

Alan Marshall Short Story Award 2013
Judges Report
Arnold Zable

General comment for both Local and Open sections

Both the open and local sections of the Alan Marshall award were extremely difficult to judge. One of the difficulties as well as one of the joys in reading these stories is that the styles were so diverse. They ranged from autobiographical first person accounts of family incidents and trauma, through to social realist stories written in the third person, and at the other end of the spectrum, a couple of tales that veered into the experimental and fabulist – or in one case, a kind of magical realism.

I have therefore not only chosen a winner for the open, but also a highly commended, and a number of commended, and also named the short-listed stories. In a field of 311 entries in the open section in particular and to a lesser extent the 41 entries in the local section to be short listed is an achievement in itself and deserves to be mentioned and acknowledged. In my view, there is too much emphasis on choosing clear-cut winners in competitions, an issue highlighted by Carrie Tiffany when she generously donated a proportion of her first prize in the inaugural Stella Prize to the short listed entries. In the open section I had up to five or six entries that were in the running for the first place – and thought long and hard before deciding the eventual winners. The stories that are highly commended were all in the running.

I was impressed by the big themes the stories confronted – of birth, teenage angst, family dysfunction, ageing, dementia – using story, and specific scenarios to poignant and telling effect. This is what story does best – reveal the complexities and subtleties such challenges present.

It is worth reflecting upon what the short story form can and perhaps cannot do. Some stories focused on a single incident, others had a broad sweep. When done well, the broad sweep approach can work – it requires a lot of skill. Some of the stories actually sounded like extracts from a longer work, or would have been better suited as a novella or novel. The 3000-word limit, while understandable in terms of the demands of such competitions, is in fact arbitrary. Indeed great contemporary short story writers, such as Alistair McLeod and Jumpha Lahiri, have stories, such as McLeod's masterpiece 'Island' that are 10,000 words long or more. Chekhov's short stories are often long, and glorious. My advice would therefore be, to those who entered the award, have a good look at the story, regardless of how they have been 'judged' and free yourself to rewrite them to the length that works and suits them well, whether that be short story, novella or novel.

OPEN

Winner:

Flood by Mark Smith

Both stories are distinguished by their originality, the textured prose, the distinct voice, and above all, by their distinctive tone. It was impossible for me to judge one as above the other because of the great difference in style. *Flood* is a fabulist tale, with a mythical quality – magical realism – this is dangerous territory for a writer, but in this case it is done extremely well, and there are some stunning images in this highly original account of a flood. An indication of how good the story is are the many passages that are quotable. Here are just two of many: 'From his vantage point on the roof the man looked up at the bald ridges. They looked down on him like a frown on the skyline.' And: 'Viewed from above, the old woman was a picture of serenity as she floated freely down the main street on her last tour. Past the butchers where she bought sausages on Mondays and rissoles on Thursdays, past the cinema where she fell in love with Stuart Granger, past the post office where the telegram had arrived in '42, to the end of the buildings and the open paddocks beyond.'

Highly Commended

Footprints in the Wind by Karen Atkinson

Loved this poignant and original story, especially the warmth of its tone, its lyrical descriptive passages of the desert, the poignant predicament at the heart of the story, the issues it tackles, and the clever twist in the plot. Also loved the nuanced and empathetic way the two central characters are drawn. This story used the short form to perfection, in creating a simple storyline to convey many possibilities.

Commended

Keeping Tabs by Michelle Wright

The Inadequacy of Wheels by Melissa Beit

Innovations by Catherine Padmore

Box One, South Longing by Kristen McEvoy

Short Listed

What I didn't put in my speech by Claire Aman

Hundreds and Thousands by Michelle Wright

May Twentieth by Rebekah Clarkson

Stage Love by Beverley Lello

LOCAL**Winner:**

Paradise by Julie Twohig

This is a moving and harrowing story. It is fierce and uncompromising in depicting the rage of the father, the sagging spirit, and encroaching madness of the mother, and the confusion and compassion of the 12-year-old Milly who has to mature long before her time. It is also a poignant tale of lost dreams, and the frustration and irrational rage that it unleashes. Daisy, the cow, her brutal treatment, juxtaposed with the mature kindness of Milly, is both shocking, and poignant. This is tale about disillusion, its terrifying effects, but also the glimmer of hope disillusion paradoxically presents in the way in which Milly confronts it. The moving, yet realistically portrayed of mother-daughter relationship is the thread that holds this tale together.

Highly Commended

Another Day by Michelle Dalton

Burnout by Gillian Essex

Keeping Tabs by Michelle Wright

Innovations by Catherine Padmore

Hundreds and Thousands by Michelle Wright

Short Listed

Postcards from Auschwitz by Joshua Arandt

Mt Blamblett by Lara Fitzgerald Beissbarth

The Rose in a Glass by Kari O’Gorman

Dry Bones by Elisabeth Bromley

YOUTH

Judge's observations

Each of the listed stories had their moments, a turn of phrase, a subtle observation, an insight, a moment of well-observed detail. In *Date* for instance, the world weary bar tender is well sketched: 'He drank too much, slept too little and hungered for things he dared not ask for.' The story *We were both Today*, has a subtly humourous voice, instantly distinguishable, interesting philosophical observations, and some subtle phrases: 'They passed each other with the slightest bit of reverence. That nonchalant atmosphere possessed by teenagers.' In *Braglu* there is the beautiful observation: 'the sound burst from his throat like a currawong.' In *Stolen*, the author subtly conveys the pain of being forcibly taken: 'I remember the most frightening thing as I lay in hospital was not being able to smell the bush.' And, later, as the girls run through the night, the writer observes: 'the night was crawling away from us, so we decided to rest until midday.' *Verglas* has a lovely opening: 'Thin, delicate feet rested limply on the dashboard. Long, pale legs, stretched out as far as the small space would allow. Torso curled against the worn leather seat, bony arms hugging wrapped around her chest in a futile attempt to warm up.'

Overall however, there was a tendency in many of the stories to depict the world in extremes, as divided between heroes and villains, the good and wicked, the purely innocent and guilty, In other words, there was a lack of nuance. So while several stories are well intentioned in their deep concern with cruelty and injustice, they undermine the case by overstating it. There was also a tendency in several stories to over-write and stray into cliché. This lack of nuance tempered the promise shown in many of the short-listed stories, even though they all had their moments, and even though all were powered by passion and a deep concern for their characters. Two stories were notable exceptions, one I have given first place, the other, highly commended.

Winner:

A hard girl by Cameron Croese

Somewhat more nuanced than most of the other entries. A tale of mother, father and two girls, with a lot hinted at within the word limit. It contains moments of poignant insight: 'It's hard to pinpoint the exact moment she stopped thinking of him as "Dad". Maybe that night when she'd watched him break into tears on the front porch.' And later, a striking use of posture as a verb: 'Stark gum trees and withered branches and ashen bark posture on a field of dewy yellow grass.' Overall the story is textured, with insights into the world of both adults and children, and a capacity to convey the complexity of family relationships with a degree of compassion: "'We have to make sacrifices for the ones we love Sal.'" He says. A tired phrase from a tired man. Just as artificial as it would have been had he cut it out from a book of inspirational quotes and handed it to her.' Towards the end of the story there is a beautiful moment, an observation which reveals the true potential of the writer: 'The car jolts. Mary grips the air with pink fingers and opens rheumy eyes. Jean reaches across the car and strokes her cheek.'

“Good morning, sweetie” Jean says. Mary sits up. Looks out at the property. “Bye house.” She murmurs. Places her hand on the glass. Sally watches, wondering.’

Highly Commended

A Filthy Rite by Cameron Croese

Captures the awkwardness of teenage infatuation. The opening paragraph in particular shows a talent for observing details that deftly capture the ambience of a valedictory night: ‘Us boys in our greys and blacks fill one side of the chairs. Girls are done up in model perfection, their dresses making the other side of the hall a fruit bowl of colour. Chartreuse is in this year.’ Also impressive is the authentic dialogue between Jezebel and Jason. There are some profound observations, which ring true as reflections of a sensitive adolescent making their way towards adulthood. For instance: ‘I still don’t know what constitutes an important development event, but I know what growth feels like.’ I feel that the story could have done with a more nuanced title – it runs counter to the sensitivity with which the story is written.

Commended

We were both today by Beatrice Tan

A fresh, original voice, a clever idea that could have been explored a little bit longer. Ends too abruptly.

Commended

Stolen by Eve McLellan

This story is fuelled by a great sense of anger at the injustice inflicted upon indigenous people, and by an attempt to write from a child’s point of view.

Short-listed

Braglu by Jemimah Rawlandson

Verglas by Harriet Walker

Date by Jess L Morgan