

# Arundhati Roy: The power of the collective

By Chelsea Jordan-Makely

With an apropos blend of humor and social activism, Baharak Yousefi, BC Library Conference 2014 Planning Committee Chair and Head of SFU's Fraser Library, set the stage for the closing keynote speaker — Arundhati Roy — and challenged the audience to “denounce the myth of the neutral profession.” As well, Yousefi read from Roy’s essay, “The End of Imagination”:

The only dream worth having is to dream that you will live while you are alive, and die only when you are dead. To love, to be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and vulgar disparity of the life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget. (Roy, 1998, para. 25)

Ms. Roy began her speech by conjuring up memories of her childhood in Kerala, India, where her mother operated a school in the same building as the rotary club. Roy fondly recalled devouring the library books that arrived in cartons every three months, saying, “the library opened my mind to writing.”

As a young adult, Roy moved to Delhi to study architecture, where she ruffled feathers by asking philosophical questions about how design reinforces systemic oppression. Several years later, she explored these same ideas as a writer and actor in the film industry, wherein she encountered success, as well as censorship. As with any of her endeavors, Roy’s first

novel, *The God of Small Things*, employs a disarming mix of comedy and criticism to address injustice and wrongdoing. The book sold more than six million copies and won the 1997 Booker Prize, but it was censored in India, and Roy was charged with “corrupting morality.”

Since then, Roy has landed in hot water, and in India’s courts, multiple times. She wrote her first political essay, “The End of Imagination,” in response to what she characterized as the “howl of nationalism,” that followed the Hindu government’s first nuclear tests. When she refused to apologize, she was sentenced to prison. Most recently, Roy published a book of essays called *Capitalism: A ghost story*, and also wrote the preface to B.R. Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste*, taking the unpopular view that Mahatma Gandhi was “shockingly bigoted.”

Answering a question from the audience about how she finds the courage to tackle unpopular issues, Roy said, “The ideal of the collective is something that capitalism fears, and seeks to erode.” Expounding on this idea, she offered advice that might apply equally to writers or to librarians interested in “denouncing the myth of the neutral profession”: place yourself in the crowd, but don’t ever relinquish your own voices.

## Reference

Roy, A. (1998, August 1). The end of imagination. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.commondreams.org/views02/0307-02.htm>

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