

2008 NSW Premier's Literary Awards

The winners of the 2008 NSW Premier's Literary Awards were announced by the Minister for the Arts, the Hon Frank Sartor MP, on 19 May 2008.

The category winner and judges' comments follow.

NSW PREMIER'S LITERARY AWARDS 2008 WINNERS

Book of the Year (\$10,000) & Christina Stead Prize for fiction (\$40,000)

Michelle de Kretser *The Lost Dog* Allen & Unwin

Douglas Stewart Prize for non-fiction (\$40,000)

Tom Griffiths *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica* University of New South Wales Press Ltd

Kenneth Slessor Prize for poetry (\$30,000)

Kathryn Lomer *Two Kinds of Silence* University of Queensland Press

Ethel Turner Prize for young people's literature (\$30,000)

James Roy *Town* University of Queensland Press

Patricia Wrightson Prize for children's literature (\$30,000)

Li Cunxin & Anne Spudvilas (illus) *The Peasant Prince* Penguin Group (Australia)

Community Relations Commission Award (\$15,000)

Jacob G. Rosenberg *Sunrise West* Brandl & Schlesinger Pty Ltd

Gleebooks Prize (\$10,000)

Kay Anderson *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* Routledge

UTS Glenda Adams Award for New Writing (\$5,000)

Rhyll McMaster *Feather Man* Brandl & Schlesinger Pty Ltd

Play Award (\$30,000)

Debra Oswald *Stories in the Dark* Australian Theatre for Young People and Riverside Theatres / Currency Press Pty Ltd

Script Writing Award (\$30,000)

Anna Broinowski *Forbidden Lie\$* Liberty Productions Pty Ltd

The NSW Premier's Prize for Literary Scholarship (\$30,000)

William Christie

*Samuel Taylor Coleridge: a Literary
Life*

Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, UK

The Special Award (\$20,000)

Thomas Keneally AO

Judges' Comments

Book of the Year (\$10,000) & Christina Stead Prize for fiction (\$40,000)

Michelle de Kretser, *The Lost Dog*, Allen & Unwin

The Lost Dog, by Michelle de Kretser, is the winner of the Book of the Year Award. The story is told from the point of view of Tom Loxley, an Indian-Australian whose family had immigrated to Australia in the mid twentieth-century from India, where his mother's family were poverty-stricken and culturally adrift Eurasians. Tom is weighed down by an almost crippling sense of responsibility for his mother as she ages. He watches as she slides into infirmity, battling with confusion and trying to hold onto what dignity remains to her. His family history clings to Tom in the bitter-sweet relationship of mother and son. It is the backdrop against which he embarks upon a friendship with a flamboyant and eccentric artist.

The Lost Dog is a love story with a difference. At the centre of Tom's affections is Nelly Zhang, a successful artist who lives in an inner city warehouse. Yet Nelly holds Tom at bay; she is not all that she appears to be. There are dark secrets in her life. Her past remains a mystery that slowly unravels in the course of the narrative. This is a novel about contemporary multicultural Australia. It moves Australian literature into a new phase by taking cultural difference and multiplicity as a given in contemporary Australian life. It confidently portrays a world of cultural hybridity but without being programmatic or pedagogical. The complex family backgrounds of the two central characters inform their actions, their emotions, their art and their general identity. Yet the details of their cultural difference are stitched into the narrative fabric of the story so intricately that they emerge only in passing, so to speak, as fleeting but telling glimpses. Both characters are articulate, ironic and self-reflexive. Although they seem very much part of the urban world they live in, they nonetheless have traces of feeling 'native yet foreign'; their family histories set them apart from mainstream 'Australians.' *The Lost Dog* deals with the complexity and effects of immigrant lives in a subtle and unselfconscious way. It explores the effects of the global movement of people, images and objects which ushered in the modern world. Nelly's artwork maps the seductions, fascinations, and cultural collisions of an urban consumerist lifestyle.

The story is elegantly and adroitly structured within the frame of a week during which time Tom's beloved dog goes missing. His anxiety over the whereabouts of the dog is interleaved with a gradual peeling back of the layers of mystery and intrigue in Nelly's life. It is a story told with an impressive command of its craft and a deft, economic style. It combines irony and a beautiful turn of phrase with an astute observation of the complicated drives of human nature.

Douglas Stewart Prize for non-fiction (\$40,000)

Tom Griffiths, *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica*, University of NSW Press Ltd

Tom Griffiths' *Slicing the Silence* is a sustained meditation on wildness and landscape, on ice, ecology and story; it is a vivid history of human enterprise and folly at the farthest reaches of culture. It is an impeccably researched, deeply felt, and elegantly made work of literary nonfiction, the outstanding work among this year's entries.

A striking feature of Griffiths' book is its braiding together of historical essays and the author's personal narrative. By this means, Griffiths casts his narrator (himself as both journeyer and historian) in the narrative, without stealing the show from the other *dramatis personae*; it gives the reader entry into the book's wandering and reflective narrative through identification, even intimacy, with the teller; and it animates what might otherwise have been a detached chronicle.

Through this weave of personal and public histories, of intimacy and detachment, Griffiths evokes 'the meditative dimensions of voyaging': the book's chapters flow like the tides, they depart and sometimes return like parties of expeditioners and penguins, from the quiet meridian struck and held in the diary entries. Each chapter explores intriguing themes (solitude, sex, time, politics, weather, silence, climate change), but the reader journeys not just through ideas and memories; the landscape itself (its form and its 'palpable' silence) is forcefully present from beginning to end.

In the Antarctic, the landscape is sufficiently attenuated and exacting to render the human quest for belonging on earth a matter not merely of spirit but of survival against steep odds. It's easy to die here, beautifully or horribly. But there are things one can learn only here, if one can just stay alive. The ice teaches those who visit it the limits of their physical and spiritual selves, for instance, and the limits and uses of culture - how much, in the end, we depend on the environment for our very lives and their sustaining stories.

The importance of *Slicing the Silence* does not lie in the intrinsic merit of the historical tales Griffiths tells, or in the philosophical vision he delicately and astutely draws from them, but in the way he does the telling. Phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence, the book is beautifully voiced and skilfully told. Griffiths' book does the work that art does; it engages us and helps us see the world and our selves within it freshly.

Kenneth Slessor Prize for poetry (\$30,000)

Kathryn Lomer, *Two Kinds of Silence*, University of Queensland Press

Occasionally one is lucky enough to encounter a book which emphatically transports the reader. Kathryn Lomer's second collection of poetry is largely set in Tasmania. A tangible immediacy resonates throughout *Two Kinds of Silence* - the reader *feels* the sand, mosses and the raw green silk. There is a marvellous weight of imagery here which threads through the book giving a

visceral vitality to the pages – ‘the river slurs’, ‘they carve three cubic feet of air / into slices of meaning’, the ‘life scar’, ‘sky’s buzz’.

This book ranges freely from sharply drawn landscapes to milking shed patois and notably a series of intensely realised personal interiors. There is frank anger and generous empathy as Lomer gives form to a life, a world. *Two Kinds of Silence* is a linguistically rich and honest exploration that will enliven all who read it.

This was a year of many impressive books: some by established figures and many with a number of superb poems. The judges chose this title for its consistency, bravery, the unwrapped wonder and stylistic dexterity. If you think poetry is unable to surprise and satisfy, then this will change your mind.

Ethel Turner Prize for young people’s literature (\$30,000)

James Roy, *Town*, University of Queensland Press

Although written for teenage and young adult readers, James Roy’s memorable and masterful collection of thirteen short stories has the potential to reach a much wider audience.

Set in a fairly typical contemporary Australian town, the lives and issues confronting thirteen young people are explored over the course of a year. Characters are very diverse and speak with their own distinctive voices but Roy skilfully links them and their stories to build up an holistic portrayal of life in a small town through their eyes.

Important themes like love, loss, family relationships, starting a new job, and leaving home are reflected through the eyes of these young Australians. Through understated prose, Roy invites the reader to share their everyday dilemmas. We experience their joys and their grief and can’t help but be moved by the hope and humour with which they face the challenges of coming to terms with the world.

Patricia Wrightson Prize for children’s literature (\$30,000)

Li Cunxin & Anne Spudvilas (illus.), *The Peasant Prince*, Penguin Group (Australia)

This is your one chance.... You have your secret dreams. Follow them! Make them come true...

Originally published as *Mao’s Last Dancer*, this touching picture book tells the story of an impoverished Chinese boy, Li Cunxin, whose life changes dramatically when he is chosen to study ballet at the Beijing Dance Academy.

Motivated by his father’s tale of a frog who escapes from a deep, dark well into the light of a new life, Li overcomes fear, uncertainty, sadness and ‘an

ocean of loneliness' to eventually become a world renowned dancer. Anne Spudvilas' delicate and haunting images draw on the traditions of Chinese brush painting to add beauty and authenticity to the narrative.

Told simply, there are many themes addressed – not least the importance of courage and determination and, of course, the importance of believing that 'Nothing is impossible!'

And so the little frog did get out of the well, but he never forgot where he came from.

Community Relations Commission Award (\$15,000)

Jacob G. Rosenberg, *Sunrise West*, Brandl & Schlesinger

Jacob Rosenberg's *Sunrise West* is at once a harrowing account of life in Nazi concentration camps and an uplifting narrative about migration, where the difficult journey to rebuild, survive and even flourish is put into stark perspective. This volume continues the story begun in *East of Time*, mainly focused on his family's incarceration in the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex where his parents, two sisters and two young nieces perished in the first few days, his three years in Italy as a displaced person, and finally his early life in Australia with his beloved wife.

Despite the intensity of the story and the chapter in history that it illuminates, Rosenberg's autobiography is surprisingly poetic and engaging. Part of the work's power is in the way it sheds light on the experience of Jewish migrants who arrived in Australia with 'hope on their lips and doubt in their hearts ... to restore the irrestorable, to repair the irreparable' and who, within a short time, 'assumed a pivotal place in the emerging multicultural mosaic' of the nation. Rosenberg's memoir is haunting and artistically brave. It is an important addition to the canon of both Holocaust literature more widely, and Australian autobiography more specifically.

Gleebooks Prize (\$10,000)

Kay Anderson, *Race and the Crisis of Humanism*, Routledge, UK

With the publication of *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* Kay Anderson has given us a book that not only charts the history of Western understanding of what it is that constitutes and signifies our humanness, but one that also takes a central place in the current debate about the relationship between human 'development' and nature, and the much contested question of 'race'. The debate is a longstanding one, and much of the material she brings to construct her argument will be familiar to many readers; but the originality of her thesis lies in the significance she attributes to European discovery of the Australian Aboriginal.

Drawing on a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, Anderson makes the trajectory of philosophical, religious and scientific argument over a

number of centuries, clear – this is no mean feat. In particular she focuses her discussion on the Enlightenment idea that ‘human potentiality was realised in a movement out of nature’, and that this movement ‘out of nature’ toward ‘civilization’ as understood primarily by creation of community, cultivation of the land and domestication of animals, was paralleled by a process of self-transformation whereby that which was understood to be ‘animal’ as represented by instincts and unregulated passions, was eradicated or repressed in favour of the human capacity to reason.

Anderson suggests that European discovery of the North American Indian was easily enough incorporated into this developmental theory of human movement ‘out of nature’ – there was sufficient evidence to suggest a human separation from animal and nature, but inclusion of the subsequent discovery of the Australian Aboriginal proved intractable. Not only was there little evidence upon which to grant ‘humanity’ as based on the definition of remove from nature, neither was there any evidence of ability or desire to do so, and yet it was equally impossible to deny humanity - they were clearly ‘human’.

Anderson claims that it was from this position of incomprehensibility that a ‘race-based’ theory of difference was derived - one that claimed the ‘unimprovability’ or ‘imperfectibility’ of some peoples. She points to the rift that developed between those theorists who supported the idea of humankind as one species whose various stages of development away from nature could be attributed to ‘physical and cultural differences shaped by circumstances’ and those who argued with increasing force and numbers that ‘human physical and cultural differences were intrinsic to different groups of people’ - that is, their place in a hierarchy of human remove from nature was ‘racial’ and fixed.

What is significant then about Anderson’s argument is the central position she gives the Australian Aboriginal in the shift to a racialized understanding of human difference. It has to be said that this book does not make for easy reading, but equally it should be said that, given the complexity of the issues, Anderson’s book is gratifyingly cogent and offers an original perspective on the debate.

UTS Glenda Adams Award for New Writing (\$5,000)

Rhyll McMaster, *Feather Man*, Brandl & Schlesinger

Feather Man is the story of Sookie, a young woman who survives childhood abuse and comes into her own as an artist. It is, however, so much more than a simple coming of age tale. The opening, in the backyard of a suburban Brisbane house, is unforgettably monstrous and real, capturing the child’s view of abuse with a truth that shakes the reader, never allowing us to settle comfortably into the story. We follow Sookie as she grows up, moving from man to man, struggling to paint and struggling to become herself as she encounters a host of appalling and fantastic people, all of whom ring absolutely true. At the centre, Sookie herself is difficult, flawed, frequently hard to like, but very much alive.

This is a novel written with a poet's love of language. The prose dances and twists out of the darkness of Sookie's childhood and into her emergence as an adult. Sookie sees the world in a completely idiosyncratic and unconventional way, never allowing us to paint her as a stereotyped victim of abuse. Rhyll McMaster has done what only the best writers do – she has used the richness of language to create new layers of story, giving us a novel that is witty, disturbing and completely alive.

Play Award (\$30,000)

Debra Oswald, *Stories in the Dark*, Australian Theatre for Young People and Riverside Theatres / Currency Press Pty Ltd

Debra Oswald's outstanding *Stories in the Dark* is a beguiling and elegant intertwining of two war-ravaged young lives, with dark, wild, half-remembered folk tales. It is that perhaps unusual thing: an Australian play which is distinctly international in setting, and which, while universal in theme, never generalizes to connect. The playwright's characterisation is pungent, her narrative lean and pointed. Both are motivated by clear emotional truth. *Stories in the Dark* is an acute demonstration of universality lying in the specific, wherein a simple tale - a teenage girl tells stories to help a younger boy through the night, and get herself some peace - is deployed by a playwright of penetrating vision and sure craft, to engage with a primal, enduring aspect of human nature: the reconciliation with life's harsher mysteries - particularly death - via their transformation into stories.

The sharp edge of Oswald's theme lies in a familiar paradox: the bedtime horror story. For her young narrator enchants a troubled audience not with benign characters and happy endings, but with the grotesque, the cruel, and the monstrous. Legendary tales populated by ogres, princes, bones that sing, savage beasts, and fools of boys who end up in big, big trouble. Scary stories which - oddly enough - amuse, and serve to dispel, not foster anxiety.

Ostensibly written for a young audience, *Stories In The Dark* achieves a far wider, cross-generational appeal, and deeper meaning, as it probes the very nature and importance of story itself. Debra Oswald's clear-eyed, compassionate play shows us the role of story in making sense. In doing so it demonstrates the place of story in the persistence of hope.

Script Writing Award (\$30,000)

Anna Broinowski, *Forbidden Lie*, Liberty Productions Pty Ltd

The judges wrestled with the decision in the Script category, not just because of the strength of the short list, but because of the question of whether a documentary like *Forbidden Lie* could be said to have 'literary merit'. It was noted that, in a previous year, the Script Award had been given to the documentary *Mabo: Life of an Island Man*, and so a precedent had been set. Had Anna Broinowski's work resulted in a book instead of a film, the question of literary merit would have seemed much more straightforward.

In the end, the judges decided to give the award to Anna Broinowski because her script was a compelling read. Broinowski's story of Norma Khouri's deception in her 2003 book, *Forbidden Love*, reveals not only one of the great literary frauds of the age but gives a fascinating and revealing insight into the life of an apparent serial embezzler. The sequence and structure of the elements of this story, chosen from the many pieces of background information and evidence which would have been collected, demonstrate the skills of a superb storyteller. To make an outstanding documentary, a filmmaker has not only to reveal a truth, she has also to find a good story and tell it well. In *Forbidden Lie\$*, Anna Broinowski has done it all.

The NSW Premier's Prize for Literary Scholarship (\$30,000)

William Christie, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: a Literary Life*, Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, UK

It is remarkable that there is anything new to say about the canonical figure of Coleridge. But in this 'literary life' William Christie says it. The interaction between the life and writing is lucidly examined with particular emphasis on Coleridge's works in both poetry and prose, especially the pivotal *Biographia Literaria*. There is much innovation in Christie's use of manuscript material, and also in his approach to Coleridge's *oral* works, notably his many public lectures.

At least three impressive features of the biography underline its originality. Christie provides a rich and full analysis of the paradoxes of Coleridge's positions regarding philosophy, religion, society and art, and adds to it a coherent developmental account of them which exposes contradictions without minimizing the importance and occasional visionary greatness of the poet's thinking. Coleridge is shown, convincingly for perhaps the first time, to have achieved eventually, despite his many changes of mind and heart, a unified world view. Secondly, Christie places Coleridge's work within a precisely understood view of his society, with its emerging free enterprise, market oriented, literary culture and new non-elitist readership. In speaking out against crass commercialism, he is viewed as ahead of his time. Finally, focusing selectively on the works, Christie reveals the poet as a lively, humorous person, loved by many of his contemporaries, a supplement to the famous biographer Richard Holmes' antidote to two hundred years of scholarship that have cumulatively and gradually desiccated, in some respects, the study of Coleridge and his works.

The inclusion of this study in the prestigious Palgrave 'Literary Lives' series has been vindicated by a brilliant, even dazzling contribution to international literary criticism, which indicates possible new directions for specialist studies of the Romantics, and gives, through a sureness and lightness of touch, pleasurable access to non-specialist readers.

The Special Award (\$20,000)

Thomas Keneally AO

Thomas Keneally has made a major contribution to Australian literary culture, both in Australia and internationally, for over four decades. He has been extraordinarily productive and versatile as a writer, publishing thirty novels, fourteen books of non fiction, five plays and several screenplays. His works have been published throughout the English-speaking world and in translation. This makes him one of the most prolific and accomplished of Australian writers and one of our most distinguished and well known literary ambassadors.

Keneally's work has earned him high accolades. He was awarded the Booker Prize in 1982 for *Schindler's Ark*, later made into the Academy Award-winning film, *Schindler's List* by Steven Spielberg. He had been shortlisted for this award for three earlier novels - *Gossip from the Forest*, *Confederates* and his classic, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, also made into a film by Fred Schepisi. Keneally twice won the Miles Franklin Award for *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967) and *Three Cheers for the Paraclete* (1968). In 1983, he was awarded the Order of Australia for his services to Australian literature and in 1999 he was designated an Australian Living Treasure by the National Trust.

Keneally is a fine writer and engaging storyteller, whose work spans a broad sweep of issues, geographies and timeframes. These include Australian history of the colonial and war years, the history of the Irish diaspora, the American civil war, the Nazi Holocaust, Antarctica, Africa, famine, conflict, the refugee experience, race, religion, culture and politics. His passion for social justice shines through it all, as he brings readers face to face with the moral dilemmas and contradictions inherent in everyday life and seeks to broaden our sense of common humanity. As a writer, commentator and ready participant in public forums over many years, Keneally has given voice to critical issues of our time and demonstrated the important role writers can play in society by building respect and understanding within our community and across the world.

It is appropriate that he be honoured for his outstanding contribution to Australian literature with the 2008 NSW Premier's Special Award.

The judges for the 2008 NSW Premier's Literary awards were Mara Moustafine (chair), Geoffrey Atherden, Georgia Blain, Anne Brewster, Anne Collett, Robyn Ewing, Judi Farr, Tim Gooding, Jean Kent, Joan Kirkby, John Larkin, Stephen Measday, Camilla Nelson, Ken Stewart, Mark Tredinnick, Gerry Turcotte, Murray Waldren and Les Wicks.