

Thank you all very much.

I don't know why but I'm reminded of the deathless words of Robert Benchley of the New Yorker. He said: 'It took me fifteen years to discover that I had no talent for writing -- but I couldn't give it up because by that time I was famous.'

Andrew Jaspan, as you know, is editor-in-chief of the 'Age' and we all wish him well. And Neil Mitchell, as you also know, presents the morning show on 3AW and Steve Bracks wishes he didn't.

But I'm here to tell you that neither of them is pursuing his chosen career. Like so many journalists, what they've always longed to do is to write fiction.

And tonight both have finally climbed the mountain. Expect to see both short-listed for the Miles Franklin Award. I thank them both for their generosity – and their lurid imaginations.

This is my third visit to the Quills. I'm now teasing fate because my first two visits here were disasters – utter and complete. The last time I was here I had to announce the winner of the Graham Perkin Award.

Now the speaker that night happened to be Cheryl Kernot, who was at that time a shadow minister in the Labor Opposition. She gave one of the most original speeches I've ever heard about journalism. In essence what she said was that all of the media was a plot against her and this had to stop because it was extremely naughty.

After she spoke I got up to announce the Perkin winner. The winner happened to be Paul McGeough. And he'd just written a long piece about Cheryl that she hated, although that particular article wasn't in the portfolio that won him the award.

To make everything worse, I'd just had an eye operation and couldn't see too well. I ad-libbed my way through the preliminaries but I knew I had to look down and read the exact words of the citation for Paul.

And when I dropped my eyes and stole a glance at the citation I knew I was in trouble. I couldn't read a bloody thing. All the lines swam upwards and the type got smaller from left to right. I knew I was going to have trouble reading it and I began to panic.

Anyway I managed to get to the point where I said: 'The winner is Paul McGeough.'

And as I did so there was this loud shout. Oh, no!

It was Cheryl, sitting at the front table just below me. The Perkin Award was another plot against her.

I struggled my way into the next sentence as it curled its way up the page and there was another shout. Oh, no!

Another sentence. Oh, no!

And so it went for about six sentences.

It was like a vaudeville routine – the half-blind leading the completely paranoid. I haven't been back since – till now.

[In passing, congratulate Perkin winner. Quite simply the best award in journalism.]

As I said, that was my second time at the Quills. The first time was 1996, the first year of the awards. Steve Harris had told me about his idea for the awards and I rather admired what he was doing. I not only came along: I entered a piece for the sports writing award. It wasn't anything much but I gave it a rough chance.

Now a few months earlier my good mate Andy Rule had rung me up. He was doing a story on Harry White, the jockey who had won four Melbourne Cups. Did I know any good stories about Harry?

I told him I knew a beauty and Andy put it to Harry, and Harry confirmed it. Andy used the anecdote to start his piece and I forgot about it.

On the night of the Quills the judges said I'd done a fair job with my piece and placed me second.

The winner was Andy Rule for his piece on Harry White, which, everyone agreed, started with a great anecdote. I hasten to say Andy's was the better piece and deserved to win – and, besides, Andy needed the money.

That first night also led to a traumatic experience for another of my friends, Ross Stevenson. Ross enjoyed the Quills very much and had one or two drinks afterwards. At 5 am, half an hour before he was due to start the breakfast show on 3AW, he fell asleep and didn't wake up. Dean Banks did the show by himself.

Nothing too terrible there. The trauma was to come.

Steve Price, who was then the programme manager at AW, piled up six telephone books on the floor. Then he climbed on top of them, and gave Ross a dressing down about appropriate behaviour and his responsibilities to the station and to the nation. Poor Ross, understandably, has never quite got over this -- the ultimate indignity -- and I understand perfectly.

To be honest, I don't really know why I'm here tonight. Well, I do really.

Mike Smith, another old friend, told me I wanted to make a speech.

I said, no I didn't. Mike's now a PR man and they're pretty devious people. He then mentioned some photos he had of me frolicking with Fred Hilmer and Margo Kingston and I thought it best to agree to speak.

What to talk about? I told Mike I didn't want to talk about myself. But then I also realised I didn't want to make another of those serious speeches about journalism.

You know the ones. About how journalism is being threatened by the defamation laws and craven politicians. Or the ones about how my paper's circulation is going down but its AB readers are going up and isn't this terrific. Soon we'll have only eighteen readers but they'll all be millionaires.

Or the ones about ethical dilemmas and the responsibilities of the media to society and the unborn and the environment and so on.

I've never gone along with that stuff. One of my heroes – H. L. Mencken, the Baltimore newspaperman – called it the tin-horn statesman stuff.

As he said back in the 1920s, the main troubles with journalism are technical, not ethical. They don't come from outside but from inside.

And it's still true. The main troubles with journalism are sloppy writing and sloppy editing, advocacy masquerading as reporting, gossip masquerading as reporting, stories that abound in loose ends and clichés, stories that are half-right, stories that insult the reader's intelligence.

In other words most of the problems of journalism are our fault. They're matters of craft, not ethics. Why, I wonder, when we get on public platforms, do we talk about everything but the words? The words are the only thing the readers judge us by.

But I didn't want to tip-toe into this minefield either, because it might get too serious. So I thought I might – briefly, I promise -- use a few of my own experiences to show how journalism has changed -- mostly for the better and occasionally for the worse.

I learnt one of the best lessons about journalism when I was only one or two years into my teens. This concerned reporting footy for the Bendigo Advertiser. One had to write long match reports at a penny a line. And if you wrote 'Smith then stab-passed to Jones', you had better get it right.

Because Mrs Smith lived just down the road. And she'd come knocking on your door to tell you with some violence that her little boy Merv actually kicked a torpedo punt, not a stab pass, and that you were an idiot, and that her husband Stan, a notorious thumper, was coming around to deal with you once he'd been thrown out of the pub. It was a good way to learn about accuracy.

When I came to the Sun News-Pictorial around 1960 the world wasn't like it is now. The 'Sun' had a style book, a good one, and I read it diligently. Under 'P' was listed the word 'pregnant'. The entry said this word was not to be used in copy without reference to the editor. Now the editor was a very impressive man, but even at the tender age of eighteen I couldn't see how he could be responsible for every pregnancy in Australia.

What that proves, I think, is that political correctness isn't new: it just means different things in different eras.

One of the worst jobs in those days was reporting the church sermons on Sunday. One had to wade through all this sanctimonious claptrap to find a sentence here and there that was worth reporting. Eventually both Melbourne papers stopped reporting church sermons, and we all thought this was progress.

Now we read sermons, terribly earnest, written on op-ed pages not by clerics but by journalists and academics, and I wonder whether this is progress. I saw a short piece in a Sydney paper recently that carried the byline of four academics. How did they do it? Did each of them write every fourth word?

At the Sun I saw my first proprietorial figure and one night he did something that lodged in my mind. Sir John Williams wasn't really a proprietor: he didn't have an equity interest in the place, just enough shares to qualify as a director. But he was the managing director.

And on this particular night Mr Menzies, the Prime Minister, had announced in a fit of nostalgia that he wanted to call the new decimal currency the Royal. Just about everyone in the office thought the idea absurd, but it was news and the story was running as a straight report on page one.

About 11 o'clock Jack Williams appeared in the office. He'd heard about the story. He took off his coat, sat down at a clapped-out Remington typewriter that sounded like a machine gun with constipation and started to tap out an editorial.

It was only about six pars and it ran on page one from the second edition onwards. The prose was simple and direct and about as perfect as such things can ever be. The editorial said the Royal was a silly idea that belonged to another time and place.

Sir John also had a coupon put in the second edition, asking readers to vote on whether they wanted the new bank note to be called the Royal. By a majority of about ninety per cent they said they didn't.

It was a fine study in the art of leading by example.

And what one saw was a man who was sure of his craft and in touch with his readers. He'd just shown us all why he deserved to be the boss.

I've always been glad I started on the Sun. One had to write tightly to get in. There was no place in the news pages for humbug or fatigued introspection -- just news, news and more news. And there were some fine writers there -- the likes of Harry Gordon, Lyle Turnbull, Keith Dunstan and Doug Wilkie. They too were an example to all of us.

The ethos of the place was dead simple. There were no classifieds to speak of. You couldn't hide. Everything depended on circulation. Everything therefore depended on engaging with readers.

I've been reading the Sun since I was a small boy and it pleases me that it has not only endured but is today, without question, the best it's ever been.

When I went to the Age it was the start of a wonderful adventure.

What made the Age such an adventure was Graham Perkin. He was an extraordinary journalist -- and not for the reasons that are often put forward.

He could do it all, and he did it all just about every night. He wrote captions, rewrote news stories, wrote headlines, fiddled with editorials, cropped pictures, laid out pages and shouted praise and abuse across the newsroom.

He was also a man of unusual presence, a brilliant wit and a good bloke, but these were the lesser things. He was first of all a craftsman.

His Age had a big wide agenda. He was as interested in police rounds stories as he was in political stories. He was as interested in local photos as he was in foreign news. And success came to the Age, not because of cost-cutting or clever management -- but simply because people out there thought it was a good read -- it had a pulse -- and more and more of them wanted to buy it.

It was a case of if you get the words right, the rest -- the profits, the circulation, the ads -- will come to you. Or, to put it another way, if you get the top line right, the bottom line automatically comes right.

The Age didn't pander to anyone. Once, when I was finance editor, we ran a story about how Comalco, the aluminium company, had -- with obvious intent -- allocated shares in its public float to politicians, who all made large profits. The story caused quite a fuss.

Next day I saw Graham Perkin sailing across the newsroom towards me. He was literally quivering with laughter.

'What's happened?' I asked.

'Comalco's cancelled all their ads,' he said, and fell about laughing.

Comalco came back.

There were lots of characters there. We took on Neil Mitchell as a cadet and we all said he was just about the best natural we had ever seen. His copy was just so clean. So when he was only a lad of about nineteen we made him industrial roundsman.

Now the industrial round in those days was a hangover from the 1920s and a hangout for dinosaurs. No journalist today would put up with the house rules that prevailed down there.

To get a story you had to go drinking at the John Curtin Hotel every night. About 8:30 or 9 pm the bloke who ran the postal union and spoke in the jargon of the 1917 Revolution would finally call you 'Brother' and consent to give you the story you were expected to write for page one. Neil used to start filing about 9.45 or later.

And as I said, Neil's copy had been so clean -- and now he was dropping in the odd ninety-word sentence with about six subordinate clauses.

I used to get him on the phone after he'd filed and tease him by saying: 'You wouldn't be little bit smashed, would you?'

He'd deny it all in his thin teenager's voice that had now taken on a slight slur. He worked like that for years down there.

Getting smashed very night -- not because he liked a drink, but because he was dedicated. Greater love hath no man.

One of the other characters at the Age was the then chairman, Colonel Neill. He was a former British army officer with the Seaforth Highlanders who had married into the Syme family. He had a large Prussian head, wore a monocle, was hopelessly right wing, and -- even though he was quite elderly -- used to fly a light plane.

He'd land in some outlandish place in Africa, climb out of the plane, screw in his monocle, and ask: 'Any Seaforth Highlanders here?' We had a rule -- never, never talk to him about flying. We all lived in fear that he'd ask us to take a spin with him.

Now the Age in those days used to sponsor the Racehorse of the Year Award and one year the colonel asked me to write his speech for him. I was sitting next to Sir Eugene Gorman, the famous QC, at the dinner. And while the colonel was speaking Gorman leaned over and said to me: 'His speech is a bit better this year.'

Being young and stupid I said: 'I wrote it.'

When the colonel finished speaking and muted applause broke out, Pat Gorman stood up and started shouting 'Author! Author!' and pointed at me. I learnt a little that night.

One day during the Kerr election the colonel came down and told me, very calmly and evenly, that he had been thinking about things and had decided most of the staff were probably communists. He then told me there was a good possibility that I might be a communist too. He said these things, but he didn't interfere. Ranald Macdonald -- thank, God -- ran the place.

I also met old Sir Warwick Fairfax back then. He certainly interfered at the Sydney Morning Herald, but he never interfered with Age editorial. The only times he rang me when I was editor was when he had spotted a story in the paper that he thought was exceptionally well written.

Old Wokka was quite strange: he pranced about in opera capes, made the staff in Sydney attend performances of his plays, and gave the impression that God asked him for advice most days. But he cared about words and was quite nimble with them himself.

I often think about those old-time proprietors. They were a mischievous lot -- the Beaverbrooks and Northcliffes and the Wokkas, but they also understood how newspapers were put together, and they appreciated any piece of reporting or layout that was done with style.

Reporters used to get out of the office every day then. They'd start returning by the dozen around 6 o'clock. When a freakish rainstorm flooded Elizabeth Street in the 1970s we put the story together by taking one or two pars from about twenty reporters who had witnessed it on their way back to the office.

Things have changed a bit these days. Too much work is done on telephones, where you can't see the face of the bloke who's lying to you. And for every reporter out in the field, there seems to be three or four functionaries back in the office trying not only to manage them but also to anticipate events.

A few years ago I was standing with an interstate reporter watching the Melbourne Cup field go out. We were both nervous, as you always are before a Cup, because you haven't a clue about what you'll be writing and it's all going to be decided in a fraction over three minutes.

Anyway, while we were watching the parade my mate's mobile phone went off. It was his sports editor.

'What shape's your story going to take?' the sports editor asked.

My mate launched into an explosion of obscenities, loud enough to turn heads in the mounting yard, and went on to make the rather good point that if he knew who was going to win the race, he wouldn't have to work for such a dopey sports editor because he could live off the punt.

After the Age I worked as a freelance for around twenty-five years, apart from a few years at the old Herald, where Neil Mitchell and I and a lot of others tried to save it, did a lot of things that we're all proud of, but ultimately failed. All we managed to do was create Steve Price as a media superstar. I blame Neil for this.

While I was a freelance I managed to meet, ever so briefly, another proprietor, perhaps the strangest of all, Conrad Black. He had this weird slinky walk, as though he was a vegetarian skier who had just bought a new four-wheel drive. His body language said he was deliriously pleased with himself.

Now he's in a little trouble. In the unlikely event of him going to jail I hope he doesn't persist with that sinuous walk -- particularly when he's going to the showers. If he does, he'll be in a lot more trouble than he's in now.

I wish I could have talked more about radio and television tonight, because I know so many of you come from those places, but my experience of both is slight. I can, however, offer a word of advice about television.

I was once asked to be one of the three broadcasters at the big international race meeting in Hong Kong. It was a disaster.

My tongue seemed twice as thick as normal, I couldn't see the horses properly -- mainly because they asked me to describe the horses with my back to them -- and there was this fascist in my earpiece who kept saying: 'Keep talking, Les. Wing it.'

I left the course thinking it was one of the dumbest things I'd ever done. On the way back to the hotel I stopped to see Colin Hayes, the trainer, who had been taken to hospital with a heart condition the day before. Colin was sitting up in bed watching a two-hour replay of the day's racing.

The hospital only had the Chinese-language channel. And there I was talking in dubbed Cantonese. And it sounded so fluent, so relaxed, so natural. I learnt something that day too.

If you're going to do television and you're no good at it, make sure it's dubbed into Cantonese.

Freelancing was the best time I've had in journalism. And I now know why. I'd got back to the very reason I'd fallen in love with journalism in the first place.

I'm convinced there are only two reasons for being a journalist.

One is that you're curious about the world and the people in it, and this is where political correctness, from either the left or the right, is a danger... because political correctness, by its very definition, is hostile to curiosity. It says, in effect, you've got to look at the world through a keyhole, not a big bay window.

And the other reason for being a journalist is because you love to write. The rest is all dross. All journalists are ever remembered for are their words.

I thank you all for this award tonight.

I really don't deserve it.

I can think of a dozen people who should get it before me.

But I'm going to take it, and gratefully. It makes up for that one Andy Rule beat me for at the Quills ten years ago.

Thank you all.