

KSP Speculative Fiction Award 2011 – Judge's Report

Judge: Stephen Dedman

Youth category - Mundaring National Young Writers Awards

There were 27 stories submitted in the Youth category this year, of which eight stood out.

Of the others, five were quite well written but lacked any speculative or fantastic content. Some had grammatical problems which sometimes made them more difficult to follow – though one of these was written in diary form, so that writer can shift the blame for the punctuation on to the diarist.

Apart from this, many of the stories had similar weaknesses to those in the open category: 'A Scout's Diary' – another good use of the diary form- and 'Forever Ella' were interesting, but felt more like first chapters of longer works than complete stories. Others seemed more like synopses, or were very unevenly paced. Stories that tried to be funny had some good lines, but not enough of them.

Commendations go to '2084', which dealt with obsessive-compulsive disorder; 'The Path of Redemption', and 'The Identity Thief', both of which began and ended very well, though in each case the middle was slightly uneven; 'Mrs Wallace and the Little Black Cat', an amusingly evil little story; 'Caelen's Killer', an action-packed story that did a good job of sustaining a mood of suspense as it built towards a climax.

Third place went to 'Society Black', which was very nearly my choice for second place – it was extremely well constructed and made excellent use of multiple narrative voices, including second person perspective.

Second place goes to 'The Golden Lily's Guardian', a fantasy story with interesting ideas, and a plot that kept twisting in unexpected directions, frequently changing the reader's perception of the narrator.

The winner in the youth category, though, is 'Bigger Than Jesus', which is told in chapters which become progressively shorter and more dramatic. The premise is interesting, and the parody of sports commentators extremely entertaining. It's wonderful to see that there are young people who

have such a good understanding of how to write an entertaining short story.

Open category

There were 64 stories submitted in the Open category this year, of which eight stood out – most of them urban fantasies.

Of the other stories, there were a number that, while interesting, seemed more like first chapters than completed stories – including 'A Curious Incident at a Seven-Eleven', 'Montreal Palisade', 'The Carrot Farmer', 'Where the Sun Sets', 'Varum', 'Joshua', 'Dumpling 2044', 'The Road and the Fence', 'Affirmation Day', 'Old City', 'The Last Letter', 'Tooki' and 'The Tribunal'.

Some writers who seemed to want to write novels rather than short stories, squeezed so much into a few thousand words that the stories felt more like outlines: examples include 'The Red Scorpion', 'Spy', 'Maggie's Voice', 'Victoria Chase', 'Trigger', 'Eve', 'NeXus', 'In the Company of the Dead' and 'Sam'. Several stories, such as 'Let There Be Dark', 'Don't Talk to Me', 'DeepApp 9', 'Victoria Chase', 'The Phases of the Earth' and 'Carbon Dating', put too much background information into the first half of the story, seriously slowing down the plot. Others, like 'King of Glass' and 'The Cottage', had too little plot for the length.

'Double Take', 'Crossroads at Crystaluna', 'Jack'll fix it', 'Appointment with an Orphic Headhunter', 'The Father, The Sun', and 'The Gazebo' were all rather predictable. The stories that tried to be funny – 'The Price of Convenience', 'The Weather Makers', 'The Eternal Search', 'Final Whistle', 'Hero's End' and 'Mismatch' – all had good lines, but not enough of them.

'Lucy's Magic', 'P.E.D.', 'How Long, the beforedeath?', 'A Little Light Music' and 'The Sky is Falling' all began very well, but the endings didn't have the impact necessary for a really satisfying short story.

'Books by their covers' was written well, but depended too much on an implausible premise. 'Best Face Forward' was intriguing, but difficult to follow and rather frustrating.

There were a few more stories where some aspect impressed me, even if the stories as a whole didn't make the final cut. 'The Broken Fence' featured well-drawn characters; 'The Final Siren', interesting conflicts; 'The Mother', good descriptive writing, 'The Hearse', 'The Dictionary' and

'Hiroshima' did a great job of creating and sustaining mood. 'Eli', 'Maglyn's Trash and Treasure', and 'Cross Words' had genuinely surprising plot twists.

In the end, three stories seemed worthy of honorable mentions. 'Nine 'Till Three Free' is a particularly good example of the urban fantasy genre – or, more accurately, suburban fantasy. It's so firmly grounded in the mundane present that the fantastic element doesn't become clear until the last page, but the ending is both surprising and consistent with the set-up.

'Beautiful Ghosts' was one of the few horror stories in this batch, and definitely the best of them; very disturbing, very well written, with a chilling last line.

The fantasy element in 'Norman Nightingale' is ambiguous – it's a belief held by one character that isn't shared by the narrator, and probably isn't true. This ambiguity is handled well, and while the story starts rather slowly, the last page is wonderful.

'Mirrorball' was my choice for second place. It's a Twilight Zone sort of story of slightly skewed reality, with a perspective which makes it impossible to tell whether it's fantasy or science fiction. Its strengths are the carefully paced revelation and, even more, the characters and their relationship.

'The Statues of Melbourne' is the winner, and a real gem. It takes a simple but very weird premise – statues of Melbournians suddenly and inexplicably appear in random locations around Melbourne, providing the city with tourist attractions – and develops it beautifully, with the perfect choice of narrator, a great ending, and a wonderfully wry last line. Congratulations to the author for a great story!