

Acceptance Speech: Children's Peace Literature Award 2007

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I want to start off with a confession if I may. I just hope it doesn't disqualify me from being able to receive this wonderful award. My confession is this: when I was a young boy I didn't dream of being a writer - that came later when I left school. I'm afraid that my ultimate goal in life in Primary school was to be a Samurai Warrior and failing that I wanted to be a Ninja. Probably not a good start for someone receiving a Peace prize.

The reason that I wanted to be a Samurai Warrior was because when I was young my favourite TV show was called The Samurai. It was set in Medieval Japan and followed a Samurai called Shintaro as he battled clans of bad Ninjas with the help of his trusty side-kick a good ninja called Tombei the Mist. I wanted to be Shintaro. That was my dream.

And I have to confess that I wanted to be a Samurai warrior so much that I made myself a long samurai sword out of wood and every afternoon I would come home from school, watch the Samurai and then I'd run back and forth across our yard in Brisbane yelling, screaming, leaping and attacking our Hills Hoist clothesline with my sword. This didn't help my writing at all but my swordsmanship improved dramatically and I was very confident that if I was ever walking down a dark alley and was set upon by a gang of clotheslines, I could fight them off.

However my dreams of being a Samurai ended one day when a careers man visited our school and when he interviewed me he asked, 'Michael if you could be anything in the world, in your heart of hearts, what would you be?' Of course I answered, 'a samurai warrior.' The careers man stared at me for a while like I'd just stepped off the alien mother ship, then he looked at my report card and said the most devastating thing I had heard up to that point in my life. He said, 'Michael, unfortunately you have taken the wrong subjects to be a Samurai - have you ever thought of being an accountant?'

As it turns out I didn't become an accountant I became a teacher first and then quite recently a writer. This has been a dream come true for me to be able to call myself a writer. I feel blessed to have been given the opportunity to write for a living and on days like today I feel doubly blessed.

I am thrilled and honoured to be receiving the Children's Peace Literature Award for 2007 for *Don't Call Me Ishmael*. It's an honour just to be included on this year's award shortlist alongside such a talented group Australian writers and it's an honour to receive an award that recognises the power of stories to make a difference in our world.

I would like to pay tribute to the Psychologists for Peace in South Australia and the Australian Psychological Society for their generosity and commitment which have made this award possible and I would like to thank them for their wonderful support of children's writers in Australia for the last 20 years. These days when we seem to be bombarded with disturbing images of violence on the news, You Tube and other places, the goals set down by Psychologists for Peace of encouraging non-violent

means to resolve conflict and of promoting peace at the global, local and interpersonal level have never been more relevant or crucial.

I would also like to thank Omnibus Books and Scholastic Australia for allowing me to send *Don't Call Me Ishmael* out into the world. Especially I would like to express my immense gratitude to Dyan Blacklock and Celia Jellett my publisher and my editor at Omnibus books. Those two ladies are the reason I am standing here today.

Finally I'd like to say that I had a great deal of fun writing *Don't Call Me Ishmael* and it's been a joy to find that others have had fun with it too. I am proud that it's a book that hopefully makes people laugh and I'm also proud that it's a book that says something about the destructive nature of revenge, the importance of friendship and family and the right of everyone to be accepted for who they are, so that in the words of Herman Melville we might all stand forth our own inexorable selves.

And as for my boyhood dreams of being a Samurai Warrior – well today if I had to choose between being a Samurai and being a writer, I'd choose writer every time. I guess I've just discovered what the great people in the Psychologists for Peace group have known all along and that is, that the pen is not just mightier, but it is also smarter, more effective and more noble than the sword.