

Dennis Haskell's speech at the ceremony for the 2011 Australia Council Writers Emeritus award

The Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts is pleased to announce Australian poet Robert Gray as the recipient of this year's \$50,000 Australia Council Writers' Emeritus award.

The following speech by [Dennis Haskell](#)

(http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about_us/our_structure/artform_boards/literature_board/literature_board_members#haskell), Chair of the [Literature Board](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/artforms/literature) (<http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/artforms/literature>) and Winthrop Professor of English and Cultural Studies at the [University of Western Australia](http://www.uwa.edu.au/) (<http://www.uwa.edu.au/>), at the ceremony for the 2011 [Australia Council Writers Emeritus](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/grants/grants/writers_emeritus_award_-_literature) (http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/grants/grants/writers_emeritus_award_-_literature) award (the speech was delivered on Professor Haskell's behalf by Susan Hayes, Director, Literature).

The Literature Board's main activity is to give grants to selected writers, writers' organizations, magazines and publishers, but once a year it considers nominations for its Emeritus Award. This is not a grant but an award in recognition of an individual's contribution to Australian literature through the creation of a significant and substantial body of creative work. It is the major award for literature offered by the Australia Council and is the closest thing that the nation has to a Nobel Prize for literature for Australians. In many years no award is made. I am delighted to announce that in 2011 the Literature Board has decided to make an award, and it is to the poet, editor, reviewer and memoirist, Robert Gray.

Robert is best-known as one of Australia's major poets, the author of eight individual volumes published in Australia and overseas, plus a number of editions of a Selected Poems, ever expanding like Whitman's Leaves of Grass. He is also, with Geoffrey Lehmann, an important anthologist of Australian poetry, work which has culminated in their publication this year of Australian Poetry Since 1788, at 1100 pages the largest and most comprehensive anthology of Australian poetry ever to appear. Robert is also the author of an extraordinary memoir, *The Land I Came Through Last*; the title comes from Christopher Brennan, a poet utterly unlike Robert Gray, although both have been wanderers of sorts. *The Land I Came Through Last* is so lyrically written that it is viable to read it as a long prose poem. As with all Robert's work, it is tempting to quote from it endlessly – but I'll save that temptation for the poetry. The memoir does present some of Robert's key ideas, and his courage in adopting and defending them, for most of them have been intellectually unfashionable. One of these ideas is a valuing of realism. "Realism," he writes, "is the foundation of art":

whatever forays we make from that, and we certainly need to experiment, they are minor forms... Realism in art is innately satisfying – it bites down hard into our experience. It is not just style, but is morality – a respect for what is outside ourselves. To feel we have before us an effort at the truth adds another dimension to a work of art.

It is surprising to think of realism as morality as well as aesthetics but it is typical of Robert to come up with such originality of thought. It is fundamental to him to deflect attention from himself, even in a memoir, to "what is outside ourselves". We also have here a belief in the value of any experience, and in the concept of truth. He writes elsewhere that "the commonplace is the sublime". All these ideas underlie all of Robert's writing, including short poems that might on the surface seem just presentations of images. He is a very philosophical writer.

I'm making Robert sound professorially serious; in fact he has a wonderful, razor-like sense of humour. The Literature Board meets, probably to the horror of many grant applicants, in the Patrick White Room, and Patrick White's curmudgeonly face grimaces at us from one wall. I'm pleased to say that Gray is very different to White. Robert was the first winner of the Patrick White Award, at White's direction, for they knew each other. Robert says that when he first met Patrick White "His mouth was like a folded warrant for someone's arrest". Invited to dinner for the first time, Robert found White "inclined toward me

aggressively, with the demeanour of a buzzard whose appetite was about to return". He displayed "a smile as bleak as moonlight on a drought-stricken paddock".

Aside from in Patrick White's face, this brilliance of imagery is found everywhere in Robert's poetry, and it is integral to his belief in the value of things in and for themselves. Unusually in the Western poetic tradition his imagery does not point to a spiritual meaning beyond the physical. "Things as they are are what is mystical", he writes, in a deliberately perverse use of the word "mystical". "Do not believe those who have promised ... that something can be better than the earth". "Our only paradise is the ordinary: to be fed by what is really here" ... "things are worthy ... of ultimate stature". Thus he seeks a poetry of clarity, of a certain wonder and quietude before the external world without the self imposing itself on the world. "Our only place / is to be what we are, to be the dust / of this world". His poetry also celebrates the sensory qualities of the things of the world, particularly in nature: sensory awareness is at least as essential as intellect for perception and understanding: "the world has weight / and colours and contours, / it has a particular / content, and light". Fascinated by painting, Gray has the best eye in Australian poetry: a propped piano lid becomes an "urgent sail, far from home", Venice's Grand Canal "can seem a swan, / with its throat stretched out".

Robert does have one defiant poem that is a kind of negative creed. It's titled "Illusions" and includes:

That humans are a special creation, above the animals. That there is progress in art. That there have been works of art produced in Hollywood. That the specialist in a subject sees it more clearly than does a layman with common sense. That there is a 'self'. That Post-Structuralist Theory is of some significance. That art requires theory.

You can see that his is a defiant, independent intellect, but he has consistently sought an art of sincerity, clarity and sensory awareness, a poetry of humility and celebration that is accessible to all readers. Many readers of his work have pointed to his interest in Buddhism, and he is one of the very few Australian writers drawn to Asian culture because of its philosophical beliefs. As part of this stance, he is also profoundly concerned with connections, and this is another function of his imagery, in which different elements of the world are likened, but never yoked by violence together. He has a poem titled, appropriately for this occasion, "Acceptance Speech", which in its final stanza "accepts all that is / as indivisible; sees it is dependent / on everything in time". Thus we get poems such as the haiku,

The sky, thick with stars, is the floor of a saucepan that's about to boil

in which there is a touch of humour as well as indivisibility.

His poems though, also frequently contain a less-recognised sense of poignancy, perceptions edged with a sense of longing. The whole poem "A Stranger" reads:

I saw how she envied, when she looked out of the bus, that football, even, which they had skyed, as in all their lunchtimes, and which came dropping past the silver tanks, safely, to someone's arms.

Another of Robert's poems declares, "What is most needed is that we become more modest," but in the effort to make him less so in the past he has won NSW and Victorian Premier's Prizes, the Adelaide Writers Week Prize for Poetry, the previously mentioned Patrick White Award, a number of Literature Board grants, and now, to add to the collection, the Australia Council's highest honour, the Emeritus Award, which I now ask him to come forward and accept.

The [Australia Council Writers Emeritus \(http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/grants/grants/writers_emeritus_award_-_literature\)](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/grants/grants/writers_emeritus_award_-_literature) acknowledges the achievements of eminent literary writers 60 years of age and over who have made outstanding and lifelong contributions to Australian literature. The award is valued at \$50,000.

The 2011 award was presented at a ceremony at the Australia Council for the Arts on Friday, 25 November 2011. Please read the [media release \(http://www.australiacouncil.gov.aua/?=117462\)](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.aua/?=117462) for more information about Robert Gray and the 2011 award.