

Wellcome Trust Book Prize: Winner announcement

On 4 November 2009, the winner of the inaugural Wellcome Trust Book Prize was announced. Featuring **Sir Bill Castell**, Wellcome Trust Chairman, **Jo Brand**, chair of the judging panel, **Andrea Gillies**, winning author of *Keeper*, and judges **Quentin Cooper**, **Raymond Tallis** and **Richard Barnett**.

BC: We believe that the Wellcome Book Prize will raise the awareness of the abundance of medical topics in literature that celebrate the best writing, both in fiction and nonfiction, that engages readers and promotes interest and discussion in medical science.

AG: Well first of all I'm absolutely thrilled to be on the shortlist; it's my first book and possibly my only book, and so to be shortlisted at all has been absolutely thrilling. I think it's absolutely fascinating to look at literature from the point of view of medicine and it's great that a book like mine, which in some ways is a minority book, it's on the dementia shelf in the bookshop, and isn't really seen by the general public, will get some wider notice because it's considered to be important in its own right. So it's thrilling.

JB: The final six on the shortlist were absolutely magnificent, every single one of them, and they were actually quite an eclectic mix of work as well, which was difficult in some ways because we had included nonfiction and fiction. So let's just say we had a fairly heated debate in order to come to the winner, didn't we Quentin? Yes we did. [Laughter] But we have actually made that decision and – can I thank the judges because they were a lovely group of people and they also didn't use too many long words that I wouldn't understand, so I was very pleased about that.

Shall we do a bit of poetry or shall we cut straight to the chase? Alright, we'll cut straight to the chase because my very enjoyable job now is to announce the winner of the first Wellcome Book Prize. The winner in fact is the book *Keeper* by Andrea Gillies.

[Applause]

Congratulations.

AG: Thank you so much.

Oh goodness, oh thank you – money, nice. [Laughter]

Well it all started because my mother-in-law became ill and for a long time it wasn't recognised what was wrong with her, and when it did become recognised she became very ill very quickly in so far as her social functioning was all kaput and she couldn't cope with living with her husband in independence. So we decided as a family, me, my husband and my three children, who were all quite young at the time, that we would buy a bigger house, pool our resources and in effect look after them full-time, just keep an eye on things. And so I began to write about our day-to-day lives as a diary, and after about six months I on a whim sent parts of the diary to the *Guardian* Family section. They printed it and I was approached by an agent and wrote the book. So I did a lot of research into the causes of Alzheimer's and incorporated the science of the disease, almost as a cathartic thing for myself as a way of therapy, coping with the situation, and that's how the



book came together.

QC: It's a fantastically well-written book and I can't recommend it highly enough.

RT: I found this an extraordinary book. As a clinician who's often dealt with people who have Alzheimer's disease, I didn't expect to learn anything and I learnt an awful lot. I think what makes it a great book is that it combines both personal experience, a deep understanding of the nature of the disease, and also an exploration of the questions that it prompts about the relationship between our consciousness and our body. But the other absolute bonus is the writing is fantastic, it's witty and it has marvellous metaphors throughout.

RB: It's just the most incredibly powerful, honest, funny, depressing, witty book. I mean it sounds like I have an enormous mixed bag of adjectives to apply but it's a really moving, powerful kind of read, definitely the sort of book you would give to anybody who's going through this sort of thing, but I think it also has the power to enlighten society on these matters.

JB: The whole package is just an absolutely magical book I think.

AG: I just would like to thank some people. First of all to my agent Judith at the back there, who's very excited. [Applause] Judith Murray who is wonderful and who saw my piece in the *Guardian* about living with my mother-in-law and said to me it would make quite an interesting book actually, and so it proved. And also to Short Books my publisher, who've shown amazing faith and confidence in the project despite the fact that we've sold seven copies – thank you. And last but by no means least, to the Wellcome Trust Book Prize judges, who have picked *Keeper* out of what is a very strong and inspiring shortlist – thank you.

[Applause]

[End of transcript]