

# Poet claims national prize

BY JENNY DENTON

CASTLEMAINE'S Andy Jackson was unaware he had won the \$80,000 Prime Minister's Literary Prize for Poetry - he had to find out from a friend.

He was watching the livestream of the December 13 Launceston literary presentations from home when a fire alarm went off, prompting an evacuation of the building and a halt in proceedings.

The delay meant a media release got ahead of the real life announcements, and a friend of Jackson's who looked up the results, found them online and sent a congratulatory message.

"This was before the actual official announcement, so I didn't quite believe it," the poet says.

The surprise was heightened by the fact he had put a lot of work into convincing himself he was honoured and fulfilled to have made the shortlist.

"It made the win feel even bigger because I'd sort of got used to the idea of not winning."

The prestigious award



Andy Jackson at home in Castlemaine. The poet has won the \$80,000 Prime Minister's Prize for Literature. Picture supplied

was for Jackson's fifth poetry book, *Human Looking*, published by Giramondo.

The title has a double meaning, the poet says, that references both the way humans look at each other, "vis-

ually and metaphorically", and how those found to be "not quite human enough" are perceived.

"I wanted the poems to kind of re-humanise that encounter," says Jackson, who

has a physical condition, Marfan syndrome, which affects his appearance.

Poetry had played a big part in helping the 51-year-old "feel a little bit more at home in the world", he said.

"I think as someone who is, I suppose disabled, or I think of myself as physically different, there's a sense for me that it's a way of being public and me being in control of how other people see me and starting to change some of those ideas about what disability means."

In *Human Looking*, the perspectives of a large cast of characters appear alongside Jackson's own in the poems, among them a conjoined twin suffering after surgical separation, the parents of a newborn with a major intellectual disability and a patient who undergoes dangerous cosmetic surgery.

The collection "goes all over the place" through different characters and experiences", Jackson said, canvassing 20th century, contemporary and mythological subjects.

"A lot of research went into it. I spent a lot of time read-

ing and thinking and looking around for subjects," he said.

"And there's lots of autobiographical poems too, about my own experience with surgery, and also with illness. And there's a long poem which is for my mum who died during the writing of the book.

"I sort of wanted to craft it so that you didn't necessarily know what to expect as you turn the page - who's going to be talking and who's going to turn up? Which is how life is.

"We don't always know who's going to be around the corner."

Jackson grew up in Bendigo and moved to Melbourne to go to university when he was 17.

Sometime in the 1990s a friend invited him along to an open mic poetry night.

"I had a go and kept being interested, kept coming back and then it just sort of evolved from there.

"It was almost an accident but it's been kind of transformative really."

While the prize had been awarded for a single book, "it really feels like some kind of

acknowledgement of all the work I've been putting in for the last 20 years," he said.

Up until now writing poetry "about the body and difference" has always felt fairly marginal but that kind of writing is "happening more and more now".

The win is also an acknowledgement of "all the other people who are writing in that territory" and shows that critics and readers are "a little bit more switched on to the fact that there's a lot of difference in embodiment, and people are interested in that stuff now".

"It just feels more like I'm not whistling in the dark as much as I felt like I was before," Jackson said.

Now working part-time as a creative writing teacher, and recently appointed one of three patrons of Writers Victoria, Jackson feels lucky to be able to work in the field of writing and share the excitement of "younger writers coming up".

Despite recent hardships, "it's a lucky life", he says, and the prizemoney will enable him to devote more time to his craft.

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