

To the President, members and guests of the FAW I present my report.

Beejay Silcox, writer and critic recently said:

Stories matter. A good story can sway a heart, a boardroom, or a country. Stories stick—they are remembered and repeated. To get noticed, you need to tell a good story.

All thirty entrants in this year's Walter Stone award tell a good story, and it was a great privilege to be able to read each work and build a picture of the current state of the art of life writing in Australia. In 2016 I compared the judging with marking university projects. Generally high distinctions can only be awarded to the top five percent, however the standard was exceptional and I can say sixteen entries would have earned a high distinction, and another eight distinctions.

There were half the number of biographies this year, but they were all notable and included the lives of writer and political activist Katharine Susannah Prichard; Dame Judith Anderson, a south Australian-born woman who became a star of the American stage; and William 'Billy' Blue, whom Governor Macquarie appointed harbour watchman and constable in 1811.

An important monograph, *An Uncommon Unity: Making a Difference*, provides a brief history of the Nambucca Valley and details the work of the Community Transport Company that was initially formed to keep ageing people at home then assisting people with disabilities.

Four autobiographies and nineteen memoirs were entered, with themes including the difficulties of migrant children living between two cultures, including Burma, Thailand and Vietnam; stories of drug addiction; building a hut in the wilderness; teaching in a Victorian country school during the 1940s; the life of a wife in the RAAF; life as a nun for 42 years; life as a musician; and a family memoir, *Land of the Second Chance*, contained a paragraph that remains with me—perhaps a reason to reflect on the past:

The death rate of the second fleet was 30%, whereas the death rate on the first fleet was a mere 3%. The British government had made the mistake of employing private contractors who were paid a flat rate per head for each convict embarked. If they died en route there was more profit to the firm.

Initially I was surprised with the significant shift in themes this year—only one work had a touch of humour with twenty-one of the entries dealing with trauma of some kind—associated with institutional abuse, domestic violence, disability, ageing, impact of war, discrimination and racism—often resulting in mental and/or physical illness. However, an essay in the November edition of the *Australian Book Review* titled ‘The art of pain: writing in the age of trauma’ by Beejay Silcox traces the history of literature that deals with such topics, sometimes referred to as ‘Misery Literature’ and their increasing popularity, so this competition certainly reflects that broader trend. I commend the essay as a thoughtful read on the ethics of writing and reading trauma narratives.

Silcox cites *Guardian* journalist Tim Adams who said:

The threat isn’t ‘out there’ anymore, it’s ‘right here’ – in our houses, offices, schools, churches, police stations, and prisons, in the hearts of the people who are meant to care about, and for, us. The idea of institutionalised abuse inflicted ... by figures of trust is very much the nightmarish mythology of our time.

The judging process included reading each entry through, then assessing in relation to the competition criteria that states:

Entries must be original, creative and inspiring works which present to the audience an engaging work of literary excellence. The work is also to show some aspect of Australian history or have some Australian Historical significance.

A small number of entries did not meet the final criterion relating to Australian historical significance. All that met the criteria were again read after letting them rest.

The top ten included

*Sandwich Family Breakdown* Gemma Tamock

*Red Widow: The Life of Katharine Susannah Prichard* Nathan Hobby

*The Fire Fighter Blues* Alan Bruce

*The River Inside* Khin Myint

*Runt of the Litter* Jim Briggenshaw

And now to the top five:

*Kamballa The Forgotten Girls Home* by Sandie Jessamine is a powerful memoir about life in Kamballa, which replaced the Parramatta Girls Home in 1974:

The Taste of Kamballa was despair ... All stories have seasons, even tales of sorrow and madness. We burn. We shed. We hide. We sprout. My mental illness touched the lives of everyone I love. It feels important to return to Kamballa to help in understanding it ... What did a middle-aged teacher have to do with this crazy girl? ... What is it about sites of trauma that beckon us back? Perhaps they remind us we are caretakers of the stories we so easily throw away.

*Wrestling The Reptile Within, Bigotry in These Dangerous Times* by Frances Lettres is a powerful, autobiography reflecting on growing up in Armidale—a work that confronts many uncomfortable truths:

The taut old White Australia trip-wire still hums in the long grass, now there's no need for even the faintest vibration from a leaky fishing boat to set it off. Cracks in the heart of our nation seem to be widening—and in many other societies too, from the fissures, hissing and spitting, is erupting a growing shower of vitriol and venom ... So let's occasionally remember, with calm self-awareness and reason, the worst of the bad places we humans have escaped from. We'd revisit them at our peril.

*Full Late in the Season* by Robert Davis is a memoir that's also a well-researched political history about the Australian Government's role in East Timor. The narrator revisits East Timor reflecting on an earlier visit just prior to the Indonesian invasion, through to the 'Balibo Five' court case investigating the deaths of five journalists, including two Australians, in 1975.

*The City of Forgetting* by Clinton Caward is a moving intergenerational memoir that incorporates a history of the impact of asbestos production by James Hardy; and the eventual death of the narrator's father from mesothelioma as a result. The father chooses the music for his funeral, and leaves an emotional 20 minute taped farewell. Afterwards the narrator retraces some of his father's footsteps:

I walked on through the quiet streets, not really knowing why I was there. I felt my dad in that worn sandstone. Like him, and everyone I saw spilling out of the pub, I was just passing through, but I somehow belonged to this place, where I could feel the ghosts of my ancestors.

*Saving Sergeant Harlock* is an inspirational and creative hybrid biography that effectively uses the elements of prose poetry—including strong imagery, parataxis, and emotional effects—to reveal the story of Corporal Ernest Albert Corey, a stretcher-bearer in World War 1, who joined the Snowy River recruiting march at Cooma, and who later served in World War II. Corporal Corey was the only soldier in the British Commonwealth to be awarded the Military Medal for bravery four times. The author provides an eloquent insight into the western front and the sacrifice of so many young lives—a work that coincides with the 100th anniversary of the end of World War 1 on the 11th November.

They were just like him, though many even younger.

Straight out of the bush.

Simple blokes, good old boys.

Perhaps not as much up for adventure as those earlier recruits—they'd heard the news, read the papers.

Still, they were a no nonsense lot. Used to hard times.

Doing your bit, that's what it came down to.

Farmers. Drovers.

Soon to be diggers; that meritorious sobriquet setting them apart from the Poms and earned for all those trenches dug in the hard ground on which these newbies would find themselves standing soon enough.

Lambs really.

Most were raggedy and thin.

They'd get ragedier and thinner yet.

And so it gives me great pleasure to declare Nichole Overall the 2018 winner of the FAW NSW Walter Stone Bicentennial Award for Life Writing.

Dr Rae Luckie

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