

2020 Patrick White Literary Award awarded to Gregory Day

29 November 2020

Continuing a legacy of more than 46 years, Perpetual today announced Victorian-based writer Gregory Day as the winner of the 2020 Patrick White Literary Award.

The award recognises Gregory Day's achievements as a novelist, poet, short story and nature writer. Day's work has attracted other honours, including the Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize, the Australian Literary Studies Gold Medal and shortlistings for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, the NSW Premier's Prize and the Miles Franklin Literary Award.

Mr Day said: "To be the recipient of the Patrick White Award is a great honour, especially because White's work has been so formative for me as a novelist. When most of Australia was hellbent on pretending there was no such thing as an inner life, let alone a narrative art that could attest to it, Patrick White proved otherwise. To be recognised for my body of work so far, rather than for a single book, feels perfectly in keeping with my approach to the art of writing, which has always been both ecological and of the long view. For this generous acknowledgment of the fruits of that approach, I am deeply grateful".

Mr Day will receive \$15,000 in recognition of his outstanding contribution to Australian literature.

The Patrick White Literary Award was established by Nobel Prize winning author Patrick White to advance Australian literature 'by encouraging the writing of novels, short stories, poetry and plays for publication or performance'. For the past 46 years it has been awarded to an author who has made an ongoing contribution to Australian literature, but may not have received adequate recognition.

The Award is managed by Perpetual as trustee, and many authors of different status and experience may qualify for consideration.

Perpetual Managing Partner of Community & Social Investment, Caitriona Fay said: "More than 46 years ago Patrick White used the proceeds from his 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature to establish this Award to support Australian authors. Through his philanthropic act, White created a lasting legacy that continues to benefit the literary community today. Today, we recognise and celebrate the incredible body of work that Mr Day has created and congratulate him on his achievement".

Gregory Day was officially honoured for his contribution to Australian literature on Sunday, 29 November 2020. The prize was awarded by Nobel Prize Laureate, Professor JM Coetzee via a live online presentation hosted by the Readings Bookshop.

The 2020 judging panel included Dr Felicity Plunkett (Chair), Dr Julieanne Lamond and Ms Michelle de Kretser.

– Ends –

Media contacts

Perpetual enquiries:

Emma Brien
Perpetual Limited
02 9229 3252 | 0435 569 331
emma.brien@perpetual.com.au

Note to editors

About the Patrick White Literary Award

The Patrick White Award was established by the author with the proceeds of his 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature and is managed by Perpetual as trustee of the philanthropic trust behind it. The Award is given annually to an author who has 'already made a contribution to Australian Literature' but who may not have 'received due recognition for that contribution'. The Award is intended to encourage and support ongoing creativity in its recipients.

The broad terms of the Award mean that authors of different status and experience may qualify for consideration. Many winners have been older writers but some have been younger, and all have been encouraged to continue writing. Poets, novelists, playwrights and short story writers have been among the now 47 recipients who have so far benefited from Patrick White's generosity and vision. Past winners include Christina Stead, Fay Zwicky, Elizabeth Harrower, Tony Birch and Samuel Wagan Watson.

The judging committee's current members are Dr Felicity Plunkett (Chair), Dr Julieanne Lamond and Ms Michelle de Kretser.

About Gregory Day and his work: The Judging Committee's citation

Gregory Day is a writer and musician from south-western Victoria. His writing encompasses novels, short stories, poetry and nature writing. He is also a respected literary critic, whose reviews feature in a range of publications.

Day's first novel, *The Patron Saint of Eels* (2005), won the Australian Literary Society's Gold Medal and was shortlisted for a Commonwealth First Book Prize. It is precise in its observation of landscape and character, focusing on interactions between people and their environment. With the introduction of an eighteenth-century Italian monk into the present-day narrative, it widens to take in a magic realist dimension. Liam Davison describes it as 'an enchanting regional fable that transcends its own regionalism to pose serious questions not only about environmental responsibility but also about our spiritual connection with the world in which we live.'

The Patron Saint of Eels was followed by *Ron McCoy's Sea of Diamonds* (2007), which was shortlisted for the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Michael Williams writes that it is 'the tone of regretful meditation on lost traditions' that best defines this book. Day's attentiveness to environmental destruction is seen once more in *The Grand Hotel* (2010). This sombre theme coexists with a playful rambunctiousness, while meticulously evoked local voices create choral-like passages conducted with affection.

Day's first three novels form the Mangowak trilogy, set in and around the coastal town of Mangowak (as Airey's Inlet was known pre-colonisation). Taken together, the three novels offer vivid insights – both comic and elegiac – into the interaction between regional communities and broader cultural and economic forces.

Day's fourth novel, *Archipelago of Souls* (2015), was shortlisted for the Tasmania Book Prize in the Tasmanian Premier's Literary Awards. It is a dual narrative that alternates between an Australian soldier's disillusioning experiences on Crete during the Second World War, and his attempt to remake his life on King Island in the years that follow. 'A richly layered and skilfully controlled novel' (Peter Pierce), it plays with both metafiction and the historical novel. It considers the collision between the individual and history in the context of intensely physical experiences of place and landscape. Day explores trauma, violence, the long shadow of the past and the power of the written word in this faceted novel. His protagonist muses that 'We have to work at being human'; Michael McGirr writes that *Archipelago of Souls* 'models one way of doing that very work'.

A Sand Archive (2018), Day's fifth novel, was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. Day blurs fact and fiction in this powerfully imagined work. Its unnamed narrator details the life and career of F B Herschell, an engineer charged with stabilising the sand dunes along Victoria's Great Ocean Road, whose inventive solutions to this problem have unforeseen environmental consequences. When Herschell travels to France to study dunes there, the narrative expands to consider two key moments in modern French history. Gillian Dooley writes that 'poetry glimmers' in this book, which she describes as 'a novel of ideas and passions'. The anonymous *Saturday Paper* reviewer notes that the novel is 'an elegiac meditation on worlds changed by natural processes and human forces' and that it 'provides a model for the kind of rigorous and poetic attentiveness that might best honour the profundities of our landscapes and the lives we experience alongside them'.

In other honours, Day's short story 'The Neighbour's Beans' won *Australian Book Review's* Elizabeth Jolley Prize (2011) and his essay 'Summer on the Painkalac' was shortlisted in the Nature Conservancy Nature Writing Prize (2019). This essay follows the curve of the river Day swims with a friend, 'two banjo frogs twanging along in old and familiar water', collecting glimpses of the land and traces of the river's history. Memory flows strongly through Day's account, with questions raised by colonisation, technology and environmental change running under the surface like currents. A range of Day's essays published in *Meanjin*, *Island* and *The Griffith Review* meditate on place, nature and writing.

Melaleuca Perfumeries (2000), is a limited-edition book of Day's poems, short fictions and acrostics. They foreshadow and elucidate characters and atmospheres later explored in the *Mangowak* trilogy. Day has published poems in collaboration with visual artist Jiri Tibor Novak, and individual poems have been published in journals and newspapers. Day's poetry is characterised by musicality, offering intricate sonic patterning along with attunement to the grain and mobility of voice. A further achievement is the balance Day strikes between imagery and narrative as he continues to evoke place and landscape. Forms are melded, with catalogue, story and song-like stanzas latticed through the work.

Day's contribution to Australian literature includes establishing the Merrijig Word & Sound Co with his partner, artist and book designer Sian Marlow. Merrijig produces limited-edition books (poetry and prose), as well as music recordings that include albums related to Day's writing; *The Flash Road*, for instance, has rhizomatic connections to the *Mangowak* novels as well as to *The Sand Archive*. Merrijig also published Day's novella *Fish Ladder*, which weaves an exploration of the ethics of writing about real lives around songs from *The Boatman's Call* by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds.

Day's strong interest in ecology is vital and timely. He has made it his project, across the body of his work, to write the south-west Victorian coast and its surrounds into literature. He achieves this by paying attention: to plants and creatures, to people and stories, to weather and landscape and, most importantly, to Indigenous knowledge and practices. Day is a respectful and perceptive observer, and his writing is a valuable record of a readily overlooked corner of Australia. Helen Elliot, commenting on Day's work, notes that 'in a globalised world, regional writing becomes more precious, more jewelled'.

It would be easy for a writer so attentive to his immediate environment and so adept at conjuring it to veer into parochialism. That is far from Day's case. He writes fluently of other places and customs – Italy, Greece, France – creating imaginative worlds that are grounded in the local but not restricted by it.

Day is alert to movement across time as well as across space. The past is never far from the present in his work. It manifests as a reckoning with colonial violence and an honouring of Indigenous experience; as an interest in local stories and histories; and as an engagement with twentieth-century turning points (World War 2, May 1968). He is currently working on a novel about connections between Australian and US modernism.

Day's work is marked by both lyricism and intelligence. His fiction is realist in its depiction of character and precise natural detail but can slip the bounds of realism without strain. These features, taken together with Day's thematic concerns, make his fiction truly distinctive – there is no one else writing like him in Australia. His novels, poems and essays are like parts in music: independent, yet coming together to form a grand whole.

About Perpetual Philanthropic Services

Perpetual is one of Australia's largest managers of philanthropic funds, with \$2.9 billion in funds under advice for charitable trusts and endowment funds (as at 30 June 2020). Perpetual is trustee for many charitable trusts and endowments and provides individuals and families with advice on establishing charitable foundations and structured giving programs. Perpetual also assists charities and not-for-profit organisations with investment advice and management.

Perpetual's Philanthropic Services are provided by Perpetual Trustee Company Limited (PTCo), ABN 42 000 001 007, AFSL 236643. This media release has been prepared by PTCo and contains information contributed by third parties. It contains general information only and is not intended to provide you with advice or take into account your personal objectives, financial situation or needs. You should consider whether the information is suitable for your circumstances and we recommend that you seek professional advice. The information is believed to be accurate at the time of compilation and is provided by PTCo in good faith. To the extent permitted by law, no liability is accepted by PTCo for any loss or damage as a result of any reliance on this information. PTCo does not warrant the accuracy or completeness of any information included in this document which was contributed by a third party.