

2020 KSP Spooky Stories Judges Report

Carolyn Wren

This year's Spooky Stories Contest had one change from the previous few years, and that was the inclusion of an initial judging panel, who read *all* the entries and passed the longlist onto me.

As much as I love to read each and every story, the contest becomes more popular each year and the sheer number of wonderful stories submitted meant I needed a team of helpers. Thank you to the round one KSP judging panel for your awesome work, and I envy you for getting to read the entire catalogue of 2020 entries.

The aim of any author when constructing a story, is reader satisfaction. I believe the short story genre is the hardest one to master, especially when given a specific themed subject. 1200 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 participate in 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 in the KSP Spooky Story contest 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 this 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. The winners, the finalists, the entrants and all of those who thought about entering this year's contest, 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.

The theme for 2020 was 'beneath'

The judging panel was looking for clever usage of that theme. Judges love to be surprised. The story needed to incorporate some form of the paranormal, real or imagined, and of course, it needed to be spooky. Submissions could involve paranormal or supernatural themes, including magic, ghosts, spirits or altered states of realism. As the longlist 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 longlist entries were spooky and fit the theme. All our writers deserve our congratulations for being brave enough to enter.

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Winners and Finalists Report

Open Category

1st Place – The Tube by Lisa Rodrigues

Lisa won this year's contest because of the tension she portrayed so effectively within the story. Every line takes you further and further into fear and panic even as the train moves further and further into the depths of the tunnel. It's a clever metaphor on the 'beneath' theme and highly believable in its execution. To make the story even more impressive, it delivers a doubling down of the theme at the end *and* a genre change *and* a twist I didn't see coming. To achieve all of that in a short story deserves the recognition of 1st place in this year's contest. Well done Lisa.

2nd Place - The Arms of the Ocean by Melanie Talbot

Melanie's story is beautifully written, wonderfully expressive and evocative. Using mythology in a short story is difficult and can come across as rushed when including exposition and plotting. This story has wonderful pacing and a haunting rhythm as we wait for the inevitable fate of the doomed vessel. Well done Melanie.

Commendation – Beneath The Bridge by Kathy Shortland-Jones

I love it when a story takes the theme and twists it into something unexpected. Kathy's story did exactly that. I could feel the frustration of the musician in this story, the building of tension winding itself around the classical music and the instrument in his hands. It's exceptionally well written and deserves its commendation. Well done Kathy.

Commendation – Beneath These Wooden Skies by Fionna Cosgrove

Fionna's story packs an emotional punch, taking the reader on a journey of grief, loss and love, while keeping true to this year's contest theme. It's not easy to write a spooky story with a happy ending, one that feels real and honest. Fionna managed it with ease and that kind of writing talent deserves recognition. Well done Fionna.

Youth Category

1st Place – Beneath Warm Smiles by Anna-Grace Lau (14)

There is an incredible maturity and confidence to Anna-Grace's writing. The story is filled with a creepy atmosphere as we delve into the twisted mind of the lead character, hearing her

taunting thoughts, and her scorn for those around her. It's a wonderful story, genuinely scary and deserves its place as winner of this year's contest. Well done Anna-Grace.

2nd Place – Goodbye Tom by Hannah Sambell (15)

I love Hannah's story as it has such wonderful pacing. Delivering a defined beginning, middle and ending, together with a strong degree of spookiness is difficult in only 500 words. It has great use of the theme and is very well written. Well done Hannah.

Commendation – Beneath the Dying Sun by Rosie Scutt (13)

Rosie's writing style is confident and concise. She delivered a clever use of the theme in a creepy and well-rounded story. Well done Rosie.

Commendation – The Lonely Witch by Jasmin Pradhan (18)

I loved the themes represented in Jasmin's story, themes of friendship and positivity. It's always refreshing to read a spooky story with a happy ending, one that left me smiling. Well done Jasmin.

Commendation – Little Boy by Aydee Bull (14)

Aydee's story is creepy and well written, and leaves the story open ended just enough for the readers to keep thinking about it long after the last word. Well done Aydee.

Commendation 11371 – Beneath the Reflection by Makayla Deanne Blythman (14)

Makayla's story has a wonderfully spooky feel to it, with a clever use of the theme and a spooky twist ending! Well done Makayla.