

MONTANA NEW ZEALAND BOOK AWARDS 2007 JUDGES REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The judges of the Montana New Zealand Book Awards for 2007—Paul Millar (Convenor), David Larsen and Morrin Rout—have pleasure in presenting their report.

In New Zealand, a country with the population of a largish city, we seem to publish above our weight in both quality and quantity. The best books in this year's awards reveal us to ourselves, add to the record of our individual and collective achievements, and contribute something of great worth to our future. They speak to almost every facet of our lives—art, fauna, flora, food, music, history, industry and politics are just a few of many subjects covered by this year's entries. Not long ago the doomsayers of the digital age predicted the demise of the book. We salute the New Zealand publishing industry for answering them in the best way possible; by producing year-by-year more books, better books, and bigger books. We don't believe any screen will ever replace the sensory pleasures of a weighty book, the anticipation of turning the first page, or the heady aroma of a library of accumulated wisdom. As that great philosopher Giles, from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, so wisely stated: 'Knowledge is meant to be smelly.'

It is the unfortunate lot of judges to decide winners and losers, to disappoint the many as we acknowledge the few. And there were many worthy entrants who, by a whisker, failed to find a place among our finalists. We wish to acknowledge those whose books made the finals but did not win prizes for their important contribution to New Zealand publishing.

The process of winnowing this year's 206 titles down to a list of 35 finalists would have been impossible without the reports of our expert category advisors. It has been our good fortune this year to work with nine exceptional people whose commentaries and follow-up conversations inform many of the decisions outlined in this report. In those infrequent instances where we took a different course to that recommended by our advisors it was with the utmost respect for the advice offered, and only after much careful deliberation. The eight category advisors for the 2007 Montana New Zealand Book Awards were: Elizabeth Alley (Biography), Kerry-Jayne Wilson (Environment), Louise O'Brien (Fiction), Peter Gibbons (History), Lawrence McDonald (Illustrative), Liz Grant (Lifestyle & Contemporary Culture), John Newton (Poetry), and Peter Simpson (Reference and Anthology). When it became clear that we required expert advice on books in Te Reo and books dealing with aspects of Maori culture we were fortunate to be able to call upon our Maori Language Advisor, Hone Apanui, for assistance. We wish to thank him for the clarity and wisdom of the reports he provided us. Also, for work beyond the call of duty, we wish to further acknowledge Peter Simpson, Lawrence McDonald and

Kerry-Jayne Wilson, who at short notice provided additional reports on single titles to assist us as we attempted to settle the various winners.

One of the great pleasures of this year's judging turned out to be the conference calls with advisors to discuss their reports. The value of these secondary contacts between judges and advisors cannot be over stated.

This was a year when the eight categories seemed particularly unforgiving. Despite cautions from our advisors, we ended up pushing the boundaries to recognise two excellent books from what seems to be an increasing pool of titles challenging their genres,.

We wish to thank the New Zealand publishing industry and book trade for the tremendous pleasure its product provides. Judging has felt at times a thankless task, but these superb books have been, in the end, great compensation. Particular congratulations to those publishers who have defied the risks to produce works of extraordinary beauty like *Stitch*, *New Zealand a Natural World Revealed*, *Extinct Birds of New Zealand*, *Julia Morison: a loop around a loop*, and *Eagle's Complete Trees and Shrubs of New Zealand*. Our plaudits to all the designers, editors, artists and other talented people involved in the production process. And, most importantly, congratulations to every author who bravely launched the product of much private labour and personal sacrifice for public scrutiny.

In conclusion, we wish to thank Montana Wines for its vital and enduring commitment to these awards, and Booksellers New Zealand for its highly professional administration of the process.

Paul Millar (Convenor)
David Larsen
Morrin Rout

NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY OF AUTHORS BEST FIRST BOOK AWARDS

New Zealand Society of Authors E.H. McCormick Best First Book Award for Non Fiction

This was a crowded field with 32 eligible titles and an extremely diverse range of books to be considered. We were impressed with the quality of writing on display and the dedication of publishers in encouraging and nurturing new talent. There were, however, clear finalists—two from Reference and Anthology and one from Biography—these are: ***An Illustrated Guide to New Zealand Hebes*** by Michael Bayly and Alison Kellow (Te Papa Press), ***Furniture of the New Zealand Colonial Era: An Illustrated History 1830-1900*** by William Cottrell (Reed Publishing), and ***Douglas Lilburn: His Life and Music*** by Philip Norman (Canterbury University Press). The winner is a craftsman who has spent a lifetime dedicated to researching and restoring colonial furniture. He has stuffed this book with information, adorned it with illustrations, and polished it to a gleaming finish with the same passion he devotes to his craft. Peter Simpson, the category advisor for Reference and Anthology, describes the book's 'crowded and somewhat cluttered' layout as 'resembling the Victorian interiors illustrated in so many of the photographs and drawings'.

The winner of the E.H. McCormick Best First Book Award for Non Fiction is ***Furniture of the New Zealand Colonial Era: An Illustrated History 1830-1900*** by William Cottrell (published by Reed Publishing).

New Zealand Society of Authors Jessie Mackay Best First Book Award for Poetry

The judges had difficulty choosing between the three excellent contenders for this award: ***After the Dance*** by Michele Amas (Victoria University Press), ***Cup*** by Alison Wong (Steele Roberts), and ***Secret Heart*** by Airini Beauvais (Victoria University Press). All three are likeable, intelligent collections, each one strongly unified internally and each with its own distinct voice. The winner was only decided upon after long deliberation. Our poetry advisor, John Newton, describes this book as 'extremely well-conceived: a decisive choice of form perfectly matched to an original choice of content'. Its prose poems are resonant, wry, innovative, and bring the world – and the language – of inner city bohemia vibrantly to life.

The winner of the New Zealand Society of Authors Jessie Mackay Best First Book Award for Poetry is ***Secret Heart*** by Airini Beauvais (published by Victoria University Press).

New Zealand Society of Authors Hubert Church Best First Book Award for Fiction

Of the nine titles eligible for the best first book award for fiction three titles stood out as worthy finalists: ***Davey Darling* by Paul Shannon (Penguin Books)**, ***Overdue New Releases* by Matt Johnson (Urban by Longacre Press)**, and ***The Sound of Butterflies* by Rachael King (Black Swan)**. In the words of our category advisor, Louise O'Brien, the contenders share a 'depth and credibility of character, plot and emotion'. In other respects they could hardly be more different: *Davey Darling* veers between tragedy and comedy with a period setting in small city New Zealand and pithy vernacular reminiscent of Ronald Hugh Morrieson; it is escapist cinema and small-screen lives that anchor the contemporary urban angst of *Overdue New Releases*; while *The Sound of Butterflies* sets Victorian morality against the steamy terrors of Brazil's rainforests in an intriguing pastiche of popular romance and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

The Winner of the New Zealand Society of Authors Hubert Church Best First Book Award for Fiction is ***The Sound of Butterflies* by Rachael King (published by Black Swan)**.

ILLUSTRATIVE CATEGORY

This is a category where production values are paramount and the titles that caught the judges' eyes were those where the quality of image production and reproduction, as well as the felicitous placement of text and image, were of the highest standard. It is also a category where one can be easily seduced by sumptuous and beguiling images, so we were grateful for the specialized knowledge and technical expertise of our category advisor Lawrence McDonald. Many of the 22 books submitted ranged across the visual arts, and landscape and portrait photography. Others represent important additions to the reference shelf and to the historical record more broadly. We wish to make special mention of Matheson Beaumont's artfully composed photography in his book ***Chasing the Southern Light*** and also Bryan James' stunningly illustrated biography ***E. Mervyn Taylor- Artist: Craftsman***.

The finalists were:

***Lake of Coal: The Disappearance of a Mining Township* by David Cook (Craig Potton Publishing/ Ramp Press)**

David Cook has documented the demise of a small coal-mining village on the outskirts of Huntly over a period of twenty years. Lawrence McDonald sees it as 'a genuinely innovative study of the poetics and politics of place' as Cook 'aims to evoke a community by means of its visual-textual traces rather than attempt to represent it in some kind of "objective" manner'. Cook presents his

wealth of graphic and written material—landscape photos, family snapshots, children’s drawings, maps, illustrated diary entries, facsimiles of letters, advertisements, video stills—in a ‘topographical’ fashion which requires the reader to actively mine the layers of information. This is visual history at its most potent. As such, it is a book that generates many differing emotions, predominant among them tremendous respect and affection for the resilience and tenacity of this destroyed community, and gratitude to Cook for his enduring commitment to the project.

***Eagle’s Complete Trees and Shrubs of New Zealand* by Audrey Eagle (Te Papa Press)**

Audrey Eagle has devoted her life to the painstaking work of classifying and illustrating New Zealand flora. This monumental work is a magnificent tribute to her vision, her perseverance and to her consummate skill as a botanical artist. Lawrence McDonald describes it as a book that ‘has enduring merit and will remain the standard reference work in its field. However it is more than just a work of reference. It is a contribution to New Zealand’s visual culture.’ With more than 800 paintings ‘all precisely delineated upon a cream background, and rendered in subtle, natural colours’, and a consistent and clean page layout which allows all the information to be readily accessed, this is indeed a masterpiece of book design. All the practical elements of production—paper, binding, covers and storage box—are sturdy, substantial and of the highest quality. The product of Audrey Eagle’s life’s work is a book that will be treasured and utilized for generations. It is, in short, a triumph for all involved in its production.

***Julia Morison: a loop around a loop* by Justin Paton, Jennifer Hay and Anna Smith (Christchurch Art Gallery/ Dunedin Public Art Gallery)**

Lawrence McDonald describes this as ‘the most substantial and beautifully produced of the monographs devoted to a single artist submitted in this category’. It is a selective retrospective of one of our most important contemporary artists, published to complement a major exhibition of her work at the Christchurch Art Gallery. The reproductions are superb and give a compelling sense of the scale, texture and execution of Morison’s ‘impressive visual objects’. Because Morison’s art does not give up its mysteries readily, the immensely readable and informative essays by Justin Paton, Anna Smith and Jennifer Hay are essential conduits into and around the works. McDonald made special mention of ‘the cover’s grey, “suede” texture with its embossed pattern and title. In sum,’ he wrote, the book ‘is a visually rich and in-depth monograph on an artist’s work that is itself something of a work of art.’

The winner of the Illustrative category is ***Eagle’s Complete Trees and Shrubs of New Zealand* by Audrey Eagle (published by Te Papa Press).**

LIFESTYLE & CONTEMPORARY CULTURE CATEGORY

This sometimes seems like a ‘catchall’ category, with the risk that the judges’ individual preoccupations and prejudices will be brought into play. It was therefore something of a relief to find the judges and category advisor, Liz Grant, quickly reaching unanimity on the finalists. There was plenty in the 33 titles submitted to intrigue and interest—gardening, cooking, tramping, fishing, saving for retirement, how to watch a cricket match, how to maintain a lifestyle property, how to appreciate the best first five/eighths, and how to enjoy a journey through New Zealand film. The books that stood out were those that combined an excellent and informative text with high production values, superb illustrations and a fresh look at an aspect of New Zealand lifestyle and culture. When it came down to the wire, the winner was the book with the highest production values. Our finalists were:

***Crown Lynn: A New Zealand Icon* by Valerie Ringer Monk (Penguin Books)**

There would be very few households in New Zealand that have not had a piece of Crown Lynn in use at some stage so this is a book that will kindle memories on every other page. Liz Grant described ‘this thoroughly researched, well written book’ as ‘a fascinating account of an important strand in our history’. But it is not simply a lively documentary of those involved in making these iconic products, it is also the inspiring story of one of our pioneering entrepreneurs, Tom Clark. Avid and amateur collectors of the china are well catered for with numerous photographs of Crown Lynn products, a comprehensive timeline and an illustrated catalogue of backstamps. This engaging book will have wide appeal and a deserved place in the burgeoning genre of cultural histories.

***Stitch: Contemporary New Zealand Textile Artists* by Ann Packer (Random House)**

The old adage not to ‘judge a book by its cover’ can be ignored in the case of *Stitch* as the seductively silken, padded cover is an accurate indication of the riches within. As Liz Grant notes, ‘the production values that have gone into this book are exceptional.’ Ann Packer has documented the work of more than fifty New Zealand fibre and textile artists and the range and quality of the work illustrated will surprise and delight. This beautiful book highlights the depth of talent working in a field of creative endeavour where the boundaries between art and craft are constantly being challenged, and in which the artists are often overlooked and undervalued. A common thread throughout the detailed interviews is the homage paid to the craftswomen, often mothers, grandmothers and aunts, who inspired the artists. Fears expressed that these

skills are being lost should be allayed by the intricate and innovative work here displayed.

***Kāhui Whetu: Contemporary Māori Art—A Carver's Perspective* by Roi Toia and Todd Couper (Reed Publishing)**

This book is the very personal project of two exceptionally talented carvers. Toia and Couper welcome the reader into their world, giving their whakapapa, explaining their spiritual imperatives, describing their evolution as artists, and then exhibiting a selection of their work. Each carving is expertly and sensitively photographed against a black background, highlighting the intricacy of the design and the skill of execution. These illustrations are accompanied by a detailed description of the genesis of the work, the form and the materials used. Toia and Couper have earned an impressive reputation for their work not just in New Zealand but also among the First Nation artists in America. This book is testimony to the enduring beauty of their taonga.

The winner of the Lifestyle & Contemporary Culture category in 2007 is ***Stitch: Contemporary New Zealand Textile Artists* by Ann Packer (published by Random House).**

HISTORY CATEGORY

More than 40 books were submitted for consideration in the History category this year, canvassing such diverse topics as shipboard life en route to colonial New Zealand, the local development of photography as an art form, Maori-language newspapers in the nineteenth century, the influence of pressure groups on twenty first century party politics, and the history of the noble New Zealand sheep. The overall standard of both writing and research was high, and the majority of the books were well produced. As category advisor Peter Gibbons noted in his invaluable report, 'Publishers seem prepared to showcase historical writings through good design and high quality paper. If print culture is to survive challenges of the internet, books must be attractive artifacts. Printouts from websites offer easy access to texts; books will have to provide additional aesthetic pleasure. The submissions in the History Category suggest that publishers are aware of these considerations'.

History was one of two categories in which the criteria were challenged by a particular book – specifically ***Luca Antara*** by Martin Edmond. Peter Gibbons' two pages of comment on why the book 'does not seem to fit comfortably into the History Category' were prefaced with praise for Edmond's 'outstanding literary achievement' and brilliant writing 'that should be awarded as many gold medals as [are] available.' Ironically, Gibbons' detailed objections to *Luca Antara* as conventional history persuaded us that

the book was more than an excellent read and was capable of challenging many of the assumptions of the discipline. The three finalists for the category are therefore:

***Luca Antara: Passages in Search of Australia* by Martin Edmond (East Street Publications)**

Peter Gibbons describes this literate, highly engaging book as ‘presenting in absorbing form epistemological questions historians cannot avoid.... This account of a sixteenth century Portuguese discovery of Australia takes what might be called a postmodernist approach to supplementing the limited documentary records, something to counterpose to the endless repetitions of the words of The Great God Cook about his experiences in Botany Bay’. Martin Edmond’s interweaving of personal memoir and historical documents of highly ambiguous provenance has to be considered creative non-fiction of the highest calibre.

***Vaka Moana: Voyages of the Ancestors* edited by K.R. Howe (David Bateman)**

The expansion of human settlements across the Pacific is one of the great navigational achievements of all time. This well written, beautifully designed book does the story full justice. Authoritative essays take us from the days of the earliest human communities on the extreme Western Pacific rim, right up to the contemporary renaissance of traditional Polynesian navigation. As Peter Gibbons says, ‘Henceforth, it will not be necessary, or possible, for Pakeha, palagi, or haole to be vague or patronizing about the skills of the indigenous navigators. This finely-produced work will be not simply an attractive record of present knowledge about past (and now recovered) competencies, but should have an important influence on intercultural respect and understanding’. For New Zealanders, the book establishes a collective narrative ancestry: irrespective of ethnicity, we can all say, ‘These are the foundation stories of my country’.

***Chiefs of Industry: Māori Tribal Enterprise in Early Colonial New Zealand*, by Hazel Petrie (Auckland University Press)**

Intelligent, ground-breaking historical research is rarely this accessible. Hazel Petrie has done an impressive job of presenting her doctoral dissertation in clear, incisive language. She tells the story of the Māori entrepreneurs of the early colonial period in all its many-layered complexity, showing how cultural and economic forces acted on each other over many decades to produce results that will come as a surprise to many contemporary readers. In Peter Gibbons’ words, ‘*Chiefs of Industry* is a very timely book, since Māori, especially through iwi organisations, are currently strengthening corporate structures and extending their commercial interests,

and thus Petrie's discussion of Māori enterprise before the 1860s offers historical antecedents for present-day activities'.

The winner of the Montana New Zealand Book Award in the History category is ***Vaka Moana: Voyages of the Ancestors*** edited by K.R. Howe (published by David Bateman)

ENVIRONMENT CATEGORY

The 14 books entered in this category ranged over a wide variety of topics and formats, from environmental politics to eco-tourism to the origins and evolution of the New Zealand biosphere. The judges were extremely well served by category advisor Kerry-Jayne Wilson, whose detailed and closely argued report was crucial to our deliberations. This was one of several categories where we regretted being limited to three finalists; we could easily have extended our list to five because the standard was so high. We commend David Young's superb ***Whio: Saving New Zealand's Blue Duck*** and Peter Carey & Craig Franklin's ***Antarctica Cruising Guide***. Our three finalists were:

New Zealand: A Natural World Revealed by Tui De Roy & Mark Jones (David Bateman)

The judges approached this book with some initial scepticism. Did New Zealand's native plants and animals really need yet another pictorial survey? The authors quickly overcame our doubts. This is the book, we all agreed, that we would want potential visitors to this country to pick up and look at: and once they pick it up, they would find it hard to put down. As Kerry-Jayne Wilson says, 'not only are the authors technically brilliant photographers, they are inspired observers of nature. They show us New Zealand in a way no one has done before'.

Ghosts of Gondwana by George Gibbs (Craig Potton Publishing)

Easy to read, and yet presenting up-to-the-minute science from a range of different disciplines, this is the first book ever to tell the evolutionary origin story of New Zealand's flora and fauna. It deserves to be widely read both by scientists and the general public. In Kerry-Jayne Wilson's words, this 'exceptional book... introduces the educated lay public to recent advances in science with a minimum of technical language and no loss of accuracy'. One of the most intellectually stimulating and informative books on the whole 2006 Montana list.

***Extinct Birds of New Zealand* by Alan Tennyson & Paul Martinson (Te Papa Press)**

This is in every way a benchmark book. Production standards, text and illustrations are all of the very highest standards, with the result that the book is likely to bring New Zealand's sadly inglorious history of avian extinction to the attention of a wide audience. Kerry-Jayne Wilson describes it as 'among the best New Zealand bird books'.

Despite the very high standard of this year's contenders in the environment category, the judges all agreed that the clear winner was ***Ghosts of Gondwana* by George Gibbs (published by Craig Potton Publishing)**.

BIOGRAPHY CATEGORY

There was a substantial leap in the number of entries in this category from 20 in 2006 to 36 this year. Category advisor, Elizabeth Alley, commented on the 'comprehensive and highly instructive overview of New Zealand life and literature' provided by these entries. Whether through astronomy, exploration and adventure, swamp reclamation, career memoirs, music, art, drama and photography, religious history or politics, 'the New Zealander is revealed among our many disparate interests, sensibilities and social and cultural backgrounds, reinforcing our reputation as a people prepared to give anything a go, find enjoyment and fulfilment along the way—then write about it.'

Both the category advisor and the judges were aware of tensions emerging when evaluating thoroughly researched biographies against memoirs that were often more fragmentary and selective. In the end excellent writing and compelling narratives saw memoir and autobiography well represented in the list of the top ten contenders. Sadly memoir lost out narrowly in the final round. However, we highly commend ***The Accidental Anthropologist*** by Michael Jackson and ***Wrestling with God*** by Lloyd Geering.

Biography was the second category in which a provocative book challenged the genre. Chris Price's ***Brief Lives*** is a small book that made a large impact and caused considerable discussion. In the end the judges were persuaded by Price's exquisite prose and the insights she provided into the very nature of biography. The finalist were:

***A Life of J C Beaglehole—New Zealand Scholar* by Tim Beaglehole
(Victoria University Press)**

Tim Beaglehole has written a masterly work of scholarship that delineates not just the remarkable life of his father, the historian JC Beaglehole, but also the pivotal part 'JCB' played in the evolution of cultural life in New Zealand. His relationship to his subject gave him a unique advantage in being able to access material that may have been otherwise obscured and, while this could easily have compromised his objectivity, Beaglehole has maintained a professional distance thus giving the reader invaluable insights into JCB's intimate thoughts and deliberations. Elizabeth Alley commented that 'the lucidly written narrative rich in much fascinating detail, presents a fully rounded portrait of a man of great scholarship, many achievements, attributes and interests, as well as human flaws and foibles.'

***Brief Lives* by Chris Price (Auckland University Press)**

Elizabeth Alley described *Brief Lives* as 'signifying a new and excitingly innovative direction', but she also identified the dilemma the judges grappled with for a long time when she added that it is 'almost impossible to judge within the definitions of either biography or memoir.' However this beautifully crafted book was placed among the finalists because its short meditations on various lives, real and fictional, offer a lively and inventive reworking of the genre of biography. Few books so amenable to being dipped into are also capable of provoking so much thought and introspection. Price's poetic prose is a major factor in luring the reader into engaging with aspects of the lives described in ways that intrigue and enlighten.

***Douglas Lilburn: His Life and Music* by Philip Norman (Canterbury University Press)**

Lilburn has been acknowledged as 'the father of New Zealand composition' and this biography is a compelling portrait of a complex and, at times, contrary character. Norman has meticulously researched this creative life, and he provides a vivid depiction of the artistic milieu Lilburn inhabited at a time when New Zealanders were forging a strong sense of nationhood and cultural identity. This is a book that is also primarily concerned with Lilburn's music and, as the biographer is a composer himself, the musically literate will find much of interest in the general text and in the three comprehensive essays that comprise the addendum 'An Introduction to the Music'. The production values of this book greatly impressed the judges. The text is enlivened by the careful placement of an extensive selection of illustrations, photographs and musical manuscripts, all illuminating Lilburn's rich and varied life in much the same way as his music has enriched our cultural landscape.

The winner of the Biography category is ***Douglas Lilburn: His Life and Music*** by Philip Norman (published by Canterbury University Press).

REFERENCE & ANTHOLOGY CATEGORY

A difficult category to judge, in that it brings together books of such fundamentally different natures. We were faced with the unpleasant task of excluding several exemplary anthologies from our final three, not because of any failings on their part, but because the best of this year's reference books were so strong. The judges would like to thank category advisor Peter Simpson and Maori language advisor Hone Apanui for their thoughtful comments, which were invaluable in deciding on our three finalists:

***An Illustrated Guide to New Zealand Hebes* by Michael Bayly and Alison Kellow (Te Papa Press)**

We suspect that this will become the definitive work on its subject, the identification, classification and biology of the flowering plant genera *Hebe* and *Leonohebe*. In Peter Simpson's words, 'a superb work of reference, comprehensive, clearly and attractively laid-out and designed and with excellent production standards from Te Papa Press'. A very impressive publication.

***Furniture of the New Zealand Colonial Era: An Illustrated History 1830-1900* by William Cottrell (Reed Publishing)**

One of those rare books which presents a highly specialised topic with such infectious enthusiasm as to draw in even those readers with no initial interest in the field. Profusely illustrated and intelligently written, it offers a new perspective on New Zealand's past, as well as providing a splendid reference work on its immediate subject. As Peter Simpson puts it, 'while the book is clearly intended for those with a specialist interest in the subject of colonial furniture, it has much to appeal to the general reader, especially one with an interest in this country's social and cultural history. The expertise of the author and his passion for his subject are manifested on every page.' A prodigious achievement.

***Tirohia Kimihia: He Kete Wherawhera* (Huia Publishers)**

Well designed and attractively produced, this landmark beginner's dictionary is the first all-Māori dictionary ever to be published. Our Māori language advisor, Hone Apanui, describes it as an invaluable book for Kura Kaupapa Māori, for Māori medium schools, for kōhanga reo and for higher learning institutions that foster te reo. He explains that the 'dictionary is long overdue, particularly with the renaissance of te reo Māori over the past decade or so,

and the cry for more support to prop up the burgeoning of the language nation wide... much research into Māori children's literature and some delving into children's spoken language, as well as a raking over of Māori dictionaries and word lists, would have been required to produce this book.'

The winner of the Reference and Anthology category is ***Furniture of the New Zealand Colonial Era: An Illustrated History 1830-1900* by William Cottrell (published by Reed Publishing)**

MONTANA MEDAL FOR NON FICTION 2007

In terms of the quality and quantity of the titles submitted to the Montana New Zealand Book Awards, 2006 was very much non-fiction's year. The titles contending for the Montana Medal represent the very rich cream of a substantial crop. In the end, two titles stood out: ***Ghosts of Gondwana* by George Gibbs** and ***Eagle's Complete Trees and Shrubs of New Zealand* by Audrey Eagle**. The problem was to discriminate between George Gibbs' exceptional story of the origins and evolution of the New Zealand biota and the culmination of Audrey Eagle's life work illustrating the trees and shrubs of New Zealand to gift to us a reference book that will be as useful in 50 years time as it is today. In making our decision we found ourselves relying heavily on the knowledge of our Environment category advisor Kerry-Jayne Wilson who described Gibbs' book as 'totally original, with no precedents' but then said much the same about Eagles' book, remarking that the illustration of 'a complete flora in such meticulous detail is a formidable task that no one is ever likely to repeat'.

The winner of the Montana Medal for Non Fiction 2007 is ***Eagle's Complete Trees and Shrubs of New Zealand* by Audrey Eagle (magnificently published by Te Papa Press).**

POETRY CATEGORY

Last year's Judges' report described the Poetry category as one of the strongest, with 32 books, many of them by major poets 'performing at the top of their form.' This year's poetry was nowhere near that quantity—just 19 books—but the judging was no less challenging partly due to a change to entry criteria to allow posthumous selections. However, we were pleased to note that where poetry is truly tested, in terms of language, originality, and technique, all three finalists give a good account. The finalists were:

***The Year of the Bicycle* by James Brown (Victoria University Press)**

Category advisor John Newton felt that this small volume's four sections contain 'the freshest and most inspired writing in the field'. Brown's poetic persona is the voice of the 'nameless *second* half of the Baby Boom (born, say, post-1960): baffled, nerdy, white-bread, anti-heroic.' The poems' focus isn't bohemian escapism, political reform, or social justice. The eponymous bicycle is a purely utilitarian symbol; a mode of transport and the means to a few brief hours of escapist, middle-class leisure. The dutiful father always returns to support the family. If he is absent it is only in spirit, and only briefly, as his mind drifts from the netball court sideline to the stuff of life and poetry: growing up in Palmerston North, his parents' broken marriage, or, more immediately, a detailed and precise recollection of a mountain biking excursion. Funny, wry, cleverly understated, and genuinely affecting, *The Year of the Bicycle* provides further evidence of Brown's continual project of development throughout his decades-long commitment to poetry.

***The Goose Bath* by Janet Frame (Vintage)**

The production values of this sumptuous book speak volumes about the status (and marketability) of its author. Furthermore *The Goose Bath's* trinity of editors includes Bill Manhire—one of our greatest living poets editing the poetry of our greatest deceased novelist. Frame's edge is, as we should expect, her use of inventive, imaginative and memorable language. She steps lightly and precisely across the surface of the swamp of words where others wade less confidently, ankle-deep in slush. She is also highly original. As John Newton remarks, 'you always know you're in the hands of a high-powered literary intelligence.' Only in matters of technique do we discover less assurance, and share Newton's mild surprise that, 'our pre-eminent modernist fiction writer...doesn't seem to have taken to heart the modernist understanding of poetic form.' Not that Frame is technically poor; rather the poems suggest that technique was of lesser importance, that Frame's abiding project, in poetry as in prose, was first and foremost the original use of language.

***One Shapely Thing* by Dinah Hawken (Victoria University Press)**

Dinah Hawken's first new volume since her *Selected* (2001) is a significant book from a very accomplished poet. Set in the era of 9/11, the aftermath of which plays out alongside a personal health scare, many of the poems deal naturally with 'friendship, home and personal vulnerability'. As well as poetry, Hawken includes two long sequences in diaristic prose that make up nearly half of the book's 140-odd pages. John Newton observes that these prose sequences add something new to Hawken's familiar themes of her 'feminism, her humanism, her ecologism, her unflinching ethical seriousness and sense of global responsibility'. What is new is 'a personalist, domestic note that brings a male partner into the foreground of some of the writing for the first time' which Newton found 'interesting in relation to [Hawken's] abiding thematics of balance.

The winner of the Poetry category is ***The Goose Bath* by Janet Frame (published by Vintage).**

FICTION CATEGORY

It is instructive that the only title set wholly in New Zealand amongst this year's fiction finalists re-imagines the Central Plateau and the Upper North Island as the Wild West. As a New Zealand poet once said 'the world is here, not somewhere over the horizon,' an observation each of these books treats as a truism: Nigel Cox finds in the generic preoccupations of the western a metaphor for New Zealand experience; James George reminds us that the Nuclear threat of the Cold War era is no less immediate or relevant to New Zealanders because new threats have pushed it out of contemporary consciousness; Lloyd Jones' point is that the islands of the Pacific are linked under the sea, and that we must not turn a blind eye to the atrocities that hover on our doorstep; C.K. Stead's fictionalised Judas Iscariot, while he may be an historical figure, learns lessons that resonate strongly in a contemporary world of increasing religious intolerance; and Damien Wilkins is most subtle in his reiteration of a lesson we all learned at the beginning of the millennium, that random violence in New York spares no one, not even a man from distant New Zealand.

These, then, are the five authors whose books have made the finals from a list of 35 titles competing for this year's fiction award. Of the others, some were comic, some tragic, and many were compelling fictions about New Zealand experience: narratives of family, history and belonging. Narrowing down this list was not easy and we must acknowledge the invaluable input of the Fiction category advisor, Louise O'Brien, without whom we would have had significantly greater difficulty arriving at a list of finalists. The finalists were:

***The Cowboy Dog* by Nigel Cox (Victoria University Press)**

Few coming of age stories are as unusual as Chester's attempts to find himself and avenge the cowardly murder of his father. Nigel Cox's luminous work of the imagination is, as Louise O'Brien notes, 'a stunningly original and fascinating re-visioning of a familiar landscape, literary as well as physical—startling, surreal, fantastical and parodic.' We also noted the literary nature of Cox's project which produced an engrossing story, deep and complex, written in flexible and powerful prose, which has an almost fractal depth to it – you can look at it on any level, and it repays you. *The Cowboy Dog* is a bittersweet triumph that evokes both joy and grief: joy that Nigel Cox was able to complete this final great testament to his talent, grief that like Mansfield he left too soon and we will never know how much further that talent might have taken him and us.

***Ocean Roads* by James George (Huia Publishers)**

This big and complex novel is woven of multiple strands stretching back into the past, and across the globe to connect, among many other places, Antarctica, New Zealand, Hiroshima, Vietnam, and the nuclear testing grounds of the American desert. 'James George's talent is detail,' writes Louise O'Brien, 'the language of the novel is dense and lyrical, metaphors beautifully and precisely phrased, images sharply defined and loaded with meanings.' This is a novel concerned with the impact of past mistakes upon the present, and with the effects on individuals of war and the development of nuclear testing in the twentieth century. Bold in its science and tragic in its conclusions, *Ocean Roads* seeks to understand why the great global threat of nuclear annihilation has been inexplicably sidelined in the new millennium.

***Mister Pip* by Lloyd Jones (Penguin Books)**

This novel withstood detailed critical scrutiny, impressing with the layering of its narrative, whereby a simple coming of age story is juxtaposed with one of the great tragedies of contemporary Pacific politics. This narrative situation is in turn complicated by a sophisticated series of intertextual references which, argues Louise O'Brien, set up a 'network of stories which inform, produce and revise each other, all foregrounding the central theme of *Mr Pip*: the power of storytelling.' Although *Mr Pip* is firmly anchored to time and place it is first and foremost a powerful work of the imagination, but one that is also authentic at every point, highly textured, and presented in such a way that, to quote one of our greatest critics, it is like the best fictions 'a recreation of life, so that we experience it and remember it as we experience and remember actual life.'

***My Name was Judas* by C.K. Stead (Vintage)**

Those for whom Stead's atheism is well rehearsed might reasonably have approached this novel anticipating another polemical attack on faith and belief of the type to be found in his book of poems, *Dog* (2002). But this fictionalised account of the origins of Christianity is more sympathetic, and for that reason more compelling. Louise O'Brien was particularly struck by Stead's intelligent use of foreknowledge to maintain suspense and surprise: 'The reader's knowledge, or false knowledge... forms the basis of the reading experience. This mimics in reverse the journey undertaken by the narrator: what the reader knows first as received truth, Judas knows second as the revision of the truth, the truth that we come to know as the revision.' This is a book about the power and danger of charisma, the creation of myth, and the very human desire to discover ways to transcend death.

***The Fainter* by Damien Wilkins (Victoria University Press)**

Reading *The Fainter* is like encountering a modern version of Henry James such is Damien Wilkins' narrative control and the glacial momentum of his plot development. Louise O'Brien describes the prose in this novel as 'simply stunning: deliberate, elegant, judicious, thoughtful, superbly crafted and always sharply accurate.' Wilkins' comedy of manners is also similar to James in its hard-edged satire, although his protagonist, Luke, is ultimately a sympathetic portrayal 'complete, credible and detailed... the central character in his own life, always peripheral to others'. Luke's tendency to faint, the legacy of a golf ball to the temple, re-triggered by exposure to a violent death and exacerbated by witnessing a brutal accident, is on many levels a metaphoric strategy of avoidance that can be extrapolated to encompass all the ways by which we avoid unpalatable aspects of contemporary existence.

The runners up are ***The Fainter* by Damien Wilkins (published by Victoria University Press)** and ***The Cowboy Dog* by Nigel Cox (published by Victoria University Press)**.

The winner of the Fiction category is ***Mr Pip* by Lloyd Jones (published by Penguin Books)**.

MONTANA MEDAL FOR FICTION OR POETRY

The two books vying for this award could hardly be more different, with the strongest point of comparison being that both authors are recognised first and foremost as novelists. However, Janet Frame's most compelling poems take us on a different journey to her novels, into an unusually private world of personal and introspective verse that moves us closer to the unvoiced layers of meaning that make her memorable autobiographies so affecting. No less

affecting, in its way, is Matilda's account in *Mr Pip* of how she learned about literature, love and loss on an island paradise that becomes a killing field.

The Montana Medal for Fiction or Poetry 2007 goes to a book that reminds us that atrocities don't just happen in far away places, and that we in New Zealand bear some responsibility for what happens to our neighbours. The winner is ***Mr Pip* by Lloyd Jones (published by Penguin Books)**.