

## THE GROLO RUZZENE FOUNDATION PRIZE FOR WRITING ABOUT ITALIANS IN AUSTRALIA

Judges: Robert Pascoe (Convenor), Piero Genovesi and Adriana Nelli

This year we had an increased number of works to consider – including fiction, non-fiction, and drama – suggesting that word of the Prize has spread. It was also pleasing to consider the first play script to be entered for this Prize, a gripping dramatisation of the North Queensland canecutting experience, entitled *Mano Nera* (Black Hand). We enjoyed all of the books, and we detect a growing sophistication in the range and depth of writing about Italians in Australia and Australia's relationship with Italy.

Two of our final three shortlisted works were stories of single Sydney women who look to Italian culture for some purpose and direction in their dissatisfied (and hectic) Anglo-Australian lives. Although the theme is well-worn these two authors (both female) managed to pull off significant achievements, as signified by both books making it into the final list.

### WINNER

**When in Rome: Chasing La Dolce Vita** by Penelope Green

Hachette Livre Australia

Well realised in terms of its structure, plot and significance, *When in Rome* is written in a youthful and nimble style, the text is overflowing with characters and impressions of contemporary Italy. Although it gives an Australian readership a sense of the existential experience that is Italy, it nonetheless does not always succeed in explaining the everyday life of Italians and stops short of full analysis of their culture. Perhaps that is its strength as a story – it does not moralise about Italian life but merely reports images of it. When we set it alongside other popular accounts by English-language writers who describe contemporary Italy (such as Tim Parks) we conclude that *When in Rome* is less judgmental and rather more self-reflexive.

The imagined author, whose name is Penelope, describes how she decided to give up her career in PR, her Sydney apartment, her family in country New South Wales, and even her friends, and go to live in Rome – even though she spoke absolutely no Italian.

Many Australians and Italo-Australians who have travelled to Perugia or to Rome will find that this book is extremely successful in bringing back vivid memories of those landscapes. The long and difficult path to attaining some kind of mastery of spoken Italian is also well described. We feel a strong connection with the author as she struggles to get by with her very limited Italian.

## SHORTLIST

**The Olive Sisters** by Amanda Hampson

Penguin Books Australia

A startling first novel. This too is the story of a Sydney woman who gives up a career in marketing (her business has gone bad), a stylish apartment, her daughter, and her friends.

Adrienne Bennett retreats to Duffy's Creek, to an old house bequeathed to her by a dead and long-lost father, Jack. As Adrienne and her daughter Lauren sort through the belongings in the house, and meet a neighbour, Mrs Oldfield, we imagine that this will be a detective novel, with the details of her family history gradually revealed through patient interrogation of the clues in Duffy's Creek. Very soon, however, the novel changes direction and becomes two narratives told side by side. One is the gradual accommodation of this cityslicker to country life, the other is the story of an immigrant Italian family whose house and adjacent olive grove this property was.

Unfortunately the family history narrative overtakes the contemporary narrative fairly quickly.

However, the historical details of this second narrative are very accurate and well told. We learn that the Martino family is subjected to good old-fashioned Anglo-Australian racism that dates the story to the 1920s. Like many other immigrant families of the period, they smuggle their favourite foodstuffs into Australia.

Francesco Martino wants to cultivate an olive plantation and make a business of it – but, true to the times, nobody takes the idea seriously.

The novel also contains outstanding descriptions of the Australian landscape and its transformation at the hands of an Italo-Australian contadino.

Just as Kate Grenville manages in *The Secret River* to put in words the beauty of the Hawkesbury River, so too Hampson succeeds in depicting the landscape of the New South Wales hinterland. Above all, her account of the two sisters to whom the title alludes is convincing and sustained. We also get to understand why Adrienne's father deserts her, and we almost forgive him.

**From Tuscany to Victoria: The Life and Work of Pietro Baracchi, Carlo Catani, Ettore Checchi**

by Daniela Volpe

Italian Australian Institute

This book is superbly researched and technically well written. It will inspire other group biographies of the Italo-Australian experience. Its only faults are that it reads still too much like a thesis, despite some skilful editing, and that Checchi's life pales alongside those of his two friends – there simply is much less of a story to tell about him.