

ALS Gold Medal 2013

Judges' Report

Judging Panel

Dr Jo Jones (Chair), Curtin University

Professor Terri-ann White, UWA Publishing

Associate Professor Paul Genoni, Curtin University

Our thanks go to the publishers and writers for submitting their titles for judging. Over eighty titles were submitted, a group that represents both the quality and diversity of Australian literary publishing. (Titles were submitted by A & U, Black Inc, Blue Door, Fremantle Press, Fourth Estate, Giramondo, Hybrid, John Leonard Press, Macmillan, New South Books, Penguin, Picador, Picaro Press, UQP, Scribe, Text, Transit Lounge, Vagabond, Vintage and Wakefield Press.) The excellence of the work submitted made our task difficult but it was also affirming to engage with the depth of talent on the current Australian literary scene.

We would like to congratulate Michelle de Kretser on her outstanding novel *Questions of Travel*. We would also like to congratulate the other writers on this list – Jessie Cole, Robert Drewe, Christopher Koch and Paddy O'Reilly – for the excellent standard of their publications.

Winner

Michelle De Kretser, *Questions of Travel* (A&U)

Questions of Travel embarks on an exploration of the present and emerging conditions of late modernity on a scale that could only be successfully achieved by a highly accomplished writer. Through her two central characters, Australian woman Laura and Sri Lankan man Ravi, and their parallel narratives, De Kretser creates an expansive fictional space that both traverses continents while never losing sight of the separateness of individual lives defined by their especial relationships to place and culture, new and old. Through unsentimental, carefully-metred prose, very different lives unfold where the event of globalisation is not a convenient one-size fits all category but, for De Kretser, is an acutely focused vision that reveals historically and geographically specific experiences. The late modern preoccupations of *Questions of Travel* reveal the link between long established debates about nations and cosmopolitanism, political activism, Western ennui, the sense of home and authentic experience. It is as if, in all its investigation of communication technologies, travel and other manifestations of recent progress, De Kretser creates a brilliant reminder of the essentially modern dilemmas that continue to exist at the centre of so many lives.

Shortlisted

Jessie Cole, *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (4th Estate: Harper Collins Publishers)

In *Darkness on the Edge of Town* Jessie Cole has produced a remarkably assured and compelling first novel, that is as rock-hard, as tense, and as gritty as the lives and times it portrays. Cole's uses a storyline based on small town Australia to explore the solid foundations of love and compassion that frequently underpin the detritus of fragile relationships and broken dreams. The restrained characterisation and dialogue are fully believable and equal to Cole's ambitions as she leads the narrative through fraught territory without reverting to cliché or melodrama. *Darkness on the Edge of Town* is an extraordinary debut that should mark the beginning of a major career.

Robert Drewe, *Montebello* (Hamish Hamilton: Penguin)

Montebello is a second work of memoir by a significant Australian writer. Robert Drewe has written novels, short stories and memoir since 1976 with a particularly acute eye for the dramatic landscapes of beach, city and bush. Drewe's distilled style has carried compelling dramas of political intrigue and social contradiction for generations of readers. *Montebello* returns to a childhood in Perth defamiliarised by a surprisingly little-known event that occurred when the British detonated a nuclear bomb on an island off the west coast in 1952. Drewe uses this event and its ongoing aftermath to build a story of ecological and personal renewal, and love. The book is set in fragments, and ranges over reminiscences from the beginnings of a literary career and encounters with figures in a nascent OzLit scene in university departments, the book pages of daily newspapers, and literary festivals. It is a joyous read full of Drewe's characteristic wry observation (at times sharply scarring) and humour. The form of *Montebello* builds into a fine literary work by a writer at the top of his game, shifting focus to allow it to be more than a sequel to *The Shark Net*; *Montebello* is an outstanding and unconventional memoir.

Christopher Koch, *Lost Voices* (4th Estate: Harper Collins Publishers)

Christopher Koch's masterful story-telling weaves together dual storylines spanning a century to produce a compelling inter-generational account of ambition and consequences. *Lost Voices* re-visits some of the central concerns and setting of Koch's earlier novels but produces a narrative that is vigorous and convincing, and distinguished at every turn by the author's assured and confident prose. In particular Koch addresses Australia's long history of disturbed utopias to bring a new understanding to colonial Tasmania and its convict histories. *Lost Voices* is a significant late career novel.

Paddy O'Reilly, *The Fine Colour of Rust* (Blue Door: Harper Collins Publishers)

Paddy O'Reilly's novel, *The Fine Colour of Rust*, is an original rendering of many of the hardships of life in a country town. It is also, unexpectedly, a work of shrewd optimism. The seeming cultural familiarity of the setting both grounds the life of its rough-around-the-edges heroine, Loretta Boskovic, as much as it undermines heritage industry configurations of "the bush". Loretta, a city-raised single mother, stumbles through the joys and frustrations of daily existence in an action similar to a chaos butterfly, both random and subtly patterned, in order to salvage that which is of worth, even – or particularly – when value is hidden. *The Fine Colour of Rust* is a joyful exploration of the modern Australian idiom which is at once playful, surprising and poetic. The characters and narrative emerge

from skilfully-wrought humour which works through recognition and, ultimately, inspires delight.