



Media Release

16 November 2017

Acclaimed writer Tony Birch wins 2017 Patrick White Literary Award

Birch recognised as a major voice in contemporary Australian fiction and a writer of powerful, engaging and moving stories

Continuing a legacy that now extends more than 40 years, Perpetual today announced acclaimed novelist, short story writer and essayist, Tony Birch, as the winner of the 2017 Patrick White Literary Award.

Perpetual National Manager of Philanthropy & Not For Profit Services, Caitriona Fay said: "More than 40 years ago Patrick White used the proceeds from his 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature to establish this Award. This philanthropic act has gone on to impact the lives of countless authors who have made a contribution to Australian literature – authors who are no doubt grateful for Patrick's generosity and vision."

Professor Birch will receive \$20,000 in recognition of his outstanding contribution to Australian literature.

Reflecting on the achievement, Professor Birch said: "I want to thank the judges of the award for their support of my writing. I feel both proud and humbled by their decision. It would be difficult to convey the emotional impact of this prestigious award, on myself, my wonderful family and my community. Patrick White is a major figure in Australian literature and I am honoured to have won an award bearing his name.

"The Patrick White Literary Award provides me with a deep sense of personal satisfaction for what I spend a great deal of my time thinking about and putting to the page for readers."

Commenting on behalf of the 2017 judging panel, Dr Bernadette Brennan said: "Tony Birch is an exciting, important voice in Australian fiction and in Australian cultural life. His impressive body of work, across various genres, makes him an outstanding choice for the Patrick White Award. The judges are particularly pleased that for the first time in its forty-four year history, the Award has been given to an Indigenous writer."

The 2017 judging panel members comprised Dr Bernadette Brennan (Chair), Professor David Carter and Associate Professor Debra Adelaide.

The award was announced at the Wheeler Centre, where Tony Birch appeared in conversation with Chris Flynn.

The Patrick White Literary Award was established by Mr White to advance Australian literature "by encouraging the writing of novels, short stories, poetry and/or plays for publication or performance". The award has been bestowed to an author who has made an ongoing contribution to Australian literature, but who may not have received due recognition.

For further information:

Daniel Wright
Corporate Communications Manager, Perpetual
0401 703 616
Daniel.wright@perpetual.com.au

Note to editors

About the Patrick White Literary Award

The Patrick White Literary Award was established by the author with the proceeds of his 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature, and it is managed by Perpetual as trustee of the philanthropic trust behind it. The Award has been 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 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 by it to continue writing. Poets, novelists, playwrights and short story writers have been among the now 42 recipients who have so far benefited from Patrick White's generosity and vision. Past winners include Christina Stead, David Campbell, Randolph Stow, Thea Astley, Fay Zwicky, John Romeril and Robert Adamson.

The judging committee's current members are Dr Bernadette Brennan (Chair), Associate Professor Debra Adelaide and Professor David Carter.

About Tony Birch and his work: the Judging Committee's citation

The winner of the 2017 Patrick White Literary Award is short story writer, novelist and essayist Tony Birch.

Tony Birch's reputation as a writer of powerful, engaging and moving stories has grown steadily since the appearance of his first book, *Shadow Boxing*, in 2006. He is now the author of four collections of short stories, two novels, the book of poetry *Broken Teeth* (2016), and a series of important essays, critical articles and reviews on subjects including Indigenous literature, the colonial legacy and climate change. He is also highly valued as a public speaker and lecturer. Birch's most recent book, *Common People* (2017), confirms his distinctive voice in contemporary Australian literature and his capacity to create a fictional world, often one of hardship, danger or decline in inner-city or rural settings, where characters nonetheless find unexpected forms of sociability, love or purpose.

Tony Birch was born in 1957 into a family of Aboriginal, West Indian and Irish descent. He grew up in Melbourne's inner-city Fitzroy, a setting that has appeared in many of his stories. The circumstances of this often challenging, tough environment reappear in *Shadow Boxing*, a series of interlinked short stories that Birch has described as autobiographical in a 'psychological' sense, if not in a 'realist' sense. This environment was also a world of stories and story-telling. Despite being expelled from two high schools for fighting, Birch remained a voracious reader. It's said that once when he was stopped by the police, all they found when they patted him down was a copy of Albert Camus's *The Outsider*.

Birch returned to study as an adult, eventually completing a Masters' degree in Creative Writing and a PhD in History at the University of Melbourne. He taught creative writing at the University of Melbourne for many years. In 2015, he joined Victoria University as the first recipient of its Dr Bruce McGuinness Indigenous Research Fellowship, a fellowship named for one of Victoria's most respected Aboriginal elders, and a long-time activist in the struggle for Aboriginal justice.

A second collection of short stories, *Father's Day*, appeared in 2009, followed by Birch's first novel, *Blood*, in 2011. The latter made a major impact, and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award in 2012. Like much of Birch's fiction, the main characters are children, and children in potentially damaging, difficult situations, but the novel is neither sensational nor sentimental. There is tough realism, but Birch never violates the children's understandings. In the words of the *Australian's* reviewer, Ed Wright, 'the real strength of the novel is the kids. Jesse and Rachel are compelling characters... The story is told in the first person from Jesse's point of view, and Birch pulls this off beautifully with a compelling combination of flinty Australian vernacular and boyish candour. This voice never slips. It never feels confectioned or overplayed.'

Birch's style as a fiction writer might well be described as realist, but the term risks missing the sense of revelation, perhaps even magic, that can arrive in his stories, transforming characters' lives, or at least the reader's understanding and empathy. Many of the stories concern the experience of Aboriginal characters in post-war or contemporary Australia, and questions of race, identity and marginalisation recur. But in many other stories the characters might or might not be Aboriginal, and their concerns with managing their lives, finding connections, having fun, or dealing with violence, whatever it might be, take precedence over any simple 'identity politics'. As critic Eve Vincent noted, 'Birch's characters remind us that Aboriginal lives are everywhere shared with the lives of people who are not Aboriginal; there are no discrete, bounded Aboriginal worlds' (*Sydney Review of Books*, July 2014).

The Promise, another major collection of stories, appeared in 2014, followed in 2015 by Birch's second novel *Ghost River*. Here Birch tells a brutal yet uplifting tale of teenage friendship and escape played out on the banks and in the waters of the ancient Yarra River. It is the late 1960s and thirteen year-olds, Sonny and Ren, together find ways to survive poverty, domestic violence, corrupt cops and murderous stand-over men. They befriend and learn from the river men, alcoholics who shelter companionably beneath the railway bridges and abandoned factories of Collingwood and Fitzroy. The mighty Yarra—polluted and facing destruction with the coming South Eastern Freeway—weaves its way throughout the narrative offering freedom, knowledge, history, secrets, refuge and death.

The latest collection of short stories, *Common People*, confirms the qualities shown in Birch's earlier works. Like some of the greatest writers — and critics have compared him to Junot Diaz and Raymond Carver — Birch has created a unique world, immediately recognisable whatever its local setting. *Common People* explores the lives of ordinary people trapped within the everyday, sometimes grim struggles of living. Unsentimental, gritty, stylistically

restrained, these stories often contain small unexpected gestures of kindness or compassion, investing the whole collection with a quiet optimism in human nature.

Tony Birch is a major voice in contemporary Australian fiction and a critical spokesperson on issues concerning race, Australian history, Aboriginal rights, and climate change. He is the first Indigenous Australian to be awarded the Patrick White Literary Award. The judges congratulate him on this deserved recognition.

About Perpetual Philanthropic Services

Perpetual is one of Australia's largest managers of philanthropic funds, with \$2.6 billion in funds under advice for charitable trusts and endowment funds as at 30 June 2017. Perpetual is trustee for approximately 1,000 [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 and advice are provided by Perpetual Trustee Company Limited (PTCo), ABN 42 000 001 007, AFSL 236643. This publication has been prepared by PTCo and contains information contributed by third parties. It contains general information only and is not intended to provide advice or take into account personal objectives, financial situations and needs. 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 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.