

A Real Page Turner

By Rachel Loveday

Everyone loves books for different reasons. Some like the escape that a thrilling and engaging plot as well as lovable and relatable characters can provide. Others like light reads that they can get through in one sitting on a sunny Sunday afternoon. Books provide unlimited types of stories from fairytale romances to goosebump-inducing thrillers and classic novels that can't be put down and can be read over and over.

However it is well-known that although there are many books available on the shelves and on the internet, publication for authors is known to be difficult let alone for young, emerging authors. The Australian/Vogel Literary Award is a prestigious award that provides a lifeline for yet-to-be published Australian authors under 35 and well-loved and known authors, Kate Grenville and Tim Winton have won.

So what if that lifeline is put on hold or not handed out?

"Many manuscripts we admired, many we thought had real promise, and many we returned to again and again, hoping that we had overlooked that special quality that a winning entry has. We didn't find it, not this year."

Geordie Williamson, *The Australian* chief literary critic and one of the judges of The Australian/Vogel Literary Award was talking about the decision that he as well as the other judges made to not hand out the Award for the second time in its history. Straight after this decision was announced, the entries opened for next year's Award.

Williamson defined the special quality that he and the other judges were looking for as "not just technically proficient or full of wild potential, but with some further, intrinsic quality. It's something to do with the personality of the author, the voice of their narrator(s), the overall architecture of the work in its entirety. It's an organic wholeness, a sense that the work is cut from one whole piece of cloth rather than patchwork."

Annette Barlow, publisher at Allen and Unwin, who provides winners of the Award with publication of their submitted manuscript as well as \$20,000 of royalties and prize money, had a similar belief in what that special quality for a book means.

"What captures me is an interesting and original voice, with a narrative through which I want to journey."

Shady Cosgrove, whose book *She Played Elvis* was published by Allen & Unwin as a result of being shortlisted for the Award in 2007 believes that a combination of the qualities that Williamson and Barlow have described constitutes a book's special quality.

"I think a manuscript has to contain a hook, something that grabs a reader's attention, good line-by-line writing, a gripping plot, interesting characters, a strong sense of setting and a

structure that makes sense to the story being told. As well as a controlled writing style and sense of dramatic tension.”

That missing special quality was only one half of the judges’ decision to not hand out the Award, however it did lead to the other half that made the decision whole. The other half of the decision was a desire to not compromise the Award by picking a winner just for the sake of it and disappointing the readers.

“Compromise is the dirty word that haunts all prize juries. It means that none of us wanted this book win, but each of us we wanted our book to win so much that we disagreed totally. Hence a win for the polite, blameless, perhaps mediocre book that no-one hates (and conversely, that no-one really loves).” Williamson said.

Barlow agreed with Williamson and the judges’ decision not to compromise the integrity of the Award by just picking a winner for the sake of it, that doing so would disservice readers.

“It would do the award a disservice to pick a winner just because everyone expected a winner to be published. The Australian/Vogel Literary Award has launched some very high quality writers and we believe there’s a standard to which we must adhere to in order that the readers will continue to believe the winner, whatever it is, will be worthwhile their purchasing.” Barlow said.

Cosgrove also agreed, saying that the writers need to have trust in the Award.

“I think it’s important for writers to trust that the Vogel Award is committed to finding the best work for emerging authors and to know that they won’t put something forward for the prize if they don’t think it’s worthy.”

Despite the judge, publisher and shortlister agreeing with the decision, it has received mixed reviews from Ashleigh Kelman, Darcy Tranter-Cook and Aideen Weingarth, interns at the South Coast Writers Centre and authors that are yet to have published manuscripts themselves. Kelman is concerned with this decision and worries of what will happen if the judges come to this conclusion this time next year.

“I can understand that the panel is tasked with finding the best stories ever, but it also seems like they are this huge obstacle now. What will they do next year if they can’t find a winner again? Do we just rein it in that nobody is ever going to be good enough and cast aside all other stories? Would it be such a big loss to accept a manuscript with few faults as worthy of an award?”

Weingarth believes that the decision will push authors further as it is clear that there are high expectations from the judges and from the publishing industry.

“I think the amount of attention this decision received indicates an ongoing interest in the award and the publishing industry, and if anything it would probably push writers interested in submitting to work harder and realise there is a certain expectation from the judges.”

Tranter-Cook found the decision depressing although agreed that the Award needs to keep its prestige.

“It is rather depressing that out of what must have been a large amount of entries, there was not one that was worth awarding the prize. I suppose on the other hand it is good to see that they only award it to the best of the best, it keeps the award prestigious and maintain its reputation.”

Only the judges will know what other positive qualities that the large amount of manuscripts that were submitted had. However Kelman and Tranter-Cook raised the issue of the surprise that out of the large amount of manuscripts, there was not a worthy winner that should be published. This raises the question of what does make a book publishable and therefore a good read.

As a publisher, Barlow believes that the craft and structure to a book makes it a good read as well as an interesting voice and narrative.

“(If a book is a good read) it has an interesting way of using language, complex plots, subplots and multilayered thematic levels with characters you want to read about. A writer who is clearly in command of his or her material and is a storyteller to boot.”

Tranter-Cook, Kelman and Weingarth although value a book that is crafted and structured well, they also appreciate being able to be drawn into its story.

“The characters, setting, plot—everything needs to be fleshed out to the point that you forget you’re reading something someone has written and just enjoy being taken in by the story.” Tranter-Cook said.

“If I can enjoy a story for what it says and how it says it, without thinking about craft or how something looks, then it’s a pretty good read.” Kelman said.

“I find that I connect most to character development in conjunction with a well-planned, creative plot. Plot holes irk me to no end! But it’s the books that surprise me that I consider great, such as *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak or *Dune* by Frank Herbert. *The Book Thief* is told through an incredibly original and unusual plot device that I was not expecting and it was a gripping read. *Dune* was very much a setting-driven novel and by far one of the best things I have ever had the pleasure to read.” Weingarth said.

Despite the competition that books face in regards to the free access of several channels and programs that television offers and the visual plot that movies provide, they have

managed to remain popular and have never gone into extinction. Tranter-Cook believes that this is due to the unlimited amount of time that a reader can spend with a book.

“With a book you can read for extended periods of time and allow things to sink in. There’s a lot more detail of course and it all happens in your mind, as opposed to playing out in front of you.”

Kelman believe that books will always be around due to the power of the reader’s imagination.

“Books have always been this kind of solitary experience. They also allow readers to imagine and I think it’s a kind of way to be included in the story to an extent. Writers can also play with your perceptions using that, maybe more so than other mediums because it can point to things you internalise.”

Weingarth also believes in the imagination of the reader and also that enjoying books are about the journey and not the destination.

“I think the written word gives your imagination more room to move and create. If you have been handed an entire world, as soon as you hold it in your hands, it’s yours to discover and journey through.”