



Civil stoush to enliven debate

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Now that the literary sun has set on another entertaining Perth Writers' Festival, perhaps it might be worth pondering on some additional directions — in terms of format and content — that it might take in the future.

As a contribution to that thinking, I have a modest proposal. Would it be possible to introduce a dialectic of debate into the Festival's overall chemistry? It might be possible to have, say, three major debates scheduled that would become highlights of the overall proceedings. These would be genuine contests of opinion between individuals with sharply different analyses to offer. The extent to which writers' festivals are marked by a monochrome intellectual conformity on many issues that are by no means settled — literary, historical, political, and cultural — is quite remarkable.

Clearly, the subject matter of these encounters would vary. For example, a debate might explore one (or some) of the myths underlying Australian cultural life. Take the so-called "cultural cringe". It has been a remarkably influential construct in

the way we think about our broader social history. It inevitably surfaces at literary festivals, as it did this year.

Recently, Melbourne University Publishing reissued A. A. Phillips' seminal essay, *The Cultural Cringe*, in its Masterbooks series. Yet the work of L. J. Hume, in *Another Look at the Cultural Cringe*, published in the mid-1990s, undermines the concept entirely. So what accounts for its continuing potency?

Obviously, there could be a debate centred on a recently published book. One that is both topical and controversial. In this regard, a chance for dialectical fireworks was lost this year in the appearance of Naomi Wolf, author of *The End of America: A Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot*. The tome warns darkly of a "fascist shift" in US politics. It would have been fascinating to have seen her square off against Jonah Goldberg, author of the recently issued *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning*.

An encounter between Festival

participant Cullen Murphy, author of *The New Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*, and Victor Davis Hanson (*Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*), an expert on ancient Rome and Greece, would also have been enlightening. I am told Murphy sat on a panel of three, all of whom agreed with each other about the state of the US.

There are many other issues across the literary genres that could be presented in the form of a spirited, but civil, stoush. Such events would be talking points, both during and after the Festival. And that would be good for its reputation as a cultural event with a certain intellectual zest about it. None of this would be mutually exclusive of the usual panel discussions, readings and interviews.

One final suggestion. Would it be possible to have the Perth Writers' Festival held separately from the Perth International Arts Festival itself, perhaps later in the year? The profile of the literary gathering seems to be lost in the demands of the broader range and dazzle of events.

All that said, judging from the offerings I sampled, the 2008 Festival had much to recommend it.

