



Judges' Commentaries on 2023 Finalists and Winners

17 May 2023

2023 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards

One hundred and ninety-one titles were submitted for the 2023 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards, with twelve debut books featuring in the longlist and five in the shortlist. Nineteen independent presses were represented in the four longlists, twelve in the four shortlists, and six amongst the eight winners.

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

Best First Book Awards supported by the Mātātuhi Foundation

The Hubert Church Prize for Fiction

Home Theatre by Anthony Lapwood

Published by Te Herenga Waka University Press

Home Theatre, a collection of interlinked short stories, is unfailingly inventive. Narratives move between the twentieth and twenty-first century, with strong characterisation and genuine voice. The stories are humane and warm at the same time as being cerebral and challenging. Anthony Lapwood writes skilfully in all genres, ranging smoothly from domestic stories to science fiction to love stories to historical fiction, and sometimes all four at once. He demonstrates a keen interest in technology, both contemporary and of the past. Lapwood's writing is sophisticated and of great promise.

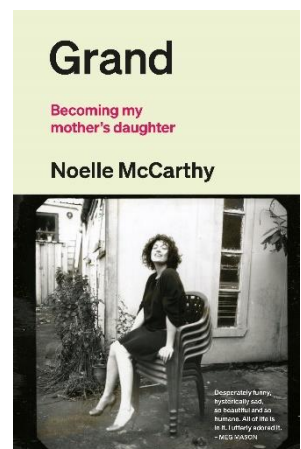


The E.H. McCormick Prize for General Non-Fiction

Grand: Becoming my Mother's Daughter by Noelle McCarthy

Published by Penguin, Penguin Random House

This exquisite debut masterfully weaves together the threads of Noelle McCarthy's life, and her relationship with her mother, in a memoir that connects with truths that unite us all. Poignant and poetic language renders scenes with honesty and colour. Intimate, but highly accessible, the fragility and turbulence of the mother-daughter relationship is at times brutally detailed. Despite this, *Grand* is an uplifting memoir, delicate and self-aware, and a credit to McCarthy's generosity and literary deftness.

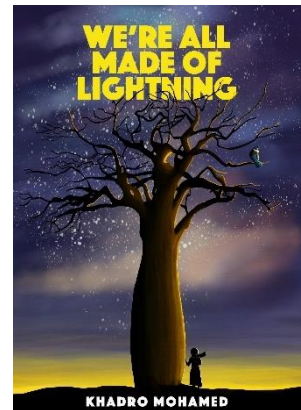


The Jessie Mackay Prize for Poetry

We're All Made of Lightning by Khadro Mohamed

Published by We Are Babies Press, Tender Press

Khadro Mohamed's *We're All Made of Lightning* takes us to distant lands, Egypt and Somalia, in heightened sensory language as she grieves for her homeland. Heart-breaking vulnerability and anger are revealed after *a man had taken a knife and sliced straight through the sky* on the March 15 attacks. Time, memory, dreams and reality are fluid and woven into lyrical poems and prose poems that consider what she would take *if she were to go back to where she came from*.



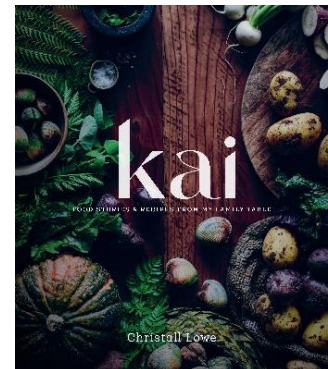
The Judith Binney Prize for Illustrated Non-Fiction

Kai: Food Stories & Recipes from my Family Table

by Christall Lowe

Published by Bateman Books

Kai has everything you'd expect from an internationally recognised food photographer: elegant and enticing images, topped with well-placed illustrations and the compelling use of colour. But it is the substance of the book that shines. Whānau stories and recipes provide the reader with a wider insight into te ao Māori, creating a homage to food that is both grounded in tradition yet modern. *Kai* is the Edmonds cookbook for our time.



Ockham New Zealand Book Awards

Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction

Judges' remarks delivered by convenor Stephanie Johnson

In order to find the winner of the Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction my co-judges and I read a record fifty-three works. These ranged from collected short stories to novellas to novels, and in every possible genre. Historical, crime, domestic, fantasy, contemporary, futuristic, experimental, speculative and science fiction rubbed shoulders in heavy boxes delivered to our respective doors. Entries came from all over New Zealand, from Australia and Europe. We were by turns amazed, delighted, amused, sobered and enlightened. The process brought us not only elation at evidence of the great health of our national literature, but also the opportunity for many wide-ranging, robust and enjoyable discussions.

I would like to thank the New Zealand Book Awards Trust and my co-judges Jemma Morrison and John Huria. Expert international judge John Mitchinson in the UK winged in on Zoom to help us with our final decision.

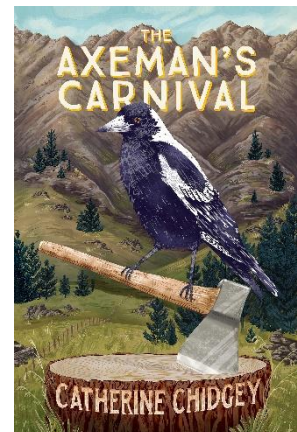
Thank you also to all the publishers and writers whose books were entered, especially those that made the long- and shortlists. The judging process took us across centuries and around the globe, and most importantly into the hearts and minds of New Zealanders. It is my belief that several of the books in this year's competition will be treasured for generations.

I am delighted to announce that the winner of the Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction 2023 is Catherine Chidgey, for *The Axeman's Carnival*.

The Axeman's Carnival by Catherine Chidgey

Published by Te Herenga Waka University Press

The Axeman's Carnival is a novel that has been clasped to New Zealanders' hearts. It is narrated by the unforgettable Tama, a fledgling magpie taken in and raised by Marnie on the Te Waipounamu high country farm she shares with champion axeman husband Rob. Without anthropomorphism, Tama is constantly entertaining with his take on the foibles and dramas of his human companions. An underlying sense of dread is shot through with humour and humanity. Chidgey's masterful writing explores the diversifying of rural life, the predicament of childlessness, the ageing champ, and domestic violence. She provides a perspicacious take on the invidious nature of social media and a refreshingly complex demonstration of feminist principle. *The Axeman's Carnival* is unique: poetic, profound and a powerfully compelling read from start to finish.



General Non-Fiction Award

Judges' remarks delivered by convenor Anna Rawhiti-Connell

This category frequently inspires remarks about the daunting task of comparing genres that include works of scholarship, historical writing, memoir, autobiography and essay, but I would like to speak to the commonalities shared by the books on the shortlist. All contribute something new and lasting - whether it be to our understanding of Aotearoa, past and present, or to our understanding of ourselves. All exhibit a literary deftness - through structure, innovation in form and mastery of language. All are exceptionally well presented and produced - discerning editing and design can make all the difference. Importantly, all of this made them good reads that could and should be widely read.

Thank you to my fellow judges, Alison Jones and Te Maire Tau for sharing the task of reading, discussing and judging the 60 books in this category. Our discussions about enduring literary merit, innovation, presentation and accessibility created clear totems to keep coming back to as we narrowed the pile down.

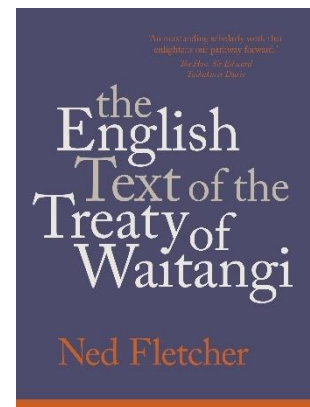
Congratulations to all the writers who entered, made the longlist and the shortlist and to the publishers, editors and designers involved.

I am pleased to announce that the winner of the General Non-Fiction Award is Ned Fletcher for *The English Text of the Treaty of Waitangi*.

The English Text of the Treaty of Waitangi by Ned Fletcher

Published by Bridget Williams Books

The English Text of the Treaty of Waitangi is a meticulously constructed work of scholarship that provides surprising and essential analysis of Te Tiriti. It will shift and inform debates about the intentions of those who constructed and signed the Treaty and how we interpret it today. Though it is weighty, Ned Fletcher's book leads readers through a series of clear and well-evidenced hypotheses. It provides colourful and necessary detail about the characters and context involved in the creation of the English text of Aotearoa's founding document. Fletcher's comprehensive examination sheds new light on the document's implications and contributes fresh thinking to what remains a very live conversation for all of us that call this country home.



Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry

Judges' remarks delivered by convenor Diane Brown

Reading the 45 books of poetry published in New Zealand in 2022, was challenging, engaging, and ultimately rewarding as they explored the turbulent events of the past few years. As judges, we despaired when we couldn't include more books on the longlist and despaired again when we had to narrow down ten to four. It was remarkable to have three first books in the final four and to see new publishers. Congratulations to the four finalists who all portrayed a precarious world and posited urgent questions which aroused our imagination and demanded we listen.

I wish to thank my fellow judges, Serie Barford and Gregory Kan for their gracious contributions to our many debates.

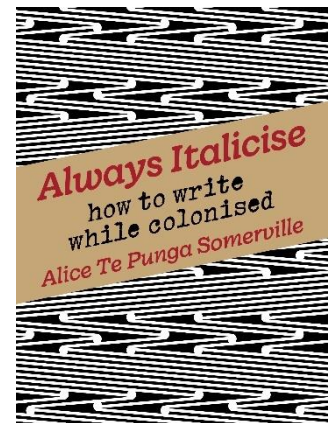
I am delighted to announce that the winner of the Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry is Alice Te Punga Somerville for *Always Italicise: How to write while colonised*.

Always Italicise: How to Write While Colonised

by Alice Te Punga Somerville

Published by Auckland University Press

Alice Te Punga Somerville's collection, *Always Italicise: How to Write While Colonised*, voyages out like a waka seeking new ground, visiting four areas of life: language in *Reo*, identity in *Invisible Ink*, work in *Mahi* and love in *Aroha*. Readers are challenged but crucially invited in to accept that challenge and reach a new understanding of what it is to be a Māori woman scholar, mother and wife in 2022, encountering and navigating uncomfortable and hostile spaces. *Always Italicise* shines for its finely crafted, poetically fluent and witty explorations of racism, colonisation, class, language and relationships. A fine collection, establishing and marking a new place to stand.



BOOKSELLERS AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND AWARD FOR ILLUSTRATED NON-FICTION

Judges' remarks delivered by Jared Davidson

Judges Stephen Stehlin, Anna-Marie White and I feared we'd be overwhelmed by legions of coffee-table books marching into our lives. However, this was quickly dashed as boxes of high-quality titles arrived on our doorsteps. Māori histories. Māori and Pasifika art. Ecology and the extra-human environment. Food sovereignty. Autism. A range of compelling topics from 19 publishers – as well as a handful of quality self-published books – are signs of a confident moment in book production. The number of Māori and Pasifika authors is especially exciting. Congratulations to all the writers, designers, publishers and assistants who made this year's submissions so rich and diverse.

Our mini book club was thrilled to read the 33 books in our category – perhaps a little too thrilled, for we devoured them in record time. We were looking for wonder and found it among a very strong field. But it was clear which of the books demonstrated excellence in production and design, as well as topicality and importance. In the words of my fellow judges, they were just 'cool'.

With that in mind, I am pleased to announce that the winner of the Booksellers Aotearoa New Zealand Award for Illustrated Non-Fiction is Nick Bollinger for *Jumping Sundays: The Rise and Fall of the Counterculture in Aotearoa*.

Jumping Sundays: The Rise and Fall of the Counterculture in Aotearoa New Zealand by Nick Bollinger

Published by Auckland University Press

With its homage to the look and feel of a countercultural tract, *Jumping Sundays* is a triumph of production and design. The cover alone is one of the best of the year and signals the visual excellence that follows: vibrant endpapers, distinctive typography and bountiful images on an appropriately uncoated stock. Yet *Jumping Sundays* is more than just a well-designed book. Drawing on archival research and rich personal narratives, Nick Bollinger has written a compelling account of an epoch-making period, linking international trends to the local context in a purposeful-yet-playful way. A joy to read and to hold, *Jumping Sundays* is a fantastic example of scholarship, creativity and craft.

