

Having her name mentioned in the same paragraph as Agatha Christie was enough to prompt Perth author Dawn Farnham to travel to the other side of the country for one event.

In August, the Melbourne Athenaeum Library hosted a reading of winning entries from the Body in the Library category of the Scarlet Stiletto Awards, and Dawn's prize-winning entry from 2013 was among those chosen.

At the event, award-winning author Angela Savage introduced Agatha Christie's pioneering Miss Marple novel, *The Body in the Library*, and author, barrister and broadcaster Susanna Lobez entertained the audience with Dawn's short story.

"Having a reading at the library was such a compliment and having my name linked, even tenuously, to Agatha Christie's in the same paragraph was never likely to happen again. I had to come," said Dawn.

"Also, I had never been to Melbourne or the library before so it was an absolute pleasure. Of course I was delighted with the reading. The location was hallowed, all the readings were entertaining and the audience appreciative. What more can you ask?"

"I also got to meet some great women and feel part of what is obviously a truly warm and inclusive group in the Sisters in Crime. I think Victorian women writers are pretty lucky. I'm still seeking that here in the West."

The Melbourne Athenaeum Library's sponsorship of the Scarlet Stiletto Awards' Body in the Library category is in its sixth year, but this was the inaugural reading of winning entries.

The annual Scarlet Stiletto Awards, run by Sisters in Crime Australia, are a crime and mystery short story competition conceived in Victoria in 1994 with the purpose of discovering and supporting new female talent.

In the Body in the Library category, which is now the second-most popular category, the only criteria is that the author's story must include the words "body in the library" and have a strong female protagonist.

Dawn's winning entry was titled *The Body in the Library* and was tapped out not long after she had resettled in Perth.

"When I returned to Australia from living abroad I was looking around for interesting and prestigious competitions with a special interest in women's writing," she said.

"The Scarlet Stiletto Awards jumped out. It seemed incredible fun and the bonus was that it was organised and run by women for women. It seemed to have at its heart a nurturing and a generosity which had contributed to success for other women writers and it offered such a variety of interesting possibilities.

"I'd written crime short stories before (*Crime Scene Singapore and Crime Scene Asia*) so I was familiar with the genre. This just seemed the best outlet for having a go in Oz."

Dawn's story revolves around a Chinese family living in Australia but with a steadfast grip on the traditional ways. "I lived in East Asia for over 25 years through my husband's journalism work," she said.

"I did a BA in Japanese and in Singapore, where we stayed for 12 years, I was a guide at the Asian Civilisations Museum so I had a long contact with Chinese cultural influences and the importance they place on knowledge, books and scholarly pursuits. The scholar is placed highest on the social order and a library of Confucian Classics and ancient poetry often lay at the heart of most educated elderly Chinese aspirations.

"I just wondered what that would look like in an Asian/Australian immigrant setting. In this story the library becomes a refuge and a shrine to the culture that one family left behind and a catalyst for the changing attitudes between the older and younger generation.

"It seemed a perfect location for the exposure of the sisters' tense relationship, the revelation of an old crime and a scene of ambiguity – did Amy kill her mother, did her mother kill a young man or rob a grave, where did the other body come from?"

"The bonus is that in a traditional Chinese home, the family would keep a coffin in such an environment waiting for an auspicious burial date and make offerings to the departed, thereby allowing me to play with the theme and offer the reader the titillating surprise of two bodies in the library; crime, cultural complexity and creepiness. That was the aim."



Dawn said she was "genuinely astounded" to win the award.

"If that sounds falsely humble or disingenuous, I apologise. But it is true," she said.

"I had not written any stories set in an Australian context before. The award had been around such a long time and won by so many wonderful women writers and my subject was unusual and possibly unappealing to Australian readers, so it came as a delightful surprise and, more importantly, a great boost to my confidence as a new writer in Australia. It encouraged me to not fear the unusual and possibly challenging context and keep thinking outside the box.

"A prize like this forms a bedrock of faith in oneself, a validation that what you're doing is not just inside your head. I guess all writers have moments of fear, of not being good enough, of simply writing nonsense with no appeal to anyone, of not daring to challenge themselves. An award like this keeps you at the coal face!

"I'm now working on the first of what I hope will be a series of detective novels set in Japanese Occupied Singapore with lots of surprising Australian angles. A highly charged setting and definitely a challenge to get right. But I'm not afraid to try. That's what the Sisters in Crime award did for me."

- Digital publications of recent winning Body in the Library entries, including Dawn Farnham's story, are available at www.melbourneathenaeum.org.au under the Partnerships tab.
- For information on Dawn Farnham's novels and short stories visit www.dawnfarnham.com
- For information on the Scarlet Stiletto Awards visit www.sistersincrime.org.au