

Stella in Schools

By Bec Kavanagh

The Stella Prize was awarded this week for the third time, to debut novelist Emily Bitto for her book *The Strays*. The prize continues to make its mark in Australia's literary culture, as it challenges the unconscious gender bias and encourages readers of all ages to become more aware of their choices. Named after Stella 'Miles' Franklin, the prize has the admirable goals of recognising and celebrating the work of Australian women writers, and awarding one with a significant financial prize to enable them to continue to pursue a literary career.

I started working with the Stella Prize in 2014, in a position contracted to develop teaching resources around the books shortlisted in 2013 and 2014. At the time, I hadn't fully considered the gender bias in my work or in my reading habits. I would have called myself a feminist, but I believed in my own privilege. I'd been lucky enough that being a woman had never set me at a true disadvantage. That's still true. But what is also true is that in year 12, I chose to write about *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, because it seemed like the more 'literary' text to choose for an exam. I don't remember the book at all. The book I do remember is *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, by Carson McCullers, whose ideas about the nature of the lover and the beloved inform my relationships to this day. I should have written about that, but I didn't. I remember looking at the wall of the shelves in my library and being faced with rows upon rows of Patrick White and despairing because I felt no connection to the characters in his books. Many of my choices, shaped as they were by the books that I read, were limited to the roles I saw for myself in characters and their authors.

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In 1901 Stella Maria Sarah 'Miles' Franklin wrote *My Brilliant Career*. She is now regarded as one of Australia's most significant novelists, but her work was published under a pseudonym because 'women's books' weren't taken seriously at the time. If Stella hadn't taken her publisher's advice, changing her name to the more masculine 'Miles', her book, now regarded as one of the great Australian novels, may have vanished without a trace. What else is lost when we discount the contributions of women and girls? I've been lucky enough to have worked in the book industry for over a decade now, and I've spent most of that time working with young adult fiction. In Australia, we're lucky to have a thriving YA industry and there are almost too many exceptional Australian women writing in this category to count. It would be easy, looking at our major YA prizes, the Inky awards and the CBCA awards, to think that at a young adult level we don't have a problem. Cath Crowley, Fiona Wood, and Gabrielle Wang are recognisable names to all of us. But it bothers me that on many lists – VCE text lists, Premier's Reading Challenge (PRC) lists and individual school book lists – to see that Australian women are still so underrepresented. There are so many Australian women writing YA. They write across genres, on a variety of themes and with a good deal of skill. When an author recently told me that she visited a school where students told her 'that they didn't know women wrote YA' I just didn't know what to say. Are the voices of women still being sidelined as not serious enough?

It has been written about with great frequency that boys are reluctant readers. As a result it is often decided that the solution is to give them books that will engage them – books about boys, and more specifically, books about boys doing 'boyish things'. This means that in a lot of classrooms, these books about boys become the set texts. Because, we're told, girls will read anything. It's boys we really need to reach out to. And so girls continue to receive the message that their needs and interests are secondary to boys, while boys are told that the lives of girls and women are of no interest to them. Both of which just aren't true. In a Stella Prize Schools Program panel for the Melbourne Writers Festival in 2014, I held up a book with a cover specifically aimed at girl readers and asked the boys in the audience if they would pick up that book – not one said yes. When I told them what the book was actually about, there were some takers. I then asked these young readers how they felt about gendered marketing, and one boy told us that he felt 'betrayed'. They were disappointed to be excluded as readers based on their gender. Young readers have great capacity for empathy, engagement and critical thinking, if we only give them the opportunity.

Since its inception three years ago, the Stella Prize has managed to achieve a great deal. In addition to the awarding of a significant literary prize, Stella also undertakes the Stella Count, which tracks the comparative review coverage of books by men versus books by women. Moreover, the Stella Prize Schools Program (SPSP) was launched in Victoria in 2014 and has received excellent feedback so far from both teachers and students. In 2015 the program will be extended into NSW, and hopefully Australia wide in coming years. By providing teaching resources and offering text selection advice, we hope to make it easier for teachers to add books by Australian women to their reading lists. In addition, the SPSP tries to provide as much information about the unconscious gender bias as possible, in order to start conversations in and around the classroom.

As the Stella Prize Schools Program moves into its second year I would hope that, in addition to making changes at a list level, we also start to see changes in the way contemporary women's voices are taught and heard. In an article for *The Conversation*, following the announcement of the 2015 Stella Prize, Michelle Smith writes:

The deserved publicity and readership for The Strays and all of the shortlisted works for the Stella Prize is sufficient reason enough for its existence. However, chipping away at ingrained views about women's writing as of niche appeal only for women readers is also a crucial, if difficult, aim to work towards.

The Stella Prize has the potential to inspire great change, particularly at a school level, where young men and young women are starting to imagine the future they want for themselves. As they imagine this future, the voices that they discover in literature will have, as they always have, the power to help shape it. Only through reading characters that are like us, and that are unlike us, will we have the foresight to create a world where there is space enough for everyone.

References

Smith, Michelle (2015) 'Stella 2015 Shortlist Highlights New Literary Voices', *The Conversation*, 13th March, Accessed at <https://theconversation.com/columns/michelle-smith-128?page=2>.

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