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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**CONDOLENCES**

**Deveson, Ms Anne, AO**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 8 February 2017**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Ryan, Joanne, MP

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**Ms RYAN** (Lalor—Opposition Whip) (19:14): It is an absolute privilege to be in this place and to have an opportunity to pay my respects to Anne Deveson by putting on the record the impact that she had on not just me but also my family and all the students I taught who studied the text *Tell Me I 'm Here*. That is where my life intersected, if you like, with Anne's, as did the lives of all the students across Victoria over several years who had the privilege of studying this text in year 12 English. It was an extraordinary text, and I think I am going to limit my comments today to the power of that text—to what Anne Deveson managed to do at the height of her powers as a writer and a communicator, in making the very brave decision to take perfect strangers on a journey with her family, recounting the highs and the lows in the extraordinary events of their life from Jonathan's diagnosis through to his death. It was an honour to be able to read that story. I know that, for me and for many families, reading that firsthand account from Anne opened our eyes and assisted us to reflect on the way we interact in our own families, the way we interact with society and the way that society thought about mental illness.

I vividly remember reading passages in classrooms of 25 young adult children who could do nothing but connect with Anne's children through that text. They could connect so closely to Jonathan's experience, thinking about themselves and their friends. Schizophrenia is an incredibly cruel disease that tends to come on young men in particular, or in larger numbers, at a time when they are developing their notions of themselves and are entering a world that is no longer so black and white as they go into adulthood but is filled with shades of grey. It makes the onset of schizophrenia so much harder on the individual when their own identity is being shaped and then there are those layers and layers of confusion.

I remember distinctly the first time I read that book in class, when Anne had used the word 'mad' to describe Jonathan, and how confronting it was to think in those terms. As a teacher and as someone who strove to write, I remember thinking how incredibly brave it was but, most importantly, how incredibly effective it was. Anne did not write *Tell Me I 'm Here*, in my interpretation of the book, to shy away from the words that scared people. She did not come across in the text as wanting to say that the story of her family and the illness was different to other families. She wanted the world to understand that this was the illness and that this was the impact of the illness. I had the privilege of watching young people interact with the text and open their eyes to a new understanding of mental illness, with empathy for sufferers and for the families.

The writing that Anne did in this text was also extraordinary, and often what Anne was doing, or what it appeared to me that Anne was doing as I read it with young people, was that they heard Jonathan's voice. The young people in my classroom heard that young man's voice as he struggled with a diabolical illness. One of the most compelling lines in the book for me and for the classes that I taught—the one that the young people I taught came back to more and more often—was the single line where Jonathan recounted that it would be better to be a junkie than a psycho. The power that that had on young people thinking about mental illness was extraordinary—the notion that a disease was the worst thing that could happen to you and that belonging was so important to every individual that Jonathan was relaying to his mother that somehow he had found a place where he felt like he could belong.

There was the heartbreak, I know, for mothers around the country when they read that line—the heartbreak they felt for Anne and for mothers around the country at the time who were struggling with this. As the member for Port Adelaide said, they were alone in their lounge rooms or were with a close group of friends, whispering about the pain, whispering about the anxiety and whispering about the nights they lay awake and wondered where their child was, if their child were coming home and, if they were, what state they would be in. It was that one line and the devastation of that one line—that belonging was so important that you would rather be a junkie than be perceived to be mad or psychotic in our society. It was the pain for a mother who had fought so hard to have a welcoming home for Johnathan on his return—to know that he no longer saw home to be a place to belong. It is in that one line, in the retelling of Jonathan's saying that, that I think Anne Deveson captured the pain that was happening across the country and which still happens across the country, as families battle with themselves and with their own perceptions and understanding of mental illness.

For me, Anne Deveson opened a door in my classroom that went wider, of course, than that classroom. It reverberated around the suburbs of the children we were teaching. It started conversations that had not been had before: young people going home and coming back into class, telling me that they had relayed our classroom conversation about this text to families. The copies of that book were sometimes not in our classrooms because they had been lent to a mother, to a brother, to a cousin or to a friend down the road. It was an extraordinary thing to see.

So for that, I wanted to take this time to put on the record my appreciation for the courage that it would have taken to be that mother who put pen to paper after the extraordinary loss of losing her son not once but losing her son daily in moments when the illness took over his life. Thank you.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER ( Ms Claydon ): Thank you. As a mark of respect I invite honourable members to rise in their places.

*Honourable members having stood in their places—*

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: I thank the chamber.