

Article Written After I Won The Queensland Premier's Literary Award

I have been writing as long as I can remember, semi-professionally for the past fifteen or so years, in conjunction with my twenty-four year teaching career.

I've actually published quite a lot; over twenty classroom textbooks, either as sole author or co-author, as well as two novels, a book of short stories and some plays. The textbooks in particular have done well, and my first novel – *The Rose Leopard*, published nationally by University of Queensland Press in 2003 – was well-received. That said, like most authors, I have written a great deal more than I have published. This is a past-time that demands persistence, self-belief and a willingness to keep learning, all of the time.

I've won various plaudits in the past for my writing contributions; an Excellence in Educational Publishing Award in 2009 for a series on Shakespeare was a pleasant surprise, and I've been lucky enough to receive prizes and commendations for script, poetry and short story writing. However, winning something as prestigious and 'big' as the Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Young Adult Fiction was, to coin the cliché, beyond my wildest expectation.

I didn't enter the book, which is self-published, thinking that I might win the award. I just hoped that some 'industry' people might read it and perhaps recognise some merit and contact me. When I found out that I had won, I was stunned. The field of authors was so experienced and well-rewarded; I was daunted to even be in their company on the short-list.

My book is called *Drink The Air*, which is part of a quote from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. When I conceived it, I wanted to write about three things:

1. The voices of two teenagers who are forced to overcome difficult personal circumstances but still maintain that lovely, whimsical, honest view of the world that young people have;
2. The power of the performing arts in particular as a way of healing people, as well as helping them, through shared storytelling, to better understand themselves, their families and their communities;
3. My home town of Hervey Bay, with all its paradoxes of loveliness and ugliness.

The novel is written in blank verse, highly accessible but unusual nevertheless. I chose to write it this way because that's how it came to me; in a series of sharp, not-always-connected images. It was like a photo-essay in my head that I needed to transform into words. I always enjoy writing – it's both challenge and relaxation – but I loved writing *Drink The Air*. It was like painting a new, refreshing artwork every time I picked up my metaphoric brush.

One of the delightful offshoots of winning the award has been the response of my students. They are very complementary and enjoy talking with me about it (particularly about the money, to which they seem to think they have some claim!). I think it's really important for students to see and connect with their teachers having 'outside' successes, in whatever field or hobby they might choose. As role models, we need to be part of the whole community, not just that encompassed by the school. When the kids say to me, 'you must be really creative,' I

tend to answer along the lines of; ‘possibly so, but more importantly, I’m persistent and I finish things.’ That’s the lesson to be learned here.

The Award has already led to other opportunities that I will continue to explore. The most significant aspect for me was the recognition that I do have something to offer, and that my work is worthwhile in a range of ways. I was particularly pleased that it was for my first Young Adult novel (but not my last!). I suppose all those years in schools have given me a pretty solid understanding of adolescents, and it was gratifying to be able to write about them in a successful and meaningful manner. I was really conscious and careful throughout the writing to not be patronising to the teenage voice. They have given me such enormous pleasure over the years; I wanted to treat them, through my characters, with respect and affection.

What now? I have other projects happening including a series of textbooks, an adult literary novel and hopefully, in the new year, a sequel to *Drink The Air*. To paraphrase The Carpenters: I’ve only just begun.