



Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009 Shortlist

Judges' Formal Comments

***Ice*, Louis Nowra (Allen & Unwin)**

Ice is a story within a story, set in two time frames: the nineteenth century and the twenty-first century. It explores the link between obsessive love and irreconcilable loss. The wider canvas is a vision of Australia in the late nineteenth century as a melting pot of people and ideas.

The main story begins in the late 1880's with one of Nowra's great descriptive scenes – a battered ship sails into Sydney Harbour towing an iceberg from Antarctica. The shores teem with people who have come to gaze on the dazzling spectacle and the quays are crowded with traders with their horses and carts ready to buy the precious frozen water. One of the leaders of this extraordinary expedition is Malcolm McEacharn, a Scotsman, and it his story that is the core of this engrossing novel. As a young man he was rescued from a bleak and lonely existence by marrying the beautiful Ann. Working for her father in Yorkshire, he learnt about engineering and scientific theories; his fulfillment is complete but short lived – his wife's sudden death plunges him into inconsolable grief.

It is the era of emerging technologies and the growth of capitalism and Malcolm forsakes England and arrives in Australia as the colony is expanding. His intelligence and ambition deliver him enormous wealth, status and political power and a suitable, but loveless marriage. Malcolm remains haunted by the idea of Ann. She appears in his dreams and is more real to him than anything in his present life. Driven by grief and an obsession to reclaim her, he builds a secret mausoleum beneath his Melbourne mansion. His world unravels as he descends into madness.

In a parallel story set in Sydney in the twenty-first century, Beatrice, a young writer, lies in a coma after a violent attack. She had been researching a book on Malcolm McEacharn; Rowen, her distraught husband, who has continued her research, sits by her bedside telling the story of the Scotsman's life, willing her to wake up. Here Nowra ingeniously uses a play on the word 'ice' to link the two tragedies.

This is perhaps Nowra's best fiction yet, his relish for language and rich imagery making it a superb and entertaining book.

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