

## THE 2016 STELLA PRIZE SHORTLIST: JUDGES' REPORT



### ***Six Bedrooms* by Tegan Bennett Daylight**

The ten stories in this collection take the reader through the six bedrooms of teenagers. A cast of feckless, brilliant and believable characters experience first sexual encounters, illness, death and grief. All the stories in *Six Bedrooms* connect the reader with the world of adolescence, in a strong and urgent representation of the vulnerabilities and the loneliness of the young.

Tegan Bennett Daylight navigates her territory with great energy and skill. Her writing is fine-edged and precise, delivering an insider's view of the minutiae of teenage lives. These stories elicit great concern for the young, and also for the state of parenthood. They are thoughtful, full of understanding about situations and motivations, and, almost painfully, believable.

### ***Hope Farm* by Peggy Frew**

*Hope Farm* concerns thirteen-year-old Silver, who has spent her life being moved from ashram to ashram and commune to commune by her mother Ishtar. In 1985 the latest move – at the urging of her mother's new lover – is to Hope Farm, a run-down, weed-strewn property in rural Victoria, where the commune's adults stubbornly cling to the faded promise of their ideals.

Peggy Frew displays an acute understanding of the powerlessness of a child: Silver is at the mercy of adults who are oblivious to the depth of her emotions and strength of her intellect. She also portrays the sometimes pathetic, sometimes funny, sometimes harmful actions of the book's adults, without allowing them to become caricatures or villains. In spite of its darkness, *Hope Farm* is written in prose infused with love and wonder for the world.

### ***A Few Days in the Country: And Other Stories* by Elizabeth Harrower**

Elizabeth Harrower's short fiction, gathered for the first time in *A Few Days in the Country*, is as vibrant today as when it was first published some decades ago. She convincingly depicts a dark and often unacknowledged side of human behaviour: from a glamorous couple who might be termed psychopathic in contemporary times, to petty acts of vindictiveness perpetuated by characters with domestic authority, each story is a glimpse into the way power can work in individual lives. There are also tender tales about the anxieties of friendship and burgeoning adulthood.

This is a superlative collection, written with great clarity and precision and an understanding of the subterranean intensities of human interactions. It gathers together a constellation of stories from a variety of sources, and exhibits the unerring skill of one of Australia's most significant writers.

### ***The World Without Us* by Mireille Juchau**

Set on the north coast of NSW in the aftermath of a young girl's death from cancer, *The World Without Us* traces the varying effects of grief on the remaining members of her family while emphasising the wider world in which those lives are embedded: a world in which ecological breakdown operates both as metaphor and disturbing fact. Mireille Juchau uses anxieties about the fragility of the natural systems that sustain our lives as a referent for her story of love and loss.

*The World Without Us* is an acute portrait of individuals who persist in the aftermath of loss, recorded in prose that is witty and self-aware, and capable of making poetry from the most mundane aspects of the everyday. It is a book that reminds us that a single human loss can fall with terrible force on those who are left behind.

### ***The Natural Way of Things* by Charlotte Wood**

In *The Natural Way of Things* ten women are imprisoned on an isolated property, forced into hard labour in scorching heat while wearing rough uniforms and vision-impairing bonnets. They are given no reason for their incarceration, but they gradually determine that each has been involved in a public sex scandal, making them dangerous, embarrassing or inconvenient to men who have the power to punish them. As their food runs out and it becomes evident that their guards have also been abandoned by whatever power placed them there, the women are forced to look to each other for survival.

Exposing the threads of misogyny, cowardice and abuses of power embedded in contemporary society, this is a confronting, sometimes deeply painful novel to read. With an unflinching eye and audacious imagination, Charlotte Wood carries us from a nightmare of helplessness and despair to a fantasy of revenge and reckoning.

### ***Small Acts of Disappearance: Essays on Hunger* by Fiona Wright**

*Small Acts of Disappearance* is a collection of essays on anorexia, a disorder as disturbing as it is mysterious, even to its own sufferers. Documenting Fiona Wright's experience from the beginning of her affliction, when she was a student, to her hospitalisation with a life-threateningly extreme version of the illness, the essays display a candour and an intelligence that describe the course of illness with great precision and illuminate the sufferer's motives and actions over time.

The narrative is crosshatched with other experiences and subjects: travel, autobiography, and literature – in particular writers who have used their art to anatomise the extremity of compulsion. The range of Wright's research, from contemporary neurobiologists to old school modernists, and the quality of her insights make *Small Acts of Disappearance* a valuable book. Wright brings a sometimes melancholy, sometimes comic, well-informed honesty to an important subject