

The Stuart Hadow Short Story Competition 2021: judge's report

Thank you to FAWA for the invitation to judge this year's Stuart Hadow Short Story Competition. This year there were 182 entries from across the country. 182. That large number is both a sign of the continuing prestige of this long-running competition, and a rather daunting prospect for a judge required to provide a shortlist of only six stories.

My task was made even more challenging, as well as thoroughly enjoyable, because of the high standard of many of the entries. I read an admirable number of well-written, thought-provoking and engaging stories on a range of subjects, from the so-called 'domestic' – personal relationships, family, personal identity – to more overtly political narratives about the use and abuse of power, environmentalism and climate change. There was also a pleasing range of genres, including realism, satire, fragmented narratives and interior monologues. I was also impressed by the skill with which many writers created a distinctive and credible sense of voice.

In choosing six stories for a shortlist, I used several criteria. Firstly, and most importantly, I was looking for stories that used precise and evocative language. That didn't use a single cliché. As I'm sure you all know, clichéd writing is lazy writing; it's a reliance on what's been said so many times that the words fail to encourage thought or elicit emotion. By contrast, the stories I chose were the product of hard thinking; of going beyond the clichéd and predictable to find a more interesting and inventive way of expressing ideas. As well, the stories on my short list didn't lapse into overwriting; the writers didn't slather on the adjectives and adverbs in an attempt to impress the reader with their vocabulary. Nor did the stories spell out their meanings or offer a 'message'; instead, they gave readers the challenge and the pleasure of working out possible meanings for themselves. They are all wonderful examples of what the Irish poet and playwright W.B. Yeats described as the basis for a memorable short story: 'Only that which does not teach, which does not cry out, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible.' The six stories also knew how to deploy 'the unsaid' – those silences that lie beneath the surface of speech – to add to the complexity of characters. And they all successfully negotiated the competing demands of the short story form, combining economy and resonance, brevity and depth, to suggest other worlds, other lives, beyond the relatively few words on the page.

And so now, at last, to what you've all been waiting for: the announcement of the place-getters and 'winners.'

I want to commend three short stories which kept asking me to return to them, to re-read them attentively, to keep discovering new layers of meaning. The stories are, in alphabetical order of surnames:

Jean Flynn, from Queensland, for her story 'Someone like you'

This is a moving story about guilt, irreparable loss and the need for sympathy and understanding instead of judgement of the other. It centres on a young woman's reluctance to engage in conversation with a man on a tram; repelled by his obesity and annoyed by his intrusiveness, she stubbornly refuses his invitation to talk. The story gradually reveals the traumatic backstories of both characters, and in so doing, enables the young woman to see common ground and the necessity of fellow feeling. 'Someone like you' also avoids both sentimentality and sensationalism, and its conclusion is beautifully restrained.

Karen Holland, also from Queensland, for her story 'Unravelling'

Seen from the perspective of a socially autistic man, 'Unravelling' deals with a son's discovery of his mother's corpse and his struggle to live without her. The son's intense love for his mother, which in the hands of a lesser writer would be reduced to mere pathology, is treated respectfully and tenderly. The story makes subtle use of symbolism and an affectless tone to contrast the son's devotion to his mother and, by extension, the loss of meaning in his life, with the superficial responses of neighbours. It's a haunting and skilfully crafted narrative that offers us the gift of access to a deeply troubled mind.

Kerry Greer, from WA, for her story 'Espalier'

As its title suggests, 'Espalier' is about the 'training' or pruning of growth in a confined space. This framing metaphor enacts the movement of the story, in which a woman's desire for a man is constrained by insistent doubts about his trustworthiness. It's a carefully controlled and psychologically complex first-person narrative which subtly

gestures towards the genre of the crime thriller, and which uses a series of imaginative metaphors to suggest the woman's conflicted state of mind. It's both emotionally vertiginous and morally compelling, resisting easy answers to the questions it raises about a woman's desire for sex and intimate connection.

And now for the three place-getters.

I have awarded third prize to Michael Burrows, from Western Australia, for his story 'Green Thumbs'

This story takes on the challenge of writing about what must surely be one of life's more heartbreaking experiences: the death of a beloved child. What distinguishes this moving story is its unexpectedness: its audacious contrast of the blatantly sexual, symbolised by the vagina-shaped flower with which the story begins, and the terrible pathos of a daughter's death. Narrated in the first person by the father, the story derives its emotional power from its linguistic restraint, and from a predominantly flat tone which the reader comes to recognise as the father's attempt to cope with unbearable grief. It's a story about guilt, anger and helplessness, in which the use of fragmented sentences, in the very act of utterance, enact the inexpressible nature of grief.

I have awarded second prize to Paulette Gittins from Victoria, for her story 'Only Joking.'

This story takes an 'ordinary' experience – a child's resentment of parental abuse and misunderstanding – and turns it into something quite extraordinary: a series of glimpses into the casual cruelty of a family and the child's surreptitious plotting of revenge. It's the kind of story in which the meaning is oblique or slanted, such that the reader must fit the pieces together, be an active co-creator of the text. Its use of a third person limited narration is masterly; it allows us to share the child's thoughts and feelings, while using sophisticated language to make her observations both morally trenchant and incisive. It's a clever and heartbreaking story that neither displays its cleverness nor overplays the sentiment. And, as its title ironically suggests, 'Only Joking' is deadly serious in its implicit plea for the right of children to happiness and respect. An absolute gem.

First prize goes to Julie Woodland, from WA, for her story ‘The Astrophysics of Love’

This story centres on a daughter’s return to Australia to care for her dying father, a man from whom she has long been geographically and metaphorically distant. It uses this familiar subject of familial estrangement to explore different forms of knowledge – scientific, intuitive, bodily, idiosyncratic – and to encourage reflection on crucial existential and moral questions: who am I, and how should I live? How, if at all, am I responsible for the welfare of others? Blending theoretical discourse, lyricism, pathos, and the immediacy of first-person narration, the story is a stunning example of what the writer Barbara Kingsolver sees as the defining characteristic of the best short stories: what she calls ‘the execution of large truths in small spaces.’ In the confined space of less than two thousand words, ‘The Astrophysics of Love’ speaks confronting and consoling ‘truths’ about family, friendship and the limits of human understanding.