



Judges' Commentaries on 2026 Finalists and Winners

13 May 2026

2026 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards

One hundred and seventy-eight titles were submitted for the 2026 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards, with nine debut books featuring in the longlist and four in the shortlist. Twenty-three publishers were represented in the four longlists, nine in the four shortlists, and five amongst the nine winners.

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

Ockham New Zealand Book Awards

Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction

Judges' remarks delivered by convenor Craig Cliff

On behalf of my fellow judges, Alison Wong and Melissa Oliver, let me exclaim: what a pleasure it was to read 52 works of fiction published last year!

We had novels and collections of stories and novellas. We had humour and history, mystery and sci-fi. Books from self-publishers, new presses and old stalwarts. Some covers were controversial. We learnt a lot. Older writers tackled climate change. Younger writers dug into intergenerational trauma.

Anyone who thinks they can pin down contemporary fiction in Aotearoa isn't reading widely enough. He toi whakairo, he mana tangata.

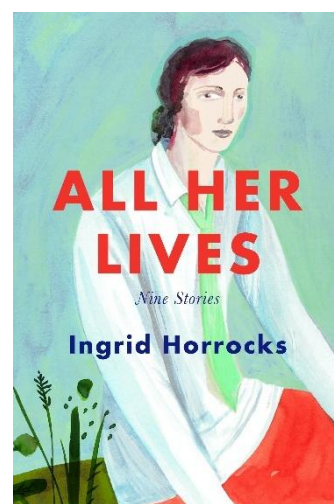
As a panel, we struggled each time we needed to narrow the field. How to fit twelve into ten? Five into four? Some much quality, so much depth. Leslie Hurtig joined as the international judge post-shortlisting. Four judges, four books. Initially we each stumped for a different winner. After more discussion (and a little maths), one title rose to the top.

I am delighted to announce the winner of the Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize for Fiction is Ingrid Horrocks for *All Her Lives*.

All Her Lives by Ingrid Horrocks

Published by Te Herenga Waka University Press

Poet, memoirist and scholar Ingrid Horrocks turns to fiction and crushes it. Across nine elegant, probing stories that range from the late eighteenth century to the unsettled present, from rural Wairarapa to icy Norwegian ports and rave culture Berlin, *All Her Lives* explores the shifting expectations and constraints of womanhood. Characters confront leaky rentals and sexual assault, join anti-nuclear and climate movements, while seeking many forms of love. Sparks from one story and one generation ignite elsewhere in the book, illustrating how material conditions, freedoms and ideologies can be shaped, for better or worse, by our forebears. Emotionally intelligent and historically alert, this book is an outrageously good addition to the top shelf of New Zealand fiction.



General Non-Fiction Award

Judges' remarks delivered by convenor Philip Matthews

Before I announce a winner, some words about the category. There is an ongoing micro-debate within the New Zealand literary scene about general non-fiction. Is general too general? Can a hefty work of academic scholarship really be compared to a memoir or creative non-fiction?

It's a big question but the judges came down on the side of the generalists. This is a varied and possibly even overwhelming category, but we discovered it is a rich, healthy and rewarding one. We read 53 books of general non-fiction, and both the quality and the range was impressive.

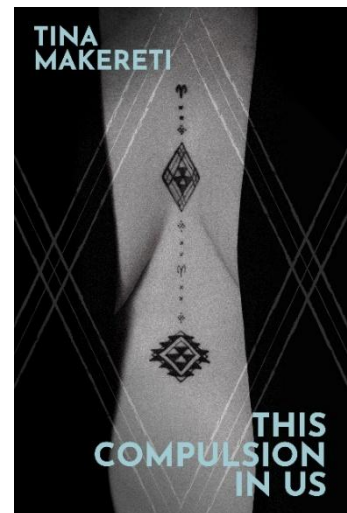
The best of the books were those that aimed for intelligent readability. The judges were conscious this is a literature prize and we wanted to honour books written for ordinary readers as well as specialists. I want to acknowledge my fantastic fellow judges Dan Salmon and Georgina Tuari Stewart. We shared a great experience and we all learned a lot.

I am very pleased to announce the winner of the general non-fiction award is Tina Makereti for *This Compulsion in Us*.

This Compulsion in Us by Tina Makereti

Published by Te Herenga Waka University Press

Tina Makereti is better known as a writer of fiction, and she uses her well-honed literary skills to advantage in this artful and skilfully curated collection of essays, adding up to an alternative memoir of one person's discoveries about her whakapapa and childhood family, and her place in national society and within Māori literature. The linked essays build with a growing sense of connection, as Makereti craftily balances the wider social context and her own fascinating life story. Complex yet universal, *This Compulsion in Us* is an honest, revealing and stimulating work, and a celebration of writing as a timeless way of experiencing and understanding the world and ourselves.



Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry

Judges' remarks delivered by convenor Daren Kamali

Tonight, we celebrate another extraordinary year for Aotearoa New Zealand poetry, full of remarkable new and established voices.

First though, I would like to acknowledge my fellow judges, Claudia Herz Jardine and Jordan Hamel. Together, we undertook the joyful yet formidable task of selecting the longlist and our finalists from 39 entries for the Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry 2026.

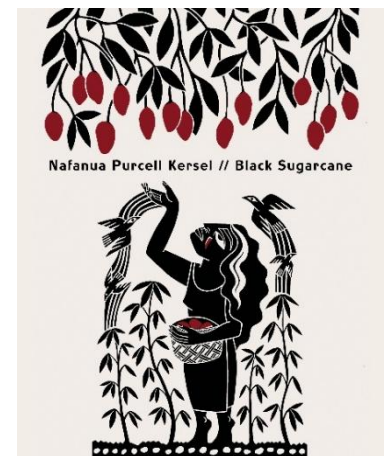
The depth, courage, and innovation across submissions made every decision both difficult and deeply rewarding, and we salute the four collections of literary excellence that made our shortlist – all extremely well written, edited, researched and versed on the page.

In the end, our decision came down to a work of resonance, strength, and unforgettable poetic vision. I am pleased to announce the 2026 winner of the Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry is Nafanua Purcell Kersel with her powerful first collection, *Black Sugarcane*.

Black Sugarcane by Nafanua Purcell Kersel

Published by Te Herenga Waka University Press

Black Sugarcane is a work of rare linguistic grace and emotional precision, a collection that transforms memory, land, and inheritance into something both intimate and expansive. With a voice that is at once grounded and lyrical, the poet navigates histories of labour, migration, and identity, distilling them into images that linger long after the page is turned. Each poem pulses with clarity, restraint, and quiet power, revealing the extraordinary within the ordinary. The collection's careful architecture and tonal control mark it as a deeply considered achievement for debut author Nafanua Purcell Kersel. *Black Sugarcane* not only enriches contemporary poetry but also expands its possibilities, offering a resonant, enduring contribution to the literary landscape today.



BookHub Award for Illustrated Non-Fiction

Judges' remarks delivered by Lauren Gutsell

Standing with my fellow judges, Natalie Robertson and Rebekah White, we heartily commend the writers, photographers, designers, archivists, publishers, editors and the many other contributors that have brought these incredible books to life. I acknowledge Natalie and Rebekah for their commitment to this process and for their kindness throughout our open, honest, and robust discussions.

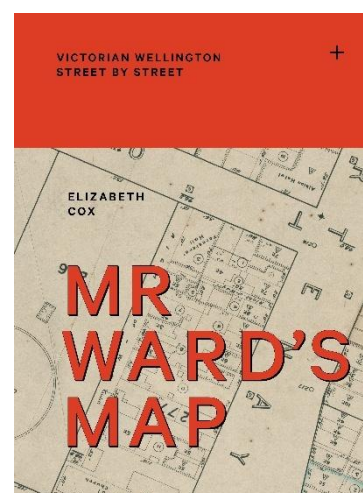
Since receiving cartons of books, we have spent every day thinking about them – 34 entries became the 10 longlisted, to the four shortlisted, to this moment, the one winner. Throughout our deliberations, we have felt the weight of this decision.

During this process, we prioritised scholarship, innovation, originality, and legacy, carefully considering the crucial relationship between the text and the illustrative material. We were also seeking moments of joy and delight – the books that were a pleasure to read and experience, that challenged us, that opened up new ways of thinking, and those that stayed with us long after we finished reading them.

I am very pleased to announce the winner of the BookHub Award for Illustrated Non-Fiction is Elizabeth Cox for *Mr Ward's Map*.

Mr Ward's Map: Victorian Wellington Street by Street by Elizabeth Cox
Published by Massey University Press

Innovative, engaging and inherently human, *Mr Ward's Map* is a celebration of research, storytelling, and archives. Elizabeth Cox deployed one historic cartographic document as the foundation for a superbly written publication that bridges multiple world views and time periods – highlighting one source and how it resonates in the contemporary moment. Across 560 pages, Cox unpacks the 88 sheets of Mr Ward's map, alongside carefully selected archival photography and illustrations. While anchored in Victorian Wellington, Cox presents a range of complex issues and histories that have universal reach. This skilfully interweaves impacts of colonial land alienation on tangata whenua, reveals imbalances and intersectional experiences of race, class and gender, and offers a reflection of societal changes, and what remains the same.



Te Mūrau o te Tuhi Māori Language Award

Judge's remarks delivered by Dr Hone Morris

Tēnā anō tātou kei te whare, tātou o te motu kua ikapahi mai nei hei whakanui i tēnei tohu nui whakahirahira. Tuatahi, me mihi te hunga tautoko: Creative NZ, Ockham Residential, Jann Medlicott me te Acorn Foundation, Ko Mary rāua ko Peter Biggs, Bookhub, me te Mātātuhi Foundation. Ka mutu ki a koutou o Auckland Writers Festival.

Tuarua, ka mahi ki a koutou Ngāti Whātua ki Ōrākei i runga anō i ngā hononga tāngaengae e whirihia mai te taura tangata. Inā tā koutou.

Tuatoru, ki Te Tohu Te Mūrau o te Tuhi anō. Ehara tēnei tohu i tētahi tohu hei whakatau noa iho i te kounga o te tuhituhi—ehara—engari he tohu hei whakaatu mai i te hiranga o te tuhinga. He tohu whakarangatira i te ngākau tapatahi e hāpai tonu ana i te hā o te reo Māori. Ko ngā kupu huatau mai i te mātārae o te kaituhi, ki te mata o te arero mai i te arero ki te mata o te pene. Nā reira, ko te pukapuka e tohua ana i tēnei tau ka raua atu ki te pātaka mātātuhi o Aotearoa hei tekoteko o te whare kōrero reo Māori.

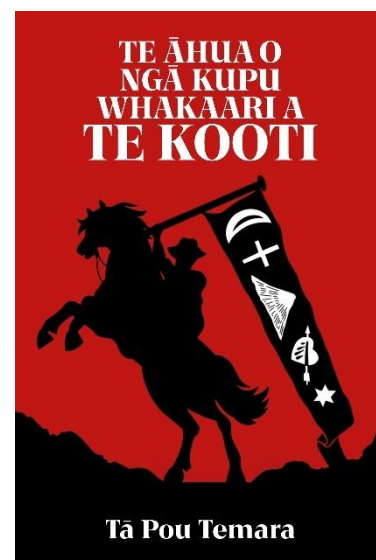
Ā kāti hā, e te whare, nōku te hōnore kia pānui atu ki te motu nei i tēnei kupu: ko te tohu TE MŪRAU O TE TUHI mō te tau e rua mano e rua tekau mā ono ka whakawhiwhia ki Tā Pou Temara mō tana pukapuka *Te Āhua o Ngā Kupu Whakaari a Te Kooti*.

Te Āhua o Ngā Kupu Whakaari a Te Kooti by Tā Pou Temara

Published by Auckland University Press

Ko *Te Āhua o Ngā Kupu Whakaari a Te Kooti*, he mahi rangahau nui whakahirahira e wānanga ana i te rētōtanga, te mana, me te toitūtanga o ngā kupu whakaari me ngā whakataukī, me te hononga ā-ngākau ki te whakapono, ki te whenua, ki te hītori, me te tangata. He mea whakarite te hanganga o te pukapuka nei ki tētahi tupuna whare hei arataki i te kaipānui mai i te tūāpapa o te whare ki tōna whatumanawa, e whakakitea ana te kupu tapu mā ngā whakataukī, ngā kupu whakaari, ngā waiata, me ngā ingoa o ngā whare nā Te Kooti Arikirangi Turuki i tapa. E whakaatu ana a Tā Pou he tapu atua tō te reo poropiti, he maha ōna paparanga tikanga, ā, he kawenga matatika kei runga i te kawē o aua kupu. Mā tēnei pukapuka ka whakarangatira te reo Māori, ka whakahoki i te mauri o te mātauranga Māori, ā, ka waiho he wāhi mā te kaipānui hei whakaaroaro, hei wānanga, ka mutu, kia ū ki tōna ake māramatanga.

Te Āhua o Ngā Kupu Whakaari a Te Kooti is a significant scholarly work that examines the depth, authority, and enduring power of kupu whakaari and whakataukī, and the intimate connections to faith, land, history, and people. Structured metaphorically as a whare tūpuna, the book guides the reader from the foundations of the whare through to its heart, revealing the sacred nature of language through whakataukī, kupu whakaari, waiata, and named houses of Te Kooti Arikirangi Turuki. Tā Pou Temara demonstrates how prophetic language conveys divine tapu, layered meaning, and moral responsibility. This work enriches te reo Māori, restores the mauri of mātauranga Māori, and creates space for readers to reflect, interpret, and arrive at their own understandings.



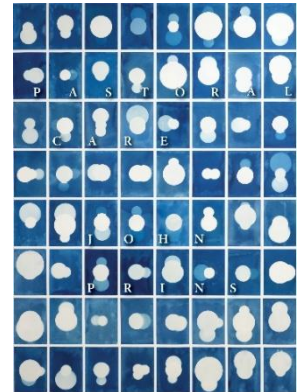
Mātātuhi Foundation Best First Book Awards

The Hubert Church Prize for Fiction

Pastoral Care by John Prins

Published by Otago University Press

A youth group leader seeks solace from an AI chatbot. Two brothers disagree about the future of the family bach. A teacher positions himself for another career change. In John Prins' lively story collection, both men and women battle to balance domestic and work spheres, how they perceive themselves and how they act. Funny, assured, thoughtful, of the moment and of this place, *Pastoral Care* is a grand debut.

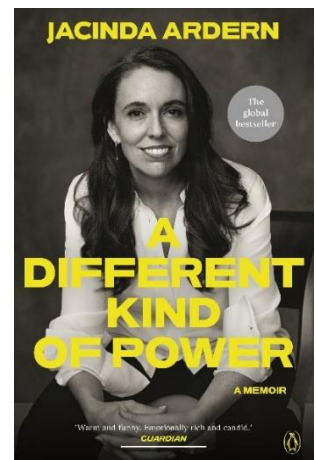


The E.H. McCormick Prize for General Non-Fiction

A Different Kind of Power by Jacinda Ardern

Published by Penguin, Penguin Random House

Good political memoirs and biographies are rare in New Zealand, but former prime minister Jacinda Ardern's first book, *A Different Kind of Power*, is exceptional. A singular figure with both national and global appeal, her time in office was marked by several catastrophic events, including the country's worst terror attack, the deadly White Island eruption, and the defining pandemic. Ardern's thoughtful and rewarding account sheds important light on those years, and on a Kiwi childhood that somehow inadvertently prepared her for the rigours of leadership.

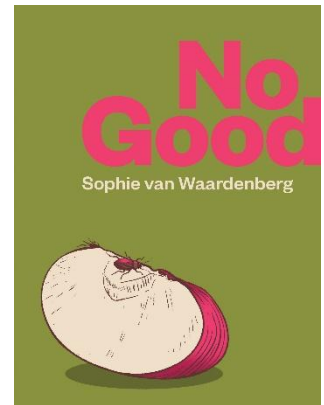


The Jessie Mackay Prize for Poetry

No Good by Sophie van Waardenberg

Published by Auckland University Press

The poetic persona in the poems of *No Good* begs for attention. And why? Sophie van Waardenberg's honed ability to hold the reader's focus is impossible to ignore. *No Good* reads like a stupefying kiss. The poet shares her insights on grief, love and friendship with generosity. She makes the work of editing look effortless. The 'Cremation Sonnets' sequence is particularly impressive for the confidence with which this debut poet tackles the inexpressible, non-literary realities of bereavement.



The Judith Binney Prize for Illustrated Non-Fiction

He Puāwai: A Natural History of New Zealand Flowers by

Philip Garnock-Jones

Published by Auckland University Press

Built out of a career dedicated to research and scientific discovery, *He Puāwai: A Natural History of New Zealand Flowers* cements Philip Garnock-Jones as one of Aotearoa New Zealand's leading botanists. Detailed, accessible and stunningly beautiful in its design, his first book is a celebration of scholarship and the power of stereoscopic photography. In the text, Garnock-Jones reveals the hidden sex life of Aotearoa flora supported by his exquisite macro photographs that communicate a sense of wonder about our natural world.

