

## **2024 Katharine Susannah Pritchard Writers' Centre Short Fiction Competition**

Judge's Report - Brooke Dunnell

This year, the Katharine Susannah Pritchard Writers' Centre Short Fiction Competition received 156 eligible entries across the Open and Youth categories. While a number of these stories will have been written prior, it's certain that others originated when the writer saw the callout and felt inspired. Think of that: with only the prompt of a word count and a deadline, each year this competition results in the invention of characters, events, and worlds that would never have existed otherwise.

This is one of many reasons why competitions run by local writers' centres are so vital to the literary and cultural landscape. They give writers valuable experience at meeting deadlines, following submission guidelines, and honing their craft. Being acknowledged in a competition reassures writers they're on the right track and that their words have impact. Organisations like the Katharine Susannah Pritchard Writers' Centre facilitate the development of everything that is core to the writing community—not just writers, creative work, and connections, but also feelings of recognition, accomplishment, and delight.

As a fellow short fiction writer who has experienced all the highs and lows of the submission process, it was a privilege to judge this year's KSP Short Fiction Competition. With over a hundred and fifty entries, only sixteen can be recognised, or just over ten percent. Having read them all, I can assure you that there was value in every single submission, and there were many more worthy stories to choose from than there were awards to allocate.

For those entrants who were unlucky this time around, or anyone who's interested in what makes a great short story, the concept I kept returning to as a reader was 'balance'. This is what makes short stories both so satisfying and so difficult: the careful combination of vital elements like exposition and conflict, description and action, beginning and ending. There is no precise formula for how to weigh these—what feels right will be unique to each piece.

This meant that what often prevented solid stories from being placed or commended was an unevenness in the way they were formed. I was left wanting more, and not in the best way: I wanted to understand the characters, for example, or to see what was happening more clearly. Amongst many strong components, something was lacking.

Another common issue that entrants can watch for is an unnecessarily formal use of vocabulary. As writers, it's common to feel we should justify ourselves by choosing the most complicated synonym even if it doesn't suit the genre, narrator, or style. In short fiction, every word must earn its place. Choosing the most effective and meaningful word while maintaining a voice that enhances the story is one of the many challenges of this form.

Finally, while we always want our stories to mean something to readers, it's best to focus on the tangible qualities that make narrative unique—detail, setting, character, dialogue. Lead with the specificities of the world you've created and allow themes and issues to arise from there, rather than trying to populate an argument with a cast of characters.

### **AWARDS – YOUTH CATEGORY**

#### **First place: 'Past the Horizon' by Hannah Tiechert, NSW**

A suitably melancholic tone pervades this short story, in which an intergalactic scout is sent out to harvest resources for his home colony. The beauty of the world is depicted in affecting detail and the protagonist's feelings about the landscape and his job are nuanced, with an ending that is well earned.

#### **Second place: 'Chickens and Their Terror' by Emmanuel Agomuo, Tas**

This story's narrator has a unique, energetic voice that looks back ruthlessly on their thoughts and feelings when playing with their grandparents' chickens as a child. In some places, language is stretched to its limits, in a way mirroring the sudden, unexpected situation that is soon thrust upon the young character.

#### **Highly commended: 'A Creature in the Forest' by Lana Cleasby, WA**

This was the standout story among several that depicted forest scenes and mysteries. Through precise imagery and the careful build-up of dread, the writer successfully utilises timeless tropes of lost maidens and frightful beasts.

#### **Highly commended: 'Pink, Orange and Daddy' by Haruka Cooper, Vic**

Gender roles are examined from new angles as a tomboyish daughter judges her feminine mother in this Electra Complex story. It can be difficult to establish an unreliable narrator, but this one is cleverly executed to reveal a stubborn, childish view of the world.

**Highly commended: 'Perfect Child' by Rob Davison, WA**

A wry story about a child whose exemplary behaviour begins to turn sinister, this piece shows a deftness with language and the admirable ability to control pacing, tension, and a successful twist.

**Highly commended: 'Solitude' by Ainsley Presely, Vic**

In this precisely rendered and suitably bleak piece, a lone child plays in the rubble of a war-destroyed landscape. The detail is precise and affecting, and the child's slow realisation of what he is doing is highly empathic.

**Highly commended: 'The Echo of Past Selves' by Melina Richardson, NSW**

The narrative voice here grabs readers immediately by comparing the running figure to the child they once were. The writer deploys tone and mood impeccably, creating a sense of wistfulness that matches the descriptions.

**National Young Writers Encouragement Award: 'Lace' by Sara Jiang, NSW**

This author shows maturity far beyond their years in the depiction of a bride before her wedding day. The fantasy elements, themes, and vocabulary are all highly evocative, leading to a suitably tragic ending.

**AWARDS – OPEN CATEGORY**

**First place: 'Basketbird' by Deborah Frenkel, Vic**

In its shifts between exposition and the final, crucial scene, this story achieves the mesmerising balance of a Harlem Globetrotter spinning a basketball on their finger. The distinct, personal narrative voice reassures us that we are in steady hands and should enjoy the show. The characters are drawn swiftly and convincingly, and the author demonstrates impressive skills in guiding us between the all-too-realistic pressure of youth sports and the magical symbolism of a basketball hatching mid-game.

**Second place: 'All Good Things' by Pi James, Vic**

The slow tragedy of dementia is an important story to tell, but its shifts in logic and attention can be difficult to replicate in fiction. 'All Good Things' succeeds through immersion in the drifting mind of an elderly sufferer, carefully managing the third-person point of view so that

readers can follow but stand apart from the protagonist's disintegrating train of thought. The relationship with his adult daughter is represented in all its bittersweet reality as the father is buffeted between the present and the past, his pride and his regret.

**Highly commended: 'Sister M' by Tina Cartwright, Vic**

The language, tone, and point of view offered here thoughtfully convey an ageing nun's personal struggle with pride and love. The construction of the two main characters is sophisticated and the 'confession' ends on a suitably ironic note.

**Highly commended: 'Making It' by Philippa Freegard, WA**

This tongue-in-cheek romp follows a wannabe influencer in her quest to find love and likes. The narrative voice is whimsical but pointed as it weaves between action, dialogue, and hashtags with skilful pacing and character construction.

**Highly commended: 'Right Path' by Henry Hamilton, Vic**

This economical piece of fiction toes a thrilling line between the fantastical and the all-too-real in its portrayal of a rainy day at a mixed-use suburban green space, where confrontation turns to unlikely infatuation.

**Highly commended: 'Sin Aesthetic' by David Harris, WA**

This story-within-a-story uses imagery in refreshing ways to depict a character whose synaesthesia morphs sound and memory into colour. Themes of trauma, transfer, and letting go are beautifully handled to create a satisfying resolution.

**Highly commended: 'Wildfire' by Caitlin Prince, SA**

Here, the aftereffects of a lover's stroke are compassionately likened to those of recent bushfires as the narrator struggles to deal with her partner's smouldering anger. The descriptive writing and insights into the complexities of caring are exceptional.

**Shire of Mundaring Encouragement Award: 'Inappropriate' by Melanie S Hobbs, WA**

I was immediately drawn to the lively narrative voice in this story, in which three Indian teenagers are unfairly ousted from a school performance. The physical and temporal setting is seamlessly rendered and the characterisation feels joyous, despite the seriousness of the conflict.

Thank you so much to Executive Officer Sofija Stevanovic and the team at the Katharine Susannah Pritchard Writers' Centre for asking me to judge this year's Short Fiction Competition. Your flawless running of the administration side was an immense help and your commitment to the competition, and to Western Australian writing more widely, is extremely inspiring. I'm very grateful that we have KSP and have no doubt that all the authors, members, and the wider community are as well.



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