

LAUNCH OF WAITING ROOM BY GABRIELLE CAREY

Launch Speech by Lucinda Holdforth

It is an honour this evening to introduce **Waiting Room** by my friend Gabrielle Carey.

We gather under very special circumstances. As many of you will know, Joan Carey, Gabrielle's modest, generous mother – who has also been a steadfast wife, active citizen, talented cook and gardener, ethical individual and cultivated woman – Joan Carey whose story is at the heart of Gabrielle's book – is gravely ill.

I know all of us here send our love and good wishes to Joan and Gabrielle and the whole family.

Joan is so tenderly and gently revealed in **Waiting Room** that those who have read the book must surely feel we've come to know her.

When Gabrielle told me that, despite her illness, Joan was still able to take pleasure from reading a poem aloud, I was immensely moved and not surprised.

Now, in **Waiting Room**, to paraphrase W.B. Yeats, Joan has been gathered "into the artifice of eternity" - beautifully memorialised in this work of art created by her daughter.

I first heard about this project when I met Gabrielle at *Varuna, The Writers House* some years ago – Gabrielle didn't say too much then, but I understood that her research related to her mother and to the history of the West Australian vineyards.

And that's just about all I can recall – partly because Gabrielle is way too modest ever to go on in detail about her work, but mostly because that connection with the wine industry seemed to provide a good reason for us to drink a great deal each night.

But ever since then, I have been waiting for **Waiting Room**.

It is indeed worth waiting for. It has all the shimmer and depth that comes with intense application, great artistry, true feeling and a long ripening.

Once when I was struggling with my own writing I told Gabrielle that the book I was working on seemed a bit dull – and as usual she said just the right thing, which certainly wasn't some platitude that she was sure it all was going to be just fine.

Instead she said firmly that dullness was the worst of all literary crimes and that I was to go back and ensure that there was not a dull word.

It was excellent advice.

And when you read **Waiting Room** you'll see how the master does it.

I began reading **Waiting Room** one evening at home a few weeks ago. I went on reading it late into the night. And the next day I took **Waiting Room** to my office and read it under my desk, steadily ignoring all the demands of work, until it was finished.

I had to finish it, because only then could I could breathe out once again.

While the writing isn't at all rushed, while each sentence has immense integrity, yet the momentum is so strong, you turn each page fascinated by what you are reading and craving to know what happens next. For me it is a rare and wonderful thing to be so engrossed. Not a wasted word, not a dull moment, not a break in energy or rhythm. Compressed and intense, yet also 'wise, sorrowful and graceful' as Gail Jones beautifully puts it.

And yet, as I was thinking about this evening and the prospect of making a few public remarks about **Waiting Room**, I realised to my surprise that I felt strangely shy, even a little reticent.

It's not just because of the sad timing of the launch of this work. Although of course that's part of it.

Nor it is because, in reading **Waiting Room** you feel as though you have been given a very private, intimate glimpse of Gabrielle Carey's world.

Although you certainly have.

Brigie and Jimmy, this seems like a good moment specifically to acknowledge you and to thank you both. You'll each go on to do wonderful things in your lives in your right – but I can tell you that by letting your mother freely do her stuff you have already made a national contribution. And you both come out of it beautifully. Although I warn you, having let her go this far, there's probably more to come.

But these things are not really the source of my shyness.

I think there is another reason. **Waiting Room** is in the tradition of the personal essay, that silver stream of idiosyncratic reflection that finds its modern originator in Michel de Montaigne, who knew that every individual bears the whole stamp of the human condition.

Waiting Room is an example of this art form at its finest. Which means that while it is unflinchingly about one woman and her relationships and her world, it is equally about each one of us.

It is about one self – the insightful, honest, inquisitive and funny Gabrielle Carey – and about the perennial challenge she confronts of understanding and transcending that self.

And so her work speaks to all our selves, our preoccupations, our histories, our large hopes and our small tragedies.

And most of all, like all the great personal essays, it offers us a conversation, so when you read **Waiting Room** you'll discover yourself chatting back to Gabrielle on all kinds of things. Perhaps nodding in vehement agreement, perhaps raising questions, perhaps actively disputing. It's a book that raises so many interesting questions. And in the process of hearing yourself think, you find yourself discovering more and more about your own values and preoccupations.

I guess that is why the personal essay is so personal.

The way you respond to it reveals to you something of your self.
And that explains why I felt shy.

As for Joan Carey, of course, no work of art supplants the presence of someone we love and respect, whose company gives us solace and joy.
Waiting Room is a beautiful salute from a daughter to her mother.

I've now read **Waiting Room** two and a half times and each time it brings fresh pleasures.

The essay covers vast human terrain from brain surgery to cosmetic dentistry to cosmic analysis, from pikelets to pole dancing to Protestantism.

It is a powerful interrogation of what it means to be a woman, an artist, a mother, a daughter, a citizen, a human being and an Australian.

And it is a questing study of the legacies that one generation passes on to the next and the complex dance between nature, nurture, health, money resistance, fortune and memory that combine to formulate each one of us.

As always with Gabrielle's writing, there are no false notes or easy answers. Her literary voice embraces the full range of human experience - sad and funny, wise and foolish, focused and digressive.

And **Waiting Room** has one of the most beautiful and satisfying endings of any book I have ever read.

Michel de Montaigne wrote his essays – his attempts – over many years and together they form one of the great works – a portrait of one man, and therefore all men.

Through her various writings, I think that is Gabrielle's project as well. A portrait of one woman, and all of us. I am looking forward to all the books to come, and the privilege of watching Gabrielle watch life.

And now it is my pleasure to declare the wait is over, and **Waiting Room** is launched.