

NATIONAL BOOK COUNCIL

1996 NATIONAL AWARD FOR BIOGRAPHY

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COMMENDED

Patsy Adam-Smith: *Goodbye Girlie*, Viking, 1996.

This is the sequel to the author's "Hear the Train Blow". It is written in the characteristic style which has made Patsy Adam-Smith so popular. It portrays Australian "battlers" in a way that only an insider could do. Full of vivid portraits, the text often invokes a good belly laugh as when the author described what happened when her mother sent her to a dance in a corset explored by an inquisitive (and astonished) young man. Easy reading from a true professional.

Sharon Clarke: *Sumner Locke Elliott - Writing Life*, Allen and Unwin.

This is a serious literary biography of the notable Australian-born writer. It describes how and why he had to get away from Australia and assume American citizenship to be recognised and rewarded. The book "Careful, He Might Hear You" sold millions of copies and was turned into a film. The text of Elliott's life is

illuminated with many extracts from *Careful* and from other works, including *Fairyland*, a description of homophobia in the Australia in which he grew up. A dense, serious work, it takes the heroes life as artist and man drawing on memory which Elliott described as "the strongest power I have. It is my lifeline to the truth".

Hayden: *Bill Hayden, An Autobiography.*

This readable account of the former Governor-General's public career to date disarmingly reveals his independent turn of mind and attractive inclination for self-criticism. These qualities are the more astonishing because rather atypical in the top echelons of Australian politics. Well researched and free of the self-justification typical of the *genre*, the book will become an important source for Australia's national history which the author improved by his thoughtful part in it. From policeman to Governor-General is quite a story and Bill Hayden tells it well.

Amirah Inglis: *The Hammer and Sickle and the Washing Up - Memories of an Australian Woman Communist*, Highland House 1995.

This book by the author of the Talking Book of the Year in 1984 is a vivid description of life as an Australian communist in the 1940s and 1950s. It captures poignantly the atmosphere of the time as political orthodoxy, attempted suppression and then self-doubt confronted the small band of idealists. The book is interwoven with the story of the author's life and relationships. It brings back

memories of Baria, Petrov, Benjamin Spock, the 1956 Olympics, *Reedy River* and the controversies surrounding Frank Hardy's *Power without Glory*. A short work (190 pages), it is evocative of a time in Australia's history that has passed. But it is a warning against intolerance. A good mood piece.

Denis Warner, *Wake Me if There's Trouble*, Penguin Books, 1995.

As a war correspondent, Denis Warner's story takes us back into the turbulent recent history of our region. His life during the Second World War and in subsequent conflicts has been remarkable and exciting and it is all captured here and well told. In post-War Japan, during the Korean War and later throughout the long conflict in Vietnam, Warner met a parade of powerful people, good and bad. Through it all, he showed personal integrity and objectivity, professional skill and not a little courage. His book stands as an inspiration for later generations of journalists, many of them living on press releases and reticulated television images. This book makes powerful reading, yet the author almost apologises for troubling us with his story.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Abraham H Biderman: *The World of my Past*, AHP Publications, Melbourne, 1995.

The author of this brilliant account of the holocaust felt compelled to publish his story. We must be grateful that he did. Although highly didactic, it is difficult to put it down. It is a long way from the Lodz ghetto in Poland to leafy Melbourne. Yet the terrible events of Auschwitz, Althammer, Dora and Bergen-Velsen described here have a personal integrity and coherency which is immensely powerful. Specially telling is the repeated criticism of Christian leaders for their failure to lift their voices against what happened. Another book of tears, I am afraid. A book of terrible suffering, unimaginable cruelty and shining determination to survive. On the last train journey, just in front of the Russian soldiers, the author's cattle truck on the way to Belsen was pelted by stones in Austria: but in Czechoslovakia workers threw their lunches to the starving Jewish prisoners. An angry masterpiece.

Judy Cassab: *Diaries*, Knopf, 1996.

Astonishingly enough, this most distinguished Australian painter has produced another contribution to the arts, this time in the field of biography. The record of her diary from the age of 12 begins in Budapest, in the perilous time of war and takes us through Judy Cassab's richly textured life. Here, the portraitist paints pictures in words and many are as vivid and arresting as her better known works of art. It is as if there is a highly creative extra spirit struggling to find its way out of her mind and hands into the world. The early years are the most sharply drawn, bearing out the experience of most of us: the first years of life seem in slow motion. In Judy Cassab's life in

war-torn Hungary she experienced unforgettable perils and excitement. The book is illustrated with interesting pictures which bring together the life of a remarkable woman: painter and writer.

Timonthy Conigrave: *Holding the Man*, McPhee Gribble Publishers, 1995.

This is not a work for the faint-hearted. It is a scrupulously honest description of a young gay man in Melbourne coming out, responding to love and then confronting the world of HIV/AIDS. The story of Tim and John is heart-wrenching as each has to confront, successively, their families, friends and then the terrible journey of AIDS. It is hard to read the last chapters without the interruption of tears. Yet this is the reality of many young Australian lives. It won the 1995 Human Rights Award for Non-Fiction. From its cruel end and relentless realism, the reader emerges from what is truly a love story.

Ross Fitzgerald: *Red Ted - The Life of E G Theodore*, Uni of Queensland Press, 1994.

This is the story of how a boy born in 1884, son of an orthodox priest from Romania rose to be Premier of Queensland, Federal Treasurer and Deputy Prime Minister in the Scullen government. Banished from public office by suggested financial impropriety "Red Ted" Theodore turned to the accumulation of wealth, including by the launch (with Frank Packer) of the *Australian*

Women's Weekly in June 1903(?). Chifley called him "the best financial brain this Parliament has ever known". J T Lang said "when he was beaten he didn't squeal". Unsurprisingly, perhaps, he was one of Paul Keating's heroes. A thorough, illuminating biography where the detail has been consigned to ample footnotes and the reader can trace a remarkable life of ups and downs and ups again. The 1920s and 1930s in Australia are vividly reconstructed. The loss of the financial abilities of Theodore at the critical time of the Depression was fateful for Australia. This masterful book tells the tale of one of the nation's most important "might have beens".

Gordon Matthews: *An Australian Son*, William Heinemann, Australia, 1996.

An evocative story of a determined search for identity. The author who was adopted out at birth by Collette, was taunted at school as an "Abbo". As a young man, he tracked down his parents only to discover that they were Sri Lankan. The story is simply told and illustrates past Australian attitudes to race which still take their toll on human relationships. Shining through the pages is the suffering of Collette, the love of the adopting parents and the determination of the author to discover his own true identity.

David Marr (ed): *Patrick White Letters*, Random House, 1995.

This painstaking collection of the letters on our only Nobel Laureate for literature is lovingly selected and assembled by the

author whose previous *Patrick White: A Life* was universally acclaimed. It starts with a letter to Father Xmas in December 1918 and finishes with a "Happy New Year if That is Possible" in 1990, the year of White's death. The second-last letter warns that the author was becoming, like most biographers "unfortunately obsessed with their subject. All biographies are too long". We must be grateful for David Marr's obsession. Recorded here is brilliant wit, sharp insights into people, "bitchery and bitterness" but also, surprisingly, flashes of gentleness and kindness which belie the public image. An outstanding work of scholarship but one which is also easy to read because of the outrageous verbal jewels scattered on every page.

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REMARKS ON JUDGING

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG

The task of judging the National Award for Biography rivals, in difficulty, many of the other tasks of judging which have been my lot in life.

The sheer quantity of the entries was large and the quality matched.

I knew a number of the authors (such as Judy Cassab, David Marr, the Hon W G Hayden and Ross Fitzgerald). But I have endeavoured to put this personal acquaintance out of account. It is inevitable that a judge of such a prize will bring to bear his or her own experience and interests in comparing and evaluating the entries. This is inescapable. A completely objective assessment of biography is impossible. Some readers will be fascinated by literary biographies which will leave others quite cold. Others will devour a political "life" which many will discard as unendurable.

Fortunately, my interests are relatively catholic. In the result, the finalists include books by men and women; political, literary and

personal stories; books by the great and good and other unknown authors.

The themes treated in these biographies are varied. They range from the tender personal accounts of life's misfortune, to the scholarly but readable prose and horror stories of suffering almost painful to read.

A rich crop of publications bringing credit on the authors, publishers and those who offer and organise this award in Vancouver have been proud, as a fellow citizen, to participate and judge.