



# Helping some people, some of the time

“As a writer, you hold an interesting position because you can be both cynical and idealistic at the same time.”

By Poppy Nwosu

Idealism lies at the heart of Nicholas Jose’s latest novel. His new book is a moving political mystery 10 years in the making, which – he points out jokingly – will take readers just a few hours to finish.

Perhaps it’s his long and fascinatingly diverse career that has given Nick – now an Emeritus Professor at our University – such a healthy perspective on his art. After all, he’s published numerous novels, short stories and essays over the past 40 years. He’s also taught and mentored creative writing students at the University of Adelaide, studied literature at Oxford and even served as a diplomat in China during the 1989 Tiananmen Square tragedy.

Nick’s latest book, *The Idealist*, is set during a different – but equally fraught – period of modern history. It focuses on the violent lead-up to the 1999 East Timorese independence referendum.

Travelling from the idyllic familiarity of the Adelaide Hills to an icy Washington DC, from the dry distances of Yorke Peninsula to humid mountains in Timor-Leste, every setting within *The Idealist* is beautifully rendered.

In the novel, an Australian defence analyst becomes ‘unmoored’ by his destructive relationship with his own idealism as he asks the question, ‘Isn’t there a natural law that calls for a neighbour to come to your aid if your life is in danger?’

“Idealism is an ambiguous thing, or a dangerous thing in some ways,” Nick says. “But it feels necessary, too. I think you have to believe it’s possible that things can be better.”

*The Idealist* is a vivid meditation on these themes, wrapped into the sharp outline of a mystery that takes a hard look at Australian international policy – both the positive and insidious.



“I think as Australians we want to think of ourselves as nice people, or as small and insignificant among bigger forces. There’s truth in that, but where we are the bigger force – and, for instance, East Timor is a tiny little island offshore – the tables are reversed.”

It’s his time in China as a diplomat that might have informed Nick’s latest work the most. Interestingly though, he wasn’t consciously aware of those threads at the time of writing *The Idealist*.

“When I was offered the role of Cultural Counsellor in Beijing, I wondered if I really wanted to do it. I had a lot of Chinese friends because I’d been teaching there, and I didn’t want to be cut off from them by working for the Australian government.” Yet he received advice that changed his mind.

“A friend told me I just had to do the job. I’d learn more about Australia in that role than I’d ever learn any other way, and that was true.”

Being caught up in the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 also led Nick to question “where I stood, what side was I on, what could I do?”

Nick then received another piece of lasting advice. “I was told you can’t really do anything, but you can help some people some of the time. And that was it.”

Nick drew on these experiences for *The Idealist*, focusing now on Australia’s complicated role in East Timor’s occupation by Indonesia.

“As a writer, you hold an interesting position because you can be both cynical and idealistic at the same time,” he says. “You can express your ideals through writing, but you also know the world isn’t really always like that, so you try to depict that truth as well. Then, when someone far away in another space reads it, you hope it helps them see the world differently.”

And that’s the power of a good book. Even if it only takes a few hours to read.



Poppy Nwosu is a former Media Officer for the University of Adelaide and published author of multiple novels.

*The Idealist*, by Nick Jose, was published in September 2023 by Giramondo Publishing Company. Nick is Emeritus Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide. He has published seven novels and three collections of short stories.

The main image of Nick Jose photographed by Isaac Freeman.