**2017 MILES FRANKLIN LITERARY AWARD**

**JUDGES’ COMMENTS**

**OVERALL COMMENT**

Like all great literature, the five novels on the 2017 Miles Franklin shortlist explore the restorative power of love, the pernicious influence of the past upon the present, the tragedy of the present avoiding the past, the challenge of unconventional identities, the interweaving of lives across communities, the devastation of grief, and the warzone that is the media, masculinity and a small country town. Yet again the shortlist celebrates the diversity of voices and approaches to writing about Australian life. None of these novels draw on familiar tropes of Australian literature – yet each brings a distinctive pitch of truth and insight into the Australian experience.

**COMMENTS FOR SHORTLISTED BOOKS**

**Emily Maguire *An Isolated Incident***

*An isolated incident* begins like a crime thriller – a young woman, Bella, murdered, a grieving sister, and truck-stop country town. But the novel doesn’t dwell on the crime, or its resolution. Instead its focuses on Bella’s older sister, Chris, and May, a young reporter sent to sensationalise the story. Emily Maguire creates characters whose complexities and fragilities explore despair, loss and grief, and also the redemptive power of love and empathy, no matter how inexpertly articulated.

Both Chris and May have back stories of failed relationships, but Maguire’s narrative avoids cliché and sentiment. Chris relies on her ex-husband Nate to deal with the aftermath of the murder, while May struggles with the fallout from the sudden termination of her relationship with a married man. These are not censorious but emotionally real and visceral relationships. Chris plummets into deep grief: Nate’s tender ministrations to her despair, despite the bitter failure of their marriage, is the tender heart of this remarkable novel.

Maguire’s novel explores masculinity and violence, both personal and corporate, set in a tough regional town. Maguire mediates on the negotiations and compromises of power and sex, and the violence that circulates around them. At the heart of this absorbing novel are people, whose lives defy convention but in whom Maguire embeds us completely. Maguire writes her readers into the heart of Australian masculinity in this powerful novel of grief, loss and empathy.

**Mark O’Flynn *The Last Days of Ava Langdon***

Ava Langdon is an eccentric recluse living in a dilapidated shack on the outskirts of Katoomba. The once critically acclaimed author of two published novels (and a number that weren’t) she is a gender-fluid identity, who puts on an Oscar Wilde persona to protect her fragile ego. Over the course of a day she posts her finished manuscript, stops a newly widowed woman from jumping off a cliff, slashes her way through town, has an accident and is reunited with her long-lost son.

The beauty of this novel is in its lively and colourful language and the warmly empathetic portrayal of a misunderstood but spirited outsider (based loosely on the real-life author Eve Langley) who refuses to conform to society’s narrow expectations. Her disregard for convention does not get in the way of her keen interest in how others live. Ava’s mind is full of rush and creativity, imagination and fury, tenderness and contempt, of self-importance and self-abrogation. The material poverty she lives in does not equate to poverty of spirit. To others, her life might be sad and pitiful, but Ava never succumbs to self-pity, taking – and making - her joys wherever and however she pleases. Words have not failed her, as people have, and they provide her with an inner nouishment whatever her physical state may be. Gleeful, unrepentant, brave and admirable, Ava Langdon is a marvelous creation, and this vivid novel a tribute to the whole process of creating – art, literature, and life.

**Philip Salom *Waiting***

Philip Salom’s deftly executed novel could be seen as a lyrical variation on the Lennon line, ‘Life is what happens while you’re making other plans’. *Waiting* centres on a pair of odd couples: the physically disparate duo of timid/tiny Little and pontificating heavyweight cross-dresser Big, who haunt the inner-city margins; and the mind/body mix of athletic academic Jasmin, a cynical semiotician, and solitary handyman Angus, who constructs public gardens to expiate the ashes of his past.  All four are waiting, in Godot-like pauses and with greater or lesser awareness, for some thing or someone to change their lives.

Salom interweaves their tales, with walk-ons by an eclectic cast of eccentrics, to dissect the vulnerabilities of the human condition (loneliness, fear of intimacy, powerlessness, guilt), the power of the past to haunt us, the fear of the future to mire us, and the redemptive effects of love and acceptance.

*Waiting* is poignant, compassionate and droll; it is never maudlin nor idealised. Salom’s prose, poetic and frequently playful, bestows a multiplicity of incidental insights en route, yet never condescends to its subjects nor patronises its readers.  As rollicking as it is original and affecting, *Waiting* is a highly readable addition to Australian literature.

**Josephine Wilson *Extinctions***

Fred Lothian is a man in denial: a brilliant engineer, now retired and widowed, he still believes that ‘for an engineer there was a bridge for every situation’ - that a problem which cannot be solved cannot be acknowledged. So he looks away from his son’s tragic injury, his adopted Aboriginal daughter’s cultural loss, and obsesses about his failing powers. Only the intervention of his next-door neighbour at the retirement village, Jan, forces him out of his self-absorption long enough to bring both comedy and pathos into the story, and some degree of redemption. The setting is Perth, a place of recent migrants and recently displaced local people. In this clever and compassionate novel Josephine Wilson explores ageing, adoption, grief and remorse; rescue and resistance to rescue. Her subject is extinctions both human (the Stolen Generation as well as individual deaths) and animal (the species extinctions that Caroline Lothian is researching for her exhibition). Images of extinct birds alternate with Fred’s images of the wonders of modernist design, suggesting the interplay of opposing forces that have produced the dilemmas of today – just as memory and love emerge as the countervailing forces to Fred’s blind egotism.

**Ryan O’Neill *Their Brilliant Careers***

The biographical narrative is a fundamental component of any history: it’s a scaffold around which the status and authority of a text can be conferred. Ryan O’Neill’s startling inventive novel, *Their Brilliant Careers,* is a rich and entertaining upending of this scholarly device, set in the field of literary history. O’Neill cleverly plays on the idea of a literary cannon and its often circular and self-referential foundations, in which luck – as much as talent – can develop, and end, a career. Indeed the novel’s very title is a play on Miles Franklin’s first novel *My Brilliant career.* O’Neill has imagined some fifteen biographies of Australian writers – literary authors, poets, hacks, editors and academics – whose bizarre and exaggerated lives he neatly slots into real literary history.

But *Their Brilliant Careers* is much more than satire. It is a beautifully crafted, carefully plotted, maze of a novel which contests its genre, through wit, absurdity, and clichéd tropes of literature and literary life. O’Neill questions authorship, authenticity, whether talent is natural or nurtured, and the very origins of culture. O’Neill effortlessly captures the smooth detachment of the biographical format, but at the same time trips it up with outrageous insertions and risible comments. *Their Brilliant Careers* is a sparkling, intelligent and fun riposte to the manufacturing of history.