

## **2024 My Brother Jack Awards Junior Secondary and Senior Secondary Short Story Awards**

### **Junior Secondary**

What a great selection of stories, with timeless themes of loneliness, longing and other aspects of life, with plenty of fun, fantasy and imagination thrown in for good measure. More than anything, I was looking for original voices in these stories, with something interesting to say, and I wasn't disappointed. It's testament to the quality that I've ended up with not only a winner but three highly commended stories.

#### ***Escaping the Sky* – First Place**

I adored the narrator's voice here, a girl whose name 'might have been Mary or Joanne or even Banana, but let's call her ... Lola'. The surrealness and audacity of the plot (that the sky has, quite literally, fallen in) gives plenty of scope for comic writing that is well-developed and expertly understated: 'A long, jagged and very visible line had appeared in the sky. Lola Frowned. This was unusual.'

The balance between pacy prose and poetic technique is also a winner, as in the line: 'A sensation that could only be described as a cloud going straight through you overcame her, and she passed out.'

It can sometimes feel a little abstract when 'voice' is held up as an essential element of good writing but the proof in this story is right there in the pudding. Whether it's the sky falling in, the ground opening up or simply trying to find a parking spot near the MCG on Grand Final day, I would happily follow Mary, Joanne, Banana or Lola on her future literary adventures.

#### ***No Sun in Sight* – Highly Commended**

This is a beautifully written story about a complicated relationship between a son and his mother – and particularly the duty of care and love a child owes to a parent. Lines such as 'Alexander tugged on her wrist, and felt like he was trying to pull a skeleton that had already decided it wanted to be swallowed by the dark earth' elevate the moodiness and poignancy of the piece. A wonderful story.

### ***All That Glitters is Not Gold* – Highly Commended**

A dreamlike sense of loss permeates and guides this story alongside the narrator's hope that a reconnection can be made. It is, in every sense, haunting, with sentences that are perfectly poised and show great promise. A case in point: 'As you wandered into my thoughts, the shadows hid, covering away from you, the monsters surrendered themselves to the dark once more.'

### **3) *What If.....?* – Highly Commended**

This story comes bounding from the gate with a fully formed voice. Funny and vivacious, the narrator – Nicole Sniper – is someone we cannot help but cheer for as she schemes, daydreams, plots revenge and inhabits a world that is part real, part magic. This writer shows a lot of promise.

## **Senior Secondary**

I really enjoyed the scope and energy in this year's Senior Secondary Short Story Competition entries. The stories ran the gamut from future to past dystopias, from science-fiction to realism, from fantasy to satire, from vignette to memoir to historical fiction. As I might have guessed, this variety, and the overall quality of the pieces, did nothing to speed up the judging process.

My main criteria in choosing a winner were originality, particularly in the use of language, and a sense of ambition, whether in the delivery or the concepts informing the story. I was also keen, having read all of the entries, to sit with them for a day or two to see which ones returned to me via my subconscious while I was washing the dishes, driving to Bunnings and all the other slightly boring tasks that make up much of day-to-day adult life.

There could have easily been six or seven worthy winners from this year's constellation. I would like to congratulate all of the writers who took the time to submit their work and encourage them to keep honing their craft. Your future readers are relying on you!

### ***Peeping* – First Place**

A dark and gothic tale set in and around England's Belmarsh Prison in the 1800s, it is sophisticated in its telling, with some truly arresting metaphors, my favourite being:

*I took notice of some poor tree's coat slowly being stolen away from him, his orange and yellow complexion so brightly coloured yet so miserably losing hope of survival.*

The psychological insights in the story – and the broader interest in psychology and mental illness that oozes through its lines – bodes well for this author's future work. Lines such as 'In the night when we sleep and dream, we are all of us psychotic,' will stay with me, I'm sure, for a long time.

The author's judicious use of poetic techniques such as alliteration (*solemnly solus*, a *puppeteer's plaything*) also makes for a lively and affecting read.

Perhaps because of the themes in the story, it was hard not to think of Dostoyevsky when reading it – which, to my mind, is a very good thing indeed.

Despite occasional syntactic missteps and overreach in the language and imagery, the fact the author *is* overreaching and taking risks speaks to an ambition that will pay dividends as they continue to develop their skills.

The structure of the piece – a letter, in the tradition of epistolary stories, with a satisfying twist – was perhaps the final factor that, for me, elevated this story above the other entries.