

2022 Mark & Evette Moran Nib Literary Award Judges Report

This year we are celebrating twenty-one years of the prize we now refer to as the Nib, or more formally as the Mark and Evette Moran Nib Literary Award. The award has been known by several different names in the years of its existence since its establishment as the Westfield Waverley Library Award for Literature in 2002. And this year, there were more nominations (174) than ever for the award.

Deciding on a short list, was quite a painless process. One of the judges went so far as to ask, in jest, "How boring is this that we all are so agreeable?" It would seem ironic, then, that the six books we have chosen for the Alex Buzo Short List Prize are linked by such a disagreeable common theme: in different ways, all six are concerned with mortality. This might seem morbid, but the approaches to that common theme lead us along diverse and surprising byways.

For the prolific historian and cultural critic Tim Bonyhady, one such byway opened up with an Afghan rug. For aesthetic reasons, he had long been an enthusiast for the "rich iconography" and abstract patterns of the artworks, carpets and embroidered sheepskin coats that "first became chic in the United States following the Soviet army's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989." Then, after the events of 9/11 his interest was sharpened by "a small rug dominated by a Kalashnikov". The result is a well-written history of a country which has, with American assistance, transitioned from being a remote, lawless land ruled by religious fanatics to its current state as a remote, lawless land ruled by religious fanatics. The stadium in Kabul has been used for well-attended (but not by women) soccer matches, but for today's Taliban regime it is a venue for public executions, described in *Two Afternoons in the Kabul Stadium* in excruciating detail.

The literary merit of Delia Falconer's writing has been recognised by the judges previously. Her latest work shows it undiminished. *Signs and Wonders* is made up of acute observations of the earth's wonders, "the extraordinary interconnections of nature's systems", while at the same time confronting "the weird signs of damaged nature". The appearance and disappearance of birds, fish and animals, the storms and droughts that preoccupy the news media, all seem to be warnings of mortality for ourselves and for the planet we live on - yet the author points out that "In ancient Rome, priests and officials called augurs would look for omens of the future in the weather, the flight of birds, and the entrails or movements of animals", and thus manages to suggest that our (and her own) fear of climate change is no more than a superstition. These days, she says, "we are scrutinising the same things, not to divine the gods' will but as signs of our own actions."

While travelling in France, a bereaved mother writes a series of imaginary letters to a daughter who lived with muscular dystrophy and died of cancer despite being subjected to a curative asparagus diet. Though Carol Major suggests, in a preliminary note, that her book is a memoir it reads like an epistolary novel, one made out of letters that have never been sent. The letter-writer pretends to be "compiling a history on World War I!", as she is staying in the Marne Region, but the title of *The Asparagus Wars* refers not so much to military history as to the battle between the writer and her former husband, referred to in the letters as "your father", without a name. This haunting, elegantly expressed hybrid work begins with the daughter's death before going back in time to recall "twenty-eight hours of labour... and then your arrival, wild-eyed in the middle of a thunderstorm", but every description of life in the letters that follow cannot help being overshadowed by the knowledge of impending death.

Colin McLaren must have faced impending death in his time as a detective with the National Crime Authority asked to "attempt a long-term undercover infiltration" of a notorious Australian Mafia clan. Yet the experience awakened his curiosity about the organisation that he had joined in the guise of a "dodgy art dealer, able to launder money and sell vast amounts of cocaine". After his

targets had been “gifted an unwanted holiday in prison”, he was left with “an insatiable itch to know the origins of this gang of bad men”, so he ended up in Sicily working his way through dusty archives. The research began with the discovery that the unification of Italy in the nineteenth century, led by Garibaldi, might not have been achieved without the assistance of thousands of criminal thugs, and led from there to the Mafia’s expansion throughout the world, particularly in the United States and Australia where there was widespread legitimate Italian emigration. *Mafioso* tells a compelling story in highly readable style and is an epic of life-threatening research.

The theme of mortality is announced in the title of *Mortals*. The father and daughter team of Ross and Rachel Menzies are psychologists who became interested in the fear of death most people suffer from, and asked themselves “why do humans appear uniquely troubled by it?” This might seem like an easy question to answer, but in searching for that answer the authors make it clear that nearly all human achievement, in science, religion and the arts, is the product of our fear of death. Most of their conclusions are supported by quotations from Shakespeare, who arrived at the same ideas six centuries ago without the help of the hours of academic research that lie behind this readable and stimulating book.

The narrator in *Here Goes Nothing*, the latest novel from the Booker Prize shortlisted author Steve Toltz, is dead from the beginning, finding himself in the afterlife, a place with “a brown river, narrow streets, and the coloured rooftops of squat buildings” full of bureaucratic regulations. Yet he is able to look back on his former life, and to observe the world he has left, and his wife in particular, continuing in his absence. From this unusual premise the author has achieved a feat of imaginative brilliance, transforming what would otherwise be a mundane suburban plot into a story full of surprises, carried along by a satirical sense of humour that ranges from wisecracks to profound observations of human nature.