Delighted to and honoured to be asked to speak at the launch of Death and Forgiveness for several reasons.

As much as anything, because this book in subject matter, origin and author, links two of the 14 UNESCO Cities of literature Dunedin and Prague, both of which were granted that designation only 4 months ago. Dunedin and Prague were two of the four designated last year, the other two being Heidelberg and Granada. We keep illustrious company in all three cases.

This launch of Death and Forgiveness is among the first events implementing if you like, our City of Literature designation. The fact that the book connects Prague and Dunedin is a reminder of the international outward-looking nature of the UNESCO designation. So much good writing, good literature, is about ones place in the world. It is about the individual, where they are at, their place, their feelings about that - AND about the wider context for that the wider world and how the two interact.

I understand that Death and Forgiveness is regarded with great interest in Prague as it is here.

Jindra Tichá is a highly acclaimed author in her native Czechoslovakia, but this is her first book that is accessible in the first instance to monolingual NZ English speakers. I'm pleased about that, because while Death and Forgiveness is clearly a memoir, it is at another level an exploration of the cultural challenge of dislocation, of being uprooted and replanted and uprooted again, and being confronted by different mores, attitudes and values at every turn.

It's also an account of addressing those challenges and how reactions to and judgements of fundamentally different cultural values can change and mature over time. They can change from instinctive antipathy to admiration, from fear to affection, as more is learned and experienced about the new social environment. This in turns brings about a new perspective on ones birth culture.

Death And Forgiveness is also an acknowledgement of the commonality of human needs, fears and insecurities, regardless of cultural background.

I was impressed by the author's detailed recall of her reactions to, and feelings about, the moves forced upon her by political circumstance and the totally new social and cultural environments in which she found herself. First middle-class England, then the totally artificial, proscribed, on-board culture of the ocean liner. A world unto itself that the author later found actually included several levels of society – levels with quite different expectations and conditions.
Then the arrival in a raw post-colonial NZ and the author's (I suspect) bewilderment at its barren cultural landscape, a landscape that gradually blossomed and grew more offerings and interest. Offerings and interest contributed to ironically particularly by European immigrants like the author.

Death and Forgiveness is a book I would probably not been attracted to but which, on reading, drew me in and which I found thought provoking.

I commend Death and Forgiveness to you all, particularly forgiveness.