

## Compelling story of ups and downs of a year spent in isolation in the Simpson Desert wins Finch Memoir Prize 2014

***Spinifex Baby* by Karen Harrland is announced the winner at SWF**

Leaping into a nature conservation project in the Simpson Desert with your new husband is one thing; coping with the reality of 45-degree heat, drought and isolation in the face of an unplanned and difficult pregnancy is quite another. Fortunately, Karen Harrland survived to tell her tale and to reflect on both the beauties and the hardships of outback living in her book *Spinifex Baby*.

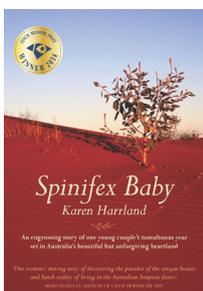
Karen and her husband Al Dermer were planning on building a house in the cold, lush green climate of Tasmania when an impulse decision on Karen's part led them to accept a nature conservation position in central Australia. For most of their time on the station, they had only each other for company - even the postman only came out every couple of weeks - and when Karen fell unexpectedly pregnant, things took a turn for the worse. Through a difficult pregnancy and overwhelming post-natal depression, she learnt that the harsh environment was not the biggest challenge she had to face:

*This desert with its rolling dune fields is an unforgiving land that relentlessly destroys even its own ancient beauty. It is a place where, compared to the age of the landscape, a single life means less than a grain of sand. I could not have known that the biggest challenge I would face would not be from the piercing sun, not from the unforgiving dust, not even from the aching loneliness of isolation, but from the treachery of my own self.*

Karen conjures up wonderfully evocative images of life in the desert that sit beautifully alongside the minutiae of daily life as a new mother, including her battles to push a pram up a sand dune and coping with the realisation that the first solid food her baby ate was a massive blowfly.

Karen says that writing *Spinifex Baby* helped her process the experience of living in the outback.

'Each time I worked on a section of the story, I felt as though I was taking it out of me and leaving it there on the page. I also felt very hot and dusty every time I wrote! Writing **Spinifex Baby** has been a five-year gift to myself, but the best present will be if others enjoy it and learn something from my story.'



### Pre-publication praise for *Spinifex Baby*

'One woman's moving story of discovering the paradox of the unique beauty and harsh reality of living in the Australian Simpson Desert.' - Heidi Douglas, author of *Catch up with the Sun*

'Lovely writing with sharp evocative descriptions.' - Pam Hewitt, editor

***Spinifex Baby* by Karen Harrland is published by Finch Publishing on 22 May 2014. It is available from good bookshops nationwide and online and ebook retailers at price of \$27.99 (paperback) or \$9.99 (ebook). Photographs included.**

Winning the award has given Karen additional the motivation to keep writing.

'Winning the Finch Prize made me jump up and down for months, wearing a ridiculous grin! Because I wasn't allowed to share the secret with anyone, I imagine more than a few of my friends wondered why I looked so happy for no apparent reason,' she says.

Samantha Miles, Publishing Manager for Finch Publishing, encourages both novice and published writers to consider submitting their life stories for the annual prize.



**KAREN HARRLAND**

'The entries get stronger every year, and we keep an open mind about the publishing potential of shortlisted stories that don't win. The 2015 competition opens on 1 August 2014. All the details are available on our website, [www.finch.com.au](http://www.finch.com.au).'

Karen concurs: 'It has been an enormous honour to win the Finch Memoir Prize and to then be supported by their team to produce the best possible version of my book. I am still pinching myself over my good fortune.'

The other shortlisted authors were Anthony Crowley (*Remembering How To Breathe*), Quynh Dao (*The Beauty That Remains*), Robert Perrier (*If Not the Shadow*), Lisa Southgate (*Pie Street*) and Karen Treanor (*Into Africa*). The judges of the 2014 Finch Memoir Prize were Jacqueline Kent, Richard Glover and Susan Duncan.

Karen Harrland has packed bananas in northern Queensland, studied Environmental Management at university, made djembe drums in Africa, staked road kill wombats to the ground for Tassie Devils to eat in Tasmania and helped wayward youths learn how to plant trees. Along with her partner Al, she has also managed half-a-million acres of conservation land in Australia's Simpson Desert. Currently, they live in their self-built home with their three children in Tasmania, where Karen is a garden teacher at a primary school teaching children how to respect the earth and each other, and to enjoy good food. Karen also writes obsessively and passionately every chance she gets.

### Sydney Writers Festival

Karen Harrland will participate in a panel discussion on 'Simple Living' at the Sydney Writers Festival on Saturday 24 May at 11:30am. Her fellow panellists are Richard Glover, Luke Slattery, Greg Foyster and Inga Simpson. Venue: Sydney Dance 2, Pier 4/5, Hickson Road, Walsh Bay.