

The seduction of good writing is forgetting who we are and where we are sitting, and have a vivid world draped over every sense. It's the ultimate magic trick. Performed with 26 letters and 14 punctuation marks. Black symbols on a white background that become motion, emotion, insight, place, time, and memory. Real as skin. Warm as blood. Alive – because reading is a physical act.

I have forgotten films that I know I watched and loved. Yet I cannot ever forget the stories I've read and deeply connected to, especially from the earliest times. I still feel the cold as Ratty loads his pistols and searches for Mole in the Wild Wood, or Jadis offers Edmund Turkish Delight in Narnia. For the best writers give you the material, and then you as the reader get to make it your own through living it.

Reading the entries for the 2023 KSP Short Fiction competition, I was reminded of the power of this intensely human artistic gift again and again – that good writing transports you *and* cuts a groove into you.

This year there were 164 entries – 101 in the Youth category, and 63 in Adult. That may sound like a lot of stories to read. But the process of judging the competition was one I embraced physically. Sitting in my office on a reading chair, lamp on and Rooibos tea ready, night after night I read stories that writers from all over WA and Australia had sent in – all listed anonymously and limited to no more than 2,500 words in length.

Very quickly, stories rose that I had to read again. That stayed with me. That cut a groove as they moved beyond the physical to become part of my memory and experience. The writers of these stories performed that ultimate magic trick, and like all good magicians, they never quite revealed how it was done. They just shared their souls. And we as readers get to do the rest.

And so, it's an honour to announce the results...

The ADULT category

Winner - The Reef by Michael Schaper.

This is a deceptively simple story of an ocean swimmer challenging themselves to face their fears and then finding terror in the unknown. Deft touches of character and insights of a wider world drive this tight narrative into incredibly vivid territory – I felt every panicked stroke and relished the thrill of words disappearing completely from the page as I read, utterly transporting me to the moment. A sublime fusion of action, character, imagination, and perception.

Second - A Green and Pleasant Land by Rita Tognini

A slow burn story of strangely jilted love that haunts and invites closer reading. The start has something off – broken notes amongst the melody. Then as Zack and Amanda's story unravels, there's the intensity of mismatched expectations, disappointment, and the sodden reality of life sometimes. Story as a splinter. Elegantly done. And I'm left with the feeling of something very beautiful that will haunt, as perhaps Zack still thinks of that lost time with bittersweet longing.

Highly Commended

- **End of the Line by Pierette James**

A sharply cut exploration of modern love, or what can pass for it. Neon with shadows, where characters hide their truth.

- **Paper for the Netherworld by Gillian Wang**

Evocative and elegant, this story of memory and loss, grief and hope washes over like a waking dream.

- **Coffee with Joan by Fiona Wilkies**

Apt storytelling of having a chat with Joan of Arc, and parting as friends. I loved the sense of rebellion and mischief.

- **The Fruits of his Labours by Penny Flanagan**

A very considered and sensitively layered story of slowly building friendship and respect. And what a pearler of a last line.

- **Hurt People by Thomas Gurn**

This story was one I returned to several times, with each read revealing something new. A quiet and incisive look at a failing relationship and the loneliness that can come from being ignored, all lit with faded neon.

Commended

- **Counting Ibis by Jacqueline Warner**

Love and love, memory and longing, tied together with care.

- **Hush by Louise Burlinson**

Chilling. Superb horror writing.

- **The Contract by Doug Jacquier**

A dryly funny and tender story of careful love.

- **Crossed Wires by Michael Burrows**

An audaciously intricate story revealed through a crossword – a joy to read that builds on Burrow's oeuvre as a literary alchemist.

- **McDonalds Has The best Drive Through by John Bradley**

Truth and wisdom from the perspective a young child hostage to his parents' bad decisions. Alarming and wryly funny.

Shire of Mundaring Encouragement Award for Adult Resident

- **Afloat by Janelle MacGregor**

This tautly written story of a message in a bottle has a vivid quality that makes for compelling reading. The description of the storm and the refugee's desperation adds an intriguing layer.

U/14 Category

Winner – CTF-4207 by Isla Constantine

A vividly told story of Artificial Intelligence and robotics gone wrong, or inevitably? The prose is cold and calculated for maximum dramatic effect, with a playful sense of time and suspense that pays off with an ending that echoes after the full stop.

Second – So Happy by Larissa Sycz

So Happy is one of those stories you must read twice so you can experience the harpoon to the heart in all its glory. A superbly told account of teenage judgement, jealousy and coming of age, with a strong narrative voice and balanced, assured prose.

Highly Commended

- **From Dusk to Ash by Jonatan Hu**

Rock star life and resentment, entitlement as the detonator. Great character work.

- **A Sweet Bitter Melon by Joseph Sullivan**

Verisimilitude in every line. I hope this starts something larger.

- **Dad's Finger by Sam Sidoti**

Elegantly dry and sparse prose that explores hidden feelings and a family legend. Great ending.

- **Homecoming by James Hood**

Wonderful descriptive writing fused to hints of character and wider world. Very well done.

- **Love Lost in Time (0066) by Abeedah Anas**

A beautiful and nostalgic story of love and loyalty suspended in time.

Commended

- **The Misunderstood Dolphin (0047) by Aarlo Priest**

Something about this one – brief, terse, with hidden humour.

- **The Tale of Arrogance (0074) by Linus Li**

A modern take on fable writing with poised prose.

- **Fight for a Cure (0079) by Sophie Forrester**

Good narrative and character welded to some deep insights.

- **Thank the Lord (0092) by Eleni Chapman**

Great set up and funny end.

- **Ring (0123) by Evelyn Hart**

Well done fantasy with some great imagery and ideas.

I'd like to thank the team at the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers Centre for the warm and inclusive professionalism that makes KSP a truly great supporter and incubator of writing in Western Australia and beyond. I have spent several happy writing times in the hills at Katharine's Place and think of the rustling gum leaves often.

Thank you for the opportunity to judge this special competition and placing trust in me to contribute service to KSP's community. Special thanks must go to KSP's Coordinator Sofija Stefanovic who made the judging process as smooth as possible.

Judging the 2023 KSP Short Fiction competition was a pleasure. I read with focus, interest and a spirit of looking for the good stuff, embracing the challenges that selection based on personal taste and opinion brings. For there is no guidebook for this. No rules governing who or what gets over the line.

To all the authors whether winning or commended, congratulations! Thank you for the opportunity to read your work and connect to your stories. They were a pleasure to have in my hands for a little while, and I wish you all the very best in what's next.

To everyone who entered, well done on having a go – which is what counts in life and art as the knock on the door. Submission takes gumption and courage, and I wish you all the very best for next time. For iteration is the thing that pushes the door open. Keep going!

David Allan Petale – KSP Short Fiction Judge 2023