

Arnold Zable

Writer, Storyteller, Educator, and Human Rights Advocate

Message to the ASRC



“It is a privilege to be asked to be an ambassador for the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. The work the centre does is extraordinary. It expresses that which is best in the human character. The centre is a house of welcome. It is a place where refugees and asylum seekers feel at home. It acts as a bridge between a traumatic past and a hopeful future. It provides a sense of family to many who have lost their families, or who are separated from them. One of the most devastating aspects of being an asylum seeker is a sense of isolation. At the centre the asylum seeker is relieved of their loneliness, and surrounded by people who care. The help received is both practical and sublime, with material aid for many who are living on virtually nothing. The centre provides the basic necessities, advice and good counsel, and a listening ear in an informal, caring environment.

“There is a more personal reason why I am thrilled to be associated with the centre. My parents lost almost their entire families to the Holocaust. They too were once in search of a place where they could feel at home. In the 1930s, my mother, a young woman at the time, was deported from Australia within 15 months of her arrival. She was about to be sent back to Poland. As it turned out, this would have almost certainly resulted in her death. At the last moment she found refuge in New Zealand. One could say that I am alive today because my mother was a queue jumper.

“She then spent years battling to bring over her loved ones. She succeeded in bringing over the man she married on the eve of her departure. She never forgave herself for not being able to rescue the rest of her family. She did all she could. She knocked on the doors of bureaucrats, petitioned politicians. But the doors were shut. The one light in her life, she once



told me, was the knowledge that there were people who had helped her in her darkest times. She never forgot that handful of people who enabled her to find refuge in New Zealand. They included lawyers who worked to help her, the family that took her in and sponsored her in New Zealand, and the people who spent time with her when her sense of isolation and despair was almost unbearable.

“This is why I am obsessed by the journeys of the displaced as a writer. And this is why I am drawn to the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. It is a place to come in out of the cold and receive sustenance. It shows what our country can be, at its best – a place that is based on the understanding that give or take a few generations, except for the indigenous peoples, we all come from elsewhere. It comes down to the basic understanding that with just one shift in the wind, we can all become strangers; and in need of a place where people are willing to welcome a stranger. We would have to knock on closed doors, and hope that the doors will be opened. The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre is a place where the door is open.”

Biography

Arnold Zable is a writer, storyteller, and refugee advocate with a doctorate from the School of Creative Arts, Melbourne University. His books include *Jewels and Ashes*, *The Fig Tree* and three novels, *Café Scheherazade*, *Scraps of Heaven*, and *Sea of Many Returns*. His most recent book is *Violin Lessons*. He is the author of numerous stories, columns, essays and features, and is co-writer of the play *Kan Yama Kan*, in which asylum seekers tell their stories. He was an artist consultant to the recent Asylum Seeker Resource Centre production *Not Just My Story*.

Zable's stories and books focus on the journeys of displaced peoples. He writes about the lives of those who are forced to seek refuge. He speaks and writes about memory and history, displacement and the multiplicity of cultures within Australia. He has been a visiting lecturer at Deakin, Melbourne, Monash, RMIT and Latrobe Universities, a writer-in-residence at Victoria University. He has worked in a range of cross-cultural projects and conducted workshops for many groups including refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, the homeless, the hearing impaired, and most recently, problem gamblers and survivors of the Black Saturday bushfires. He is president of Melbourne PEN, a patron of Sanctuary, a board member of Researchers for Asylum seekers, and a former member of the Victorian Immigration Museum advisory committee.

