2007 WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PREMIER’S BOOK AWARD WINNERS

NON-FICTION
Antonio BUTI
Sir Ronald Wilson: A Matter of Conscience
UWA Press
This biography is the first comprehensive biography of former High Court Justice, President of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Chancellor of Murdoch University, W.A. Inc. Royal Commissioner and President of the Uniting Church of Australia, the late Sir Ronald Wilson. ‘Sir Ronald Wilson: A Matter of Conscience’ makes an important contribution to legal and political biography, one that will be of immense public significance and interest, containing, as it does, great insights into this highly complex, thoughtful and talented Australian.

POETRY
Hal COLEBATCH
The Light River
connorcourt publishing
Colebatch is one of those versatile literary voices that our 21st century society needs - celebrating both the utterly local, such as the minute glory of shells on Rottnest shores, and the distant ‘scream of jet fighters’ above the hills of Lebanon. As Les Murray says in his foreword, this collection is ‘more tranquil than some of his earlier ones’. It is indeed a ‘light river’ rather than the polemical white-water raftings that Colebatch has sometimes released.

Even so, in ‘The Heroes’ he savages a couple of Australian ex-prime ministers. Colebatch, who in his day jobs as lawyer and media commentator is usually restrained by verbal decorum, can be virulent in verse. Calming down again, he is an assured host, inviting us to share his praise for St. Paul’s Cathedral in London and for more ephemeral high points such as para-sailers soaring above the Swan River.

SCRIPT
Elissa DOWN and Jimmy the Exploder
The Black Balloon
Black Balloon Film Productions
Down skilfully portrays the touching story of a teenage boy, Tom, struggling to deal with his autistic and sometimes embarrassing brother while trying to fit in with his classmates in a new school in a new town. The author draws a convincing portrait of Tom’s family, with his pregnant mother relying on his help to deal with the unpredictable antics of autistic Charlie.

The story of Tom’s growing relationship with school friend Jackie, his genuine affection for Charlie and the challenges he faces with Charlie’s embarrassing behaviour, reaches a dramatic climax with Tom’s explosion of anger when Charlie ruins his birthday party and humiliates him in front of Jackie. Down’s script is truthful, warm and thought-provoking, based on her own family experiences.

HISTORY
Ruth Marchant JAMES
Cottesloe: A Town of Distinction
Town of Cottesloe
An expansion of her earlier book, ‘Heritage of the Pines’ (1977) which concluded at World War II, this volume begins with the period of the ‘first inhabitants’ and early European settlement and brings the story to the present day. It includes extensive new research and interviews, and previously unseen photographs. It combines big
picture issues with the minutiae of everyday life, and ranges across everything from geology to social history, from education to business, from religion to beach culture. Though focussed on one area of Perth’s coastal strip, it also offers some broader reflections about life in Perth.

The book is well designed, its large format lending itself to the attractive use of photographs. The referencing procedures are excellent, with useful appendices and a comprehensive bibliography. The writing is readable and attractive. In all, the author shows her knack for a thorough mining of the past for the information and entertainment of the present.

CHILDREN’S
Liz LOFTHOUSE and Robert INGPEN
Ziba came on a Boat
Penguin/Viking
Beautifully written with spare, lyrical text and deeply moving illustrations, this picture book captures the experiences of a young Afghani girl and her mother escaping to Australia in a small boat. Moods and movement of the story echo the motion of the sea. Using a strong, often monochromatic colour palette, with cover images and endpapers capturing the microcosm of the boat adrift in the deep blues of night and ocean, Ingpen’s incomparable illustrations capture haunting portraits, moments of domestic warmth and the vastness of the sea in its differing moods.

Universal experiences of refugees are condensed into the intimate story of one little girl, as Ziba’s fears and confusion are soothed by memories of home and the comfort of her mother’s presence. Poignant and restrained, open ended but in a hopeful mood, this picture book will have wide appeal to a broad audience as well as young children.

FICTION
Stephen SCOURFIELD
Other Country
Allen & Unwin
A travel editor who with this debut novel has reached leagues beyond mere recall and genial publicity, Scourfield rubs our noses in the dust of his fictional terrain of dysfunction. If we had not previously listened to men with ‘raspy chainsaw voices’, we have now. The author’s talent for authentic dialogue is just one of the qualities making these characters of a harsh northern Australia so credible. There’s a town ‘clinging on…torn between booming mines, pastoralists struggling in a degraded landscape and families on welfare’.

On the rough face of it, this is a story of two brothers and their father but at a deeper level the book evokes many other varieties of creaky relationship. We learn a little of how a real public war, far away in Europe, launched the many private conflicts into which this particular family fell. A glossary, by the way, might have helped overseas readers drawn into the otherness of this Top End but perhaps unable to distinguish ‘swags’ from ‘ringers’ who are ‘larrikining and chiacking’. ‘Other Country’ has pathos and grit in equal measure.

YOUNG ADULTS
Ken SPILLMAN
Love is a UFO
(Young Adults) PAN
For Oscar, life is ‘weird and getting weirder’ after his parents separate, his father moves on to a new relationship, and then Dad suddenly dies. Confused about what he
is supposed to feel. Oscar finds some enlightenment discussing his problems with sympathetic adults, but when his attention is captured by a cute new girl in the park he has yet one more problem to figure out. Family relationships under stress are vividly conveyed through wildly veering emotions.

Chapters are short and punchy, leavened with email exchanges and perfectly capturing the tone and mood of a young teenage boy dealing with complex life issues in the 21st century. How Oscar navigates his way through his adolescent grief with an angry mother, ‘zombie’ sister, Dad’s girlfriend and assorted school problems could be a story drowned in angst, but in the skilful hands of this author, Oscar’s emotional journey is told with sensitivity and a lively dollop of humour.