

One for the books

Highly lauded Australian author Charlotte Wood has attracted critical acclaim internationally with the shortlisting of Stone Yard Devotional – a novel forged by the pandemic and family health battles – for the coveted Booker Prize

WHEN

CHARLOTTE

WOOD learned that her British publisher had entered her novel *Stone Yard Devotional* for the 2024 Booker Prize, her heart sank. “The publisher was allowed to enter one book from everything they’d published that year,” she recalls. “I just thought, *Oh no – you’ve blown your chance.*” Wood need not have worried. From an initial selection of 156 works, judges picked a 13-book longlist before whittling it down to a shortlist of six – and her novel made both cuts. Marking the shortlist nomination on Instagram, Wood reflected, “I don’t feel this very often, but today I am proud”.

The author, who lives in Sydney with husband Sean McElvogue, director of fine art transportation firm Art Van Go, forms part of a rare breed: she is one of only four female Australian Booker Prize nominees in the award’s 55-year history. To date, no Australian woman has won the prize. Wood is the first Australian author to be longlisted since J.M. Coetzee (for *The Schooldays of Jesus*, in 2016); the last Australian winner was Richard Flanagan for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, in 2014. “I don’t think it’s in most Australian writers’ consciousness [to be considered for the Booker Prize],” offers Wood. “It certainly was not in mine.”

Prize-winners receive £50,000 (\$97,000) and a trophy named in honour of novelist Iris Murdoch, while shortlisted authors can expect £2500 (\$4800) and a special edition bound version of their book. Five female writers feature on this year’s shortlist, representing the highest female representation ever. Taking home the prize propels an author into the limelight overnight; previous winners include literary heavyweights Margaret Atwood, Kazuo Ishiguro and Bernardine Evaristo.

Wood’s novel has also been heavily garlanded elsewhere, nominated for the Prime Minister’s, Victorian Premier’s and Miles Franklin Literary Awards, as well as the Australian Book Industry Award’s (ABIA) Literary Fiction Book of the Year.

The second of five children, Wood was born in Cooma on NSW’s Monaro plains to English parents. “At school, I was an obsessive reader and I loved writing essays,” she reflects. She undertook a cadetship at the *Cooma Monaro Express*, a now-defunct local newspaper, before studying journalism at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst. It was there that she began dabbling in creative writing but, by her own admission, didn’t invest a lot of effort. “I sort of thought, *One day I’ll get around to it.*”

After working as a freelance journalist and subeditor in medical trade publishing, tragedy struck in Wood’s late twenties. “My mum died; my father had died 10 years before that,” she says. “Life separated into things that mattered and things that didn’t. At that point, I started taking [writing] seriously.” Wood enrolled in creative writing classes at the University of Sydney’s Centre for Continuing Education and published her first book aged 34, 1999’s *Pieces of a Girl*.

Next came 2004’s *The Submerged Cathedral* (which was

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

shortlisted for the

2005 Miles Franklin

Literary Award), *The Children*

(2007) and *Animal People* (2011).

The Natural Way of Things (2015) won the

2016 Stella Prize and was joint winner of the Prime

Minister’s Literary Award for Fiction, and the *The Weekend*

(2019) won Literary Fiction Book of the Year at the 2020 ABIA.

Also in Wood’s oeuvre are three works of non-fiction: *Love & Hunger* (2012), an ode to the arts of cooking and eating; *The Writer’s Room* (2016), an anthology of interviews with writers about their working process, and *The Luminous Solution* (2021), Wood’s meditation on creativity; she also contributed to and edited *Brothers & Sisters* (2009), a collection of stories about siblinghood.

Her résumé likewise includes an MA in Creative Arts from the University of Technology Sydney and a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of New South Wales; and in 2019 she became a Member of the Order of Australia “for significant services to literature”.

In *Stone Yard Devotional*, an unnamed narrator retreats to a monastery in remote NSW as respite from her daily life, eventually joining the religious order permanently. “I became interested in what would compel a contemporary woman to become a nun,” says Wood. Then the pandemic

and consecutive lockdowns struck, casting a new light on Wood’s musings on seeking sanctuary from the chaos of the modern world. The novel is a touching, often amusing, portrait of a religious community and the minutiae of the sisters’ everyday lives, their foibles and their kindnesses. An invasion of mice, like something plucked from the Old Testament, befalls their town, adding an undercurrent of darkly comic tension through the novel. Of the book, author Marian Keyes has said: “It is so great I am struggling to find the words to do it justice”.

The writing of *Stone Yard Devotional* was punctuated by adversity. In 2022, just as Wood had finished the first draft, her older sister was diagnosed with breast cancer. Within the span of six weeks, Wood and one of their younger sisters had also received the same diagnosis.

“It was a very hard year,” she reflects. After her treatment, Wood returned to her work with a new, braver perspective. “My attention was now only on the book,” she says. “Of course, I [wanted] to please the reader, but on my own terms. If I hadn’t had that experience, I might have lost a bit of nerve.”

After a solid year of promoting *Stone Yard Devotional*, Wood is looking forward to getting stuck into writing her next book. And, at age 59, she’s relieved that the Booker nod didn’t arrive earlier in her career. She cites Dutch author Yael van der Wouden, whose debut novel, *The Safekeep*, also made this year’s shortlist. “It would be quite terrifying with your first book, [although] wonderful, of course. I’m just glad it’s happened to me when I’m 10 books in. Because I know what it is and what it *isn’t* as well.” Ultimately, reflects Wood, “[This] Booker thing is just a beautiful, big, joyful surprise.” HB

