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## Performing Femininity

Storytelling and gender

May 5, 2014 9.03pm AEST

## The importance of women's literary prizes

Time to adjust your sets. Since October last year, this column has focused on television, but “Square Eyes” has now metamorphosed into “Portable Magic”, and will discuss books, reading, and literary culture. Stephen King used the phrase “uniquely portable magic” to describe the power of books to enable us to immerse ourselves in new worlds and unfamiliar perspectives.

My academic research concentrates on 19th-century literature and periodicals, as well as children's literature. I also collect Victorian-era children's books and women's magazines. As my use of a quotation from King suggests, I'm interested in all kinds of books, including maligned genres, as well as literary fiction.

In this newly directed column, I will write about historic and contemporary fiction; the culture surrounding books, including bookstores, writing festivals, and literary awards; as well as ideas about reading, especially as the printed book is being superseded by the ebook. To begin the column's first chapter, I'd like to talk about Australia's women's literary award, the Stella Prize.

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### Author

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Kate Grenville, winner of the 2001 Orange Prize, commented that “a prize for women’s writing wouldn’t be necessary in an ideal world”. In a world in which female authors are highly popular, yet are disproportionately overlooked for prestigious literary prizes, Australia’s own literary award for women, The Stella Prize, was awarded for the second time last week.

The UK equivalent, now titled the Baileys Women’s Prize for Fiction (yes, it’s sponsored by the liqueur), has been criticised for supposed sexism, including by writers A.S. Byatt and Germaine Greer. Byatt pointed to the prize’s supposed assumption that “there is a feminine subject matter”, something that she does not “believe in”.

Whether or not a “feminine subject matter” exists, when it comes to non-fiction, it is true that women’s stories, especially those of historical women, have been neglected.

There are numerous reasons for women’s absence from our historical consciousness. To begin with, we have overinvested in stories of male heroism, exploration, and bravery. Histories of women’s part in colonialism and war, for example, have been buried underneath the mass of men’s stories.

Only in recent decades have writers and scholars begun to ask how women contributed to the expansion and maintenance of the British Empire, nation building in the colonies, and to various war efforts, for example.

While women may not have always effected the same kinds of social and cultural changes as men, especially those women who were confined to domestic work, overlooking their role can only offer an incomplete reconstruction of the past.

Frequently women’s voices are simply not recorded in archives. Printed records, such as newspapers and government papers, do not always register their lives and contributions. Unless a woman happened to keep a diary and subsequent generations considered it important enough to preserve, there might be few traces of her existence.

It is into a culture where women are often elided from history that Clare Wright devoted ten years to writing them back into the events of the Eureka Rebellion. Wright received the Stella Prize for *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*. The book shows that the goldfields of Ballarat in the 1850s were not solely the preserve of men and that the rebellion of workers against British colonial soldiers was not disconnected from the labour and influence of women.

Interview with Clare Wright.

Though we might question the notion of a feminine subject matter, certainly few male writers and scholars have devoted themselves to uncovering the forgotten histories of women. If women writers, like Wright, don’t recover these stories from obscurity, then they’ll most likely remain hidden.

Wright's book tells of the women who worked alongside men on the goldfields, including the extraordinary ones who were community leaders.

In her prize acceptance speech, Wright describes the subjects of her history as “a bunch of noisy sheilas getting up to no good on the 19th-century frontier”. She evidently took pleasure in reading and writing about women who stepped outside restrictive social conventions. Yet Wright also places importance on the role these women played in “proclaim[ing] the people’s right to freedom and independence in a new upside-down society where merit was supposed to count for more than inheritance”.

Wright's book shows that the women involved in the Eureka Rebellion were integral to political and social change. The women behind the Stella Prize are also seeking to redress inequality in a supposedly merit-based society and to ensure that the historical record of outstanding Australian literature does not similarly fail to note women's achievements.



Literature Books Stella Prize