



# **Judges' Commentaries on 2021 Finalists and Winners**

12 May 2021

## 2021 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards

Over 175 titles were submitted for the 2021 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards, a 16% increase on the previous two years. A number of debut books were included in the longlists, including five in the fiction category alone. Nine independent presses were represented in the four longlists, reflecting the vibrancy and range of the local publishing scene, and two of the best first book winners, for fiction and poetry, were published by small independent presses.

The judging panels' remarks on each of the four categories, and citations for all the winners, are published below.

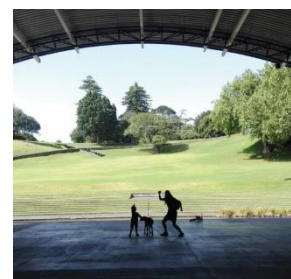
## MitoQ Best First Book Awards

### The Hubert Church Prize for Fiction

***Victory Park*** by Rachel Kerr

Published by Mākaro Press

Five debut novels made the Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction longlist, and the judges were particularly impressed by the big-hearted social realism of *Victory Park* which follows the quiet heroics of a widowed solo mother of squeezed means. Sensitively examining the emotional and mental labour of being careful with money and the blindspots people have when they *don't* need to worry about it, this quietly powerful novel is about privilege, community, compassion and care.



**Victory Park**  
Rachel Kerr

"A rich, funny, compassionate exploration of care and carelessness – this is a wonderful book – like its heroine, astute as hell and full of heart." **DIARY PRESS**

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

***Specimen: Personal Essays*** by Madison Hamill

Published by Victoria University Press

'Think of it this way. You're a horse but you live in the Namib Desert and all your friends are oryx. You think of yourself as a deformed oryx. What else could you be? You live in a habitat that doesn't accommodate horses'. In this compulsively readable first book, Madison Hamill observes her own difference with an outsider's detached gaze, and the ordinary people around her with tender curiosity. This is the work of a luminous new talent in New Zealand life writing.

**SPECIMEN**



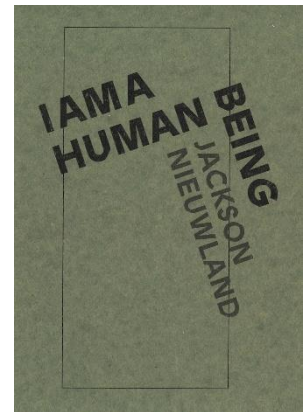
PERSONAL ESSAYS  
MADISON HAMILL

## The Jessie Mackay Prize for Poetry

***I am a Human Being*** by Jackson Nieuwland

Published by Compound Press

Jackson Nieuwland's *I Am a Human Being* asserts a Whitmanesque ecstasy of holistic oneness with the world. The poems' insistent 'I am' refrain merges selfie and panoramic view, close-up and long shot in a whirl of words. Nieuwland's dramatic monologues assail the reader with absurd, appealing, poignant, and humorous scenarios that are gleefully illogical, grandiose, deflating, and bulging with insight. The writing frequently overflows its lyrical open form and flows into newly imagined dimensions. It's fun, fast, sometimes fragile, and full-on.



## The Judith Binney Prize for Illustrated Non-Fiction

***Hiakai: Modern Māori Cuisine***, by Monique Fiso

Published by Godwit, Penguin Random House

*Hiakai* is an astounding first book. Monique Fiso shares her personal journey as a chef alongside her journey into the knowledge of her tūpuna/ancestors. *Hiakai* weaves understanding of our unique environment, hunting, foraging, cooking, eating and preserving into an expansive but very accessible offering. She does not shy away from unusual ingredients and this makes it all the more fascinating. The pictures are beautiful and combined with the words this book will be a favourite for many years to come.



## Ockham New Zealand Book Awards

### Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction

#### *Judges' remarks by Kiran Dass*

We read a whopping 50 books submitted to the 2021 Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction over eight weeks. But not once did that feel like a slog. In fact, it was an honour to read what was such a wide range of New Zealand fiction, so closely and deeply.

Thanks to the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards Trust and thank you to my fellow judges Claire Finlayson and Paul Little for their generous critique and care throughout this process. Thanks too, to our International Guest Judge Tommy Orange, who joined us at the shortlist stage and whose exacting analysis was significant.

I'd like to warmly congratulate *all* of the shortlisted *and* longlisted authors. The longlist is an excellent reading list so I encourage everybody to dive in. As for the shortlist, the books were so diverse, affecting and accomplished that it made the task of picking a winner, monstrously difficult. The writing was by turns raw, spiky, audacious, immersive, elegant and inventive. We eyeballed a rich cast of characters along the way – from quiche-confused recovering alcoholics and morally-wonky Nazis, to privileged private school boys, psycho exes and, even a talking toroa. Suffice to say, NZ fiction in 2020, was no beige cardigan.

I'm thrilled to announce that the winner of the 2021 Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction is Airini Beautrais for *Bug Week*.

#### **Bug Week & Other Stories** by Airini Beautrais

Published by Victoria University Press

There's nowhere to hide with a short story. It must say a lot by saying very little. With its spiky confidence and mordant humour, short story collection *Bug Week* is a knockout from start to finish. Casting a devastating and witty eye on humanity at its most fallible and wonky, this is a tightly wound and remarkably assured collection. Atmospheric and refined, these stories evoke a strong sense of quiet unease, slow burning rage and the absurdly comic. Our guest international co-judge Tommy Orange says, "I was consistently surprised by sentences, the beauty and singular language. If the book were a bug it would be a big one, with teeth and venom, with wings and a surprising heart, possibly several, beating on every page with life."



## General Non-Fiction Award

### *Judges' remarks by Sarah Shieff*

The 65 'general non-fiction' entries we received this year covered sub-genres as various as regional and economic history, military and iwi history, institutional history, art writing, personal wellbeing, biography, memoir and personal essay. Other panels get to compare poems with poems, and novels with novels. On *our* panel, we often found ourselves talking about how to balance excellence in *one* form of nonfiction with excellence in another.

The books we eventually agreed to shortlist all show outstanding achievement in the criteria we were asked to consider. These include literary merit, impact, and production values. Each of our shortlisted authors has found a *new* story to tell -- a story not just for the present moment, but one we could imagine readers in the future coming back to.

I would like to acknowledge *all* the authors who submitted their work this year—and the designers, editors and publishers who brought their books to light. I would also like to thank my fellow judges, Arini Loader and Michael Yeomans, for the expertise and collegiality they brought to the process.

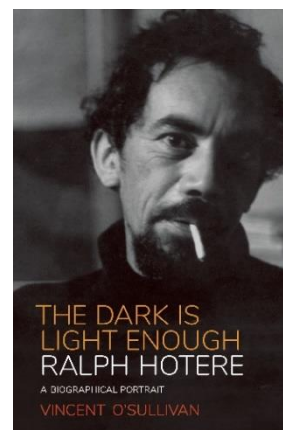
I am *delighted* to announce that the winner of the Ockham New Zealand Book Award for General Nonfiction is Vincent O'Sullivan, for *The dark is light enough: Ralph Hotere A Biographical Portrait*

### **The Dark is Light Enough: Ralph Hotere A Biographical Portrait** by

Vincent O'Sullivan

Published by Penguin, Penguin Random House

When Ralph Hotere asked his old friend to write his biography, Vincent O'Sullivan hesitated. As a Pākehā, and an outsider to the art world, was he the right person for the job? Hotere saw no problem. This is a sensitive, detailed portrait of one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most important modern artists, shaped around the four pou of Hotere's identity: his Māoritanga, faith, whenua, and whānau. O'Sullivan displays masterly skill in the layering of information, observation and anecdote. He gives us a deep understanding of the forces and passions that drove one of New Zealand's greatest artists. The judges commend Vincent O'Sullivan for an extraordinary achievement in biography.



## Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry

### *Judges' remarks by Briar Wood*

Reading the thirty-seven collections presented in the Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry has provided assurances of the humanity in shared experience during a year of exceptional strains and shocking events.

The award process entails coming to terms with some of the contradictions in poetry histories that include celebration, consolation and competition. Anne Kennedy, Jacob Edmond and I lived with the collections for months as we debated their multifarious strengths.

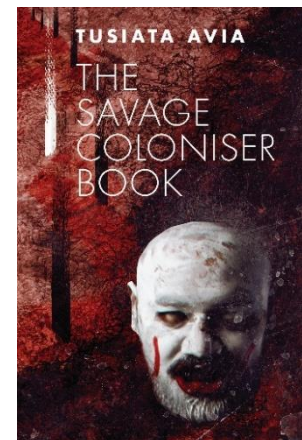
Poetry collections are a team creation. From cover design to editing and typesetting, to publicizing, everyone involved plays a part in the life of the book and contributes to its circulation. Book production facilitates co-operation, as is testified by dedications, the acknowledgement of tautoko, support and friendship between poets, publishers and family, the declarations of alhabu, alofa, aroha, ài, love. The poetry of 2020 is media savvy, resoundingly embedded with film, radio, digital sex, Skype, YouTube, WhatsApp, soap operas and graphic art. Its paratexts are all over the place, geographically and imaginatively—on marae, in mosques, art galleries, prisons, asylums, clubs, theatres, protest movements. There's a real sense of continuous traditions morphing into new forms.

With work exemplifying so many of these contemporary elements, I'm very pleased to announce that the winner of the Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry is Tusiata Avia for *The Savage Coloniser Book*.

### ***The Savage Coloniser Book*** by Tusiata Avia

Published by Victoria University Press

Tusiata Avia's *The Savage Coloniser Book* is an enthralling performance, from Pati Solomona Tyrell's striking dried-blood and plaster-masked cover, to the titles, to the spell-binding poems within. The violence of shared and fractured histories surfaces throughout the collection like liquefaction, unsettling, displacing, disrupting. In a year of outstanding poetry publications that respond to Covid, Black Lives Matter, the Christchurch Massacre, and ongoing violence against women, she expresses the outrage shared by many, while maintaining faith that love helps the healing process. It's a book bursting with alofa, profound pantoums, profanity and FafSwagging stances, garrulously funny, bleakly satirical, magnificent.



## BOOKSELLERS AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND AWARD FOR ILLUSTRATED NON-FICTION

### *Judges' remarks by Dale Cousens*

I think it's fair to say that, for the judges of the 2020 Booksellers Aotearoa New Zealand Award for Illustrated Non-Fiction, the twenty eight submissions that we received were definitely a bright spot in a challenging year. I want to thank my fellow judges Jenny Nicholls and Brian Phillips for sharing their knowledge and making our deliberations interesting, thought provoking and most importantly, fun.

We were deeply impressed by the variety of passions that were shared through all of the submissions. By the time we had settled on firstly the long list, then the short list and finally on the winner we were equally impressed by the high quality of production, the creation of beautiful and engaging works that will hold their own for years to come.

But there can only be one winner and so we are delighted to announce that the Booksellers Aotearoa New Zealand Award for Illustrated Non-Fiction 2020 goes to Monique Fiso for *Hiakai*.

### ***Hiakai: Modern Māori Cuisine*** by Monique Fiso

Published by Godwit, Penguin Random House

The recipes in Monique Fiso's first, extraordinary book occupy fewer than half of its pages. The rest is a tour de force of Māori knowledge, written from a Māori perspective. For many of us this will be our introduction to the indigenous cuisine of our own land, and its ingredients, practice, culture, history and knowledge. Monique Fiso's text is hard-won, inspiring and utterly original in scope; the book is also beautifully designed and photographed. As judges, we were all drawn to it, coming back to it again and again; finding a careful, kind and generous work which never lectured, but took us on a journey and left us hungry for more.





## TE MŪRAU O TE TUHI | MĀORI LANGUAGE AWARD

### *Judge's remarks by Paraone Gloyne*

Through his book, Sir Dr. Tīmoti Kāretu provides a window into his world.

He draws from his life experiences to give unreserved reflections and opinions on things close to his heart, such as: language; customs; traditional Māori performing arts; and many other things that underpin te ao Māori. Through sharing his many involvements he's had with pioneers of te reo and Māori performing arts over the years, we get to meet legends such as Tuini Ngāwai, Ngoingoi Pēwhairangi, Hamuera Mitchell, Ngāpō & Pīmia Wehi, and Te Wharehuia – moe mai rā koutou kei aku kahurangi.

While Kāretū is from another era and of an ilk rare in today's generation, his writing is current and applicable to today. His book kept me engaged and inspired from cover to cover, and although he is living apotheosis of the Māori language, his book is relatively easy to read (although I would advise to keep your Williams dictionary at hand!)

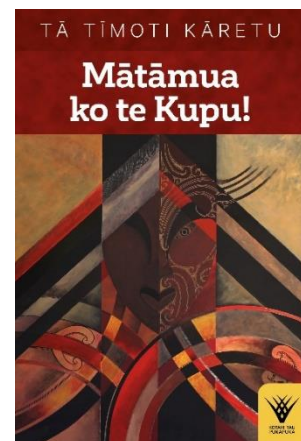
I'm very pleased to announce the recipient of te Mūrau o te Tahi Māori Language Award is Tā Tīmoti Kāretu for Mātāmua ko te Kupu!

### ***Mātāmua ko te Kupu!*** by Tā Tīmoti Kāretu

Published by Kotahi Rau Pukapuka, Auckland University Press

He kupu Hautoa mō Mātāmua ko te Kupu!

Mātāmua ko te kupu! Koinei te kōrero a Tā Tākuta Tīmoti Kāretu, ka mutu, kāore i tua atu i a ia hei whakatauirā i tēnei tauākī āna, i ōna hekenga werawera ki te reo i āna kaupapa huhua, mai, mai. Ko tana mahi hoki tērā mō te reo i ngā mahi a Tānerore, e tātai mai ana i roto i tana pukapuka nei, ōna whakaaro, ōna mōhiotanga, huri noa i tana takahi i roto i tērā ao hei kaihaka, hei kaitito, hei kaiako, hei kaiwhakawā, anō hoki. Tō tātou māri hoki kua kōpakina ōna whakaaro ki āna anō kupu ki te reo, ki te wana, me te hāngai hoki ki te rae.



'Lyric is paramount!' this is the axiom of Sir Dr. Tīmoti Kāretu, and there is no other than he who best personifies this statement in his labors for the Māori language in all he has done for countless years. Similarly, are his efforts for te reo in traditional Māori performing arts, as recounted in his book with his views and knowledge throughout his journey in that realm as a performer, a composer, a tutor and a judge. We are fortunate that his reflections are encapsulated with his own words in the Māori language with such passion and candor.