

2016 Peter Cowan 600 Word Short Story Competition

President's Comments

I would like to thank Dr Laure Steed for agreeing to be the judge this year for the Peter Cowan 600 Word Short Story Competition. By entering this competition writers are provided with an opportunity to present their work to a highly qualified and respected author. Dr Steed has produced an excellent report which contains an immense amount of feedback. Proficiency at writing clearly and concisely requires both practice and discipline. This is especially the case of the Peter Cowan Short Story Competition where the writer has only 600 words to tell their story. I congratulate everyone who has entered this year.

Judge's report: Peter Cowan Writers' Centre, 600-word short story completion

Dr Laurie Steed

600 words is a very short time in which to tell a story.

It's a tight turnaround, a looming deadline. And contrary to belief, it's not simply a shorter story. Just as poetry is a kiss to short fiction's long, loving embrace, shorter short fiction, or flash fiction, as its commonly known, is something in between. Something that stays even after such a brief stay in a writer's fictional world.

There were some great short stories amongst 207 submissions in all three categories this year, and those authors selected knew just how important it is to get in and situate your reader not necessarily with an emotional state but with a scenario that's pin-pricked with emotion, slowly rising to the surface.

There were 20 entries in this year's **Julian Cowan Youth Award**, and in general, I enjoyed these a great deal. While their level of execution hurt some writers, this polish, and a willingness to draft and redraft one's work will undoubtedly come in time. In the meantime, the winning story this year was something else: clever, risky, and willing to sit in the messiness of life and all its events.

The winner this year was Abigail Strangward, from Frankston South, Victoria, with her story, 'Seven Seconds.'

Strangward's story skilfully breaks down memory into seven seconds, the amount of brain activity that's left after the heart stops. Here the heart stopping is a symbol, a potent metaphor for love, and it's in her recreation of love's moments that the author excels. In point, I have read hundreds of short stories about romantic love, and yet I have never read one structured quite like 'Seven Seconds' or one as viscerally charged.

In Strangward, I found a writer who either did her revisions or, if she didn't, then she's unnaturally gifted. Whatever the case, she has a knack for engaging, memorable storytelling, and I felt blessed to have read her story.

As it's name would suggest, the novice writer award goes to either young writers or adults who've not yet won a short story competition. This year, there were 114 entries in the novice category.

The quality of these stories varied greatly, and often those stories that were not successful were undone by the author's need to 'make' a story out of their submission, by either inserting a cumbersome twist ending, or making things melodramatic, as opposed to simply dramatic.

The winner of the novice prize was 'Things That Aren't There' by Ellen West, from Campbell, ACT. It's a subtle story about fear and anxiety. It's also arguably about secrets, memory, and knowledge, at least on the symbolic level.

The protagonist in this story immediately sees *something* (or *some things*). She goes to her Gran, who's not afraid to talk, but given she's talking about things that aren't there, is necessarily vague. And still, our protagonist sees things. And, by the story's end, she knows that someone's lying to her, or at least not giving her the full story.

In this story, the author of it is willing to ask the right questions, as opposed to concocting a simple but ill-fitting answer to the proceedings at hand. Such flexibility is a great lesson for any writer that's compelled to tie-up loose ends. Sometimes, it's these loose ends, at least as they pertain to the character's emotional state, which can make a story.

The Adult Section was stronger than the other two sections in regards to the quality of work, although the best in either the youth or novice sections were easily the match of many of those stories submitted in the adult section. I've thought long and hard about why this may be the case. Perhaps it's that as writers we sometimes learn too much. We start to

guess our second guess our stories when we should be listening to our characters.

The adult stories also sometimes tried to be explicitly about something, a buzz topic, popular movement, or societal problem. This type of writing does not work for the most part, primarily because readers connect first and foremost with your character or characters, as opposed to your subject.

In writing more flash fiction, I'd encourage all writers to either start with a character; to ensure that their character is motivated and suitably driven for the story at hand. To quote Kurt Vonnegut, 'Every character must want something, even if it is only a glass of water.'

Third Place, in the Peter Cowan 600 short story competition was Martin Chambers, of City Beach, Western Australia with his story, 'Handyman'.

'Handyman' is one of the more charming stories I read, but it's also gently profound. A man does odd jobs for Mrs. Lefroy, who has Alzheimers. What happens next is perhaps what makes Chambers a fine writer. Instead of making this story only about Alzheimers, it's equally about humour, compassion, and the use of both to ease another's turmoil or suffering. It's funny in parts, and heartfelt too. I read many stories about Alzheimers in competition. None, excepting 'Handyman', has been able to meld the comic and the tragic as successfully.

Second Place, in the Peter Cowan 600 short story competition, was 'Between Dark and Dawn' by Susan McCreery, of Thirroul, New South Wales, a poignant story about fathers who leave, or feel the overwhelming need to depart from the family home. It also takes in a father's realisation of all they're about to lose, and so was above average in terms of its narrative complexity.

The winner of the adult section was 'Learning to Fly' by Elizabeth Egan, of Crookwell, New South Wales.

As with the winners of the previous two sections, Egan's story is not explicitly about the subject hinted in the title, or it is, but it's a different kind of take. A fresh, original take, and therein lies the strengths of the piece.

'Learning to Fly' is about a child on 'the spectrum', but again, that's only briefly mentioned, a guide post to the story at hand. It's a moving and

powerful piece of writing because of its economy, and its willingness to show, not tell its story.

In terms of imagery, it's one of the best I read. In terms of getting into the mental space of its protagonist, in this case, a small boy, it's excellent, charting his obsessions, tantrums, and even his language with care and precision.

Most beautifully, it's not just a story about boys with developmental issues. It's one about young boys, and children to a greater extent, regardless of their classification, designation or prescribed medication.

The Autism spectrum, like romantic love and, to a lesser extent Alzheimer's Disease, are topics often explored in fiction. And yet, while there are writers as skilled as Elizabeth Egan doing the exploring, I'd be happy and honoured to read the results, such is the regenerative, life-affirming nature of excellent short fiction.

Highly Commended entries for all sections, in alphabetical order by author, were:

'Karen' by Jeanna Atmarow, of Heathridge, Western Australia
'Enlightened' by John Gallop, of Adamstown Heights, New South Wales
'The Interview' by Kevin Gillam, of Beaconsfield, Western Australia
'Playing Possum' by Helen Lyne, of Balgowlah, New South Wales
Jeanna is here at the ceremony today, so I'd like to say a few words about her story.

Karen is a story about pack-mentalities, and the people unfortunate enough to be caught up in them. Like any good tale, it makes the reader reflect on their life too; on thoughts, reactions, and assumptions that were at the time beneath them, and perhaps still are.

It's a story of difficult truths, but never one that's told in an overly didactic way.

Commended entries for all sections, in alphabetical order by author, were:

'Curiosity Shop' by Tate Kafka-Bauer, of Lammermoor, Queensland.
'Back Beach' by Rachelle Rechichi, of Bunbury, Western Australia
'The Ex-Mothers' Club' by Ellen Vickerman, of Carindale, Queensland
'In search of truth, justice, and a comfortable seat' by Samuel Turco, of Woodbridge, Western Australia

Because Rachelle and Samuel are with us, I'd like to say a little more

about their stories.

When I first read Rachelle Rechichi's story, 'Back Beach,' I felt a bit unsettled. It looks at madness and displacement, and specifically a woman on the beach who has had her fair share of both. I wish I could say the story was not at all familiar to me. Some of you here today may have seen a similar woman at Neil Hawkins Park here in Joondalup, or elsewhere in our city.

This is not a moralistic story, more a dreamlike, almost nightmare vision as a family makes its way along the beach. And yet it's also more than that. In 'Back Beach' Rechichi does something very clever in crafting a beach-based story on a wild night. One might expect the raging seas, the swaying spinifex. Instead, what's wild is closer to home, both frightening and captivating.

Samuel Turco, author of 'In Search of Truth, Justice, and a Comfortable Seat,' already knows a golden rule of storytelling: to start with the character who's least besotted with, or most conflicted by the situation at hand. In this story, it's a woman's clothing store and the poor sap boyfriend who's unwittingly stumbled into the store with her. As with most stories of gender relations, it's a story that's all the better for its grasp of humour. Even more impressively, its ending is a genuine surprise, which I won't spoil for you, and shows Samuel knows more than a thing or two about how best to create a comedic scenario.

The Adult Section had many fine stories in its shortlist: with a different judge on a different day, the rankings may well have been different. Regardless, those stories selected were all excellent, and all are worthy of celebration. I particularly thank those writers who were willing to challenge form, structure, or societal perceptions in their work. I felt their compassion, their courage, and their keen minds with each and every word.

To those writers not awarded this year, take heart. Stories have a habit of seeking their best possible home, regardless of our best intentions. As writers, your job is not necessarily to win awards, or to be celebrated, but to get better: to perfect your craft, and to connect with your reader. You are blessed to be writing. Anything else is, and has always been a bonus.