

2021 Spooky Story Competition Judge's Report – Carolyn Wren

KSP WRITERS' CENTRE

Every year when I receive the KSP Spooky Story Competition entries to judge, I know I'm going to have a scary month. That thought made me wonder, why do people read things that scare them? Why welcome that involuntary intake of breath, the increased heartbeat and icy shiver down our spines? Isn't fear a bad thing?

Then I remembered a workshop I attended at the KSP Writers Centre some years ago with children's author, Steve Cotler. Someone asked Steve about writing adventure books for younger readers, and he replied, "People, especially children, enjoy being scared as long as that fear comes from a place of absolute safety."

I love that explanation and it's always stayed with me. It's so simple and yet so true. None of us want to be trapped in an *actual* haunted house, tormented by a vengeful ghost...or find ourselves being chased down a dark alley by a demented knife wielding maniac.

But, put us in our own home, snuggled on the sofa surrounded by familiar things and people we love and trust, and we're happy to read *all* the scary things writers can throw at us.

I believe this explains why the KSP Spooky Story Competition is so popular. Readers love reading spookiness, and thankfully, all our talented authors love writing it.

And now a little about the competition itself...

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 must stand on its own merits. The entries in the KSP Spooky Story competition 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 competition, and I thank KSP for giving me the opportunity.

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.

This year the theme was Voices. 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 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.

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 short listers included in the print anthology, the other 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.

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Judge Comments for finalists/winners

Child

Comm: Shadelands by Ellen Bourgault

Shadelands is a wonderfully evocative story filled with spirits, shadows and enchantments. It has excellent descriptions and fits the theme well. Well done Ellen

3rd: Isabelle by Saufi Risal

Isabelle is a genuinely spooky story with an excellent use of the theme. It has a high level of tension that continues throughout. Well done Saufi.

2nd: Mary Kings Close by Ben Lesley

Mary Kings Close is an action packed story designed to grab readers to the very end. Well told with great pacing and a spooky final line. Well done Ben.

1st: Illusion by Jun Chu

Illusion took out this year's top prize because of the wonderful mystery element of the story and the surprising reveal right at the end, all wrapped in an emotional heart. It's difficult to get those multiple layers in such a short number of words and I felt Jun Chu really succeeded. Well done and congratulations.

Adult

Comm: Stay by Jo Morrison

My notes on this story started with the word 'beautiful' which may seem an odd description for a spooky story. But it is beautiful, and emotional, and evocative. And the story is so intricate and detailed I had to check twice to make sure it

hadn't exceeded the allowed word count. I loved the use of the theme and the surprise ending. Well done Jo.

Comm: Listen by Kaitlin Pradhan

Listen is an incredibly imaginative story with a totally unique use of the theme. I loved the fantasy elements and the emotion weaved throughout the story. Well done Kaitlin.

3rd: Whispers by Sarah Ayres

Whispers is a spooky story! A heart pounding tale of fear and panic. I loved the mysterious elements and the high tension throughout. Well done Sarah.

2nd: Voices Ethereal by Caroline Michell

Voices Ethereal tugs at the heartstrings with a story about love, loss and family. The characters are well written fully formed. I was fully immersed in Octavius, Annabel and Katherine and the way their lives are intricately woven together. Well done Caroline.

1st: Just a Voice by Fiona Mayers

In choosing this year's winner, I was reminded of a quote attributed to Alfred Hitchcock which says... 'In order to allow fear in, sometimes you have to strip everything else away.'

This is what I found in Just A Voice, and this was the story that sat front and centre in my mind if I woke up in the middle of the night.

The stark elements of darkness, a woman alone, and a stranger on the end of a phone line, plus the visceral – and very believable - reaction of our main character, Maeve, to her experiences, gives the story a genuinely spooky feel that stays with the reader long after the final word. Well done Fiona.