

## **THE 2016 TRUDY GRAHAM - JULIE LEWIS LITERARY AWARDS**

### **PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS:**

**Keith Melrose**

I would like to thank Shane McCauley for being the judge for this year's awards and would also like to congratulate everyone who has been short listed for an award today. Shane has produced an excellent report and makes an interesting comment, which is that regardless of whether we are writing fiction or non-fiction, it is important that we have interesting characters.

To make our characters interesting, we must be able to describe their beliefs, hopes, dreams, ideas, values, morals, fears, vices, virtues and talents.

However, these characters must also ideally contain one key attribute, which is regardless of their strengths or weaknesses, that they are likeable and therefore we want them to succeed.

### **JUDGE'S REPORT:**

**Shane McCauley**

It is always a great privilege and pleasure to be asked to judge an award such as this, and to be encouraged by the thriving nature of writing, both locally and interstate. I am not aware of other competitions that combine fiction and non-fiction entries (no doubt they exist), so was at first a little disconcerted to think I might be very frequently changing hats as I moved from one genre to another. Mostly, this was not the case, as the features which strengthen fiction - characterisation, structure, atmosphere, point of view - are also very necessary in forms of non-fiction such as travel writing, memoir and family history.

The bulk of the entries in the Adult category were contemporary and realistic in their treatment of such topics as: family, marriage, religion, shopping, prison, hospitals and illness, ageing, pregnancy, the outback, crime, the beach and car racing. There were a few that dealt with matters historical, such as the World Wars, and a very few set overseas in places such as Spain and China.

Very few diverged from the realistic mode, though these few (comedy, science fiction, ghost story, satire) were imaginative and very finely done. There were a few mostly short essays dealing with matters such as pollution, dictatorship, euthanasia, Islam and other relevant topics. There were several written in the form of memoir or reminiscence that crossed the borders, and could be either fiction or non-fiction. As long as they drew me in and told a coherent story, this didn't seem to matter.

The Youth category reversed this trend. There were only seven entries, all of high standard, but only one - a highly imaginative historical romance set at the beginning of the American Civil War - that was fictional. The others were all very moving essays or sustained observations that highlighted the continuing or echoing world problems of racism, the stolen generation, injustice, prejudice, current conflicts - oh, and football too! Well, it is that season.

I agree with the major Filipino writer, Jose Garcia Villa (1908-1997) that a “good story is an enlargement of experience”. When we read a well-constructed story, we as readers are in that story, too, comparing our reactions with those of the characters, perhaps learning from them, assessing the nature and depth of our own emotional responses to similar events or problems. Villa has also emphasized the important twin qualities of substance and form. Despite the gargantuan experimentations of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (think *Finnegans Wake*), I still believe many readers wish this sense of sharing, of emotional engagement with a story, while still perhaps being able to appreciate other fine or clever writing in a technical sense.

For writers entering future competitions - and I hope all who entered this one will - I would just like to make two brief observations about elements that could be worked on. The first is characterisation. Many of these stories had named characters, but name alone is not quite character - though it can contribute to it (think of Dickens’ Mr Gradgrind, the school teacher!). It has not been a particularly fashionable matter in the recent period of so-called Post-Modernism, but in any narrative - whether film, story or novel - if we don’t really know something about the characters we are not likely to care or be interested in what befalls them. And just a touch of physical detail can help, such as Garrison Keillor writing that his Uncle Gunar had eyebrows as large as mice!

The second matter might also seem an old-fashioned one. It is the writing style. While the majority of the stories here were clearly and conscientiously written, there were relatively few that stood out for the sheer quality, texture, of the language. A sense of style (gained by practice and wide-reading) creates and enhances setting and atmosphere, characterisation and theme. At its best it can almost carry the story alone. It is most apparent in the great writers: no-one is likely to confuse a paragraph by Hemingway with one by Henry James or Virginia Woolf.

**Now for the matter at hand! I will begin with the Encouragement Award for the YOUTH CATEGORY:**

As already mentioned, these were all heartfelt and thoughtful pieces. There was one, however, which seemed to synthesize the ideas of several and bring them together in a well-framed and structured manner. This entry is “A MIND IN MOTION” by Adam Lamb. The frame is a 2-hour train journey from Bunbury to Perth, which gives the narrator a “time to think”. He observes and mulls over various observations of prejudice, homophobia and injustice. His conclusions are not especially optimistic, and he closes with the statement that “My mind’s in motion, and I’m not a fan of motion.” It is strong, sensitive and controlled. Well done.

**Now to the ADULT CATEGORY.** Firstly, in no specific order, **four COMMENDED stories:**

“A SILKEN TRAIL” by Linda Carter. Told mostly via dialogue, this is a tender cross-generational tale (as were several) that provides a convincing beach background to a story of developing friendship.

“THE QUESTION” by Rob Walker. This was, I think, the single SF entrant, dealing with some very imaginative and blackly humorous aspects of a future where there is “no conceivable reason why he should ever show any of the outward signs of ageing.”

“DO IT OR SURF IT” by Karen Lethlean. Very much a memoir of growing up in the Scarborough of the 50s and 60s, the rather taciturn narrator reminds us of the days when motorists actually picked up hitch-hikers, though actually dealing more with the expectations placed on a woman in that transitional period.

“PLASTIC BAGS: AN ENVIRONMENTAL SCAPEGOAT?” by Jennifer Bryant. Well, the title seems to sum up the content of this deeply committed essay, which really deals with broader issues of sustainability and over-population, fueled with cogent observations such as: “It seems that the poorest countries on Earth can afford weapons to kill people.” Powerful and timely.

**And now to four HIGHLY COMMENDED awards, again in no particular order:**

“CLEANING SILVER” by Helen Dewar. Another well-written story/memoir about family and the interaction between generations. Much personal history as well as social detail has been compressed into this clear and moving account.

“SHARING A SUNRISE” by Margot Ogilvie. And, yes, another convincingly rendered account of a grandchild’s fondness for a grandparent, in this case Grandpa. The simple event of a shared and lastingly remembered sunrise could easily have become sentimental, but this is avoided through the sheer conviction of the sentiment told to and shared with the reader. The last sentence beautifully clinches the mood of the foregoing: “Just as the sunrise colours changed, feeling special turned to feeling loved, which became peace and, finally, joy.”

“UNMASKING OLD FATHER TIME” by Garry Hurlle. I liked the whimsy and imaginative verve of this story, one of the few to diverge from the grip of realism. The relationship that develops between a young librarian and an old man trying to discover the secret of becoming young again (a secret hidden in poetry!) is bitter-sweet, and funny too.

“NOTES FROM THE STAFFROOM” - by Nicolette van Schie-De Ross. This story used the form of convincing and sequentially humorous memos and other messages in a school environment, giving a wry insight into the goings on in such an institution.

**Now to THIRD PRIZE:**

“LISTEN. REMEMBER” by Christine Johnson. While centred on the importance of family, the cultural background here is Chinese, with significant differences (though similarities too) from Western attitudes to marriage and family duty. Again a grandmother’s experiences are contrasted with that of the younger woman whose own wedding is approaching. A touching and convincing insight into the importance and tradition of passing on wisdom and experience.

**SECOND PRIZE:**

“A LIFE OF MUSIC” by Michael Woodhouse. Whether memoir or story, this fine piece of writing works as both, and is yet another homage to a grandparent. (Where would we be without them?) The reader is swiftly immersed in another world, that of a major musician who had played in the Madrid Symphony Orchestra. As with the earlier mentioned story, “Do It Or Surf It”, a great deal of insight and detail has been effectively compressed here to come in under the 2,000 word limit. It is ultimately a very uplifting and joyful story.

**And now to FIRST PRIZE:**

This is “A GOOD FOUNDATION” by Rita Tognini. Told essentially from the young girl Danuta’s point of view, this story chronicles the growing awareness by the child of the puzzling complexities of adult life, as reflected in the obliquely seen relationship between the girl’s school teacher and the teacher’s husband. The title refers both to the make-up which the teacher puts on (in front of the class!), the words of a song and, of course, as a metaphor relevant to life. There remains a mystery at the core of the story, as the child, unlike an omniscient author, cannot be expected to know everything. It is a piece that repays several readings. Congratulations on such a finely wrought story.

As always, my sincerest thanks to all at the Peter Cowan Writers’ Centre who by their hard work make such vital competitions as this possible.

And thank you to all who entered - I was constantly aware of the trust placed in me as I read these extremely well-written stories and admired their energy and skill very much indeed. Please enter again next year!

Thank you.

- Shane McCauley  
7 September 2016