

Judges' comments



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NEW SOUTH WALES

Chloe Higgins *The Girls*

'This is what grief looks like' writes Chloe Higgins, 'an inability to speak'; a wave of sorrow and loss that stuns and silences, overcoming mind and body. In 2005, when Higgins was 17, her younger sisters were killed when the car their father was driving veered into oncoming traffic. Her father survived. Higgins and her mother were not in the car. Now in her early thirties, she has wrung this impressive debut after experiencing more than a decade's physical and emotional turmoil as her grief continued to unfold. Higgins' voice – raw, intimate and direct – rings true, sometimes unbearably so, but is never cloying or solipsistic.

One of the book's great strengths is the way Higgins comes to understand her spiral into self-destructive behaviours and her relationship with her father, destroyed by guilt, and her more resilient mother. *The Girls'* episodic, fragmentary, journal-like prose, unbound by chronology or narrative convention, collapses past and present into one abiding moment. This is a memoir that looks death, loneliness and grief in the eye; and allows readers to understand how the act of writing finally enables Higgins to remember 'the girls' – Lisa and Carlie.

Jacqueline Kent *Beyond Words: A Year with Kenneth Cook*

Jacqueline Kent's understated, beautifully rendered portrait of her relationship with writer Kenneth Cook flows effortlessly onto the page. In February 1986 Kent became Cook's editor and by January 1987, she had become his wife. At first glance, it seemed an improbable love. Cook – estranged from his family, dependent on alcohol, insolvent and unable to surpass the brilliance of his first novel *Wake in Fright* – was almost twenty years older. But they were drawn together by their different literary sensibilities as much as their shared love of writing. For both, words were almost equal to life itself.

Kent's memoir is vividly written at the same time as it exercises restraint and resists sentimentality. Her moving tale of love and grief resonates long afterwards and reveals how the time with Cook left an emotional imprint that lasted a lifetime. Like the best memoirs, Kent's writing illuminates not only her subject but every character in the book, as well as the 14 heady months through which the couple lived. Kent's nostalgia for the literary and publishing culture of the 1980s – a 'lunatic, passionate industry' – walks hand in hand with her undying affection for Cook, who gave his life to writing.



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Russell McGregor *Idling in Green Places. A Life of Alec Chisholm*

A fine biography of Alec Chisholm, a pioneering naturalist and conservationist who was at risk of slipping into obscurity. Chisholm's love of nature began in childhood; his last bird watching observations were recorded in 1976, shortly before his death at 86. Largely self-taught, Chisholm was a prolific author who enthused a genera: *The Life and Stories of William McMahon* tion to appreciate nature, enjoyed a successful career as a journalist, dabbled in history and later became the imperious general editor of the landmark *Australian Encyclopedia*.

McGregor draws insightful conclusions as he outlines Chisholm's character and achievements against the wider social and historical context of his time including his grumpiness as his attitudes and expertise lost relevance. Chisholm's popular writing and interest in bird behaviour, for a time dismissed as anthropomorphism, is sensitively relocated in the context of recent scientific research. McGregor's lightness of touch belies extensive research and sophisticated analysis. His writing is admirably clear and graceful; his judgements thoughtful and fair. When many of the environmental concerns Chisholm aired have become freshly pressing, it is heartening to read this elegant account of an unsung environmental pioneer.

Patrick Mullins *Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon*

How many politicians deserve a biography of 250 000 words? William McMahon is not the obvious candidate, but *Tiberius with a Telephone* is a substantial and surprising achievement, making a credible case for McMahon's significance. Patrick Mullins has produced a sweeping comedy of manners reminiscent of Anthony Powell in its sophisticated handling of political and social context alongside its very readable style and feel for the absurd. He marshals the apparently trivial incident to reveal so much of how politics was done through the 1950s and 1960s.

McMahon is neither hero, nor villain. Instead Mullins has painted a satisfying picture of a complicated, driven, flawed, yet unexpectedly sympathetic figure. McMahon's own sense of self, so often at odds with just about everyone around him, is nevertheless given its due: a conscientious political actor who many regarded as lacking conscience. Mullins cleverly interweaves McMahon's life and times with an account of McMahon's futile efforts to write his story: the result is a biography that not only tells much of its subject but of the nature of biographical writing itself.

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Amra Pajalic *Things Nobody Knows But Me*

A wise and engrossing book about growing up between Australia and Bosnia, centred around the author's relationship with her damaged mother. This is a beautiful telling of a complex intergenerational story of life in two worlds. Her grandmother's village in rural Bosnia, the landscape, people and traditional culture, is exquisitely contrasted with growing up in suburban Melbourne, and a family life punctuated by Fatima's mental illness. Despite the hardship of her childhood experience, the book is tinged with humour and filled with love.

Told as a series of vignettes, the text is deceptively simple but the deep emotional backstory shines through, as the family negotiates a tangle of myths, fears, cultural misunderstandings and the very different experiences of being Muslim in Australia and Bosnia. Much is conveyed in few words and the child's perception is strongly recalled as the adult writer reflects on bewildering secrets in her family history. Pajalic skilfully interweaves memories, documentary sources and fictional recreation of her lived experience to create a tender memoir and an optimistic story of resilience.

Jessica White *Hearing Maud*

Usually books entered for the National Biography Award are either biography or memoir but *Hearing Maud* is a skilful interweaving of the two genres. Jessica White tells the tragedy of Maud, the daughter of expatriate Australian novelist Rosa Praed. Maud's profound deafness deeply affected her life's trajectory, as a clever and accomplished young woman ends up paranoid in Holloway Sanatorium. White brings to her account careful research, an excited sense of discovery and, above all, her own experience of deafness following a bout of meningitis at the age of four.

The writing, unsentimental and unobtrusive, beautifully evokes White's life, a sunny Australian farm childhood, miserable London winters, the challenges of her journey to understand Maud. There are shrewd insights into the history of deafness and its treatments, the ideological battles between signing and oralism and sign language's relationship to the emergence of the telegraph and the fad of automatic writing. But we are also left with a sense of exhaustion: how gruellingly hard it is to be deaf and not show it. This is simultaneously a contribution to the history of nineteenth-century women's lives, a revelatory study of deafness, and a fine work of Australian literature.

