

Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers Centre
Speculative Fiction Competition 2010
Judge's Report – *Peter Mcallister*

Judging fiction competitions can be a weighty responsibility. Writers put their whole hearts into their creative work (at least, they should) so assessing their efforts adversely can feel like passing judgment on their whole being. On a more mundane level, if the stories lack in quality it can also be dreary work. Luckily, neither is the case here. The stories entered in the 2010 Katharine Susannah Prichard Speculative Fiction Competition have all been a delight to read (in some cases re-read, several times) and they reflect very well on their authors' skill. The generally high standard, of course, brought its own problems: so many of the stories were so good that choosing between them was sometimes difficult. That, however, is an infinitely more preferable problem.

Before introducing the winners I'd like to talk a little about what it means to *not* win a competition like this, or to take out a commendation. Why didn't your story score an award, if it didn't? Was it because it wasn't *good*? Actually, this was rarely the case. Some stories lost out because they simply didn't fit into the competition rules: they weren't really speculative fiction. Speculative fiction is a broad church, but it does have a couple of common threads: it has to take place in an imagined world fundamentally different to the world in which we live (whether the difference lies in the existence of elves or hyperspace drives). Some beautifully written stories didn't have those elements, and hence were first onto the reject pile.

Other well-written stories fell short because, while a pleasure to read, they weren't really short stories; they read more like a slice of a novel. Short stories are, for my money, a form all of their own, and while they don't all have to follow the same pattern, they do have to take the reader on a journey that brings them to a destination different to the point at which they entered the story. That is difficult to do, particularly within such a tight word limit, but those stories that didn't at least take a stab at it were the next to go, no matter how interesting and well written (and some were *very* well written indeed).

For the remainder of the stories, however, what made the difference between the good and the *very* good (the winners, in other words) was two elements: imagination and believability. There is a tension between the two of these in speculative fiction. The more imaginative and different the world you create, the harder it is, often, to make it believable. When a story did well in one or the other of these aspects, I tended to mark it up as a good effort, worthy of entry onto the winning pile. When it did well in both, it inevitably blew me away and made it right to the top of that pile. The good news, however, for those not in that category, is that these two elements are both things you can work on. Imaginative muscles can be exercised; the elements that add plausibility to your created world can be learnt and practiced. My advice, therefore, is not to lose heart. Just let your imagination run wild, and practice making your speculative world so believable that your next judge will find him or her self completely drawn in. And remember that most of you missed out by the merest shade, in any case.

Anyway, so much for those who didn't win. On to those who did, and their inspiring, engaging and thoroughly enjoyable stories.

Mundaring National Young Writers Awards

1st Prize: *Behind Closed Doors* by Raeden Richardson (VIC)

Behind Closed Doors is a delightfully menacing tale that terrified me so much I felt I had to give it first prize just so the author would stop scaring me! Seriously, though, several things immediately stood out about this story. It is beautifully written, with poise, pace, and both economy and colour of language. It has that most important quality of good speculative fiction: believability. Despite its highly imaginative (if dark) vision, I found the story utterly engaging, so I would like to congratulate the writer on an impressive piece of work, particularly for such a young author.

2nd Prize: *Tales of a Time Traveller* by James Brock (WA)

Tales of a Time Traveller is not quite as beautifully written as the first-prize winner (or indeed, some of the other entrants) so I would encourage this author to develop his or her writing skills. However, it has one very strong element that elevated it above other entries, to my way of thinking: structure. The story is very well resolved and ends with a dénouement that is very satisfying to the reader and quite well plotted – again, particularly for a writer so young. *Tales of a Time Traveller* also shows a powerful imagination at work; again, this is an essential element of speculative fiction.

Under 13 Award: *Soldiers of Lonestar* by James Crowley (NSW)

James Crowley might seem to have had a leg-up in winning this section of the competition – he was in fact, the only entrant in the under 13 category! He needn't feel he has won an undeserved award, however, for I would not have awarded one if his story had not been thrilling, action-packed, imaginative and impressively believable. His tale of two Lonestar soldiers mixes high technology and magic into a thrilling tale that seems to have an incredible synergy with videogames, since the reader genuinely feels he or she is moving through the levels of some high-octane, multi-level adventure. Surprisingly, this also works as a short story, so I'd like to congratulate James on a well deserved win.

Commended:

<i>The View From the Elevator</i>	by Daniel Ortlepp (WA)
<i>The Colour of Happiness</i>	by Linda Mulenda (WA)
<i>Class Picture</i>	by Rejinette Moreno (WA)
<i>Joe's Aurora</i>	by Katie Birkinshaw (WA)
<i>Bound by Blood</i>	by Rachel Chan (VIC)

Katharine Susannah Prichard Open Award

1st Prize: *Wolves, Sheep and I* by Denis Bastion (VIC)

Wolves, Sheep and I offers a fresh, new take on two stock figures of speculative fiction: witches and werewolves. I found the author's casting of witches as 'seers' blessed (or maybe burdened) with the ability to perceive the true nature of the werewolves who stalk their human prey both novel and exciting. His protagonist, similarly, offers a fresh vision of the 'prostitute with a heart of gold' cliché: the harlot as avenging angel, complete with killing blades concealed in her petticoats. The story is beautifully structured and written, and utterly convincing in the world the author has brought to life. For all these reasons I take great pleasure in awarding the work 1st prize and offering my personal congratulations to the author.

2nd Prize: *Flight of the Bumblebee* by Janeen Samual (VIC)

Flight of the Bumblebee is a hilarious tale of two boy-men so dead keen on zoological specimens they'll give anything, even their own lives and limbs, to make, keep and display them. The story is, once again, very nicely structured, with the earnest optimism of the bumblebee (who keeps flying no matter what the aeronautical engineers say) echoing the perilous can-do spirit of the tale's protagonists. The piece is briskly written, with bright and flowing language, but I think it is the sheer imaginative power and plausibility of the work that impresses me most, and has earned it a much-deserved 2nd place award.

3rd Prize: *Saint Olivia's Light* by Carol Ryles (WA)

Saint Olivia's Light is a curious tale of the secret life of a leadlight saint, animated in equal measure by an artisan's blood and the light that illuminates her beautiful image. Again, I think it is the imaginative power displayed by the author in so confidently animating his or her unique protagonist that has won my admiration. The story is richly textured and shows an acute sensibility; the writing is similarly vivid – sometimes searing. It also moves inexorably to a dénouement both well structured and satisfying. A very impressive work, too, and one justified in edging out the many other quality stories for the 3rd place award.

Commended:

<i>Foretold</i>	by Cheryse Durrant (QLD)
<i>The Remembery</i>	by Guy Salvidge (WA)
<i>The Red Marble</i>	by Daniel Simpson (WA)
<i>La Belle Dame</i>	by Satima Flavell (WA)
<i>The Deception of Numbers</i>	by Shaun Taylor (SA)