

# LETTERS

## Hands off Miles!

Dear Editor,

I can't share your enthusiasm for a 'rejuvenated' Miles Franklin Award (Advances, July–August 2010). On the evidence of the latest shortlist and winner, it is shifting towards a best-seller award for commercially successful genre fiction. This will no doubt please booksellers. But pity the writers who continue to grapple with Australian life if it also ignores Miles Franklin's stipulation about the subject matter. There is a miniscule overseas market for this fiction, and one of the last means of supporting these writers will disappear.

**Susan Lever, Erskineville, NSW**

Dear Editor,

Whatever next! First we hear that the award ceremony is to be held around Australia in future. Well, it's been in Sydney for over fifty years, so maybe change is a good idea, though in my experience the further you go from Miles's home state the less sure you can be of a roll-up. Every second year somewhere else would probably be a better bet.

Now we learn from last month's *ABR* that the award could be 'rejuvenated' by 'widening' the terms of the award (Advances, July–August 2010). Leaving aside the idea that the award needs 'rejuvenation' – shorthand for more than the present \$42,000 prize money – the terms of the award as set down in Miles Franklin's will are already very wide; and the prospect of interference with a writer's literary estate and clearly expressed intentions in a legal document should be enough to send shivers down the spine of anyone thinking of making a bequest to a cultural institution.

Disentangling the drivers of this objectionable proposal is too big a task here. What needs to be said is that the Franklin prize is special. Why is it special? First, it was established by a writer for the benefit of writers. So far as I know, there are still only two others in Australia: the Patrick White Award

and the Magarey Medal. Second, it is for a subject – 'Australian life in any of its phases' – just as the Archibald Prize is for a portrait and the Wynne for a landscape. Third, anyone from anywhere in the world can enter, provided the work was published in the preceding year and deals with 'Australian life in any of its phases'. That is to say, in terms of eligibility the Franklin award is an international award. To enter for the Pulitzer for fiction you have to be an American citizen, and most if not all literary prizes in this country specify Australian citizenship or residence. In my view, it would be a good thing if the Miles Franklin Award went to a non-Australian writer very soon.

A friend of Miles Franklin's once remarked that she was too clever for the real world. Maybe. But it doesn't take too much brainpower to recognise that the Franklin Award is special and historic, integral to our cultural history. I am sure I will not be the only one to object to poorly considered proposals to fundamentally change its character. Both the Association for the Study of Australian Literature and the Australian Society of Authors would have an interest for starters.

Finally, if some writers don't feel comfortable with the award as it is, they don't have to enter; and if their publisher does so against their wishes and they win, they can always give the money back. Better still, they could support the award. Instead of urging that the award be made into a yet another 'best book' prize, they should do something practical to keep it up where it belongs by donating to the prize fund. If the associations immediately affected, the winners, and the family and friends all did their bit, there soon would be plenty in the kitty to satisfy even the most hard-pressed writer.

**Jill Roe, Pearl Beach, NSW**

## Peter Rose replies:

I fail to see how the Miles Franklin Award differs fundamentally from other 'best book prizes', or why it should.

Also, when I spoke of the possible rejuvenation of the Miles Franklin Award, I was not using shorthand for an increase in the prize money. For most writers, certainly those without permanent salaries or much superannuation, \$42,000 is a handsome prize. And why should it be left to winners – even their families and friends – to 'do their bit' and supplement the prize money? Why not the trustees, professionals, interested onlookers, etc.?

Given the welcome renewal of interest by The Trust Company, an investigation into the possible widening of the pool of eligible authors seems timely. Authorship itself often conveys a national sensibility, irrespective of where the tale is set (think of *An Imaginary Life*, doubtless excluded at the time). That's one aspect that might be scrutinised. The Miles Franklin Award would hardly be the first cultural benefaction to be re-examined long after its creation. The Rhodes Scholarship is just one famous example.

Professor Roe is not alone in regarding the Award as 'special'. It is this consolidated prestige that accounts for many people's desire to preserve its unique status, which is by no means guaranteed. Surely the inclusion of writers of the eminence of J.M. Coetzee and David Malouf (ineligible this year) would enhance the Award. To paraphrase Miles Franklin's biographer, change may just be a good thing after all.

## A place at the table

Dear Editor,

In her review of my new book on Christopher Isherwood, Sarah Kanowski asks why I would cite a review of Isherwood's work that appeared as long ago as 1979 (July–August 2010). Is it really such a surprise that I should go to some pains to place Isherwood in the context of the dominant ideas operating in his time? And is it such a stretch to suggest that late twentieth-century medico-scientific prejudice might still be in operation today?