

Judges' Report: 2019 Voss Literary Prize

The winner of the 2019 Voss Literary Prize (\$5,000) for the best Australian novel published in 2018 is

Tim Winton, for *The Shepherd's Hut*, published by Penguin Random House Australia.

Tim Winton is one of Australia's most recognised authors and this book has garnered rapturous reviews in Australia and internationally.

The Shepherd's Hut is narrated by an anger-fuelled 15-year-old boy, Jaxie Clackton, living in a depressed rural town outside of Perth. Believing he will be blamed for the death of his brutal father, Jaxie flees, on foot, into the gold country. He stumbles across an aged Irish priest, Fintan MacGillis, living alone in the wilderness, exiled by his order for misdeeds unspecified. Fintan feeds the boy, tends his injuries, and treats him with respect. Jaxie starts to see the world – and himself – differently.

MacGillis is murdered most savagely and Jaxie is alone again, but there is a hint of redemption - he's back on the road, drawn north to his girl-cousin Lee, the only other person he knows who accepts him as he is. Self-hatred is replaced by self-knowledge. Fear is replaced by hope.

This is a gut-wrenching novel that is full of ambiguities – it doesn't make an argument or solve a problem, but instead follows its characters as they interact with each other and the landscape. There's violence aplenty, born of poverty, isolation, lack of education and absence of compassion. The horror is leavened by humour, by language (the rich poetry of Jaxie's profanities and Fintan's brogue, rolling with classical and biblical allusions), and the consolations of the natural world.

Winton challenges the inevitability of violence passing from father to son and asks if it can be short-circuited by an intervention of kindness, mercy and love. Michael McGirr captured the essence of the book perfectly when he wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

'There is music in this brilliant and uncomfortable book ... a landmark book in Winton's career: austere, beautiful and compelling. It has a subtle moral clarity that stands out even in a career that has relentlessly searched for the gold hidden in human rubble ... After three readings, *The Shepherd's Hut* was still yielding the riches of its unblinking vision of hope, a vision that will renew readers for generations to come.'

Judges:

Elaine Lindsay
Diana Barnes
Christian Bok
Matt McGuire
Anthony Uhlmann