

Acceptance Speech for Children's Literature Peace Award 2003

By Irimi Savvides

There have been few times in my life when I have been at a loss for words. One was when Mark Macleod casually mentioned to me that they wished to publish my first novel. Yesterday when I found out that my second novel *Sky Legs* had received the Children's Literature Peace Prize was another. Now I sit here trying to find the words to express my thanks. I find myself in the somewhat unusual situation of being too overwhelmed to speak. (And of knowing I will be spoken for by another at a distance).

So since I do not know what to say I will tell you a little story – for that it seems is what I do best. On Monday, I was on an excursion with my senior students- eight Year Twelves who next year will attempt Extension 2 English. This unit of English is where students create a major work. Where they get to work on a project, an extended piece developed around something they love. A short story, a suite of poems, a monologue, a speech. We had left our beloved Blue Mountains for a day and travelled to the city for lectures. After a long but interesting day I stood waiting to pay the parking ticket so that we could start the long journey home.

My mobile phone rang and I answered. Now to anyone else this may not be unusual- but to me who never has the phone on it was a small miracle. Mark who was on the other end nearly died. He had rung to tell me I had won the award. Well... I stepped out of the line; I flustered around and kept repeating '*Oh my God! Oh my God!*' over and over. Finally I told my by then very concerned students and they cheered, hugged me and laughed at me as I was I was all a dither for the next half hour. I do not recall driving home that day, but I did recall another young girl in Year 12. She had fulfilled a very old dream.

The story continues. We have had a time shift. Stay with me. There I stand – now in Year 12 myself- aghast and ashamed at the human race. '*But Miss, I ask, how could they, drop a bomb- on civilians? How could invent such an atrocity?*' as I look at the child's face as the bomb seers away her skin. I remember raging and wanting to change the world, and

writing endless public speeches on disarmament and not talking to my fellow class mates because they were not at all interested. I got nowhere. A few weeks later I realized that fighting with others about peace just didn't work. So I apologized and tried to rebuild the bridge between my ever patient school friends again and tried other ways. They laughed at my passion and forgave me my platitudes and I started to learn what peace really meant.

It is many years later- in fact, nearly twenty. At times I have been too selfish to care. Too busy to run my Amnesty group and find the time to write a letter. But I would like to thank you. Because somewhere inside of me that Year 12 student found her voice and her way of expressing what she had learned by telling stories. You by selecting my novel for the award listened. Thank you.

It is doubly an honour when I see the names of the previous recipients. Books that I have taught in my classes and loved, *Space Demons* and *The Gathering*, authors who have shaped my desire to be one, like Libby Gleeson and those who I am now studying for my PhD, like Brian Caswell. What an honour to share an award that they have won- to have my name on the same list. Thank you.

My aspirations for my characters and readers are simple. I hope they may do what Aidan Chambers refers to as '*smashing the frozen seas within us.*' I write a great deal about difference, about those that inhabit the margins. About facing loss and beating it.

Eleni in *Sky Legs* has to come to terms with the following:

Why have you sky legs,

While I walk on flat earth, feet

Dying to feel clouds?

She must find her own sky legs; learn to walk on stilts while on the earth. To dance- with those that see her for what she is. She befriends those who also inhabit the margins, the

ones who often have no voice and must find it in any way they can. Sometimes even...
by writing poetry!

I know that Young Adult Fiction is often accused of being bleak and troubled. But I think that is too simple an equation. I hope to present characters that can face the bleakness and still find the beauty beneath. I think the haiku that the secondary character in *Sky Legs*, Pete writes expressed the *hope* that lies under the surface of all my novels.

*Beneath frozen ice,
Life will crack its way upwards,
Into the new spring.
(p.181)*

I want to present a realistic world to my readers, with splashes of hope, dripping in colour, sloshed with a sweet or two smothered in honey, a world that acknowledges the angst and the angels, the glory of a first kiss, the irreplaceable loss that some teens face, the hope and humour that life can bring.

I want them to read my books and know that eventually we all learnt to dance...

*One two three one two three
I hear and move slowly slowly to the wind's call
Happy I waltz on a mountain top
With a boy wearing a dress.*

Thank you for giving and Eleni, Pete and Mihali a life by reading their stories.

Thank you for rendering me silent for an afternoon.

Thank you for helping me know that that idealistic year 12 was just below the surface!

I will remember that afternoon phone call all my days.

I.Savvides

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