

## 2018 Peter Cowan Short Story Award

### President's Report

By entering competitions writers can gain proficiency at writing clearly and concisely, so as to present their work to highly qualified and respected authors. For many entrants this can lead from being an aspiring or emerging writer, to one who is becoming more established, and having more success in having their work published.

I would like to thank Dr Josephine Taylor for agreeing to be the judge this year for the Peter Cowan 600 Word Short Story Competition.

Josephine Taylor is Associate Editor of Westerly Magazine, at The University of Western Australia. She is also a writer and freelance editor, an Adjunct Senior Lecturer in Writing at Edith Cowan University, and an editorial board member of Margaret River Press. Her work has been anthologised, and has appeared in diverse publications, including Australian Book Review, Axon, Outskirts and Southerly. Her PhD thesis was awarded the ECU Faculty Research Medal in 2011, and the Magdalena Prize in Feminist Research in 2012. Josephine is passionate about the workings of creativity in response to physical and psychological disorder. She presents and facilitates in the areas of creative writing, Australian fiction, and critical disability studies.

## 2018 Peter Cowan Short Story Award

### Judge's Report, Dr Josephine Taylor

I was really pleased to be invited to judge the 2018 Peter Cowan Short Story Competition for a number of reasons. Firstly, I love reading short-form prose, and am especially interested in new and original Australian short stories. Secondly, I have a particular interest in Peter Cowan's short fiction and the possibilities he brought to the form, especially in the creation of convincing and compelling setting, characterisation and atmosphere. Thirdly, I have a strong sense of the continuity of literary history here in Western Australia, at least partly fostered by an awareness of Peter Cowan's association with many of the same organisations and institutions with which I am now involved. The wonderful Peter Cowan Writers' Centre builds productively on this literary history, encouraging all that is best in the writing endeavours of new, emerging and established authors. Perhaps this accounts for my enthusiasm for this judging role and my delight in reading so many fine examples of short fiction!

It is my job to bring you the results of the 2018 Peter Cowan Short Story Award. First though, I would like to thank all the writers who entered this competition, young or older, experienced or novice. I know it takes courage to enter competitions, not least because one is exposed to the possibility of disappointment. I would like all writers who entered this

competition to know that I considered each piece carefully, and was pleased with the overall level of writing. Lack of prize or place does not necessarily indicate that your writing was not strong; judging in this context invariably involves leaving unrewarded, writing that might deserve reward.

One of the great joys of competition judging is the opportunity to sample a wide variety of writing. In reading and assessing the competition entries, I was struck by the diversity of content and theme. Youth entries included variations on fable or fairy tale, fantasy writing (especially involving battles), horror, imaginative recasting (for example, the use of an animal protagonist), social justice, and meditative or philosophical speculation – the best of which used incident to suggest or illustrate ideas. Adult entries included science-fiction, the fantastical, humour (including satire), social realism (including subject matter involving domestic violence, war, old age, migration and re-settlement), and dramas that explored the psychology of relationships in the spheres of childhood, family, friendship, and amorous love. In many of the stories that stayed with me, small, apparently ‘everyday’ moments were given significance through close observation and telling detail, with ideas tending towards the universal – thoughts, feelings, conflicts and predicaments to which all humans can relate.

Peter Cowan said, ‘It is the form and pattern, the style, the degree of implication possible, the whole business of technique, which gives the short story its significance as a literary form’ (Bennett). Technique and implication, or suggestion, become especially important when writing a short story limited to 600 words, with success or failure in these elements often determining the effectiveness of the piece. The criteria I used for judging this competition – what I looked for in each piece – spring from this understanding of the importance of technique and implication, as well as accounting for elements of writing that hold true for all genres.

So, the criteria:

- Precise language: Precision is especially important when word count is limited and there is little room for unnecessary words or repetition. Important-sounding or ‘clever’ language can sometimes obscure meaning, and the excessive use of adjectives and adverbs can be distracting. Often it is the most direct, precise and simple language that strikes home.
- Concrete language: Words that evoke real places, people and things are more engaging than abstract language in narrative. I look for language that evokes images, that stimulates my senses, so that I can imagine myself in the fictional world.
- Original language: Fresh words, or familiar words applied in unfamiliar ways; such language is more effective than clichés or poorly chosen metaphors.
- Sound punctuation: Punctuation doesn’t need to be complex to work well. But understanding how punctuation works can mean the difference between engagement and annoyance – especially in dialogue. (A simple solution, here, is to see how dialogue is structured and punctuated in a high quality work of fiction, and to apply this to your writing.)

- Consistent tense: Tense applied consistently gives the reader something on which to rely; tense that shifts without reason between past and present, and so on, is disconcerting and often confusing.
- Convincing fictional world: The fictional world can be as realistic or fantastical as the author desires, as long as it is internally consistent and inherently interesting. Drama is more persuasive than melodrama, sensationalism, or the surprise ‘twist’. Effective characterisation through telling detail suggests close observation of the human state on the part of the writer.
- Consideration of length: The fictional world and narrative arc need to be shaped with an awareness of length – especially important in this competition, given the tight word count. Works that are overly ambitious in scope, or that attempt to include a number of characters or incidents are less likely to be effective than those that aim small and suggest big – which leads me to...
- Subtlety and suggestion: The best short fiction issues an invitation to the reader: imagine this world and its characters; use your intelligence to complete the meaning of the narrative, or to wonder what happens beyond its confines. Character ambivalence and moral ambiguity are delightful when handled well, but watch for the tipping point between implication and the merely confusing! Closely related to this is...
- Information and withholding: The best short fiction also finds the balance between providing and withholding information. Being told what to think in a story or being the recipient of a writer’s ‘beef’ or rant is usually more off-putting than engaging.
- Evidence of drafting, editing and proofreading: Even fascinating stories must be well written. Careless typos, or poor grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure jolt the reader out of the fictional world, breaking the spell of the narrative. Draft, re-draft, edit, proofread, and always read your work out loud before submission!

And so, we come to the awards for the stories which to a greater extent fulfilled these criteria.

First, the Judge’s **Encouragement Award for Youth**. Youth entries were mixed, with some strong writing, especially in the writers who entered as Non-Novice. But this year, it is a Novice Youth entry that wins the Award. **‘A Long Night’, by William Yap**, impressed me with its sustained metaphor. Nothing much happens – the narrator eats, works on the computer, receives a phone message, plays a game, has a shower, completes a task – but each element is subtly pervaded by a problem in circularity, suggesting futility and pointlessness without ever having to spell this out.

The **Novice Writer Award** goes to **Alex Gerbaz for ‘The Safety House’**. There is some exceptional writing here, with the author using a child’s understanding of geography to evoke levels of safety and danger. The central character’s perspective is sustained, apparently effortlessly, through to the final reverberating sentence.

**Now to the Open Section with first the Commended Certificates, in no particular order.**

**'Fatal Bear Attack in Wyoming' by Rebecca Handler** is distinguished by convincing dialogue and carefully communicated detail. Narrative and characterisation are understated but suffused with unease. The story left me simultaneously wanting and not wanting to know more.

In **'Nothing Left' by Julie U'Ren**, past and present are juxtaposed to great effect. An everyday scenario is made resonant through understatement, delicate detail, and emotional restraint on the part of the author.

**'When the Railway Came to Clyne', a Novice entry by Philip Keenan**, outlines an unconventional wooing, in which the exotic wide world is brought irresistibly to small town newsagency manager, Madge. Elegant description and a touch of magic realism lift this tale out of the ordinary.

The short story **'Feel', by Matthew George**, relies on convincing dialogue and a sensitively evoked relationship to draw the reader into its world. The protagonist's ambivalence is nicely suggested through action rather than words.

Next, the Highly Commended Certificates.

In **Jim Briginshaw's 'Hell's Belles'**, the author uses humour to upset preconceptions, and shows particular aptitude in dialogue and characterisation. I found myself celebrating the surprise come-uppance!

**Lisa Kenway's 'D-Day'**, another Novice entry, uses a sustained metaphor to suggest the distance between different generations. What might be bitterness twists effectively into a conclusion that sweetly affirms the older generation.

**'Closer. Further.' by Kerrin O'Sullivan**, also focuses on older age. The world beyond the glass of the care centre is evoked vividly, with sensual detail, its precious ordinariness frighteningly out of reach for the intelligent central character.

I appreciated the cheeky humour of **'Lies in the Fowl-Yard' by Ted Witham**. Here is an author relishing the possibilities of language, employing the ornate to enliven the domestic, using sensual detail to elevate chicken flirtation to high art.

And now we move to the major prize winners.

I have awarded **3<sup>rd</sup> Prize to 'A Winter Lease' by Mary Pomfret**. This author demonstrates considerable skill in the use of form to suggest meaning, with, for instance, the repetitive 'you' simultaneously suggesting the ex-partner's nature, and the narrator's compulsion. The reader is invited to work here; is brought toward an understanding of human attachment; is asked to imagine what growth might, or might not, be possible.

The **2<sup>nd</sup> Prize is awarded to 'How A Man Goes Missing' by Kate Rees**. This short story asked me to return to it again and again, and with each reading, I felt more implicated in the central character's life and position. Here is an author who understands the rhythmic possibilities of language and syntax, someone who is comfortable with figurative and lyrical

language, someone who is adept at conveying an uncomfortable and discomfiting subjectivity.

Finally, I have awarded **1<sup>st</sup> Prize to 'Heat' by Karen Whitelaw**. It takes particular skill to create the subjectivity of childhood without strain or artifice. In this story, the author uses embodied language and a child's imperfect understanding to suggest unease and the possibility of imminent danger. It is hard not to feel concerned for this child, partly because the author sustains so skilfully the ambiguity of the threat.

Well done to all the prize-winners!

I would like to close with a word of encouragement for all the writers here. The world often tells us that to win is to arrive, and to understand. But writing is a craft, and a lifelong apprenticeship; it is also a process where the reward must often lie in the act of writing itself. So I would advise you, as I frequently advise myself, to read widely and well, listen to intelligent critiques, take every opportunity to hone your craft – to practise, practise, practise; draft, re-draft, re-draft – and to treasure the moments of joy that come when actively creating.

Again, a huge thanks to Peter Cowan Writers Centre for inviting me to judge the 2018 Peter Cowan Short Story Competition. Happy and joyful writing to you all!

Bennett, Bruce. *Australian Short Fiction: A History*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002. (Peter Cowan quoted in Frontispiece.)