



Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009
Shortlist

Judges' Formal Comments

***The Slap*, Christos Tsiolkas
(Allen & Unwin)**

At a suburban barbecue, a man slaps a fractious child. The child is not his, and the rippling repercussions of his act lead the people at the gathering to interrogate their values, lifestyles, relationships, aspirations and desires. Told from the points of view of eight people, *The Slap* is a continuity of consequence, a pungent yet poignant novel about thwarted aspiration and conflicting perspectives – love and sex, marriage and parenting, growing up and growing old are all explored with forensic intensity, as are the disconnects between reality and fantasy, between belief and posture.

Alliances, affairs and associations face trials by fire, as do friendships and kinships. Tsiolkas has a keen ear for the conversation of women, for the demotic speech of men and women, for the modes or the surrogates we use to engage or evade one another – gossip, lawyers, verbal abuse, stereotype, self-righteousness.

With a deceptive skill that draws equally from literary antecedents and popular culture, Tsiolkas evokes as he eviscerates contemporary, middle-class life. He has an unblinking eye and a storyteller's rhythm, and his tale comes gift-wrapped in edgy anger and curious affection. *The Slap* also demonstrates Tsiolkas' intimacy with the urban texture of a particular place – in this case Melbourne, with its complex codes of class and ethnicity, subtly signalled in place names, habits, suburbs, meeting haunts. It catches the hectic tone of contemporary anxiety about the care of children and their vulnerability (and agency) and the responsibility owned, or disowned by parents. But in Tsiolkas' hands, the particulars of time, place and zeitgeist have a general resonance.

In his suburban and emotional demography, there are echoes of John Updike and Raymond Carver, if with a distinctly Greco-Aussie accent. *The Slap* is a contemporary page-turner that plays with perspective and prejudices, and in so doing it holds up a particular mirror to our lives that both confronts and disconcerts our gaze.

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