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Address to the Librarians of Australia -Mitchell Library, Sydney. 19th September 1980

Mrs Wran - Librarians - and anyone else concerned about the future of books in a debased world

Everybody must know by now that I can't make a speech, I can only read one – which isn't inappropriate when speaking to librarians. I must say I was pretty horrified when I was asked to do this today, but I felt I had to for several reasons. In the first place, you librarians, as guardians of the printed word, are such important members of society. Then I owed it to Neville Wran for his interest in the arts. We might have had some arch-Philistine, like others I shan't name. There are also sentimental reasons for my being here. The first day I made, or read a speech from my trembling paper, protesting against a project which could have destroyed Centennial and Moore Parks, the man who is now our Premier was on the same platform. Again we were together at the Opera House on an occasion when it seemed to many Australian artists and intellectuals that we were really getting somewhere at last. But we were slapped down. I like to think that before I die we shall achieve the state I still envisage and that Nev Wren may play an important part in accomplishing it. I know this is supposed to be an a-political occasion, but to be realistic, no occasion is a-political today.

Back to the Libr'y, however! I first came, or was brought to the Mitchell when I can't have been more than three or four years old. I had come with my parents to look at a collection of early New South Wales stamps given by my uncle H.L. White, a philatelist, ornithologist, and bibliophile of earlier this century. The collection was arranged in cabinets standing at the end of what is still the reading room of the Mitchell - before the sanctuary, as I see it. I got out of hand, as I usually did, and ran clattering over the polished floor, till the Librarian -her name was Miss Flower, I seem to remember -came up and said, 'SSShh! All the poor people are reading.' She seemed to imply they were in some way sick. I looked round and couldn't see any signs of sickness in the readers. It rather puzzled me, but she didn't give me time to work it out or ask questions. She led me up to an enormous, yellow-brown globe, and set it spinning to attract my attention. I found it momentarily of far more interest than any sheets of black old stamps or sick readers.

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However, in a couple of years I too, caught the reading sickness. It was my nurse Lizzie Clark from Carnoustie, Scotland, who infected me about the age of five: The fat cat sat on the mat - and all that. I never looked back. I was soon in a fever - while not understanding half of what I read - but reading and reading.

It was not till much later that libraries began playing a major part in my life. I have to confess I've always been intimidated by them. The Mitchell to this day frightens me stiff. So I think you should take pains to make yourselves less frightening to those likely to be frightened. In my teens I had a great affection for the City Library because you could take the books home - those old, lited, often rather smelly volumes. In the State Library and the hallowed Mitchell, the frivolous side of my nature finds itself at variance I can never concentrate. I am really more interested in people than ideas, so my attention continually strays from my book to the faces around me. Perhaps it's all to the good in a novelist, but it sometimes makes me feel an impostor sitting amongst so many serious people - even though we are united in our devotion to books - however different our approach and the results.

I've led a peculiar kind of life - in two hemispheres and a variety of spiritual worlds. I was sent to several schools and one university. I've had every opportunity for education, but I don't see myself as educated in the accepted sense - the sense respected by my colonial parents, and as discussed endlessly today in the press, on the radio, and the telly. To me, having gone through it all, real education is self-education, though of course you've got to get the nudge from somebody. I got very few nudges at the schools I went to, except from a man I thought mad at the time, and realised later that his clown's performance was that of a genius. At Cambridge the lecturers were deadly, with the exception of one visiting Frenchman. I more or less gave up lectures and dropped out into the library. To give them their due, my tutors gave me the nudge, and how grateful I am for the worlds of French and German literature they opened up.

And this is what my perhaps boring preamble is leading up to. I can't see that the debate by educational experts is getting us very far. Wide and independent reading – self-education - is what matters. And you, the librarians, are in the best position to give a lead to confused youth. I am not condemning our teachers, many of them genuinely dedicated,

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but finding it difficult to cope with over-populated classes, in what are often antiquated schools.. And when I say "librarians", I don't mean those in a great institution like this - where you don't have the same opportunities for contact with the ordinary or shy reader. I mean those of you in charge of suburban and country libraries. You hold the balance between hope and despair for starving intellectuals and embryo artists. You can feed the hungry and perhaps fire imaginations by gently suggesting.

And don't be too strait-laced. The puritan strain is one of the great flaws in the Australian character. Some of us are unable to distinguish between porn and bawdy – the sludge of today and the lusty tradition of world literature, as found in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Rabelais, to name a few exponents. I like to remind myself of the Dorset proverb, "God gave us meat, we have to go the Devil for sauce." Good God, yes: A spoonful of gamey sauce never harmed anybody. And how fashions change. It's incredible to think that Flaubert's great masterpiece Madame Bovary should have caused such a panic and a court case when it appeared last century, or that Lolita should have banned only recently. I remember hearing Sydney ladies who had gone to ingenious trouble and considerable expense to smuggle Nabokov's classic satire into Australia - to enjoy a perv - afterwards protesting with disgust, 'It's so boring

you can't read it!' So, let the bourgeoisie, the Festival of Light, or whomsoever, take heart. What they want to root out is in the Bible and the dictionary, anyway. The dictionary was one of my great reads as a child. Spending much of my time in the country, I might not have understood what country people were exploding about if I hadn't consulted the dictionary. My own explosive vocabulary was born in my early childhood - by life out of the dictionary.

Those early days when it is always morning! Time was endless. Even as a young man who had written a couple of insignificant novels, I felt I had endless time before me in which to write masterpieces. Now, perhaps because I am an old man, I am obsessed by the limitations of time - not only that it is running out for me personally, but for Western civilisation as a whole, and his retarded colony in particular. Whether I am deluded or not, it can only pay to pull ourselves together. Everything is happening too quickly. The pressure of circumstances and certain specific aspects of our plastic culture don't give us time to develop the art of thinking. Catchwords are popped into flabby minds by the media. The telly seduces us with

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hair-dos, the commentator's tie, a politician's dimple. Why, recently, our little terrier bitch got so excited, she darted forward and began smelling an alderman's dimple as he flashed it at us from the screen. Let me give you another instance of the dangers lurking in the box. I was discussing one of our politicians with a neighbour who shares my beliefs more or less. I ventured to suggest, 'He's an honest man.' My neighbour agreed, but at the same time he shook his head, 'Arr, but his image-his image won't get him anywhere!' In other words, it is not principles, sincerity, but the superficialities which count -the avalanche of sentimentality and technicoloured dishonesty. Unless we cultivate the habit of consulting the books in our libraries -unless we search and sift -toughen our minds -I feel we are lost - we cannot hope to decide for ourselves whether we really believe what the Americans, the British, the Soviet, or even some of our more abysmal politicians, and of course our newspaper proprietors, tell us we should.

The blight from the box is one of the most pernicious Twentieth Century diseases. If ever I appear on television, not from choice, but during some crisis when I feel I have to, immediately people I pass in the street start turning on sentimental smiles, even though I know the majority do not really approve of what I tell them. They probably wouldn't have understood the language I speak, anyway. Quite often when I talk to children, even adults, they look at me in blank surprise because I don't trot out the half-a-dozen telly clichés-for the most part gifts from our American overlords -with which so many Australians communicate today -when the minerals of language and thought are here in the libraries, waiting to be mined, as potent, as important for our future as uranium.

The wisdom which surpasses money, cars, swimming pools, and sport... It seems to me when I look around and see children toiling on the playing fields almost any day of the week that sport plays the major part in Australian education. A mother tells me, 'Oh well, if my children don't play sport they won't get good passes.' I like to think-I do believe that librarians can combat to a great extent this pathetic attitude. You're in a better position than the

teacher, because we're all of us a bit averse to teacher and school, and we're not inclined to think of you as crypto-teachers because your approach makes us feel more adult. I'm convinced it will be sharp wits -moral strength -not muscle -perhaps not even armaments - that will save us in a grim future. You librarians can offer us an antidote to mindlessness - and to

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worse, the dishonesties undermining society in every walk of life, every class of a supposedly classless democracy - together with the childish false optimism of jingle-land.

Time is running out! Even if the fat cat is still sitting on the mat, he won't be there much longer. It may appear a hopeless mission trying to stave off the collapse of a great civilization - particularly to shore up one like our own, still struggling to emerge from the colonial mists. But who knows, we may succeed in building something better through our collaboration - you the guardians of the printed word - we, the writers - all those who read and think for themselves - and any politician in whom we can still have faith.

Patrick White