

2021 Patrick White Literary Award awarded to Adam Aitken

6 December 2021

Continuing a legacy of more than 47 years, Perpetual has today announced Sydney-based writer Dr Adam Aitken as the winner of the 2021 Patrick White Literary Award.

The award recognises Dr Aitken's achievements as a poet and non-fiction writer. Aitken's work has attracted other honours, including shortlistings for the Kenneth Slessor Award and the Prime Minister's Literature Prize, and a longlisting for the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal.

Dr Aitken commented: "I feel deeply honoured to win the Patrick White Literary Award, which validates my lifelong commitment to poetry and storytelling. The recognition it confers gives me the self-belief to continue writing, as it has for previous recipients. I am more convinced now than ever before that each book I have written speaks of this country with all its complexities, and that my own struggle to express my part in it has been worth a lifetime of labour."

Dr Aitken 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 47 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: "Today, we congratulate Adam and celebrate his significant contribution to Australian literature and the incredible catalogue of poetry and non-fiction he has produced. This Award wouldn't be possible without the foresight of Patrick White, who used the proceeds from his 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature to establish this Award. Almost half a century later, Patrick's legacy continues to benefit the literary community and recognise talented authors."

Dr Aitken will be officially honoured for his contribution to Australian literature at the launch of his upcoming book, hosted by Gleebooks in Sydney, in February 2022.

The 2021 judging panel included Dr Felicity Plunkett (Chair), Dr Julieanne Lamond and Ms Michelle de Kretser.

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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 46 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 Adam Aitken and his work: The Judging Committee's citation

The winner of the 2021 Patrick White Award is Adam Aitken.

Dr Adam Aitken is a poet and non-fiction writer. Born in London, he moved to Sydney with his family in 1969. He spent his early childhood in Thailand and Malaysia, and has taught English for extensive periods in Indonesia. He has also lived and travelled in the UK and Europe, recently spending long periods in France. He is the author of seven full-length collections of poetry, a number of chapbooks and a memoir. He was co-editor of the journal *P76* and associate poetry editor with *Heat* magazine. In recent years, Dr Aitken taught writing at the University of Technology and University of Sydney.

Many of the poems in Aitken's first collection of poetry, *Letter to Marco Polo* (Island Press, 1985), had previously achieved publication including in the University of Sydney's *The Union Recorder* as well as journals such as *Overland*, *Southerly* and *Poetry Australia*. As the title of one poem, 'Sacred and Profane', suggests, Aitken initiates a vivid, inventive poetics of lyricism and assemblage that situates stray dogs alongside quotations from the Buddha, and angels near a faltering 'Vietnamese boat' collapsing like a 'wrecked umbrella'.

His second collection, *In One House* (HarperCollins/Paperbark Press, 1996), expands the wide range of styles and modes with which Aitken works. While this eclecticism precludes his being identified easily or exclusively with any particular form or school, his work is often lyric and postcolonial, and the poems exhibit a fascination with form and language. Geographically, they are restive, moving from Burma to Bondi, Mosman Bay to Cambodia, while their images and icons include Angkor Wat, the Mona Lisa, a cold can of VB and W.B. Yeats. Poems about destructive and acquisitive colonialism prefigure what has more recently become a major current in Australian poetry.

Aitken's third collection, *Romeo and Juliet in Subtitles* (Brandt & Schlesinger, 2000), was shortlisted for the John Bray South Australian Literary Festival Award and was runner-up for the *Age Book of the Year* poetry prize. In a review in *Heat*, Martin Duwell praises Aitken as 'an impressive and unavoidable voice in Australian poetry', having, from his first collection, 'marked out a distinctive poetic territory'. Writing about the collection's hybridity (it includes, for example, science fictive and postmodern poems), Duwell suggests that Aitken's poetic world is 'not so much the world of multicultural Australia as the world of cultural markers ripped from their conventional national matrices'.

Impermanence.com, a chapbook published by Vagabond Press as part of their Rare Objects series (2004), observes sacred and profane objects, from a Hindu temple to a bicycle. Aitken has put out several chapbooks with different publishers, including Tinfish Press and Picaro Press.

Aitken's fourth full-length collection, *Eight Habitation* (Giramondo, 2009), was shortlisted for the John Bray South Australian Literary Festival Award. The title refers to the Buddhist afterlife realm in which lives are evaluated, and the collection includes intimate poems addressing other artists, love poems written in lean couplets, and poems concerned with place and placement, of being outside and beyond. Poems concerning intimacy and loss, or Dukkha, a Buddhist word usually translated as 'suffering', reach back to the collection's shaping idea and title. Nicholas Birns's review in *Transnational Literature* identifies an 'overriding theme' of 'expanding our idea of cosmopolitanism'. Birns sees Aitken's work as bringing an Asian frame of reference into poems where a more conventional one would refer only to Europe. At the same time, the collection encompasses contemplative and metaphysical aspects.

With Michelle Cahill and Kim Cheng Boey, Aitken edited the anthology *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets*, a text now set for NSW Higher School Certificate English (Puncher & Wattmann, 2013). This ground-breaking anthology spans several decades and includes thirty-seven poets, including Jaya Savige, Omar Musa, Bella Li and Eileen Chong.

One Hundred Letters Home (Vagabond, 2016) was longlisted for the ALS Gold Medal. In this memoir, Aitken attempts to piece together his parents' histories in a quest to arrive at an understanding of his own. It is a lucidly written, unconventional work with great depth of feeling. Using a range of forms – letters, lists, official documents, photographs, newspaper reports, poems – Aitken creates a textual collage that evokes the piecemeal nature of identity. He avoids linear narrative, the past surging forward unpredictably throughout the text to suggest memory's instability, its shifts and splits. Eileen Chong observes that 'orbits of meaning overlap like memory' in this layered book (*Cordite*). Drawing attention to the ambiguity that streaks Aitken's representation of his cultural heritage, Rebecca Allen finds 'a persistent vacillation between feelings of closeness and distance, of connection and estrangement' (*Mascara Review*). Ivy Alvarez likens the narrative to 'a story torn from an old newspaper, or a confession inside a much folded letter', and notes that the memoir is less concerned with 'biographical exactitude', favouring 'excavation and piecing-together' instead (*Southerly*).

David Gilbey, writing in *Cordite*, describes the poems in Aitken's collection *Archipelago* (Vagabond, 2017) as "postcards" of places in France (from Paris to Avignon), French art, writing and history; freewheeling thinking and memories, cultural commentary'. Gilbey reflects that Aitken's uses of synecdoche offer a way to think about his poetry: 'synecdoche is right, too, as a descriptor of Aitken's poetry: dazzling – so many parts standing for many more wholes.' The France in this collection is considered through the postcolonial lens Aitken has refined, and is observed from both within that country and beyond it. *Archipelago* was short-listed for the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry and the Prime Minister's Literary Awards.

Aitken's seventh collection, *Revenants*, is forthcoming with Giramondo Press (2022). The wide reach of his work is evidenced by its translation into French, Swedish, German, Polish, Malay, Mandarin, Japanese and Russian, and international publication in journals such as *Poetry* (USA). In his review of *Eighth Habitation*, Nicholas Birns writes that the poems 'fulfil the old Horatian ideal of both teaching and delighting'. Aitken's writing over several decades attests to a sustained, often prescient body of work that is venturesome, restless and inventive. The judges congratulate Adam Aitken on the Award.

About Perpetual Philanthropic Services

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