



## Novel idea with pictures engineers major award

STEPHEN ROMEI  
LITERARY EDITOR

“How could anyone have loved such a monster?” asks Frederick Lothian in Josephine Wilson’s novel *Extinctions*, which last night won the \$60,000 Miles Franklin Literary Award.

Frederick is no Hannibal Lecter. He’s 69, a retired engineer of some repute, a former university professor, a widower and father. He is educated and civilised but he is also responsible for terrible damage to the people in his life.

Wilson’s father was an engineer and so are her two brothers. She is the “artsy outsider”, an artist and writer. She drew on her own experiences for the novel, but it is not about her family.

“Frederick is not my father at all,” she said. Her father died eight years ago. “I think he would have been thrilled with this novel ... but perhaps not with the character of Frederick and the representation of engineers.”

Wilson prevailed to win over four other shortlisted writers who are a bit like herself: not household names but writing important novels, mainly picked up by small publishers: Emily Maguire (*An Isolated Incident*), Mark O’Flynn (*The Last Days of Ava Langdon*), Ryan O’Neill (*Their Brilliant Careers*) and Philip Salom

(*Waiting*). “I don’t know what to say,” Wilson said of her win. “I am

speechless. I am overwhelmed. I am thrilled. All the clichés are coming through, and it’s all true.”

Perth-based Wilson was born in England and moved to Australia

in 1966. *Extinctions* is her second novel, and it almost didn’t happen.

Her 1990 debut, *Cusp*, about a tense reunion of a mother and daughter, received little attention, a result that “was difficult for me”.

*Extinctions* had a problem from the start. Wilson wanted the novel to include photographs. She sent a synopsis to agents and it was rejected. The idea of pictures in a novel was laughed at, despite the genre-bending success of the great German writer WG Sebald.

She pushed on and the manuscript won the inaugural Dorothy Hewett Award, set up in memory of the West Australian poet. That brought \$10,000 in prize money

and a publishing deal with UWA Press.

“I believe we are in a period of transformation in literature,” Wilson said, “and I wanted in this novel to acknowledge objects and the roles they play in our lives, and in why we collect and keep.”

“What this moment means to me is that I was able to have an idea, a vision, a concept and have it supported, have it seen through. “Often in publishing that doesn’t happen.”

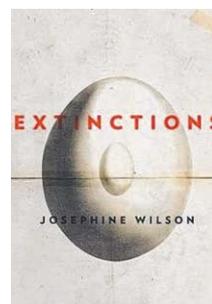
We first meet Frederick in January 2006. He has moved into

an upmarket retirement home following the brain cancer death of his wife, Martha. He holds on to her possessions, the objects she

liked to collect. He is a curmudgeon but as we learn more about his past, we realise he is coming to a pivotal if belated point of self-awareness, a change that holds hope for optimism.

The novel explores ageing, the intensity of family, memory and forgetting, sympathy and empathy, the complexity of life and the often-too-simple simplicity of death. It also touches on issues such as gender, sexuality, race and the Stolen Generations.

“I wanted to write an adult novel,” Wilson said, an ambition the judges seemed to endorse with the unusual comment that *Extinctions* was “unapologetically intelligent”.





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'We are in a period of transformation in literature': Miles Franklin Literary Award winner Josephine Wilson at the NSW State Library in Sydney yesterday, and her novel, below

JOHN FEDER