

Prime Minister's Literary Awards – Nominee Q&A

Please return your answers to your publicist, or directly to Awards publicist Emma Noble at emma@noblewords.com.au.

1. Why did you become a writer?

I think I grew up with it as an idea, like a second me, trailing along in the background and waiting for his turn to play. I can't remember NOT wanting to write stories. There were, of course, some key moments. At school, I was beyond excited on that day of the month when the Scholastic Book Club catalogues arrived. I was allowed to order three books every month, and I chose VERY carefully. I used to stare at the names of the authors on the front cover and wonder what it would be like, to write something as big and wonderful as that? Now I know – and there's a lovely synergy to the coincidence that Scholastic has become my publisher.

2. What are the best things about being a writer? And the challenges?

Best thing: creating characters and seeing where they intend to take you. My characters run me, rather than the other way around. We have intense but loving relationships. I feel like the landlord to a bunch of disparate, fascinating flatmates.

Equal best thing: talking to my audience, young people, and being reminded about how important books, and reading, are in their lives – sometimes to the point of compensating for other difficulties that they may be experiencing.

Challenge: finding time to write. Finishing what I start. Not being published every time I think I should be published. Going into bookshops and seeing shelf after shelf of imported novels, and very few Australians represented.

3. How do you get started each day?

At the moment I work full-time and write part-time so five days a week are news, breakfast, drive to work and teach. On writing days, I always review the previous day's work – sometimes more – in order to get myself back into the rhythm and the voices of the story. I have a rule about leaving myself something to say for next time – as in, don't quit your writing time when you're done. Quit before then, so it's easier to get started next time.

4. Do you have any writing rituals?

I write out of order; beginning, end, pieces in between, review end, review beginning, work in more pieces. And I always use Times New Roman 12, paragraph 1.15 spacing and double justification. Don't ask me why!

5. Where do you find inspiration?

Everywhere. Writers need to be open to story at all times. The poet Calvino said that we live in 'story-surround'. Oxygen and blood keep us alive; stories keep us relevant and attuned.

6. Any tips for beating writer's block?

Plan well. Move to a different part of your story and try that. Write through the rubbish, rather than be daunted by it. Accept that you will have days when writing 50 words is hard work, and those words might be awful anyway – just as you will have days of immeasurable, unstoppable flow.

7. What's your best advice for new writers?

Read voraciously but focus on other genres. I rarely read books that are classified as being in the same sort of genre as the one in which I write. I'm very wary of derivation of notion or style, conscious or otherwise. Additionally, I don't like the idea that a certain type of book can suddenly become fashionable, usually on the back of effective marketing, so everyone will try to write in that area. Writing is about inviting people into your special, specific prism and sharing the view, not rehashing what someone else has done for the sake of populism or commercialism.

8. When I'm not writing I like to...

Travel. There is no better way of waking yourself up as a writer and ridding yourself of that tortoise-shell of lethargy, dullness and conformity that can form if you don't push yourself outside of your comfort zone.

9. Which book do you most wish you had written?

A Bridge to Terabithia, by Katherine Patterson. Beautifully judged and written, and perfectly balanced, both structurally and tonally. I read it as a part of a teaching course, and it cemented my desire to write in this field.

10. What is your all-time favourite book? And the best book you've read this year?

The best book that I've read this year: Gabriel Garcia Marquez's classic, *Love In The Time of Cholera*. I'm teaching a literature course next year; that's one of the set texts. Unique, imaginative, deliciously playful.

All-time favourite: impossible to say. Instead, I'm going to nominate an author, the great American crime and western writer, Elmore Leonard. No one, to my knowledge or belief, has better explored the rich possibilities that emanate from economy of language and simplicity of style. His brilliance was to make the mundane seem mythical.