

2018 City of Fremantle T.A.G. Hungerford Award Fremantle Press Judge's Report

This year's shortlist is a very strong one in terms of potential and variety, and this year a number of contracts will be awarded after the announcement of the winner.

A longlist was provided to me by the judges Delys Bird, Richard Rossiter and Catherine Noske, and from this, six moved to the shortlist.

What stood out for me this year was the range and depth of stories. Though their settings and focus vary widely, the shortlisted manuscripts all share an authenticity of voice and a diversity of gender, sexual orientation and culture. From a young Australian physiotherapist in Ethiopia to a gay boy growing up in Geraldton; from a meth addict in Peel, WA, to a South Sudanese boy caught up in a civil war; from a new mother in London to the story of a mother and daughter set across time in Holland and Australia, each of these stories is fresh, interesting and worth telling. Of course, one must not only have a good story to tell, but the ability to deliver it. Each manuscript on the shortlist, whether fiction or non-fiction, had an energy about it, and an awareness of audience, that made me feel I was in good hands and, as a reader, very happy to follow where the author led me.

Fremantle Press manuscript assessor Wendy Jenkins read the shortlist and provided me with valuable consultation and advice. It was felt that several manuscripts showed great potential for the young adult list, and children's publisher Cate Sutherland had essential and helpful input here.

All entrants in the award are to be congratulated on their achievement in writing, revising and submitting a book-length manuscript. The quality of work submitted, and the competitiveness of this year's field, is a clear indicator that writing in WA is going from strength to strength.

Comments on shortlisted titles

***Father of the Lost Boys* – Yuot A. Alaak**

A fascinating and important work of narrative non-fiction, this is the story of Mecak Ajang Alaak, a teacher who assumed command of 20,000 of the Lost Boys of South Sudan during the conflict of the Second Sudanese Civil War, and – enduring attack, starvation and extraordinary hardship – who led them to the safety of a refugee camp in Ethiopia. The key action takes in the late 80s and early 90s. The story details the despair of the narrator and his family as they hear of their father's death, their years of mourning, and their joy at learning of his survival. It describes the dogged belief of Mecak Ajang Alaak that, when it comes to resistance, education is ultimately the mightiest weapon of them all. The narrator, Yuot A. Alaak, is a direct witness to the horrors, deprivations and extraordinary courage shown by his father and by thousands of Lost Boys.

***She Came to Stay* – Zoe Deleuil**

An unsettling novel with the gothic undertones and insistence of a psychological thriller. Hours after Jane has given birth to her first baby, a young woman called

Rachel – who turns out to be the cousin of Jane's boyfriend Paul – arrives in Jane's hospital room and, before too long, moves in with the new parents and their baby. Rachel's inexplicable presence disturbs the difficult, anxious days of new motherhood for Jane, and imbues the novel with effective unease. The novel recreates London through a new mother's eyes (the difficulty of navigating crowds, unpleasant weather, crowded public transport; the refuge that Jane discovers in the Museum of Childhood). *She Came to Stay* is a compressed, tense and engaging domestic drama.

***Floaters* – Alan Fyfe**

This novel is a closely observed account of a contemporary social malady – the meth epidemic concentrated around the Mandurah and Peel region. *Floaters* is an ambitious novel of many voices, and was a standout in the field for the strength of its writing. Timothy (or T), is at the core of the narrative, with other cameos of destruction unfolding around him. The history and character of the Mandurah and Peel region inform both the identity of the protagonist, and the lives of the people that T encounters. The work is confronting and discomfiting, with small moments of redemption – and is very much a story for our times.

***Invisible Boys* – Holden Sheppard**

This is a novel about four gay teenagers negotiating what it means to identify as gay, and the risks and issues of coming out in a small town. Set in Geraldton in the present day, the story is shared in alternating chapters between four young men whose journeys and destinations are all quite different, but who each struggle to be seen or accepted for who they are. This manuscript has tremendous energy and authenticity, as it explores what it is like to grow up gay in an insular regional community. *Invisible Boys* is a valuable contribution to the growing voices of younger LGBTIQA+ people.

***Chewing Porridge: Fixing up and breaking down in Ethiopia* – Julie Sprigg**

A narrative non-fiction memoir recounting the two years from 2005 that the narrator spends in Ethiopia as a physiotherapist, first as a volunteer in a strictly run convent, and then at the University of Gondar, where she is employed to train Ethiopia's very first physiotherapy students. Since the narrator trained the first graduates, more than 450 physios have graduated from the University of Gondar. *Chewing Porridge* offers a window into a world we rarely see. Highlights include the vignettes involving the children Julie treats, convent life, and a vivid rendering of Ethiopian landscape and towns. In the course of her story, Julie survives a fraught election process with its accompanying civil unrest and falls in love with her work colleague Tadesse. She also faces the big question of whether to return home or stay.

This work is a highly readable account of a young Australian woman who swings between small daily triumphs with her clients, and despair at their poverty and illness, for which there are few resources, equipment or medicine. Is it possible for one young woman to 'do good' and make a difference? And of what consequence are the author's own struggles when her clients are dealing with the much larger question of basic survival?

***The Seventh Sister* – Trish Versteegen**

A multi-generational story, in which the adolescent experiences of a mother and daughter unfold in parallel. The adolescent Thea is on an aircraft bound for Holland, still recovering from a recent hospitalisation and trauma. Her mother Eva, with whom Thea shares an ambivalent relationship, recalls her own teenage years during the Second World War, when her older brother joined the resistance movement and disappeared. Each young woman negotiates the question of emerging sexuality and the expectations and mores of the community around them. The losses, secrets and missed moments of the two women's stories create connections between Eva and Thea of which both are unaware, but which establish a dynamic and satisfying forward momentum in the story, and allow for the reader some moving insights and understandings.

Georgia Richter, Publisher, Fremantle Press