

KAIROS Prize 2026 Speech of Martin MacInnes

Thank you; it's a great honour for me to be here. Thank you to Freo and all the judges, and to Ansgar and the foundation. Thank you also to all the wonderful speakers and performers, and to Nil for her beautiful film.

When I learned, earlier this week, that I would be giving a speech, I almost froze in terror. It's not only that I'm an introvert, and painfully awkward in public settings, though I am. [And I'll say now, briefly, in parenthesis, that if anyone wants to ask me anything about my writing, then please do approach me at the reception afterwards, where I'll be more than happy to talk, and more comfortable doing so away from an audience.] The main reason I froze, is that I am profoundly skeptical, or cynical about, the direct address. I am not persuaded of the legitimacy, never mind the authority, of my first person voice. I don't prioritise it: I don't speak to myself very often. I don't write letters. I have never kept a diary.

Writing fiction, for me – part of the attraction of it – is about moving away from this voice, beyond it. It is a place of exploration, and it's where I do my thinking. I don't really know how to think, outside of fiction; I've never learned the skill.

Another thing that makes this difficult, is that I don't know anything. I have no wisdom to offer up. For better or worse, I often feel, in everyday life, as if I have just woken up, in an unfamiliar and enigmatic place, and my imperative, my only priority, is to explore this place while it remains, and record what I have found. Again, the only way I know of doing this, is through fiction.

So the voice I'm using now, addressing you, is an unfamiliar one. And it is very strange to me that I'm broadcasting it in public.

My need for fiction arrived at a young age, when I first experienced reality as something violently unpredictable, and continually being erased. I could not hold onto anything, and this left me in a state close to grief. I would go over and over the most routine and ordinary experience, unable to accept the fact that it was gone. I couldn't reconcile myself to the simple fact of time's passing. Seeing, and feeling, as much as I can, and interrogating and building on this in fiction, was, and remains, my only recourse against this incessant disappearance. Fiction, essentially, as a way of recovering the lost promise of the fleeting moment.

Why was I so affected by time? And why have I been unable to move beyond such an immature preoccupation? Of course it's related to things that have happened to me, but I believe it's more than this. I had a sense, from the earliest age, that it was unusual that the world existed. Seen from this perspective, every event, down to

the smallest detail, was a marvel, never to be repeated. This is the perspective I return to, when I write.

It seems to me, when I am writing, that terrestrial life is singular in at least two respects. So far as we know, it is singular, exceptional, in all of space and time. Life has happened, and will happen, only once.

Secondly, our life is cooperative on every level, from the cellular to the social. It appears interconnected and interdependent – indivisible – beyond all attempts at categorisation and distinction, over and above all kingdoms and domains. Life, then, as a singular phenomenon, a singular entity, vastly, and endlessly elaborately, distributed across one planet.

I am still kept awake by this. I feel certain, that I have not yet apprehended the significance of this fact, that I am not yet demonstrating an adequate response to it. It is a singular sensation, an ache inside my stomach. Being, for the moment, alive, I feel a sense of grave responsibility and opportunity. All the while, the world is roaring past.

I don't claim that any of this is particularly novel. On the contrary, my work is about looking closely at things that are so obvious, it's easy to forget them. We do not know what we are, or how we got here. Our lives are miraculous, surpassingly mysterious, and easily lost. Our awareness, our sensitivity, is of a kind with forests and oceans and everything that lives there. We need each other. We are nothing without the life that surrounds us.

I want to finish by coming back to a word I used earlier: 'opportunity'. Receiving the Kairos prize has been one of the biggest surprises, and certainly the greatest honour, of my life, and I don't have the words to express what it means to me. In the truest sense, it is a gift – it will help me to go on, to push further and further in my work, to give everything I possibly can to it. I will be forever grateful to the foundation, and to the judges, for granting me this.

Finally, I would also like to thank three individuals who have helped me profoundly, and who mean a great deal to me. My editor, James Roxburgh. My agent, Emma Paterson. And my partner, Adna. Thank you.