

KSP Short Fiction Award 2018
Open & Youth Section
Judge's Report by Michelle Michau-Crawford

Thank you for inviting me to judge the 2018 KSP Fiction Award. And thank you to all of the writers who took the opportunity to write and fine tune their stories for submission, and entrusted me with their precious creative work. This year 132 stories were submitted across the two categories. It was a privilege to read these entries. I read each story fully, and more often than not returned multiple times. The overall standard of presentation was high and there were many strong entries. On the first reading choosing just a few for recognition seemed an impossible task. But of course at some point decisions have to be made and criteria applied. As would probably be expected I sought tightly-crafted stories where writers had avoided clichés and stereotypes, and had used interesting language and stylistic devices that felt appropriate for the particular story. I looked too for refreshing, honest and distinctive voices. I returned to stories that lingered, were subtle, demanded to be read again, made me ask questions, or stopped me in my tracks and made me *feel*. In the introduction to *Selected Stories* (1993) Alice Munro says a story has “a sturdy sense of itself of being built out of its own necessity, not just to shelter or beguile you.” These were the stories I hoped to find.

Young Writer Awards

I was impressed by the scope and daring of the entries. Reading these stories it is apparent that young writers are engaged with the same complex issues that preoccupy many adults. With such interesting developing writerly voices we'll be assured of richness in our reading for years to come. I encourage all young entrants to keep on writing. I firmly believe that the real pleasure in writing is found in the process of writing itself, not just in publication or awards.

Commended

The Lost World by Sofie Clementi, from WA. This touching story explores memory, grief and longing from the perspective of a recently bereaved child. The other two stories, *Freedom is in the Blood* and *La Zingara*, are by Isabella Evangelista, of NSW. The first story explores loss of home from the unique perspective of a bird. The second explores a young girl's acknowledgement of the relative privilege of her life.

Highly Commended

The Beach by Lara Skerratt, from QLD is a mysterious, tightly written gem. When I reached the end I wasn't entirely certain I understood quite what had happened, and sometimes that is just as it needs to be. Similarly, *G(ensis) Gospel* by Isabella Vacaflores, of NSW is intriguing, exploring complex subject matter around religion, community, and making sense of the world.

Mundaring National Young Writers Encouragement Award goes to *A Social Endemic* by Michael Swift from WA. This is a remarkable and complex piece of writing and while it does not quite hit the mark in its present form, the young writer, aged only 12, should be recognised and encouraged. This submission demonstrates a level of intellectual rigour rarely seen in a work of fiction.

Second Prize is awarded to Hana Lont, from WA for *Ladybug*, a story based on a shattering premise. Sensitively written and without lapsing into sentimentality, Hana explores the complexities of emotions and responses when confronted with such an incomprehensible tragedy as teen suicide.

First Prize goes to Jasmin Pradhan, from WA for *The Girl with the Pink Shoelaces*. Beautifully crafted, this deceptively simple story explores one girl's experiences of the world. Jasmin took me right into Robyn's head, and her challenges with sensory overload and communication were compassionately, sensitively and convincingly rendered. One of the many elements I admire about the crafting of this story is the way Jasmin shifts smoothly between the internal thoughts and external action and dialogue without disrupting the narrative flow.

Open Awards

The stories selected in the Open section are quite varied, but each of the recognised entries holds a mirror up in some way to the ways we live our lives, and demonstrate sensitivity and insight in those explorations.

Commended

Her Name is John James by Benjamin James Mason, of WA and *Head-bob* by Janet Applegate, also of WA, are quiet, reflective stories. In the first, a young call centre employee considers whether taking a new position will mean compromising her values and in the second, a FiFo worker uses the flight to work to contemplate the meaning and value of his life. *Summer-Break*, by Gina Burgess, of Tasmania, is told through the eyes of a child unaware of the lengths his parents go to ensure he experiences an annual summer holiday, just like everyone else.

The two Highly Commended, Second and First Prize entries were standouts. All are richly layered, and engage at some level with personal, political, moral and ethical dilemmas, and in no way 'shelter or beguile.' I confess to having had a tough time making my final decision.

Highly Commended

Returning to Rome by Kathy Prokhovnik, of NSW is set on a train heading to Rome. A stranger inadvertently forces a woman to reveal life-changing news she wasn't ready to share. Evocative and nuanced, this story creeps up on the reader and shows how easily our world can tilt. How sometimes one response, or even a gesture or expression, can change everything. *Talking Beasts* by Rashida Murphy, from WA shines a light on the disadvantages and challenges, and the complexities of the lives of migrants and international students in Australia. It cleverly and subtly highlights some of the individual and systemic racism that exists amongst even those amongst us who think we're better informed than to behave that way. There is no single 'international student and migrant story' but this rich work compassionately and astutely provides some insight to both the personal and universal experiences of a particular subset of migrants attempting to find a way to 'be' in Australia.

Second Prize goes to *Extras* by Rita Tognini, of WA. This highly imaginative and strongly realised story packs a punch, in my case quite often straight after a scene that made me laugh. Set partly on a movie set in China, one year after the massacre at Tiananmen Square, two western academics have signed up to be extras in a film set in the Vietnam war as a way to see a bit more of the country. Subversive and more than a touch irreverent, there's an air of Bakhtin's 'carnavalesque' weaving through this textured story. The gaps, the unseen and the unsaid, are incredibly powerful. Reading it in the present, knowing what we know (or think we know) about then, adds another level of discomfort to the reading experience

First prize is awarded to *Aggiornamento (Bringing up to Date)*, by Cynthia Fenton, WA. This confronting and accomplished story explores a number of topics including gender inequality in the church and wider society, moral and ethical dilemmas, intergenerational trauma, racism, and dispossession. It is not a comfortable read at all, but I truly felt it to be 'built out of its own necessity.' The story opens with Sister Anne walking behind, and not beside a priest toward the room where we soon discover she is to appeal the decision for excommunication from the Catholic Church for assisting young girls to access birth control. This story raises many questions, including those around who gets to tell the stories, a subject rightly very much in the forefront of the minds of storytellers nowadays. Told from Sister Anne's point of view, the complex and devastating situations that lead her to help those she loves in the only way she truly can, are explored with compassion, love and non-judgement.

Congratulations again to all the recognised entrants, and to all who submitted stories.