Smith, Michelle 2015, And the winner of the Miles Franklin Award is ... Evie Wyld, *The Conversation*, 26 June.

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A 34-year-old British-born writer has won Australia’s most prestigious literary prize. Evie Wyld’s All the Birds, Singing was named as the unexpected winner of the 2014 Miles Franklin Award tonight.

The shortlist of six novels featured four women authors. Yet four-time winner Tim Winton was favoured to take out the award for Eyrie, as was Richard Flanagan for The Narrow Road to the Deep North. The Award has attracted criticism, and inspired the creation of the Stella Prize, because of past “sausage-fest” shortlists.

Miles Franklin’s requirement that nominated works engage with “Australian life in any of its phases” historically lead to the exclusion of novels set overseas. Christopher Koch’s The Year of Living Dangerously, set in Indonesia, was considered ineligible in 1979. Likewise, in 1994, Frank Moorhouse’s Grand Days, which takes place in Europe, was also excluded.

In recent years, the prize judges have taken a wider view of what constitutes Australian life, with two of this year’s shortlisted novels, including Wyld’s, largely unfolding overseas.

Wyld’s novel begins by demonstrating the physical and mental strength of protagonist Jake Whyte, as she holds her own in a shearing shed. Yet this Australian past, tantalisingly revealed in reverse order alongside her present life as a resident in an isolated farmhouse on an island in England, shows that Jake is also a victim of a masculinist culture.

The novels in this year’s shortlist radically repurpose iconic Australian literary themes, particularly war and bush life.

Wyld offers an alternative view of the hard-working man labouring on the land who was romanticised
in colonial Australian literature. Her novel shows that the Australian bush remains a masculine space. Yet it also celebrates the tenacity of an unconventional woman like Jake who must struggle for independence and contentment.

Cory Taylor’s My Beautiful Enemy takes the subject of Australia’s involvement in war, strips it of nationalist sentiment and instead examines love that transgresses expectations of race and sexuality. Arthur Wheeler is dismissed from the Air Force and never has the opportunity to redeem himself “through true acts of heroism”. Instead, he becomes a guard at a Japanese internment camp in rural Victoria. Despite his attempts to perform heterosexuality – he is already married and has a son – he is instantly drawn to intern Stanley Ueno, who helps him to overcome his self-denial.

A love story that falls outside social norms similarly punctuates Richard Flanagan’s The Narrow Road to the Deep North, also set during World War Two. It entwines the story of the developing relationship of army doctor Dorrigo Evans with his uncle’s wife with his imprisonment by the Japanese and forced labour on the Thai-Burma railway. The ways in which the men endure and are painfully destroyed by the hellish conditions reveal facets of bravery, as each man weighs up the cost of individual survival and the need for camaraderie.

Alexis Wright’s The Swan Book defies easy categorisation: it is political, mythic, satirical, funny, and tragic. At its heart is a mute Aboriginal woman, Oblivion Ethyl(ene), who inhabits a dystopian Australia in which climate change has radically transformed the landscape. In this imagined future, Indigenous Australians can both be confined to a fenced-off detention camp (a dry, polluted swamp) and rise to the ranks of President, like “half-caste” Warren Finch, who claims Oblivion as his promised wife.

Using the psychic haze of dementia, Fiona McFarlane also plays with the division between the real and the fantastic with her genre-melding The Night Guest. Elderly protagonist Ruth Field lives alone in a beach house; her mundane routine is made more difficult by her worsening health. A tiger disturbs Ruth one evening (and continues to visit, as if it’s nothing out of the ordinary) and the following day a government carer named Frida Young arrives, who gradually takes control of Ruth’s life.

In Tim Winton’s Eyrie, former environmental activist Tom Keely isolates himself in a seedy Fremantle highrise after his divorce and fall from grace. Yet his sense of failure, and retreat into alcohol and prescription pills, is put into perspective by his encounters with the damaged Gemma Buck, a figure from his childhood past, and her grandson, Kai.

It is clearly a strong year for Australian writing with a sizeable shortlist of outstanding novels.
Likewise it’s an exceptional year for Wyld, whose Miles Franklin win comes on top of success in the UK’s Encore Award and Jerwood Fiction Uncovered prize.

The only remaining debate concerns which country gets to claim her for its own. Though Wyld is a dual national, she’s being embraced as “British” in the UK media.

Many of this year’s shortlisted books suggest that it is no longer possible to maintain a straightforward, monolithic notion of Australian identity and life as Franklin may have imagined. Her inability to be categorised is perhaps one more reason why Wyld is the perfect winner for this moment.