

2020 CITY OF FREMANTLE HUNGERFORD AWARD

JUDGE'S REPORT

This is the Hungerford Award's thirtieth year. Since 1980, when Brenda Walker won the Hungerford Award with her first novel, *Crush*, the award has launched the careers of many winning and shortlisted writers including Gail Jones, Simone Lazaroo, Donna Mazza, Alice Nelson, Natasha Lester, Madelaine Dickie, Holden Sheppard, Deb Fitzpatrick, Kim Scott, and Yuot A. Alaak to name just a few.

The award has always been judged anonymously: three judges read all entries and select a list for the consideration of a judge at Fremantle Press. From this longer list, the shortlist is decided and announced. A publishing contract is offered for the winning entry and sometimes is offered to the shortlisted entries too.

Since I began judging the award in 2008, the standard of works submitted has been consistently high and demonstrates that an impressive number of writers have the capacity to write, shape and polish a book-length manuscript to a standard that is at, at a minimum, competent – and is often significantly more. The 66 writers who entered the 2020 award are to be congratulated on their achievement on doing just that.

This year there were 38 fiction entries, 16 young adult novels, eight narrative non-fiction manuscripts and four short story collections. Each of these entries was assessed and discussed by Sisonke Msimang, Richard Rossiter and Brenda Walker who presented a comprehensive list of manuscripts for me to review.

What I was looking for in the shortlist was manuscripts with a confident narrative delivery and a distinctive, compelling voice. Stories (even old familiar ones) need to be told in interesting ways – they need to be bigger than themselves and remain with the reader after the reader has finished. They need to cause a shift in the way that a reader sees the world.

So many elements go into achieving this combination: the right subject matter and the right person to deliver it, as well as significant time and dedication to the honing of a writer's craft in a way that stretches beyond any single manuscript.

For me, the shortlisted works stood out because they were full of potential. They exhibited a sharp way of seeing and an adroitness of delivery along with strong ideas, memorable lines, characters and scenes, and it felt as if each was told with the reader firmly in mind.

The novels shortlisted were:

The Silence of Water – Sharron Booth, Como

A work of historical fiction based on the life of Edwin Salt, who arrives in Fremantle in 1862, having been sentenced to death for the murder of his first wife, Mary Ann Hall, and subsequently transported to Western Australia. This vivid and deeply researched novel traces the lift of Salt and his descendants and the wounds and healing and slow resolution that occurs down generations. The work shines a particular light on the children born of British in the

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Australian colonies and the difference between them and their convict parents. This sad and hopeful tale is an exploration of both exile and belonging.

Still Dark – Joanna Morrison, Mosman Park

This novel begins with a corpse on a boat on the river. Who killed Sam, and why is the story narrated by the ghost of a woman who died two decades ago? *Still Dark* is a compelling crime novel that explores the friendship between Sam, Cohen, Mary and Kate – four students who meet at university. One dies and the others drift apart. This novel is about what happens when the living three reunite in the present. The role of the narrator is just one of the clever and surprising elements of a story in which the writing was tight, and the setting and characters well-drawn.

I Belong to the Lake – Maria Papas, Karrinyup

A delicate story about the siblings of two children from two different families, in which each family experiences a child who has leukemia. The lake of the title is Lake Clifton, just south of Mandurah, and it exists in this novel as a site of meaning, restoration and a continual reminder of the cycle of life. The novel is told from the perspective of Grace, all grown up and now a nurse, who runs into Nate, a boy whose family grew up at the nearby Preston Beach. The bond the pair forged as teenagers hovering on the periphery of their siblings' illness is instantly reaffirmed at their meeting and a new narrative between them begins. The writing in this novel is very moving, the emotions and subtle meanings within the story traversed skilfully and with care.

When reading each of these works, I did not feel as if I was judging a manuscript competition – I just felt like a reader. The immersion was complete. At the end of each novel, I felt rewarded, satisfied, and thoughtful, and as if all the potential that was apparent at the novel's beginning had been delivered by an excellent storyteller.

Many thanks to the initial Hungerford judges, Sisonke Msimang, Richard Rossiter and Brenda Walker, for their care, expertise and dedication to the important job of supporting emerging writers.

Georgia Richter, Fremantle Press Publisher