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CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

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Ponder prose

Writers blend story-telling and scientific questioning in the collection, which includes a piece on the Black Saturday fires

NON-FICTION

THE BEST AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE WRITING 2012. Edited by Elizabeth Finkel. NewSouth. 227pp. \$29.99.

Reviewer: **STEPHEN WILKS**

Science writing should be the monarch of all prose. It combines the discovery of the natural world with the profoundest of the creative arts, literature. So how lucky are we today that there are more good science writers around than ever before?

Put this together with Australia's broad strength in the sciences and this latest annual anthology of our best science writing promises much.

Its editor takes as an exemplar the closing words of *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin's famed passage about "grandeur in this view of life". Her three pillars of great science writing are "clear explanation, storytelling and passion".

This book has all three in abundance, but there's another quality which I value equally. More on this shortly.

This is a book of writing for the masses. Most entries first appeared in popular journals like *COSMOS* and *Australian Geographic*. All contributors are Australian and just under

half are research scientists. There are fewer big names than in the 2011 edition – no Paul Davies or Tim Flannery. Brian Schmidt's introduction this year is more worthy than insightful, but who wouldn't want him on the team?

Only a minority of the 29 pieces have distinctly Australian themes. Adrian Hyland writes on bushfires, Emma Young ponders why Australia experiences more earthquakes than it should, and Ashley Hay reports on the war against dengue fever-carrying mosquitoes. Hyland's contribution cascades brilliantly from the generation of energy within the sun by atomic fusion, through the Earth's global weather patterns, into the topography of south-eastern Australia and then down to a local policeman sensing something wrong on the morning of February 7, 2009 – Black Saturday. There is a healthy contingent of essays counter-attacking medical pseudoscience – a tiresome but necessary diversion nowadays. The most stylish inclusion is extracted from *Physics on the Fringe* by Margaret Wertheim. Physics off the Edge could have been the blunter title, for it deals with the strange new proclamations about the universe that real physicists are always receiving unsolicited in the mail. Wertheim tracked down the engaging American Jim Carter to check out his





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belief that absolutely everything in the universe is mechanical in nature. Carter's entertaining ideas lead Wertheim into a sparkling summary of how theoretical physics has changed over the last two centuries.

Any book of fresh science essays should be full of the unexpected, and this one certainly had me flipping through its pages wondering what I'd find next. Its surprises include a claim that ancient oarsmen could shift an Athenian trireme 236 kilometres from Byzantium to Heraclea in a single day, well beyond the tested capacity of modern rowers. Another oddity is the much-publicised identification of the bones of Ned Kelly – well, most of them. The adage that cockroaches are tough enough to survive a nuclear war gets debunked.

Science is supposedly neutral, but it is in our natures to find it reassuring or frightening. On the scary side, Frank Bowden ponders the prospects for influenza pandemics. Craig Cormick imparts the almost as worrisome news that pseudoscience retains a mass following because natural selection has wired our brains to think more intuitively than rationally.

I am only slightly reassured by research suggesting that young people develop wider skills by playing video games – wouldn't they be better off reading?

Every piece is crystal clear to the lay reader. Enthusiasm abounds, especially when combined with the allure of the unknown.

What will be found when scientists explore the underground waters of Lake Vostok in the Antarctic, sealed under ice for up to 30 million years? Could water jetting from Saturn's moon Enceladus signify subsurface liquid that harbours life?

Against all this, many entries employ a predictable style, and a couple are almost prosaic. Which brings me to that other quality I have in mind. This is the sense of wonder. Much of this book consists of sound, workmanlike pieces on a particular issue. Don't expect the soaring speculations about the cosmos and metaphysics that characterise science writing at its most inspiring, admittedly only rarely. Yet it does manage to end with a poetic little prose piece, *A Dream of Goldfinches* by Vanessa Mickan.

If there is a unifying message in this collection, it is "this means you". Science affects all our lives, whether through earthquakes, the flu, climate or cockroaches. One great thing about science writing is that it invariably has a clear point to make. There's little of the pretence and hollowness of so much writing on the humanities that leaves me wondering what the author is on about. Science can be seen as lacking overt humanity – even I sense this at times – but at least it has something to say.

• Stephen Wilks lives in Canberra and is a freelance writer.

