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Media Release:

ANNOUNCING THE WINNERS OF 9th DAVITT AWARDS

A Beautiful Place To Die (PanMacmillan), the debut novel by Sydney-based filmmaker turned crime writer, Malla Nunn, tonight won Sisters in Crime's Davitt Awards for the best (adult) crime novel by an Australian woman in 2008.

Blue Mountains writer Catherine Jinks took out the Davitt (young adult) for *Genius Squad* (Allen & Unwin) while Melbourne's Chloe Hooper won the Davitt (true crime) for much-awarded *The Tall Man: Death and Life on Palm Island* (Penguin Books Australia). The Davitt (reader's choice as voted by the members of Sisters in Crime) went to last's year's Davitt (Adult Fiction) winner, Gold Coast writer Katherine Howell, for her second novel, *The Darkest Hour*.

This year 39 crime books competed for the Davitt Awards which were set up by Sisters in Crime in 2001 to celebrate the achievements of Australian women crime writers. Justice Betty King presented the awards to a crowd of 140 at the Celtic Club. For the third year running, the awards were sponsored by the Victoria Police Museum.

Sisters in Crime spokesperson, Dr Sue Turnbull, said that this year the books were subjected to the 'Beijing Blur Test'. "The test was whether a book could help alleviate the heat and pollution of a hot July day in Beijing. Like the Connex Test of previous years, it's a basic but effective test of a book's ability to retain interest under trying circumstances.

"Once again there was a wonderful range of adult fiction books, from the light and frothy to the very dark and grim. We travelled round the world and back in time. Some left us discussing whether or not the book came into our concept of crime and mystery, always a thorny question.

"*A Beautiful Place To Die* by Swaziland-born Malla Nunn is a debut novel of considerable power which uses the device of a murder to illuminate the history and politics of South Africa in the fifties. That she does so with such understanding and empathy for those caught up in the ramifications of apartheid, is commendable. This memorable and significant first novel, both disturbing and enlightening, was the unanimous choice of the judges."

Nunn, of mixed race parentage, moved with her parents from Swaziland to Perth in the 1970s and has written and directed films in both the US and Australia. *Fade to White*, *Sweetbreeze* and *Servant of the Ancestors* have won numerous awards and have shown at international film festivals from Zanzibar to New York. She now lives in Sydney with her husband and their two children.

Nunn told the Davitts Awards ceremony by phone from Maryland USA that she had written the novel part-time, between school hours. "I dreamt it would one day get published. Winning an award was beyond my dreams. The Davitt is an honour that means a great deal to me because it comes from my peers: a group of women who like murder, mayhem, sleaze and a

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great yarn as much as I do. Your support has made my maiden journey into the world of crime fiction an absolute joy." Her second novel in the series will be published next year.



Dr Turnbull said that the judges were impressed by *Genius Squad*, a follow up to the 2006 Davitt (Young Adult) award-winner, *Evil Genius*.

"This is a complex, gripping thriller which explores many of the tumultuous themes of adolescence – self-identity, relationships between father and son, self-expression – against the fast-paced, high-tech backdrop of espionage and super-villains. Particularly pleasing was the portrait of a young woman with cerebral palsy, who played a central part in the story, even to the point of being kidnapped. The treatment of her was most sensitive, a very positive description.

"*Genius Squad* made some judges appreciate just how far behind they have been left in the world of computers, but in spite of this, they still found the book absolutely enthralling. Among some very good books for young adults, this was the stand-out and the unanimous choice of the judges."

Jinks is the author of over twenty books for children and adults, including the award-winning Pagan series. She says she became a writer because she loves reading, as well as history, films, TV and gossip.

Jinks told the award ceremony: "I feel not only flattered but extremely lucky to have received this award, and not just because of the calibre of nominations I was up against. I'm not exactly a crime writer, you see – I'm more of a genre writer. As well as crime fiction, I've tried my hand at historical fiction and science fiction and horror fiction – you name it – and I've always wondered if I might be sacrificing a certain level of expertise by not specialising. So this award is very reassuring. It means that I haven't been making a big mistake, flitting around from genre to genre all these years."

Dr Turnbull said that *The Tall Man* was the stand-out true crime book from 2008. "It's much more than the standard rehash of the news coverage. Hooper sets the incident in its geographic and cultural context. Her research takes her well beyond Palm Island to the Gulf of Carpentaria and, in particular, to the outback towns where Hurley, 'the tall man' police officer at the centre of the story, had previously worked, establishing constructive relationships with many in the aboriginal communities, and to the aboriginal settlement where Doomadgee's family had lived.

"Both Doomadgee and Hurley are presented as fully rounded characters, not the villains and victims which they might well have been in the melodrama which could have emerged in other hands. Hooper is already an acclaimed writer for her novel *A Child's Book of True Crime*. She has now written an outstanding adult's book of true crime, a deserved winner of the Davitt award."

Hooper won the 2009 New South Wales' Premier's Literary Award for Non-Fiction for *The Tall Man* which had also been shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. She said, "It's a great thrill to have *The Tall Man* recognised by Sisters in Crime. For many people reading the story of what happened to Cameron Doomadgee in the Palm Island police station is too confronting, but not so for the brave-hearted sisters, who have really got behind this book, and who have been incredibly supportive. I am incredibly touched and honoured."

Dr Turnbull said that the novels of Katherine Howell had struck a chord with Sisters in Crime members. "Last year Katherine Howell took out the Davitt Award (Adult Fiction) for *Frantic*.

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This year the 500 members of Sisters in Crime have voted for her second novel, *The Darkest Hour*, as the top book of 2008.



“It’s not hard to see way – her fast moving plots, sharp writing and well-developed characters grip the reader from the first page. Both novels feature a woman paramedic and draw on Howell’s considerable experience in the field.”

Howell, who worked as an ambulance officer in Tweed Heads while she wrote her first novel, told the crowd: “It’s truly an honour to be here again accepting a Davitt award, and to win the reader’s choice category is really something special. The members of Sisters in Crime are both highly discerning and very widely-read so for *The Darkest Hour* to be selected as their favourite read of the year is wonderful.”

Frantic is being published in France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the UK.

“We’re delighted to be again partners in crime with the Victorian Police Museum,” Dr Turnbull said. “The museum’s generous support has enabled us to pay for the trophies and other expenses.”

The judging panel comprised Dr Shelley Robertson (Sisters in Crime member, forensic pathologist), Rosi Tovey (former owner of Chronicles Bookshop in St Kilda), Dr Sue Turnbull (Head of Media Studies, La Trobe University, Sisters in Crime national co-convenor and *Sydney Morning Herald* crime columnist), Sylvia Loader (Sisters in Crime national co-convenor, and reviewer) Tanya King (reviewer and former Sisters in Crime national co-convenor).

The awards are named after Ellen Davitt (1812-1879) who wrote Australia’s first mystery novel, *Force and Fraud*, in 1865.

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