

Stringybark Stories
Open Competition – Judge’s Comments
– Eugenie Pusenjak

It was a privilege to be one of the judges for this year’s Stringybark Open Short Story Award. The stories submitted crossed a range of genres; from dystopian fiction, to historical fiction, to family drama, to everything in between! It was also great to see a diverse range of styles. Some stories were spare and understated; others were poetic and lyrical. Some were hilarious; others were deeply poignant.

I found that many stories were let down by an insufficient plot. They had engaging characters and wonderfully evoked settings but lacked the necessary conflict and tension that makes a story truly compelling. Some stories started strongly but suffered from a lackluster ending. Similarly, a few entries didn’t quite fit the short story mold, and read more like non-fictional memoirs, or the first chapter of a novel.

Another shortcoming of some stories was too much ‘waffle’ at the start, often in the form of unnecessary backstory or description. In several cases, the first few paragraphs could have been cut altogether to make the story stronger. With a 1500 word limit, every word counts, so don’t waste them!

The stories that generally worked best for me and my fellow judges were technically well-written (free of typos and grammatical errors), had three-dimensional characters, natural dialogue, and an interesting plot. Additionally, a number of shortlisted stories successfully used an object (for example: a watch, trees, a musical instrument) as a symbol or metaphor to enhance their themes. In particular, the top three stories impressed us with their strong narrative voices, intriguing set-ups, and satisfying endings. All of them moved us in some way.

Finally, I want to congratulate to everyone who entered this competition – it takes courage to put your work out there. Keep on writing!

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– David Vernon

When you read 277 short stories in a row you quickly get into the swing of knowing what you like and what you don’t.

What I like in short stories:

- Something to happen.
- Characters that I care about (or detest).
- Unusual or intriguing situations and places.
- Competent use of vocabulary.
- Natural dialogue.
- A bit (or a lot) of humour.

What I don’t like:

- Punctuation, grammar and spelling errors (particularly in the first paragraph). Re-read your submissions — preferably out aloud.
- Stilted dialogue (again reading out aloud can identify dialogue that just does not flow).
- Excessive use of cultural references (eg contemporary music/films/film stars etc)

which can quickly date the piece or alienate the reader if they do not know the latest Rap piece from Snoop Dog. Note that my comment starts with the adjective ‘excessive’. Some cultural

references can very quickly and handily place a story within a time frame and context.

— Artistic layout of text for no apparent reason. These are not poetry competitions where layout can give clues to rhyme and meter.

— Plot holes (ask a friend to look for them).

— Stories that excessively parrot the current literary zeitgeist. Vampires and S&M are not my thing.

— Stories without a satisfying ending (this doesn't mean that every story must have closure — but the story must not simply peter out because the word limit has been reached). The best way to understand what I like as a judge is to read some of the many anthologies of short stories that I have edited since 2010. They are all listed in the bookshop.