

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?

***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.

***The Pages*, Murray Bail
(Text Publishing Australia)**

Two Sydney women, friends, but oddly matched, set out on an adventure. Erica, who is self contained, academic and undemonstrative, has been commissioned to appraise the philosophical leavings of an Australian autodidact and thinker, Wesley Antill, whose papers are preserved in the woolshed of the family sheep station in western New South Wales. Sophie is opulent, compulsively verbal (a psychologist) and recovering from an affair that didn't go her way. Both women are of an age to be examining their lives.

Detached from their urban routines, the two women find their diffident but obliging hosts, sister and brother, Lindsey and Roger Antill, disconcerting, and rural life, with its integrity, ritual hospitality and latent threat, unsettling. New alliances form, different affinities develop. The friendship frays.

No Murray Bail novel follows a straight narrative track. Each sentence, each paragraph is layered, every observation pointed ('Presbyterian church there converted into a carpet emporium'). The novel's structure is a pattern of interleaved reflection, story, and speculation about love and being, grief and understanding, sometimes embedded in the narrative, at other times given in a voice that has the timbre of the authorial, a sceptical voice that has done some time with Australian philosophy, and with its British and European antecedents.

Wesley Antill's own philosophy, which is also the story of his life, is at the novel's core, and Erica's task, the reader's task, is not so much to judge what it is worth, but to follow it as it sounds, like an antiphon, through the narrative, recalling the journey of Antill's questing life, from his fractured childhood, through country and city experience, affairs and friendships, epiphanies, intersections, through Australia and Europe, the great and not-so-great philosophical metropolises, to his death, prematurely white-haired and aware of what he has lost, what he has missed, what he has failed to value, or understand, until too late.

If the novel raises questions, and it does, it also plays with paradox, and wonders at human intellectual endurance: 'The puzzle is whether to continue with the *puzzle*. The puzzle? What are we doing here?' The answers, and the occasional tentative resolutions, when they came, are all the more poignant for being, perhaps, provisional.

***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.

***Wanting*, Richard Flanagan
(Knopf, Random House Australia)**

For Richard Flanagan the past is full-bodied, pulsing with irreconcilable facts, desires and intentions – banal, malign, meretricious, occasionally good. Flanagan paves his novel with them. *Wanting* is not a history. Rather it is, as its writer claims, a meditation on the consequences of human beings' repressing, denying, failing to understand or subverting the impulses of their hearts.

In Van Dieman's Land, the protector of Aborigines, Charles Augustus Robinson is cleft by contrary instincts. He loves the people he is charged with protecting, with 'bringing in', yet they are dying around him, victims of contact with the colonising society that is supposed to elevate them. When he dances naked with 'his' people, he is prey to passions he does not understand and exhilarated in ways that both pleasure and alarm him.

The governor of Van Diemen's Land and his ambitious wife turn the colony into a scientific experiment. Sir John and Lady Franklin hold improving soirees, institute lectures, and displease their staff and colonial society by not licensing a benign decadence as compensation for dutiful exile at the other end of the earth. The childless Lady Jane adopts a beautiful native child, Mathinna, ostensibly to educate her in white ways. But black ways prove intractable, and the child grows into a fascinating, tragic hybrid, at once a reproach and a temptation.

Flanagan crisscrosses events in the colony with contemporary London life, playing free with time and place. His London is the London of Charles Dickens, of extravagant exploration, of science, of ambition, of misery. Dickens, stalled in a marriage that has blocked love, walks the streets at night in a fever: 'Looking, thinking, improvising scenes, rehearsing monologues and dialogues and inventing plots.'

When he meets Lady Jane, now old, and obsessively concerned for the reputation of the husband she has never loved, Dickens is persuaded to use his fabled rhetorical sway to absolve Sir John from rumours that his latest experiment, an exploratory voyage to find the Northwest Passage, has ended in cannibalism. And Dickens's own 'civilized' life? Flanagan explores its contradictions and impactions as he details the great writer's fateful meeting with the young actress, Ellen Ternan. And like the great moral ringmaster himself, Flanagan marshals his diverse characters, ideas, and locales – physical and metaphorical – with gusto and compassion.

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