

## **‘The Oxenbridge King’ author Christine Paice wins \$10,000 prize for elegy for late mother**

Poet and author Christine Paice has won \$10,000 in the ACU Prize for Poetry for a poem about the death of her mother.

Paice was in the final stages of writing her new book, a mystery novel inspired by the 2012 discovery of King Richard III’s body under a carpark, when her mother died.

“I’ve been over in England looking after my mum, and unfortunately, she’s no longer with us. This poem came out of that experience,” Paice said.

“It’s really normal for me to express one of the biggest events in my family history, the death of my mum, in a poem.”

*Gabriel in the Playing Fields* describes the final months of Paice’s mother’s life, followed by a supernatural imagined moment when a giant barefoot angel carries her into the afterlife.

As well as memorialising a precious, life-changing moment, Paice’s poem is also an attempt to explore of one of life’s biggest unknowns – the existence of the afterlife.

“I can’t think that this life is all the life that we have,” Paice said.

“I love the idea that there is something else that carries on. How it works we don’t really know, but I like exploring that as much as I can while being on the other side of it.”

The afterlife has been Paice’s focus for the past seven years as she developed and wrote her recent book, *The Oxenbridge King*.

Inspired by one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of the century – the remains of King Richard III under a carpark more than 500 years after he died - *The Oxenbridge King* follows the controversial king’s attempts to pass through to the afterlife. In 2013, under the weight of his soul and sins, life and the afterlife eventually collide.

### **Winning poem ‘an act of joy’**

In between editing proofs and scheduling publicity for *The Oxenbridge King*, Paice turned to poetry as a cathartic release from the stresses of work.

“For me, poetry is my special secret world I can go into as my reward when I’ve done all the things I need to do,” Paice said.

“I was working on that draft of the poem (about her mother’s death) for months and months. It wasn’t until I got back to Australia, and I was doing work on *The Oxenbridge King*, that I was able to look at the poem as an act of joy at the end of a long working day.”

That act of joy is now an award-winning tribute to the biggest moment of her family’s history, and worth \$10,000. ACU Prize for Poetry judge Emeritus Professor Margot Hillel OAM congratulated Paice on her emotive poem and her interpretation of this year’s theme, Faith.

“Christine Paice’s moving and eloquent poem about her mother’s death opens with a remarkable observation about the nature of illness and death, in that we so often pretend everything is all right when confronted with something beyond our comprehension,” Professor Hillel said.

“While presenting a new and striking picture of the angel Gabriel, she manages to be both loving and challenging, using the imagery of this huge angel enclosing the frail body of her mother. Paice is ultimately saying that her mother is not just disappearing from earth but entering another life.”

Second prize of \$5000 is being awarded to first-time entrant Carolyn Leach-Paholski of Melbourne, for a poem on the perils of climate change from the perspective of her husband’s childhood and their eventual marriage.

Australian Catholic University has specialists who can comment on news matters relating to their area of expertise. Please direct requests to ACU’s [Media Team](https://www.acu.edu.au/media-enquiries) at [acu.edu.au/media-enquiries](https://www.acu.edu.au/media-enquiries).

Poet and fiction writer Jo Gardiner of the Blue Mountains has taken out the \$3000 third prize for a poem that illustrates faith amidst trials and tribulations.

“What is really striking about Leach-Paholski’s poem is her faith in the natural world, and her engagement with the natural world as a place of spirituality. Meanwhile Gardiner beautifully captures the evocative Australian bush and fauna, particularly using the symbol of the black cockatoo,” Professor Hillel said.

“It really is a delight to read such an array of poems, so many different interpretations of faith, and to see poets explore the theme with such emotion and personal experience.”

Poets Tug Dumbly, Tric O’Heare, and Vuong Pham have also been awarded Highly Commended. Ninety-two poems will be published in an anthology edited by Prize judges Professor Hillel and Professor Robert H. F. Carver and launched at the Awards ceremony on 1 October.

### **Poetry is “a living art form”**

Being a poet is not something Paice grew into; she believes she was born a poet.

“When my dad died, he kept these poems in his desk that I had written when I was 10 years old. They’re not bad. I don’t know how a poet is made or born or why the spirit of poetry flows into somebody but doesn’t flow into somebody else,” she said.

“My aim as I get older is to live inside a poem if that’s possible.”

Having been a practicing poet in Australia for more than 25 years, Paice is excited about the potential of the nation’s first Poet Laureate.

“I love the fact there is going to be a poet laureate. That will make a real difference to the status of poetry in Australia,” Paice said.

“I think having a poet laureate will give a better profile and public awareness that poetry isn’t a terrible thing, it’s a wonderful thing, and it’s not a dark, inaccessible piece of art, it’s something you can remember a line of or, or apply to your own life and you can live with poetry.”

The ACU Prize for Poetry is one of Australia’s richest prizes for a single poem. The Prize is a continuation of the Catholic Church’s long tradition of being a major patron of the arts.

ACU Vice-President Fr Anthony Casamento CSMA said the University was committed to giving poets and writers a space to explore the spiritual dimension of life through poetry.

“Throughout two millennia, the Catholic Church has always maintained a great respect for poetry and poets, with the understanding that God himself is the ultimate poet,” Fr Casamento said.

“For 12 years, the ACU Prize for Poetry has supported poets and published hundreds of new poems, and we hope to continue this great contribution to the Australian arts scene well into the future.”

Copies of *Faith: Poems from the 2024 ACU Prize for Poetry*, selected and edited by Robert H. F. Carver and Margot Hillel OAM can be purchased at [acu.edu.au/prizeforpoetry](http://acu.edu.au/prizeforpoetry).

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