

Judge's Report — Eliza Henry Jones

There was a real theme of enemies turning out to be friends this year, and the importance of not judging on appearances. Many of the stories explored portals, while others were written from the point of view of various animals. There were stories that grappled with existential questions of meaning and morality, and stories of love, courage and forgiveness. There were, quite mysteriously, many stories which involved copious amounts of slime.

When judging, I considered the originality, message, technical expression, form and flow, and the overall impact of each story. Once I had this year's shortlist, I yet again invited my school-librarian mother out of retirement to help me decide the placegetters.

The standard of stories was impressively high this year, with an astonishing breadth of themes, tone and genres. The reoccurring issue that held stories back this year was a rushed or incomplete ending – which often came after a very strong opening.

Thank you for trusting me with your stories – it was a privilege to read them. For those of you who have placed – huge congratulations! For those of you who might be feeling a bit disappointed – every single writer I know has been in your shoes. I hope every single one of you keeps writing.

Junior Primary Short Story Category

First Prize — *Greed Goes Beyond the Gates*

Our main character goes on a quest. An active opening, followed by a quick flashback immediately piques and holds the reader's interest. The language is lyrical, the plot has clear beats, with well-sustained flow. This story is evocative and imaginative with a satisfying conclusion.

Highly Commended — *Ducky Dinner*

This quick-paced and original story follows a dinner with our main character's mum's boss – but things take a turn when a duck determined to rescue his daughter enters the scene. Highly entertaining.

Highly Commended — *The Day the Future started*

This story describes the future in a highly original and imaginative way, with a strong voice and vivid imagery utilised throughout. Readers can't help but see the small moments that make up our days from a new perspective after reading this story.

Highly Commended — *The Unexpected Beach Day*

Two friends encounter a sea monster called Barry – and things taken an unexpected turn. This story is fun, unexpected and offers a lovely exploration of what it means to help those in need (even if they're monsters).

Senior Primary Short Story Category

First Prize — *A Guardian's Grip*

This thought-provoking story tackles big questions around our right to live joyously in a lively, humorous and timely way. An elderly man, whose well-meaning children have set up an AI ecosystem in his house to keep him safe, rails against the limitations placed on his life. The story was well-sustained with excellent use of language. It immediately captures the reader's interest and holds it.

Highly Commended — *The Day I swallowed a Lion's Roar*

This story is fantastically original and very well executed. Our main character accidentally swallows a lion's roar – with startling consequences! Well-paced with a satisfying and dramatic conclusion, this was great fun to read.

Highly Commended — *A Mother's Reckoning*

This story offered a profound meditation on the intricacies of grief, following a mother who has lost her young daughter. It captures the harrowing loss with an astonishing maturity, including the moments of joy that can in between the waves of intense pain. Absolutely heartbreaking, in the best way.

Highly Commended — *Beneath the Station Lights*

A sophisticated, melancholic story of love and loss. Charting the relationship of two people who meet in a train station with great maturity and a dramatic, heart wrenching conclusion. The writing is vivid, with the author using descriptions of the station to build suspense and create a striking atmosphere throughout.