



# USING LITERARY AWARDS TO BUILD BETTER LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

**L**iterary awards are obviously great for their recipients, but they also provide unintended benefits for libraries and library users, as **FIONA BLACKBURN** reports.

The recent Mudgee Readers' Festival included a panel session about the value of literary awards. Most of the panellists agreed that they served a purpose – primarily in bringing authors to the attention of publishers, and secondarily in providing a nice fillip to the winner's bank account. But one area of their potential usefulness wasn't mentioned at all: using them to build library collections. Literary awards can be used to help create distinctive collections that rely on more than the specifications in a contract with a library supplier, and which could be described as 'anti-fragile'.

Borrowing heavily from Hugh Rundle ([hughrundle.net](http://hughrundle.net)), who himself borrowed heavily from Nassim



*Nassim Nicholas Taleb's Antifragile: Things that gain from disorder*

Nicholas Taleb's 2012 book *Antifragile: Things that gain from disorder*, an anti-fragile library is one that benefits from instability (not one that can withstand instability – that's a robust library). In practice, building an anti-fragile library means using as many options as possible, creating collections with a high number of unique (and locally relevant) items along with a number of frequently used ones. This involves working against outsourced purchasing, a trend that is perhaps cheap and efficient but which ultimately renders a library fragile because it works to the middle, to averages, and creates homogeneity across similar institutions. Anti-fragility means developing knowledge and expertise firmly based on a library's specific circumstances and in areas that an outsourced purchasing arrangement would not cover. Literary awards are one mechanism for countering the homogenising effect of outsourced purchasing.

Commercial suppliers provide the bulk of acquisitions, according to frequency-of-use statistics, historical patterns and specified profiles, selecting from new commercial products. That is, they respond to that part of the status quo that moves off the shelf the most. Items used infrequently but with quality content will not



be selected. New, emerging and self-published authors will not appear in a frequency-of-use metric. Niche, specialist, low-volume, intensely local or migrant language publishing may also be overlooked. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content is an area of small print runs, few reprints or second editions, but it has significant value; it quickly disappears from a collection weeded of old and battered items without a dedicated collecting strategy. Similarly, a local poets circle's low-cost chapbooks or the ephemeral zines produced by street artists struggle to appear in their local library unless the purchasing librarian actively seeks them out.

Augmenting supplier contracts – by selecting for local content or in those areas not included in the contract or seeking less visible items that do meet specifications – isn't new. The ACT Heritage Library maintains a Local Author Showcase; finding local authors who self-publish or publish infrequently is a significant collection-development activity. Maribyrnong Library in Melbourne employs a Chinese-language speaker to purchase directly from offshore Chinese-language publishers. The purchasing officer at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies handpicked 50 per cent of the items added to the collection in 2014–15.

Using literary awards isn't a new strategy. Awards highlight authors and offer the added value of providing peer review: they are judged by writers and critics and others experienced in judging. The NSW Premier's Literary Awards and other similar awards have systems for selecting judges and judging entries, which boost its credibility. They can also be targeted to a particular genre or group of

authors. Some awards offer prizes across writing categories – fiction, non-fiction, poetry and so on. The ACT Book of the Year Award provides local authors with exposure to publishers, it gives the ACT Heritage Library a means of identifying emerging talent, and it also suggests the library as a place for local authors to promote their books – three benefits for the price of one, plus some anti-fragility. Librarians seeking to maintain an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence have the David Uniapon Award to consult. The Stella Prize was established for women. Writers' centres often run competitions, and some libraries run their own prize; Waverley Library, for example, runs the Nib Waverley Library Award for Literature.

Hugh Rundle suggests that libraries should aim for anti-fragility, especially in reference and non-fiction. But the popularity of fiction among the reading public, the volume of fiction publishing (commercial and otherwise), and the proportion of a public library's collection that is fiction all suggest it is an area in which to also aim for anti-fragility. You can see ALIA's list of Australian literary awards at [bit.ly/1ATelck](http://bit.ly/1ATelck). Using them in collection development adds colour and distinctiveness, and it counteracts the collecting-by-numbers approach that can render a collection vulnerable to mediocrity and bland uniformity. ✱

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