

Miles Franklin Literary Award
2005 Shortlist

Description of Novels

***Salt Rain*, by Sarah Armstrong (Allen & Unwin)**

An extraordinarily evocative novel of discovery, where fourteen-year-old Allie gradually realises that the picture of the past she is piecing together is different and much more complicated than she ever thought.

Allie's free-spirited mother, Mae, mysteriously disappears on Sydney Harbour one night, her dinghy found drifting in the darkness. Fourteen-year-old Allie is whisked away to the north, to a rainforested valley, by Julia, an aunt she barely knows. On the dilapidated dairy farm where Mae and Julia grew up, Allie waits for her mother to call.

As these anxious days pass, Allie learns about Mae's childhood and about Mae herself through the eyes of others. Allie watches her aunt, who is determined to return the valley to its natural order, replanting the trees of the forest that her grandfather cleared for grazing. And she watches her mother's first love who she discovers still lives in the valley. As the intoxicating heat of the wet season builds, Allie tries to decipher the truth and lies that her mother has told her, and must come to grips with the many secrets held close in the valley.

Beautifully written, *Salt Rain* is an extraordinary evocation of the moods of the inexorable rainforest, of families and of the secrets hidden within them.

***Sixty Lights*, by Gail Jones (Vintage, Random House)**

'An Indian man had been climbing the bamboo scaffolding of one of the high colonial buildings, with a large mirror bound to his body by a piece of cloth. His white dhoti was flapping and his orange turban was atilt, and he hauled himself with confidence from level to precarious level, when some particular gust or alarum that carried the dimension of fate caused him to misjudge his footing and fall through the air. Because he could not release the mirror, but clutched at it as though it was a magic carpet, he landed in the midst of its utter shattering, and was speared through the chest. The quantity of blood was astounding. It spurted everywhere. But what Lucy noticed most was that the mirror continued its shiny business: its jagged shapes still held the world it existed in, and bits and pieces of sliced India still glanced on its surface'

Sixty Lights is the captivating chronicle of Lucy Strange, a girl growing up in the late nineteenth century. From her childhood in Australia through to her adolescence in England and Bombay and finally her death in London at the age of 22, Lucy is fascinated by light and by the new photographic technology. As a result, her perception of the world is passionate and moving, a series of frozen images captured in the camera of her mind's eye showing her feelings about love, life and loss.

Written in confident, finely interwoven and intricate layers, *Sixty Lights* is the powerful account of a modern and independent young woman's life in the Victorian world. Objects evoke memories and hint at the future in a narrative that flows between pleats in time. Through her observation of such objects Lucy's photographic vision is apparent. Her world is a series of still images which one day, printed on albumen paper, she will leave as affecting mementoes of her own extraordinary life.

***The Gift of Speed*, by Steven Carroll (HarperCollins Publishers)**

A quintessentially Australian story of a boy, a suburb, and a summer of cricket and dreams.

Set during the glorious summer of 1960/61, *The Gift of Speed* chronicles the lives, fates and fortunes of a memorable group of characters in a fictitious outer-Melbourne suburb in the post-World War II era. The roads and footpaths may have been paved, the houses painted and the gardens grown – but the suburb still hovers between town and country.

We catch up with Michael, 16 and obsessed with cricket; his parents, Rita and Vic, whose marriage is on the rocks; Vic's 70-year-old mother, who comes to stay; and the mysterious factory owner who hurtles around the suburb at night in his sports car ...

For one unforgettable summer, the closed community of the suburb opens up to the outside world. And it is not – as in the past – a war that allows this, but rather a carnival of cricket, music and colour.

This is Steven Carroll's best book to date – a subtle, powerful novel which puts the 'extra' into 'ordinary' and celebrates what it means to be Australian.

***The Submerged Cathedral*, by Charlotte Wood (Vintage, Random House)**

'Set me as a seal on your heart, for love is stronger than death.'

Spanning many years, moving across Australia's vast landscapes and through some of Europe's great cities, *The Submerged Cathedral* is a beguiling, heartbreaking story of paradise and the fall, of sacrifice and atonement, and of sisterly love and rivalry.

Most of all, however, it is about an enduring and sacred love - a love stronger than death - and the journeys undertaken in its name.

Written in spare, haunting prose, this novel is a work of the highest literary merit, as well as a timeless love story that will enthrall readers.

The release of Charlotte Wood's acclaimed first novel, *Pieces Of A Girl*, marked her as a young writer of great promise; *The Submerged Cathedral* thrillingly confirms that promise with astonishing assurance and lyricism.

***The White Earth*, by Andrew McGahan (Allen & Unwin)**

A grand, pulsating novel about the power of the land and the passions of people trying to make it their own. McGahan has written a major new Australian novel. One spring day in late 1992, when William was halfway between his eighth birthday and his ninth, he looked out from the back verandah of his home and saw, huge in the sky, the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion. He stared at it, wondering. The thunderhead was dirty black, streaked with billows of grey. It rolled and boiled as it climbed into the clear blue day, casting a vast shadow upon the hills beyond. But there was no sound, no rumble of an explosion. William was aware of the smell of burning . . . but it was a good smell, a familiar smell. The smell of grass, of wheat, of the farm itself.

His father dead by fire and his mother plagued by demons of her own, William is cast upon the charity of his unknown uncle - an embittered old man encamped in the ruins of a once great station homestead, Kuran House. It's a baffling and sinister new world for the boy, a place of decay and secret histories. His uncle is obsessed by a long life of decline and by a dark quest for revival, his mother is desperate for a wealth and security she has never known, and all their hopes it seems come to rest upon William's young shoulders. But as the past and present of Kuran Station unravel and merge together, the price of that inheritance may prove to be the downfall of them all. *The White Earth* is a haunting, disturbing and cautionary tale.