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**Stuart Hadow Short Story Competition 2023**

It was a pleasure and privilege to be asked to judge the Stuart Hadow Short Story Competition for FAWWA. I received a total of 96 entries, all deidentified, and I read most of them several times. My usual practice is to read and make notes and sort into piles of Yes, Maybe and No. Imagine my panic when I reached the halfway mark at about 45 and realised that all the stories had been sorted into Yes and Maybe. Undaunted, I continued. On a second reading I was able to find more stories to place into the No pile. This is not a judgement on the writing, instead an acknowledgement that I was reading an extremely accomplished set of writers of a standard I have rarely encountered in my years of reading, assessing and judging literary competitions. Broadly speaking, the stories reflected the times we are living through, with references to national and local landscapes, the pandemic, isolation and connection and what it means to write through times of global uncertainty. The stories I read navigated grief, joy, hopelessness, privilege, anger and acceptance through a genre defying mix of surrealism, magic realism, humour and straightforward storytelling. There were stories with unexpected and clever endings, those that transported me to unfamiliar worlds with deft competence and those that spoke from the positionality of feminist and cultural rage. The ones I loved most were self-reflexive, ironic and linguistically brilliant, when writer and subject matter became indistinguishable and engaged both my heart and mind. There were stories that reflected on culpability and the way writers write about what and who they know and how they handle the trauma of small things.

The nine shortlisted entries are the ones I returned to and in an ideal world they would all win prizes. If I were asked to put an anthology together, I would include these and another nine. In case I haven’t mentioned it already, it was incredibly hard to make decisions and I think at one stage I asked if I could have shortlist of twelve. The wonderfully patient folk at FAWWA suggested I might settle for nine and I thank them for their indulgence.

Before I move on to speak about the shortlisted entries, here are some general comments on the stories that didn’t make it to my Yes and Maybe stash. Some of the stories were not stories. They were chapters from longer works and did not work as stand-alone fiction. Some were essays and memoir pieces, which though well-written were unsuitable for a short story competition. Some had not been proof-read as was evident from editing notes submitted with the story. Still others had fragments of unrelated material attached to them, suggesting a last-minute submission made in haste. Some were simply confusing with unresolved threads that went nowhere. These stories were often whimsical and charming, but they were reflections rather than fully realised fiction. And finally, to borrow a phrase from Rebecca Solnit, I am not a big fan of “misogynist/white supremacist dumpster fires.” I found stories with graphic depictions of cruelty to animals, women and small children, profoundly disturbing.

I’d like to mention three stories I really liked even though they did not make it to the shortlist. In no particular order they are:

* *0630 Perth to Melbourne.* Written in second person, a gorgeous story of loss and friendship.
* *Let the Ocean Take Me* is a quiet story of a boy’s relationship with his father, told in a heartbreakingly understated manner.
* *Saucy* is a funny foodie story, clever, existential, millennial. Perhaps a result of watching cooking shows during lockdown.

And now, here are the Commended, Highly Commended and Prize-winning stories.

**Commended:**

* *On the Princes Highway, somewhere between Wollongong and Sydney* by Joshua Sorenson from Victoria. This is a road trip story with a difference. Through the use of tense dialogue between a same sex couple and a rich interior monologue, this story asks us to sit with discomfort. It dwells in territory all writers inhabit. It asks what if we imagine the worst for the people we love for the sake of art. A story that demonstrates both lightness of touch and narrative dexterity.
* *Shall I Tell Him* by Lyndall Weightman from WA. An unnerving story that uses sparse dialogue and incredibly detailed inner and outer landscapes to drop us into a story of gaslighting and survival. The feminist in me raised a fist, swore quietly and damned the male character to hell.
* *True North* by Karen Hollands from Queensland. This atmospheric story begins and ends with a quest for freedom. A woman grieves the death of her father while living a normal suburban life as a mother, wife and employee. Like the best stories, it goes quietly into murky emotional territory, balancing the narrative with a deft blend of show and tell.

**Highly Commended:**

* *Fantastic Guy, Just Terrific* by Jack Kirne from Victoria. This is a clever, episodic, contemporary story about a man visiting a dentist with all the existential abstractions the visit might entail. A man who won’t stop talking, a right-wing dentist, a forlorn receptionist and a narrator who contemplates his education and privilege in language that stings.
* *Big Driver* by Faiza Bokhari from WA. A story constructed around the interior lives of women from a specific immigrant background. It plays with the idea of ‘home’ and ‘going home’ through a deliberate layering of language through familiar tropes like food, people, clothes and landscape with a subversive ending that both satisfies and disrupts.
* *Sunshine* by Jodie Kewley from Victoria. A story of intergenerational trauma delivered with a precise and light touch. Despite noticing the clues dropped deftly throughout, I was lulled by the rhythm and linguistic strength of this story and cheered loudly for the deeply flawed woman at the centre of the narrative.

And now for the three prize winning stories. These are very different, stylistically, thematically and structurally. They surprised me with their diversity and obliged me to think of my own biases as a reader. I’m happy to report that I have not read anything like these stories before and I will do my best to describe them for those who like to know which genre or style a piece of writing may slot into.

* In third place is *Oops I did it again* by Felicia Henderson from NSW. Despite the obvious pop reference, this story does something incredible. It remains witty and ironic after multiple readings and anyone who has attempted to write humour knows how difficult it is to pull off, and even harder to sustain over 3000 words. Replete with references to a “femme tatt artist who’d covered her shoulders and boobs with an exuberant cloud of rainbow butterflies” this story about love and lust at a market stall is clever, funny, self-deprecating and writerly.
* In second place is *Griffon’s Laundrette* by Asha Rajan from WA. A story set in that most suburban of utilitarian places – a laundromat. We are immediately positioned inside the mind of the main character as she contemplates that she is “neither acceptably white nor obediently Oriental” for her former in-laws. This story embraces the others, the outliers, the weird ones, the traumatised and the creepy and does it all with a furious energy. At its heart is a feminist rage that feels potent and justified. It defies genre but I’ll have a go and call it a magic realist feminist fable with a touch of horror.
* The first prize is awarded to *Poetry* by Cathryn deVries from Queensland. This is a sublime piece of writing that also defies easy categorisation. A kind of medieval fantasy with a touch of magic. Incredible world building, a protagonist enslaved in a library, a fey hunting cat called Shimash, a young lord in need of both assistance and poetry. Reminiscent of Alexandrian libraries, Bedouin caravans and Moroccan souks there is a sense of a larger and stranger world that is both conveyed and hidden within the scope of the story. Congratulations Cathryn. An extraordinary story.

Thank you.