

Judging the Vogel Award 2008

Matt Rubinstein

Not so long ago I realised that I would never win the *Australian/Vogel* award. It's Australia's leading prize for unpublished manuscripts by authors under 35, and my time had run out.

I've since learned that a lot of my contemporaries have been feeling the same way: they have the same sense of sorrow, which we might call *Vogelangst* or even *Vogelschmerz*.

It's an epidemic that illustrates not only what a depressing bunch we all are but also how large the Vogel looms in the landscape of Australian literature.

We all know its success stories, Kate Grenville and Tim Winton and Andrew McGahan, and we know its controversies, from the disqualified winner of the first award in 1980 to the Demidenko/Darville scandal of the 1990s.

But I think its real value lies beyond the headlines, in the chance it gives to young writers who might not be ready for publication but who need a nudge in the right direction, or an encouraging nod along a path that can often be lonely.

Judging the award for the first time, along with Cate Kennedy, Marele Day and Murray Walker, has been enormously rewarding. Not as rewarding as winning it would have been, but almost.

Attracted perhaps by the \$50,000 on offer this year, the number of entries rose to well over 200, and many of them were remarkable.

They came from every mainland state and territory and from almost every genre, from crime, fantasy and science fiction to the picaresque, the unreliable memoir, the satire and the illustrated interactive adventure – and of course every kind of urban, suburban and rural drama.

They covered the country, coast to rainforest and city to desert; and travelled across Asia and Europe to imagined planets and even to the picket fences of the 1950s. Many of them dealt with various kinds of faith and spirituality, with depression and mental illness, with the intersection of indigenous and non-indigenous Australia, and with young men and women forging an identity, a voice, and a place in the world.

There were exciting ideas, complex characters, strong narratives, beautiful descriptions and snappy dialogue. Not every entry had all of these ingredients in equal measure, but a surprising number of them did. There were disappointments, but there were also revelations.

Some of the writers have emerged from creative writing courses, and their works show a polish at every level from the clause up. Some have published short stories or

have been sighted in previous Vogel years or in other awards. And some have appeared miraculously out of nowhere, fully formed or close to it.

It's exhilarating to imagine how many people are scribbling or tapping away right now, getting ready to unveil something completely new and unexpected. There's a pretty good chance that they will choose the Vogel award for their debut.

Given the number and quality of entries this year, the judges decided to expand the shortlist to six manuscripts.

These novels are all utterly distinctive, extremely ambitious and just as accomplished. They represent an impressive cross-section of new Australian writing in all its diversity and achievement.

All of the shortlisted authors should be proud of their achievement, even if they don't win. They should revel in their *Vogelfreude* – in their *joie de Vogel*.

Jeremy Chambers, *THE VINTAGE AND THE GLEANING*

Kenny is a retired shearer turned vineyard worker who has been forced to give up drinking after a lifetime of alcoholism and is reflecting on his life and the decisions he's made. This is a quietly remarkable observation of country and masculinity, told in a mesmerising voice with a beautiful ear for the taciturn conversation of working men, a poem to rural Australia that is entirely modern in its telling.

Andrew Croome, *DOCUMENT Z*

This richly-imagined account of the defection of Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov explores the large and small psychological and political pressures on the Russians with perception and humanity. As compelling for its character studies and its views of 1950s Australia as for its Cold-War-thriller plot, it effortlessly spans both the global clash of ideologies and the negotiations of bureaucracy, community and marriage.

Demet Divaroren, *ORAYT?*

Azra is a 21-year-old Turkish girl who is pregnant to her Greek boyfriend and has to negotiate her mother, her aunts and her grandmother, all formidable women who cling to Turkish culture even as they run riot through the suburbs and health spas of Victoria. This is an irresistible story of the joys and trials of family and tradition, told with great humour and feeling.

Rachel Hennessy, *THE HEAVEN I SWALLOWED*

World War II widow Grace McAllister adopts a young Aboriginal girl, intending to give her the benefit of a proper upbringing in white society. But Mary's presence and the circumstances of her "rescue" force Grace to confront the lies that underpin her own life, and her careful house of cards comes tumbling down. This is a book of the Stolen Generations told from the perspective of a perpetrator who is neither excused nor condemned but emerges as a painfully engrossing character.

TR Magarey, CREDIBLE DETERRENT: A FOLLY IN PARTS

A badly-behaved Australian Rules footballer, an ambitious newsreader, a senior staffer to the Premier and a low-level diplomat come together with much else besides in this high-octane farce that begins with a one-night stand and ends with the forced depopulation of Adelaide in the aftermath of a North Korean nuclear strike. Enormous and frequently hilarious, this is a novel of great energy and no restraint.

Theresa Meads, NOBODY

A choose-your-own-adventure from hell that puts you in the heart of the action and forces you to make impossible choices as you try to help a young girl from childhood to adolescence. A unique structure and a compelling voice lift this story of violence and abuse into a haunting and heartbreaking work that lingers in the mind.