

How the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* was compiled

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After initial scoping to outline an approach to producing a major new anthology of Australian literature, we held workshops and consultations with just about everyone involved in the process of taking something from being a good idea to becoming a book that people would actually welcome and use. Once our partnerships were in place, with Macquarie University as the research centre and Allen & Unwin as the publisher, and the prospects of funding in sight, we got down to work. What is Australian literature? We answered that question by defining 'Australian' and 'literature' as generously as possible. 'Australian' was any writing by someone born or living in Australia, or about Australia. 'Literature' included the range of non-fiction and occasional writing (essays, letters, diaries, speeches) as well as poetry, fiction and drama (we excluded screenplays for practical reasons). We decided to stay with writing in English, or translated into English, and to arrange the anthology chronologically, starting from 1788 and ending as close to the present as was feasible, with authors who were established by 2000 (although including later work by those authors). Shaping the anthology in sections, we then invited expert contributing editors to make their initial selection: Aboriginal Literature (Anita Heiss and Peter Minter), Literature to 1900 (Elizabeth Webby), Literature 1900-1950 (Nicole Moore), Fiction and Drama from 1950 (Kerryn Goldsworthy) and Poetry and Non-fiction from 1950 (David McCooey), with myself as general editor.

At 600,000 words, the scale of the anthology was as large as we could manage. Within the overall word count, quotas were applied to each section. We wanted to offer a coherent introduction to the full range and variety of Australian writing, known and less well-known. We wanted to do justice to the authors, with choices that could stand alone for readers. We wanted to suggest interesting connections and telling contrasts. The strengths of Indigenous writing, for example, and of all kinds of writing from the late twentieth century, are on show as never before. Every new inclusion, however, meant a painful omission somewhere else. It was like creating a jigsaw puzzle.

As the contributing editors compared notes on their selections, and as feedback was received from our distinguished board of national and international advisors, further revision took place—horse-trading even—as new suggestions were taken on board, and as differing editorial approaches bounced off each other, always against the pressure of word counts. In accordance with our preference for whole works, novelists such as Katharine Susannah Prichard, Murray Bail and Gail Jones are represented by complete short stories. In a few cases, writers are not included simply because their work proved too difficult to excerpt satisfactorily; other authors are represented by extracts that show them at their best. The selection is indicative rather than

exhaustive. It is comprehensive in the sense that it includes examples of most things within a coherent and balanced survey of Australian writing.

The selection criteria can be summarized as: literary quality; cultural significance or representativeness; readerly appeal. These criteria are debatable and overlapping, and most works that made the cut meet all three. Each is 'compelling' in itself—our short-hand criterion—and adds something vital to the whole. And while we did not choose works according to any template of what is 'characteristically' Australian, both the overview and the close-up encounter with the writing in the anthology offer ways to think about shared Australian experiences. But that's for the reader. The selection was a tough process, requiring the rethinking of familiar terrain. It was carried out against strict deadlines and word limits, with much argument and hair-tearing, but also a powerful sense of responsibility to what the writers of Australia have achieved. That commitment has kept us going through the many stages of what has truly been a monumental undertaking. Now the book is here we are proud of what it represents as a gift to readers everywhere. Would we do it all again? Of course. It's how things are kept alive.