

Judge's Report — Paul Dalgarno

Junior Secondary Short Story Category

I certainly hummed and hawed judging this year's **Junior Secondary Short Story Prize**. How do you choose between a detective story and a volleyball drama? Between a magical girl in a storm and a lonely vampire? Well, with some difficulty as it turns out.

Well done to everyone who entered. Keep going. We need good storytellers and, just like making cups of tea or annoying your parents, you'll get better the more you practise.

First Prize — *The Day the City was Free*

The winner of the Junior Secondary Short Story prize is ***The Day the City was Free***. Preeti and her daughter Sara are out for the day, taking advantage of Melbourne's temporary free tram rides in April. What they see and hear isn't necessarily unusual: a violinist playing on the street at a tram stop, a toddler handing out 'invisible tickets' to strangers on the tram.

But everything *feels* different in ways that aren't immediately easy to pin down. When Sara tells her mother, 'Everyone's acting weird today', Preeti shakes her head and says: 'Not weird. Free.'

I really like the mother and daughter relationship in this story, and what they learn from each other over the course of their journey. Likewise, the punchy sentences: 'No destination. No cost. Just movement.' I also liked the sense of life moving slower, and a city operating differently, just for a while. 'A day where' – as Preeti puts it – 'nothing holds you back.'

Highly Commended — *Unshakable Figures*

Unshakable Figures gives us a young person's point of view at a family funeral. I really liked the narrator's realisation that their parents were vulnerable people in the world, and not superheroes – a coming-of-age moment, I'm sure, many adults remember from their own childhoods.

Highly Commended — *The Book of Questions*

Look, you're onto a winner if you write a story about the magic of books for people who believe in the magic of books. This adventure story – with a mysterious book at its heart – is endearing and loads of fun.

Senior Secondary Short Story Category

My goodness. There was no shortage of compelling stories in this year's Senior Secondary Short Story category. A story told from the point of view of a flower, apocalyptic, futuristic tales, fantasy, family drama, grief, regret, love and enduring friendship. It was great to read such a diverse selection of stories – several of which showed real talent and promise.

First Prize — *Viola*

The winning story is ***Viola***. It's a terrific short story. And like many terrific short stories, not much happens ... but also *everything*, somehow, happens.

We start with Mrs Chaney on her cruiser bike, heading to her new job at a house in a town she has lived in – we learn – for much of her life. And in one sense, that's what this is: Mrs Chaney's ride to her job.

The beauty of *Viola* is the sense of mood it creates from the get-go – the ominous details Mrs Chaney, and we as readers, notice: the 'large drop down that cliff to the water', the bike swerve that has Mrs Chaney 'narrowly missing the electrical pole that holds up the street sign'; the forest that 'swallows her up'.

The author makes it clear there's more going on here than a simple commute. There's a past life snatched in glimpses. Unanswered questions. A growing sense that Mrs Chaney and the forest she rides through are connected in mysterious ways. All of which is served up with lovely turns of phrase: the 'sticky, slow-moving years', the 'eager daffodil bells', the forest's 'muddled mess of greens and browns.'

Viola shows us how mood and tension and mystery can be combined to great effect and is a worthy winner of this year's Senior Secondary Short Story Prize.

Highly Commended — *Blue*

An engaging tale about self-acceptance. I enjoyed many things about it, but particularly the narrative voice. Written in the 'I' voice, the first-person, it has strong pacing and snappy dialogue and takes its narrator from a negative to positive state of mind in a really satisfying way. Well done.