



Celebrating Our North Queensland Writers

We North Queenslanders are a hardy lot, and we love our literature. This must be true, because on Thursday, 20th February, more than a hundred of us converged on Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts – Townsville City to celebrate the achievements of four regional authors and a cohort of writers who are still at school. We came despite the recent cyclonic weather, and even when we arrived it wasn't looking all that bright.

The Foundation for Australian Literary Studies (FALS), the English Teachers Association of Queensland (ETAQ) [Townsville Branch], the Roderick Centre for Australian Literature and Creative Writing, and the Mary Who? Bookshop were joint sponsors of the event.

After FALS Company Secretary, John Chandler, and Heather Fraser, long-serving President of ETAQ [Townsville Branch], welcomed the gathering, Mary Vernon entertained us with some of her adventures as a journalist and book reviewer. Mary, who has worked overseas and in most Australian states and is currently writing a novel of her own, is a long-serving member of the judging panel for the Foundation's Margaret and Colin Roderick Literary Award.

All four of the writers honoured at Thursday's gathering presently live in Townsville. They share extended connections with North Queensland, but their lives and writings about the region could hardly be more diverse. Each writer read a thoughtful excerpt from his or her latest work.

Nicole Crowe's debut novel, *The Washup*, written as a requirement for Nicole's Creative Writing PhD at James Cook University, will be published later in 2025 by Pantera Press (Hardie Grant Publishing). Nicole grew up on Magnetic Island, so I'm looking forward to exploring insights in *The Washup* about life on the island and in Townsville, where this crime novel's events take place.

A second crime writer and speaker at our event, Veronica Lando, creates her novels in the midst of a busy family life. First published by HarperCollins in 2022, *The Whispering* is a prize-winning mystery thriller set in the rain forest but drawing on other Queensland locations such as "Granite Creek" and "the notorious Boulders." Veronica's second novel, *The Drowning Girls*, set in the fictional Gulf town of Port Flinders, was published in 2023. Sentences such as, "a woman's body, identified as a local

teenager thought dead twenty-five years ago, is pulled from the inky waters of the gulf,” evokes the Gothic dimension that sometimes shapes North Queenslanders’ perception of the place that we regard as home.

The name Elliot Hannay is well known to Townsville readers and to Australians generally. Published in 2020, Elliot’s autobiography, *The Colt with No Regrets*, traces his distinguished and often exciting career as a journalist from his home town of Bundaberg in 1958 to his appointments as editor of the *Townsville Bulletin* and as an ABC news journalist in Brisbane, Townsville and Mackay. Elliot deserves credit for his engagement with First Nations’ resistance to racism in Queensland, from the Mabo Native title dispute to the Stolen Wages and Black Voice campaigns. His opposition to crime and corruption led to his being targeted with litigation and even death threats by gangsters, among them Abe Saffron. Elliot read a description from the prologue to his memoir, of “An eccentric, gay, alcoholic, war-wounded retired major of the Irish Guards who sometimes alluded to degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge.” Elliot is married to the popular romance writer, Barbara Hannay. A speaker at last year’s FALS and ETAQ celebration, Barbara’s latest book, *The Wife’s Secret*, published in 2024, is set in a tropical Queensland town.

Trisha Fielding is neither a novelist nor a journalist, but a Special Collections Officer at James Cook University. She is also a respected historian of our region. I recommend that you visit <https://trishafieldingwriter.com/about-me/>, which gives access to Trisha’s work, including her beautiful photographs of North Queensland places, plants and animals. Trisha’s latest book, *Expedition to the Great Barrier Reef*, with contributions from Suzie Davies and Liz Downes, can be accessed at <https://jcu.pressbooks.pub/yonge/>. In addition to the many articles that she has contributed to the *Townsville Bulletin*, Trisha is the author of *Asleep in the Deep* (2022), *A University for the North* (2021), *Neither Mischievous nor Meddlesome* (2019), *Queen City of the North* (2016) and of the blogs “North Queensland History” and “Women of the North.” Trisha spoke about her latest project, which centres on three adventurous women and their travels through the landscapes of north Queensland and New Guinea.



The final event of the evening was the awarding of prizes for the FALS Narrative Writing Competition for Senior Students in 2024. The winners were introduced by Helene Kotzas-Lazaredes, FALS board Director and English teacher at Ignatius Park College.



The joint winners of the competition, both from Tully State High School, were Taylah Reis for the story, “He’s a Grade A Pillock, But He’s Mine,” and Jasmine Pitman for the story, “The Toll of Trench Warfare.”

Together with one of their teachers, Mrs Kathleen MacDonald, the winners succeeded in being present (by swimming from Tully?) to receive their prizes. These were presented by the competition judges, Professor Emeritus Nola Alloway and Associate Professor (Adjunct) Cheryl Taylor, former lecturers at JCU. The judges were very favourably impressed by the overall standard of the entries, which came from schools as far south as Yeppoon.



In addition to the winners, the following stories received the award of Highly Commended:

“Aftermath” by Mia Parlapiano, Cairns State High School;
“The Circle of Life” by Maya Hadar Pagliari, Cairns State High School;
“Burning Ballerina” by Sierra Squire, Cairns State High School;
“When I Flew Over” by Tate Hastie, Ignatius Park College;
“Pleading Guilty” by Summer Cassells, Kirwan State High School;
“Windows to the Soul” by Jack McCosker, The Cathedral School;
“Poster Girl” by Lana Campbell, Tully State High School;
“Snowflakes” by Stefanie van Tonder, Tully State High School;
“Whispering Walls” by Natasha Davis, Atherton State High School;
“Solitude” by Ariarn Mann, St Ursula’s College Yeppoon.

Postscript: For over half a century I’ve read, researched and assessed North Queensland’s fiction, poetry and prose writing. The richness of this undervalued literary heritage never ceases to amaze me. An advance relevant to Queensland literature as a whole was marked by the granting of the 2024 Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, Margaret and Colin Roderick Literary Award to Melissa Lucashenko for *Edenglassie*, a vivid recreation of race relations in early and contemporary Brisbane. Trent Dalton’s *Lola in the Mirror*, a novel about Brisbane fringe-dwellers, was shortlisted for the award. Events like the one described indicate that, wherever they are based, present and future Queensland writers promise to equal or outdo their predecessors, in both the quality and the abundance of their work.

Cheryl Taylor

Photographs taken by Bethany Keats

Page 1 – L to R – Mary Vernon; Elliot Hannay; Veronica Lando; Nicole Crowe and Trisha Fielding.

Page 2 – L to R – Heather Fraser; Audience at Umbrella; Nicole Crowe.

Page 3 – L to R – Helene Kotzas-Lazaredes; Jasmine Pitman, Cheryl Taylor, Nola Alloway and Taylah Reis.

Bottom photograph winning students with Judges and their teacher Kathleen MacDonald