
Tony Birch wins the Patrick Award

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When Tony Birch talks about the honour of being named the winner of this year's Patrick White Literary Award, he doesn't immediately dwell on the Australian Nobel laureate's novels.

Instead he talks of how White spoke out about the things that were politically important to him: "I admired the fact that as a writer in his older age he protested against the Vietnam War, that he was a great supporter of Whitlam after the Dismissal and that he had been involved with Jack Munday's protests and the Green Bans."



Author Tony Birch is the first indigenous writer to win the Patrick White Literary Award. Photo: Joe Armao

White's activism strikes a chord with Birch because he is "very involved" with the campaign against the Adani Carmichael coal mine in Queensland. And as a research fellow at Victoria University, his work "is essentially about the relationship between climate change and what we now call protection of country".

Birch, the first Indigenous writer to win the prize, is the author of four books of short stories, a book of poetry, and two novels, the first of which, *Blood*, was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin award, and the second, *Ghost River*, last year won the Victorian Premier's award for Indigenous writing.

The White award, worth \$20,000, is given "to an author who has made an ongoing contribution to Australian literature, but who may not have received due recognition". It was established by White with the proceeds from his 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature.

Birch says his academic work doesn't feed into his creative work. "My point is that while novelists writing about climate change and ecological issues is important, I think any writer who is writing the human condition or connections between people and the value of community is contributing to that as well," he said. "I suppose my writing is broadly about class, but more essentially about valuing people who might otherwise be regarded as marginalised."

He writes often about people living with the consequences of decisions - usually bad ones - they have made, and likes to understand how those characters have got to that point. But he is not judgmental, and imbues his writing with his own philosophy of life, which embraces a strain of tenderness, forgiveness and acceptance.

When Birch received his first royalty cheque for his first book of stories, *Shadow Boxing*, he rushed out to buy a whizzbang coffee machine and a giant flat-screen television. These days he donates a portion of any windfall from writing to Seed, an Indigenous youth climate network, but will use a chunk of Patrick White's money to take his family to his daughter's wedding in Italy.