

Miles Franklin Literary Award 2006
Shortlist

Judges' Formal Comments

***Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living*, Carrie Tiffany (Picador)**

This novel by Carrie Tiffany is a perfect little book to which Picador has given the production values it deserves. It begins in the 1930s on a Government-sponsored train, travelling through the Victorian countryside, which carries "experts" to advise local farmers and their families. Two of the naïve specialists on board marry and take on a farm in the Mallee - which they hope to make into a showpiece place. They bring with them their own memories of childhood.

The characters are portrayed with real affection, neither sentimental nor comical. A Japanese chicken-sexer working on the train and a conductor of the Vienna Boys Choir are two lovely characters who get caught up when the Second World War breaks out. There is a beautiful understanding of relationships and friendships. It is a quietly funny, but serious, novel you won't forget.

***The Ballad of Desmond Kale*, Roger McDonald (Vintage, Random House Australia)**

In the prison colony of Botany Bay, rumours and ballads circulate about an escaped convict, Desmond Kale, who has fled beyond the limits of settlement with a legendary flock of merino sheep stolen from a Spanish nobleman during the Peninsula wars. Persecuted by the flogging parson, magistrate and rival sheepman, Matthew Stanton, Kale, his daughter Kate, her lover, Tom Rankine, and their network of supporters strive, seemingly against the odds, to outwit the combined forces of the nineteenth-century church and state.

Steeped in the lore of wool and bushcraft, *The Ballad of Desmond Kale* echoes a clutch of Great Australian and American Novels, from *Moby Dick* and *Tom Sawyer* to *His Natural Life* and *Such is Life*. But this is no ordinary work of historical fiction. McDonald's is a comic and redemptive vision of colonial history that turns on his free-wheeling use of the pastoral mode, both as a form of national myth-making, and an imagined world where innocence and energy confront evil and corruption; where tyranny yields to the New Jerusalem. Stanton returns from his voyage to London a diminished man, while the pastoral characters are led by Kale beyond the settlement into an apparently boundless

and redeemed world. Kale is an Australian version of the American Johnny Appleseed, though his gift is the fleece rather than the plough.

***The Garden Book*, Brain Castro (Giramondo Publishing Company)**

Castro's novels are characteristically layered and seriously playful. His latest, anchored in Victoria's Dandenong Ranges, sends two of its principal characters, Australian Darcy Damon and American Jasper Zenlin, adventuring across continents and epochs while binding the third—the point of the triangle—Swan Hay, at home. Swan, born Shuang He, a third-generation Australian-Chinese, distils the chaos of their lives into calligraphy, writing poems on leaves in the dark garden of the Dandenongs. Castro is a master of signs and ironies.

He is also a risk taker. When Squizzie Taylor turns up and builds a folly in the Dandenongs we are not surprised: the local gangster is a natural bit player in a Castro narrative that so adroitly blends jazz-age glamour with tragedy. There is a multi-lingual wisdom in this book, a bi-cultural wit that makes the distance between people seem like fertile ground. But Castro is a writer who never baulks at catastrophe or loss, so it is that promise, held out so tantalisingly, that gives his narrative its extraordinary poignancy and power.

***The Secret River*, Kate Grenville (Text Publishing)**

Meticulous research and an informed imagination, credible characters and an uncanny sense of time and place are the engines which power Kate Grenville's splendid seventh novel. It's a story of struggle, principally that of William Thornhill, a London ferryman, and his wife, Sal, and their family.

Having drifted into crime, Thornhill is transported to New South Wales and to a new life no easier, yet marvellously better, than that which he left behind. He resumes his ferryman's role, this time on the Hawkesbury River, and settles on land which is his for the taking. It is vacant, but it is not empty. The Thornhills, toiling daily merely to survive, live uneasily with the shadowy Aborigines for whom the Hawkesbury is home. Coexistence slips slowly into conflict. Thornhill finds himself part of an awful savagery.

Among the questions Grenville leaves with her readers is whether this clash between the peoples of the Thames and of the Hawkesbury was as inevitable as it was bloody? In a narrative which is both seductive and shocking, *The Secret River* delves deeply into the sweat and the grit of the European conquest of Aboriginal Australia.

***The Wing of Night*, Brenda Walker (Viking, Penguin Group Australia)**

Into this clear-eyed, lyrical story of war and Australian life, Brenda Walker has woven snatches of Gallipoli's historical record, remembered dialogue, letters, poetry, graphic incidents, songs, and research on early twentieth-century farming. But it is the novelist's imaginative sympathy, not the authenticity of the historical fragments, which gives this beautifully modulated novel its resonance. Walker moves seamlessly between battlefield and homeground, sure in her details, subtle in her creation of character and assured in her manipulation of time and memory.

Two women, Elizabeth and Bonnie, farewell their men, both Light Horsemen. Left behind, the women are initially separated by class and disparities of wealth. In battle their men learn a levelling camaraderie of need. As war and poverty change the pattern of their lives, the women also learn lessons— how to survive, to improvise, how to reconcile oneself to loss and to the agony of hope. War is a savage crucible; Brenda Walker understands its terror and its transformative power all too well.

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Miles Franklin Literary Award 2006 Judging Panel
Eve Abbey
Professor Robert Dixon
Morag Fraser AM
Ian Hicks