

RENEE PETTITT-SCHIPP

From Christmas Island to Denmark

STORY LUCY SMALL | PHOTO LATA WRIGHT

Renee Pettitt-Schipp won the Western Australian Premier Book award for emerging writer for her book of poems *The Sky Runs Right Through Us*. It was the only book of poems nominated for the award, and is a body of work created by the Denmark-based teacher, writer and PhD candidate founded on her time spent in Australia's Indian Ocean territories.

I've never even really thought about Christmas and Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Nothing beyond the intermittent political controversy over the detention centre out there and my friend's sister once mentioning that there are crabs on the islands big enough to crack your head open. These islands, on the margin between mainland Australia and Indonesia, are somewhere Renee Pettitt-Schipp has thought about more than most.

Renee is a teacher who left the comfort of her job in Fremantle to teach on Christmas Island. She felt the need to be on the frontline for the people arriving in Australia seeking asylum, to be there in hope of sharing joy with some of the world's most vulnerable people. I chatted to Renee on the phone and wished it could have been possible for us to meet in person. Her voice doesn't pitch as she describes the personal

hardship she faced watching people arriving in Christmas Island excitedly, anticipating the life they are yet to live in Australia – only to watch it dwindle as hope of the life they left everything for dissipates over a wide, Indian Ocean moat.

Poetry is an emotive medium. It's a form of expression that has the capacity to spark both the imagination and the heart. Renee's voice is gentle, she speaks slowly as she describes the wilderness of Christmas Island, pausing before explaining the depression that gradually blankets the children and their families held in arbitrary detention. The two descriptions are jarring – an island laden with the wealth of nature, yet trodden with the heavy feet of the Australian government's repressive refugee and asylum seeker policy. An island that represents a cul-de-sac in the lives of people fleeing terror, Renee's poetry documents both the mindsets of the people and children she meets as well as her own perceptions. Renee reflected on what it means to have authored the only nominated poetry book, and the only book of poems to have ever won the award:

"Winning the Premier's Award feels incredibly important on several levels.

"In Australia I believe we have a history of poetry not being highly valued in our society,

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poets often find themselves at the bottom of the pile in their relationship with their publishers, so for this collection to hold its own in this context is really exciting.”

This is not the only reason why the win is important, Renee explained, the circumstances in which she created the body of work and the acknowledgement by the Western Australian government is particularly powerful.

“Winning the award has been extraordinary when you consider up until August 2017, when the Border Force Act was challenged in the High Court, I lived with the threat of a two-year jail term if I spoke openly about what I witnessed in Australia's detention system. To now find myself not only being able to speak on radio, to papers and magazines about what I witnessed, but to have that witnessing celebrated and rewarded by the State government, is the strangest experience.” Renee said.

Renee's dedication to the cause is reflected not only in her literature, but in her advocacy in her local community to heighten our empathy to the plight of people not only seeking asylum, but detained in Australia's offshore centres. Her campaign to raise awareness and her willingness to bear witness and speak truth to the many layers of power that push down on people teetering on the fine line of precarity, are testament to Renee's character. She described her experience accepting the award:

“On the night of the launch I was able to speak to Government ministers directly, to tell them the story about one little boy called Ali Reza who over the 11 months he was imprisoned on Christmas Island, lost his ability to laugh, to play or sing. Our country stole this little boy's childhood, and on the night of the awards I could appeal to people in positions of power directly, and people afterward shared how deeply moved they were by his story.” Renee recounted.

After a year on Christmas Island, Renee and her husband moved to Cocos (Keeling) Islands, where Renee taught art to local Cocos Malay students as well as starting her collection of poetry as part of an honours course. At the beginning of 2014 Renee returned to mainland Australia, soon finding the urban environment of Fremantle too much of a change after life in the Indian.

“After living in such a wild place, to live in such beautiful places full of biodiversity I really struggled with living back in the city. My husband is a surfer and had wanted to move down to Denmark for 10 years, so he finally won. We were really just needing to be back in a wild place,” Renee said.

“Denmark is the most beautiful community, we've just felt so welcomed and it's completely exceeded my expectations,” she said.



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