

## **Katharine Susannah Prichard Short Fiction Prize Judge's Report 2022 – Bindy Pritchard**

The American short story writer, Flannery O'Connor once wrote that, 'So many people can now write competent stories that the short story is in danger of dying of competence.' But I could never fully understand why that was such a terrible thing. Rather than ringing the death knell on the whole genre, shouldn't this be an occasion for rejoicing? People can write! *Many* people can write and will continue to do so, churning out stories that tick the boxes of what the average reader demands of them (surely this is what competent means?).

Competence made my job as a judge hard (a lot of stories got on my long list) yet easy (I thoroughly enjoyed reading all the stories). So many of the 119 stories for the Youth section and 61 for the Adult Section were very good, with a base level of ability covering essential elements like style, plot, characterisation, point of view, narrative pacing, sound grammar and imaginative settings. I was transported down magic mazes, chased by zombies, had a conversation with a talking wombat or two, propelled into family drama, hid my sexuality, travelled to Croatia, became a witty and erudite ghost under a coolabah tree. These stories entertained, amazed, and challenged me and I felt privileged to have had this window into other people's creative imaginings that must have taken time and patience and thoughtfulness to finally reach the page. Some themes may have been similar but the unique rendering of, for example, zombie stories or coming of age stories or climate change stories belongs to an individual writer: only YOU can write this story, at this particular time in your life.

Now, I'm not advocating for writers to stay in that place of competence (surely a second understanding of the word competence is "predictable" or "not being exceptional") because the stories that made it onto both my short lists went beyond ticking all these basic boxes of craft. These stories piqued my interest from the get-go. These stories bristled with so much more than the average well-written story and if I had to break it down into neat components, I would suggest something like an amazingly strong and convincing voice (voice is king!), intense emotional pull, seamless narrative pacing, sparkling language, cleverness and originality of theme and characters that you really care about long after the stories are finished. But there were some stories on my short list that weren't perfect in the conventional sense of perfect (e.g. the endings fell short, the grammar was a little off, the meaning too opaque, a few cliches scattered here and there). There was something else happening for me on the page. It's an alchemy that occurs when the words enter my brain and hit my heart, that ineffable connection that I have with a story which I cannot explain away and nor should I, for is it ever a wise idea to deconstruct magic?

So, I congratulate the winners on my final list and give a small morsel of advice to those writers who didn't get nominated this time around. Keep on writing and submitting as you will get better and better each time you work on your craft. (Even resend the same story to another competition because the magic may happen for a different judge on a different day.) Most importantly trust in your writer's voice, don't force it to be something it's not by making it appear cleverer by using language lifted straight from the thesaurus—although this is a good way to expand your vocab it's one sure fire way to ruin the voice. Settle into

your authentic writing self; be playful and joyful on the page. Take risks and allow the magic to happen.

## Youth Section

Commended: *The Beast of Adventure World* by Clem Chapman

There were many stories about monsters in this youth category and this was the shining example of how to punch above the other contenders. With textbook narrative pacing (tighter than the protagonist's speedos!), there was not a word out of place in these economical 541 words. A very strong voice that conveyed joy, humour and a zestful energy that propelled the action of the story to its very clever and satisfying conclusion. Like all great short stories, the awakening of the Black Widow at the end opened up the possibility of another story to be told (as Alice Munro says 'every short story is at least two short stories').

Commended: *Dealing with the Dempseys* by Aditya Paul

It's not easy nailing the voice of a 60-year-old man when you are 11 years old, but this writer did so convincingly and humorously. I loved the comic absurdity of this babysitting nightmare with three rambunctious triplets who are at odds with their pacifist parents. It's not easy to make a reader laugh but Aditya Paul is a natural humourist with great comic timing as evidenced in lines such as 'In an instant, a NERF gun that I never knew Ralph owned is expertly flicked up from under his bedsheets and levelled straight at my head. Handcuffs spring into Tom's hands and suddenly, Joel comes into possession of a very menacing red button.'

Commended: *My Mother's Cooking* by Amber Zhao

Beautifully rendered piece about a young girl struggling to connect with her busy nurse mother in the time of the covid pandemic. There was an oftentimes virtuosic command of language and a joyousness reverberating in alliterative descriptions such as the 'oven belched a blast of heat on sweltering days, like a dragon blasting fire into our kitchen. The toaster gleamed in all its mint-green retro glory.'

Highly Commended: *Baby Shoes, Half Price off* by McKayla Tan

Wow, this story about a toxic love affair really caught my attention, especially the unique and jaded voice of the protagonist and some unforgettable lines such as 'I returned to the restaurant we used to visit every Sunday after church. No one was there except a new group of teenagers. I could pick out the one who was going to follow my path. I'm planning to do nothing to stop them.' The writer took a lot of narrative risks with the fragmented structure which often made the meaning too opaque (but then intriguingly so). Like every great story, this one needed to be revisited again and again to unearth another hidden layer of meaning. I even started questioning the title and wondered if it were an ironic nod to the

Hemingway-attributed short story 'For sale: baby shoes, never worn'. I didn't question however the undeniable talent of McKayla Tan.

Highly Commended: *Wadjemup Island* by Kaia Gooch

A very impacting story about how a teenage girl changes her mind about holidaying on Wadjemup/Rottnest Island after discovering its brutal colonial past. There was a genuine empathetic response to the theme that avoided virtue signalling and raised important questions about how the violence against the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation is conveniently whitewashed and forgotten (and conjured up for me a connection to the powerful Sally Morgan painting *Greetings from Rottnest*).

2nd Place: *Monkshood Murders* by Qian Fu

A dark epistolary tale that had such a sinister and brazen voice that never faltered nor shied away from its narrative intention. Told through the eyes of the maid who murdered her entitled mistress with a concoction of monkshood mixed in her tea. It not only revealed an unjust class system but had a substory of the parents' relationship with the murdered girl to add to the layers of subtext, which made this story more complex than first expected ('It helped that she had stopped eating just a while before I killed her. Pity that I wasted so much time on tailoring her dresses as per her mother's requests to make her ribs look less like her bones were trying to rip out of her stomach. Her words.').

First Place: *The Fall of Robespierre* by Dominique To

A sensitively and expertly rendered account about the moments before an execution during the French Revolution. This story was more than a predictable historical reimaging of what it was like to be Saint-Just incarcerated with the infamous Robespierre. It contained flashes of incredible insight, emotional connection, and a deep understanding of the politics of the time, with a skilfully woven tapestry of facts (the jaw 'hastily bandaged with gauze from the Hotel de Ville', the irony of being in Dante's same cell) and flash backs that made me stand in awe of Dominique To's incredible accomplishment.

Encouragement Award for Under 14: *The View from Here* by Isla Barker

Isla Baker took the classic 'what if' premise of storytelling—what if Mona Lisa was created from a real person falling into the painting—but then slapped another layer of acrylic onto the canvas by making that person a jealous younger sister. The voice was excellent, the joke and humour not piled on too thickly, so that the reader ended up seeing Leonardo da Vinci's work and persona in a different light. Isla Baker had a deft artistry at play on the page herself and I look forward to seeing her writing career develop further.

## **Adult Section**

Commended: *100% Customer Satisfaction Guaranteed* by Alexandra Svoboda

Deceptively simple language that packed a complex emotional punch, Alexandra Svoboda is a natural and accomplished storyteller. This story had such a gripping narrative pull on me that I was developing the same level of anxiety as the poor overworked editor for the unscrupulous Deborah Dot (though luckily, I didn't lose my hair). A fantastic voice and even though the ending wasn't perfect (had a summary feel) there was so much to love about this story that it needed to be on the short list.

Commended: *Purity* by Rita Tognini

A beautifully written piece about the moment before a young girl steps into the confessional box to profess a sin she cannot fully fathom yet. The author created a perfect glimpse into the ritualistic and patriarchal world of Catholicism with a skilfully woven backstory about parental control and sexual abuse in a country town. Rita Tognini understood where and how to withhold information in order to masterfully control the narrative arc.

Commended: *Rheta's Resolution* by Bronwyn Boehm

This is speculative fiction at its best. Intelligent, thought provoking and highly imaginative, the author mastered world building in a mere 2354 number of words. What happens to the last human refugee when the earth has been destroyed by artificial intelligence? You decide as the author cleverly gives us two choices of ending. A lovely sense of playfulness too that shimmered at the edges of those alien spheres and made this story stand out among the other spec fiction stories in the competition.

Highly Commended: *Bozo* by Rachel White.

Like a clown this story entertained, and unlike a clown, it made me laugh. I particularly loved the way the point of view changed as the protagonist decides to embrace his inner Bozo and truly become the clown he always wanted to be. Strong craft at work that made this more than a funny tale—a plausible and emotionally compelling back story lifted this story beyond the trick of the joke.

Highly Commended: *An Unopened Life* by Kit Scriven

A moving story about a boy who feels unloved by his emotionally distant mother, amongst a sea of sisters. Some wonderful lines that stopped my heart and made me feel the protagonist's pain: 'But I always return to the rehearsal of her arms, slim and wiry biceped and eminently suited for the holding of babies. I try. But I can't remember her holding me.' The mystery of the unknown woman (perhaps another daughter?) who visits the dying mother is another layer in this story to be admired and pondered over.

2<sup>nd</sup> Place: *The Caretaker* by Hannah Jones

From the moment I started reading the first paragraph of *The Caretaker*, I knew this was a real contender. Something about the voice leapt out at me and held me captivated throughout this poignant story about a troubled lesbian relationship. And then, like with every memorable story, it turned on a coin with the surprising change of events—the

assumed danger and homophobia in public places was surpassed by the toxicity of the private co-dependent relationship. This story stayed with me well off the page with its raw vulnerability and ability to convey huge emotion in a very tight space (exactly what a short story needs to do!).

1st place: *The Accomplice* by Kit Scriven

This entry was sheer perfection. The implied violence, the secrets kept from the autocratic father, the beautifully drawn-out conceit of being an accomplice that reverberated in all aspects of small-town Wimmera life, it had so many pitch-perfect components that my brain was screaming, yes, yes, yes! Great lines like, 'No sound enters the kitchen from the television or Mrs Conroy. She told me once she lives her life on mute,' and 'He lights me up with a cigarette lighter so frail and beautiful I think for a moment that a moth has ignited in his hand.' And, 'Only the Wimmera could seed a town like this.'

This story left so much still to be unpacked and discovered, and as Flannery O'Connor wrote (yes, she is one of my favourite short story writers), 'A story that is any good can't be reduced, it can only be expanded. A story is good when you continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you.'

Beyond the Wimmera, this story was clearly the winner.

Bindy Pritchard

Judge for KSP Short Fiction Award 2022