

*Launch speech for THE ATTACHMENT – Charlotte Wood, 28 March 2017*

Hello everyone. What an honour it is, to be invited to launch THE ATTACHMENT into the world.

I have always loved reading collected letters. A good volume of letters, it seems to me, can offer a fresher, less mediated, more intimate portrait of a person, or a group of people, than might be possible in biography or memoir.

But even as I say this, I understand the naivety of the notion – for don't we all strive to present our best self to another person? Doesn't a letter allow us to craft our own persona even more carefully than other forms of conversation? And a collection of letters, indeed, *insists* on a certain degree of artifice. For in order to curate, one must select, and discard, and shape, and append. One must allow some gaps, but fill in others. The arrhythmic chaos of real life must be cherished, and yet the rhythm of *story* must also be respected.

So given all this necessary artfulness, how then does one produce a collection of letters that both contains and expands existence? A collection that has the shapeliness of art and, more importantly, the natural breath of life?

Well, I think for this, one needs two writers for whom pretence is a completely foreign concept. Those writers are Tony and Ailsa.

To read *The Attachment*, as I've said elsewhere, is to be present at the unfurling of a lively, tender friendship between two thoughtful and compassionate human beings.

When I finished the book, I wrote to Tony and Ailsa about my response to it, and what it's led me to understand about my own life – for like all good literature, it speaks to its own people but also to the life of each individual reader.

I'll come back to this in a moment, but first I want to show you how this book is already touching the lives of appreciative readers. Here's what some of its other acolytes have said.

Debra Oswald says ‘*The Attachment* captures the intoxication of being swept into a new and deeply nourishing friendship. It fizzles with joy and humour, wrestles with agonising questions, always anchored in compassion and wisdom.’

Sofie Laguna said this: ‘*The Attachment* made me want to notice my world, love my world, shape it into words. These two are mature enough to know the value of the moment, and how precious and fleeting life is.’

Kat Stewart called it ‘a candid, illuminating journey into the heart of a profound and unexpected friendship’. And Hugh Mackay rightly says that this book ‘will stir in you a deep yearning for connection, for quiet communion, for conversation, for intimacy.’

All of this is true. And yet, these letters contain so much more breadth than any of us were able to summarise in a cover line. Indeed, one of the things I love about letters is the way they can skip and skate across and within subjects, turning as easily to big questions – What is atonement? How does one farewell the dying? – as to small ones: Where did you learn to swim? Why *do* you eat so much rhubarb?

It is a book about people, tenderly portrayed: poets, prophets, friends and family – the family we’re born into and the one we make for ourselves.

On the topic of family, I’d like us all to give a very warm Sydney welcome to Ailsa’s father John Piper, and her little sister Amanda, who’ve both travelled to be here tonight. Equally, I send ethereal greetings to Tony’s late brother Peter and their fierce, brilliant mother Aileen (who actually deserves a book of her own I think) – of course they’re not with us tonight, but are powerfully present throughout the book. And, of course, I think of Ailsa’s husband Peter Curtin, a man who was so deeply loved, a man so without ego. His quiet presence runs beneath all these letters like a cool, steady stream.

*The Attachment* is about places, too: marked by the jacaranda blossoms and ocean pools of Sydney; the flocks of cockatoos and the kangaroo paw prints round the dam at Peter and Ailsa’s Kyneton shack. There are reports from Tony’s Irish and African travels, Ailsa’s

musings from Ubud, and of course there are the roads they shared in their separate caminos of France and Spain.

*'Let me tell you where I am.'*

This is a line that appears often – or perhaps it's just repeated in my memory, because it feels so important. It seems to me a clue to what makes this collection so deeply serene. That phrase, 'let me tell you where I am' evokes the pure equality of this relationship – two people meeting, just where they are, in that moment.

Time and again the letters show not only what friendship *is*, but what it is not.

Unlike so many of our own friendships, and how we conduct them, in this one I see no grasping, no keeping count. There's no attempt to corral or censor or control another person. There's nothing competitive or querulous here. Neither correspondent wishes the other to be anything different from exactly what they are, in the moment they connect. It's an openness, a willingness, that seems to me something blessed – something, almost miraculous.

This acceptance on both writers' parts creates an extraordinary sense of harmony with each other, with the world and each of their places in it - and with the reader. And it has made me long to cultivate this tranquillity in my own friendships: to offer more acceptance and less need. Less grasping, more generosity. Greater freedom.

At one point Ailsa says, 'Loving well is a life's work, isn't it?'

I've recently been struck by the Jungian psychologist James Hillman's suggestion that the purpose of human ageing might be for us to become our true, authentic selves – and that it might be possible to perceive of growing old as an aesthetic pursuit, even an art form.

To me, *The Attachment* offers similar possibilities for friendship. It shows us that the life's work Ailsa mentions – growing well together, loving well as friends – maybe this, too, is an art form. And this book is the result - friendship as work of art.

In one letter, Tony asks Ailsa what the word *companero* means to her.

‘For me,’ he says, ‘it’s one with whom you break bread, with whom you break open your life.’

Thank you, Tony and Ailsa, for breaking open your lives not just to each other, but to us, your readers. I predict *The Attachment* will have a long and happy life, passed enthusiastically from friend to loving friend, provoking big questions, impassioned conversations and many acts of tenderness along the way.

I’m thrilled to launch it into life. Congratulations to you both.