



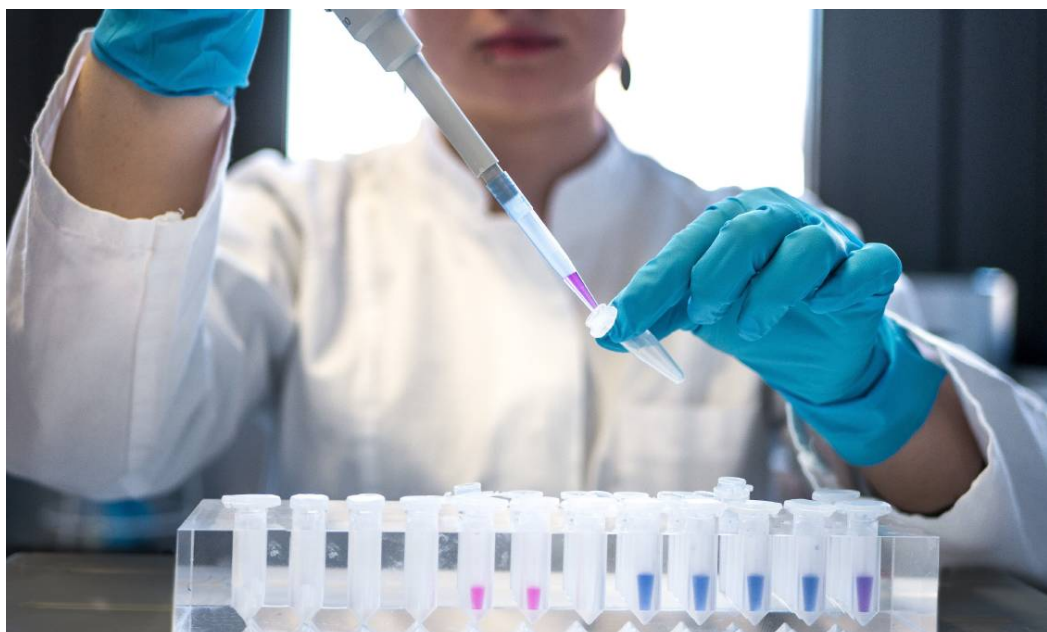
Review: The Best Australian Science Writing 2022 is a compelling and timely anthology

By [Amy Walters](#)

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The wonders of modern science are discussed in this compelling anthology. Picture Unsplash

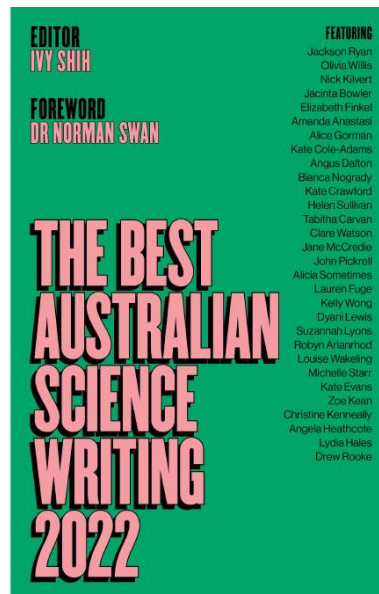
- [The Best Australian Science Writing 2022](#), edited by Ivy Shih. NewSouth. \$32.99.

The Best Australian Science Writing has been a publishing fixture for 12 years. Arguably, this year's edition is more timely than ever. As editor Iv Shih writes in her introduction, "During the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was given front row seats to witness something remarkable - the scientific process magnified." She has put together a remarkable compendium of reportage and cultural criticism.



with Dylan Lewis's article on the science of COVID prevention.

Although studies have shown that COVID does not spread easily via contaminated surfaces, deep cleaning has become a standard expectation on the part of the public. In 2020, Lewis reports, the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority spent US\$484 million on its COVID response, "including enhanced cleaning and sanitisation". This level of investment of both money and energy is tainted, however, by the fact that it detracts from more effective means of prevention, such as improving ventilation to minimise the risk of aerosol transmission.



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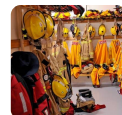
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Clare Watson examines the move to circulate more scientific studies in pre-print phase (prior to peer review and formal publication) to



Although this aided rapid data sharing, Watson also reports that it "exposed the inner workings of the scientific process to a new audience and laid bare the best and worst of pandemic research". One success story was the clinical trial of a common steroid, dexamethasone, which was shown to reduce COVID deaths by a third among critically ill patients. Having picked up the study in pre-print form, statisticians worked frantically over a weekend to triple check its results, and the study was released to the media few days later in June 2020. Within a few hours the drug was being used globally as a COVID treatment, and at the end of the year it was estimated to have saved one million lives around the world.

The value of scientific research is another salient theme. Michelle Starr examines the importance of studies that yield no result, which "keep us from repeating the same errors, and shape the direction of future studies". One way they shape research is by assisting to adjust the parameters of subsequent studies. The fields of cosmology and gravitational wave astronomy operate in this way - the detection of colliding black holes being one example of a result obtained after years of null detections. Tabitha Carvan interviews Amnon Neeman, a Professor of mathematics at the ANU, who solved two algebraic problems that have puzzled researchers for two decades. His contribution comes at the tail end of a 40-year career, and despite the fact that he may not live to see his findings put into practice, he remains committed to pure problem-solving.

Aside from these topical articles, reportage on the spiralling climate crisis dominates. Helen Sullivan reports on the intersection of environmental destruction and war in her article about the bank of crop seeds managed by the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas. Originally located in Aleppo, it had to be shifted to Lebanon when Syria's civil war broke out in 2012, which involved tortuously complicated logistics and danger to human life.

Lydia Hales, similarly, looks at the role biobanking - the freezing of endangered species' biological material - can play in countering



...uly National Biobank in 1995, Australia has since lagged behind global efforts to conserve endangered species in this way, and a group of scientists are seeking for this practice to become more of a government priority.

Zoe Kean looks at the loss of shared cultural knowledge in the animal kingdom. Whales, bees, fish, fruit flies and birds are all known to learn socially, and the destruction of their habitats and populations means the tools for their survival are not passed on. But it is not all doom and gloom; Kean also locates research looking at the re-ignition of cultural knowledge among populations, such as Brazil's golden lion tamarins, as a result of intensive conservation efforts.

There are a number of standout pieces not related to global crises. Christine Keneally delves into the effectiveness of brain implants in controlling epilepsy and Kate Cole-Adams investigates clinical trials seeking to determine whether psychedelics can assist in relieving mental distress, while Bianca Nogrady looks into biological and social theories about the cause of pre-menstrual dysphoric disorder. The collection highlights work shortlisted for this year's UNSW Bragg Science Prize, which was won by Lauren Fuge's piece on deep time, and how an international team of scientists are attempting to reconstruct tectonic plate movement over the last billion years.

This an insightful and compelling anthology that deserves to be widely read.

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