

# Marj Wilkie Short Story Award – Results and Judge’s Comments

By Josephine Moon

Dear lovely writers and members

I wish to thank you for bestowing on me the honour of being the judge for this year’s award. It’s truly been a wonderful experience and I’m grateful to have been a small part of your writing endeavours and future journeys. For many years, I wrote short stories, swapping them each month with a writing buddy and entering many competitions. During those years, the skill development, camaraderie and enduring friendships provided so much richness and joy to my life. I imagine, and trust, that being part of this hardworking society of writers is adding value to your life in many similar ways.

Collectively, you submitted 171 entries and I was genuinely blown away by the consistently high quality of submissions. My first attempt at making a ‘short list’ only reduced the entries to 86 (and I briefly considered making a longlist out of all of them). But, after giving myself a sturdy pep talk, I made myself reduce the pile to a longlist of just 21. I had to let go of stories I truly enjoyed and believed were strong, worthy contenders. I felt like a race caller for an Olympic swimming final, lamenting about the mere hundredths of seconds splitting medal winners.

There were some commonly repeating themes through the stories, including reflections of war, ageing, relationships, mothering, loss, and the seemingly relentless challenges for women, which (sadly) haven’t changed from the past till now. There were also meditations on violence, murder and revenge, and a sprinkling of sci fi and the supernatural. Some made me laugh out loud, others brought tears, and one scared me enough to make me ‘put it in the freezer’ till I felt brave enough to return.

Many of you shared deeply personal, painful, brave and important stories, and I commend you for that. We writers often dig through some of the worst moments of our lives and bring them to the page, which helps us to heal, but which also helps others see themselves in our stories too, connecting us through time and space. Reading these stories reminded me, again, of just how much *we are not alone*, at all. Thank you.

## Judging

When choosing winners, I looked for stories that ‘met the brief’ of what a short story should do. Whenever I teach writing workshops, I emphasise about structure. Just like a house, a

story needs strong foundations and accurately constructed framing (or the house falls down). The majority of stories – despite presenting wonderful ideas and flashes of greatness – fell down in structure. Many stories took half a page, or more, to bring us to the conflict and the true beginning of the story. Likewise, stories were frequently let down by their endings.

After structure, I looked for a point of difference (the X factor), literary craft, the ability to captivate me from beginning to end, and a logical, meaningful, satisfying ending.

### **Advice (if I may..)**

#### ***Endings***

Many stories had endings that needed to work harder. Time and again, I was engrossed in a story, only to have it all fall apart at the end. Two quick tips:

- Don't introduce a new character towards the end of the story.
- Make sure your protagonist is part of the ending (i.e. don't hand over the power to another character to finish the story).

#### ***Drafting***

I encourage you to work on the idea of *drafting* your short stories. Many writers finish a draft, then go back and 'edit', yet what they're really doing is simply 'cleaning up' typos and punctuation etc. True drafting/editing involves slashing and burning – deleting excess words and whole paragraphs that don't need to be there, rewriting the beginning or the ending, and making sure your POV is consistent. (Many stories had issues with shifting POVs.)

#### ***Keep writing (please!)***

Truly, there is SO much talent in this group! Every submission held the promise of a story that could be drafted again into the next level of craftsmanship, and all of them had sound bones and bright ideas. I shuffled the 'winners' around and around, day after day, splitting hairs (measuring those metaphorical 'hundredths of seconds') over and over. So, please, keep writing. If your name's not in the lists below, it means nothing other than 'not yet' (it *doesn't* mean 'not ever').

My favourite saying for my students is: '*You have to throw spaghetti at the wall!*' Go out there and throw spaghetti at those walls until something sticks!

Finally, thank you again, for making this a truly wonderful experience.

Jo x

### **First Prize**

*Death of a Phoenix* by Kathryn Phillips, NSW

For a hundred years, the phoenix has ruled the land, worshipped by the animal and human kingdoms alike. Now, he is dying, and they have come to pay their final respects before he erupts in flames. But the phoenix is no longer sure he believes in the legend. Will he really be reborn... or just disappear into ashes.

This was the first story I read that had me thinking it might be the winner. The premise is clear, there's a real sense of place, and the phoenix's fear is palpable as he approaches his fiery death. Through it all, the lioness stands vigil with him. Few words are spoken, but the depth of their tender connection is genuinely moving. It was a story that stayed with me and called me to return to it again and again.

### **Second Prize**

*Desperation* by Amanda Mergler, Qld

Katja is in danger – bombs have fallen, the planes are coming, the Germans are looking for her – but she must keep going. Her children are hiding at a nearby farm, waiting for her to bring them food. She must feed her children, no matter what dangers stand between her and her babies.

This is such a well-executed story – a beginning that opens right in the action, with our heroine in danger; a clear conflict that must be solved (escape the enemy to save the children); and clues for the reader that are lightly, cleverly included, allowing us to see the ending before our heroine does. A really great job.

### **Encouragement Award**

*Octopi Sky* by Taneesha Davis, Vic

On top of the ocean, a fisherman takes in the world around him, where he's spent most of his life – his second home. Now, though, he has begun to wonder if there is more out there, beyond the blue. On the bottom of the ocean, an aging octopus looks up at the hull of a boat floating above and considers his own life. He, too, wonders, if there is something more out there.

This story is a lovely, quiet meditation on the connections between humans and animals, and nature and spirit, and dreams and our place in the world. A gentle vignette.

### **Highly Commended**

**Shifting Atoms** by Penni Giuluiani, Vic – a tightly woven, and intense reflection on violence in our homes

**Mother** by Emily Kirkpatrick, NSW – a brave and well-written piece about the unfathomable loss of a child and the tiny moments of healing that may be found through connection with others

**City of Light** by Rebecca Burton, Vic – an atmospheric, captivating and immersive read about a woman's new, wobbly relationship in 1993, Cairo

**The Red Dress** by Deborah Glover Qld – well written, good structure, unique. An unusual story from the point of view of fabric, turned into a dress, and the long-awaited excitement of fulfilling one's destiny.

### **Commended**

**Elegy to Leaving** by Roxeena Bidgood, Qld – some incredible writing in there. This won't be the last we hear from this writer.

**Scheherazade** by Sunday McAllister, NSW – funny, clever, unique. Had me laughing out loud. I hope there's more.

**Mother's Nature** by Robyn Willey, NSW – so much well-developed craft and 'voice' in here. We'll be seeing more from this writer, I've no doubt.

### **Shortlisted**

'Living in Paradise' by Bev Young, Qld (member)

'Clear Head When Engaging' by Philippa Yelland, NSW

'Victoria Baird is Back' by Robyn Knibb, Qld

'Until' by Mary Pomfret, Vic Ablaze

'The Classics' by Ruth Lee, Qld