

THE CONVERSATION

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Heart-warming, biting, tragic, funny: the Miles Franklin shortlist will move you

September 6, 2017 2.03pm BST

Each of the five shortlisted authors for Australia's prestigious literary prize is a first-time nominee. Shutterstock

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The 2017 Miles Franklin Award winner will be announced tonight, but I'm not taking bets on who it's likely to be. Each shortlisted novel is by a **first-time nominee**. Each is of satisfyingly high literary quality and very different in voice, logic, focus and story.

But they do have one feature in common: each includes as a key character an author, or authors. I'm not sure I have ever read a shortlist where the protagonists of each volume shared an occupation. Of course all five include heartbreak, loss and death — that is, after all, *de rigueur* for literary fiction — but the focus on the lives and works of writers, and on narratives about narrative, presents as though the Australian literary community as one turned to look inward, and then wrote down what it saw.

We have a worn out, avant garde novelist (*Last Days of Ava Langdon* by Mark O'Flynn); an ambulance-chasing journalist (*An Isolated Incident* by Emily Maguire); “famous Australian writers” (*Their Brilliant Careers* by Ryan O'Neill); and academics in linguistics (*Waiting* by Philip Salom) and engineering (*Extinctions* by Josephine Wilson).

Art imitates life

I started with *Last Days of Ava Langdon*, by poet and novelist Mark O'Flynn. This book, which channels the Australian-New Zealand writer *Eve Langley*, opens with the rhythm and pulse of a prose poem:

Sound of the sea slapping at the green and greasy legs of pier. The crashing of dishes. A cartoon whale.

This, on the very first page, sets the tone for the rest of the novel, one that vividly renders the glorious Blue Mountains environment (and its small towns with their country values), and the portrait of a

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writer who might have been, should have been, no longer is.

O'Flynn presents his Langley/Langdon as immensely sympathetic, and stunningly irritating. "All her life", says the narrator, "has been the pursuit of the perfect line".

While any writer must surely doff the cap to that pursuit, Ava's single-mindedness has been more destructive than productive. She valiantly channels Oscar Wilde, refuses to acknowledge that she is ancient and frail, ignores the squalor of her home, and flickers between hope and hopelessness about her writing. She is a damaged person, a dada artist. She has lost her family and friends and she dies alone.

Still, Ava's imagination (to say nothing of her splendid dress sense) brings a degree of sentience to the world, casting it in

a luminous light. O'Flynn's novel brings to bear a cold but tender gaze on "the last days" of someone who, but for fortune, could have been an extraordinary Australian artist.

Misfits in an unforgiving world

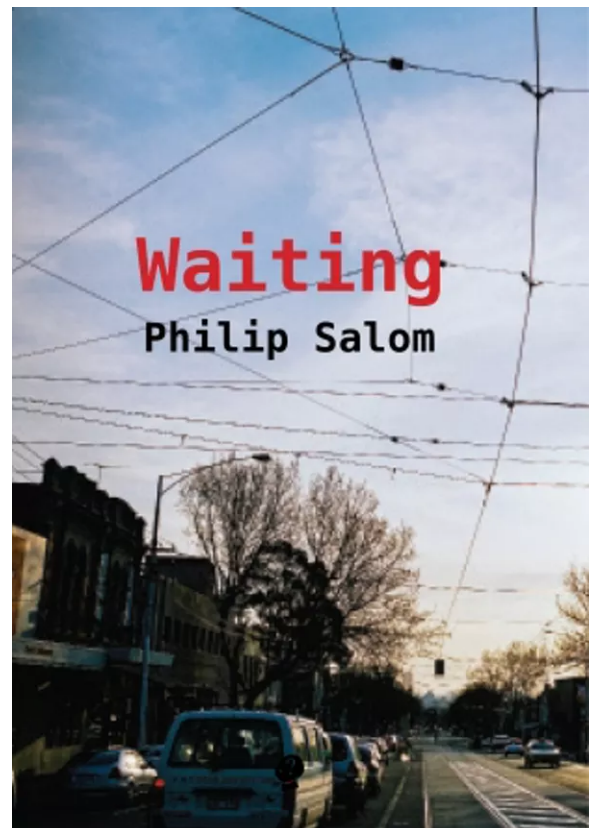
Philip Salom, another poet, gives us *Waiting*. It relies on the skill of poetic diction and the narrative traction of strong characters, the "looking awry" that so often accompanies mental illness, and the urgency to connect, to find a safe haven in an unforgiving world.

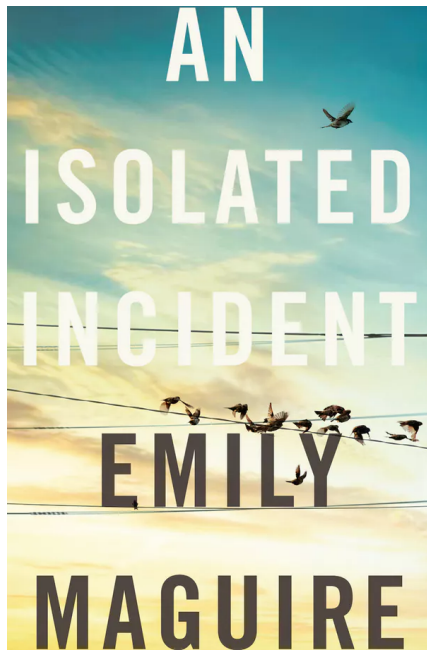
He juxtaposes together two pairs of difficult people to propel the narrative. The first two are Big (a cross-dressing, over-performing "crazy professor") and his partner Little (quiet, crushed Agnes, the troubled lamb of god). They have effectively fallen out of history and are, Agnes reflects, "two characters in a novel who have no further story".

The second pair, by contrast, are the inheritors of a further story: designer/landscaper Angus (coincidentally Agnes' cousin) and the linguist Jasmin. They are creeping by fits and starts toward a relationship, but unlike Big and Little, who cling together for the most part in real intimacy, Jasmin and Angus struggle to connect, given their tendency to compete with each other, and their misunderstandings of each other's values and professions. For Angus, the physical shaping of the material world is what matters. For Jasmin, it is the socio-political positioning of work that matters.

The novel is set against the increasingly threatening qualities of bushfire in the Australian environment, and the increasingly constrained options for those who do not or cannot fit into middle class conventions. The characters' stories play out, to an end that promises consolation, at least.

Not so isolated





With Emily Maguire's *An Isolated Incident*, we leave the poets and misfits and return to the "real" world: small-town New South Wales, and the struggle to make a living, maintain an identity, and retain hope for the future.

Chris Rogers, a barmaid and some-time prostitute, is faced with the loss of her beloved younger sister Bella, whose body is found on the side of the road, raped and murdered. May Norman, an ambitious journalist, attaches herself to Chris to report on the story and the unfolding investigation. So far, so crime thriller.

But actually, this is more an analysis of mourning, woven through with a biting critique of the social and legal context in which, in Australia, one woman is murdered each week, on average, by someone close to her. At one point May

reflects on yet another appalling story of such violence, and observes:

This had nothing to do with what had happened to Bella and what happened to Bella had nothing to do with Tegan Miller and none of it had to do with the rich Sydney housewife left out to rot in the street which had nothing to do with the Nigerian girls stolen as sex slaves...

The unwavering attention paid to violence against women and to the commercial exploitation of suffering renders the title bitterly ironic: all these "isolated incidents" add up to a deeply felt and troubling novel.

Extinctions of all kinds

Josephine Wilson's *Extinctions* is the winner of Dorothy Hewett Unpublished Manuscript prize, so has already made a significant mark on the literary landscape. It offers a tragic portrait of the various ways in which extinction looms — environmental, personal, cultural.

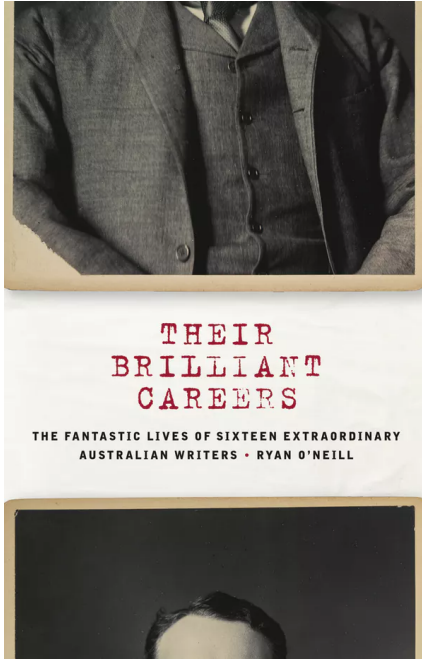
We see the sorrows, indignities and regrets of old age, as viewed through the eyes of retired theoretical engineer Fred Lothian, who fills his home with designer furniture rather than with his family.

We see the heartbreak of a wasted life, in his brilliant son, Callum, who was left with acquired brain injury following a car accident. And we see the struggle for identity in his adopted daughter, Caroline, who researches species extinction and is disconnected from her own Indigenous heritage. Together, these stories present an overwhelming narrative of loss, failure and distress.

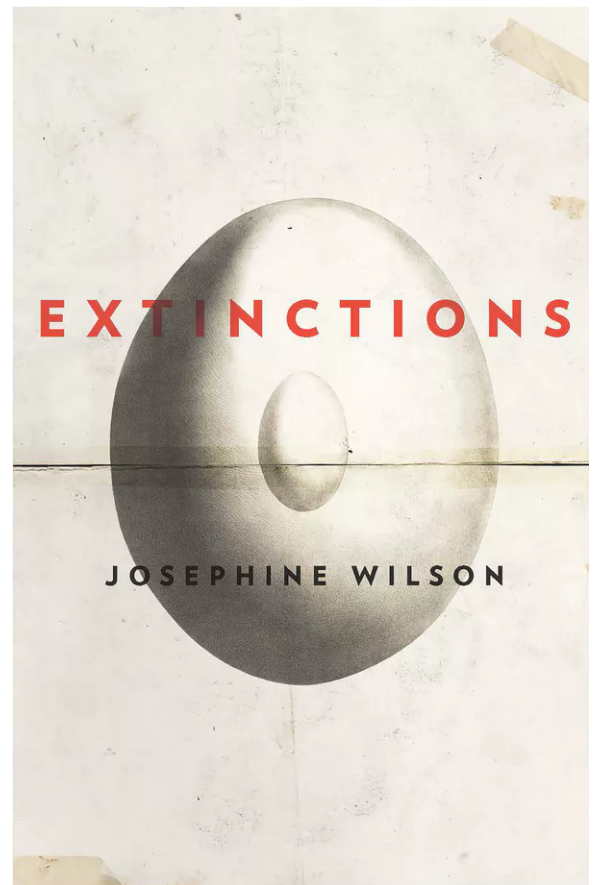
But there is the possibility of an alternative in the form of Fred's neighbour Jan. Though like Fred and his family, she has suffered great loss, she brings a wonderful energy and resilience, and a refusal to resign herself to extinction. Instead, she presses Fred to start over, to find a more productive way to be.

Literary satire

Finally, we come to Ryan O’Neill’s *Their Brilliant Careers: The Fantastic Lives of Sixteen Extraordinary Australian Writers*, one of the funniest novels I’ve read in a long time. He sails close to the wind of defamation (were the original authors still alive), unmercifully lampooning the models for his “extraordinary Australian writers”.



Like a supremely confident stand-up comic, he pushes the joke from initial humour through infuriating repetition to helpless laughter. And along the way, he shows impressive knowledge of Australian literary culture, so erudite readers can play the game of “spot the reference”. We see the sexism that runs through literary culture. We revisit the poetry wars— “a knife fight in a phone booth” — in the character of Arthur rhutrA, an author of whom it was said that: “the only constraint he couldn’t overcome was his lack of talent”.



We bump into parallel-universe versions of Ern Malley, Australia’s most infamous literary hoax, and radio characters Dad and Dave. We meet the litigious Stratford, self-proclaimed original author of works plagiarised and made famous by Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Joyce.

We are confronted by the rightwing racist Edward Gayle (writer for the journal Quarter) and the communist Francis McVeigh, whose early memory of reading Marx’s Manifesto “terrified me so much I had nightmares for the next six months”. Literary giant after literary giant, publisher after publisher, is kneecapped by these excoriating and hilarious accounts of the players, their work, and the impossibly interwoven lives they lead.

Compassionate voices

There is a surprising degree of compassion in the narrative voice that relates each of these novels, even when they are also characterised by sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued commentary. The characters are damaged — as are most human beings — but (with the exception of some of O’Neill’s writers) they are rarely people of ill will.

The narrators, in each case, maintain the distance required of an objective observer, yet cannot help but record small acts of humanity, the struggle to manage, to be recognised and to recognise others. This makes them, as a group, the most heart-warming selection of shortlisted novels that I have read for some time.