



Australian Society of Authors

## **Barbara Jefferis Award 2010: Judges' Reading Report**

The Award judges were Susan Martin, Gina Mercer and Elizabeth Webby.

### **Shortlist**

**Steven Carroll** *The Lost Life* (HarperCollins)

**Enza Gandolfo** *Swimming* (Vanark Press)

**Cate Kennedy** *The World Beneath* (Scribe)

**Kristina Olsson:** *The China Garden* (University of Queensland Press)

**Susan Varga** *Headlong* (UWA Publishing)

### **Highly Commended**

**Judith Lanigan** *A True History of the Hula Hoop* (Picador)

**Lili Wilkinson** *Pink* (Allen & Unwin)

Judges of the 2010 Barbara Jefferis Award read fifty-eight novels, all but three written by women. As in 2009, twenty-five publishers were represented, showing the continuing strength of fiction publishing in Australia, despite the recent global financial crisis and increasing competition from new media forms.

Entries included a variety of genre fiction as well as literary fiction. In a number of cases, the novel's target audience was young adults.

The guidelines specify that, as well as demonstrating literary merit, the winning novel must be significantly driven by or concerned with the depiction of women and/or girls, and must depict them in a positive way, or in a way that empowers the status of women and girls in society.

A number of the novels entered in 2010, while demonstrating excellent literary merit, failed to meet the guidelines for the award, either because they were more focused on their male characters, or depicted women or girls primarily in terms of their relationships with men. The judges were particularly struck by the number of novels set in a depressing Melbourne setting, where the women characters struggled to overcome disastrous childhood experiences. Though some equally bleak novels were set in Sydney, Australian country towns and the USA.

The best books — including the five on the shortlist, and the two highly commended — featured strongly defined women and girls whose stories were central to the narrative. Several dealt with complex issues particularly relevant to women that are not often depicted in fiction, including the long-term effects on a woman's life and relationships of not being able to have a child on the one hand, or of having to give up her baby on the other. Younger female characters were shown as capable of learning from the mistakes of themselves and others; more mature women were able to discover or come to terms with their pasts and their futures.

Above and beyond their subject matter, the five shortlisted books displayed the high standard of literary merit that is one of the key values of the Barbara Jefferis Award. It is pleasing to see two first novels on the shortlist, as well as, for the first time in the three years since the Award began, a novel by a male author. The two highly commended novels were by new authors (one writing for a young adult audience) who we thought deserved recognition and encouragement for their original and positive representations of women and girls.

We congratulate all the shortlisted and highly commended authors for their fine achievements.

## **SHORTLIST (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)**

**Steven Carroll** *The Lost Life* (HarperCollins)

In this elegantly written novel, Steven Carroll demonstrates that he can evoke the England of the 1930s just as stunningly as he depicted Melbourne suburbia of the 1950s in his award-winning trilogy. The carefully structured narrative intertwines and draws parallels between the lives of a young couple and those of poet T.S. Eliot, his estranged wife and the American woman he had loved in his youth. The central focus, however, is on eighteen-year-old Catherine, who discovers the joys of a first love affair but also learns the necessity of living in the moment rather than the past, the dangers of being the muse rather than the creator. Far from being a footnote in someone else's story, she is to go on to an independent and fulfilled life of her own.

**Enza Gandolfo** *Swimming* (Vanark Press)

A meeting with her former husband leads Enza Gandolfo's heroine back to an unfinished novel written twenty years earlier in which she described the impact on herself and others of her repeated failure to give birth to the daughter of her dreams. Skilfully shifting between the past of 'Writing Sarah' and the present, Gandolfo conveys the intensity of Kate's desire for a daughter, the pain of her failures and the terrible revenge she takes for the destruction of her marriage. The double narrative enables both Kate and the reader to confront and come to terms with the past, to accept that creation takes many forms, as do daughters. This is an empowering examination of the complex impacts of infertility on a woman's life, as well as the potency of long-term woman-to-woman friendships and long-distance swimming.

**Cate Kennedy** *The World Beneath* (Scribe)

In her highly accomplished first novel, Cate Kennedy's focus is on a fifteen-year-old girl, the mother who has brought her up and the father who cleared out when she was a baby but now wants to reconnect. He decides to do this by taking his daughter on a demanding bushwalk in the Tasmanian wilderness, where things go badly wrong. Presenting her narrative from the alternating perspectives of these three characters, Kennedy casts a highly ironic eye on many features of contemporary society and especially on her older characters' seeming inability to move beyond their past as environmental protestors who helped save the Franklin. All three, however, manage to engage the reader's sympathy as they are forced to confront present realities and learn new ways of approaching both the past and the future, with the daughter in particular revealing her true potential.

**Kristina Olsson** *The China Garden* (University of Queensland Press)

Unusually for a story about relinquishment and adoption, this fine novel deals with the impact on the mother and her remaining child, rather than her lost one. It delicately unfolds the ways in which Angela has made a life as a painter in a small coastal community, and has helped, and been healed by, those around her. The title refers to Angela's garden and its broken pieces of china. This evocative image suggests that beauty can be created from what is broken and apparently irretrievable, but also the danger and sharpness of buried secrets. Kristina Olsson traces different possibilities of mothering, in Angela's mutually enriching friendship with a young man, Kieran, in Kieran's relationship with his grandmother, Cress, and in Cress's tentative friendship with Angela's daughter. Without feeling the need to resolve every absence or mystery, Olsson gently suggests that it is always possible to make new things out of the past, however fractured or painful.

**Susan Varga** *Headlong* (UWA Publishing)

*Headlong* confronts the reader with the contentious issue of an elderly parent who wishes to control the end of her life. There is complexity and compassion in Susan Varga's account of a mother seeking to die, a family who diagnoses her as simply depressed and grieving for her husband, and their various attempts to resolve this dilemma. She provides a thought-provoking portrait of a mother-daughter relationship fraught with guilt, pain and the mother's request for assistance to commit suicide. The mother's final choice is shocking and controversial yet can also be seen as an empowering act of will by a member of a social group frequently disenfranchised. This compelling novel gives in-depth consideration to a highly contemporary issue from the perspectives of the women involved, making an imaginative and useful contribution to the debate.

### **HIGHLY COMMENDED**

**Judith Lanigan** *A True History of the Hula Hoop* (Picador)

This engaging first novel provides a portrait of a wonderfully independent woman street performer who lives outside contemporary social norms with courage, success and a great deal of *joie de vivre*. Use of historical material concerning the history of the hula hoop is skilfully woven into the narrative and provides fascinating background and depth. The split narrative concerning the sixteenth-century street performers was less successful but reinforced the book's theme of women pursuing their chosen careers in spite of the numerous obstacles placed in their way. Judith Lanigan delivers this message with all the wit, talent and skilful avoidance of cliché one would expect from a high-wire act.

**Lili Wilkinson** *Pink* (Allen & Unwin)

As a novel written for young adults, *Pink* deals in some refreshing and witty ways with the stock themes of confusion over sexuality, peer group pressure, and what not to wear. While Ava's parents have no problems with her lesbianism or goth attire, she is not so sure. She dons a pink cashmere jumper and switches schools. But rather than just inverting a conventional coming-out plot to produce something more conservative, *Pink* complicates the simple trajectory of this kind of narrative. It depicts young women, gay and/or straight, positively, and offers a far from neat conclusion. Ava, having learnt several *Emma*-esque lessons about tolerance and judgment, still remains undecided.

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