



Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009  
Shortlist

**Judges' Formal Comments**

***Breath*, Tim Winton  
(Penguin)**

When paramedic Bruce Pike attends the death of a seventeen year old boy he alone can read the signs: a bedroom reeking of pot, ligature marks on the boy's neck, a pattern of older bruises around them. In this compelling and masterly novel about rites of passage, Pike goes on to recall his own adolescence in an ordinary mill town on the West Australian coast in the 1960s. Dedicated young surfers, Pikelet and his mate Loonie are taken in hand during their final year of school by Sando, an older American surfer who has ridden the break at Oahu, and his partner Eva, a ski jump champion from Utah. Beside Sando and Eva, Pikelet's parents seem bland, their drab suburban lives pointless and uninspiring. Compared to Sando, his father is scarcely a man. At twenty five, Eva was 'a woman not in the least ordinary'; at seventeen, Pikelet is 'jailbait'. Taken out of school, he is inducted into a range of extreme experiences: with Sando, he graduates from riding the huge storm waves at the Point to the terrifying bombora known as Old Smoky; with Eva he learns another kind of limit experience.

*Breath* is a searing document about masculinity, about risk, and about young people's desire to push the limits. Winton is at the height of his powers as a novelist, and this is his greatest love letter yet to the sea, to the coast of West Australia, and a compelling testimony to the role of surfing in Australian culture. Written in Winton's own distinctive voice, we can sense that it is also a homage to some of his favourite writers: Salinger, Faulkner, Melville and Hemingway. But as we are drawn in by the elemental currents of its narrative and the compelling, wave-like force of events, *Breath* raises disturbing questions about desire and 'the damage done'. What lines are crossed during rite's passage? What ethical constraints affect relations between different generations of men and women? Throughout the novel we hear the scream of wind and storm waves and the distant, siren call of the bombora – surf breaking far out at sea. After 'so much damage, too much shame', can there be a going back?

16 April 2009  
Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009 Judging Panel  
Professor Robert Dixon  
Morag Fraser AM  
Lesley McKay  
Regina Sutton  
Murray Waldren