

TERRITORY LAWYER AWARDED VOGEL LITERARY PRIZE FOR NOVEL: *THE ARTIST IS A THIEF*

The last two months have been anything but uneventful for Darwin lawyer Stephen Gray: first there was the news of the \$20,000 Vogel literary prize for his novel *The Artist is a Thief* and then the arrival of his baby boy, Mark. While the dust has not quite settled, Stephen was still able to find time and talk to *Balance* about his life and latest work.

Originally from Melbourne Stephen Gray has lived in the Territory since 1989. He completed his articles of clerkship at Darwin firm Waters James McCormack before taking a year off to write short stories.

"I set out with the idea of doing a short story every two weeks. While I was at Waters James I had to turn up at eight o'clock and leave at half past five or whatever. If I had to have that sort of discipline why not use the discipline for writing, rather than sitting around at a cafe waiting for inspiration to strike. I also had this 1000 words a day target. I stuck to it for a while and managed to write a story every two weeks for quite a few weeks," said Gray.

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One of those short stories won a Fellowship of Australian Writers Award. Since then he has published two novels — the first published in Malaysia and coauthored by playwright John Lee and the second titled *Lungfish* which was published in 1999 by the Northern Territory University where he lectures in intellectual property, copyright, indigenous legal issues and criminal law.

Lungfish, like his Vogel winning novel *The Artist is a Thief* is set in the Northern Territory of Australia. *The Artist*

combines several of Grays's interests: writing, the law, art and indigenous issues.

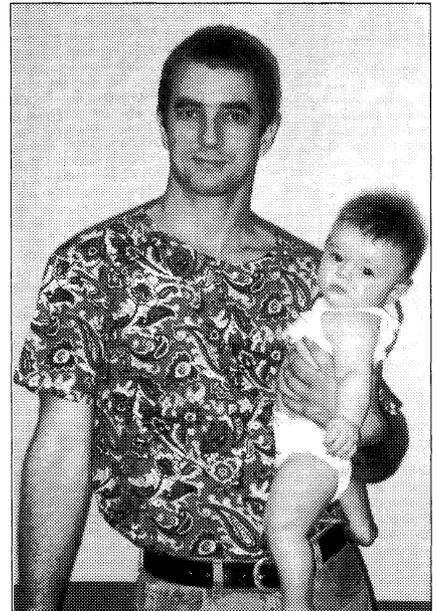
The story was described in *The Australian* as "a mystery with political overtones about a young white accountant sent to sort out the finances of an Aboriginal community near Darwin, where he stumbles on an art scam ... Ultimately, the book's message is that claims of forgery in Aboriginal art can be more complicated than white outsiders believe — like Aboriginal lives."

Gray says "The whole Aboriginal art and copyright business is something I am very genuinely interested in." He has written academic articles and lectures on the subject at NTU.

When asked how he combines his work in the law — a traditionally "dry subject" — with writing novels, Gray argues the two preoccupations can benefit each other.

"*The Artist is a Thief* has fed off the law side of things a bit," said Gray. "Ten or twelve years ago, or perhaps even more recently, I saw the law and creative writing as in a kind of opposition. Rather than seeing them as conflicting I have become to see them more as a pendulum where you can swing between them. If I was teaching literature or creative writing I don't think it would help the creativity. It is almost a bit of a trap you can get into — talking about writing and creative stuff rather than actually doing it. Doing something completely different like the law and meeting real people with real troubles and hearing about their lives actually helps the creative process," he said.

The Vogel prize is Australia's most prestigious award for an unpublished manuscript and has launched the careers of some of Australia's most notable writers, including Tim Winton, Kate Grenville and Andrew McGahan. The judges in this year's competition included writers Debra Adelaide, Murray Waldren, Garry Disher and Gillian Mears.



Stephen Gray and son Mark

For Gray, the award has provided national public recognition, the bonus of having his book published and a sense of validation in his work.

"I was always interested in writing. I used to write when I was a little kid. When you are an adolescent, though, it gets drummed into you that you must find a job, that there's not much in writing."

"You get a reaction from people when they ask you what you've been doing and you tell them that you've been writing a novel or writing a story — they always ask if it has been published. If you haven't been published their eyes sort of glaze over and you can see them think 'oh, another would-be writer'. The Vogel prize is good from that point of view — it gives you recognition and validation as a writer," said Gray.

"The Vogel is good for lots of other things too. It doesn't help you actually write any better. It helps in that I can feel that someone is actually going to read what I write and I can actually publish it."

The Artist is a Thief will be published by Allen & Unwin next year.