

Adapting to deliver a 'remote' writers festival experience during Covid-19 lockdown

By Rachel Kerr

Snapshot

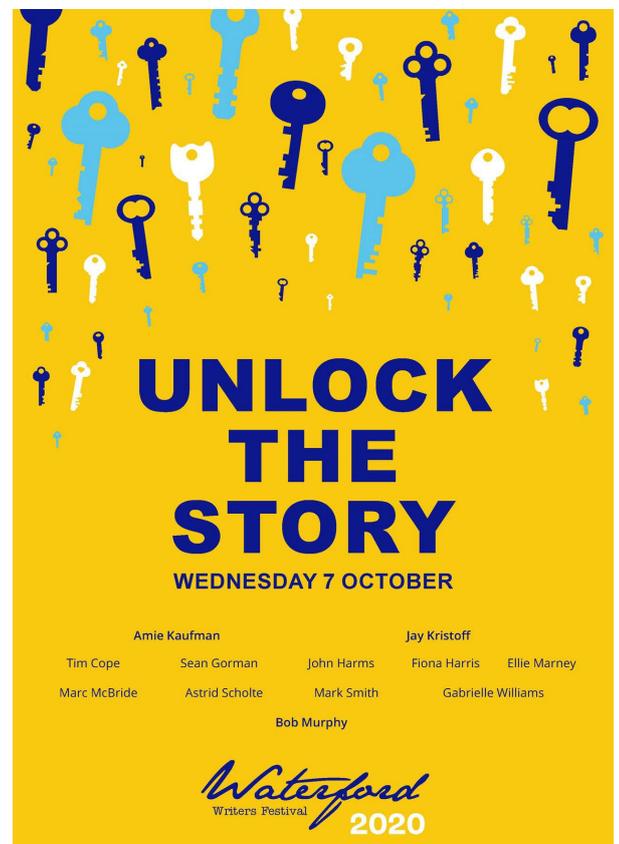
Rachel Kerr, from the Waterford Campus of St Kevins College, describes their online writers festival, detailing student response and involvement and the pros and cons of the experience.

Waterford is the Year 9 campus of St Kevin's College, with an enrolment of 255 students in 2020. At Waterford, we try to do things a little bit differently, with a strong focus on experiential learning. In a normal Waterford year, students are immersed in camps, excursions and a variety of other opportunities for exploration and 'hands-on' learning. To further compliment the experiential learning ethos of Waterford, a couple of years ago we developed the concept for a full-day writer's festival to expose the students of Waterford to storytelling in all its forms.

The 2020 Waterford Writers Festival took place on Wednesday 7th October.

Our theme for this year's Festival, 'Unlock the Story' was particularly apt as we were under Stage 4 lockdown restrictions at the time of the Festival. This meant that the Festival program had to be adapted to be delivered remotely. We chose to use the Google Meet platform as staff and students were already using it for remote learning and were familiar and comfortable with it.

All Festival presenters were informed of the change to remote delivery three weeks prior to the Festival and were generous in adapting their presentations accordingly. Each presenter was emailed a basic 'Google Meet Presenter's Guide' and requested to attend a technology run-through the day prior to the Festival to ensure they were familiar with the basic functionality of Google Meet (presenting their screens, videos, etc).



We used mail-merge software to email each student their own personalised program, which included information about timings, workshop allocations and all the Google Meet links they would need throughout the day. Student volunteers took on the role of introducing and thanking speakers and received a book by a Festival presenter in the post as a thank you gift.

Morning keynote address: Amie Kaufman & Jay Kristoff 'Unlock a world of story'

After our regular daily online Tutor Group, the day commenced with all Year 9 students joining a large-scale Google Meet to hear from keynote presenters, Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff. With a Google Meet capacity of 250 participants, we also provided a 'live stream' option for overflow audience members.

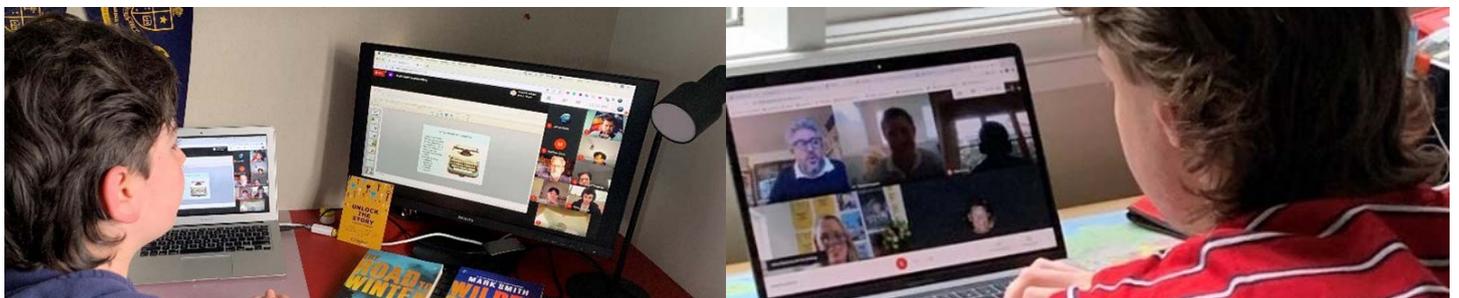
In order to increase audience engagement and encourage audience interaction, Amie and Jay took a conversational approach to their presentation, discussing their different pathways to publication, the rewards and challenges of co-authoring, and how they unlock the worlds they create. They spoke for 30 minutes and allowed 30 minutes for questions from the audience. Students were asked to submit their questions to the chat stream with individual students called upon to turn their microphone on and ask their own question.

Small group workshops

After a short recess break, students were allocated to attend two small group workshops. Students were able to choose from nine options including authors, an illustrator, a screen-writer, a film-maker, an historian and a sports writer. Each workshop ran for an hour and included some 'hands on' practice of writing, drawing and/or performing.

Workshops included:

- Adventurer, film-maker and author, **Tim Cope** – 'The journey of writing & riding on the trail of Genghis Khan'
- Author, historian and Indigenous AFL specialist, **Dr Sean Gorman** – 'Indigenous football history'
- Sports writer and biographer, **John Harms** – 'So you wanna be a sports writer?'
- Actor, screen-writer and author, **Fiona Harris** – 'Script and performance'
- Author of YA crime novels, **Ellie Marney** – 'How to live a life of crime!'
- Fantasy illustrator, **Marc McBride** – 'Creating creatures!'
- Author of YA fantasy novels, **Astrid Scholte** – 'Creating brave new worlds'
- YA Author, **Mark Smith** – 'Would I lie to you? Generating fiction from lived experience'
- YA Author, **Gabrielle Williams** – 'Story-a-Go-Go!'



Afternoon keynote address: 'In conversation with Bob Murphy'

After a lunch break, students returned for the afternoon keynote address from ex-ALF star and writer, Bob Murphy. Once again, we set up a large-scale Google Meet, with a live stream option for overflow audience members. Sports writer and broadcaster, John Harms, acted as moderator for this session and did a great job of crafting the flow of conversation to allow Bob to talk us through his journey from being a sports-mad kid growing up in Warragul, to AFL superstar and captain of the Western Bulldogs, to published author. As per the morning keynote session, students submitted their questions to the chat stream and were individually selected to turn their microphone on and ask their own question. Bob's warmth, generosity and story-telling ability shone through in his responses to both John's questions and students' questions.

Staff vs Student Debate 'That movies are better than books'

The final session of the day was the highly-entertaining Staff vs Student Debate, on the topic 'That movies are better than books'. Again, we set up a large-scale Google Meet, with a live stream option for overflow audience members. To keep things lively, we had the staff argue the affirmative and the student team presented the negative case. Adapting to the remote format, the debate was decided by an online audience poll, with a surprise victory going to the Staff team.

Student exit survey

At the conclusion of Staff vs Student debate, students returned to their Tutor Group Google Meets to complete an online exit survey. The survey was produced using Google Forms and prompted students to give feedback about all aspects of their Festival experience. After the Festival, the Planning Committee met to discuss student feedback, along with staff feedback that was generated through a separate survey. Evaluation reflections will then help shape the 2021 Waterford Writers Festival program.

Data from student surveys indicated:

- 72.2% of students said that the Festival had provided them with useful strategies to improve their writing
- 68.6% of students said that the Festival had inspired them to read
- 63.3% of students have gone on to read a book by one of our Festival presenters
- Of those students who haven't read a book by a Festival presenter, 52.8% indicated that they are interested in reading one in the future.

Donation to the Indigenous Literacy Foundation

While the Waterford students enjoy and benefit from the Festival program, it is important for them to think about others who do not have access to the abundance of resources we enjoy at St Kevin's College. Our social justice initiative to raise money for the Indigenous Literacy Foundation (ILF) was therefore an important aspect of the Festival. We were pleased to be able to work with the ILF to set up an online platform for donations. We raised a total of **\$1112** to assist the ILF in providing culturally appropriate literacy resources to students in remote indigenous communities.

Advantages to the remote delivery of this year's Festival:

- We managed to secure some 'big name' authors that are often unavailable for school bookings as their international book tours had been put on hold due to Covid travel restrictions.
- When one of our presenters had to pull out at the last minute, we were able to engage a replacement speaker from interstate without incurring the normally prohibitive cost of flights and accommodation.
- We saved money on travel costs, catering, printing and other periferal expenses.
- We were able to give students access to eBooks and eAudiobooks by Festival presenters via the BorrowBox platform.
- The Festival came at the tail end of a LONG period of remote learning and gave students something different to look forward to.
- We had one student attend the Festival from Queensland!

Disadvantages to the remote Festival:

- Students lost some of the 'festive feel' as we were unable to host lunchtime activities such as book signings, etc.
- Students were not able to access the Library's hardcopy collection in the lead up and immediate post-Festival periods.
- Students and staff were unable to meet and mingle in person with the presenters which we know can provide life-long memories.

Student comments:

'The Waterford Writers festival was one of the most enjoyable and well run events of the year especially during online learning. The diversity and collection of writers to choose from was magnificent.' - Finn

'I really enjoyed the WWF as it provided a gap and a break in a tough year of online learning. I learnt a range of new skills, especially the use of time management in writing an almanac (John Harms) and the Indigenous history in sport (Dr Sean Gorman). Overall I had a great time and enjoyed listening to Bob Murphy as well as the staff vs student debate.' - Pierre

'I thought the Writers Festival was an excellent way to break up the monotony of remote learning whilst delivering interesting and inspiring content to the students. I thought the writers selected were fantastic and had great things to talk about.' – Tim

'The Waterford Writers Festival was an event to remember! The amazing guests, such as Bob Murphy and Jay Kristoff, made the day one to enjoy. It has given me an insight into authors and their different approaches to writing. The Festival was a highlight during remote learning and has made me want to read more.' – Benjamin

Ms Rachel Kerr is the Waterford Writers Festival Coordinator and the Waterford Library Coordinator at St Kevin's College.