

Ms Geraldine Brooks

The honorary degree of Doctor of Letters was conferred upon Geraldine Brooks by the Chancellor the Hon Justice Kim Santow at the Health Sciences graduation ceremony held at 11.30am on 30 March 2007.



The Chancellor and Ms Brooks, *photo, copyright Memento Photography.*

Citation

Chancellor, I have the honour to present Geraldine Brooks for the conferring of the degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*).

Geraldine Brooks is a renowned novelist, journalist, and war correspondent. She is a graduate in Arts, specialising in Government, from The University of Sydney.

In 2006 she won America's highest literary award - the Pulitzer Prize - for her novel, 'March'. In 1990 she was joint winner of the US Overseas Press Club Award for the best print coverage of the first Gulf War. After completing her studies on this campus in 1979, Geraldine Brooks became a cadet journalist with The Sydney Morning Herald, where an early stint on the racing desk became her first 'foreign assignment'. Soon she was off on a Shackleton scholarship from Melbourne to The Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. And from there she moved to The Wall Street Journal, soon to become its Middle East bureau chief.

Then, over a period of more than a decade, she worked as the Middle East correspondent for the Wall Street Journal. And so, during the Iran-Iraq war, the Palestinian uprising, the first Gulf War and the Eritrean independence war – to name but a few of the conflicts she has covered in that troubled region and in the Balkans - she came to talk to and understand Moslem women in a way that no male correspondent could ever really do. In due course, the insights gained were to be reflected in her book 'Nine Parts of Desire. The Hidden World of Islamic Women', published in 1995. In it she makes an impassioned plea for the West to take up the fight against the repression which afflicts so many Moslem women, from London to the Middle East.

But it was a very different environment – a village nestled in the peaceful fields of the English countryside – that inspired what The Guardian described as her 'staggering fictional debut'. A therapeutic ramble had caused her to stumble on the tiny town of Eyam, known as 'The Plague village' after it lost nearly all its citizens to bubonic plague in 1665. And so in 'Year of Wonders. A Novel of the Plague', published in 2002, she explores the imagined psychological traumas and relationships between the town's self-sacrificing inhabitants as they quarantine themselves against the outside world.

March is the book that won the Pulitzer Prize. And in this case the village responsible for the book's inception and conception was in Virginia, where Miss Brooks lived and where bullet-holes in trees still bear testament to the Civil War. And so her mind turned to another American iconic book – Little Women by Louisa May

Alcott - and the one pivotal character of whom little is said or known. For Mr March, father of the four 'Little Women', was away at the Civil War. What is known is that his character was based on Alcott's own father, a renowned philosopher and feminist. And so Ms Brooks constructs an exquisitely written imaginative story of how the early experiences of Mr March in a slave-owning community, and then in the brutal battlefields of the war, shaped his relationships with his family. It is an imagination set in 1860s America, yet suffused with her own perceptions of the harsh realities and psychological consequences of modern war in the Middle East.

On her own account, her international proclivities were evident at an early age; 'Foreign Correspondence. A Pen Pal's Journey from Down Under to All Over', published in 1998, documents her adult travels to meet her childhood pen-pals, scattered from Israel to France to New York City. It is perhaps hardly surprising that she concludes that there is a universality about ordinary human hopes and desires.

Geraldine Brooks has crossed the literary genres – from journalism and essays to novels. Her signal success in all of these is underpinned by a depth and breadth of historic scholarship, an elegance of prose, and an uncanny ability to draw lessons from history and small particularities in ways which generalise across time and place.

She is an exemplar of the kind of internationalism of which this international university feels justly proud.

Chancellor, I have great pleasure in presenting to you, for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa), author and journalist, Geraldine Brooks.