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Summer reading 2008/9

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Some of the biggest names around have disappointed this year, but others are in top form. Christos Tsiolkas' *The Slap* (Allen & Unwin) is disturbing and exhilarating, a multidimensional look at Australian society through the prism of one controversial moment in the lives of an interconnected group of families in suburban Melbourne. Tim Winton's latest, *Breath* (Hamish Hamilton), is well worth chasing up if you haven't read it yet. He also looks at family, childhood and sex with astonishing and audacious clarity, like Tsiolkas questioning attitudes and assumptions which have become modern-day axioms.

Prizewinners worth following up are the Man Booker winner *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga (Atlantic), Steven Conte's *The Zookeeper's War* (HarperCollins), which won the Prime Minister's Literary Prize, and David Malouf's *Complete Stories* (Random House) which took out the inaugural Australia-Asia Book Prize this year. The Miles Franklin was won by Steven Carroll with *The Time We Have Taken* (Fourth Estate), the third in his trilogy of contemplative and absorbing novels centred on a suburban family.

Two of Australia's major novelists, Kate Grenville in *The Lieutenant* (Text) and Richard Flanagan in *Wanting* (Knopf), both in their own ways use historical characters and events to explore white Australia's early relations with the Aboriginal inhabitants. Other standout fiction from 2008 comes from debut novelists, such as Jesse Pentecost's *The Con* (ABC Books), a bravura coming-of-age novel about a young music student, and on a quieter note, also from ABC Books, an accomplished novel from Sharlene Miller Brown, *The Retreaters*. Set in central western New South Wales, Brown's novel is gentle, subtle and unpretentious. And one of the best novels of the year was Malla Nunn's *A Beautiful Place to Die* (Macmillan), a crime novel set in South Africa in 1952, bleak and taut and very moving.

If there was an award for knockabout irreverence it would have to go to William McInnes for his memoir *That'd Be Right* (Hachette), a view of Australian politics and sport through a very idiosyncratic series of autobiographical vignettes. Far more serious is poet Robert Gray's memoir *The Land I Came Through Last* (Giramondo). His difficult childhood is related with candour and without self-pity, and he provides interesting sidelights on prominent writers like Patrick White, Les Murray and Bruce Chatwin. Sally Cooper's *A Burqa and a Hard Place* (Macmillan) is an insider's view of the foreign aid community in Afghanistan, not always flattering either to the United Nations or the people of Afghanistan, though in general UN comes out worse. But the most disillusioning book of recent times for many people will be Colette Livermore's *Hope Endures* (William Heinemann). Livermore spent eleven years as a nun in Mother Theresa's order, the Missionaries of Charity, trying to help the poor in Manila, Calcutta and outback Australia. She found that the main obstacles were not lack of resources but an inverse pride which stifled initiative and intelligence and encouraged petty tyranny within the order's rigid hierarchy. *Hope Endures* is a clear-

eyed and uncompromising account of one of the twentieth century's most cherished icons and a salutary reminder of the difficulties involved in institutionalised charity.

If your taste runs to big biographies, it's worth looking out for Brian Matthews' *Manning Clark* (Allen & Unwin), a lively and detailed account of the life of the colossus of Australian historians. Another major figure of the last century to receive the full treatment is novelist Miles Franklin, in Jill Roe's *Stella Miles Franklin* (Fourth Estate) (reviewed in this issue). Weighing in at 700-odd pages, this is a comprehensive look at a unique woman whose name is commemorated in the prize she endowed, but whose work is now remembered by most people only through Gillian Armstrong's 1979 movie of *My Brilliant Career*. Closer to home, *Roma the First* by Susan Magarey and Kerrie Round (Wakefield) is a fascinating account not only of Roma Mitchell's life but of Adelaide's politics and society during a period of great change.

Black Inc's *Best Australian* series is always worth investigating. This year, Peter Rose has once again gathered the *Best Australian Poems 2008* (reviewed this issue), and David Marr has compiled the *Best Australian Essays 2008*, drawing together pieces on all sorts of subjects by some of our best writers, including Christos Tsiolkas, Robyn Davidson, Nicolas Rothwell, Kate Jennings and Marr himself. Emily Maguire's *Princesses and Pornstars* (Text) is a passionate appeal to a new generation to rethink and reanimate feminism. *The Duck that Won the Lottery and 99 Other Bad Arguments* (Granta) is an entertaining book with a serious purpose by philosopher Julian Baggini, dissecting the rhetorical tricks used by politicians, advertisers and even comedians to bamboozle us. Which shouldn't stop us enjoying Catherine Deveny's *Say When* (Black Inc), a selection of her outspoken and often outrageous columns from *The Age*.