

## Miles Franklin Literary Award 2006 Shortlist

### ***The Garden Book***

**Brian Castro**

Giramondo Publishing Company

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Brian Castro returns to Australia in his new novel, set in the Dandenong Ranges in the period between the Depression and the Second World War.

*The Garden Book* revolves around Swan Hay, born Shuang He, the daughter of a Victorian country school teacher and classical scholar. Trapped in the bush by her passionate yet pitiless husband Darcy Damon, Swan finds an outlet for her troubled thoughts by dispersing them as poems written on fallen leaves. 'Discovered' by the American adventurer and architect, Jasper A. Zenlin, Swan becomes a celebrated figure in the larger literary world while remaining hidden (and exposed to danger) in domestic isolation in the Dandenong Ranges.

Fifty years after her disappearance, Norman Shih, a rare book librarian, pieces together Swan's chaotic life from clues found in guest house libraries, antiquarian bookshops and her own elusive writings. The tale that Norman weaves of the relationships between Swan, Darcy and Jasper from their letters and literary remains is both intricate and reticent, because of his own involvement in their story, revealed only at the end of the novel.

*The Garden Book* is charged with the vitality and desire which animates its three main characters. At the same time, it is unflinching in its portrayal of addiction, obsession and exploitation, and the brutality and prejudices of a country gripped by the White Australia Policy and a fear of the foreign. It is this combination of delicacy and cruelty, this awareness of vulnerability, which gives the romance between Swan and Darcy, and Swan and Jasper, its power, as if they were figures in a fairy tale, moving through an enchanted landscape, but encountering at each turn the political and social realities of their time.

### **About Brian Castro**

**Brian Castro** was born in Hong Kong in 1950, and arrived in Australia in 1961. His previous novels include *Birds of Passage* (1983), *Double-Wolf* (1991), *After China* (1992), *Stepper* (1997) and *Shanghai Dancing* (2003). He has won the Victorian Premier's Award for Fiction three times, the NSW Premier's Award for Fiction, the Age Book of the Year Award, the National Book Council Banjo Award and the *Australian/Vogel* Literary Award. He lives in the Dandenong Ranges near Melbourne.