

Stringybark Times Past Award 2019

Judges' Comments

The Stringybark Times Past Award opened on 13 March 2019 and closed on 16 June 2019. It attracted 124 entries. For comparison our previous competitions were as follows.

2011 Times Past Award — *Marngrook* — \$520 in prizes — 117 entries

2013 Times Past Award — *Stew and Sinkers* — \$810 in prizes — 165 entries

2016 Times Past Award — *Longing for Solitude* — \$1024 in prizes — 83 entries

David Vernon

I was delighted with this year's competition and particularly with the quality of the entries. In past years we have a much greater variety in quality — not the plot or the theme — but basic issues with grammar, spelling and layout. However, I do remain bemused that some writers do not have a grasp of their word processing software with some using tabs to delineate new paragraphs or even using multiple spacing. A carpenter knows how to use a hammer and a vet a syringe. If we profess to be writers, we need to know the tool of our trade and these days it is the word-processor — not the typewriter or the writing pad.

This perhaps seems churlish to start a critique of the entire competition by focussing on what might seem so inconsequential as story layout. However, if you are selling a house, do you sweep the front verandah and put a lick of paint on the peeling door? Presentation is important. If you look as though you know what you are doing, then the judge can focus not on the presentation but on the contents — exactly where you want them to focus.

So to the content. Wow! What a great collection of stories — a varied subject matter and some wonderful characterisation was dished up this year. As someone who has a pretty good knowledge of Australian history, I really appreciated those stories that examined little known aspects of our history — exhumations of obscure characters or events to provide a wider canvas on which to view our history. Not just the usual focus on convicts and Gallipoli. Astute entrants will have read (or at least glanced) through our previous anthologies (all available for sale either as paperbacks or ebooks) and known what we publish. If you want to excite me by rehashing the tale of the Petrov Affair then you need to take a different tack, as in *Doosia's Choice* by Juliet Blair. Juliet focussed on the air attendant and not the Petrovs. A clever idea. We all know about the horror of Gallipoli but rather than stick in the trenches, Shannon Coyle in *For Valour* chose to look at after the war and gave us a greater insight into veterans by doing this. The winning story won my heart through the vivid description and the wonderful use of words. The Newcastle earthquake was less the focus of the story than both the backdrop and the climax to a relationship tale. Holly Bruce's *Fault Lines* was practically faultless. I am bored witless by royalty but Kay Spencer's *The Woman on the Wall* was such a delicate exploration it had to be published. From the delicate to the brutish, *The Swamps of Truro* is a horrid story, yet it seems that Petr Joura got completely inside the head of James Miller.

There were many other stories that I thought deserved a highly commended and thus publication, but my colleagues did not agree. This is the strength of *Stringybark Stories*. To

be published you need to impress four judges, not just one. Judging is a subjective exercise (no matter how much we try to make it objective) and so impressing four judges is harder but gives a better quality anthology. It certainly helps reduce the element of chance that arises in so many one judge competitions.

Thank you everyone for your thoughtful contributions, your skilled writing and your imagination. I loved judging this competition and I look forward to the next with anticipation.