

JUDGE'S REPORT

Peter Cowan Writers' Centre

Trudy Graham-Julie Lewis Literary Award for Prose Competition 2018

Annabel Smith

President's Comments

I would like to thank everyone who entered this year's Trudy Graham-Julie Lewis Literary Award for Prose Competition. I would also like to congratulate everyone who has been short listed for an award today.

By entering this competition, writers are provided with an opportunity to present their work to a highly qualified and respected author. I would like to thank Dr Annabel Smith for being here today at the awards day so as to read her excellent Judge's Report and to present the Award Certificates.

Annabel Smith is the author of *The Ark*, *Whisky Charlie Foxtrot*, and *A New Map of the Universe*, which was shortlisted for the West Australian Premier's Book Awards. *Whiskey Charlie Foxtrot*, published in the USA as *Whiskey & Charlie*, has sold in excess of 70,000 copies.

In 2012 Annabel was selected by the Australia Council as one of five inaugural recipients of a Creative Australia Fellowship for Emerging Artists, for her interactive digital novel/app *The Ark*. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Edith Cowan University.

Introduction

American writer Alexander Chee said: You can have talent, but if you cannot endure, if you cannot learn to work, if you cannot take the criticism of strangers, or the uncertainty, then you will not become a writer.

As the judge of the 2018 Peter Cowan Writers' Centre Trudy Graham-Julie Lewis Literary Award for Prose, I was struck by how everyone who entered a story in this competition demonstrated the qualities Chee described.

Often writing feels difficult, frustrating. We must overcome self-doubt, procrastination. This takes commitment, and sometimes a leap of faith. Beginning a story can be hard, but it is only the first hurdle. Real writing requires that we finish what we have started and this takes tenacity. Even when we come to the end of a story, we are not yet finished. We must return to it, again and again, seeking the combination of words which will make it more powerful, more resonant, more profound. This takes time and it is not always easy to find or make time for writing. Sometimes it requires the sacrifice of other pursuits. Those of you who have made that choice know that the satisfaction of making a story the best it can be is a reward in itself. I think this is what Chee means when he talks of endurance, of learning to work.

Everyone who entered a story in this competition had the courage to send something they had written out into the world, to undergo the criticism of strangers that Chee described. And everyone who entered was willing to accept the uncertainty of not knowing whether their story would be chosen as a winner.

This year there were over 70 submissions across the adult, novice and youth categories, representing dozens of writers who demonstrated the qualities necessary to become a writer.

Summary

The stories submitted in this year's competition represented a wide range of genres, from poems to allegorical stories and fairy tale re-tellings; from memoir and historical fiction to alternative history; from realism to speculative and supernatural fiction featuring time travel, witches, monsters and ghosts. There were some fascinating narrative points of view ranging from children to people on their deathbeds, and one story was narrated, very convincingly, from the perspective of a cat!

There were pieces set in small country towns and big cities and suburbs, as well as in imaginary worlds. A vast majority of the stories were set in Australia which was encouraging to see, and demonstrates that we're moving away from the cultural cringe of writing about our own backyard.

In Kazuo Ishiguro's Nobel Prize acceptance speech he said: 'stories are about one person saying to another, this is the way it feels to me? Does it feel the same to you?' Many of the stories submitted in this competition dealt with ordinary human rites of passage: birth and death, marriage and divorce, children growing up and leaving home, illness and ageing. Others ventured into life challenges such as disability and bullying, emigration and affairs, sex and drugs, alcoholism.

Most of the writers understood that the heart of a story is in the relationship between the central characters, and these stories explored relationships between parents, grandparents, and children; lovers, married couples, friends, mortal enemies and neighbours. A notable number of stories explored the epiphanies we sometimes have when we realise there is more to someone that we might have realised upon first impression. Others explored how simple things like surfing, music, books, nature and even coffee sometimes have the power to transform lives.

Albert Camus said the purpose of a writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself, and it was heartening to see some writers willing to take the risk of exploring humanity's dark side, with stories touching on domestic violence, sexual predators, and childhood sexual abuse.

Awards

The thirteen entries that have been acknowledged in this year's awards demonstrate an understanding that how the story is told is just as important as what we are told. Attention to structure and narrative point of view, character development and pacing can elevate a simple story into something profound and deeply engaging.

Judge's Encouragement Award for Youth

Time by Kodi Sawtell shows a maturity beyond what can be expected by a young writer, has an interesting choice of narrative POV and a powerful emotional engine.

Commended Entries (adult & novice)

Hunter & Hunted by Gita Bolton is a suspenseful piece of writing which uses all the senses, with a very strong attention to detail, especially in the natural world.

The Boy in the Blue Overalls by Sasha Pcino tackles the difficult topic of domestic violence, from the point of view of a child. The perspective is skillfully drawn, with the story as much in what goes unsaid, as in the words on the page.

A Change of Season by Sasha Pcino is a subtle story in which the meaning is all in the subtext of a conversation between two characters, a tricky thing to pull off but done successfully here and taking on the topical issue of gender fluidity.

Finally, The Change Quilt by Helen Kerr uses the metaphor of a patchwork quilt to tell a universal story of a child growing up and leaving home and how this impacts on her parents.

Highly Commended Entries (adult & novice)

Cat by Gita Bolton convincingly uses an experimental narrative POV, has a lovely rhythm to the sentences, and a heightened sense of tension.

Gone by Maureen Fries is a crime story with a speculative -fiction twist, which is pitch perfect in tone, with a distinctive narrative voice and an eye for evocative details.

Little Girl Lost by Colleen Russell is a restrained evocation of a tragic episode in a woman's life

There is immediate tension in A Small Affair by Beverley Lello, which has some lovely descriptive writing, and a sense of mood created by small details.

Novice Writer Award

Karen Taylor's Dust is an understated, beautifully-paced revenge story with a clever structure and a strong opening which circles back to the close.

3rd place:

Third prize goes to Conversations, Commotion & Silence by Helen Lyne which has a slightly wicked narrative voice, and a convincing rendering of an aged character's interior life and how it might be at odds with the way they appear to the world around them.

2nd place:

Taking out second prize, Harmony by Christine Johnson shows keen insight into the thoughts and feelings of her main character, a middle aged divorcee. There was a restraint in the writing which created tension, and a deftly handled evocation of those moments when we realise that our first impressions of someone might have been wrong.

1st place:

Finally, the top prize for 2018 is awarded to 2/4 Time by Leslie Thiele. This story stood out for its very strong and distinctive voice, eye for detail, original metaphors, sense of history, and humour. The story took a fresh approach to a deathbed moment, and had a wry little twist in its tail.

I am very grateful to the Board of the Peter Cowan Writers' Centre for inviting me to judge this year's Trudy Graham-Julie Lewis Literary Award. There was strong competition amongst the entries, and all of the recognised writers deserve high praise for their standout work.

Having said that, it's important to remember that prizes aren't everything. It is just one person's point of view. Judges are human. If you achieved what you set out to do, if you told the story you wanted to tell, if you wrote to the best of your ability, or stretched yourself, or tried something you had never tried before, your story is already a success, whether or not it won an award.

As a writer, the road to success is paved with rejection. If you weren't successful here today, don't give up. You will write other stories, there will be other competitions. Keep writing. Endure. Do the work. Make peace with criticism and uncertainty. Good luck.