

Glittering Prizes

I want to begin by thanking Wendy and the Women's Club for inviting me to give this address.

When I was first invited to take part in this Festival, it was suggested that I might talk about literary prizes. So I spent the next little while thinking about how the subject of prizes might tie in with the theme of the conference: 'literary legacies and contemporary classics'.

The idea of literary legacies on the one hand and contemporary classics on the other, when you think about it, are two very different things: a legacy is something handed down from the past, while a contemporary classic is, well, contemporary. You could even argue that the phrase 'contemporary classic' is itself an oxymoron, although I might disagree with you there.

After a lot of thinking, I made a couple of useful connections among these different subjects and themes. Any book that we might think of as a contemporary classic might well go on -- in future years, and decades, and even centuries -- to become a literary legacy. So we're left with the question of what a contemporary classic is, and how and why such a book might gain that sort of status.

Which is where literary prizes come in.

So I want to talk to you this morning about six things: two particular literary prizes, and four novels that might all be called classics, although in very different ways. I've confined myself to the arena of Australian women's writing, because that is what we're celebrating at this gathering, and to novels, because that is the literary form that I know most about.

The two prizes I want to talk about are the Miles Franklin Literary Award and the Stella Prize. The four novels are *Seven Little Australians*, *My Brilliant Career*,

Monkey Grip, and *The Natural Way of Things*. These four novels were published between 1894 and 2015, over a span of 121 years. They seem quite startlingly different at first glance, but they have one overriding common concern: the autonomy, the agency, and the freedom of girls and women.

By considering all of those things separately and together, I might be able to come to a few conclusions by the end of this talk about why we give literary prizes, what we mean when we say that a book is a classic, and where women's writing fits into this overall scheme of things.

Miles Franklin, as I'm sure most of you know, was an Australian writer who was born in the NSW Southern Highlands in the late 19th century, and published a large number of novels over the first half of the 20th. As a young woman she was befriended and mentored by Rose Scott. But she is still best known for two things: for her first book, *My Brilliant Career*, written when she was still a teenager; and for the major national literary prize that bears her name and is still one of the most significant events on the Australian literary calendar. She died in 1954, and her biographer, Professor Jill Roe, reports what happened next:

'Miles's will was declared for probate on 14 January 1955, and her last and best-kept secret, the literary prize for which she had been preserving her capital all along, became public knowledge. Most of her estate, valued at 8,922 pounds (almost \$300,000 in today's money) was dedicated to it. ... literary critics were astonished. Such personal beneficence was unprecedented.'

The prize was first awarded in 1958, when Patrick White won it for his novel *Voss*. Both the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, and the Federal Leader of the Opposition, Dr H.V. Evatt, were there at the presentation. (And if you think it would ever be likely that we would see both Malcolm Turnbull and Bill Shorten put in a friendly bipartisan appearance at the presentation of a prize for literature, then there's a nice bridge just down the road that I would like to sell

you.) The prize was worth 500 pounds (\$15,000 in today's money) which Patrick White said he was going to spend on, and I quote, 'a hi-fi set and a kitchen stove.'

The Miles Franklin award has now been presented 58 times. Some writers have won it twice or more, with Tim Winton and Thea Astley jointly holding the record at four each. The prize has been won by 29 men and 13 women, four of whom won it over the last five years, so the ratio in 2010 was 28:9 – that is, just over 3:1. In 2009, and again in 2011, the shortlist consisted exclusively of novels by men. When the all-male shortlist of 2009 was announced, I wrote about it on my blog. Here's an edited version of what I said back then, seven years ago:

“The feminist complaint here is not just some simple essentialist thing about equal numbers of men and women. It's more complicated than simply being a numbers game. It's more to do with who is acting as an agent or conduit for the dominant culture, and that person or people can be male or female.

It's not a case to be met with “We don't need feminism any more because we're all equal now”. I assume that the people who say this are people who never read the paper, or listen to politicians, or watch TV, or even just go outside. Or they're trapped in a big plastic bubble, or they're living in some parallel universe like the Magic Faraway Tree. If you think we're all equal now, you have only to compare the numbers of men and women in Parliament, to compare the numbers on the average men's and women's pay packets, or to compare the numbers of men and women who do most of the housework and most of the childcare, to realise how wrong you were.

It's not about the question “But can't the prizewinners just be chosen on literary merit?” That one is a common response that begs the question of what literary merit *is*. Whose values define literary merit? Can it ever be objective or absolute? Who decides what it is? Whose values have dominated literature and the judgement of literature for centuries?

A quick read of Virginia Woolf's book *A Room of One's Own* is all that's needed for answers to most of these questions.

No, the feminist complaint is this: that the masculine world view is still the norm, and the feminine world view a lesser variant. That the masculine representation of women is still accepted as the truth, while female resistance to that representation is seen as some kind of wilful rebellion. That masculine values are still taken as universal values, and feminine ones seen as aberrant and unimportant in the world. Simone de Beauvoir still puts it best, even after all this time. 'There are two types of people in this world: human beings and women.'

And spare a thought for that dedicated, hardworking feminist, Miles Franklin, who scrimped and saved and ran herself short to amass the capital for the establishment of this prize. In her name, let me record here that in the chronological catchment area for this prize in 2009, the following excellent novels, most of which have won at least one other major literary prize, were published:

The Household Guide to Dying by Debra Adelaide

The Spare Room by Helen Garner

The Lieutenant by Kate Grenville

Vertigo by Amanda Lohrey

The Good Parents by Joan London

All five of these books were eligible for the prize, within the terms of Franklin's will. All five are of 'the highest literary merit', and all five are dealing with, as Franklin put it, 'Australian life in any of its phases'.

None of them even made the longlist.'

This blog post prompted a long discussion in the comments section, involving quite a few participants. One of them was Michael Williams, the then newly appointed Head of Programming at the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne, who wrote 'Anyone fancy stumping up for an Australian Orange Prize?'

Now the Orange Prize, as, again, I'm sure most of you know, is a prize for the best novel written in English by a woman writer in any given year, now known as the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction. It was founded in 1996, and if you go to its website and read its history, you'll find it has a familiar ring. Here is some of what it says:

'In January 1992, a diverse group of journalists, reviewers, agents, publishers, librarians, booksellers – male AND female – gathered together in a flat in London. The Booker Prize shortlist of 1991 had included no women at all ... and the group decided to meet and talk about it: did it matter [that] there were no novels by women [on the shortlist]? If so, why? And what could or should be done? ... After some hours and several bottles of wine, the idea of setting up a new kind of literary prize – one which would celebrate women's creativity ... -- was born. Everyone at that ad hoc first meeting was puzzled that .. the leading literary prizes ... often seemed to overlook accomplished, challenging, important fiction by female authors. ... Did it matter? The group decided [that] it did.'

Twenty years later, a group of women in Melbourne responded to the same kinds of concerns in much the same way. At the Stella Prize website, the history of *that* prize is outlined like this:

'Dreams of the Stella Prize emerged in early 2011 out of a panel that was held at Readings, an independent Melbourne bookstore, on International Women's Day. The panel was partly a discussion about the underrepresentation of women on the literary pages of the major Australian newspapers, both as reviewers and as authors of the books

reviewed. For example, in 2011, 70% of the books reviewed in *The Weekend Australian's* books pages were written by men.

The panel also discussed the underrepresentation of women as winners of literary prizes. After the panel at Readings, a group met to decide what to do next. ... And thus plans for the Stella Prize were born: a major prize for Australian women writers, along the lines of the UK's very successful Orange Prize ... The prize would celebrate the best book by an Australian woman, whether fiction or nonfiction, in the previous calendar year.'

I was a member of the original steering committee for the Stella Prize, and when we were discussing a name for the prize, we talked about Miles Franklin and the way that, like so many women writers of her time, she had felt it necessary to adopt a masculine pen name in order to be taken more seriously as a writer. She was fortunate in being able to use one of her own given names, the family name 'Miles'. Her fellow writer and countrywoman Henry Handel Richardson had been christened Ethel Florence, so *her* given names were no use to her. But Franklin had been christened Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin, and on that early steering committee, we decided that nothing could be more fitting than to restore the name by which Franklin had been known as a girl and a young woman. Not only is the name 'Stella' unequivocally feminine, but it also means 'star'. For us, it was a way of honouring Franklin and of restoring her given name.

The establishment of the Stella Prize caused quite a stir in the Australian literary world, and the question asked most often, and in the most bolshie and challenging manner, was 'But do we really *need* a special prize for women?' The long answer to this question was 'Well, it depends on who you mean by "we", and what you mean by "need".' The short answer was 'Yes. Yes we do.'

Oddly enough, most of the people who asked this question seemed to have no clue that the Stella Prize was by no means the first Australian literary prize exclusively for women. I know of at least five others, all of them older than the Stella. The Nita B. Kibble Literary Award recognises the work of an established

Australian female writer, and the Dobbie Literary Award is for a first published work by a female writer. The Asher Literary Award is offered biennially to a female author for a work with an anti-war theme. The Magarey Medal for biography is awarded biennially to the best biography by a female writer on an Australian subject, and the Scarlet Stiletto Awards, incorporating several different prizes, are for short stories in the crime and mystery genres, written by Australian women and featuring a strong female protagonist. There is also the Barbara Jefferis Award, which is open to both male and female writers but is awarded for, and I quote, "the best novel written by an Australian author that depicts women and girls in a positive way or otherwise empowers the status of women and girls in society."

As I said at the beginning of this talk, the four novels that I want to use as a kind of framework for talking about prizes and classics and what sort of relationship or overlap there might be between those two things are *Seven Little Australians* by Ethel Turner, published in 1894; *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin, published in 1901; *Monkey Grip* by Helen Garner, published in 1977; and *The Natural Way of Things* by Charlotte Wood, published in 2015.

Seven Little Australians is the story of a large family living in a semi-rural and slightly run-down house on the Parramatta River, a house appropriately called Misrule. This is the home of the Woolcot family: the stern and middle-aged Captain John Woolcot and his very young second wife Esther, who at 20 is only four years older than his oldest child Meg. His seven children range in age from the infant Peter, also known as the General, to sixteen. They are extremely naughty but mostly charming children. The book recounts various episodes in their family life, most of which focus on the second daughter Judy. Judy at thirteen is thin, dark, clever and wild, with a funny and whimsical nature and the capacity to enrage her father; near the end of the book she dies a heroic death in the process of saving her baby brother from a falling tree.

My Brilliant Career also features a young girl at odds with her family and her surroundings. The heroine, Sybylla, is a lover of music and literature who is

forced to do farm work and to act as governess for a rough-natured local family. She forms an attachment to a wealthy young local grazier who understands her passionate nature and her desire for freedom, but she realises that marriage between them would be a failure and the book ends where it began, with Sybylla single and still at home with her family.

In *Monkey Grip*, the heroine Nora lives in a share house in inner-suburban Melbourne during the 1970s, and is living with her group of friends by the principles and unspoken rules of feminism and the counter-culture. She falls in love with a heroin addict called Javo, who wanders in and out of her life in a relationship that goes around in circles rather than progressing: as one of her friends says to her, 'There's no future in it!'

And finally, Charlotte Wood's novel, *The Natural Way of Things*, is the story of a group of young women who find themselves drugged, kidnapped, and transported to an abandoned farm or station in the bush. It's slowly revealed that each of these girls has been at the centre of some sort of sex scandal, where she has been assaulted or abused or betrayed or used, and she has then been spirited away by fathers, brothers and boyfriends after she has become a public embarrassment, and is of no further sexual or ornamental use. The novel tells the story of what happens as they live a harsh and captive life strongly reminiscent of the detention centres for asylum seekers, and each girl must find her own way to survive if she can.

You can see some unexpected but fascinating cross-currents and similarities showing up among these very different novels even across the 120 years that separate them. Both *Monkey Grip* and *My Brilliant Career* are love stories, but at the same time each of them is also an anti-romance: they are both stories in which the heroines are passionate and independent women who want love and romance but simply cannot or will not find their way to the conventional ending of a romance plot, the happily-ever-after wedding bells. (There's no future in it!)

And both *Seven Little Australians* and *The Natural Way of Things* show in stark and distressing detail what will happen to a girl or young woman who is too wayward, too bold, too clever, or too inclined to push the boundaries and break the rules of a patriarchal society. And there's no future in that, either.

Monkey Grip and *Seven Little Australians* both have a slightly uncanny quality of making the reader want to be there with the characters. A couple of years ago a nurse in Melbourne, a woman who was a whole generation younger than Garner, wrote a feature article in the *Age* about her love of *Monkey Grip*. Describing a driving holiday across the Top End, she wrote:

'While [we were] driving between Broome and Darwin, with massive skies and beautiful sunsets, I was head down, reading by torchlight, aching to be cycling through the Edinburgh Gardens [in Melbourne] once again ...When Javo ended up in the emergency department of St Vincent's Hospital, I felt a funny warm glow. My first thought was, "I wonder who was working that night?" I might even have met him. ... Fiction had come face to face with my life, as though I was living in an enormous novel.'

I was reminded of this article while I was listening the other day to a podcast of ABC RN's Books and Arts, in their 'Australian Classics Book Club', where Michael Cathcart interviewed two distinguished scholars of Australian literature, Dr Brenda Niall and Professor Sue Martin, about *Seven Little Australians*. He also played a recording of a little girl called Ruby, age 9, who read the book with her mother and was happy to talk to an interviewer about it afterwards. She talked about how sad it made her when they got to the scene where Judy dies, when all her brothers and sisters are gathered around her. When Ruby was asked why that scene made her so sad, she said 'I sort of felt like I was with them.'

All four of these books have one overriding thing in common: they all explore the limitations of freedom and the struggles for autonomy in the lives of girls and women.

But what makes a classic a classic? Is it the winning of prizes?

Seven Little Australians and *My Brilliant Career* were both published before there were any Australian prizes being handed out for literature. Each of those books made its own way into the Australian literary consciousness over generations and without any help from the publicity boost that a prize will always give to a book. But one thing their authors have in common is that each of their names now adorns a major prize in contemporary literary life. I've talked about the Miles Franklin Award already; the Ethel Turner Prize for Young People's Literature is one category in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards. It has been won in the past by such luminaries as Ruth Park, Patricia Wrightson, and Markus Zusak, and it carries a handsome pay packet of \$30,000. These two prizes are literary legacies in more senses than one -- and in the case of the Miles Franklin Award, literally so. In both cases, one of the things they give to their winners each year is a sense of connection back to those iconic writers, Turner and Franklin, as well as a sense of their own place in the wider landscape of Australian literary history.

Each of the two more recent novels has won at least one major literary prize. *Monkey Grip* carried off the National Book Council Award in 1978, and *The Natural Way of Things* won the Stella Prize this year, as well as the Indie Book of the Year award and a place on the Miles Franklin shortlist. There can be no doubt that the winning of those prizes enhanced the reputation of both writers and both books.

But there was a ferocious word-of-mouth buzz about them that began even before they were published, much less before they had won prizes. I have a very vivid memory of the first time I saw the words 'Helen Garner'. It was at my own 25th birthday party in 1978 in Adelaide, when a friend of mine handed me a wrapped gift that was obviously a book, and said 'Here – this is what everyone's reading in Melbourne.' That hardback copy of *Monkey Grip* is a first edition, and I still have it. McPhee Gribble published 3,000 copies in hardback and it sold out

immediately; Penguin did a paperback reprint with a print run of 8,000 and that sold out straight away as well.

37 years later, in August of last year, I had an email from my friend and editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* books pages, Susan Wyndham. Susan wrote 'Would you have interest and time to review Charlotte Wood's new novel, out in October? ... I read it over the weekend and it is a very powerful portrayal of misogyny as a kind of fable but also a tense survival thriller and a beautiful piece of writing.' I would have been pleased to review any book by Charlotte Wood, but Susan's email had a real tone of fascination and excitement about it. I accepted the book for review, and as I searched the internet for any news of it, I began to get a sense of how much growing excitement there was around it. All of which was explained once I'd actually read the book, which seemed to me to justify everything that was being said about it.

Is this kind of early and excited buzz within the literary community, or the word-of-mouth reputation spreading quickly around parties and dinner tables from friend to friend, one of the ways in which classics first begin to acquire their status? Are they earmarked for the label 'classic' right from the beginning? It might not be the only way that the label is earned, but it's certainly one way.

Or sometimes there's a gender divide that reflects people's emotional relationship to the things they read. In my days as an academic I would often encounter anxious parents, usually fathers, who would demand to know whether their children would be taught 'the classics'. When you asked them what they thought of as 'the classics', they might mumble 'Dickens' or 'Shakespeare', and I often thought that if you pushed them further to name some of the characters in Dickens or Shakespeare, they might be able to manage Romeo or David Copperfield but they'd never be able to tell you who Mercutio was, or Mr Barkis. But many of the literate women in the western world know who Mr Rochester is, and most of us know who Mr Darcy is. And all of us know about Heathcliff.

Another way that a book can be elevated to the status of a classic, or its existing status reinforced, is through adaptations for stage and screen. These bring the book to a wider audience, as there is almost always a reprint to tie in with the production. The screen versions in particular tend to get successive generations reading the books for the first time and thinking about what they mean. *Seven Little Australians* has been adapted for the stage four times, over the years, including once as a musical. There has also been a feature film and two TV mini-series, the earlier one made by the BBC. *My Brilliant Career* had a major revival in 1979 with Gillian Armstrong's brilliant film of the book, starring the young Judy Davis as Sybylla. *Monkey Grip* was made into a movie only four years after it was published, and was many people's first introduction to the book. And in 2014 there was also an excellent TV documentary that some of you may have seen, titled 'Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip*'. This doco features interviews with Garner and her friends from the period, and it looks closely at the Melbourne milieu and the counterculture of the 1970s, out of which the novel grew.

And most recently, *The Natural Way of Things* was snapped up by two young female film producers within a few months of its publication, and their ambition is to make it into a classic film. When Charlotte Wood was interviewed about the movie project and the producers, she said "One of the things they said in their pitch was that there hasn't been an Australian film with an extensive young, female ensemble cast like this since *Picnic at Hanging Rock* – that stuck in my head and would not let go ... I thought, imagine if this could be the next *Picnic*? I have total faith in these young women to make something astonishing."

Or is a book a classic simply because authoritative people say that it's a classic? And if it comes to that, who qualifies as an authoritative person? Is it the book reviewers? Is it the teachers and academics who set the literary texts for school and university? The people who have the most influence over how widely a book is seen and read are probably publishers. *Seven Little Australians* has never been out of print, in the whole 120 years of its life. But again, in the end, it comes down to readers: if readers don't like a book, then that book won't sell. And if

successive generations of readers don't like it, then it won't be read or remembered.

However, if you go online and Google these four titles, you'll see that all but the most recent one are repeatedly referred to as 'a classic' by various influential organisations and individuals. *Seven Little Australians* gets called a classic by Wikipedia, Booktopia, Penguin Books, the ABC, and the State Library of NSW, which holds the original manuscript. *My Brilliant Career* is called a classic by Text Publishing, Reading Australia, Jennifer Byrne from ABC TV's *Book Club*, and, again, Penguin Books. *Money Grip* also scores the label 'classic' from Penguin Books, as well as from Wikipedia, the ABC, and the Wheeler Centre.

The Natural Way of Things, which was first published less than a year ago, hasn't been called a classic by anybody yet, as far as I can see, but I'm getting in first and calling it now: I think 'classic' is a label that it will earn, and probably sooner rather than later. Some of the things that I did find people saying online about this book speak for themselves. The British reviewer in *The Guardian* calls it a masterpiece. Someone on Goodreads called Roger gives it five stars and says 'I still don't understand it, but I know I have never read anything quite like it.' One Australian book blogger says 'It has taken me a week to write this review, because this book has held my mind hostage,' and another says

'Such is the power of this book that after I finished it, immediately I searched for someone to discuss it with. I rang a friend who had been to the book launch on Monday night, hoping she might have read it already. She was only a few chapters in, but she told me a friend of hers, after finishing it, had rolled up in a ball on the floor and wept.'

For the last part of this talk, I want to return to the place where I started, which is the subject of literary prizes. What are they good for? And *who* are they good for?

That they are good for writers is self-evident, or at least for the writers who win

them. But I think they are good for readers as well. There are many busy people who love to read but are strapped for time, and who find the prize shortlists very helpful as a rough guide to introduce them to new works and to new writers, and broaden their literary horizons in other ways. Then there's the fact that literary prizes always raise awareness of literature across the spectrum of a society that doesn't always pay attention to it. Prizes and awards are the kinds of things that attract media attention, so the Miles Franklin, or the Stella, or the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, will usually make the ABC news, and, if not quite the *front* page of the paper, then usually page 2 or 3.

But the literary prize is a problematic beast in a democratic society, because there is a widespread underlying belief that we all share: a belief that in any endeavour, everyone should get a chance. Everyone should get a fair go, a turn at the wheel, a slice of the pie. In Australia the democratic ethos is deep-rooted and strong, as is the desire to cut down any tall poppy that might rear its head. But the very point of awarding a prize goes against that grain. Prize-giving is, by definition, about competition and winning. To give a prize is to say that this one book is better than all these other books. And this effect is exacerbated by the growing fashion for longlists and shortlists. Individual writers and books are eliminated stage by stage as though they were competing in Olympic heats and finals.

In sport, of course, there is usually no argument about who won: it was the person who ran the fastest, or who jumped the furthest, or who hit the bull's-eye most often. Nobody thinks that sport should be democratic; it is, by its nature, the opposite of democratic. But unlike the 800 metres hurdles or the 50 metres butterfly, literary merit is not quantifiable, and so the giving of prizes for it is always problematic and always open to disagreement. Nobody in the sporting world ever talks about 'whose turn' it is to win a race or a competition, and nobody in the sporting world ever complains that it 'isn't fair' when one athlete wins again and again. But in the world of literature, people talk like this all the time.

In fact, there is a surprising number of people in the literary community who criticise and complain about the whole culture of literary prizes. Some writers find them depressing, especially writers who have never won one, and some writers talk dismissively about how literary prizes are 'just a lottery', though this ignores the hundreds of hours of work put in every year by well-informed people on judging panels trying to arrive at good decisions. Some publishers don't like having to pay the entry fee for prizes, even although they know that there are good reasons for charging it.

Sometimes their reasoning is ideological: one academic critic dislikes literary prizes because he thinks they are too elitist, and another dislikes them because he thinks they are not elitist enough. Where these two critics agree is in their sneering dismissal of what they call the middlebrow. One of them wrote an article a year or two ago saying that Australian literary prizes are essentially rewards for middlebrow books, which he regards as a bad thing, and that they should be done away, with and the money used for other things. 'We should get rid of prizes altogether,' he says. 'They don't do much for authors on the whole.'

But most authors who have ever actually won a prize will tell you something different. Maxine Beneba Clarke, whose short story collection *Foreign Soil* appeared on the Stella Prize shortlist in 2015, recently published an article in which she too was critical of the contemporary culture of literary prizes in Australia. But she also gives a detailed and informative list of what a prize can do for writers, in a sort of knock-on effect. She wrote

'... each time [my book] showed up on a shortlist, there was a new round of publicity. Each time there was a new round of publicity, sales figures rose. Each time the sales rose, the word of mouth would also increase. ... Other things also came of the increased visibility the prize-lists brought: a UK, and more recently a US, publishing deal; some small grant success where there had previously been none; increased offers of teaching and writing work.'

And so we come, by way of an ending, to the strongest and most straightforward argument in favour of literary prizes, and especially of literary prizes for women. It's the argument that literary prizes mean more money and more work for writers, who ply one of the most cash-strapped trades on the planet, and especially for women writers, who are statistically much *more* cash-strapped even than their male counterparts.

But what Virginia Woolf said on the subject back in 1929 is still true today: above all, a woman writer needs some privacy and enough money to live on, or, as Woolf put it, five hundred pounds a year and a room of one's own. When Helen Garner won the National Book Council Award for *Monkey Grip* in 1978, she was unable to attend the presentation because she was by then living and working in Paris with her daughter, but she sent back a message saying that the prize meant two main things to her: recognition, and a bit of money in the bank. 'It's like a formal pat on the back from a well-wishing stranger,' she wrote, 'and it means I can buy a coat with lining in it!'

And 35 years later, when Garner was the main guest speaker at the presentation of the inaugural Stella Prize, she spoke again in praise of prizes for women writers: she reminded us all, and I quote, of 'the undeniable fact that every girl who writes needs a bucket of cash to be thrown over her at least once in a lifetime, so she can soldier on.'

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