

Media Release



Unlikely biography on former PM wins nation's richest prize for life writing

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An unlikely biography of a “complicated” and “flawed” Australian prime minister, William McMahon, has won the nation’s richest prize for biographical writing, the State Library of NSW announced TONIGHT [Friday 28 August 2020].

Patrick Mullins’s *Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon* (Scribe Publications) claimed this year’s \$25,000 National Biography Award from a strong field of 89 entries.

“Political biography can be tedious reading,” says senior Judge Margy Burn. “William McMahon is not the obvious candidate for an extensive scholarly biography, but *Tiberius with a Telephone* is a substantial and surprising achievement.”

“Patrick Mullins has produced a sweeping comedy of manners: sophisticated in its handling of political and social context, a pleasure to read and with a feel for the absurd.... it does much to recover McMahon’s achievements, despite his manifest flaws.”

This year the \$5,000 Michael Crouch Award for a Debut Work was presented to Jessica White for her skillful interweaving of biography and memoir in *Hearing Maud* (UWA Publishing).

“Her book is simultaneously a contribution to the reclamation of the lives of nineteenth century women, a revelatory study of deafness and a fine work of Australian life writing.” said Ms Burn.

According to NSW State Librarian John Vallance: “Awards on their own don’t guarantee good writing. It’s the atmosphere created around this particular prize that makes it such a special part of our literary calendar.”

“The prize was founded by Dr Geoffrey Cains and the late Mr Michael Crouch AC back in the 1990s,” says Dr Vallance. “I’m delighted that the Nelson Meers Foundation, which stepped in to rescue the award after the death of Mr Crouch, has continued its support for another year.”



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The shortlisted authors each receive \$2,000:

- *Beyond Words: A Year with Kenneth Cook* by Jacqueline Kent (UQP)
- *Hearing Maud* by Jessica White (UWA Publishing)
- *Idling in Green Places: A Life of Alec Chisholm* by Russell McGregor (Australian Scholarly Publishing)
- *The Girls* by Chloe Higgins (Picador Australia)
- *Things Nobody Knows But Me* by Amra Pajalić (Transit Lounge)
- *Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon* by Patrick Mullins (Scribe Publications)

The judges for this year's Award were Margy Burn, Professor Mark McKenna, Associate Professor Richard White and Professor Ian McCalman.

The National Biography Award is administered and presented by the State Library of NSW and is generously supported by the Nelson Meers Foundation.

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