

## **Katharine Susannah Prichard SF/F Competition 2014**

### **Judge's Report**

It was a pleasure to judge this year's competition and see the wide range of speculative fiction ideas presented by both new and accomplished writers. The winning stories of the Open Section were of a high standard and would require minimal polishing for publication. The Young Writer's Section had a range of stories with varying strengths in different areas; but all tackled thought-provoking ideas. To judge these fairly, I needed to consider each entrant's age, which ranged from eleven to twenty years.

Overall, my decisions were based on stories that not only held my attention from beginning to end, but also resonated with aspects of the real world while seamlessly incorporating fantastical elements. I looked for stories that illuminated something interesting about the human condition, told from the points of view of well-rounded characters whose personalities were not based on stereotypes.

For stories to come alive, they need to take place in a setting with details enough to give the illusion of reality, but not bogged down by unnecessary description or poorly placed backstory. Dialogue needs to feel natural and not solely a means of providing info dump. In order to elicit reader emotion, the important action needs to be 'shown' and not 'told', or in other words, it needs to be dramatized and backed up with sensory detail. On the other hand 'telling' also has its place in fiction, and a useful article that discusses the distinction between the two can be found at: <http://www.sfwriter.com/ow04.htm>

Some of the winning stories used well-worn themes, but added new elements and twists that made those old themes feel original. Each of the entered stories displayed a good measure of writerly 'talent', but in the end, it was 'craft' that set the winning stories apart. These stories showed well-developed or developing styles and an engaging 'narrative voice' that complemented the point-of-view character's actions, thoughts and observations.

Lastly, I cannot overstress the importance of manuscript presentation. When submitting work to competitions or publishers, take note of their guidelines and if none are given, adhere as much as possible to accepted professional standards, an example of which can be found at: <http://www.sfw.org/2008/11/manuscript-preparation/>

For those writers whose stories did not receive a mention, if you enjoy writing, keep at it. A non-win does not mean that your story was not good or did not have the potential to make the grade with more work. It means that, in the world of publishing, you will always be faced with tough competition. The writers who persevere will eventually become the next winners and closer to becoming the next published authors. The more you write, the further your writing will develop. Also do not forget that regular reading from a variety of genres is absolutely necessary to understand how fiction works.

## **Mundaring National Young Writers Awards**

### **1<sup>st</sup> Prize:**

**The Man in the Moon** by Ashleigh Mounser is the story of a young girl's lost love as dream seeps into reality and reality seeps into dream. The speculative element is subtle, while the narrative voice is lyrical and otherworldly, reminiscent of the styles of master writers such as Jeanette Winterson and Toni Morrison. "The Man in the Moon" would be equally at home in a literary or fantasy fiction anthology.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Prize:**

**Forevermore** by Jenny Chang is about a young boy who no longer has a place in the world of his quarrelling parents and unwittingly submits himself to permanent stasis. At five hundred and fifty words, this sf/horror story is a successful piece of flash fiction and is filled with enough detail to create a character I wanted to vouch for.

**COMMENDED** (in alphabetical order by authors' surnames)

**Even the Immortal Perish: Archer** by Claire Chua is a harrowing tale of the horrors of war. Although the narrative contains some great details that add to the sense of impending doom, the action has the potential to elicit more emotion if dramatized (ie, 'shown' instead of being 'told').

**The Light of Dawn** by Nathaniel Crouch tells of a man's defeat during a long and bloody war. The setting and backstory are well done but overshadow the characterization and action.

**The Nightmare** by Radheya Jegatheva is a first person account filled with wonderful details that create tension to accelerate the plot to the terrifying moment when the narrator wakes up to find that their nightmare is real.

**Little Timmy** by Wendy Qu is a first person account of sibling rivalry with world-destroying consequences. Based on a fabulous idea, this tale would have really come alive if it were dramatized with action, setting and dialogue, instead of being told mostly through backstory.

**Nostalgia** by Li Yifei is an ambitious story of time travelling robots that kill humans to prevent future disasters. A lot of good ideas are put together to make a thought-provoking end. However, too much happens for a story of this length. It would benefit from at least double the word count to allow major decisions to feel convincing and character driven.

### **Under 13 Award**

**The Accepting** by 11 year-old Madison Stibbe

A 3000-word story of a girl's quest to become a princess. Faced with danger and the trickery of an evil king, she soon learns that she is perhaps destined for humbler pursuits. Told in a fairy tale format, "The Accepting" has a lively narrative voice, great characterization and well-placed humour. An outstanding achievement by this young writer.

## **Open Awards**

### **1<sup>st</sup> Prize: Peace Before the Flame** by Janeen Samuel

This beautifully crafted story is set in a vivid and bleak landscape that not only establishes mood and tone, but also reinforces the protagonist's mind-set. Character motivations are quickly made clear, while world-building and backstory unfold unobtrusively as the plot progresses. The author uses the common fantasy trope of the dragon, but links it to the story's main conflict in a fresh and believable way. The ending is pleasingly unpredictable, logical and character driven.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Prize: The Structure** by Marlee Ward

Like all excellent science fiction, "The Structure" is as much about the present as it is about the dystopian near future it depicts. The opening scene immediately hooked me with the birth of a baby in one of the many dilapidated cars in a multi-level car park that houses the poor. Told from the point of view of a child, the narrative is competently written with natural dialogue and good pacing from beginning to end. The juxtaposition of humour and tragedy hurls the reader into a visceral story of entrapment where the gap between rich and poor widens, and injustices are perpetuated from generation to generation.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Prize: Tinged With Light** by Dimuthu Alankarage

This story of loyalty and endurance impressed me with its mythical voice, strong imagery and symbolism. Past and present merge as two young men are trapped in the tenuous boundary between life and death. Only their love for each other and for those they have left behind can save them.

### **COMMENDED** (in alphabetical order by authors' surnames)

**Sweetwater Ruby** by Gil Bosaid is a poignant coming of age story about a mentally disabled girl with extraordinary talent. The outback setting and character relationships add depth to the story, however the restricted word count makes the plot feel rushed. If more time were spent on character development, this idea would have the potential to shine as a novelette or novella.

**The Revelation** by Merran Jones tells of siblings discovering past lives via the memories of a centuries-old abandoned house. The prose successfully conveys a sense of fear and impending doom, however sometimes the description is overwritten and sometimes the action feels rushed. The omniscient point of view distances the reader from the main characters despite the wonderful quirky details that brings them to life.

**Blown** by Kristen Levitzke has a wonderful idea at its core. A glassblower working in Disneyland to escape life's disappointments is visited by a coterie of famous literary characters. As the boundaries between the real and the imagined become as malleable as molten glass, his one gesture of kindness backfires on him. The text is ironic and engaging, however the lack of details during critical moments leads to a rushed and overly cryptic ending.

**All In** by Louisa Loder is a fly-on-the-wall account of a poker game between fantasy and science fictional characters. The mood and tension work well, raising the stakes as the game progresses, but the text relies too often on “telling” in places where “showing” from a single character’s point of view would have enhanced the reader’s emotional response. Although the ending is predictable, the characterization of the winning player creates a wonderfully sinister final image.

**Bella-Mia** by Rachelle Rechichi is an ominous tale of a deadly pet and its withered owner told via alternating scenes of first and second person points of view. Strong imagery and unusual syntax provide an excellent narrative hook, however the lack of clear character details and of connections between alternating scenes create confusing ambiguities. The reader is forced to work too hard to take it all in.

**Conclusion:**

Many thanks to the KSP Centre for asking me to judge this year’s competition. And best wishes to all entrants. Thank you for giving me the privilege of reading your work.

Carol Ryles.