

BOOKS

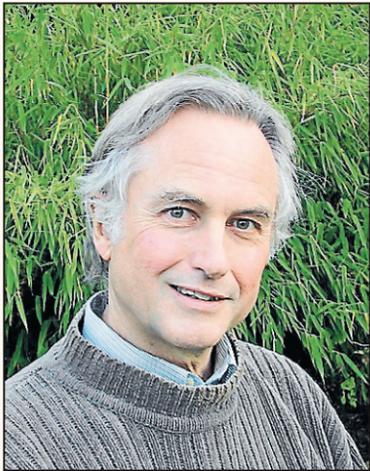
UNDERCOVER SUSAN WYNDHAM

A WEEK OF WIT AND WISDOM

Adelaide Writers' Week was as stimulating as ever, with sunny weather that kindly rose no hotter than 30 degrees (it was 40-plus in 2008) and a well-balanced program in the two tents. The biggest "name" was the British evolutionary scientist and atheist

Richard Dawkins (pictured), who said he felt as if he was giving "the sermon on the mount" to the crowd spilling out of the "revivalist tent". The festival had an unshamed patina of English

intelligence, wit and charm in the writers **Sarah Dunant, Sarah Waters, Salley Vickers, Jim Crace, William Dalrymple, Marina Lewycka, Philip Hoare, Philip Kerr, Andrea Levy, Adam Nicolson** (a delightfully understated aristocrat) and – my "discovery" – **Geoff Dyer**. **Irvine Welsh** brought his own style of Scottish charisma in a reading studded with "f---" and "c---" that sent a few women running from the tent but was a brilliant performance. He was the one guest who fitted in with the black-T-shirted hordes in town for the AC/DC concert that boomed through our sedate writers' gatherings. Of course, many of these writers have since appeared in Sydney, so we benefit from the clever programming of executive producer **Rose Wight** and her advisory committee. (I have **J. M. Coetzee** to thank for inviting Dyer but it was strange to watch the deadpan Coetzee in conversation with Dyer, whose humour was irresistible.)



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BIENNIAL WILL DO, THANKS

No one sees any point in the South Australian Premier **Mike Rann's** election promise to make the biennial Writers' Week annual (along with the Adelaide Festival of the Arts). Publishers say it is ever harder to persuade writers to travel on the constant festival circuit, and festival committee member **David Malouf** says an annual festival would lose its "literary" focus and rely more on journalists and other lesser types (not Malouf's words). Many people travel interstate for the festival but would be unwilling to do so every year. As the final decision is up to the committee, it seems unlikely to change.

MORE WRITERS GET RECOGNITION

Kevin Rudd (pictured) has used his blog to announce, unofficially, an expansion of the annual Prime Minister's Literary Awards, which already go to a fiction writer and a nonfiction writer. At the end of a discussion about children's literacy, he wrote: "We do a lot to celebrate Australian authors who write for adults but I realised

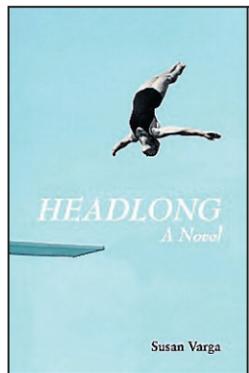


that there is room to celebrate and encourage authors who focus on providing exciting stories for young children and teenagers. With this in mind I am pleased to let you know we have decided to create two new categories in the Prime Minister's Literary Awards – for children's and young adult fiction – to give due recognition to this important part of our literary landscape."

No prizemoney is mentioned but presumably each winner, like the others, will receive \$100,000. The Arts Department has contacted **Maree McCaskill** at the Australian Publishers Association and she has, as requested, advised all members to ready themselves to make nominations in the new categories. There is, however, still one gaping hole in the awards. When will Rudd recognise our poets?

AUTHORS WITH INFLUENCE

Five authors – including a man – are shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award, which gives \$35,000 for "the best novel written by an Australian author that depicts women and girls in a positive way or otherwise empowers the status of women and girls in society". It's good to see small publishers featuring on the list, as they do so often for literary awards. The finalists are **Steven Carroll** for *The Lost Life* (HarperCollins), **Enza Gandolfo** for *Swimming* (Vanark Press), **Cate Kennedy** for *The World Beneath* (Scribe), **Kristina Olsson** for *The China Garden* (UQP) and **Susan Varga** for *Headlong* (UWA Publishing). Also highly commended are **Judith Lanigan** for *A True History of the Hula Hoop* (Picador) and **Lili Wilkinson** for *Pink* (Allen & Unwin). The winner will be announced in Sydney on Sunday.



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Breaking down the boundaries

A Turkish feminist sees similarities between the modern corporate world and the sultan's harem.

INTERVIEW

ELIF SHAFAK TALKS TO CAROLINE BAUM

WHEN I get a text message from Elif Shafak that reads "Meet me at Starbucks", my heart sinks. Not just because of the coffee but because it's such an un-Turkish place for an encounter in Istanbul with the country's best-selling female author. I had hoped for something more exotic. A steamy hamam (bath house), perhaps?

Luckily, Starbucks is too busy to accommodate us and Shafak leads me instead to a cafe inside a department store where shoppers whirl around us with dervish-like frenzy. "This is where I write," she says, settling at the communal table. "Here with the noise, the music, the bustle. I find it stimulating."

It makes sense. Her writing throbs with vitality on the page. Her stories are social. In her novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*, published in English three years ago, families and friends eat, argue and love. But they do so mostly in the domestic, private sphere, not in public places. Which is why it's a surprise to hear that Shafak considers Istanbul a feminine city. In the week

I have been here, I have noticed groups of men on street corners talking, men in cafes playing backgammon, men fishing on the Galata bridge. It does not feel like a feminine city to me.

"In old Ottoman poetry, Istanbul is always referred to as 'she' – the virgin who has been married a thousand times. Ankara is masculine, geometrical, straight but Istanbul is curvy, round, mysterious, a labyrinth," insists Shafak, who is a confirmed feminist. "Women are claiming the public space more and more. Secularisation and modernisation have been taken to the furthest point, through the abolition of polygamy and other legislation. Ataturk was good for women but now we have to go further still."

Noticing groups of young women laughing and talking together, some veiled and some not, I ask about her attitude to the veil. She hesitates. "There are six or seven words for 'veil' in our language, so it has a different nuance or emphasis. Its meaning can be religious, cultural or political but you can't lump all those together. Some women here and abroad get very tense and strident about this question but we need to find a way not to generalise or simplify. Not just about the present but also about the past."

"We misunderstand the harem, for example," she says, surprising

me yet again. "Yes, it was a prison for the body but it was also a school: the women there learnt about art and music ... We are only just beginning to understand the complexity of that world which we knew so little about until recently. It interests me a great deal."

"The way women compete today in the corporate world, and are capable of being very mean to each other, sometimes makes me wonder whether we are not still stuck in a harem today, vying for a sultan's attention. Turkish women have yet to embrace the concept of sisterhood that we see among black American women."

Shafak, 39, studied international relations and political science in the US and spends several months a year teaching at the University of Michigan. Of her nine books, four have been published in the US. Her work is translated into 25 languages.

In 2006, Shafak shocked her readers with *Black Milk*, a nonfiction account of her battle with postnatal depression after the birth of her daughter. It will be published in English next year. "The title came from my grandmother saying that if you cried too much the milk would turn sour. I wanted to show that mother's milk is not always as white – that is, spotless – as society likes to think. Out of that black milk I got ink, with which

Keen wit fires a parting

FICTION

Too Much Money
By Dominick Dunne
Crown, 268pp, \$37.95
Reviewed by Daphne Guinness

WHEN even a review of the book gets a menacing response on the letters page, you know Dominick Dunne was on the right track. And when news of his death last August was held over not to clash with Ted Kennedy's obit, you can correctly assume he had a last laugh.

Except, not quite. Because in *Too Much Money*, written shortly before he died, he has more than a final chortle at New York high society. He has a pay-off fling, as it were, before departing the folk he has skewered over the past 25 years in his books and *Vanity*

Fair columns, not forgetting *Dominick Dunne's Power, Privilege and Justice* TV show.

Too Much Money, a sequel to *People Like Us* (1988), is autobiographical. Part of the fun is matching fake to real names, which I can do because I spent a week with Dunne profiling him. So to read *Too Much Money* is spooky, having met some of the not-so-disguised characters and been to his penthouse at Turtle Bay, New York.

"It could hold a hundred or more but I never reciprocated, because of hurt feelings of those not invited," as Dunne's fictional alter-ego journalist, Gus Bailey, explains. Modestly admitting he is a popular fellow, he continues: "Concurrent with public popularity, there is a small but powerful group who despise me."

It's here we join Gus in his tale of woe and high jinks. He is being sued for \$US11 million worth of slander (as Dunne was)

by a congressman he accuses of being involved with the disappearance of a young woman, and fears it could be the end of him.

Also, a book he is writing for \$US1 million about the suspicious death of billionaire Konstantin Zacharias – based on another real incident – is difficult to focus on. Perla, Zacharias's hot-tempered widow, will do anything to stop Gus. Then there is Ruby Rental and her billionaire husband, Elias, in prison for financial malfeasance. Ruby is intent on returning to New York high society "where they belong".

Dunne kicks off with queen bee Lil Altemus's annual Easter luncheon party to sketch the social set-up. Sixteen pages of sizzling dialogue, ranging from "better dead than Mrs Fayed", a reference to Princess Diana's death in 1997; to Gus's insisting to Lil that her son, Hubie, "dies of AIDS not Epstein-Barr"; to Addiston Kent, a pretty society