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Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

19 Aug 2017, by Emily Maguire

Spectrum, page 18 - 1,109.00 cm²

Capital City Daily - circulation 177,722 (MTWTFSS-)

ID 829464613

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BOOKS | Prizes

Behind the lines with final five

The Miles Franklin shortlisted authors discuss their novels.

Emily Maguire *An Isolated Incident*

A few years ago I began to be bothered by how many books, TV shows and films use the death of a beautiful young woman as a jumping off point to tell a story about the professionals who are tasked with solving or avenging her murder. I kept thinking about the enormous hole the death of any individual creates in the lives of those who loved her and how often those stories are skipped over in favour of more detail about the solving of the crime.

So I wanted to write something that starts in that familiar way – the violent death of a beautiful woman – and then moves not to the grizzled detective who'll make it all better but to a living, grieving, raging woman who unlike her murdered sister cannot be idealised, mythologised or used as a prompt for someone else's story.

As soon as I started writing with this idea in mind, the character of Chris Rogers came very easily. She is the kind of woman who a lot of people – including the cops on her sister's case – look down on. She works in a pub, sleeps around, drinks a lot, has little education. But she's also smart and funny and proud and – most significantly for this story – she loved her younger sister Bella more than anything in the world. She just poured out on to the page, this potent cocktail of grief, rage and love.

Surrendering to Chris' viewpoint also helped me with a major ethical and craft challenge: how to write about the glamorisation and fetishisation of violence

against women without perpetuating exactly that. Chris isn't a detective or coroner. She's a woman whose sister has been taken from her in terrible circumstances. She knows the particulars but the last thing she wants is to dwell on them or describe them to someone else. And from a narrative point of view, it's just not necessary. Chris' distress whenever the details of what happened invade her thoughts, conveys all anyone needs to know about the horror of the crime.

An Isolated Incident is published by Picador.

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

With any novel there are numerous key elements, and *The Last Days of Ava Langdon* was no different. One of these was patience. I had done some not-very-extensive research some 15 or more years ago into the neglected Australian writer Eve Langley, including reading her remarkable *The Pea Pickers*. I have always wondered why something hadn't been

written about Langley in this vein before, she was such an inspiring, complex and dramatic figure. I had the inkling of an idea – her life – which of course was too big. What I gleaned from that early reading was a voice, an attitude; also the desire to revitalise some tiny spark of interest in Langley's work.

Some people have said that Langley's eccentricities have distracted from the quality of her fiction, but I think they are an integral part of understanding both her writing and her character.

Many years later I was reminded of the specific device of confining a narrative to a limited time span. I thought the modernists did



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not have exclusive dibs on this, so suddenly I had a structure. This was the pivotal catalyst to the beginning of the novel. I did not have to try to describe a life, merely a day.

Little, if anything is known about Langley's last days, so effectively I was free to make it up. I deliberately chose not to revisit the earlier research, not wanting to be shackled by biography. So another important element was my memory of that reading, or rather a

distortion of that memory. What I was able to fabricate could therefore only be fiction, hence my thinly disguised version of Langley – Ava Langdon.

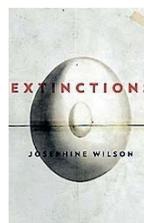
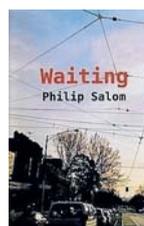
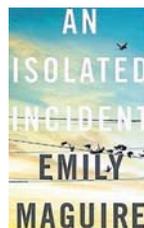
I tried to remain faithful to what I recalled of her personality, plus some of the critical incidents of her life. This was hardly a limitation given that I had a voice. I could hear her commenting on the various scenarios I imposed on her. In trying to populate her isolated, reclusive world I was also free to imagine how she might react, and how others might react to her. Imagination, tempered by the constraints of biography, was another necessary element to the development of the character.

The Last Days of Ava Langdon is published by UQP.

Ryan O'Neill Their Brilliant Careers

I had always considered myself a short-story writer, so it seems appropriate that *Their Brilliant Careers* developed from a short story.

A few years ago I was asked by the journal



Miles Franklin Literary Award |
shortlist authors Emily Maguire
(left), Ryan O'Neill, Josephine
Wilson, Philip Salom and Mark
O'Flynn. PHOTO: DARRIAN TRAYNOR



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The Canary Press to write a story around the theme of erasure. I had several ideas, one of them being the biography of Sydney Steele, considered to be Australia's greatest writer, despite the fact that none of his works had survived. I wrote the piece, but then decided to publish another story on erasure instead.

Still, the idea of fake biographies appealed to me, and I returned to it for another project for *if:book Australia*, where I wrote the life of Rand Washington, a racist science-fiction writer. Having written two pieces of fictional biography, I wondered if there might be scope for a book satirising various aspects of Australian literature. I had come to live here in my late 20s having read few Australian novels or short stories, and so I spent the last decade reading as much Australian fiction as I could lay my hands on, discovering a rich literary tradition. When writing *Their Brilliant Careers* I recalled some of the themes these books had explored, and in some cases the writers who had written them.

Stories of the bush dominated Australian literature for many years (and to an extent still do) and this dominance seemed ripe for satire, so I wrote a biography of Addison Tiller, the Chekhov of Coolabah, in reality an Englishman who had never left Sydney. Other biographies followed, including Matilda Young, a poet who wins the Nobel Prize in the 1940s, but whose achievement is ignored because she is a woman.

As I wrote, I found ways for the biographies to cross over and connect, until the book became an alternate history of Oz Lit from 1850 to 2016. To further complicate matters, I made one of the characters my (fictional) late wife, dedicating the book to her, and had myself appear in the introduction, acknowledgments and index as an unreliable narrator.

By the time I had finished writing *Their Brilliant Careers*, I had discovered, to my lasting surprise, that it had become a novel.

***Their Brilliant Careers* is published by Black Inc.**

Philip Salom Waiting

After re-reading *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf... I began wondering how I might use her subtle and flexible techniques of narration to write the everyday consciousness not of people with class, poise and privilege, but of people with no such advantages – people who live in a rooming house like the one I walked past every day.

And to allow a sympathetic representation of people who have very little and whose

potential for change is socially unlikely. What exactly do they wait for in life? I think many of us suffer from symptoms of repressed waiting: a kind of desire for change but without knowing whether change will bring good or bad outcomes. It can be a “nowhere” state, an anxious suspension in waiting. As long as my two characters, Big and Little, have each other they can be said to wait upon each other, in the word's other meaning, but living in a rooming house and in uncertain health, they have no likelihood of change. There seems little to wait for.

Until, it seems, Little may receive a significant inheritance. For the first time there is the possibility of a more independent future.

The question is: do Big and Little wait for the same future?

To write Big and Little and the wildly various other characters, including the middle-class Jasmin and Angus, I began a modest challenge – to write about 500 words every day – with one condition: I could not end the day's session until I had written something unexpected, or startling, or strange, or made some kind of breakthrough. As a poet I always hope any session of writing will generate a leap. Writing like this also draws into the language a kind of latent knowledge, things we have observed (then forgotten), as well as unexpected connections and associations emerging only through the writing process. In the case of *Waiting* this also created a more comic element of writing than I had realised. My narrator is a source of comic observation and, crucially, also carries a persistent empathy. My narrator never judges the characters.

***Waiting* is published by Puncher & Wattman.**

Josephine Wilson Extinctions

I began my novel when we were waiting for the adoption of our second child. Six months later, we were on our way to China to meet a pale, fragile child of almost three. We had not been home long when my father had a stroke, and two weeks later he died.

My mother's decline, though inevitable, had a gentler inclination. When our child started kindergarten I went back to my work. After school, we would visit my hollow-boned mother in her aged-care unit and watch *Dora the Explorer*. My mother smiled a great deal during this period, which was surprising, as she had not always been a happy woman.



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To the reader, a book can appear both effortless and intentional, but ideas are not conjured out of air. How could my book not be concerned with endings and beginnings?

In *Extinctions* I tried to make connections between personal and political registers, and the literal and the metaphoric. I wanted to mark the violence that has not disappeared today but went largely unremarked in the 1970s and '80s, a violence played out in the hierarchical relations between men and women, fathers and sons, and white and Indigenous Australia.

Frederick Lothian is a product of his time and place. Caroline, his daughter, has lost her birth mother and her adoptive mother, her father, her brother, her family, and her culture. She has grown up with the legacy of government policies formulated on the assumption of inevitable extinction.

The novel was like a complicated wooden toy without the instruction sheet: words, images, bridges, chairs, modernism, museums, tanks, auks, eggs, the *Bringing Them Home Report*, the lives of women and children. I toyed with these pieces for a very long time before I started to write. And even now, with the puzzle complete, I know that it is not finished.

***Extinctions* is published by UWAP.**

The Miles Franklin Literary Award will be presented at the State Library of NSW on September 7.