

Debut novelist Emily Bitto wins the Stella Prize

Written by The Conversation

Emily Bitto has won the 2015 [Stella Prize](#) for her debut novel, *The Strays*. The prize is now in its third year and was established to redress the way in which women writers were typically overlooked for major literary prizes such as the [Miles Franklin award](#).

Bitto's novel, loosely inspired by the modernist artists at [Heide](#), revolves around an artists' circle in the 1930s. It is narrated by a girl named Lily who is drawn into the world of the bohemian Trentham family.

The judging criteria seeks to reward works that are "excellent, original and engaging". This year's judges' report praised *The Strays* for its "ring of originality in its richly and fully imagined vision of a particular time and place in Australian social and cultural history". The novel is also favourably likened to Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and A.S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* in its subject matter, characterisation and mood.

This year the award received more than 150 fiction and non-fiction entries, which were whittled down to a shortlist of six, also including Joan London, Christine Kenneally, Sofie Laguna, Maxine Beneba Clarke and Ellen Van Neerven. Bitto has remarked on the major impact of the Stella Prize and the conversations it has encouraged about women writers. "As a female writer, I have benefited from this award before even finding myself on the longlist, and I am so grateful for its existence".

The idea for a dedicated women's writing prize arose in 2011, at which point only ten women had ever won the Miles Franklin over a period of 54 years. Perhaps not without coincidence, the winners of the prize from 2012 onwards have all been women.

Yet efforts to increase the visibility and recognition of women's writing still have much to achieve despite the welcome string of three consecutive winners of Australia's most prestigious literary prize.

The [Stella Count of 2013](#) measured how books are reviewed in Australia's

Debut novelist Emily Bitto wins the Stella Prize

Written by The Conversation

major magazines and newspapers. Not only did it show a continued disparity in the percentage of reviews devoted to male and female writers, but it also revealed a major difference in the prominence afforded to reviews of books by women.

According to the Count, “books by male writers tended to be given larger reviews and these were generally positioned more prominently in newspapers’ review sections”. These and other factors, those who worked on the Count argue, “reinforce that perception that books by men are for everyone, while books by women are of interest only to women, and that men’s writing is more deserving of reflection, recognition and review than that of women.”

One of the most neglected groups of writers identified in the Count is emerging or first-time female novelists like Bitto. It is refreshing, then, that the major profiles or lead features that Bitto would most likely have been overlooked for will now be guaranteed as a result of this major award. (This group of authors is the focus of the [Dobbie Award](#), which is presented to the best debut novel by an Australian women writer, and for which *The Strays* has also been longlisted.)

Increased book sales will also follow. In the week following Richard Flanagan’s Booker Prize win last year, sales of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* [increased 32-fold](#).

The deserved publicity and readership for *The Strays* and all of the shortlisted works for the Stella Prize is sufficient reason enough for its existence. However, chipping away at ingrained views about women’s writing as of niche appeal only for women readers is also a crucial, if difficult, aim to work towards.

Impressive writing like Bitto’s novel, which the judges liken to a gemstone for its polish and complexity, will be part of that transformation.

Disclosure

Michelle Smith has previously received funding from the Australian Research Council.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/debut-novelist-emily-bitto-wins-the-stella-prize-40609>