Good evening everyone and thank you for having me here tonight. It's a real honour to have the opportunity to speak to you all, although – I must confess – I did wonder whether I was the best candidate to speak to a room of educational leaders at an educational leadership conference. For those of you who look for new pedagogical insight from your conference speakers, I'm afraid I'm probably going to disappoint you. I'm certainly no expert in pedagogy. I never studied education at university. I have never taught in the Australian public education system, and I still get my Pasi Sahlbergs and Sir Kenneth Robinsons all mixed up.

As much as I am no educational leader, and certainly never will be, I am, however, a product of the South Australian public education system, and it is from this position – as a beneficiary – that I address you all tonight. I believe that the nature and quality of my public schooling in this state is the primary reason why I have been able to achieve success in my chosen career as a novelist, editor and writer.

In many ways, what I want to talk to you about tonight should come as no surprise. I don’t speak to you with the intention to elucidate, or to indulge in didacticism or to challenge. Rather, this speech – in many ways – is an address of gratitude. I am the daughter of a public school principal, and I know how demanding and taxing your occupation is. I also know that it can be a thankless job. Those in educational leadership spend an incredible amount of time managing conflict of every kind under onerous circumstances, and often without enough feedback, support and encouragement.

All too often, the ripple effect of our actions extends beyond the periphery of our knowing. We do not always receive opportunities to hear about the long-term results of our work. So, tonight, let me remind you of how your brilliance, commitment and
dedication as primary school leaders shapes adult lives and careers, by using my own as an example.
I’d like to begin by talking a little about what it is that I have done since finishing school, thirteen years ago. After all, the true value of an education lies in how it continues to shape one’s life after it has formally concluded.

In 2003, my first year out of high school, I left my home country of Australia for Sauðárkrókur, an isolated fishing village in the north of Iceland, on a twelve-month student exchange with Rotary. This small town lies snug in the side of a fjord: a clutch of little buildings facing an iron-grey sea, the mountains looming behind. When I arrived it was January, and the days were gripped by darkness for twenty hours at a time. The daylight was nothing more than a brief blue twilight that would slowly arrive then disappear back into night after no more than four hours. There were no trees. The town’s houses were hostage to snow, and in the distance the north sea met the north sky in a suggestion of oblivion. It felt like the edge of the world.

I soon became intensely lonely. The community was small and tightly knit and I was an outsider. I was the exchange student. Everyone knew who I was – cars would slow to a crawl as passengers gawked out of the window to stare at my foreign face – but few people approached me. For the first time in my life I felt socially isolated, and my feelings of alienation were compounded by the claustrophobic winter darkness and the constant confinement indoors. I turned to writing for company, to fill the black hours. I sought shelter in libraries and consolation in books.

It was during these first difficult months of my exchange that I travelled through a place called Vatnsdalshólur. Returning northwards after a visit in the south, my host family and I drove through an unusual tract of landscape: a valley mouth pimpled with hillocks of earth. When asked if the area was significant, my host parents pointed to three small hills nestled closely together. Over one hundred years ago, they said, a woman called Agnes had been beheaded there. She was the last person to be executed in Iceland.

I was immediately intrigued. What had she done? What had happened? Over the next few months I discovered that Agnes was a 34-year-old servant woman who had been beheaded on January 12, 1830, for her role in the 1828 murders of two men, and the
arson attack that attempted to destroy their bodies. It was a tragic tale. Agnes had been thought of as an ‘inhumane witch, stirring up murder’, and had been unequivocally condemned by her community. And yet, I felt an uncanny kinship with this dead, convicted murderess. Retrospectively, I believe the strange, isolated place of her death resonated with my own feelings of loneliness at the time; that I thought of Agnes as a fellow outsider in a remote Icelandic community.

Over time my loneliness eased and I fell deeply in love with Iceland, finding another home in that small town of Sauðárkrókur. The long dark days grew brighter until the sun ceased to set altogether. I made friends, learned the Icelandic language, and spent my days of compulsory attendance at the local school scribbling poems in the margins of my books. I wrote constantly, and my interest in the story of Agnes’s 1830 execution intensified as I learned more about Icelandic culture and history. Surely, I thought, there was more to this woman’s character than the ‘monster’ spoken of in the records I found in the local library.

I returned to Australia in 2004 and began a Bachelor of Creative Arts at Flinders University, in a specialised Creative Writing stream. Finding myself alone in a land where I – at least initially – understood little and could barely communicate had given me a renewed appreciation of the power and the potential of words and how we use them. Reading and writing had offered me both escape and refuge from the difficulties of living in an alien culture, and, as my respect and awareness of language increased, I had realised that I wanted to pursue a career in literature.

Throughout my three-year degree, thoughts of Agnes continued to seep through the layers of my consciousness. I dreamt of her frequently. I had what you might call, a quiet preoccupation with a ghost. By 2008, when I began my Honours degree, I decided I needed to research this woman’s life and write about her. Who was she? What had her early years been like? What forces had shaped Agnes, or at least contributed to the trajectory of her life and its brutal end? I wanted to find the woman behind the stereotypes. I didn’t want to protest her guilty conviction, or turn her into an angel or victim—to do so would be just as ridiculous as representing her as unequivocally evil. Rather, I wanted to discover something of Agnes’s humanity, and explore her contradictions, her ambiguity. Writing this book, I decided, would be an act of empathy.
It would be an attempt to tell the story of the murders and the events leading to Agnes's execution from her perspective.

Of course, it's one thing to be haunted by a ghost, or an idea, or something similarly indistinct, and another thing entirely to set it down in ink. I realised, soon after beginning my Honours thesis, that the research necessary to write about Agnes with accuracy and plausibility would take more time and resources than were available to me during one year of study. My Honours thesis became a PhD research proposal, and by 2009 I was began conducting the intensive biographical research that would form the basis of what later became my debut novel, *Burial Rites*.

Writing that book was one of the hardest things I have ever done. The research into Agnes's life and the times in which she lived took two years of full time work, and took me to archives, farms and gravesites all over Iceland. I wrote 50,000 words during this time of research, then – feeling compelled to stick to what was established and known about Agnes and the murders – started the book over again from scratch from a position of increased familiarity. In 2011, for five months straight, I sat at my computer from eight in the morning until I'd written 1000 words, just to get the thing finished. Some days I was done by 11am. Other days I was still there after dinner. By the end of the year I had completed a second draft of my manuscript, and – with nothing to lose – I submitted it to an Unpublished Manuscript Award.

I was very fortunate to win, and in the months that followed the announcement of the prize my career advanced very quickly. I received a mentorship from Pulitzer-prizewinning author Geraldine Brooks, and signed with a literary agent who sent my manuscript to all major Australian publishers for their consideration. The book leaked internationally, and within two weeks I had a second agent in London, a third in New York and another in LA, all managing what had suddenly bloomed into an international auction for separate territorial rights to my book. I signed contracts for Australia and New Zealand, the UK, the US and Canada, and in the years since, *Burial Rites* has been translated into 29 languages. It is also being adapted to film by Lionsgate, and Jennifer Lawrence has signed on to play the title role.
Since my novel was released I have had the opportunity to travel throughout Australia, the USA, the UK and Europe on book tours, and have attended many national and international literary festivals. I now write full time. For someone who has always longed for a career in literature, it has been, in every way imaginable, a dream come true. But it’s a dream that I have sweated and cried over and worked so bloody hard to achieve; a dream manifested through constant work, and the encouragement of others when I thought my efforts were in vain. Like anyone who has enjoyed a modicum of success, luck and timing have played a role in my career. But there is no doubt in my mind that I would not have written *Burial Rites* had I not had the good fortune to have been taught certain immeasurably valuable skills at an early age.

I expect that some of you may now be anticipating a breathless exaltation of a particularly inspiring English teacher, or a Dead Poet’s Society-esque method of teaching. The truth is, I had many good English teachers, and school certainly taught me a great deal of technical information about writing and poetry and books, but my career’s trajectory cannot be so easily traced back to an individual or class.

Rather, what skill I might profess to have as a writer comes from the some of the greatest qualities public education offers an individual, and those, I believe, are empathy and resilience.

When I say that public schooling gave me the ability to become more empathetic, I don’t mean that it taught me sympathy, which is a feeling of pity for others’ misfortune. Empathy is different from kindness and compassion. It is different from doing unto others what you would have done unto you, because not everyone is like you. It is not oppositional to rationality or reason, and it benefits analytical thought.

Empathy is the ability to understand or share the feelings or perspective of others. It is an imaginative act, whereby you put yourself in other people’s shoes with consideration for the individual and their social, political and economic circumstances.

My public schooling taught me the value of empathy in three ways: through the natural diversity unique to most government school student populations; through the emphasis
placed on community-minded values such as consideration and care of others; and through direct examples of empathetic behaviour as displayed by my teachers.

The public schools I attended were filled with students who came from diverse social, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. At the time I didn’t think a lot of it. I knew that some of my friends didn’t have much money, while others had swimming pools. Some kids parents had come from other countries, and some went to church, and others didn’t. Sleepovers at my school friends’ houses were ventures into the unknown. One family had a kangaroo in their loungeroom and taught me about recycling. Another held hands and sang religious songs before dinner. Another ran a nudist camp. One classmate’s dad was in prison. Another was adopted. The gates of my little country government schools held an incredible array of distinct and differing opinions, backgrounds, belief-systems and cultural practices.

It is only looking back now, since I have had the opportunity to meet people whose school friends led lives largely like their own, that I see how the diversity public education exposed me to gave me an awareness, understanding and tolerance of others. As Professor Alan Reid says, ‘public schools are microcosms of the community at large’. I would emphasise the ‘at large’ component of that truism. They encapsulate the wide differences that exist in our Australian society and – I would argue – show how unity and community can flourish despite those differences. The diversity I encountered daily as a matter of course gave me knowledge and skills to connect across different social groups.

Empathy underpins successful teamwork and leadership. I know that as primary leaders you are required on a daily basis to consider the perspective and circumstances of students, teachers and parents, each of whom has particular and individual needs.

Whether you realise it or not, empathy is intrinsic to the way you operate as leadership staff. You cultivate and encourage empathy amongst your students in the way you implement and encourage the teaching of social skills and integration. You are teaching your students to become more tolerant, more understanding and more considerate people. You are teaching them to think more and judge less. For anyone who believes
that public education is key to developing considerate, responsible citizens, the importance of teaching and encouraging empathy cannot be overestimated.

I can see now, looking back, that public school actively encouraged me to develop skills in empathy from an early age. I have no doubt that I was taught to empathise by the example shown by my teachers and school leadership staff.

I understand that there may be some of you who are wondering why I consider empathy crucial in determining my success as a writer.

Empathy, simply put, gives us a keener insight into the human heart. It helps us move beyond the narrow parameters of our individual experiences.

For any writer who seeks to tell stories about others’ lives, who wishes to write truthfully about the human experience, empathy is key. It enables you to write not only what you know, but to write convincingly about what you want to know.

Writing *Burial Rites* was, in many ways, an exercise in practised empathy. How do you write a book about an Icelandic woman convicted of murder in 1828? Not by putting yourself in her position and asking what you would do. Not by assuming that her actions are the result of a particular temperament or inherent inclination to do evil. Rather, by understanding her as an individual shaped – as we all are – by external social, cultural and political circumstances. Empathy was the guiding light by which I was able to write *Burial Rites*.

The benefits of empathy for any author are manifold. Empathy not only allows you to write about characters who are very different from you as an individual, but to understand them too. Empathy enables you to more fully understand that every person is the protagonist of his or her life. Every character, even if they have limited page space, is – off-page – the central player in their own drama.

Empathy will help you realise that everyone wants something, and that conflict – so crucial in all genres of writing – arises when desires cannot be met because of external
circumstances, an individual’s contradictory desires, or because other people have demands that are oppositional. This is as true of life, as it is of fiction.

Thank you all for the work you do in your school communities to encourage empathy amongst your students. Thank you for embracing the diversity of your student and parent population, and for actively teaching your students how to listen, how to communicate effectively, and how to open their minds to difference. Thank you for encouraging their curiosity about others, and for understanding that education is not limited to maths and words, but also comprises lessons in consideration, compassion, and imagination. When my schools extended my capacity for empathy, they increased my ability to write about perspectives that are not my own. They taught me how to be a good writer.

It is no secret that we, in Australia, are in an empathy decline. The majority of Australians now think that their fellow citizens can’t be trusted – social trust has declined to 43%. We live in a world that sometimes encourages self-interest to the detriment of community, personal relationships, global harmony and lateral thinking. All too often we are at threat of being swept up in a culture of hyper-individualism and competition, where we are becoming less able to listen to those whose beliefs differ from our own.

The values and empathetic practices you uphold in your school cultures – those of tolerance, kindness, and the importance of considering matters from other peoples’ perspectives – have never been more important. It is only with empathy in combination with action rooted in kindess and compassion that we can traverse the barriers thrown up by differences in culture, society, gender and ethnicity. Thank you for encouraging your teachers and students to become empathetic citizens. These are the people who will go on to write books, solve conflict, and initiate progress.

The other quality my public schooling gave me, that I would argue has ensured my survival and success as a writer, is a capacity for resilience.

Many writers will tell you that the challenges of their occupation are predominantly the extended hours of solitude involved, the poor financial reward for long hours of work, the constant need to insist on the relevance, value and necessity of the arts to Australian
society, and the uncertainty inherent in an occupation built on innovation and freelancing. To survive as an artist you need to be self-motivated, resourceful, and to possess enough resilience to inure yourself against the inevitable self-doubt that comes when you are hell-bent on a career that many people consider unreliable at best, and unnecessary at worst.

I grew up in the Adelaide Hills and attended three local government primary schools before attending the local high school. Each of these schools had a culture that emphasised community over the individual, and in doing so taught me and my peers that education is not about winning or losing, but about growth. For someone to work in a career where they are routinely sent rejection letters (and sometimes hate mail), and have their performance reviews published in national and international newspapers, the psychological benefit of being able to process negative experiences as crucial to continued growth and development rather than as simply ‘losing’, cannot be overstated.

Education as winning or losing is about self-importance. It is about the individual’s worth as determined only when pitted against others. Education as growth and development is about self-esteem. It is about the individual only competing to better him or herself, where there is no possibility of winning or losing, only improving.

I am of the strong belief that, had I not been taught resilience from primary school age, I would have called my parents and flown back home at the first sign of chronic loneliness when I was on exchange in Iceland. Had I gone to a school whose educational ethos emphasised ‘winning’, it is highly likely that I never would have studied the subject I loved because the likelihood of future job insecurity would have translated to ‘losing’. Had I not been taught that all difficulties are really opportunities for self-development, I would have opted out of writing a hugely ambitious book that demanded two years of research and weeks of translation. Had my primary schools not encouraged me to see education as personal, ongoing, non-competitive development, I would not be talking to you all today.

School leaders, I know that – more than ever – there are people who see education as a service that churns out winners and losers, and who would do everything in their power to encourage competition between schools and students. But let me thank you all for the way in which you actively work against this damaging attitude. Thank you for creating
school cultures where students are taught that education is about personal development, where there is no such thing as failure if you learn from your mistakes. Thank you for teaching me that I need not worry about what everyone else is doing, so long as I am taking risks and learning and improving at a level that is appropriate to my circumstances and my background. Thank you for teaching me that difficulty is not a bad thing. Thank you for making me resilient, because resilience has been, and continues to be, crucial in my career.

Research shows that I am not alone in attributing resilience to a public school education. We know that those who attend government schools adapt to university life with greater ease, and have a higher success rate in completing tertiary studies. When schools encourage students to see difficulties as challenges, and encourage them to work independently for the sake of progress and learning, they create people who are unburdened by fear of failure or need for ongoing positive reinforcement. They create lifelong learners.

As a student you don’t have a lot of direct interactions with your school leaders. My memories of school are largely of meaningful experiences with my teachers and school friends. The school leaders were largely out of sight and out of mind. But, looking back, I realise now that the ethos and culture of my schools were the work of the leadership staff, and it was this culture of progress and diversity, community-minded action and emphasis on resourcefulness and resilience, that taught me the skills that have most benefitted me not only as a writer, but as a human being.

I know many of you here are overworked. I know that you might not agree with everything I’ve said. But I want you all to know how truly grateful I am that I attended Crafers Primary School, Aldgate Primary School, Heathfield Primary School and Heathfield High School. If I am ever fortunate enough to have children of my own, I want you all to know that I will be sending them to a public primary school because it is there, I know, that they will not only receive an excellent formal education from passionate and dedicated teachers and school leaders, but that our government schools will equip them with the life skills that will see them become resilient, capable and empathetic adults. Every time you, as educational leaders, feel exhausted, or downtrodden, or angered by the challenges and difficulties that come from a lack of
resourcing, ongoing conflict, or budgetary limitations, please remember that your work’s impact is profound and ongoing.