability to be alone with your thoughts now are making a lot more sense, I can connect the dots. Note to self, bring it up on your session on Monday. All right, yeah, so being alone. There wasn't much to do except make things up.

Vidya Rajan: I remember the first thing I ever wrote. With characteristic megalomania, I took a universally loved cultural product and proposed an alternative to it. This was the alphabet song. You know how it goes, W, X, Y and Z, now I've said my A, B, Cs. Next time won't you sing with me. I decided to rewrite it to W, X, Y, Z, so some early [inaudible 01:02:27] of sensibilities there. Really breaking the form, W, X, Y, Z I have said the alphabet, now it's time to go to bed. I know that I did this because I grabbed my nearest parent and forced them to write it down. I couldn't actually write at that point physically. It was a quick, giddy, descent slash accent from then to writing my first series of books. A collection of nursery rhymes that consisted of rewriting existing rhythms and also some original compositions. An incisive critical act of pastiche.

Vidya Rajan: Quick other note, just to a short note for any cute, single funding bodies listening at home, these books were self published by a four year old stapling papers together. Do not constitute an outcome for the purpose of emerging an early career funding, so back off guys. Once I'd done my time in the naïve poetry movement though, I progressed to other types of writing. I wrote almost constantly growing up. High on the feeling that I was remaking the world or making new worlds. Completely unquestioning of the fact that I was a writer, I felt no need to emerge. I don't think I even knew what that was.

Vidya Rajan: Now, I don't know where this urge to remake the world came from, but I know that it feels like the opposite of fear. Like great blemish-less healthy glowing skin it is its own kind of

freedom. When did we start to lose this? How does this start to change? Through the lack of a daily moisturizing routine, yes, but also I think through merely existing in the world. Somewhere along the line it became harder to say with confidence that I was a writer or that I was emerging as one or that I could emerge of my own accord. Then when the world finally labels you as emerging through I guess opportunities like this, it did become easier to say that, but I don't know if it still feels like that freedom that I experienced. I guess like anything, when you're fixed by the gaze of others, there's a risk that what you've achieved may disappear at any moment. It's not a sustainable state.

Vidya Rajan: I can't help but feel that a lot of people feel like this. When you talk about it all the time in the community, many of us have this sense that it takes a lot to work up to the definition of emerging. There are barriers that we experience and then once we're there, there's also a fear of loss that that definition is unstable. No matter how hard one what lies next? It's quite difficult. I constantly wonder about what factors cause this feeling, this anxiety. I think some of them are personal, but also a lot of them are political and apply to a lot of us. In a culture that loves youth and endless novelty that's just another way of saying it's a culture that loves privilege. Privilege makes cocks of us all in the end.

Vidya Rajan: I thought I could wind up maybe by talking a little bit about how I think these reasons are worth investigating. Why does it feel so hard to emerge? Why does it feel so difficult once we're there and so anxious? I'm going to venture just a few reasons now, some of which are probably applicable to a lot of us. Some of which might just be idiocy critic, none of it's definitive. Please don't take it to heart, I don't want to be canceled.

Vidya Rajan: All right, so I guess I'm talking about things like never seeing anyone in spaces, establishment spaces who look like you, not hearing voices like yours, so not daring to speak. Watching the

first season of Riverdale and thinking was this show written by a Tumblr algorithm? If so what is the point of what I do, should I just give up? I can't. I can't stop watching, put it in my veins. I'm talking about things like having to earn a living or becoming a carer in your 20s and still having to earn a living. Or having an illness and having to earn a living. Or things like watching the second season of Riverdale, because you can't stop now. That jingle jungle is so good and because the Twitter hate watching parties are really addictive. You're just watching and watching and you're wondering how much time you are spending on this terrible show. Why you keep doing it when it makes you feel like you can never leave your bed. Oh God when was the last time I actually emerged from my room with any piece of writing? What has Archie Andrews done again? He's such a stupid, yes, no, no, he is such a stupid piece of shit. I would personally like to see all the serpents stand in a circle and piss on him.

Vidya Rajan: I'm talking about things like the way institutions prioritize the narrow taste of gatekeepers rather than investing in communities or the worth of individual achievements overshared culture making. I'm talking about things like buying into capitalist versions of ourself that require us to be endlessly productive and super brandable and coherent in our vision. That by the time you get to mid career, you have something, anything, please anything oh God to show for it. Yeah, won't that be nice.

Vidya Rajan: In all sincerity though, dropping the veil of irony, that is the curse of my generation and eating us from the inside out, for just one second. Spaces like EWF are a treasure. The openness with which they platform people is really something amazing to me. Never once have they asked us to define emerging or writer. It's up to us to define what culture should be like. I am truly delighted to be here and to get into the program. I am truly delighted that I have made the decision to refuse to watch the third season of Riverdale. At some point I guess you

need to choose to remake the world the way you want to. Whether that's through writing or just by saying it's okay if I don't know if it was a griffin or a gargoyle. It's okay if I don't know who the gargoyle king is. It's fine, it's fine, I'm not missing out, I can just read the recap. Thank you.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Frankly I'm just furious that you didn't share this skincare knowledge before we came on stage where I was asking you about how to use concealer. Jesus. Vidya will be hosting hysterical unsurprisingly, a night of comedic brilliance featuring a lineup of badass women and non-binary babes on Thursday the 27th at Brunswick Mechanics Institute. Thank you.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Now it's time for the thank yous part of the evening. There are a lot so buckle in. Thank you firstly to all of our wonderful speakers this evening. Give them a round of applause. Now as I'm sure you know, this festival is nothing without its people. Huge thanks to our brilliant team for holding it all together, Aïsha, Nicole, Mia, Ruby, and Ling. To our 2019 creative producers, DM, Jim, Curby, Latifah and Lauren. Especially to our brilliant new Executive Director Alice Muhling who stepped in about two months ago and has just hit the ground running. Yeah give her a round of applause too.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Thank you to our board for supporting our vision and us. Thank you to the Wheeler Center for having us and making this event just a beautiful breeze. Thank you to our fantastic Auslan interpreters. Thank you to our major partners, Creative Vic, City of Melbourne, Catalyst is a lot of them. Monash University, The Wheeler Center, and the Saturday paper. Thank you to our education partners, RMIT, Vic Uni, Swinburne. Thank you all for investing in Emerging Storytellers. Thank you all for making a tax deductible donation to the festival. Yeah, but seriously though, making good art costs money and for us a little bit goes a long way. I know it's a terrible joke, but over half the gorgeous program you're about

to receive at the back is free. In order to do that it's really helpful for us if you have any spare dash to throw it our way. Part of that is just making sure that we keep the paid events low or free so that practicing writers and folks who want to be there and learning how to tell their story can get into it. There's details in the program about how to do that.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Tonight you got a bit of a taste of that program, I hope you enjoyed that taste. I personally thought it was delicious. I don't know if we've fully answered the question of what it means, exactly what it is that makes a writer. We had some damn good answers to that question. I love that throughout these speakers we had this question of emergence as well. What I hope emerging means is something that we continue to do through our practice. That we see writing and storytelling is a process of becoming, of learning and that the festival is a space you all feel comfortable to come and do that with us.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: We're really proud of this year's program and we hope you enjoy participating in it as much as we enjoyed putting it together. This year's artwork is thanks to Ali Matilda and the design is by our favorite Matthias at Loop Studio. Tickets are now officially on sale through the website. If you're looking to save some dash, but you want to go to all the things, consider getting a golden ticket or one of the passes we lessened, we added them onto the website this year. If you're a die hard fan you can save some money.

Izzy Roberts-Orr: Grab a copy of the program on your way out the door and please join us downstairs for celebratory tippie at the Mote. Thank you all for coming.