

2023 My Brother Jack Awards

Junior Secondary Short Story Award

I was impressed by the scope of the stories submitted to this year's competition, with themes ranging from the climate to life and death, and genres ranging from fantasy to crime to mystery. It was a fabulous selection of stories and left me keen to read the work these young authors will be writing in the future.

Of course, any judging is subjective. What I was looking for in making my selection was originality, whether in the concept or the telling of the story, good pacing and control of the sentences, interesting and arresting use of language and imagery, a compelling voice, and stories that stayed in my thoughts long after reading.

I was spoiled for choice, initially getting the stories down to a longlist of ten, then seven, then six, and so on, until I arrived at what felt like the clear winner and a couple of very strong contenders.

***Hidden* – First Place**

The standout winner for me was *Hidden*. I loved this story. A dead narrator has to reckon with their own demise and the disintegration of their body underground. From the first couple of sentences – 'Dirt. There's nothing but dirt.' – we share the narrator's sense of disappointment, disorientation, confusion and claustrophobia. The excellent pacing and variation in sentence length keeps us fully engaged throughout. It's also a story of longing and regret for someone who is 'gentle', with 'words like feathers', and who remains, for now at least, out of reach. Beautiful imagery, engaging writing and a story worthy of celebration. Congratulations!

***A Choice* – Highly Commended**

This is a well-told story about war and humanity, examining the kinds of attitudes soldiers are trained to have (see their enemy as less than human) and how difficult that becomes when their training comes up against reality. The author shows considerable empathy and manages to distill large and complex issues into a story with just two characters – which is no mean feat. Of course, it takes more than one soldier having second thoughts about war to stop the cycle of conflict, and this is very nicely illustrated too.

That's What I Told Them – Highly Commended

What this story lacks in length it makes up for in pacing and intrigue and punch. Our narrator is telling us about a grisly series of crimes supposedly committed by their partner – taking us into their confidence, in other words – and telling us what they told the police during the investigation of those crimes. This is a great use of first-person unreliable narration. We're kept constantly on our toes and feel unsettled as the narrator dodges and dives through their telling of the story, culminating in a sense that maybe it would have been better for us if we weren't their chosen audience. Really sparky and grimly enjoyable. Well done!