The Russell Prize for Humour Writing

2017

Tragicomic bromance takes out Australia's only humour writing prize

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Steve Toltz's dark comedy chronicling the misadventure of two best mates has won Australia's only humour writing prize, the State Library of NSW announced tonight.

Los Angeles-based writer Steve Toltz won the $10,000 biennial Russell Prize for Humour Writing for *Quicksand* (Penguin Random House Australia), selected from a diverse field of 48 entries.

Quicksand follows on from Toltz's Booker-shortlisted debut novel, *A Fraction of the Whole*. The story — narrated by Liam, an aspiring writer-turned-policeman — chronicles the life of his friend Aldo Benjamin, an eternally optimistic 'born loser'. As Aldo's life disintegrates around him, his decline assuming mythic proportions, Liam's quest for meaning assumes existential profundity and comic exhilaration.

The judges – Patti Miller, Lex Marinos and Sami Shah – praised *Quicksand* for the "beauty of its writing, the complexity of its insights and its sharp, intelligent, wise humour."

"Frequently tears of laughter are pursued by pangs of grief," the judges reported. "Toltz switches styles with virtuosity as he scales comedic peaks and plumbs despairing troughs, always taking the reader with him. It is a wonderful achievement from a writer whose words serve as a scalpel to reveal the absurd beneath the veneer of serious existence."

Quicksand was selected from a shortlist of six titles including:

* *Going Out Backwards: A Grafton Everest Adventure,* Ross Fitzgerald and Ian McFadyen (Hybrid Publishers)
* *True Girt: The Unauthorised History of Australia - Volume 2,* David Hunt (Black Inc.)
* *A Toaster on Mars,* Darrell Pitt (Text Publishing)
* *Error Australis,* Ben Pobjie (Affirm Press)
* *The Anti Cool Girl,* Rosie Waterland (HarperCollins Publishers)

Acting NSW State Librarian & Chief Executive Lucy Milne added: "This year's winner shows that great humour writing does not just make us smile or laugh out loud, but has the power to make us laugh and cry in equal measures.

"The State Library is very pleased to administer this unique award, the only prize to recognise humour writing in Australia, as part of its strong literary awards program," Ms Milne said.

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The Prize has been made possible by the generous bequest of the late Peter Wentworth Russell, a farmer, businessman and passionate reader.

Rachel Hill, goddaughter of Peter Russell, has worked closely with the State Library to realise his dream of establishing a prize for humour writing. Rachel fondly remembers his larger than life personality and his sense of the ridiculous: "This was Peter's gift to the literary world," said Rachel.

The Russell Prize for Humour Writing is administered and presented by the State Library of NSW on behalf of the estate. The Library administers or supports six other awards including the NSW Premier's Literary and History Awards.

Background information:

- Works nominated for the 2017 Russell Prize for Humour Writing must have been first published between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2016, and commercially available within this period.
- Works of fiction and non-fiction, including collections of short stories, poetry and verse were eligible for consideration.
- The prize was first awarded in 2015 to Bernard Cohen's witty novel and political satire, *The Antibiography of Robert F. Menzies* (HarperCollins Publishers).
- Writers whose works are nominated must be living Australian citizens or persons holding permanent resident status.

For more information and to organise an interview please contact:
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