

KSP Short Fiction Award: Judge's Report 2021 (Emily Paull)

It is always an interesting experience sitting on the other side of the judge's table. As a writer, I have found myself in the position of being judged multiple times; but it was only when given the opportunity to judge the work of others that I began to better understand the mechanics of writing competitions, which in turn has given me a much-needed perspective on all those times in the past that I missed out on a prize. I hope that I can share some of that with you now.

As is often the case with an open themed award, I saw a lot of variation among the eligible entries sent to me for judging. Variation, that is, in theme. In quality, and in passion, the standard across the board was very high indeed, which made my decisions about placements just that much harder. How do you rank a science fiction story against something with a historical setting, or a romance against a comedy? In the end, I looked for three things—I looked for stories that felt fresh and original and had a clear point of view; I looked for writing that was polished and put the right words in the right order; and I looked for stories, characters and ideas that stayed with me long after I had closed the files that contained them. Writers of short fiction will often tell you that it is much harder to write a short story than it is to write a novel, and having attempted both to varying degrees of success, I am inclined to agree. In a short story, your time with your reader is limited, and their undivided attention is never guaranteed. The short fiction writer needs a firm grasp on their story basics – the who, what, where, when, and most importantly why – before they even can begin, and in some of the best pieces, the reader is dropped into a fully formed world with people who feel like they could get up and walk off the page. I saw this again and again in the entries for this year's awards, and many accomplished writers missed out on a placement by mere millimetres.

The younger writers were all extremely impressive, especially when I took into account how young some of them were. Being a teenager is tough enough, without having to muster up the courage to send off a story you've poured a part of your soul into for some anonymous stranger to read, but this anonymous stranger is incredibly grateful that you did because it meant that I got the pleasure of spending time in your words. I suspect that many more young writers would enter this award if it weren't for the pesky requirement to study and attend school—for those who manage to do both (and during a pandemic no less), I salute you, and I see you. It was in the KSP young writers' awards that I first found my feet; winning this category in the final year that I was eligible meant a lot to my decision to pursue writing seriously, but I have always remembered that the judge's report that year spoke about a trend towards 'navel gazing' across the works submitted. I am happy to say that there was no navel gazing in 2021.

In both the adult and the young writers' categories, there were a few things that united all of the entries I have awarded a place. The stories that made the final cut felt complete, and did not seem to be a part of a larger project that had been cut down to size. They felt purposeful, intentional, and whole. They used language playfully and effectively, and had a great sense of character as opposed to caricature. Their situations were immediately immersing, and they did not waste words as they found their way onto the page. All of the listed entries had highly original and relatable situations and resisted the temptation to veer into over-dramatics. Everything in moderation. In a word, the writers had control, and as such, they were in complete control of my emotional reaction as a reader. This was what pushed them over the top and made them stand out against an incredibly accomplished cohort.

But I just want to emphasise again for those writers whose names will not be called today, that there was not a single entry that ‘sucked’ and there are no losers today. In fact, if any of you feel like giving up writing after today’s announcement, as I know I have done in the past when I have missed out on a prize that I felt I worked hard enough to deserve, I want you to tell yourself that you were one of those writers whose work missed out on an award by mere millimetres, because it’s incredibly likely that this is true, and I want to read more from all of you in the future.

This year, there were 55 entries in the Youth Category and 63 in the open category, and I count myself incredibly lucky that I was not asked to judge a total of 260 awards as last year’s judge had to. From those 55 and 63, I had a very limited number of placements that I was able to give out. Without any further ado, those placements go to:

Youth Category

Natalie Barr from Victoria for Eleven Bites (Commended)

What I love about this piece is that it takes the very familiar, and usually very comforting, ritual of preparing food and it shows us the kind of terrifying ordeal that it can become for someone who has disordered eating. That is what great fiction does, it allows us to walk in other peoples’ shoes. It’s a short piece, but very vivid, and it uses the array of senses to create a fully formed and rather powerful moment in time. For a story that looks at someone who is struggling with their mental health, too, it ends on a hopeful, triumphant note which I think speaks to the maturity of the writer, and the understanding that they have of how to take a character on a journey rather than just showing the reader a person in pain for pure shock value. Well done, Natalie.

Vihaan Pujara from WA for Rebellion Rekindled (Commended)

Language plays a key role in this story of uprising and rebellion—our unnamed narrator is a slave with a rather large vocabulary, dreaming of his or her eventual freedom through whatever means necessary. It is evident right from the start that this author is extremely well-versed in their genre of choice, and the piece plunges us immediately into a setting that could be either future or past, or a chilling version of the present, but where power structures and inequality had bred a simmering resentment among the indentured labourers. The piece ends on a final line which evokes for me Margaret Atwood’s Gilead in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and yet, this is a short story rather than something that feels like it has been plucked from something longer without context. Here is a young author who understands the art of starting as late into the action as you possibly can. Well done, Vihaan.

Syazwani Saifudin from Victoria for Glass Girl (Highly Commended)

‘The sea’s not that great.’ So says the teenaged protagonist of ‘Glass Girl’, a character who bursts onto the page fully formed, with a clear and honest voice, and something to say. Her anger at the world is twinned with her love for it, and her desire to continue living despite the terminal cancer diagnosis that she has received. This is not your typical, John Green style teenage cancer story. Well done, Syazwani.

Haelie Roberts from Victoria for I Will Remember (Highly Commended)

I Will Remember is a deceptively simple piece of writing, but a very moving one. It follows Jesse, who is visiting the War Memorial with their father. When the pair become separated, Jesse is given an opportunity to put a human face on the platitudes of war that they hear every year on ANZAC and Remembrance Day, and to reflect on how lucky they are to not have experienced these things first hand. I commend the author's choice not to be overly dramatic in their rendering of an emotional subject, as this made their words all the more impactful. Well done, Haelie.

Nadia Brownrigg from NSW for String Never Melts (Highly Commended)

Around the world and throughout history, women have been married off in 'business transactions' like the one described in String Never Melts. The story begins with Sarala, the second daughter of her family, practising spells and thinking of her two sisters as she looks at the enchanted string bracelet that she treasures, and which binds them to her even when they are far apart. This bracelet is soon contrasted with one made of a more precious material as Sarala stands at the altar with her future husband. But Sarala is fearless and therefore powerful, and she has the strength of her feminine magic within her. She will not be bought and sold so easily. This story was engrossing right from the start and I loved Sarala as a character. I love that this story ends in a way that may be interpreted in a number of ways depending on the reader, and that this means that its message is layered and nuanced. Well done, Nadia.

In second place, Liora Berry from NSW for Running Alone.

Liora is just 10 years old, and I know from judging the Tim Winton Award every year for the last four years that you should never count the writers at the younger end of this category out because they can and regularly do punch above their weight, but that doesn't make it any less impressive to witness. In Running Alone, a child is told to follow the birds as they run to escape an invading army; and in doing so, they befriend an injured bird. The pair seem to look after one another. This is a moment of stark beauty against a backdrop of fear and destruction, which is evocative and realistic and heartbreaking. The story ends with a chilling final line: "Sometimes stories end with twisted versions of happily ever after." Well done, Liora.

First prize goes to Beyas Basu from Queensland for the story My Last Husband.

My Last Husband was a deliciously creepy and sinister story told by a Lady Macbeth esque character, desperately trying to wash the blood from her skin. Yet this character has not killed for ambition, or for bloodlust. Rather, in flashbacks, the author shows us a portrait of a woman who has been oppressed and emotionally abused until she snapped. There is a hint of Daphne Du Maurier here, particularly as the narrator sits in front of the mirror trying to recognise the girl she used to be in the mirror and thinking of a photographer named Rebecca with whom she once had to compete for her husband's affections—yet in this piece, it is our unnamed protagonist and not Rebecca who is the sinister presence in the story. I loved this story. Well done, Beyas.

And the Encouragement Award for a writer under 14 goes to 11 year old Hazel Mazza from Victoria for A Seal's Story.

I wondered, as I read this, if Hazel Mazza had been inspired by the seal in Victoria who had been delighting locked-down Australians. For me, this piece was reminiscent of one of my favourite childhood movies, *Andre*. In *A Seal's Story*, Slinky leaves his family and goes close to where the humans are, determined to find out what happened to his father. While he's there, he witnesses a strange sight—humans releasing a seal into the water, and he goes closer to find out what is going on... I wanted to give this piece the encouragement award because it has all the elements of a great story. Character, drama, backstory, the dangers of the unknown outside world, and a plucky young seal who is determined to push through his fear. I think we will be seeing great things from Hazel in the future, so well done.

Open Category:

The Mundaring Resident's Award goes to Jill Southgate for Picture Perfect

Jill Southgate clearly has a wicked sense of humour. In *Picture Perfect*, our main character Jeremiah is a stylist to the recently deceased, and makes his living doing makeup and hair on people for their open casket funerals. But this can be a somewhat lonely, thankless task, and one day, Jeremiah decides that he'd like to know what it feels like to be one of his clients... There is a lightness and sense of fun to this piece that makes you smile, even though you're thinking about death and dying the whole time, and I want to thank Jill Southgate for entering her comedic talents into this competition and proving that you don't always have to write heavy, doom-laden stories to be literary. Well done, Jill.

Jen Bowden from WA for Domestic (Commended)

Hands up if you've ever had a creative writing teacher tell you not to use second person? Well, that teacher was clearly not Jen Bowden, who uses this technique with great skill to put the reader in the shoes of a woman who is returning home to be with her abusive partner after a blissful respite in the form of a family story. The whole story takes place across the course of a plane journey, and the sense of anguish that this character feels as she gets closer and closer is heartbreaking. Jen Bowden's control of language is never cliched, and her prose is never purple. She takes some risks with her writing, and they pay off. Well done, Jen.

Josephine Sarvass from NSW for Ouroboros (Commended)

Ouroboros is a haunting story of friendship; of remembering that one friend who the adults never really understood, but whose presence in the life of Cecilia, the main character, was a formative occasion. Nostalgia oozes from the words in this piece, and the sense of a long, hot, languid school year are evoked vividly. Well done, Josephine.

Kit Scriven from Victoria for The Buyer (Commended)

Christopher Scriven's *The Buyer* feels like a dark Western. It begins with a mysterious figure called 'The Buyer' drinking grog in a dingy pub and thinking about deal that is to be made. Much of the joy (if indeed that is the right word to use, because much of the piece is deeply unnerving) comes from trying to work out what exactly is really going on between The Buyer and the young girl who he finds when he gets to King's house. The story is creepy and effortless. Well done, Christopher.

Peter Mitchell from NSW for Colours of Love (Highly Commended)

The Colours of Love is a longer short story, but one that shows a clear understanding of how to use short scenes to move a story along. It is lyrical and nearly poetic at times, and Peter Mitchell is very skilled in inhabiting the skin of his main character, Miriam. Miriam and Jean-Marc's whole world is right there on the page; they felt like real people, and their problems and arguments were domestic but not at all trivial. Peter has made the personal universal in this story. Well done, Peter.

Rita Tognini from WA for Eat Bitterness (Highly Commended)

Rita Tognini takes us to Beijing with widower, Clive, in her story Eat Bitterness. Clive's uncertainty about travelling alone as an older man on his own, and the connection that he makes with the young Chinese tour guide, are tenderly portrayed in this beautiful piece of writing. They say the devil is in the details, and I want to thank Rita for allowing me to travel to China through her words in this year of closed borders and lockdowns. This is a really stunning, sharp piece of writing from a very talented local writer. Well done, Rita.

In second place, Scott Limbrick from Victoria for People to Avoid

There was something really different and special about this story. It is set in an apartment complex, where a family is moving in, but soon the reader and the characters themselves begin to realise that everyone living in this apartment complex is another version of one of the family members, and there are hundreds of facsimiles all living on top of one another going about their lives... it is the kind of imaginative, clever story that you really need to read for yourself to appreciate just how special it is. Stories like this one stand out because they represent a writer who is willing to take a big risk, and hone their craft until that risk pays off. I really enjoyed experiencing that payoff, so thank you Scott, and well done.

And in first place, the very first story from the pile I was given and the one I just could not stop thinking about... the award goes to *Scott-Patrick Mitchell from WA for The Road Trip*.

What can I say about this piece? It was beautiful, it was layered, it was powerful. I wouldn't change a single word. Scott-Patrick Mitchell is clearly a very very talented writer. The best stories are the ones you want to steal, the ones you wish with every bone in your body that you could have written. But of course, I could not have written something like this. I think Scott-Patrick Mitchell has left a piece of their soul on the page, and that is what connects so deeply with the reader. Because it was the first story that I read, at first I was daunted. I thought to myself, shit, if this is the standard of all the entries, then I am going to be a mess by the time I've really all 60 something of them. I felt vastly underqualified to be the judge of a competition that had stories of this calibre in it. And while, yes, as I have said the standard was incredibly high, I needn't have worried quite so much, because it started to become clear to me that Scott-Patrick Mitchell was in a class all of their own. I'm not going to gush any more—I'm just going to ask that Scott-Patrick might indulge us with a reading of the story so that everyone here can experience what I experienced, and conclude by saying well done to Scott-Patrick Mitchell.

And a huge well done to everyone who entered. Writing is hard. It's really tempting to give up some times. It's equally as tempting to get on social media and start tweeting about how unfair life is, and how you have been royally screwed over by the writing gods when you pour all that hard work into a story and end up with... what? With nothing? Trust me, I fight this urge almost weekly. The thing is though, that you haven't ended up with nothing. You've

ended up with one more story that you've polished and thought about, and you've entered one more opportunity that could be the last one you don't place in before you hit your stride. I think about reading *On Writing* by Stephen King, and for some reason the idea of throwing spaghetti at a splashback comes to mind.... The more you throw, the more likely it is that something will stick. To anyone in the room or at home who is thinking of giving up, I'll leave you with a quote from an especially random episode of *Stargate* that involved some sort of dangerous spaceship race. 'If you're not in it, you definitely can't win it.'

Thank you, and enjoy the rest of the day.

Emily Paull, December 2021