



Junior Secondary School Short Story

Judge's Report – Annette Trevitt

Thank you for entering your stories into the competition. I read stories with a range of characters, settings and themes. This year many stories were about death, loss, holidays, friendships and fractured families separating and coming back together.

All the stories showed imagination. I read some exceptional visual writing and vivid descriptions. One writer captured a perfect sense of contentment. Her character lies, uninterrupted, on a motel bed with her feet on the pillow. She stares at the night sky and listens to the city, 'with thoughts coming and going as they please.'

Another writer wrote of a morning ride under a ‘golden-flecked sky’. The writer wrote of the rider slipping from the horse’s back and plunging ‘into the chilled open arms of the dam.’

Another story opens with, ‘(t)he wind whispered through the dark, empty trees like a warning in a foreign language.’ This sentence sets up an undercurrent of menace that runs through the story but the character ignores it. The author played with sentence structure. Short, sharp sentences intensify the drama. ‘The trees whisper. The wind blows. The bears approach.’

When I read a story, I look for a clear structure of beginning, middle and end – not necessarily in that order. The stories that grabbed my attention had:

- a point
- an original idea
- set up a character’s dilemma or goal straight away
- created tension to make me want to read on to see what will happen next
- a consistent tone
- a crisis that forces the character to change
- a satisfying resolution linked to the beginning

I am drawn to direct, concise and lively sentences and to actions and details in scenes that I can picture as I read the story.

When you think of a character, think of what the character wants that is hard to get and why they can’t get it. The character can want anything: to have a friend, to escape danger, to make sense of an unexpected occurrence, to be free of distractions.

By the end of a story, the character has changed. A crisis, which is pivotal in a short story, forces a character to realise something new. The character has to earn this new understanding of themselves or of their world.

To write as closely as you can to the way you talk is better than to write how you think a writer writes. You don't need to develop a ‘writer's voice’. The point of fiction is to communicate with an audience, rather than to showcase your vocabulary. Stay with your own voice. It’s this voice, which brings your story to life. Stay with strong nouns and verbs and be sparse with adjectives and adverbs.

I recommend you edit your final draft on paper. It’s easy to miss typos and repetition on the screen. This is a good time to read your sentences out loud. You will hear when it works or if you may need to edit out words. If you use different words as you read it aloud, go with the words that you say as they will be closer to your voice.

All the stories had a spark of something worth continuing. As I tell my students, when writing your story, trust your observations and ideas. Fiction is a rewarding way to express them.

The following stories stood out when I read them out loud. I could imagine the characters and what they were doing.

I would like to commend two stories.

Matchsticks by Abi Beneveniste

An original story of a match that was the first match in the box of matches to be taken out. He is snapped and returned to the box. The story is about what happens to the broken match as he faces the consequences of being different from the others. The story is well written. The pace is unhurried and the tone is consistent.

My Mind is a Battlefield Sayler Delves

A fast-paced story of young girl who reacts badly to an unwanted situation. The story shows a character who acts out, from distress, loneliness and an inability to articulate her emotions.

The story has an important point.

This year's winner

Known as a Gift, Seen as a Curse by Olivia Evans

I don't want to say too much about the story's plot as I'd like you to read it.

The story is well controlled and the tone is consistent. The story sets up a situation in an ordinary setting that takes an unexpected but believable turn. The beginning, the crisis and the end are linked and this gives the story its strong spine. The shift in sentence structure at the pivotal point intensifies the moment when everything undergoes an irreversible change.

Junior Secondary School Short Story – *First Prize*

Known As A Gift, Seen As A Curse

by Olivia Evans

On the third table, in the fourth row, she sits alone. Fiddling with the pen between her fingers. Her blue eyes dulled to grey and her skin faded like old fabric.

The sounds of new-found friendship cuts through the voices in the room. Friendship is always shifting and changing but the third table in the fourth row is always empty.

“Who’s that?”

The girl’s mouth twists up.

“Oh *her*. That’s Aviana”

“Why is she sitting alone?”

“You don’t want to be near her. She can see inside.”

“Inside?”

“Inside of you. She can hear everything you’ve heard. See everything you’ve seen. She’s a witch.”

The girl glances over at Aviana. Sure, she looks odd. But she doesn’t look like a witch. Just a girl whose been alone for a very long time.

“A witch?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s stupid.”

Aviana keeps her head down as the girl walks towards her. She can’t afford to make eye contact.

“So, have you been at this school for long?”

“Yes.”

Her voice comes out as a whisper, as if she hasn’t spoken in a while.

“Aviana, right?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a cool name! I wish I had a name as cool as that!”

Aviana smiles.

“Tina is still a nice name.”

The girl furrows her brow.

“How did you know my name?”

“I just, overheard it.”

“Overheard?”

“You know, when you sat down.”

“Someone said my name when I sat down?”

“Well...”

The words of caution echoed in Tina’s head.

‘hear everything you’ve heard, see everything you’ve seen.’

“I meant when you were talking to that other girl.”

‘She’s a witch’

“You know, when she asked what your name was and you said Tina-“

“That was over an hour ago. How did you know?”

The girl stood up. Her chair clattered to the ground.

“Tina, wait.”

It was only a brief brush of skin, but by the time Aviana pulled away, it was already too late.

Hundreds of thousands of images flooded through her head.

Picnics and sandwiches. Hot chocolate and snow. Laughing in the rain. Cake, sunset, wind, scratching pencils, rain, panic, branches, falling, crimson, light, clouds.

It all came in at once. And Tina felt it too. Reliving everyone of her memories, but this time, with someone else.

Aviana looked at her.

“I’m sorry I-“

“Get away from me!”

The girl shoved her hands at Aviana.

“Tina-“

“Don’t call me by my name!”

The girl edged away. Those were meant to be her memories. Her thoughts. They were the one thing she could always trust to be private. And Aviana took that away from her.

“You really are a witch. A cruel, disgusting, witch.”

Then with a turn of her heel and her heart in her throat, she left.

Aviana took in a shaky breath and picked up her pen and sat down. The third table in the fourth row was empty once again.

She didn’t know why she expected this to be any different anyway.

Junior Secondary School Short Story – *Commended*

Matchsticks

by Abi Benveniste

Thirty matches stood still as sticks confined to the box they had been placed in.

They all looked the same with long slim bodies and a fiery red tip.

The rough woody layers all pressed tightly together restricted them to their four-sided home until someone required their light or heat and had to take one of them from their compact safety. So, they existed in harmony believing they were all the same.

As the months passed the matches became closer, almost as if they were one. Each individual match fitted together like a puzzle. With one warm grasp of their box the matches were swiftly placed into a trolley. The only proof of their movement the small metal clink as they reached the bottom.

With the autumn breeze brushing against the leaves outside the cosy cottage, a young girl had returned to the barren home for the holiday season. She reached her hand into the match box and cautiously removed one. She observed it and ran her fingers over the smooth wood, her eyes curiously doing loops around the match as they stopped abruptly at the tip. The flame. The light. The warmth. It was something all matches had. It made them feel connected. They were never without their flame. It was what made them wanted. What made them needed. But the young hands had begun to manoeuvre him into a strange position and like that he was snapped.

He felt his woozy body being roughly pushed back into the box. As days passed, his layers slowly peeled further and his jagged edges began to cause wounds to the others around him. Everyone would gravitate to one half and leave him on his own. He was broken. They weren't and that meant he was no longer one of them. Being excluded meant he felt alone. Being excluded meant he had no place to call home. Being excluded meant he had no family.

The other matches decided they'd had enough. They didn't want to be seen as "crippled" or "broken" so they dragged the decaying match into a plastic cup on the window seal and left him there to decompose until his existence was just a memory.

The solitary match leaned against the plastic cup, the what used to be vibrant green slowly chipping away by all the toddlers who reached for it. The musty cabin almost unbearable was

gradually becoming his grave. The window seal had become a lonely place. As the drops from the rain from the previous days began to drown him he began to lose hope.

Although months went by him sitting deserted from his group in his cold plastic cup, he never forgot one thing. He still had his fiery tip and it still worked as good as ever.

He may not have been needed or part of a family but he knew what he had and he knew his worth.

Junior Secondary School Short Story – *Commended*

My Mind Is A Battle Field

by Saylor Delves

Hi. I'm Etta grace Jolie, and everyone thinks I'm insane. Sure, I can be rude, and get angry, but I'm in my right mind. I know what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. But most of the time, being in the right mind is like torture. *you're not good enough*, my brain tells me. *You're weird and nobody will ever love you*, I think. *Being gay is the worst thing in the world*, I tell myself.

I was standing in the locker hall, putting my bag away, and there she was. Emerald. She flicked her red hair over her shoulder, her eyes sparkling, as she chatted animatedly with Damien, her good friend. I suppressed a sigh. She doesn't know I exists; but she's probably heard about my reputation of being the unbalanced, violent girl from the commission flats, the one everybody's too scared to talk to unless they're bullying her. Yep, that's me.

As I watched, Emerald moved in toward Damien and their lips met.

I reacted instinctively; my bag was flying toward him before I could think twice. It knocked him to the floor and his head made a sickening *thud* on the hard concrete. Blood was boiling in my brain.

“Make way!”

The cry came from Mrs V, the principal.

“Etta and Emerald, follow me *now*.”

I walked beside Emerald, whose eyes were filled with tears. She gave a big sniff, and I tried to control my breathing. Mrs V shut the door behind us and motioned for us to sit on the red plush chairs in front of her desk. Mrs V glared at me.

“Well?”

Emerald told her everything.

“...and she just threw the bag, Mrs V! Like that!”

“Thank you, Emerald. Dismissed.”

We both watched as Emerald left, and then Mrs V looked at me sadly.

“I know you love her, Etta.”

I immediately became defensive; one hand gripped my bag strap firmly, the other curled into a fist.

“I know you’re feeling confused and lost.”

You reckon?

“But violence never helps, Etta.”

But nothing else does either!

“Let Emerald be happy. Wouldn’t you rather she be happy, than angry and sad?”

Yes.

“You’ve got a condition, Etta- depression.”

“I’m not insane.”

It came out bluntly, and Mrs V shook her head.

“You’re not insane- it means you’re upset and lost, Etta, and I know a woman who can help.”

That evening, I left the therapy session feeling far better than I had all year. It was okay to feel this way. Plenty of teens like myself had this condition- and plenty had pulled through.

To make things even better, Emerald pulled me aside later that day.

“Etta?” She asked. “You’re okay, now, aren’t you?”

“Emerald, I’m so sorry about Damien.” I said urgently, taking her arm. “I never wanted to hurt him. Please believe me.”

And she smiled.

The first smile I had ever received.

“Of course I believe you, Etta.”

Finally, motivation. I was Etta, and that’s all I needed to be.