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**Literature** Miles Franklin Award for WA writer's second novel

# Wilson's coping tome takes prize

Jason Steger

Books, says Josephine Wilson, can be devastating. And that's why writers want their books to be read.

"They want someone to get them, you want to be got and got not just as a kind of 'oh, yeh, blah'. And that's the remarkable things when strangers read you and not just your husband."

Plenty more people are likely to read Wilson's books and particularly her second novel, *Extinctions*, after she was named winner of this year's Miles Franklin Literary Award on Thursday.

The prize, Australia's most significant literary award, is worth \$60,000 to the winner plus a sharp fillip in sales. The four other short-listed authors – Emily Maguire (*An Isolated Incident*), Mark O'Flynn (*The Last Days of Ava Langdon*), Ryan O'Neill (*Their Brilliant Careers*), Philip Salom (*Waiting*) – receive \$5000.

Wilson continues the recent pattern set by authors such as Graeme Simsion, Maxine Beneba Clarke and Jane Harper of writers winning unpublished manuscript awards and going on to greater success. She won the inaugural Dorothy Hewett award for *Extinctions* in 2015.

"It is quite remarkable. I had no forward vision of this. I was extremely thrilled to be long-listed for the Miles Franklin," Wilson said. "I was even more stunned to be shortlisted. Now I've run out of verbs; I'd need to consult the thesaurus to come up with the correct one."

*Extinctions* is the scrupulously structured story of Frederick Lothian, an engineer specialising in concrete – "the J.D. Salinger of concrete" – who has moved into a "retirement village" after the

death of his American wife. He has a fractious relationship with Caroline, their adopted, Indigenous daughter now living in London where she is curating an exhibition to be called "the drama of extinction", and a virtually non-existent one with his son Callum, who is in care after suffering a cataclysmic brain injury in a car crash. Then Jan, the old woman who lives next door, comes into his life and the tectonic plates of their lives start to shift.

The judges described *Extinctions* as "compassionate and unapologetically intelligent... a meditation on survival: on what people carry, on how they cope, and on why they might, after so much putting their head in the sand, come to a decision to engage, and even change."

Wilson said creative ideas were not ethereal elements to be conjured out of thin air. "This is not autobiographical, but (the ideas) have to be something that matters and for me there was a kind of puzzle, a desire to write about the beginnings and end of life. I was at the time caught up in family and my father's very steady and quite difficult decline and then my mother. At the same time, my husband and I were going through the adoption of our second child. I had these two things – life and death – together. They seemed incommensurate at the time, but these are things that

we all face." Wilson was also trying to make sense of feelings around adoption and a certain period in

Australia history. "And I really wanted to write about a family that is not just a biological family. To say that family and connections are beyond genetics and biology."

*Extinctions* is dotted with illustrations of buildings, bridges and extinct creatures and Wilson acknowledges the influence of German writer W.G. Sebald.

"I think we're in a period when books and writing and literature have to be open to extending themselves. Could a graphic novel win the Miles Franklin? I don't know, but this would be an interesting challenge for the idea of what is literary," she said. "For me the images were about just letting something resonate at a more metaphorical level." Wilson lives in Perth where she teaches part-time at Curtin University, having also taught at Murdoch University and the University of Western Australia. She is on the board of Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. Her theatre piece, *The Geography of Haunted Places*, was performed around the country, and her first novel, *Cusp*, was published in 2005. *Extinctions* was written as part of her PhD, which she took because she wanted a permanent academic job. "But I haven't been able to because the tertiary sector is shrinking." Perhaps she won't need one now.



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