



1 September 2024

Sisters in Crime's 24th Davitt Awards winners announced: Debut books triumph

Debut books triumphed at Sisters in Crime's 24th Davitt Awards for best women's crime and mystery books on Saturday night (31 August).

Four of the six winning crime and mystery books were first-time forays into the genre: **Monica Vuu** (Sandfly, Tas) for **Best Adult Novel** for *When One of Us Hurts* (Pan Macmillan Australia); **Amy Doak** (Flora Hill, Vic) for the **Best Young Adult Novel** for *Eleanor Jones is Not a Murderer* (Penguin Random House Australia); **Rebecca Hazel** (Northern Beaches, NSW) for **Best Non-Fiction Book** for *The Schoolgirl, Her Teacher and His Wife* (Vintage Press); and **Christine Keighery** (Southbank, Vic) for *The Half Brother* (Ultimo Press) for the **Debut** award.

The two other awards presented were to **Lucinda Gifford** (Preston, Vic) for the **Best Children's Novel Award** for *Boris in Switzerland (The Wolves of Greycoat Hall #2)* and to **Alison Goodman** (Brighton, Vic) for *The Benevolent Society of Ill-Mannered Ladies* for **Readers' Choice** award, as judged by the 600 members of Sisters in Crime.

Altogether, 153 books competed. Back in 2001, when the Davitts were launched, there were seven books in contention although the awards didn't then extend to true crime (or non-fiction).

Ruth Wykes, the judges' coordinator, said that there had been a seismic shift with debut books.

"Increasingly, debut books are polished and sophisticated. There is nothing at all amateurish about them," she said.

Wykes said that judging the Davitts gives you "a front-row seat to the wonderful entertainment that is Australian women's crime stories. This year, we travelled the world through the pages of 153 books: from an isolated house in Tasmania, to a road trip to the Kakadu National Park and all the way to a posh boarding school in Switzerland; and a hundred places along the way. We met some rather colourful characters; some who made us laugh out loud, others who left us in tears. And we had moments where we were secretly rooting for the bad guy," she said.

"This year's themes seemed darker than last year. There were several stories that revolved around close family dramas, many that sadly reflected the darker, more hidden side of real-life Australia. Family violence and dysfunction, or long-buried secrets were the basis for many stories. Several authors wove their stories around mental health issues, a theme that has been taboo; deliberately avoided or watered down for many years. But this is perhaps a realistic reflection of the impact of

COVID and those life-changing lockdowns we experienced in 2020. Our worlds changed, and so did the worlds of our storytellers.”

The annual awards for best women’s crime books were presented by award-winning author, **Sulari Gentill** at a gala dinner at South Melbourne’s Rising Sun Hotel. Gentill first discussed her ‘life in crime’ with Sisters in Crime’s President, author **Kelly Gardiner**, before a sell-out crowd, including 25 women crime writers from across Australia plus two male authors, or ‘brothers in law’.

Monica Vuu was born in Langley, British Columbia, and moved to Tasmania in 2019 with her Australian partner. *When One of Us Hurts* came out of a 90-day novel writing course and Vuu says it was inspired by the remoteness of rural Tasmania.

The judges said that it “takes courage to write a story like *When One of Us Hurts* and to portray a small, tight-knit community in a way that is at times familiar to readers of crime fiction, and at other times it’s uncomfortably confronting. Richly gothic at heart and fuelled by a multitude of masterful misdirections, *When One of Us Hurts* is a chilling foray into simmering small-town secrets, family tensions and mental illness.”

Eleanor Jones Is Not a Murderer, the YA-winning novel by Amy Doak, features Eleanor, the new girl at high school, who is falsely accused of stabbing another student and sets out to clear her name. The judges “all connected with Eleanor and loved her banter with the reader throughout the book. She was such a terrific character: bolshie and cynical, yet secretly vulnerable”. The sequel, *Eleanor Jones Can’t Keep a Secret*, was released in July.

The judges were thoroughly entertained and impressed by Lucinda Gifford’s children’s book, *Boris in Switzerland*, “an original take on the traditional boarding school mystery with the addition of an endearing family of anthropomorphic wolves. With witty, expressive illustrations on almost every page, *Boris in Switzerland* is jam-packed with the talent, passion, and esteem for readership of author-illustrator Lucinda Gifford”.

Gifford said that as a life-long lover of mysteries and elaborate literary twists, she had been plotting for years to ‘move into crime’.

“So, upon discovering there was a children’s literature category for the Davitt Awards, I urged Walker Books to submit the latest book in my middle grade series, *The Wolves of Greycoat Hall*. *Boris in Switzerland* may be read by children as young as seven, but it is rich in crime and skulduggery,” she said.

Justice and the voices of women were at the heart of Rebecca Hazel’s Non-Fiction winner –*The Schoolgirl, Her Teacher and His Wife*. The judges reported, “This book focuses on ‘The Schoolgirl’ JC and Lynette Simms, the victims of Chris Dawson, now convicted of the murder of his first wife Lynn. Without Hazel’s curiosity and groundwork – conversations with JC when they worked together at a women’s refuge – Dawson would never have come to account for his crimes.

“Rebecca Hazel spent more than a decade researching this compelling case. She hit roadblock after roadblock, yet never gave up. When a colleague asked for help, because he was going to do a podcast, Rebecca gave generously of her time. That colleague was Hedley Thomas and the podcast was *The Teacher’s Pet*.”

Hazel who has worked in family law, in a women and children’s refuge, and helped establish the Women’s Family Law Support Service at the Family Court in Sydney, had to leave the Davitts ceremony early with a migraine and her award was accepted by her husband, Andrew Harrison.

The prospect of turning 60 prompted Christine Keighery (who also writes as Chrissie Perry) to try her hand at an adult novel. She is the author of more than thirty-five novels for children and Young Adults, including 13 books in the hugely successful Go Girl! Series. Her work has been published in ten countries, including the US, UK, Spain, Brazil, Slovenia, and Korea.

Keighery told the crowd, “I made a conscious decision to banish humility – that scourge of womankind – begone. In a round table meeting at Ultimo Press, I told a team of Australia’s best publishers I wanted to be their next Liane Moriarty. James Kellow grinned, then asked if I could write a book a year. It turns out I can’t. But my next psych thriller/crime book is coming out in May 2025 and it’s a doozy. Well, until recently, it was a beautiful mess. But with so much help and guidance from astute editors and divine writerly friends, it’s getting there.”

The judges described *The Half Brother* as “a gripping story set in modern Australia, full of psychological suspense, gaslighting, new developments, and a well-handled final section that we didn’t see coming. The quality of her characters, the joys of her twisting plot, her control of pacing and pay-off merited this award.”

Alison Goodman, a long-standing member of Sisters in Crime, is a Melbourne based writer of crime, fantasy and historical fiction. She is the author of eight novels including her latest release *The Benevolent Society of Ill-Mannered Ladies* which was a *Washington Post* and an *Amazon Best Mystery Book of 2023*. Set in the Regency era, its sleuths are two clever older women solving crimes by using skills and knowledge they have developed through their lives.

“Lady Gus and Lady Julia were born from my own desire to read stories about older women having adventures,” Goodman said. “For me, this is a particularly sweet win -- voted by readers from the Sisters in Crime membership. You, the readers, are why we plot and write and rewrite. You are why we strive to create the delight, whether that delight be the comfort of a cosy crime or the terror of a thriller or the fascination of a police procedural.”

Five raffle prizes were on offer – two \$699 vouchers offered by Tilnak Fine Art Photography and three \$350+ book packs, won respectively by **Jacquelyn Parnell**, **Deb Bodinnar**, **Amanda Hampson**, **Maurie Baker**, and **Marija Pericic**. **Angela Savage** won the Be Immortalised in Fiction competition which means her name will go into the next novel by Vuu.

Three lucky seat prizes – \$450 vouchers donated by Tilnak Fine Art Photography – went to **Kim Bodinnar**, **Andrew Harrison**, and **Anna Zobel**. A \$1395 Tilnak voucher was auctioned and went to **Meg Caraher**.

The judging panel for 2024 comprised **Ruth Wykes** 2016 Scarlet Stiletto Award winner, true crime author and editor; **Deb Bodinnar**, retired bookseller; **Emily Gale**, editor and author of Junior and Young Adult fiction; **Romany Rzechowicz**, 2023 Scarlet Stiletto Award winner and communications manager; **Emily Webb**, journalist, author and podcaster; and **Lyn Yates**, professor of education.

The 2024 Davitt Awards were again supported by the Swinburne University of Technology

The Davitts are named after Ellen Davitt, the author of Australia's first mystery novel, *Force and Fraud*, in 1865. The awards are handsome wooden trophies featuring the front cover of the winning novel under perspex. No prize money is attached.

Media comment: Ruth Wykes on rwykes7@bigpond.com; 0407 898 754

Media information/author interviews: Carmel Shute, Secretary & National Co-convenor, Sisters in Crime Australia, on 0412 569 356; admin@sistersincrime.org.au Info: www.sistersincrime.org.au