

**JUDGE'S REPORT – 2009 SHOALHAVEN FAW LITERARY AWARD**

Conscientious craftsmanship was not enough...I found that I'd rather have a story which came alive with perhaps careless effervescence than a story which was conventionally successful.

—Frank Moorhouse, *Coast to Coast: Australian Stories 1973*

The short story is a natural form, a sophistication of the dream, the spoken anecdote (with all its great shapes) and the private fantasy... The short story, like all imaginative work, can be an intense form which releases complex vibrations and oblique stimulations not readily reducible to simple political or sociological analysis.

—Frank Moorhouse, *The State of the Art* (1983)

The short story in Australia is now the form of great candour carrying personal and sometimes painful revelations, especially of the domestic...it is the form used to express and receive complex emotional experience. It makes the personal into the social.

—Frank Moorhouse, *Fictions 88*

The short story has a lot in common with poetry. It begins before it starts and finishes long after it ends. Much can be left out; its economy needs the readers' imagination. It asks a lot of them, and repays their attention.

—Marion Halligan & Rosanne Fitzgibbon, *The Gift of Story* (1998)

I am pleased to record that the great Australian motif of the banging screen door is still alive and well in the short story.

—Frank Moorhouse, *The Best Australian Stories 2004*

I love books and reading, and when I was asked to judge this competition, I re-read the introductions to the dozens of short story anthologies in my collection. I traced the evolution of the short story in Australia from the early days of the *Bulletin* magazine (Goldsworthy, 1983) through the demise of major anthology series, literary and other magazines (including the *Bulletin*) that once provided outlets for short story writers. I reread Bruce Bennett's major study *Australian Short Fiction: A History*, in which he describes the short story as a form appreciated by readers and anthologists, but 'too often neglected by historians, critics and theorists' (Bennett, 2002, p. 315).

Marion Halligan describes the short story as something that 'needs to be lived in for a while. Like a love letter, it should be read several times, returned to, pondered over, savoured, enjoyed' (Halligan & Fitzgibbon, 1998, p. xi). I have approached the task by pondering and savouring the 237 submissions over the last three months.

I began the judging process in June by reading every story from beginning to end. At the end of this 'first pass' I had three piles—those that simply kept me turning the page; those that at some point in the reading wrenched me out of the story world but that I wanted to read again; and a pile that I felt were simply not up to a competition standard. While I have to judge and grade writing at university and for competitions, my preferred role is that of a mentor—whether in a writing workshop or one-on-one—so I missed being able to engage with the writers. I wanted to explain the importance of presentation and the need to proof read; to leave wide margins and use a reader friendly font; to encourage people to develop the craft of writing or be content to write for personal pleasure or for their families. All writing is worthwhile, but not all writing is for the public domain.

During July I began a second read of the remaining two piles—enough time had passed to view them with 'fresh eyes' and to decide on the long list, which eventually comprised sixty stories. During August, the hard work began as each of these had merit.

Over the years I have been influenced by the work of Nowra-born author Frank Moorhouse who has written and edited anthologies and commented on the ‘state of the art’ of the short story over a thirty-five year period. His introductions discuss the changing themes over time. In 1973 he suggested that ‘if some of our stories did not mention drugs, Vietnam and liberationist concerns, there would be something unsettling and unreal about our writing’ (Moorhouse, 1973, p. 2).

Many of the stories in this year’s competition are written in a realist mode, with the majority of these focussed on the personal rather than the political—the local rather than the global. It was a little surprising as I had expected perhaps some mention of Iraq or Afghanistan, shrinking freedoms, surveillance, terrorism or global warming—whereas the overarching themes were of illness—including various forms of cancer and mental illness, acquired brain injury, anorexia, Alzheimer’s, Down syndrome, SIDS—stories focused on anguish, loss, grief, ageing and death—murders, suicides and drownings—deliberate and accidental. There were also confronting stories of self-mutilation, bestiality, homelessness, paedophilia and pack rape. Stories featured cows, crocodiles, snakes and horses.

Thirty of the sixty long-listed were first person and eighteen of these were present tense—nine written from a male point of view (POV), two with multiple view points and nineteen from a female POV; two stories were written in the second person (one male, one female POV); and the remainder were third person, past tense. Seven of the sixty stories were in settings off shore (including two islands, a ship and an aeroplane)—the remaining settings fairly evenly distributed between farms, nursing homes, beaches, country towns, and suburbs in Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney (Chinatown and Kings Cross). Seven stories were in the realm of fantasy, three horror, seven romance/unrequited love, three crime—the remainder in the various categories of life story (memoir and reminiscence)—a number of these set in the 1950s and 1960s. Of the sixty stories, only five had a modicum of humour. I’m sure Moorhouse would be pleased—in 2009 the iconic screen door is still banging in many stories, including the winner of this year’s award.

Sixty eventually became the short list of twenty-five. I was asked to award a first prize and four equal second places and to nominate commended and highly commended. While it is a cliché, the final judging was extremely difficult. I am aware that the judging process is a subjective one and that someone else may well have come up with a different list, however I have attempted to judge for literary merit rather than my personal tastes in reading—some stories took me places I would have preferred not to go. Regardless, I entered the world of each story, honoured the compact between writer and reader, savoured the unexpected, and experienced delight in the ‘aha’ moments of language. I wanted to be engaged from the first paragraph—to be enveloped in the tale—I wanted to care about the character/s. I wanted to be left with an ending that, while it might not provide a resolution, would honour the story that went before it. I believe that the winning story of the 2009 Shoalhaven Literary Award did all of these things.

**First Place:**

*The Charm* (Entry No 212)

**Four Equal Second Places:**

*Photographs* (Entry No 11)

*Three Voices* (Entry No 38)

*The Far Shore* (Entry No 70)

*The Memory of Christmas* (Entry No 98)

**Highly Commended**

*Tales of Action and Adventure* (Entry No 41)

*He should have died hereafter* (Entry No 81)

*How to grow tall in one season* (Entry No 146)

*The Ping Parable* (Entry No 148)

*Geometry* (Entry No 198)

**Commended:**

*Whistler* (Entry No 5)

*Grasskiller* (Entry No 10)

*Clipsia* (Entry No 15)

*Kissing Sylvia* (Entry No 100)

*Reflections, Buses, Dreams and Windows* (Entry No 123)

*Isabelle* (Entry No 179)

Thank you for trusting me with this task.

Rae Luckie

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