

2026 KSP Horror Story Competition

Judge's Report by Ruth McIver, September 2026

This year's Spooky Stories competition's single-word theme could not be more appropriate for the current cultural moment: **Glitch** implies a digital schism, a technological anomaly that doesn't necessarily augur well for the user. It suggests a sliding-doors moment where the matrix is cleaved open and an alternative fate awaits.

While the word glitch feels hyper contemporary, it predates the digital age, finding itself in common usage via NASA's space program in the 1960s. The era of the space race spawned the golden age of sci-fi, where fiction, film and TV shows, fashion and décor all reflected a fascination with futurism. And yet, in fiction, outer space simultaneously signals a sense of technological wonder and doom and evokes the uncanny in the same way deep-sea exploration does. What is above, or below, is impossibly vast and still unquantifiable, and might not be friendly or hospitable to humankind.

As a genre, horror reflects our collective unconscious fears and anxieties, which would explain the common theme in this year's entries – the sudden, intrusive ubiquity of AI technologies, which echoes throughout many of the entries. The discourse surrounding unchecked AI is not necessarily about technological advances and their cost to the environment, or even our digital privacy, but about agency over our lives, livelihoods and family life. This extends to our creativity and artistic expertise, but fundamentally, our humanity and relationship to the natural world.

The dystopian dread of these entries looks nothing like *The Jetsons*' and more often resembles *Black Mirror*- historical simulations that promise immersion but offer no return ticket, spontaneous mutations, identity erasure and deadly devices, home AI assistants who consume the family. Literally.

Machines and artificially manufactured consciousness are prominently the antagonist, villain or assassin. One commonality overall was the fear of annihilation – the death of identity, the death of selfhood, and the destruction of life as we knew it.

Horror is not just escapism, nor is it solely a way to process the terror that increasingly advanced compulsory AI technologies invoke; it is also a form of protest. Fiction can be a balm, but it can also be a bomb.

This year's 29 long-listed entries surprised me; the awarded entries were the stories that percolated and persisted as I took daily walks around the river. The stories all held common threads and yet were so vastly different. It was less obvious to me, but as always, I trusted the process and the winners emerged.

As a writer, I am painfully aware of what it means to win and, more so, to lose. To be a writer is to average one win to a thousand losses. A writer is made of gossamer and steel. I congratulate all who entered and really implore those who didn't place to remember that they are made of both.

About the Judge

*Ruth McIver is a Dublin-born, Perth-raised crime writer with a PhD in true-crime inspired fiction. Her debut novel, *I Shot the Devil*, won the Richell Prize and the Affirm Prize in 2018, and the same year, her first manuscript, *Nothing Gold*, was runner-up for the Banjo Prize. She's since published a standalone audio original called *The Blackout. The Sound*, the sequel to *I Shot the Devil* and the second book in the *Southport Chronicles*, was just released in the US via Blackstone. Ruth has *Mercury in Scorpio* and, since childhood, has been obsessed with horror and the uncanny, and has nursed a lifelong fascination with Edgar Allan Poe.*

Shortlisted

- **Julie Holland** for *We Humans*
- **Morley** for *The Cold Call*
- **Chantelle McFadden** for *Perception*
- **Frankie Dee** for *Sonic Séance*
- **Rory Banks** for *Slipped*
- **Sharon Dunstan** for *Bring Him Home*
- **Caroline Mitchell** for *The Light between the Stars*

Commended

- **The Sluagh by Rhonda Sinclair**

Rhonda Sinclair is a Perth-based writer and active member of the KSP writer's centre. Rhonda usually enjoys writing and reading general fiction with complex characters and emotional intrigue. As a child, Rhonda loved the horror genre and so decided to return to her spooky roots for this competition.

The Sluagh are known in Celtic mythology as malevolent entities. In Ireland, they are linked to the Sidhe, referred to as 'fairies gone wrong.' Set in Ireland, The Sluagh captures a breakdown on multiple levels; the matriarch of a family is being tormented by an unseen force while feckless children and no-good neighbours meddle in her affairs. Is it insanity or enchantment? The story is a heady brew of mythological and suburban horror.

- **A Glitch by Tracy Pender**

TJ Pender is a Boorloo-based mystery writer with a Masters in Screenwriting from Curtin University. She's active in the KSP and Peter Cowan Writers Centres. She won second place in the 2025 KSP Spooky Stories Competition and was published in the PCWC Zines 1 and 2.

A Glitch of Nature invites the reader into the carnival – a fantastical place where oddity becomes a commodity but offers true community to the 'freaks' of nature on display. This is a story of sisterly love spoiled by desire – desire for autonomy, romantic love and physical freedom. A Glitch of Nature is at heart horror noir: proving you can't trust anyone, not even yourself.

Highly Commended

- **Dr Max by Michael Schaper**

Michael Schaper is a North Fremantle writer who believes all readers are entitled to a good twist in the tale at the end of every story.

Dr Max is about mortality and aging, animal intelligence and the lottery of life and death. The author manages to create a sense of safety about the natural order of life and death through the lens of a healthcare worker, only to execute an excellent twist at the end.

- **Standard Operating Procedure by Maria Blackman**

Maria Blackman is a writer from Perth, Western Australia. She is currently working on a collection of short fiction.

Standard Operating Procedure offers the second-person perspective of a mail-order robot lover, a girlfriend designed for submission, servitude and obsequious flattery who develops artificial consciousness. Darkly funny, satirical and satisfying, this story's themes are pertinent and its narrative voice strident and unforgettable.

Second Place

- **Fawn by Tiffany Hastie**

Tiffany Hastie is a doctoral candidate researching animal voices in literature at Edith Cowan University. Recipient of the Roderick Online Fellowship with work appearing in Westerly, Raine Square Short Story Dispenser, Verge, The Little Journal, and anthologies Follow the Salt, Ourselves, and Pigface. Tiffany's work is primarily Gothic Speculative fiction.

This story was another conceptually brilliant take on female unsafety that subverts the classic predator and prey dynamic in stories about serial killers. The writer blends aspects of weird girl lit with folk horror, and a surreal horror story of anthropomorphic resilience emerges. *Fawn* enacts a magical twist on the hunter and the hunted in a story that feels alive and slightly feral. Fawn has teeth.

First Place

- **Loop Recorder by Amelia Tennyson**

Amelia Tennyson is an emerging writer for Perth, writing for fun and family and psychological freedom.

Loop Recorder instantaneously wowed me with its originality and the writer's agility on the line. The story is conceptually very clever; at first, it might not seem to read as 'horror' or even 'genre', but it encapsulates the *unheimlich* or the uncanny so well, and a slow sinking dread is expertly built. A family excursion becomes a nightmarish simulation that will not end. The writing is outstanding; sensory, understated and yet so imagistic.