



Reality is the fiction

Adversity has driven a young woman now on the cusp of a writing career, writes **Sandra McLean**

WRITERS often need to massage reality to create fiction. Tara June Winch simply has to be herself. Little else is needed by this 20-year-old sensitive soul who has lived well beyond her years. Her peripatetic life of searching, travelling, family breakdown, loss and renewal has not only given Winch the raw material for many stories, it has also given her a profound maturity in her writing, winning her the 2004 David Unaipon Award for emerging indigenous writing.

The \$15,000 award, announced at the launch of the Brisbane Writers Festival, includes publication of her work by the University of Queensland Press, was given to her collection of her poetic short stories, called *Dust on the Water-glass*. It contains the story, *Swallow the Air*, which was highly commended by judges of the State Library Young Writer's Award last year.

It was written a year ago under a cloud of rootless unhappiness after returning from India where she had considered taking robes as a Tibetan Buddhist nun.

"I was just trying to find where I should be," says Winch, who was born in Wollongong. "I was pretty angry." She laughs and adds: "I think I am angrier now but I feel as if I can do something positive and writing to me is something positive.

"I left home when I was 16 because I needed to be on my own, big time.

"My dad left and that severed the story, the telling about indigenous art and culture. I needed to connect back up with that and find out about my culture. This was something I couldn't do in Wollongong."

Winch hopes to write about 35 stories for her book to be published next year

by UQP. The stories are essentially about her own life – growing up in a housing commission home, losing one's family and then culture (her father is Wiradjuri from western NSW) and finally going on a journey to find herself. Her main character is Maya, the sensitive observer.

"Maya is a quiet observer who sees things differently," Winch says. "It's almost humbling because she is so sensitive to what is going on, the racism and the injustice."

Read Maya's journey and the way she sees the world and you are also reading Winch's story. Like her main character, her world as a child was riven by dysfunction and despair. "When Dad left my mum had a nervous breakdown. She was pretty sick for a long time, mentally. My cousin, Andrew, who lived with us, he got sick too. He developed paranoid schizophrenia. It was a bad time. There was a lot of alcohol, a lot of drugs. There was a lot of bad stuff going on."

So she left home and hitched around Australia. She returned briefly to Sydney to work in a car wash and then headed overseas to India and Buddhism.

"When I was younger I used to go to a Buddhist place in Wollongong and chill out. I felt really connected to Buddhism and its philosophies. It taught me that even with all the s--- that was going on that things can be simple and everybody goes through suffering. It is a part of life. This was a truth for me at the time."

Now Winch is trying to express those truths in her writing. The loss she felt when her mum had a nervous breakdown emerges in *Swallow the Air* in which the young girl, ushered out of the house, watches a stingray die on the beach. At home her own mother also is dying. Winch reveals the mother's death is a metaphor for her own mother's nervous breakdown. But adversity works in amazing ways – Winch's mother is now working on oil rigs in Bass Strait. And Winch, well, she is finally happy and on the cusp of a career as a writer.

She has settled in Coolgardie, about 7km outside Ballina in northern New South Wales and is studying for a Bachelor of Indigenous Studies and Law at Gnibi Indigenous College, Lismore.

"I am learning about how to make



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Page 2 of 2

change and personally I am doing all right. But the external stuff worries me. Being around your own people you learn the truth about the injustices and how far things have gone wrong for indigenous people in Australia and how our government has stuffed it up.

“What do you do? You have to be strong. You just can’t change the world.”

Tara June Winch and last year’s winner of the David Unaipon Award, Fiona Doyle, will be at the Brisbane Writers Festival tomorrow, 4.15pm, The Courier-Mail River Marquee.



PERSONAL truths . . . Tara June Winch finds writing positive. Picture: **Grant Parker**