

Christina Stead Prize for fiction (\$40,000)

Helen Garner, *The Spare Room* The Text Publishing Company

Helen Garner's brief, fierce and unsparing account of terminal illness is barely a novel – more an artful transcription of real-life events. The narrator, Helen, invites an old friend, Nicola, to stay in her Melbourne home during a course of treatment for cancer. It soon grows evident that Nicola is flinching from the grave reality of her situation; she has fallen into the hands of quacks whose dubious methods only serve to increase her pain.

As the burden of caring grows, Helen, using a crisp, precise prose shorn of all sentiment, anatomises the moral sickness that can accompany physical decline. Nicola's refusal to accept her imminent death prompts Helen to ask some simple yet profound questions about the nature and limits of our responsibility to others.

It is not only the living who are obliged to the dying, she concludes; the dying also owe a debt of honesty to those who care for them.

Kate Grenville, *The Lieutenant* The Text Publishing Company

Daniel Rooke, a quiet boy born to modest means in eighteenth century Portsmouth, has talents and ambitions that a lower-middle class future cannot satisfy. Gifted in maths and sciences, his chosen route to upward mobility is to join the marines as an astronomer, where he takes his chances on an expedition to the far-flung Australian colony of New South Wales. There, his methodical, sober temperament is put to the test as he finds himself mediating the complex relations with the indigenous people he encounters in his makeshift observatory at Sydney Cove.

The Lieutenant continues Kate Grenville's nuanced exploration, begun with the award-winning *The Secret River*, into Australia's settler origins. Its finely-wrought dramatic structure and penetrating re-enactment of early contact between indigenous and 'white' Australia provide a penetrating account of our origins as a nation, and deepen our understanding of our national identity.

Julia Leigh, *Disquiet* Penguin Group (Australia)

An unnamed woman, accompanied by her young son and daughter, arrives at a French chateau after an arduous journey. In a narrative that unfolds with a stately pace, we enter a world of chilling family conflict where one unnerving scenario follows the next. In a meticulously staged series of revelations, we learn the woman's identity – Olivia, an Australian fleeing from her violent husband – and accompany her in her journey to find refuge for herself and her children in the home of her mother, a forbidding matriarch who has never met her grandchildren. Olivia's attempt to escape her past, however, is soon confounded as she finds herself caught up in a tangle of fraught, sinister relationships that provide no possibility of relief.

Julia Leigh's *Disquiet* is a strikingly original foray into the contemporary Gothic. Its precise, measured prose renders an atmosphere that is both claustrophobic yet luminous, the ideal environment for its archetypal characters to play out the themes of motherhood, death and loss.

**Joan London, *The Good Parents*
Random House Australia Pty Ltd (Vintage)**

Eighteen-year-old Maya de Jong has moved from a small country town in Western Australia to the sophisticated urbanity of Melbourne, where she begins an illicit affair with her middle-aged boss, Maynard. When her ex-hippy parents, Toni and Jacob, come to visit, flatmate Cecile informs them that Maya has gone away. Their bewilderment at her absence, the anxiety of not knowing what has happened, presents itself as some sort of cosmic testing, which separates the parents before reconnecting them.

Runaways and disappearances are recurring motifs which propel the narrative in this beautifully observed novel. Although Maya is unaware of it, running away with an emotionally risky man was also part of Toni's rites of passage. For both, their mode of escape from the values they grew up with becomes a prison.

Joan London's ability to completely inhabit each of her various characters is sublime, the multiple points of view creating both a sense of existential isolation and a web of connectivity. The events of the story test the tensile strength of the connections – between partners, parents, children, siblings, neighbours and friends. Nuanced details convey the large patterns of the novel while stately rhythms, elegantly structured sentences and restrained lyricism give rise to an underlying empathy and goodwill, a sense of the numinous in everyday life.

**Steve Toltz, *A Fraction of the Whole*
Penguin Group (Australia)**

A boisterous roller-coaster ride of a novel, *A Fraction of the Whole* tells the story of the impressively dysfunctional Dean family. Martin Dean is a restless eccentric who pulls son Jasper along in the wake of his brilliant ideas. At the heart of Jasper's search for identity is the one abiding question – 'is he doomed to become the lunatic who raised him, or a different kind of lunatic entirely?' Life twists Martin's good intentions into devastating outcomes. Despite his almost plausible scheme to turn all Australians into millionaires, he becomes nationally hated. In contrast, his sporting hero brother Terry gains even greater status and affection as a criminal exacting vengeance on corrupt sportsmen.

This zesty, sprawling epic takes its characters from rural New South Wales to Paris, Central Europe and Thailand; through prisons, strip clubs, jungles, and across the ocean in an unseaworthy boat. Yet it maintains an Australian comic discernment, and sense of place at the end of the world.

Martin comes to the conclusion that 'most philosophy was petty argument about things you couldn't know', but this is an ardently philosophical novel, with adrenalin-charged cogitations on everything from love, death, freedom, the soul, to storytelling, celebrity and infamy. Steve Toltz explodes clichés and reassembles them into aphorisms that are

fresh, ironic and astute, while unpacking assumptions and attitudes to reveal their fundamental absurdity.

**Tim Winton, *Breath*
Penguin Group (Australia)**

Two adventurous teenagers escape the boredom and stasis of small-town Western Australia in the 1970s by learning to surf. Both are addicted to testing themselves against the ocean but only the narrator, 'Pikelet', younger and more thoughtful, sees the activity in its larger light: a rare opportunity for men in that time and place to unashamedly engage with beauty.

The pair falls into the company of an older man, Sando, a former professional surfer whose skill, grace and willingness to take risks set him apart from the locals. He pushes both boys to their limits and eventually Pikelet is found lacking.

It is the relationship that grows between Pikelet and Sando's wife Eva that is most dangerous, however; she lures the fifteen-year old into sexual waters too deep for him. In a language by turns poetic and urgent Tim Winton describes how Pikelet's sublime early experience of surfing, as well as the damage inflicted by this affair, enriches and deforms his adult life.