

# **Judges' Commentaries on 2020 Finalists and Winners**

12 May 2020

## 2020 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards

Over 170 titles were submitted for the 2020 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards, a 12% increase on the previous three years. Judges' overall commentaries on each of the categories and citations for all the winners are published below.

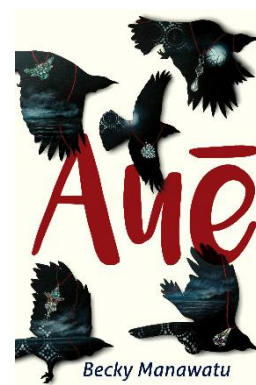
## MitoQ Best First Book Awards

### The Hubert Church Prize for Fiction

*Auē* by Becky Manawatu

Published by Mākarō Press

Three debuts made the longlist for the Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction. *Attraction* by Ruby Porter, *Auē* by Becky Manawatu and *Lonely Asian Woman* by Sharon Lam made the longlist not just because they were impressive first-time novels, but because they held their own against those of writers who've been producing work of quality for decades.



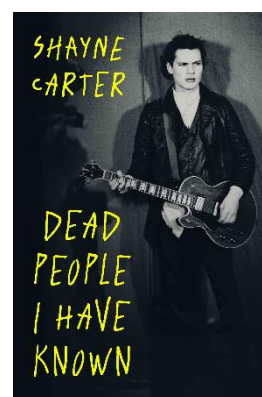
But the debut that most impressed the judges was one that handled multiple narrators, shifting time perspectives, urban and rural life, and wildly differing emotional states with enviable aplomb. *Auē*, by Becky Manawatu, is a mere pounamu: raw life polished to a sheen that's beautiful and warm but at the same time a blade with a keen edge. *Auē* stands alone as best first book of the year.

### The E.H. McCormick Prize for General Non-Fiction

*Dead People I Have Known* by Shayne Carter

Published by Victoria University Press

Shayne Carter says "I realised that the way to write was to write pretty much the way I talk – kind of terse with some swearing." *Dead People I have Known* is an illuminating insight into the childhood of a boy who didn't fit in and was saved by music. This memoir is an honest look at the life of a key figure in NZ music; refreshingly brash, reeling off the page with searing honesty, ego and obsession. Moving from lyricist to writer Carter has produced a remarkably accomplished first book. It is rock star writing that draws the reader in from the first page.

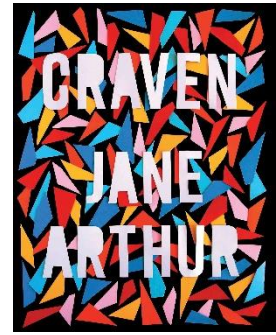


## The Jessie Mackay Prize for Poetry

*Craven* by Jane Arthur

Published by Victoria University Press

The poems in *Craven* seduced and delighted us even as they revealed a speaker filled with uncertainty, self-loathing, futility. They did that thing that the best lyric poetry does: they showed us an emotional interior, an individual human heart (often a literal heart, a stubborn, durable, hidden muscle) by way of a patient, alert attention to the world beyond the self. This introverted speaker demands to be seen, to be heard – and she is seen and heard in these remarkable poems. Jane Arthur takes, in a phrase lifted from one of them, a “sharp, large knife” to the speaker’s observed reality: she cuts it and refashions it into something new and strange, and transports us there.



## The Judith Binney Prize for Illustrated Non-Fiction

*We Are Here: An Atlas of Aotearoa*, by Chris McDowall and Tim Denee, published by Massey University Press

This fascinating and unique visual representation of Aotearoa New Zealand reveals us to ourselves, chronicling our history and capturing the present. The authors have brought together complex and often surprising sets of big data about our natural environment, government and culture, and ourselves. And they've presented it in genuinely accessible ways, through a huge variety of fascinating visualisations. Essays by a range of authors contextualise the overall themes, offering different ways to interpret the information, and each map and graph is accompanied by a succinct, factual explanation. The immediate and easy visual appeal of this book belies the comprehensive research and well-considered representation of Aotearoa. *We Are Here* is relevant to us all.



## Ockham New Zealand Book Awards

### Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction

#### *Judges' overall commentary by Mark Broatch*

First, a large thank you to my fellow judges of the fiction category, Nic Low and Chris Baskett, who with me read the 46 books submitted, and to Tara June Winch, our international co-judge, who got through the final four while trying to hastily prepare for lockdown in pandemic-struck France. We three chose to share the role of convener, so what I'm saying is a ventriloquism act, or some kind of Zoom-relay event. To be honest, the reading over the summer while working and living was enjoyable and fascinating but hard mahi at times. The choosing, by comparison, was a doddle. Picking the longlist after months of emails and chats was, apart from a few enthusiastic pitches for one book or another on the cusp, remarkably straightforward, and we winnowed the shortlist in the same morning. As we said when the shortlist was announced – and we loved our shortlist – we believe 2019 was a cheerily excellent year for New Zealand fiction. The range of stories was quite something, diverse across genre, theme, time and place, and narrative style – delving deeply and sometimes uncomfortably into Aotearoa's past, many presents and possible futures.

Commonalities? Love, humour, brutality, forgiveness, te ao Māori, more love, a dollop of sex, a helping of solipsism, and all through, inquiry into and ultimately the celebration of, life in all its marvellous forms.

The judges were unanimous. The winner of the Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction is *Auē*, by Becky Manawatu, published by Mākarō Press.

***Auē*** by Becky Manawatu

Published by Mākarō Press

*Auē*, by first-time novelist Becky Manawatu, introduces readers to the orphaned Arama, who is deposited in rural Kaikoura with relatives, and his brother Taukiri, a young man fending for himself in the big smoke.

There is violence and sadness and rawness in this book, but buoyant humour too, remarkable insights into the minds of children and young men, incredible forgiveness and a massive suffusion of love. With its uniquely New Zealand voice, its sparing and often beautiful language, the novel patiently weaves the strands of its tale into an emotionally enveloping korowai, or cloak. In the words of Tara June Winch, our international co-judge, "There is something so assured and flawless in the delivery of the writing voice that is almost like acid on the skin."



## General Non-Fiction Award

### *Judges' overall commentary by Sharon Dell*

Judging team of Sharon Dell, Guyon Espiner and Stella Chrysostomou brought their different perspectives to the task of reading the 51 books submitted to this category. Inevitably some wonderful work missed the long and short lists, but we selected books which we felt best represented the entries as a whole and which brought something new and important to readers.

We salute the authors who have taken us on such interesting journeys. We were blown away by some wonderful writing and particularly appreciated the creative writers who are broadening the approach to the non-fiction genre. We noted several books that used archives and primary resources in interesting ways. We appreciate the publishers who have presented some stellar examples of book production and design.

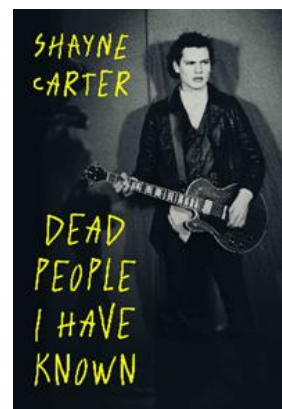
There are brave stories of people dealing with loss and trauma, struggling to live their own lives and change an uneven world. These individual lives and experiences reflect the identity and character of Aotearoa and illuminate the universal. Several books were particularly timely, marking significant anniversaries, or dealing with emerging trends.

Overall, beautiful writing and compelling content have worked together to create books whose impact will be felt beyond this year.

The winner of the General Non-Fiction Award is *Dead People I Have Known* by Shayne Carter, published by Victoria University Press.

***Dead People I Have Known*** by Shayne Carter  
Published by Victoria University Press

From the first page, Shayne Carter's *Dead People I Have Known*, invites the reader to jump right in and come along for the ride. What follows is an illuminating insight into the childhood, shaped by violence and addiction, of a boy who didn't fit in and felt saved by music. The insider's view of the development of the music scene in Dunedin makes a valuable contribution to the sparsely-populated field of NZ music writing. More especially it is a fascinating look at what it means and feels like to be a creative obsessive - pushing towards perfection despite and because of, addiction, oblivion, and isolation. It is rock star writing: entertaining, revealing and incredibly heartfelt.



## Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry

### *Judges' overall commentary by Kiri Piahana-Wong*

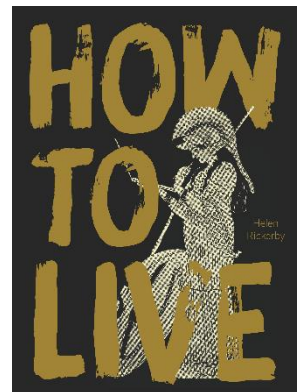
It was an honour to read the 35 books entered in this year's poetry category. As we live in different cities spread throughout the country, Phillipa, Tim and I met in person just once. The remainder of our deliberations took place over lengthy and increasingly impassioned email threads. I am grateful that we were able to put forward strong views while remaining both civil and openminded.

All of the judges commented on the very high standard of entrants. Many of our best-loved poets released worthy and interesting collections. An equally large number of impressive first-time authors launched their first books. We found our task difficult, to say the least. While the breadth of subject matter and variety of stylistic approaches was pleasing, it was dismaying to see that only a tiny number of writers of colour were published in 2019. By my count, less than 10% of entrants came from this group. That being said, it was wonderful to see that New Zealand poetry is alive with innovation, skill and true craftsmanship.

We are delighted to announce the winner of the Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry is *How to Live* by Helen Rickerby, published by Auckland University Press.

***How to Live*** by Helen Rickerby  
Published by Auckland University Press

*How To Live* names, excavates and exhumes both silenced and previously muffled women. There is a power in naming them and exploring their stories, like a poetic version of war memorials dotted throughout our cities and regions, villages. In doing so, these women get an identity, a voice, and an intergenerational existence. This collection of poetry demands much of us: to move, to discover, to challenge, to chastise, to entertain, to teach, to dare and to awaken. It talks honestly about masculine/feminine yin/yang, and requires the reader to be and to consider both silence and listening, hearing and speaking. *How to Live* is a brave collection that doesn't back down from a societal lesson that, unfortunately, still needs repeating, and often.



## ILLUSTRATED NON-FICTION AWARD

### *Judges' overall commentary by Odessa Owens*

It was no easy feat judging the Illustrated Non-Fiction category of this year's book awards. We received 40 books dedicated to familiar and unexpected ideas spanning art, culture and history. Illustrated non-fiction publishing makes a unique contribution to the cultural landscape of Aotearoa, writing our histories large and small into being. The wide-ranging scope of this contribution and the lasting impact of these books were clear in this year's excellent longlist, and our shortlist showcases just how good illustrated non-fiction can be when the literature, design and production are all of the highest quality. While each of the judges brings different perspectives to the judging table, each list and eventual winner were clear.

We are delighted to announce that the winner of the Illustrated Non-Fiction Award is *Protest Tautohetohe*, edited by Stephanie Gibson, Matariki Williams and Puawai Cairns, published by Te Papa Press.

### ***Protest Tautohetohe: Objects of Resistance, Persistence and Defiance***

edited by Stephanie Gibson, Matariki Williams and Puawai Cairns

Published by Te Papa Press

From a strong pool of contenders, one book stood above the others, not only achieving excellence in writing, illustration and design, but also – crucially – tackling a vast and significant topic worthy of these urgent times.

Readers are drawn into Aotearoa's rich and raw stories from contact to now. Engaging, insightful and incredibly well-researched texts by multiple authors provide a cohesive and strong overall narrative, covering a huge breadth of our history and the themes that define us as a nation.

The tactile, hand-hewn approach to design complements the huge variety of assiduously collected objects that are this book's focus. From the obscure and ephemeral to the well-known and loved, the images allow us to be witness to – and challenge us to learn from – our shared past of resistance, dissent and activism.

