

The Australian

Show and tell of Australia's best stories and poems

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This year's winner of The Australian/Vogel Literary Award, Rohan Wilson, right, gets some tips from the 1981 recipient, Tim Winton. Picture: James Croucher

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WHEN Randolph Stow wrote, matter-of-factly if sardonically, that "in Australia prizes matter", he was referring to Xavier Herbert's 1938 novel *Capricornia*, which had won the Sesquicentenary Library Prize.

Stow was writing a review of Herbert's latest novel, *Poor Fellow My Country*, which won the 1975 Miles Franklin Award. Stow's own literary career was established when his third novel, *To the Islands*, won the 1958 Miles Franklin.

But it was a literary establishment with which Stow was never comfortable, due in part to the ambiguous place of awards - a necessary evil - in Australia's writing culture. This ambiguity and necessity has only increased in the past 30 years but has been rarely questioned.

The Award Winning Australian Writing series, now in its fourth year, goes some way towards responding to this situation in a positive way.

The first point this series addresses is the problem that many literary competitions and awards in Australia, particularly for short fiction, do not have a wide audience beyond the small, often closed communities within which the competition is run. Award Winning Australian Writing, however, brings together the winning entries of more than 40 national competitions and gives them a potentially broader platform. And many of these emerging writers clearly deserve a wider audience, as this 2011 edition attests. The second and more important point this series addresses is highlighted by Delia Falconer in her foreword to this volume: "While the publishing industry gears itself

more and more around marketable authors, anonymous competitions - into which stories are entered without any identifying markers of looks, back story, age or sex - are one of the very few places where the work alone counts."

This implies a particular type of literary award, for unpublished fiction, that is reserved normally for short stories but also includes various novel manuscript awards, such as The Australian/Vogel Literary Award, which has been won by many soon-to-be famous names, including Tim Winton and Kate Grenville.

Such prizes are distinct from awards for already published works, such as the Miles Franklin, where all the politics and circumstances surrounding a book often unwittingly creep into the choices made.

These latter prizes, for published books usually by well-known authors, are the ones that Stow said do matter. But the Award Winning Australian Writing series points to another set of criteria that ought to matter more.

Take, for example, the recent questioning of gender imbalance in the Miles Franklin, among the shortlists and the winners. On the contrary, in this collection, where anonymity is the rule, it is interesting to note that of the 32 winning stories included almost two-thirds are by female writers. (Of course, this includes the Scarlet Stiletto Awards for crime fiction, open only to women.)

So how to approach this work, where the usual criteria does not apply? I did what I usually do with such collections: I read through it all and waited a week or so, then went back and noted the stories that had stuck with me, ones that after a week or so came back almost fully formed, or evoked a feeling or flashed a succession of images, after only rereading a line or two.

There were six such stories in this collection. In order of appearance, these are: Theresa Layton's *The Afghan Hook*, David Campbell's *The Burden of Guilt*, Llywela Williams's *Water, Lily*, Christopher Green's *Letters of Love from the Once Newly Dead*, Gillian Essex's *Marge and the Night-man* and Jennifer Shapcott's *Act of Kindness*. Other readers will choose other stories.

Coincidentally, as in the collection at large, two-thirds of my favourites are by female writers.

Falconer, who has won awards for fiction and nonfiction, suggests using this book as "a tool for seeing trends and possibilities in writing". But in reading this collection as a whole, in terms of content, there are no discernible trends - beyond the painful, if under-analysed, art of writing and reading contributor notes - and this goes to the diversity of the writing of offer. It is one of the strengths of this collection.

But in terms of form and style, there are some notable trends, not always positive. But these, I'd argue, are not the fault of the authors but perhaps with the ambiguity of an award culture that imposes narrow limits, usually in terms of word length and theme, to which writers must conform to be eligible and then to win.

Adolfo Aranjuez, editor of the Award Winning Australian Writing series, points out that literary writing, both prose fiction and poetry, is a form of poesis, the Greek word meaning "to create". He refers to Plato's veto against such free creation because it deviates from conventional truth. But there are more banal and bureaucratic ways of bringing such creation to heel.

I have banged on about the question of word limits before and shall probably do so again. Be patient with me. The problem is that good fiction writing ought to find its limits within the story being told and not fit itself to external limitations dictated by the allocated time judges have to read or the limited space publishers have to print.

It takes skill to write a good story in 1000 words, yes. But it is a skill like jumping through a hoop. And writing ought not to be about performing tricks but about telling stories. The problem is that writing that follows its own course but does not conform to the award culture, which is the likeliest point of entry into the publishing community, is not likely to succeed.

Aranjuez also refers to the "oft-used adage" that good writing shows while bad writing tells. But with limited space for showing, the tendency is to adopt techniques that emphasise telling and the most obvious and least successful is the adoption of the first-person narrator.

About half of the stories in this collection are in the first person, and it is not a coincidence (although not by design), that the six stories that stuck with me were all in the third person, where the emphasis is on showing.

Of course, a more subtle point is that there must be a balance between showing and telling. But also, especially in short fiction, it is in the telling of what is also not shown, the untold, that often gives a story its internal centre of gravity. And one of my favourite stories in this collection, Letters of Love from the Once Newly Dead is brilliantly grounded in the not shown and untold, creating a mood that stays with you long after reading. Green manages to create, in an otherwise familiar world, a degree of unfamiliarity that draws the readers in and disorients them at the same time.

For the main, the use of the first person, coupled with the often limited space allowed to tell the story, only creates an effect of being drawn into the soliloquy of a passer-by, where you feign interest, nod a few times, then move on, never to think of the encounter again. And this, I repeat, is often not the fault of the writers, or of this publication, which is doing an invaluable service, but of the conditions in which we are expected to write and to publish.

In this edition of Award Winning Australian Writing, poetry is included for the first time. On poetry, I am on less assured ground but what struck me, when reading these fine poems, often only half a page in length, when compared with some of the short short stories, is how the poetry form is designed to deal with compressed phrases, images and moods, in ways that short stories ought not be expected to attempt. The presence of these poems only highlights the problematic conditions of some of these short fictions.

Even here, there are exceptions. And one of the six stories I liked is only 1000 words: but Marge and the Night-man is sublime. Told in the days when the night-man would come and empty the sewage from backyard toilets, this brief story describes an encounter with a young girl "doing her business", while the night-man comes to do his. And in the business of writing and reading, it is such exceptions that make it all worthwhile. But there is, of course, no good reason these can't become the rule.

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