

2024
**CITY OF FREMANTLE
HUNGERFORD AWARD**

JUDGES REPORT

From a pool of 81 entries, and a longlist of 10, four works by Western Australian writers have been shortlisted for the 2024 City of Fremantle Hungerford Award.

The longlist was selected by a panel of judges comprised of Seth Malacari, Richard Rossiter and Marcella Polain.

The shortlist was selected by Fremantle Press publishers Cate Sutherland and Georgia Richter.

The shortlist includes two novels, one queer historical fiction and one work of narrative non-fiction. The shortlisted works are:

- *Far From Wonderful* by Howard McKenzie-Murray
- *Screech* by Jodie Tes
- *I Remember Everything* by Fiona Wilkes
- *የተስፋ ፈተና / Trials of Hope* by Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes

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Longlist judges' comments

The judges were impressed by the scope of the works. In a statement about the longlisted works, Marcella Polain commented:

For me, characters drive stories. Their choices make events. If the writer has succeeded in making characters seem real – complex, flawed, likeable (enough) – in other words, if I care about them, I will keep reading. If I'm intrigued enough by their dilemma – and there must be a dilemma – I can overlook small errors, inconsistencies, lapses. These can be remedied in editing. So, for me, emotional and psychological engagement is primary. When first approaching a work, as I read the opening and before (or perhaps, as) I gain any insight into character, I am acutely sensitive to language and voice. There needs to be a spark in the writing, a freshness in choices – no reliance on clichés in diction, setting, character or plot. This doesn't mean genre fiction (which uses certain tropes) is precluded; it just needs to have an energy about it, a sense of authenticity, an assuredness. I don't want to feel as if I've read it before. Overall, the writer should demonstrate they are largely in control of their material. And show me they are aware of the power of restraint.

There were many manuscripts set in colonial Australia – too many, I'd suggest – and, given the percentage of First Nations people in the overall population, a surprising number purporting to tell First Nations stories. Of course, as the entries arrived anonymously, it's not possible for judges to know if these latter manuscripts raise ethical questions. There were also a good number in YA and genre fiction. Those that affected me the most through voice and character, through restrained language and fresher choices in all their elements, are still with me weeks – months – after reading them. A wonderful gift.

Longlist judge Seth Malacari observed:

The manuscripts that made my longlist varied in genre, style and theme, but they did have something in common: they were all original. These novels also had a strong voice, and I think this showed the authors' passion for their work. These were stories that demanded to be told and those were the ones that captured my attention.

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And longlist judge Richard Rossiter said:

A commonplace observation about (creative) written works across all genres is that they involve a *search for meaning*. I think this was evident in many of the entries in the 2024 Hungerford Award, fiction and non-fiction.

Frequently, lives were depicted in disarray, lacking cohesion, a sense of direction, a sense of belonging – to place, a social group, to family, to history. And so the search within the narratives often involved an attempt to overcome the apprehension of absence, of loss, most frequently at an interpersonal level within some sort of family structure. The notion of a nuclear family seemed particularly under threat, often with the father absent and, at times, a violent figure.

Implicitly – and at times, explicitly – the central questions raised were: *Who am I? Where – and how – do I belong?* Questions where the writer, and reader, were often deeply engaged in pursuing the answers. For me, the strongest entries were those where the gap between the narrating voice and the ‘story’ – or that which is being narrated – is minimal. There’s an intensity at work. The stories were frequently challenging, but all is not lost. Most often the narratives moved towards some sort of hard-won resolution of the issues that were raised, the difficulties posed, without appearing too simplistic or mere wish fulfilment.

A wide range of cultural and social groups was represented in the submissions, including Indigenous stories. Non-fiction works were a strong component. As a judge, reading such a sweep of powerful stories provides a glimpse into a rich, multicultural Western Australia, the complexity of which may not always be evident in more quotidian manifestations.

Shortlist judges’ comments

From competition to competition, it is often the case that many works share something that aligns them to the zeitgeist. Often, these are sweeping themes – like climate emergency, environmental issues, gender identity. This year, for whatever reason, many of the works featured the death of a sibling, and this seismic event played out in different ways in different works.

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There was a great breadth and diversity in the four works on the shortlist. Each found a place there for the same reasons:

- the reader felt as if the author was in control of their material and had an innate confidence in language use;
- even when the subject matter was familiar, the work offered a fresh perspective on the world – illuminating something for the reader that had hitherto not been apprehended before;
- they were impactful, and remained in the memory long after reading.

***Far from Wonderful* by Howard McKenzie-Murray (fiction)**

This novel is set on the day of Maud's brother's funeral. Everything takes place within 24 hours, with a highly effective compression and the success of this delivery gives the novel its great strength. The details of the lives of this novel's characters are revealed via many small moments in this compacted day. *Far From Wonderful* is entertaining and sad and engrossing and distinctively quirky – a light touch has been deployed by its assured author to explore difficult subject matter.

***Screech* by Jodie Tes (fiction)**

This novel has been written from the point of view of a child, Bonnie, as she grows up witnessing the fallibility of the adults closest to her. Bonnie's parrot, Screech, is a constant in the evolving domestic drama. The novel is a study in resilience, a story about the important roles of alternative caregivers, and the perspective that a pet can bring when all a child wishes for, and needs, is to belong. Funny and heartbreaking, this insightful novel is beautifully and satisfyingly resolved.

***I Remember Everything* by Fiona Wilkes (fiction)**

Part of the achievement of this novel is that it reads and feels like a memoir. Many of the events story take place in the UK in the early 1980s. The daily dramas of its cast of characters, who first meet at university, create enduring friendship and love. This is a novel about being young and queer and discovering one's identity. The friends' burgeoning friendships coincide with the beginning of the AIDs pandemic, which begins to claim their lives, one by one. The novel ends in the present, in a much more non-binary and accepting world. This is a moving, keenly felt account of an era and a virus that changed the world for ever.

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Trials of Hope by Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes (memoir/narrative nonfiction)

A fascinating autobiographical work, in which author celebrates his culture, and mourns its erosion by western colonialising forces. The author's perspective shifts from a childhood as a shepherd in rural Ethiopia to his current position as a human rights lecturer in Australia. Prose chapters are interspersed with poems written by the author in both English and Amharic. The poems are a love song to the author's homeland: its sacred places and holy people as well as the beauty of the countryside. The structure of the work is based on the four stages of human experience (water, fire and soil – accompanied always by the wind) and grant the reader a rich dive into another culture that invites empathy and understanding.

Summary

The judges would like to congratulate all 81 entrants of this year's award for writing a book-length manuscript and submitting it to the Award. It is no small thing to complete a work, and their efforts are to be commended. The biographical notes of those authors whose names appeared on the longlist and shortlist also point to a persistence and perseverance that has led to the honing of their craft.

Georgia Richter
Cate Sutherland