

Judges' comments

Christina Stead Prize for Fiction (\$40,000)

A Room Made of Leaves by **Kate Grenville** (Text Publishing)

A Room Made of Leaves challenges history in ways that Kate Grenville has made her own in the Australian literary lexicon. Using the conceit of a secret memoir — the work of Elizabeth Macarthur long hidden until it is 'discovered' by the author — Grenville crafts a moving and witty account of Elizabeth Macarthur's experiences of life in the colony. In Grenville's bold, feminist portrayal, Elizabeth emerges from the shadows of her domineering husband, John Macarthur, as a force to be reckoned with: a woman of distinctly modern sensibilities whose intelligence, cunning, pragmatism and resourcefulness enable her to make the most of her less-than-ideal circumstances. A novel of 'true' and 'false' stories, *A Room Made of Leaves* points to some of the most interesting and challenging questions about how the past may be read.

In this work we see Kate Grenville at the height of her authorial skill as she champions the unofficial history of women's lives lived in the margins. She explores what it means, and what it costs, to find a place of one's own. A triumph of language and imagination, *A Room Made of Leaves* speaks to today in its examination of female agency, reminding us that how we see the past is never singular or fixed.

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

Cherry Beach by **Laura McPhee-Browne** (Text Publishing)

Cherry Beach is a moving coming-of-age novel that explores the powerful friendship between two young women, Ness and Hetty, who leave Melbourne to live abroad. The novel charts the unravelling of their friendship over a period of months, as Hetty becomes increasingly unstable, and Ness is overwhelmed by a love for Hetty that she struggles to acknowledge. A novel of sure and accurate brush strokes, *Cherry Beach* is remarkable for its distinctive authorial voice and the poetic precision of its language.

This is a commanding and fearless work that vividly figures states of yearning and sadness, darkness and damage. What is the line, it asks, that separates friendship from love? What is the extent of our obligation to others when communication fractures or fails? And how do you navigate the aftermath of great loss? An extraordinary new voice, McPhee-Browne tracks with sensitivity the uncertainty of breakdown, and the transformative power of desire.

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EB0-5579-7/2021

Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction (\$40,000)

The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist: Three Lives in an Age of Empire by
Kate Fullagar (Yale University Press)

This is an innovative and exhilarating account of three 18th century lives: the British painter Joshua Reynolds, the Cherokee warrior Ostenaco and the Ra'iatean Mai. Bringing together these three men allows Kate Fullagar to think in new ways, not only about encounters between the British empire and Indigenous societies, but to explore the assumptions and limitations of biography itself. This surprising and intelligent work draws on a deep well of research to animate a historical period in which worlds and world views collided.

It was the audacity of this project that most impressed the judging panel, one that succeeds thanks to Kate Fullagar's committed research and fine prose style. It's a book very interested in visual culture and there is a cinematographic quality to the narrative. Indeed, if the panel regretted the lack of colour illustrations, we found ourselves often contemplating the worlds of the book brought to screen in documentary form. *The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist* is a dazzling work, one that invites readers to look not only at Ostenaco and Mai through the eyes of Joshua Reynolds, but to look back at Reynolds and Georgian Britain from the standpoint of these two men.

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

Throat by **Ellen van Neerven** (University of Queensland Press)

Divided thematically into five parts, *Throat* reckons with memory, family, sexuality, intergenerational trauma, and intergenerational resistance. Van Neerven's verse carries the reader through difficult political and emotional terrain with the precision of stark, unwavering language. Through the voice of a queer First Nations identity, condemnations of colonial legacies are laid down with fierce wit and humour. Moments of rage and mourning echo one another, building an uncompromising intensity. Running in the undercurrents is a hope that is bold and vulnerable, moving the speaker to call for mateship in the fight against continuing colonial violence.

In this collection, van Neerven writes with a decided clarity that matches the urgency of their poetics. The lushly interwoven layers of this work create an active conversation between its themes. Careful meditation over stark verse reveals its shapeshifting voices, tones, and forms, leading to a reading experience that is consistently dynamic.

Throat is a book that extends and expands the possibilities of poetic utterance in Australia. It establishes community with joy. It provides a clarion call for justice. It speaks sensitively to multiple readerships simultaneously. This is an exceptional volume, representing a key moment in the ongoing reckoning with colonial legacies and power structures.

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Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children's Literature (\$30,000)

The Grandest Bookshop in the World by **Amelia Mellor** (Affirm Press)

In *The Grandest Bookshop in the World*, we are introduced to Pearl Cole who is interested in a curious gentleman visitor to her family's bookshop, Melbourne's Coles Book Arcade. The Obscurosmith, or Magnus Maximillian, is an unwelcome visitor who entangles Pa Cole into a dubious negotiation, which results in Pa and the Arcade falling ill, as both are inextricably connected.

The family journey that ensues is exciting and dangerous for all involved, as they campaign against the gigantic magic of Magnus. In this marvellous book, the dynamic action provides a platform for the family to overcome the odds by being clever and determined.

The Grandest Bookshop in the World invites readers to be participants across a matrix of complicated events. The quest is exciting, as readers are pushing for the children and, subsequently, the family to survive. The fear that Pa will die, and the bookshop will be destroyed by negative forces gains momentum through the superb, suspenseful writing of author, Amelia Mellor. This is a stand-out book, with lavish descriptions and characters that readers can believe in. A riveting read.

Ethel Turner Prize for Young People's Literature (\$30,000)

The End of the World is Bigger than Love by **Davina Bell** (Text Publishing)

Captivating and highly original, *The End of the World is Bigger than Love* is the story of twin sisters, Summer and Winter, surviving in a remote location after an event that has ravaged the rest of the world. Through the twins' alternating and unreliable narratives, Bell creates a compelling story that is suspenseful, engaging and, in equal parts, hilarious and devastating.

The book is ambitious in scope and form, successfully exploring themes both global and personal — from grief, love and betrayal to climate change and cyberterrorism. It is also about storytelling itself. References to classic literature throughout not only add depth and resonance to Bell's descriptions, but also draw attention to the artifice of fiction and even the ways we use internal narratives as a means of coping with trauma.

In this, her first book for young adults, Bell expertly explores issues relevant to her audience, posing important questions about what it means to live at a time when human existence is under threat from our own misdeeds. *The End of the World is Bigger than Love* unflinchingly presents the gravity of our predicament and the horror we are capable of, as well as the hope that love and compassion offer. It deserves to be a young adult classic for years to come.

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Nick Enright Prize for Playwriting (\$30,000)

Milk by **Dylan Van Den Berg** (The Street Theatre)

This is a strikingly original work, and a play of need for the author. On a metaphysical Flinders Island off the coast of Tasmania, three unnamed Aboriginal characters, diverse in gender and age and spanning two centuries, negotiate the impacts of colonisation, moving through time and space.

The writer has constructed a truly theatrical landscape, displaying an expertise in how to build scenes and momentum, knowing where to restrain and where to push forward. The play's form is sophisticated and sure, and its content compelling. This is a remarkable achievement from a genuinely exhilarating imagination.

Milk is a strikingly original work occupying dual time zones spanning two centuries, with three unnamed Aboriginal characters negotiating the impacts of colonisation. Van Den Berg's play is symphonic in construction, with deeply human characters, and one that expertly guides the audience through tragedy and loss to a poignant end. A fresh and genuinely exhilarating theatrical voice.

Betty Roland Prize for Scriptwriting (\$30,000)

FREEMAN by **Laurence Billiet** (General Strike & Matchbox Pictures)

FREEMAN is a hybrid documentary about Indigenous Australian athlete Cathy Freeman's Gold Medal performance in the 400 metre final at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Intercutting Freeman's trajectory from child prodigy to track and field superstar with the global attention focused on her in the build-up to the event, the script uses Freeman's race to speak about Race. It deftly juxtaposes her observations, and the conflicted relationship between Australia and its First Nations People, to provoke deeper questions about culture, politics and power.

Billiet's screenplay is innovative and compelling, blending interviews, archival footage, dramatised reconstruction and stylised sequences to capture the excitement, tension and meteoric stakes in play, as the young athlete prepared to run the race of her life. Freeman's authentic, poetic voice adds beauty and profundity to what, in less skilful hands, might have remained a mere sports story. Instead, Freeman's nation-stopping performance becomes a powerful and inspiring symbol of Indigenous excellence, self-determination and spiritual resilience.

FREEMAN scaffolds its political themes within an entertaining and structurally suspenseful narrative arc, achieving that rare thing in scriptwriting: complete visual and emotional engagement. Billiet, in collaboration with her insightful protagonist, has delivered a dazzling, unique and universally resonant tale.

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Multicultural NSW Award (\$20,000 — sponsored by Multicultural NSW)
Throat by **Ellen van Neerven** (University of Queensland Press)

Throat, by Mununjali Yugambeh poet Ellen van Neerven is, to put it simply, brilliant. The follow up to their outstanding debut, *Comfort Food*, the book confirms their place as one of the sharpest and most compelling poets of their generation. *Throat* is simultaneously intimate and radical, giving us an insight into van Neerven's life, experiences, and thoughts, while piercing the trauma at the core of this country.

Part of what makes *Throat* so gripping is that poets like van Neerven, with all the complexities that shape their lives and influence their art, are rarely granted the space and time to make work. It shouldn't be a rare luxury to enjoy something that explores life as a queer Blak person, but it is. Of course, van Neerven is much more than just those elements of their identity, but hopefully *Throat* will help our cultural gatekeepers understand how powerful such stories can be.

The judging panel was unanimous in its decision to award the prize to *Throat*. This year's shortlist is particularly extraordinary, and contains some of the best works of fiction, non-fiction and poetry in recent times, so for *Throat* to rise to the top is an even greater acknowledgement of how great a work it is. We were overwhelmed with the work's beauty, honesty and power, and this prize should send a clear message about what the future of literature should look like in this country.

NSW Translation Prize
(\$30,000 — biennial award, sponsored by Multicultural NSW)
Autumn Manuscripts by Tasos Leivaditis, translated by **N. N. Trakakis**
(Smokestack Books)

Autumn Manuscripts, the final book by Greek poet Tasos Leivaditis (1922–88), is a suite of vignettes and snapshots, of abbreviated elegies and fleeting thoughts, sometimes no more than an impish observation, sometimes sketching in quick strokes the mythic past or a 20th century apocalypse. Meandering between resignation, delight, absurdity, tenderness, Leivaditis retains a childlike wonder at the world even as he takes his leave of it.

Arresting in its imagery, sure handed of tone, the Manuscripts discover eternity in anything, in urban minutiae, in the flotsam of dreams: a woman standing on a pier, the stripe on a stationmaster's hat, father's lapel marigold. Trakakis' translation is fresh and mobile, making this a book to return to over and again, to be startled anew by the sincerity of its strangeness, and soothed by its deep, sweet, coming to grips with death.

Intimate, evocative, by turns startling and soothing — like all real consolations, *Autumn Manuscripts* refuses to console too much. These poems remind us that to be human is to know, remember, and anticipate loss — perhaps even to cherish loss. The *Manuscripts* are here, even though the poet no longer is, and they will remain here, even when we too are gone.

Judges' comments

Imminence by Mariana Dimópulos, translated by **Alice Whitmore**
(Giramondo Publishing)

This beautifully conceived and crafted novel makes time stand still as a new mother is filled with an absence of feeling for her baby. Taking place over an evening and a lifetime, the narrative unfolds in circular, spiralling scenes and meditations without ever losing its focus. The fragmentation of singular moments builds to a strangely satisfying ending. This work pulls readers into a slow-burn treatment of trauma that is entirely present, but also part of a complex psychology inflected by all that has come before.

Elegant and precise, this work is subtle in its intrigue, offering readers the freedom to weave their own conclusions as they retrace the woman's life over 20 years: her lovers and friendships, a country cousin, mathematical formulae, deserts. Through a dexterous mix of dreamlike, real and delusional emotions and atmospheres, this fluent translation superbly conveys the peculiar and economic use of the writer's language and style.

Imminence opens up its characters' lives like complex clockwork, taking us into parts usually concealed to wonder at the deeper philosophical mysteries of time, truth, perception and one's struggle to know others. The translation reads flawlessly in its rendition of the lyrical strangeness, detachment and beauty of the author's compelling voice and vision.

Special Award (\$10,000)
Melina Marchetta

The 2021 NSW Premier's Literary Awards Judging Panel commented that it is hard to overstate the impact of Melina Marchetta's young adult novel *Looking for Alibrandi*. For a generation of young girls with hyphenated identities in the suburbs of Australia, Marchetta's protagonist, Josie, a spirited Italian–Australian teenager struggling to reconcile the demands of her background with the reality of growing up, spoke to their story in a way many books hadn't before.

Looking for Alibrandi is noted by many writers, booksellers and academics as one of the first multicultural young adult books in Australia and it is widely credited as being the inspiration and instigator for many Australian young adult writers of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, even today.

Melina is also well-known for her literacy advocacy — teaching and mentoring young adult writers, particularly within culturally and linguistically diverse communities. She is an ambassador for *Room to Read* a not-for-profit organisation for children's literacy and girls' education across Asia and Africa.

Room to Read seeks to transform the lives of millions of children in low-income communities by focusing on literacy and gender equality in education.

In Australia, Marchetta is an ambassador of #LoveOzYA which aims to promote Australian young adult writers to readers, publishers, booksellers and the broader literary community.