

The *Australian/Vogel* Literary Award 2009

When biographer Hilary Spurling was asked recently about her memories of being a judge of the Booker Prize, she fondly recalled 'a summer of long, hot, hazy days spent lying under a tree in the garden reading novels and saying to anyone who tried to interrupt: "Go away, I'm working."'

Sadly, Vogel judges work through the winter months. I spent short, cold, drizzly days huddled by the heater while unbound manuscripts piled up around me like the beginnings of a paper igloo. Dribbles of crumpet butter and milky tea marked for fellow judges those sections I had lingered over. At night, I preserved warmth by reading beneath a feather-down doona, letting each finished A4 sheet flutter to the floor. Under the bed was where I later discovered the crucial and moving final page of one (later shortlisted) title. Luckily for the author, fellow-judge Cate Kennedy's keen eye soon noted its absence.

Hibernation has its virtues, however: the cool months gave me, Cate, Margo Lanagan and Matt Rubenstein enough time to read two hundred novels between us. We culled from this mass a longlist of just over twenty titles, along with notes briefly arguing each manuscript's vices or virtues. Like Buffy, each of us was obliged to slay the undead in their hundreds to get there, as vampire novels remain the fashion of the season. Historical fictions, narratives of emigration, and coming-of-age stories set in share-houses were also strongly represented.

Because we rotated the manuscripts, each judge was sometimes obliged to lead in justifying the inclusion of a particular work. For a prize where large disparities in literary quality are a given, and where clear signposts such as name-authors and august publishing imprints are absent, stepping onto the virgin snow of the comments page was a fraught exercise in taste-making. Did you really enjoy that postmodern mosaic of short stories narrated by various zoo animals? Or were you compensating for the slew of verb-addled airport thrillers that preceded it? Was that indisputable masterpiece you read last night, after the dinner party, still brilliant over your breakfast muesli?

The answers came at the final, face-to-face meeting. Cross-checking our responses to each title in an attempt to assemble the shortlist, I saw, to misquote Emerson, my own critical errors returning to me with a certain alienated majesty, alongside puzzled, 'not sure if we read the same novel' notes from my colleagues. Often, in these cases, we were responding to a spark of talent or the glimmer of something true among the imperfect whole. Many of those set aside nonetheless earned letters of encouragement and independent editorial reports.

What guaranteed a manuscript its place on the shortlist was unanimity. We may have disagreed about where, exactly, an individual title should sit in the final order; but every judge found something to admire in the five fictions that eventually made the cut. Each of these novels was greeted with a smile of recognition; amongst many strangers, here were the stories that had, quite independently, made friends with us all.

Jeremy Ohlback, *Squire Nation*

A smooth and understated fictional reconstruction of the life of James Squire, convict and master brewer, whose death in 1822 inspired an outpouring of grief larger than any in the young colony's history. Well-researched, and deft in its exploration of the complex and ultimately tragic relationship between white and black during those early years.

Nathan Markham, *The Book of Lilith*

The grandest of grand guignols. Oozing with sex, violence and the blackest of comedy, *The Book of Lilith* recalls de Sade, Kathy Acker and William Burroughs. In the sheer antipodean exuberance of its character's transgressions, however, Markham's novel is *sui generis*.

Kristell Thornell, *Night Street*

In a measure of the prevalence of 'faction' in contemporary Australian writing, four of the five books shortlisted have some real-life basis. This tough yet exquisite novel is loosely based the life of Clarice Beckett, student of Frederick McCubbin and Max Meldrum, and a formidable artist in her own right. Thornell's prose, with its glowing language, its delicate and restrained tones, is a perfect instrument for approximating Beckett's unique palette.

Courtney Collins, *The Burial*

A dark, swooning upgrade of the Australian gothic genre. This time, a lost child speaks plaintively from beyond the grave, adding her voice to several others in tracing the life of Jessie, based on a real-life horse thief and murderess of the 1920s, whose real crime, it seems, was to have been born a woman.

Lisa Lang, *Utopian Man*

'Happiness writes white', reckoned Henri de Montherlant. 'It does not show up on the page.' If he had read Lisa Lang's joyous, bejewelled fictional biography of Edward Cole, founder of Cole's Book Arcade, he would have recanted. Cole's life is imagined with authority and verve, and the reader is invited to warm themselves at the fire generated by a singular man's energy, wit and visionary eccentricity.