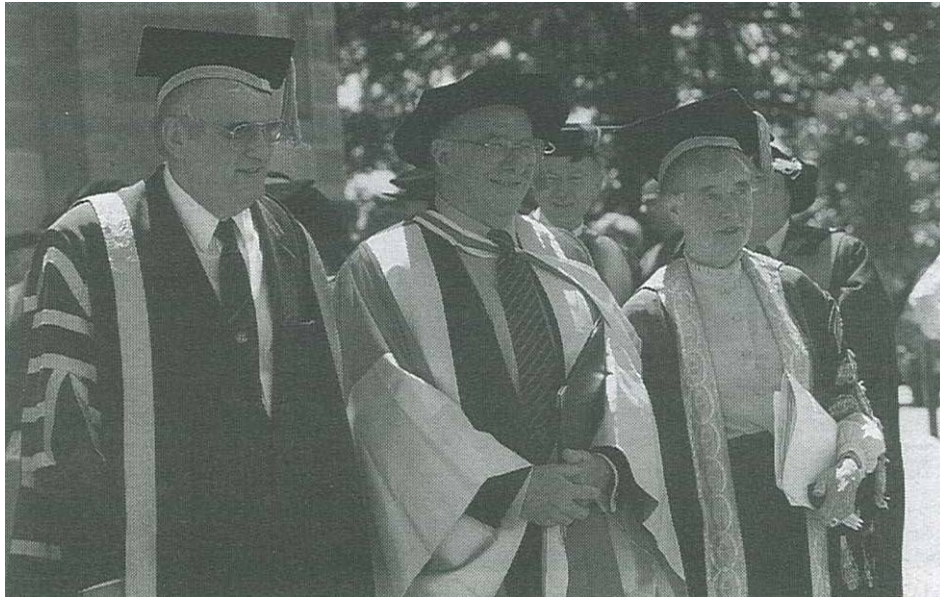


Mr Clive James AM

The degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) was conferred upon Clive James by Chancellor Emeritus Professor Dame Leonie Kramer AC DBE at an Arts ceremony held in the Great Hall on 29 October 1999.

Dr James gave the occasional address at the ceremony and a dinner in his honour was held in Maclaurin Hall that evening.



Vice-Chancellor Professor Gavin Brown, Clive James and Chancellor Dame Leonie Kramer face the media after the ceremony, *photo, Tracey Schramm, 'The University of Sydney News' 4 November 1999, University of Sydney Archives.*



Clive James with his mother, Mrs Nora James, *photo, Tracey Schramm, 'The University of Sydney News' 4 November 1999, University of Sydney Archives.*

Citation

Chancellor

I have the honour to present Clive James for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*).

Clive James has said of himself, "All I do for a living is put words beside each other." This modest statement gives no hint of his passion for language and his stylistic flair. These are the talents which have made him

widely known as broadcaster, television personality, script writer (as well as director and performer) for the Cambridge Footlights Theatre, contributor to and editor of *Honi Soit*, poet, novelist and critic.

The *enfant terrible* from Kogarah, dressing up as the Flash of Lightning and terrorising the neighbourhood, is honoured here today for his learning, scholarship and the success of his mission as a critic. Despite his beguiling wit and facetiousness, he is a serious and, indeed, profound analyst of art, literature, music, theatre, architecture, places and people, and cultural fashions and trends. "A serious note," he writes, "can be struck in casual journalism, and struck most truly when the touch is light." James's criticism is written in the spirit of Johnson's remark, "That book is good in vain which the reader throws away."

Literary journalism, Clive James points out, bears "the brunt of new creative work", but the academy has other tasks, and can be hostile, even contemptuous, of journalists. His provocative response is that, even at its worst, literary journalism is "not so dispensable as the average of academic writing", and the relationship between the two "is really a struggle for the same blanket by two people in bed together, so a truce is the only workable outcome."

Clive James entered the Faculty of Arts in 1957 because he liked to draw, and graduated with honours in English in 1961. In *Unreliable Memoirs*, he describes his University of Sydney's career as two parts - "one curricular, and the other not". He claims to have been "always careful not to read anything on the course", and that only his ability "to conjure a fluent essay out of thin air" got him admitted to third year honours. Nonetheless, he acknowledges, with no concern for the inconsistency, that much of what he read in his courses here remained with him "when all the theoretical blubber surrounding it had rotted away."

In Cambridge, he followed a similar path to academic success - neglecting formal studies for self-education, in languages, theatre and the reading of his choice. A proposed PhD on Shelley was set aside in favour of teaching himself Italian.

In his autobiographical trilogy, he admits to all kinds of misdemeanours and weaknesses, but his sharp observation annotates the social and cultural history of his years in Australia, London and Cambridge. The writer, despite his frank confessions, leads a private life beneath the surface, and we also find him disguised in his seriously effective fictions. In the novel whose Japanese protagonist is puzzled by the confusing idioms of English, his creator displays his own erudition and alertness to the absurdities and nuances of the language.

If he is an elusive figure in much of his work, he nevertheless in the poems - through the verse letter, parody, satire or lyric - speaks to us directly.

"Chill the champagne and polish the crystal goblets!
The book of my enemy has been remaindered
And I am glad."

Or from *To Martin Amis: a letter from Indianapolis*

"I offer you, through gritted teeth, my warm
Congratulations on another coup.
Success for you's so soon become the norm,
Your fresh young ego might be knocked askew.
A widespread fear, I find. Your father thinks so too."

James deploys his critical weapons too with the daring and confidence born of a remarkable range of reading, scholarship and linguistic skills. His style is subtle but unambiguous and he has no hesitation in passing judgments on his subjects. He reinstates criticism as an evaluative art, and in making it accessible, consciously swims against the fashionable tide of theoretical argument and narrow technical analysis. That takes courage as well as intelligence.

Fortunately, the *enfant terrible* has kept pace with the sophisticated world traveller and television star. We thank him for his insight that, at heart, we are all prepotent gazelles, possessed of such formidable mental capacity that our very sophistication makes us underperform on mere intelligence tests. We see this by watching a decoy character called Clive James, who is variously a fat man jogging, an insecure Australian on the fringe of London parties or the last freelance literary journalist.

The final description is real.

Chancellor, I have great pleasure in presenting Clive James for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa).