

STELLA WINNER stellar writers

This year's Southern Highlands Writers' Festival will host the recent winner of the Stella Prize, Emily Bitto. KYLIE MATTHEWS asks Emily about her life-changing novel and finds out which other acclaimed writers will entertain and inform readers at the festival.



PHOTOGRAPH TIM GREY

IT'S THE MORNING AFTER A NIGHT OF CELEBRATION FOR Emily Bitto, the Melbourne-based writer who has been awarded this year's Stella Prize, a \$50,000 literary prize that has catapulted her into the spotlight and brought national acclaim for her debut novel, *The Strays*.

The University of Melbourne PhD graduate might be forgiven for partaking of a few celebratory champagnes behind the bar she and her partner own and run in the funky inner-city suburb of Carlton. "No, no, not too much of a party...although I did have a martini," she laughs. "I'm all bright and bushy-tailed this morning!"

The Stella Prize, named after the famous author Stella Maria Sarah 'Miles' Franklin, is awarded annually to the best work of literature written by a woman. Winning at the start of her career as an author is "amazing and a huge honour" says Emily. "There are so many facets to it and I'm still getting my head around what it will mean long term for my career."

In the short term, life is going to be busy, as Emily travels the country taking part in writers' festivals and events, including the Southern Highlands Writers' Festival, which runs from July 10 to 12. Emily will join established novelists and writers including Malcolm Knox and Don Watson, who will speak to audiences about the process of writing, themes behind their writing, and the joys of the written word.

Emily's novel, *The Strays*, was born out of her PhD in creative writing. Set in the 1930s, it centres around Lily, an only child of ordinary, decent, slightly anxious parents

who have struggled to keep the family intact through the Depression. At the age of eight, Lily meets Eva, the daughter of controversial modernist painter Evan Trentham and his wife Helena, whose 'old money' is financing her husband's career. Lily's observations of this bohemian, idealistic yet disorderly household are poignant. As more young artists join the circle or actually move in, less attention is paid to the girls, and events slide imperceptibly into the jaws of a crisis.

Emily has already started her second novel and says winning the Stella Prize will make a big difference to its progress. "On a practical level, the prize money will give me writing time, which is such an incredible gift."

She has been a big supporter of the prize, whose previous recipients were Claire Wright (*The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*, 2014) and Carrie Tiffany (*Mateship with Birds*, 2013). The prize's broader agenda is to recognise and celebrate Australian women writers' contribution to literature; bring more readers to books by women and thus increase their sales; and provide role models for schoolgirls and emerging female writers.

"In its three years, the Stella Prize has had a huge impact on the Australian literary landscape and has initiated a vital dialogue about gender within the public domain," Emily says. "I'm honoured to have won a prize that has grown from a motive so dear to my own heart: the desire to redress gender inequality in the literary world."

This year's guest of honour at the festival's literary dinner will also shine the spotlight on gender issues. Prominent ABC

School of thought

Oxley College headmaster Michael Parker (pictured) knows how to get children thinking – and he intends to get parents thinking too when he speaks at this year’s Southern Highlands Writers’ Festival about discussing ethics with children.

Michael, the former deputy headmaster and head of the senior school at Cranbrook School in Sydney, moved to Bowral last year to take the reins at Oxley College in Burradoo. He has a law degree and a masters degree in teaching philosophy to children. He is also an author, having written textbooks, children’s fiction and, most recently, two books on ethics, *Talk With Your Kids: Ethics* and *Talk With Your Kids: Big Ideas*.

Michael wrote these books especially for parents to provoke interesting ethical discourse with children around the dining table. “The reason to chew over ethical issues is because we all live in a society and we work very closely together and the actions that we have impact on everybody else,” he says. “We have to talk about what is right, good and proper.”

When it comes to children, he says discussion centred on ethical issues fosters their innate curiosity. “I think curiosity and a sense of wonder are such amazing qualities. To really fan the flames of that when you’re young means you have an enriching, enlightening and stimulating life as a child that you get to take through to adulthood.”



Michael believes parents and educators must think about how to encourage the next generation to be ethical thinkers and decent members of society. “In the future. . . I’m pretty sure that creativity and out-of-the-box thinking are going to really set people apart. It’s good to do as much of that as you can when you’re young.”

Michael has already made additions to the curriculum at Oxley College in an effort to provoke thought and discussion among students. “We’ve started a subject called Cornerstone, which is compulsory for years 7 to 10 twice a week,” he says. “It’s big ideas put

together as a course so you’ve got lessons about what it is to live in a society, lessons about what is really you – is it your memories, your DNA, that sort of thing.”

He says the response from students has been positive. “I’m hearing only good things from students who are saying they like the discussion.”

Michael Parker’s free session will be held in the theatrette at Bradman Museum on Saturday, July 11, at 11.15am.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT DON WATSON, GERALDINE DOOGUE, ROBERT DESSAIX AND DAVID MARR



TV and radio journalist Geraldine Doogue, author of *The Climb, Conversations with Australian Women in Power*, will address guests at E2, Eschalot Restaurant’s private dining room, headed by award-winning chef Richard Kemp.

“Geraldine will discuss how women are represented at the top levels in Australia,” says festival director Michaela Bolzan. “It is a great honour to have a speaker of such calibre at our flagship event.”

Michaela approached some of Australia’s most influential writers to take part in her fourth festival. “I wanted to develop a program that will get our audiences involved in discussing some of the bigger social issues we’re currently facing,” she says.

A highlight will be a discussion with biographer and award-winning journalist David Marr. “David is one of this country’s most respected writers. His views on politics and culture have a remarkable influence on our cultural narrative and his session promises to be both enlightening and thought-provoking.

“Another writer I’m thrilled is part of this year’s line up is Robert Dessaix, one of this country’s finest writers.

“It is wonderful to bring so many esteemed Australian writers together in the one place, right here in the Highlands, and I encourage everyone to come along and get involved.”  

The fourth Southern Highlands Writers’ Festival runs from July 10 to 12 at the Bradman Museum, Bowral. To see the festival’s program and buy tickets, visit shwf.com.au or The Bookshop Bowral.