

Short Fiction Awards, 2013

Judge's Report

There were 37 entries in the Young Writers section. Fantasy, in its various manifestations, was the dominant mode. There were many stories of adventure and battle, significantly influenced, I would think, by video games. This is a little disappointing, partly because it is so hard to make such stories work in an original fashion.

It was somewhat surprising, then, to find not a single example of such derivative writing in the 91 entries in the Open section. Here there was a different level of indebtedness evident in much of the writing: the pervasive influence of popular fiction and its conventions of a strong emphasis on 'story' or plot and stereotyped characters. It is not at all easy to write such stories in ways that engage the reader. I'd reiterate a point made in last year's report by Natasha Lester: the need for the reader to ask questions of the narrative. And these questions are—at best—wide-ranging. They can include a desire to know more about the characters, what drives them; the plot, what motivates it. And theme and setting—and even mood: How do these play out in the story? So it's not just a matter of asking questions about what happens next. In the best stories such questions begin very early in the piece; sometimes with the opening sentence. And at the other end, there is the question of *how* to end. Often a story is reduced in its impact by the temptation, unresisted, to write just one more sentence. To wrap it up; to reach a conclusion; or that endemic dis-ease, *closure*. This desire, this impulse, is brought into question by a quote cited in the Prague Review by I know not whom: 'And when it [the story] ends, but refuses to close, it leaves you in a sort of breathless shock, waiting to see what will happen.' That, if made possible by all that goes before, is where you need to leave your readers.

I'll conclude these few prefatory remarks by a statement from the poet Ted Hughes: 'What's writing really about? It's about trying to take fuller possession of the reality of your life.' If you take up this challenge, it leads you down paths where you as a writer are personally engaged and I think that is a necessary precondition to engaging the reader.

To the winners.

The Young Writers Encouragement Award goes to **Ida Dawson (NSW)** for 'On the Arrow's Wings'. This story is more than just an account of a battle between two armies set in the distant past. It raises questions about gender roles and the power of the poetic imagination. The writer is twelve years old.

There were very few entries in this category and so I've recommended to the KSP board that next year the cut-off for this age group should be '13 and under', rather than 'under 13'—and the board has agreed to this change. And this wording is then consistent with the Youth category which reads '20 and under'.

Mundaring National Young Writers Awards (twenty and under).

Commended entries (in alphabetical order by author):

'The Secret Goldfish'	Fiona Chen (Vic)
'White'	Oliver A D Lee (SA)
'Journey'	Peter Miller (WA)
'The School Bus and the Kettle'	Ashleigh Mounser (NSW)
'Woodlawn'	Simone Williams (VIC)

Because Peter is present, I'd like to make a few, brief comments on his entry 'The Journey' which is a well-constructed, thoughtful story about 'the kid' who, on his bike, one afternoon 'rode without thinking, off in his own world, up and down,

legs burning, through the suburbs. He rode through the dying light of the day...’ The journey, at a literal level, is the bike ride—very well captured—in which ‘the kid’ meets, of course, ‘the girl’. What follows is a bike race, a rite of passage, in which he becomes ‘the young man’. The metaphorical journey is extended to include the act of writing. This story is quite an achievement. Peter is 14 years old.

Second place went to **Jemimah Payuran (Vic)** for ‘Driving Through the War’. This is a first-person account of reactions to an (aborted) attempt at suicide. This story illustrates very effectively the point made above about the need for the reader to ask questions of the narrative. Only gradually are the full circumstances revealed, along with some telling insights into the support provided by friends and family.

First place went to **Yin Lin (QLD)** for ‘Speaking Volumes’ which concerns a familiar issue in our society: What to do with an ageing and aged population? When is a person ready for institutionalised care—and who should decide? ‘Speaking Volumes’ uses dialogue very effectively throughout to address these issues and establishes—not in any ‘preachy’ fashion—the need for respect for the entire life of a person, not only what they present at the end of their days.

Katharine Susannah Prichard Open Awards

Commended (in alphabetical order by author).

‘Transference’	Rebecca Howden (VIC).
‘Beach Wedding’	Kristen Levitzke (WA)
‘Tear Along the Dotted Line’	Melanie Naphine (VIC)
‘Out of Square’	Janeen Samuel (VIC)
‘The Devil and his Works’	Annabel Smith (WA)

As the writers are present, I'd like to make a few comments on two of the Commended entries. Firstly, Kristen Levtizke's 'Beach Wedding'. It begins 'I am about to have a wedding and I am dying.' Now *that* is a first sentence that draws you in. You certainly start asking questions. It is a moving and uplifting story about a woman dying of cancer who decides to ask a number of her friends—many of whom she hasn't seen for twenty five years— to her second wedding. Remarkably, given the content, the story is not without humour.

Annabel Smith's 'The Devil and His Works' is about a skype phone call between a brother and sister. The dialogue is sharp, amusing and perceptive as the brother in Perth tries to persuade the sister in New York that being the Godmother at his daughter's (strategic) baptism doesn't *actually* require a belief in God. Just a commitment to the advantages of getting his fast-tracked daughter Nevaeh into the local Catholic school, which is supposedly a better option than the Government one. And, in case you're wondering, 'Neveaeh' is 'Heaven' spelt backwards. The writer behind the narrative is certainly aware of the foibles of her characters, but what emerges, I think, is a sense of tolerance rather than smugness or superiority.

In this section, 3rd place goes to **Robyn Mundy** (WA) for 'Everlastings'. This lively, nicely observed story provides the reader with some idea what it is like to work on the Prospector train travelling between Perth and Kalgoorlie and delves into the past of the character Eledy—or is it Maddie?—who has made a major error of judgement as a teenager and paid a price. In this layered, insightful story Eledy comes over as a survivor and the tough, pretty everlasting flowers are a perfect metonym for her.

Very different in mood is the story by **Karen Atkison** (WA) 'Light Upon the Water' which won 2nd place. This is a story that requires careful attention to detail. There is considerable subtlety in the process of revealing the connections between characters, an understatement which is entirely appropriate for a story about a covert relationship between an older man and the daughter of a family

friend. Focussed through the eyes of Hannah, the young woman, it is beautifully paced working always by suggestion rather than explicit detail.

The winning entry is 'Any Other Sunday' by **Kevin Smith** (QLD). Let me read to you the opening lines:

The main street was empty. Trees stood naked in the cold; bare branches reached helplessly towards a spring not yet whispered of by a chill wind sweeping past shop fronts, the odd parked car, garbage bins sunk into concrete at the kerb's edge. A dismal rain fell and the tar, a dull gleam, rolled past closed shops.

Such an opening does not augur well and the story relies, again, on suggestion, hints of what might have been (for the protagonist) and, for a period, what might be. It is a carefully controlled narrative that sets up a mood of nostalgia and regret. Events happen as if in a film where the shots are held a little longer than normal and so the reader is drawn in and, along with 'the man', dwells in the moment. Not much happens in the story. A man arrives in a restaurant and waits there for a woman, someone with whom he has had a relationship. The story delineates in fine detail what is happening in the world of the café and, most importantly, the man's response to the sight of an Audi that drives into the carpark, bearing the woman. She parks alongside his land cruiser. The man and the woman, it would seem, live in very different worlds and are doomed from the opening lines of the story not to come together again, with 'the day's spent light falling into blackness.' It is difficult to know, in this very fine story, whether the title is intended ironically, or if it suggests there is an inevitability about a repetition of the events we have just witnessed—and so in our minds we 'wait to see what will happen.'

It might be worth mentioning at this point that all the stories in the winning and commended categories are very fine. And on a different day, with different judges, the ranking may well be different. So, congratulations to all those mentioned today and to the bulk who entered the competition and don't appear this time—but that certainly doesn't mean it won't happen next time.