

SWW 2016 Book Award (NON-FICTION)

JUDGE: Professor Anne Brewster

Rosie's War: Escape from Singapore 1942 by Rosalind Sharbanee Meyer tells the story of the author's childhood and adolescence in Singapore, describing her departure from Singapore during the second World War to live in Bombay and her later departure to live in Australia. This book attests to the multiplicity of heritages characteristic of many Australians.

Beautifully told, it explores issues of identity and belonging, painting a vivid portrait of Sharbanee Meyer's Iraqi-Jewish family with a bright humour and a frankness that make this a moving read. Although her strong and sometimes troubled relationships with her mother and father (and the impact of the war on both of them) are at its core, the book showcases a wide variety of people from the author's childhood and adolescence, remembering kind and intimidating teachers, friends and family members in engaging detail. She recalls the sometimes-painful memories of people who performed deeds of generosity but whom she would never see again. There is a lot of poignancy in this book; Sharbanee Meyer tells us for example that she so dearly treasured her doll at one point in her childhood that she later adopted its name as her second name. But it is also a book informed with a spirit of joy and celebration.

She describes the complex and troubling impact of racial codes recalling the ways which racism impacted on her and the ways in which she internalised fears and anxieties as a child. She talks about the awkwardness of maturing as young woman and how she was sometimes exposed to physical harassment. This is a frank story told from the heart.

Second place: *Kokoda Secret. Ian Hutchinson: Australian Hero* by Susan P Ramage

In this biography of her father, Ramage follows Ian Hutchinson's extensive military career as a soldier and commanding officer in the Middle East, New Guinea and Korea. Meticulously documented and drawing on a range of research materials including Hutchinson's touching letters to his wife, *Kokoda Secret* recounts the historic victory at Eora Creek. Compellingly written it portrays a man of courage, generosity, endurance and integrity.

Third place: *Under the Colony's Eye. Gentlemen and Convicts on Cockatoo Island 1839-1869*, by Sue Castrique.

This very readable study of the penal establishment on Cockatoo Island in Sydney's harbor gives us a valuable insight into colonial life and bureaucracy as they were played out in intrigues, tension and scandal. It is sensitive to the complexity of race relations and the vulnerability of the convicts who were at risk of exploitation by an unscrupulous superintendent. This book makes an important contribution to the field of Australian history.

Highly Commended: *You'll be sorry. How World War II changed women's lives*, by Ann Howard.

Howard puts women's lives on the map in her riveting interviews with women about their experiences in the Australian Women's Army Service.

General comment:

The non-fiction section of the Society of Women Writers was dominated by historical books, particularly books about war and its effects. These were engrossing reading and made impressive use of archival materials and interviews. There was also a strong interest in the colonial period with an intriguing book on the one woman who was executed under Queensland law, Ellen Thomson, and another on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour. There was an informative study of the small town of Kandos in the central west of NSW. The objects of documentation and analysis in all these historical studies were intriguing and the authors have made a significant and original contribution to these fields.

Other writers used the memoir to excellent effect, writing about the tragic death of a brother and the migratory trajectory of a family living in Singapore in the 1930s and 1940s. Two people wrote

travel memoirs, which observed with humour and courtesy the people and customs of the lands they travelled through. The standard of writing in the non-fiction section was generally high and all the authors approached their topics with a deep sense of inquiry and a strong desire to tell a story.

SWW 2016 Book Award (FICTION)

JUDGE: Dr Anne Jamison

I'd like, firstly, to extend my thanks to the society for inviting me to act as judge for this year's fiction book award, as well as to all those authors who sent in their books for consideration. It has been a privilege and a pleasure over the last few months to have such an exciting range of books at my side to read.

The quality of writing and diversity of style, topic, theme, characters and, in particular, genre has also been impressive. One of the things in which I've always been keenly interested in terms of my own research is the way in which women's writing, both past and present, has been received and, often, unfairly categorised. Gender and genre, I have found, are inextricably interlinked when it comes to reading and reviewing literature.

When the New Zealand author, Eleanor Catton, won the Booker prize a few years ago she was very vocal about what she perceived as the unequal public reception of male and female writers, an inequality exacerbated by her recent success. 'Male writers tend to get asked what they think,' she said, 'and women what they feel.' So much of this seems to derive from presuppositions about what women write about and how they write, as if women's creative practice is somehow always an inner or emotional narrative, opposed to an outer or intellectual one.

The books for this award have certainly been encouraging in this respect and challenge this type of limited thinking. If many of these books have, indeed, focussed on the inner or emotional lives of fictive female characters, they have done so in such a way as to expose the complexity of those narratives and the interconnection between emotion and intellect. They are also a clear demonstration of the strength and diversity of women's writing across a multitude of genres, including historical fiction, murder mystery, crime thriller, the illustrated short story and literary non-fiction or memoir.

The historical fictions set in colonial Australia by Johanna Nicholls, *Golden Hope* and *The Lace Balcony*, significantly reposition women's voices as part of an historical narrative that has traditionally been dominated by men. And these aren't women of high rank or birth or acclaimed historical importance, but courtesans and circus performers, whose lives are nonetheless significantly interwoven with that of an emerging Australian nation. Women's lives in these novels are often unwillingly caught up and prescribed by the men around them, but these female characters also demonstrate independence of action and thought which, in *Golden Hope*, explicitly aligns with Australian women's advocacy of women's emancipation.

Similarly, and despite its wholly different setting – mediaeval England – Isolde Martyn's *The Golden Widows* takes a unique perspective on a well-known historical narrative, the War of the Roses. Again, it repositions historical women's narratives as a means of understanding and recontextualising dominant (and very often) masculine interpretations of history. It imaginatively explores and considers the experiences of historical women who have to negotiate with a world-view that sees them as subordinate to the battles of clan and nation that surround them.

The breadth, scope and reach of both Nicholls' and Martyn's fictions also pay testament to their powers as writers and researchers. The imaginative sweep of these ambitious sagas is clearly rooted in detailed research that impressively recaptures times, places and settings. Attention to historical detail and the ability to convince modern-day audiences of the authenticity of these texts is, here, beautifully done.

Libby Sommer sets her book, *My Year with Sammy*, in a more recognisable urban present but also one which foregrounds the female narrative voice. Its short sections, poetic language, and

privileging of the older woman's voice, gives us a moving, intelligent and raw insight into single motherhood and the parenting of an extraordinary and, very often, difficult young girl. Its relatively short narrative is compressed with the intimacies of family life, the relationship between mothers and daughters, and the daily joys and challenges of raising children.

At its heart is a brave, sometimes funny, and deeply honest account of parenting (and grand-parenting) a young child with severe dyslexia. It looks with compassion at those pressure points in a human life where it seems everything is about to break. And yet, the book has a kind of faith in the human spirit. Its abiding image of the lotus blossom at the mythical beginning of time that surfaces and blossoms is not just a comfort to the narrator, but a symbol of the enduring human spirit.

Past and present, these books give voice to wives, mothers, grandmothers, mistresses, single parents, and everything in between. Above all else, they give validity to women's stories and narratives in ways that are otherwise too often dismissed by placing women's ordinary lives at the centre of current and historical narratives in fascinating and often deeply moving and enriching ways.

SWW 2016 Book Award (POETRY)

JUDGE: Melinda Smith

General remarks

This year's entrants for the NSW Society of Women Writers poetry book award represented an astonishing variety of style, tone, form, and format. From poetic biography and memoir to translation, from short Japanese forms to sestinas and pantoums, from descriptive lyrics to elegies and comic pieces to work experimenting with new visual and rhythmic structures – there really was a veritable feast on offer.

It is also worth noting how many of this year's entries incorporated beautiful visual elements – from the incredibly painstakingly illustrated books of Marilyn Peck, to Cynthia Rowe's haiga with a sumi-e by Ron Moss, to the old photographs in Karen Throssell's book for her mother. While this is a poetry competition, and books were judged on the quality of their poems alone, it did make the judging experience a more interesting and enjoyable one to have so many lovely images to look at.

Placings

3rd prize - shared

A Girl in the River – Marilyn Peck

A Girl in the River contains many closely observed, rhythmically interesting poems. As befits a poet who is also an artist there are some arresting descriptions of colour ('That area north of Adelaide 1984' p36) and several well-rendered surreal moments. Formally adventurous, the book contains *haibun*, *senryu*, sestinas, longer free verse and blank verse pieces and the visually arresting Horse with the Paisley Heart (p11 -show).

A Call to Listen – Colleen Keating

The poems in *A Call to Listen* show us many landscapes, from Ormiston Pound to Madrid to Tokyo to various bush and garden locations. In this substantial book, Keating's specialty is the vividly described lyrical moment (for example, p118 'Aerodynamics of a feather'), rendered in short staccato lines. She also engages with political themes in poems such as the devastating 'Requiem for a suicide bomber' (p 83). The collection takes its title from a poem that evokes the portraits of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Judith Wright in imagined conversation across 'the space between' them, 'calling us to listen'.

2nd prize

Motherhood Statement – Karen Throssell

Motherhood Statement is a fascinating poetic biography/memoir for the poet's mother, Eileen Dorothy Throssell (nee Jordan), who had a Philosophy degree with first class honours from Melbourne University and who was once accused by Petrov of spying for Russia. There are some excellent poems here, achieving an interesting mosaic effect with some lines and images repeated between poems.

The book is formally varied with pantoums, haibun and some interestingly structured 'conversations' between the two voices of mother and daughter, representing a deep engagement with the theme. The diction is sparse, honed and precise. There are also fine ekphrastic pieces responding to photographs of Eileen.

'A major government inquiry into an issue of great public importance' is excellent.

1st Prize

Floating Nest – Cynthia Rowe

Cynthia Rowe's *Floating Nest* is an excellent first collection of haiku and senryu. In her best pieces Rowe finds a beautiful resonance in her images, and her diction displays perfect balance, freshness and skill. An impressive achievement. As someone who has read a lot of this poetic form in both Japanese and English I know only too well how difficult they are - there is nowhere to hide in a haiku – but Rowe rises to the challenge admirably: avoiding the cliché and the trite, and injecting interest and subtle pathos. The quality of the work is best demonstrated by allowing it to speak for itself:

*storm damage / the tradesman's trail / of old spice
dental check-up/a yacht capsizing/on the harbour
dining table/my sister's first essay / embedded
hot wind gusts/the wattle tree's shade/full of holes
leaf-strewn bridge/a ripple rakes/the stream
war veteran.../lobbing grain/at his hens
road train/bull ants around/the butterfly wing
his wake/my pearl choker/suddenly too tight*

SWW 2016 Book Awards (YOUNG ADULT & CHILDREN)

JUDGE: Cathie Tasker

Thank you for asking me to judge this award – the Children's and YA fiction. Judging is one of my favourite things to do next to reading. I have worked with children's and YA fiction for many years, and have just completed 3 years judging these categories for the CBCA.

I loved the diversity of approaches – children's picture books, younger readers fiction and Young Adult fiction.

Naturally the main criterion for the award was 'literary merit'. A lot of people ask me how I can evaluate that, and my only answer is that I could always tell. I have always read a lot, and my university studies were in literature and writing, and I worked in a library, where I had the privilege of spending the fiction budget. Then I worked as an editor and publisher for many years, and this gave me confidence in my opinions, as I could see which of the manuscripts I selected won awards, were bestsellers, and the authors who developed to household names.

But literary merit is a little more difficult to judge where picture books are involved, as the picture books are driven by illustration, but my brief was to judge the text. I considered that, and decided that the effectiveness of the illustrations were important. Good illustrations which extend the

meaning of the text are only possible where the text leaves space for the illustrator to work. Added to that I looked for a potent meaning and a lyrical text.

The shorter the work is, the easier it is to undervalue the craft involved in creating it. And that's often the case with books for younger readers. This category demands a strong voice, and a strong central idea with a strong narrative drive. The child character should embrace the issues and set out to resolve them, yet it should all be done through excellent storytelling. Never lose sight of the story for the issue, and the best children's fiction have both.

While good children's books have themes, symbols and complex storylines, it is easier to judge these things in YA fiction because the books are longer and give the author the opportunity to develop them. The characters can be more complex, and the story settings unfamiliar, but I still look for rhythmic language and an emotional impact.

I hope I have chosen stories with potent characters and plots which possess an underlying truth. For me, a book must offer an emotional response as well as technical excellence because good literature engages the heart and the mind.

And so now you understand what was in my mind while judging the books submitted.