

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

KEITH MELROSE

I would like to thank Peter Jeffery, OAM, for agreeing to be the judge this year for the Peter Cowan 600 Words Short Story Competition. By entering this prose competition writers are provided with an opportunity to present their work to a highly qualified and respected author. I would also like to thank Peter for providing a report which epitomises what the Peter Cowan Short Story Competition is all about which is giving people the opportunity to enter a competition which allows the writer to experience the *“creative enjoyment and imagination in playing with words that is liberated by fiction and the short story in particular”*.

Peter has lived in the world of art, literature, media education and multi-cultural affairs since he was 12 when he won an Australia wide essay competition for The Commonwealth Trades Alphabet.

Peter was educated at Perth Modern School, Claremont Training College (where he won the Bertha Houghton Prize for Outstanding English student), University of Western Australia, Birmingham University and London University. He taught at all levels from Infants to Tertiary and was Senior Lecturer before retiring. Peter was very much involved with arts groups as committee member and sometimes chair and deputy chair of Perth Television, Film and Television Institute of West Australia, Praxis that became Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, CTV Perth and WTV 44, and Deputy chair of Ethnic Communities Council WA and WA Poets Inc (WAPI). This led to the award of the OAM.

Currently Peter is the editor of Creatrix, the online quarterly poetry magazine of WAPI. He is also producer of The World of Art at 6EBA community radio, and on the boards of WAPI and WTV 44. He is a Life Member of FTI and WA Poets Inc. Peter has published two poetry books Scapes in the UK and True to Poetry in my Fashion, and is working on a third. Peter has appeared in many anthologies and leading periodicals as well as ABC Radio. He has judged Avon Valley Arts Festival and has been approached for FAWA'S Tom Collins Prize 2017. Peter won First and Second Prizes for Tom Collins, and First prize for Randolph Stow's poetry prize.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS PETER COWAN'S SHORT STORY
COMPETITION 2017
PETER JEFFERY

First of all I would like to thank the Peter Cowan Centre for asking me to be the judge. It was a delightful task. I have nothing but praise for the generosity of the awards, in that they are not merely the usual cut-throat first past the post prize winners, but take into account the many who might fall between the cracks by awarding a Youth award and a Novice award as well as four commended and four highly commended decisions. For in many cases, these entries could well have won a prize themselves so close were they.

The field was a considerable 229 entries both local and interstate and a strong field of some 57 Youth entries alongside 172 adults with almost half of them as novices.

The 600 word limit suggested they might be designed for the newly emerging flash fiction which has not yet settled its boundaries and its critical criteria, but thankfully for me all entries were in the tradition of the early short story with its emphasis on character and atmosphere and a dilemma that was climactically resolved.

Many of the stories were concerned with the quotidian or the celebration of the small joys and tragedies of our domestic lives but enjoyable as they might be for the individual writers they ran the risk of being over sentimental in regard to family pets and grandchildren or ended without a strong climax. Probably this type of story is occasioned by our digital climate of "selfy", Iphones and tablets.

Nonetheless there was a huge range of subjects from the perennial bush fire, the shark and the snake, the suicide and the killer, same sex lovers and sexual predators, paedophiles, warriors, farmers, Queen Victoria and Walt Disney, sadly and predictably trotted out with the salaciousness of the scandal spectacle of our daily press. It was only when the writer sought out the strangeness or 'stranieri' in any event that the story broke away from an inevitable predictability and flat writing. Fortunately there were writers who had an eye for detail and skilful narration and evidenced the good practice and advice they had gained from workshops at this writing centre and others. It is from diligence and constant reading that one learns from the best writing and yarns and

heightens one's range of interesting subjects and an increasing imagination that makes for stronger and stronger writing. Some entries showed many infelicities in grammar and vocabulary that could have been corrected before presentation both by the standard computer checks and having other readers for sub-editing so that the entry would be at its best.

A prize winning and anthologised short story friend of mine laid out his story with maximum spacing and worked out each paragraph as if it were similar to a poem with its careful choice of words and strong images.

To write frequently is at least a worthwhile and creative pastime and as its best leads to ever increasing skill and insights that are profound so make sure you line up for next year's contest.

JUDGE'S ENCOURAGEMENT FOR YOUTH AWARD

Youth eventually will determine the future of the short story, and it is praiseworthy that the Peter Cowan Centre is aware of this and allows a non-critical space for it in the contest. The modern curriculum emphasises a functional English designed for everyday multi-purpose uses and almost disregards the sense of a literary English with its sense of traditional masterpieces and aesthetic skills. This has led - as our inaugural judge said - to students having 'little idea of structure, establishing character, control of narrative voice and dialogue, and a monotonous retreat to 'cliche' rather than searching for a strong plot and a precise sense of appropriate style.

Therefore it is wonderful to see that some English teachers still take on the challenge of giving their students a creative enjoyment and imagination in playing with words that is liberated by fiction and the short story in particular. Many of the youth entries have come from one such high school and the teachers began the process probably by giving certain templates that emphasised the use of atmosphere, realistic description, sense of climax and overall structuring and the all important portrayal of character. In some cases the students copied each other being unfamiliar with creative writing but at least they traversed the elements of what elements are normally expected and now can work steadily at developing their skills to celebrate themselves and liberate their imaginative powers. On the other hand some students who

probably love to read were handling language and situation at a solid level that rivalled the skills of novice adults.

One such was

MIDNIGHT STREETS by LAURA CHEEK (Qld.)

Our culture has become increasingly aware of youth suicide and this winning entry shows the sensitivity of a young writer to his fellow victims. When night descends the world changes into a secret mysterious space and the narrator follows Conner on his first graffiti foray, as he attempts to break out from his debilitating isolation and lend his protest to the world. He is suddenly confronted by a girl who aware of the vulnerability that night brings has a protective knife in her hand and an obvious intention to suicide. Because he is gently reassuring they talk and find similarities in their situation and this leads to her returning to her home. But the next night Conner is there at the bridge just to make sure he has relieved her from her impulse and to hammer home that when people talk to us through depression they need patient listening and constant attention until they are uplifted back to normality. A worthy attempt skilfully mediated through atmosphere, dialogue and the message of a necessarily constant vigilance.

AWARDS

COMMENDED

In no particular order

SUBMISSION by SEAN CRAWLEY (Qld.)

Not having any stimulating subject in mind several entries took the process of entering the contest as their subject matter. Not all were successful in that they petered out and didn't even reach a satisfactory climax because the inventive powers were not present. This entry was far more ingenious in that for a while one felt that the entry itself was a real person who was in a triangle between two others a man and a woman. By giving flesh to the written story it allowed a contestation of points of view and oscillating attitudes which gradually move towards a delightful ending where the story lies 'flat and warm between their stomachs'.

WHAT A MAN NEEDS by CARMEL LILLIS (Vic.)

Ever since the settler colonialists invaded Australia the bush has been the unique site of a distinct genre which reached its acme in the 'BULLETIN' bush yarn and like a mine shaft was gradually worked out into the poor grade ore of cliché, boring predictability, uninvention that

led to flatness of writing. This story however is a jolt of original electricity that is almost Australian Gothic, in the murderous confrontation of guns and dark suicidal impulse that is finally redeemed by quick and courageous action laconically addressed and leading to that great attribute of Australiana - mateship. Exciting reading.

GOODBYE ATLANTA GA by HELEN LYNE (NSW)

“Home is where they have to have you!” as the saying goes and our narrator finds that Georgia is full of things that she loves and hates and nearly always rightly so, just as it is in Australia. Her visit has had both exhilaration and depression and like a war bride in reverse she is glad to leave Georgia with its body numbing cold winter and a perplexing ‘land of contradiction’ to join her lover in Australia. We wonder why he has not accompanied her but at Sydney airport we found out why in a resoundingly successful climax. A story of great crafting with sharp cultural insights.

SPINOUT by RAYLENE BROWN (NSW)

Widowhood has an initial devastating affect but in the fullness of time and realistic acceptance it can lead to remarriage and renewed happiness. I liked the lightness of touch in this story where a young son takes his widowed mother out for a time on the town with a spin in his breathtaking new car in the hope of encouraging her to reach out for a new relationship that will dispel her sadness. She enters into his youthful spirit with an initial verve and is almost flirtatious at every eligible male she sees, buoyed up by sparkling drink then the fizz goes out of the bottle and she needs to retreat to the privacy of her room and re-enter her grief. An unusual approach to an oft repeated subject.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

In no particular order

TO LOSE SOMEONE by MAUREEN WATKINS (WA)

Divorce like widowhood has its own devastating effect and the partner who has been misled often maintains a lingering hope of re-union. In this well structured story we see the divorcee fantasising in such a manner and the stress and difficulties she has undergone are clearly outlined with the material, emotional and familial re-adjustment that necessarily followed. Then the story takes a sharp turn and the reader along with the divorcee takes an atavistic pleasure in her response. Solid writing.

BALZAC IN A BAG by KERRIN O'SULLIVAN (VIC)

The joy of a middle aged spinster's release of a trip to romantic Paris on a three day furlough from her Whitechapel bed-sit and a cultural destination to investigate the controversial statue of Balzac by Rodin is beautifully expressed in this story. There is a superb balancing act of the speculations of the wary spinster of the dangers of sexual assault, drug inducement and the ever conscious threat of terrorism between the everyday delights of Parisian life of lovers and children and the elderly and yapping poodles and the pervasive smell of coffee which is so much more interesting than dreary old Whitechapel. She packs her bags for home in a solid meticulous way, and settles her account scrupulously and then a delicious thought of what if?. Loved the gentle twists and turns and the final sense of possible risk.

GUITAR BOY by KERRIN O'SULLIVAN (VIC)

An ever increasing theme is the possible romance of a relationship or sexual liaison for the traveller and the threat of an assault or exploitation that often occurs. This story's narration is a weaving of different strands of a poverty stricken nation endlessly racked by corruption and coups and tribal genocide and the sensual indulgence of beach strands and exotic sights and the final horror of violent assault. In some ways this is a moral tale of the clash of the first and the third worlds and the perversity this engenders. Economically and intricately told and instructive for us all.

URBAN GHOST by CARMEL LILLIS (Vic.)

Throughout the history of the short story the constant of O'Henry's has prevailed as much as Agatha Christie's tales of murder and detection as a template for the structuring of the well rounded tale. Such a tale is URBAN GHOST with its clever layering of the commercial against the aesthetic and its final sense of a redemption of morally uplifting creativity. A story of mutual recognitions and perhaps even the notion of kama

NOVICE AWARD

EGG SHELLS BY LYNNE JONES (WA)

The everyday domestic round of preparing for the workaday world and school in most houses is a series of minor crises from the waking alarm, the ablutions, the breakfast, the packing of lunches and the exit to

various destinations. It often generates minor clashes and alternating moods but in most happy families they are smilingly resolved in the thought of a common good, But this story is packed with the tension of possible domestic violence and abuse and the need to control noise levels and physical interactions in the manner of the title 'walking on egg shells'. The narrator has a great sense of pace and atmosphere and maintains it until all parties departed, we readers have a sense of blessed relief. Very fine writing indeed.

THIRD PRIZE

WHEN THE CHILDREN CAME BY TABETHA BEGGS (WA)

ANZAC was in the air when I was judging the contest and this story was most timely with its interesting insights into generational difference and cultural heritage. It is a gently unfolding narrative and may need a re-reading to understand the subtlety of its stages and levels. It opens up with a gentle pastoral meditation of Blackboy Hill where our soldiers were encamped and trained before they sailed from Albany to the hell that was Gallipoli, The silence is broken by a panel van of bourgeois mothers and children who are liberated by the open spaces. The mothers are over protective of their children but one speaks to the watchful old man and learns a little of the site's significance unlike the ignorant adults. Later the little boy asks if a digger is a paedophile who went to Gallipoli. His mother is not listening and nor is the world Beautifully modulated.

SECOND PRIZE.

CRUISING VANUATU by KERRIN O'SULLIVAN (VIC)

Some of the strongest writing came in the mode of the sex predator both heterosexual and lesbian perhaps because it embodies the thrill of a chase and takes us away from our gender preference to something relatively unknown and in its approach both duplicitous and ambiguous. A side trip to a marine oriented museum from a cruise ship landed at that famous tourist haven that may once have been enjoyed by the painter Gaughin allows a lesbian couple to spy upon a potential victim and on each other. One had been similarly a victim of the other, but now in a firmer relationship it made her vulnerable perhaps of abandonment and betrayal. The shifting points of view arranged against the various items in the museum made for masterly ambiguity and a precarious involvement of the reader.

FIRST PRIZE

NO TROUBLE by LESLIE THIELE (WA)

Rural life often has a necessary callousness that contrasts strongly with the reciprocal sharing of neighbours in times of adversity. Like the regional road movies this story is set in contemporary times much as country and western reflects modern everyday dilemmas. What leads a neighbour with the ambivalent sense of superiority that permits an inferred criticism and a genuine sense of returning strayed property to report a wandering steer leads into a bizarre callous reaction that sours the situation. The story shows that we should never take for granted the motivation and response of others and the implacable sense of property conferring the right to enact a self-willed perversity that negates any sense of community values. Fine writing and very Australian.

▪