Touching, ferocious and poetic, the Miles Franklin shortlist is worthy of your attention

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The search for a quintessentially Australian novel has turned up a formidable shortlist. Reuters/David Gray

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The literary calendar is marked by big public events: writers festivals, book fairs, and the announcements first of shortlists and then of winners of major literary awards. For Australian writers and readers, the Miles Franklin is a lodestone, our Big Award – the one that celebrates not just writing, not just fiction, but particularly and peculiarly Australian writing.

Since 2013 that award has been accompanied by the second literary award to be named for Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin: the Stella Prize, established to recognise women’s contribution to Australian literature.

This year, it seems to me, the Miles Franklin shortlist entirely honours the founder of the award, not only because four of the five novelists are women, but also because each of the novels, in their own idiosyncratic and nuanced ways, reflects and represents Australian life, presenting as that “indigenous literature” (Franklin’s term) that prevents people from being “alien in their own soil”.

The novels do not, though, offer a comfortable or consoling rendition of Australian life: if anything, they turn their lenses on alienation, and on the weight of the ordinary occasions of everyday life, as well as the larger scale complexities of, say, the socio-political landscape, that bear down on individuals.

This makes them sound a bit “worthy” and “serious”: novels that take as their task the imperative to instruct readers about The Human Condition. But in fact each is remarkably readable; each writer has a wonderful sense of story and its elements: character, pacing, setting and yes, even plot. Any would be a worthy recipient of this prestigious award, to be announced Friday night.

Let me tiptoe through them in alphabetical order.
Hope Farm by Peggy Frew

Peggy Frew's *Hope Farm* is set in 1985 Gippsland. It is narrated by Silver, daughter of Ishtar who – pregnant as a teenager – fled the petit bourgeois morality of 1970s Queensland that would have forcibly removed her baby from her, for the uncertain support of a local ashram. The story unfolds on the ironically misnamed Hope Farm, a communal property occupied mainly by feckless incompetents. Ishtar and Silver may be misfits, but they are neither feckless nor incompetent; and their arrival, along with that of Ishtar’s new man Miller, initiates an unravelling of that decaying place, that compromised community.

There are the expected conflicts – children vs adults; bullies vs bullied; male vs female; parent vs child – but they are delivered with a clarity and tenderness that takes readers beyond the surface impression of, say, snotty child, or slovenly adult, to the fullness, the complexity, of any individual, or group of individuals. I wouldn’t dream of saying “redemption” in relation to this novel – and indeed this is not a redemptive story in the classical sense – but it does offer a stage on which Silver, and her equally misplaced friend Ian, and her shining, glorious, damaged mother Ishtar, can begin to feel their way beyond mere survival, and toward a more endurable life.

Leap by Myfanwy Jones

With *Leap* Myfanwy Jones has crafted a lyrical account of mourning, and the long, lonely, difficult work of building sufficient scar tissue over the wounds of bereavement to allow mourners the possibility of moving on. Much of this work is couched in terms of physical being: the parkour through which Joe, muted by the death of his girlfriend Jen, is feeling his way back into the world; or the stillness and compulsive observation, that Jen’s mother, Elsie uses as her connection to memories of her daughter, to the idea of being alive.

Cats are important metaphors in this novel: the cat leap that Joe is learning to perform; the tigers that have captured Elsie’s imagination; the “catlike containment” of the mysterious nurse who moves into the spare room in Joe’s share house; Jen’s intention to have tiger stripes tattooed on her leg. Cats as a way of thinking about being: it worked for me. The novel is moving; the language poetic; the morphology of grief very believable.
Black Rock White City by AS Patric

With Black Rock White City we are again in the company of grief: loss, bereavement, trauma. Of the central characters, AS Patric’s narrator says, “Neither of them is sure about the present but this is some sort of afterlife”. Jovan and Suzana, refugees from the war in Sarajevo, have left their lives behind, along with the bodies of their little children: “Their names were Dejan and Ana. And there’s nothing more that can be said about the dead that doesn’t make them small, lost and forgotten”.

They are living now in the sort of afterlife you find in mythology: grey, and sad, and haunted by the shades of all they have lost. Even Jovan’s name has been lost in this new country (“Jo ... Ja ... Joh-von. Ja-Va. Ah fuck it, we’ll call you Joe”). But of course we never entirely lose, or escape, our past. The idea of war has come with them; Dr Graffito, who defaces the walls of the hospital with violent phrases, is a metaphor as well as an actuality of violence and death. But Patric does not leave Suzana and Jovan there; slowly, tenderly, they begin to emerge into this new country and all its possibilities.

Salt Creek by Lucy Treloar

Lucy Treloar’s Salt Creek treads the sort of ground broken a few years ago by Kate Grenville and her Secret River. Set in the Coorong in South Australia, peopled by the Finches – a large and ever-expanding family whose father cannot find the balance between ideal and action – it’s narrated by Hester, the eldest daughter and the one who is required to provide the through line for the family: including cooking and cleaning and supporting her depressed mother and caring for the little children.

What I found compelling was not the story of Hester’s endurance, but rather the way Treloar depicts the relationship between the local people and the Finches: the stupidity and carelessness, the casual brutality, with which the settlers treat the Indigenous owners of land to which they have laid claim; and the way some of the Finch children begin to connect, however inadequately, with some of the local people. One of the rare sunny spots in the novel is provided by Tully, a local youth, who is adored both by Addie, Hester’s lighthearted sister, and Fred,
her artist brother. And yes, it ends in tears. Indeed, this particular colonial adventure generally ends in betrayal, brokenness and disappointment; but to say this so bluntly is to ignore the beauty of the language, the lightness with which the historical context is carried by the story, and the vivid presence of the physical environment, which is as fully realised as are the central characters.

The Natural Way of Things by Charlotte Wood

Charlotte Wood’s *The Natural Way of Things*, in equal parts captivated and appalled me. Built out of the actuality of the Hay Institution for Girls, an institution established for the punitive constraint of adolescent “offenders”, this novel operates as a dystopic fable of the control of women and women’s sexuality. The ten young women who suffer “the natural way of things” have all been the subjects of very public sexual scandals. They have been kidnapped and enslaved and brutalised by the agents of a vaguely identified corporation, Harding International.

Their heads shaved, their clothes exchanged for heavy boots and rough dresses, and their eyes and arms under constraints, the women find themselves “abducted right into the middle of the nineteen fucking fifties”. The necessarily “bald and frightened girls” and their dull abusive captors gradually adapt to this bizarre life, in a Waiting for Godot situation where day after day Harding International fails to arrive. But how does anyone adapt to the impossible: to authorised misogyny, to absent rights? They don’t, of course; they simply find ways to accommodate themselves to it.

In those accommodations we see the crippling of selves; the ambiguous comfort of friendship; the giving over of personal values for tiny physical ease. While there are fleeting gestures toward a sense of sisterhood, only two characters really come out of it with any honour: Yolanda, betrayed by her beloved brother, named “lunatic”, but able to hunt and kill, and thus to keep everyone alive, for a time; and Verla, who is able to use her brain, and thus to some extent keep them comparatively functional. It is gruelling to read, shattering. It is important.

Novels build in their readers a capacity for empathy, we are told. These five novels do precisely that, and besides are lovely to read – each writer has a feeling for sentences and phrases, and has built in such narrative traction that I read them at a gulp, emerging only at the end, blinking, before returning to the everyday. These novels are scored through by sensitivity, clarity, and a ruthless generosity of voice, and feel their way into character, into ethical complexities, and into the small and large ways our society creaks on.

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