

Judges' Report: 2020 Voss Literary Prize

The winner of the 2020 Voss Literary Prize (\$5,000) for the best Australian novel published in 2019 is

Tara June Winch, for *The Yield*, published by Penguin Random House Australia.

Albert Gondiwindi, an elderly Indigenous man, compiles a dictionary of Wiradjuri language. August, his granddaughter, returns home from the United Kingdom for his funeral. In 1815, a Lutheran pastor writes to the British Society of Ethnography, despairing of how he had used God's words to suppress Indigenous beliefs, destroy Indigenous lives.

Three narratives, one intention: to recover language, culture and country by harvesting the past and gathering the present generation into the "big, big story", free of shame.

In its broad canvas this novel dramatises the often heart-breaking complexities of Australia's colonial past and colonial present. *The Yield* emerges proudly from an Indigenous perspective and delivers a vivid picture of the way that memories flow through Indigenous families and communities and shape present-day realities.

Albert is the still point in the turning world of this eloquent and powerful novel. Each of his dictionary entries prompts a reflection, whether it is on the pains and joys of life, on the significance of ancestral stories or historical events, or on Albert's own beliefs, values and hopes. His voice is generous, wise, loving and utterly engaging. And it is not without humour: the ordering of his dictionary from 'Y' to 'A' is "a nod to the backwards whitefella world I grew up in".

Threaded through Albert's "little stories" is August's story: in rediscovering her family she finds herself; in uniting with her cousin, aunts and grandmother to defend their property, Prosperous House, from a mining company she becomes a custodian of her people's story.

And the Rev'd Greenleaf's serialised letter ties past and present together, manifesting Albert's belief in language as a means of travelling through time, beyond maps. It is also an example of Winch's intricate command of her material. Albert is the grandson of Mercy, the first half-caste child born on Prosperous Mission, back in 1881. Albert draws on Greenleaf's transcriptions of the local language for his dictionary which will prove his family's long-term presence on the land. And the discovery of the Mission Cemetery, which had gone un-noted on the Prosperous Area plan, leads to the declaration of Prosperous House as a culturally significant site to be preserved, not mined.

The Yield, over a decade in the researching and writing, makes complex ideas accessible through the vividness of its writing and the strength of its characters. Winch describes it as her "love letter to the past and the future of Australia". Appropriately, the book concludes with Albert's dictionary, subtitled "a work in progress".

Judges:

Elaine Lindsay, Christian Bök, Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, Margaret Henderson, Ann Vickery