

Judge's Report – 2018 KSP Ghost Story Contest

Carolyn Wren

I believe the short story genre is the hardest one to master, especially when given a specific themed subject. 1500 words, or 500 words for the junior category, is a tiny number of words in which to create an entire balanced story. One that has a clear beginning, middle and end. One which captures the essence of the theme, and gives the reader well developed characters they can picture in their mind.

I do a lot of contest judging, and blind judged contests are my favourite. There's no outside influence. No cover art, no publisher logo, no author name. The story has to stand on its own merits. The entries come to me with only the story title and a code number. To add an extra layer of anonymity, I ask that no one post their intention to enter the contest to any of my social media, or tell me personally. I always have a great time judging the Ghost Story Contest, and I thank KSP for giving me the opportunity.

Anyone who writes a story is an author, and any author knows that sending your story out into the world to be judged is one of the scariest things you can possibly do. I'd like to applaud each and every one of our authors here tonight. The winners, the finalists, the entrants and all of those who thought about entering this year's Ghost Story, but didn't. I hope you'll build up your own courage by next year.

In conclusion, you should all be very proud of your achievements.

This year's theme, night, was open to interpretation, as long as the piece contained significant elements of eeriness/spookiness and a clear connection to the theme. 'Night' could be interpreted literally (i.e. a story based during night-time) or metaphorically (a character has a dark mental outlook on life) I have to say, a lot of authors took that last part to heart, and caused me more than a few sleepless nights during the reading process! As judge, I took into consideration the grammar and punctuation of each entrant, but it also came down to the 'feel' of the story. A story isn't just about each comma and full stop. It needs character and creativity. All the entries were spooky and fit the theme. All our writers deserve our congratulations for being brave enough to enter.

Instructions

The shortlisted entries for tonight's Youth and Open categories will be announced starting with the commendations.

When your names are called, could the authors come up to the stage to receive their certificate, and pose for a photo. Once all the prizes are handed out and the final winners announced, we will be calling for entrants to come back up and read their stories.

Youth Interstate

This year's contest opened up our youth category to interstate entries and those entries were superb.

Commendations

Ghost Girl - Alicia Curcio – Age 10

Ghost Girl is a tightly written, emotionally driven story about bullying, kidnapping, and revenge. I was caught up in our main characters exploits and adventures and captivated by her spirit and determination. Well done, Alicia.

When The Clock Struck Midnight - Olivia Lin – Age 8

A race through a haunted mansion to the sounds of deafening screams...And that's just the opening line to this fast paced, scary story. Dripping blood, and a shadowy predator in a black dress keep the tension levels high and the reader on edge until the very end. This is a true ghost story with a twist ending. Well done, Olivia.

Death's Warm Embrace – Sophie Wink – Age 17

I loved the character's voice in this story, about Salem, accidental death and a mad house of assorted spirits. The wonderful descriptive narration and clever author voice kept me riveted until the very end. Well done, Sophie.

The Midnight Creature - Lauren Marie – Age 16

I have great admiration for an author who can create fear and tension in a story, only to pull the rug from under you at the last moment. This is exactly what Lauren did in The Midnight Creature. I have no doubt that this young author has a great future ahead of her. Well done, Lauren.

1st Place

The Ghost of the Night – Sasha Zolotavkina – Age 10

This year's winner of the Youth Interstate category is a dark tale of a spirit prowling the shadowed streets of London, stealing the hopes, dreams and sanity for those unfortunate enough to cross her path. This story had a true emotional resonance. The visual descriptions of terror and unfeeling vengeance were riveting. I loved this story and would like to offer my sincere congratulations to Sasha for this deserving win.

Youth WA

Commendations

Guitar - Saman Azam – Age 12

Guitar wasn't the scariest story in this year's youth category, but its emotional heart and exceptional writing gave it a deserving place in the finals. The tale of a ghostly serenade by an unknown, melancholy musician, strumming his guitar by moonlight is captivating and touching. The music of the story stayed with me long after I finished reading. Well done, Saman.

Life Guard - Eva Marsh – Age 17

What is it about a deserted swimming pool at night that gives off an eerie vibe? Is it the echoing silence, the cold darkness of the water? All of these are put to excellent use in Life Guard. A tragic death and its repercussions for the living left behind give this story its genuine tension and suspense. Well done, Eva.

Fallen Soul - Montana Shepherd – Age 16

A dark stormy night and an ancient abandoned manor is a great way to start a ghost story. Especially when the story twists and turns into something unexpected. Montana takes us on a journey of fear and loneliness and leaves us with something positive. It takes a clever storyteller to achieve that. Well done, Montana.

2nd Prize

Heartbreak Crossing - Ellen Bourgault – Age 15

There were a few stories in this year's contest that caused me sleepless nights. Heartbreak Crossing was most definitely one of them. A creepy, harrowing tale of death and haunting. Of restless spirits and lost love. I commend Ellen on creating such a strong and emotional story. Congratulations on your prize.

1st Prize

The Night's Curse - Matilda Dewar – Age 12

With so many brilliant entries in the 2018 Youth WA category, you can understand how difficult it was to pick a winner. 500 words is such a tiny quantity to create a well-rounded story. Matilda did it with 336, and she did it in verse. The theme of night surrounds this story, it echoes in every line, every stanza. The Night's Curse builds in tension, pulling the reader along with it. It's a beautifully crafted, wonderfully written tale and a deserving winner of this year's contest. Well done, Matilda.

Adult Open Category

Commendations

NIGHTPHONED – Mark Townsend

Can technology bring with it its own set of ghostly rules? Can the modern world we take for granted cross over to another plane? These are the questions posed in NIGHTPHONED, a clever tale of love, loss and moving forward. I loved this different take on a ghost story. Its

emotion rang throughout (no pun intended) Well done, Mark, for writing something so distinctive and unique.

QUARANTINED - Susan Wemyss

Every time I go to Sydney, a friend of mine tries to take me to the North Head Quarantine Station and every time I refuse, with good reason. The station has a reputation for being haunted and is a great choice for a ghost story setting. But Susan's tale takes us on a different journey. Here we get a wonderful insight into the stations original inhabitants, and the unimaginable hardships they endured. Sometimes when reading a story, a single line will stay with me, lingering for a long time. This was the case in Quarantined. The last line in the story was eloquent and heartwarming, and gave this story its perfect ending. Well done, Susan.

Bed Time Story - Eloise Kiosses

It's interesting that a tale called Bed Time Story stopped me from going to bed after reading it. This frightening story of an imaginary friend and a maternal night time ritual becomes the stuff of horrors. Painting a parent in a less than flattering light is a bold move and it works in this harrowing story. Well done, Eloise.

I'd like to say a huge congratulations to both of the authors of these final two stories

2nd Place

Wundura – D.D. Line

From the very first line, this distinctively Australian story transported me to another place, another time. There is such an emotional resonance here, I could hear the vibrato of the didgeridoo, see the flickering flames against the night sky. But there is also a silence, deep and powerful, weaving its quiet between the lines of the story. This tale of a warrior called back for a final task is beautiful and evocative and executed with real skill. Congratulations, Dannielle, on your well-deserved place in this year's ghost story finals.

NOTE:

Because Wundarra is an indigenous story, both the author and KSP sought individual advice on any sensitivity issues with regard to reading the story in public.

The following is the statement issued by Jeff Murray, and KSP would like to thank him for reading the story and giving his expert advice.

“I consider the Wundurra story as suitable for reading out to an audience. With my many years of experience working with Aboriginal people and communities I believe the story as non-offensive to Aboriginal people and contains nothing that should be considered as sensitive.”

1st Place

Night Blooms – Suzannah Churchman

This year’s contest theme was ‘night’, and that theme was integral to my judging duties. It was fascinating to see the different interpretations from all our writers in their stories. Before I received the entries, I wondered if there would be night time settings? Would the darkness be of the mind, or the body? How would each author handle it? Our winner tonight takes all of these elements to the next level. Not only is the story set at night, not only is the darkness metaphorical and physical, the very essence of night is vital to the plot. Had the theme of the contest been ‘day’ this story simply would not qualify. There’s not just one component of night, there are several, and each one is entwined within the story adding layer upon layer. It takes a master storyteller to take a simple word, and transform it into a superbly written tale that is both scary and genuinely suspenseful. I loved Night Blooms and found myself re-reading it several times long after my judging duties were complete. Congratulations, Suzannah, this story deserves its winner’s prize.