



AUCKLAND WRITERS FESTIVAL WAITUHI O TĀMAKI 2021

EVENT 114: BLINDNESS CONVERSATION

As an adjunct to Auckland Writers Festival & Auckland Live's presentation of the Donmar Warehouse's production of **BLINDNESS**, join disability advocate **Martine Abel-Williamson**, legally blind writer **Steff Green** and The University of Auckland Dean of Arts **Dr. Robert Greenberg** for a post-performance conversation about the controversy surrounding Saramago's novel of the same name because of its negative representations of blindness, and the ways in which society privileges sight / the visual.

TRANSCRIPT

AWF: Kia ora tātou. Ko Anne O'Brien toku ingoa. Hei Kaiurungi o Waituhi o Tāmaki. Nau mai haere mai. I am Anne O'Brien and I am the Director the Auckland Writer's Festival. It is my pleasure to introduce this really important conversation that we are convening this afternoon. We are also recording this conversation, because we see this as the start of something.

I just want to talk briefly about the genesis of this afternoon's discussion, and that is, we programmed this piece. We have connections into the art scene elsewhere, out of London. It had had very good reviews. We obviously knew the novel had a beautiful literary connection.

I have to say hand on heart, I wasn't aware of the controversy around the novel; so that was a very interesting place to start. Then we became aware that there was one.

We talked to the production team in London, who of course went through that same process of discovery; as many of us who are not blind or visually impaired do - of discovering a really interesting conversation.

The production in London had addressed that in a variety of ways: one in the way it has approached this piece, which is not to deliver a visual piece of theatre, but to deliver an experience received through other senses.

They worked with Professor Hannah Thompson. She is blind and she is a professor of critical disability studies. The writer of the piece and Hannah worked on that closely together. In fact, they recorded a podcast of a conversation around the issues raised by the novel; it's negative representations of blindness; the sense of damage that that does to members of the community; and, the thing that I found most intriguing to start with for myself, which was to think about the ways in which the visual is privileged in society. That was a really great starting point.

The thing about the festival is this is a place for exploring the complex; for having substantive discussion about ideas. We were really actually delighted to start that conversation, and to think about how we might both present the production and then take some of the question it raises, and the challenges it presents, particularly to those of us who are sighted, and take those forward in an open way.

That is the way in which this conversation started. We then went through a variety of processes, including talking to a number of people in the networks; people in low blind vision, people who we have relationships in the festival particularly from the blind community, and we came to this afternoon – which I am welcoming you to.

On the sofas here are three people with whom we have strong festival relationships; all of whom come from the blind community, and all of whom put their hands up and said... I mean, I'm not going to name people, they might out themselves, but someone said, "I love that novel." Someone said, "I haven't read that novel." Someone said, "Wow, this is interesting." But, we all thought, 'Fantastic opportunity to start a conversation.'

One of the people I spoke to was the incredible Martine Abel-Williamson. Last year she was to chair. We were to present Haben Girma, the first deaf-blind law graduate of Harvard. Of course Covid intervened – and don't we all know about that. Martine was going to chair that. She is just a remarkable disability advocate. I've got a huge list of organisations that she's on or has been on. She's the chair of Disability Law, she's on ACC boards, she's been or may still be doing advisory work for the Health Quality Safety Commission, she has a QSM and she has won the 'Attitude ACC Supreme Award'. Martine has done a really beautiful job of charting a conversation this afternoon.

Alongside her, to her left, on one of the sofas at the front is Robert Greenberg. He is the Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Auckland. Of course, the University of Auckland is a gold sponsor of the Auckland Writer's Festival. I have had the pleasure of meeting Robert on a number of occasions - usually associated with the literary world - and he was pleased to be part of this conversation.

The third writer on our sofas, across the way, is Steff Green. Steff Green is actually one of the writers appearing in the festival this year. She is the author of about 40 – and forgive me if I have not got the number right – hugely successful paranormal romance novels. She's appeared in the festival several times. Tonight, for those of you are going to the Karangahape Road Escapades, Steff will be part of that there.

Steff, Robert and Martine have said that they were open to leading this conversation with us, provoking thought and challenge. I just want to ask you to welcome them all and then Martine will take over the conversation.

Welcome.

Martine: Kia ora. Good afternoon. Ko Martine Abel-Williamson toku ingoa. Ko Western toku kuri. My name is Martine Abel-Williamson and it's wonderful. I really want to welcome you all here today. Before I get into the real topic of why we are here, I just want to check in with the panellists. Some of my notes here on Robert Greenberg, Professor in Linguistics, is also noting that Robert is from the US and is linked with an organisation called National Federation of the Blind, which is a very staunch and very able-intent blindness organisation. If anybody becomes blind, or even been blind for life, that is the organisation to be affiliated with.

Steff Green, I've got here a note that you are the author of more than 40 paranormal and fantastica-normals, and you also commentate on feminism, heavy meatal and Indie publishing.

Before I carry on into the book 'Blindness' did any of our panellists want to talk a little bit more about where you come from or what you are doing.

Robert: Sure. Kia ora everyone, I'm Robert. I would just like to add that for me the blindness is a key characteristic of what I do, but in terms of my life, I am blind, and yes it is a part of me; but my main focus is my professorship and scholarship on the former Yugoslavia, and the books that I wrote on that as well – the articles and so forth. I gave my reputation in that area of academia. For me, blindness is just part of who I am, and something that I work with on a daily basis. Many people I work with end up forgetting sometimes about it. That's just an interesting other perspective.

Martine: You Steff? Anything to add?

Steff: Just similar to the way Robert is talking about; yes, I am legally blind, I am visually impaired, and that is part of who I am. That has shaped my experience and in turn that experience has shaped the way I write, and the kind of novels that I produce and some of the characters that I write. It's a part of me, but it is not the whole of me. I am really excited to be here to have this conversation.

Martine: Before I ask our panellists for their immediate impressions of the book, I want to acknowledge in the audience here that we have blind low vision, as well as sighted people. This book really perpetuates the fear of becoming blind. I know that there's been surveys done worldwide and people have been asked, "What are you the most afraid in life?" and it ranged mostly from, I think in the '90s, it was becoming blind, getting cancer and public speaking.

So, for another reason, becoming blind is an impairment that people may just think it may be the end of the world, or the end of their quality of life. I want to encourage people today to don't think... those of us who are here, it is not scary for us. Yes, it might be scary for people that are becoming blind. I don't want to limit that grief that people are going through, but most people you see here today have been blind either all of their life or for quite some time. When in doubt just ask. Please don't feel that you can't approach us or anything. And, we will get your questions later on, because we want to hear from you how you experienced the technical production. So, after giving the book a good go, we would like to get into the technical experience, because I believe that was something quite unique – and especially for sighted people as well.

So, without further ado, can I check in with the panellists? In a couple of sentences, your thoughts about the book – and you may be honest?

Robert: I'm happy to give that a go Martine. I'm trying to get this microphone in the right place; I hope this is not too loud.

For me, you mentioned the National Federation of the Blind earlier. This book was made into a movie in 2010. The National Federation of the Blind is not shy in expressing its views. They were the ones protesting in front of many cinemas across the United States, because of the negative portrayal of blind people. I have to say, the book has two interesting aspects from the perspective of let's say 2020/2021.

It portrays a pandemic, which are now all experiencing and see what that's like. But, then it also portrays going blind suddenly, and how society essentially falls completely apart due to that. It's also a failure of society and of government; government cannot cope with this pandemic, and I think we see that also around the world in our current pandemic. But, the real problem I have with the book is the simplistic nature of how all these blind people are portrayed so incredibly negatively; they cannot organise themselves. The hero of the book is the doctor's wife, who for some reason is the only one who remains sighted throughout the novel. She saves everybody in her own way.

What that message was telling people is, you have to have sight to succeed in that world. It would have been lovely to see at least some acknowledgement that blindness is not as horrific as it is described here. There are passages in the book said, "I'd rather be dead than blind," and things like that.

I want to just also echo what Martine said earlier. I am very happy for us to have this conversation, because I do think that sighted people are fearful of blindness and even of blind people. How often as a blind person do I walk and somebody around me panics that I might get hurt, or that I might fall, or that I might walk into the street inadvertently. That panic is not so much about me, as much as it is also potentially about the person who is watching me; who is fearful, not comfortable and not experienced with blind people. So, I think that's another aspect that would be worth exploring.

Martine: Excellent. Steff?

Steff: It was very interesting. I had read this book around when it had first come out. I fully admit that I had enjoyed it; mainly because to me I had read it as what it is, which is a horror novel. It's fascinating to me, as a blind person to read a horror novel, from the point of view of a sighted person. It really digs into and explores this fear of blindness. It's kind of very anthropologically interesting I think. So, that was really interesting to me.

I think it is okay to enjoy things, and also to see them as deeply problematic. There is no denying that in terms of the representation of blind people, this book is deeply problematic.

I really agree with basically everything Robert said. For me in particular, the main character, the protagonist, the doctor's wife, everything that she did in that book she could have done as a blind woman.

To me, I think this book would have been so much more interesting if she had been a blind woman; especially if she had been, say, blind since birth. That, that was her character.

It's interesting to re-read this book now, which I did this week during a pandemic, and sort of explore how the book explores the things that we are all going through now. I think

ultimately the message of the book was more about exploring the breakdown of society; the way that governments and systems fail us through the lens of this sighted fear of the blind.

I think from that point of view the book was successful, in that it was horrible. It was a relatively successful horror novel. But, yes a deeply problematic irksome representation of blind people that is unfortunately not that uncommon.

Martine: I mean, let's face it, as dystopia, there is something apocalyptic happening, and then there's a world of suffering. Hopefully, it either comes to an end or comes right. This book probably meets the criteria if there is something like that. I think if we do read it now, you're right; we've now actually seen how people can handle a pandemic.

And, I do agree with the panellists. I think if something like this would happen today, there are many of us that would quite successfully manage; even if we have to teach others how to adjust – ways and means. That is absolutely true.

Both of you have turned to ableism; turned to the concept of ableism in this book, and how it's been portrayed with the author meant to or not. Do you want to delve anymore into ableism and how we portray that today?

Robert: Sure. Based on the novel *Martine*, and even on what we saw in the experience, or what we felt through that experience upstairs, one thing that we should mention is, there is a group of seven of the blind people – and it's true they're led by the sighted doctor's wife; but these seven are compassionate towards one another and care about one another. They're the ones who are still human within the horror of that situation, of having gone blind suddenly.

There's that scene. It's not extensively portrayed in the experience upstairs, but they end up at the doctor's wife's apartment in the city, and they all kind of cleanse themselves. It's all sort of religiously inclined.

There's a lot of religious symbolism there. It rains and they use the rain to clean themselves. Then she washes their clothes; they all wash their clothes together. There's a sort of sense that they can live together as a community, and if they had to stay blind they would; and they would probably cope somehow.

But, of course, miraculously at the end they all become sighted; which is another sort of let down from that whole thing, that this is all temporary.

On ableism in general, I think one thing to take away is to think about how, in fact, many blind people can, do and are productive members of society. I mean, it is true that the statistics are pretty grim about unemployment among blind people. Seventy percent, apparently, around the world are unemployed and that's not a good statistics. But, there are many, many people who can get educated, can be employed and can be examples in our society.

Also, I think the interesting reference in the novel, that isn't mentioned in the experience upstairs, is there is one blind person in the horrible ward - where the crooks and the people with the guns and where the murder occurs, and the most squalid things occur – and that person is using braille. The narrator, or the author, says something to the effect of, "Oh, there's a real blind person among them, and that person is worth their weight in gold. They're able. They actually can cope. They can actually also potentially have been a leader." It almost would have been nice to see – to echo what Steff said earlier – that person being the hero of the novel; but it's unfortunately not.

Anyway, I'm just trying to open a little bit the conversation. I'm sure Steff will have other things to say about ableism as well.

Martine: Steff, did you want to add to that?

Steff: Yeah. Just to play back on what Robert had talked about, about the ending of the book, and also what I had sort of mentioned before, about how this is not the first book, or the only book to have delved into these kind of ableism places.

Unfortunately, as many of you may know, as blind people, the way we are portrayed in media is often pretty annoying. This book is a particularly bad example because it is set in a dystopia. But, common things. It basically kind of does the whole gambit from everyone gets miraculously cured in the end, which is a very common thing. It's not that often, especially in the fantasy books that I read, that you have a blind character where they don't end up cured; or they can't see through the eyes of animals, or some other way that the writer has to find to give to them some kind of sight, because again there is that fair of how do you tell the story through the blind character. Kind of the same way you do through a sighted character. That one is in the story. This kind of fumbling in the dark sense, which is how a sighted person feels if the lights in the house suddenly go out and you go, "Where's the things?" It's this assumption that that's kind of what our lives are like all the time, and that's pretty silly.

It's not unusual to read these types of ableism stereotypes. Again, as I say, I think it is okay to enjoy things and to also be able to sit here and discuss the things that should have been improved, or should have been done better; or how this is damaging to our community. I think that is a really interesting thing, and that's why I am really happy that we are doing this now.

So, it's okay if you enjoyed the book, or you enjoyed the production; but it's also really important to hear about why this is not an accurate representation of what blindness is like, or reassess your fears you might have around it.

Martine: I was waiting for that dog, that [21.24] to become a guide dog, but unfortunately the author didn't take through that people walk around with canes; people were crawling around. Instead of even developing... even making sticks out of things to walk around. There was one kind dog, but it was more, I would say, a companion dog than really a working dog.

I'm just getting to another aspect of the book. Clearly in this book become blind suddenly. They see white. Or, we're giving the impression that people live in darkness. I think I personally know two people who, either through an accident or very condition, became suddenly, or woke up the next day and were blind. But, it is actually very rare.

I will just let Robert explain. Robert has gone blind as a result of degenerative condition. Robert can talk to us about what you see and how gradual it actually was. For most people who do lose their sight, it is a gradual process.

Robert: Yeah, that's absolutely right. Martine, thank you for that. My condition called retinitis pigmentosa, you start with you are night blind to start with. I was night blind and very myopic. I had very thick glasses as a two year old in fact – I got my first pair of glasses. Then around the age of, I would say thirteen, an ophthalmologist saw some pigmentation on the retina, which was a sign of this condition, which is a heredity one. The diagnosis was, probably by the age of 35 you will not usable vision any longer. They were a bit wrong. They never are right. But, it certainly didn't happen the next day. It was very gradual. I would say by mid-20s the usable vision was not there.

What does that mean? Well, they tried to describe it to me at the time – and again, if anybody is going through this in the audience, I'm happy to talk to you, even if you want to catch me at the end of this. You're told that your vision will narrow. So, you will keep your central vision first, and it might look like a tunnel. Often you might hear the expression tunnel vision.

Obviously you don't suddenly see white, as is called a milky white – as is described in the novel. Then the macular, the central vision, starts to go and that's sometimes also known as macular generation, and that is usually is something that older people experience.

For a very long time, I think even into my twenties, I might have been able to still distinguish some colours. It could be a mishmash of things. I think I was able to read print through primary and secondary school, but then at university I started to learn to use a cane and braille and independent living schools. So, I had time, which was good; and most people do have time to prepare for the eventuality that is coming.

You do have to have a good attitude and embrace what's about to come, and want to be leading a full life, so that you can do everything that you had done as a sighted person; find alternative methods of reading and of getting around and all those things.

This room is not looking to me white. There might be a few hues of other brightness's in the room, but essentially it feels like a dark room. That's all I can say. The vision changes all the time. It suddenly might get a little brighter, or it might get a little darker. It's very changeable, depending what stimulus is out there and which of the cells is still able to get any sense of any sight.

A lot of our sight – if you read Oliver Sacks – you will see that a lot of it is all processed in the brain. There are all sorts of brain conditions that affect one's ability to see. He has very interesting books about colour blindness, including some on a Micronesian Island. I highly recommend reading also Oliver Sacks' books, because there's some really interesting portrayals of what it is to be blind in all different kinds of ways, or sight impaired.

Martine: Steff, did you want to describe what you can or can't see?

Steff: Yes, we might as well do that; especially because Robert brought up Sacks' books and about the Micronesian Islands. If you have ever read that, or see *The Island of the Colour Blind*, that is the condition that I have.

It is called achromatopsia and it's quite rare. There is about a handful of us in New Zealand. What it means is, it's a genetic condition; so I was born with it. It will never get any better, and it will never get really much worse.

Your eyes have rod cells and cone cells. You use your rod cells during the night, and it's kind of your night vision cells; and you use your cones cells during the day and they distinguish colours and depth perception and things like that. You've got a few million of each, and I have got no cone cells. I don't see any colour at all. I struggle a lot with depth perception and everything kind of looks quite flat. When you go outside in the sun, it's kind of like it's dark at night and then suddenly someone has flicked a light on and you're like, 'Argh'. That's kind of what it's like for me. So, sometimes it's like being snow-blind.

That condition often comes with other things; so I'm sort of severely short-sighted to the point I'm considered legally blind, and my eyes wobble and all this fun stuff.

That's me.

Martine: Talking of wobbling eyes, one of my eye conditions is called Nystagmus, because my eyes move all the time; because my brain is thinking, maybe if I focus somewhere else you'd be able to see better. You would think that your brain will know by now, but it doesn't.

I was born with colour perception, which I lost later on. Sometime I dream in colour and I visualise a lot. I realise it might not be realistic anymore, because it's been some time ago. But, if I look ahead in front of me, I see all sorts of little stars and white lights and things going in front of my eyes. Again, I've been told, because I can't see much anymore, my brain is trying to interpret or conjure up something to see.

I briefly want to touch on the question of – and Steff you talked about this – that painters can paint grotesque; they don't have to stick to the human form, as being the boundaries or the animal form, or nature. Isn't there poetic licence, or some sort of right of authors to portray who they want in which light, versus our rights; and maybe be stronger going into a rights based world, our rights to be portrayed realistically versus maybe not realistically? Can I just maybe have some comments from you? I noticed you've already touched upon, you can enjoy something even if it's not realistic or true. And, of course, that's what the 'Fantastical' is about.

I really just want to talk about the rights holders here and who holds the pen really.

Steff: I guess, from my point of view, I feel as though, as an author, there is a right to freedom of expression; but freedom of expression is not the freedom from consequences. As an author, if you wanted to write a book that had a blind character in it, it would be really wonderful. And if you weren't blind yourself, it would be really wonderful if you would come and talk to someone; talk to them about their experiences and the portrayals that they have already read or experienced in the media about other blind characters, and learn about the prejudices and the ideas that you have that might not actually be the reality. If you don't do that, which a lot of people don't, then you end up with a book like this. You end up with people, rightfully so, protesting in front of your movie theatres. That is the reality.

If you want to portray blindness, it's a good idea to do your research, the same way you would as an author do your research about anything else.

As a blind community, as part of my community, I don't think that's really too much to ask.

Martine: Robert, do you want to add to that?

Robert: Absolutely. I think what really irked me about the book is actually the title. Titles mean something. The title is 'Blindness' and when you search for something called blindness, is it a book about blindness? It's really not. All the blind people in this book are the same in that all are fearful and they all cannot cope with their blindness, and they all are in a state of shock. I understand that. But, this is not really what... you know.

Of course, as Steff said, everybody has the right to write something, and it's provocative, and it's good to have these conversations and the rest; but, it would have been lovely if the author had been a little bit more nuanced and maybe had more gradations within that group of people – maybe a few people who would have been okay with it. I mean, there are certain references in the book to, "The sighted woman sees some horrible things, and the blind are oblivious to it." That's sort of another aspect of our lives. Yes, there are things that are pretty disturbing, that we are spared from seeing, but it's just mentioned in passing as well.

From my own experience of writing scholarly books, the title, when I was getting my book on language in the former Yugoslavia published, the publishers had real interest in me changing my original title that I had originally proposed to something that was more searchable. So, I'm kind of sensitive to that. A searchable title called blindness, and then people will read this and they might get the wrong idea. I think that is something that the author of the novel would have had to really speak to, and really be ready for that kind of response.

Martine: Before I return to the audience, I want to move away from the book and really get onto the production that we saw. I want to commend the Writer's Festival for bringing in this. I wouldn't say I came to watch it: I came to experience it. The real unique technical experience of how this was portrayed for us, I really enjoyed that. I have only experienced that once before. It's amazing how technology and acoustical engineering has got to the point where we can actually feel disconcertedly aware, almost as if someone is whispering in your ear.

For the panellists, any comments on your experience of what the Writers Festival put on for us?

Steff: The main thing I wanted to say was, that it was wonderful for me to have a theatre experience, where I had the same experience, or was close to the same experience as I have ever had, as a sighted audience member. That was truly unique to me. Very often when I go to theatre performances we try to book tickets right close to the front. My husband or friend will have to describe things that I miss. The lighting and the sound will be wonderful, but they tend to be secondary to the visual. And, this was not that at all. The production was incredible. The sound, she was behind you. You almost felt like she was breathing in your ear. It was just incredible.

Martine: You Robert?

Robert: I just want to commend the Festival for the way this was done, and also the fact that we had an audio described version, and I think there were three sentences in the whole audio described version.

So, I want to echo what Steff just said; that it was a level playing field. I sat next to somebody and we talked a little bit before. Then we were both immersed with our headphones - immersed in the experience. Technically, it was extremely well done. I think you all could get a sense of the novel, a real strong sense of the novel and the most important details.

I have to say, having just read the novel in the last ten days or so, I kept thinking, 'I'm sure it wasn't the boyfriend/girlfriend, the first blind man, they were married in the book.' I re-read that part and yes, in the book version I read, they were married. And, she did not use the scissors to kill the man in the stomach, but she slit his throat. Again, a detail, but these things bothered me a little bit. That it wasn't quite as close to the original as it could have been.

Martine: Yeah, I must say, halfway during the performance I started to play with my earphone. I said to my husband, "I don't think I've got the audio described version." Then suddenly I heard this voice describe and talking about the fire and the light coming up from under the chairs and I realised, we're all in the same boat: if I think I'm not seeing something or hearing something then everybody else is the same.

We'd really like to open it up. We love that you could join us. If there's any comments or questions to the panellists, that would be great.

Q 1 Hi, one of the problems with the earphones was that sometimes it was too soft to hear what the woman was saying, and sometimes too loud; like those sort of public announcements, or whatever they were – to understand what was being said. But, I also did love the way you felt someone was whispering in your ear and so on.

I had not read the book. I found it quite hard to follow what was actually happening, but presumably sighted people would have too.

Like you, I felt it didn't really represent the blind community. The blind people I know would not have passively laid down and let some sighted person run the show.

That's all.

Martine: Thank you. Anybody else?

Q 2: Kia ora kōtou. I was just wondering if any of the panellists... we're all talking about this negative representation of blindness and I'm wondering if any of you can think of any examples in literature, or media, or whatever, of a positive representation of a blind powerful character; and if not, why do you think that is?

Martine: Wonderful. Robert is waiting to give this a go.

Robert: Well, there is a HG Wells story, *The Country of the Blind* I think it's called, if I'm not mistaken. It is much more positive. Everybody on an island, as I understand the short-story, is blind. There's a sighted person who's the odd one out, as could be expected. I think it was written in 1904 or something. There's a love story. This person is tempted to become blind, so that they could fit into this peaceful and beautiful place, but then changes his mind at the end and of course loses his love. That's it in a nutshell.

Other portrayals: maybe others have other portrayals. I'm thinking about novels.

Martine: There is that French one in the Second World War. It's something about the light and the girl is young. Clearly in the blackout in France she manages very well, because everything has to be dark. Her father builds her a model of what her environment looks like, so that when she goes and picks up milk, water or bread, that she knows where she is going, and she ends up tuning into a radio channel and picking up information. She wasn't a super-hero, she was just an ordinary girl, but it was quite positive in an ablest way.

Steff, did you want to add anything to this?

Steff: It's interesting, because we were talking before and Robert brought up HG Wells, and that was the one that immediately popped into my head as well. I'm sitting here, frantically going through every book I can remember, and I can't really think of another one. That probably tells you a lot.

I think one of the problems, as we have kind of touched on, is that a lot of blind characters are written by sighted people. I think it would be amazing – and this is something that I personally would love to do (and it's kind of one of the goals that I have for my career to help make this happen) is I would love to see more blind authors being able to write books with protagonists who are blind, who have a realistic experience of what it is to be blind; and who get to be the hero or heroine and have adventures and fall in love and solve the crime. Have an awesome life without having to get healed, or anything like that. There are not enough and that is really tragic.

Isn't it annoying that we have to sit here and have a conversation about this book, which has such terrible representations of us, and we can't think of a positive novel to talk about that wasn't written a hundred years ago.

Robert: Then on the other one, that suddenly comes to my mind is there's Tiresias, the prophet, in Sophocles the plays, and he's blind. Of course he can see the future. And, of course Oedipus Rex, blinds himself at the end, after he figures out what happened. So, there's a sort of positive and a negative, but it's Greek tragedies from ancient Greece. That's one that did come to mind. Whether Tiresias is positive or negative, I think clearly he's an important character. There's this notion that he can see things that others don't see.

Martine: Anything more from the audience?

Q 3: This isn't a question, but a comment. I think the book Robert was referring to is *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr.

Robert: Not HG Wells? Oh.

Q 3: No, the other one about the world war...

Martine: Yes, that's the one I talked about. The only wrong thing she did in that book is, she was lying on her stomach reading braille, which would be very uncomfortable; because you need to move your fingers and not just lie on your... most of us, who grew up in hostel situations, or hostel residential situations, would lie on our back with the book on our stomach and read like that; especially if we wanted to hide from someone that we are reading.

But, apart from that finer detail, it was actually a very realistic portrayal. She grew up and had a child out of wedlock, which wasn't portrayed as negative, it was her choice; and had a successful life, etc.

Thank you for the book name reminder.

Q 4: Kia ora tātou. Thank you for this really interesting talk this afternoon.

I am interested I guess on a broader note, in your thoughts on what it will take for us to get to a place in Aotearoa, but also in the world where we have a more inclusive society. I'm just interested in your reflections.

Robert: I think we have to have more conversations as a starting point. I think we have to have more bridge building among all the various groups in our society; especially those of the groups that are often disenfranchised or not as equal, or often feel as if they are not equal citizens in our societies.

When Martine mentioned the National Federation of the Blind, that's sort of their mission to try to get that way. I think dialogue and demonstration of what is possible, and thinking together and joining forces; that's a great start. Events like this is a good example.

It's something that all nations and countries are grappling with. I gave talks on blindness to people in Bosnia and Herzegovina who have very little means of levelling the playing field. You also have to invest. You also have to be able to invest in educating people with disabilities and people who are blind; so that they can dream bigger dreams and learn how to use all the technology that's out there that can level the playing field as well.

Steff: I agree 110 percent. I think being part of the conversation is very important. I know for myself personally how important education was, to my ability to be able to see a future for myself that was bright and filled with lots of wonderful and exciting things. I do think it's really important that we examine really closely the media that we consume, and who is creating that media, and who it is created for. That's part of the puzzle: that what we present and what we consume has to represent society as a whole.

A lot of people are working really hard behind the scenes to work on this, but it's hard, because it's been very same-same-same for a number of years and centuries even. It's hard to kind of walk back those ingrained habits and ingrained biases. We need more blind writers. We need more disabled artists. We need more producers who are of colour and who are from minority groups. That's a huge part; that's a huge part of it. We want our children and our children's children to be able to look and see themselves having incredible lives, so that they can do that.

Martine: We are nearly out of time. Are there any last-minute questions or comments from the audience?

Q 5: Hi, I have taught mainstream blind students back in the '70s and I know a number of blind people now. But, until I saw this festival programme a few weeks ago, I had never heard of this book or the film, any protests or anything like that.

My question is, when they had the protests outside the cinemas, did it make any difference to either the author, or the director of the film in their attitudes and what they thought they might perhaps do, and how they might tackle things in the future; or do we not know that at all?

Robert: I can answer a little bit of that. I didn't go to any of the protests myself, but I did read that what it did was successful. You can look it up on the web. They did get media attention. I think that was part of the idea behind the protests. Mark Maurer, the President of the National Federation of the Blind issued a statement that can be read on the internet as well; that this is, in my words, an incredibly unfortunate portrayal of what it means to be blind.

I think those things are discoverable. I did see a quote from the author, from Jose Saramago, saying something to the effect of, "This isn't really about blindness." Then, I'm thinking and scratching my head, "But, the title of the book is called 'Blindness' so how can you tell me that?" It's really an allegory for society.

Yes you can read it that way; absolutely one can be generously reading it, and society just fails. Nobody sighted comes in with PPE to take care of this. We don't even know what they are afflicted by as a virus. We just know it's incredibly contagious, and within a few hours of meeting somebody who got this blindness, they'll go blind too – it's pretty much guaranteed. That's all we know.

I think yes it's an allegory and it's dystopian; it's a horror film probably and a horror book in a way. It's hard to read even. It's hard to get through the book. In a way, I was glad I had read it, so I was less frightened by what happened upstairs in the performance, because I knew what to expect. I knew, now there's going to be the murder, or now there's going to be this.

Other people in the UK when they were asking them about this – I listened to BBC for a podcast for about how they viewed the performance in London – people said it was so frightening and so scary, there were these loud bangs and booms.

One thing about having read the book last book was to be prepared. I knew when that was going to happen. I braced myself.

Martine: Yes, we have got a minute left. Before I thank everybody, when I email you, they've got a public e-signature, with a great saying, and I hope I quote this right, I think I've got the intent right: Blindness is only a characteristic of myself. My biggest barrier is the expectations or the lack of expectations people have of me. That to me is in its most positive way; that we see blindness as a characteristic, like having blonde hair, or being left handed, the language you speak, etc. etc.

I want to thank you all for coming on this Friday afternoon and hopefully enjoying this time for us, just to sit and chill and chat about this.

AWF: Please join me in thanking Martine, Robert and Steff for their conversation today. I think we can all agree it was significant and a great contribution to the Festival. Thank you.