

## FICTION JUDGE'S REPORT – SPILT INK WRITING COMPETITION 2023

Having judged numerous short fiction competitions as well as penned my own pieces in response to open callouts, I'm familiar with the pleasure and difficulty of creating stories guided by word count but not theme. Entrants of the Fiction category in the annual Spilt Ink Writing Competition face the same wonderful dilemma. The endlessness of the possibilities is inspiring, but also intimidating: With all the options in the world available, in which direction do you go?

Members of OOTA and other WA writing organisations, the contributors to this year's competition took me everywhere. In thirty stories I travelled across our state and beyond, from a stuffy 1950s classroom and the ornate interior of a central Sydney bank to a high-end San Francisco restaurant and a starving Soviet village. There were racehorses cut from newspaper, four-year-olds slipping fences, mementoes of loss and cupcakes from beyond the grave. Love was fallen into and out of in ways I never could have thought of.

It's a leap of faith to enter a writing competition because we can't know what else will be submitted. Comparison can drive you crazy if you let it, so all we can do as writers is produce our best work and let go of expectation—easier said than done, without doubt.

Every story submitted this year had its strengths and the core nugget of what made the author write it shone through. As is common, there were excellent stories that must, unfortunately, go unrecognised this time. However, if entrants are looking for where to improve, here are some common issues to consider:

- In some stories, the language felt more formal than necessary, distancing me as a reader from the characters and their concerns.
- On this theme, I'd encourage aspiring entrants to read their dialogue aloud and absorb themselves in imagining how their character(s) *would* speak. In various pieces the speech didn't feel natural, making it harder to ease into the magic of the storytelling.
- While adhering to rigid structures isn't vital, and can even be stifling, considering the overall arc and balance of a piece helps to keep readers engaged and attentive.
- A few stories appeared to be missing context. It's possible these were taken from longer material; the risk here is leaving readers (unintentionally) unsatisfied.

Despite some flaws, all the stories entered in this year's competition had their individual merits. I really encourage the authors to review, tweak, and send them elsewhere to see what happens.

Now, to the stories that managed to stand out in a very strong field.

**First Place: 'Leta' by Taya Reid**

This story, about a teenager living on a former quarantine station who befriends the eponymous Leta when she comes for a family holiday, captured my imagination with its beautifully chosen details and contained but affecting depiction of loneliness and abuse. Setting the notion of supernatural fears against what really lies in wait is an insightful choice, and the story enters and leaves the world of Sam and Leta at just the right moments.

**Second Place: 'The River Doesn't Care' by Judd Exley**

The narrator of this piece is a young man who has a near-death experience while fishing with his mother and brother, making him realise what truly matters. It's a premise that's hard to make fresh, but the author manages it through keen detail, a deep understanding of family dynamics and careful use of tone. The well-deployed symbolism merges seamlessly with its realism, and the protagonist's self-awareness at the end further thwarts any potential for cliché.

**Third Place: 'Do Pigs Know Weather?' by Laurie Smith**

On reading this story I felt like I had to cling to every word for fear of losing the thread of meaning, which was an exhilarating experience rather than a frustrating one. Here, two researchers are taken by an unlicensed fisherman to the islands off Israelite Bay, dodging snakes, bad weather and Fisheries officers on their journey. The deliciously unconventional quality of the piece is grounded by rich language and a deft portrayal of setting and character.

**Highly Commended: 'Chemistry Test' by Liana Christensen**

This piece manages to convey a sense of gentle hopefulness, a rare but appreciated quality. It follows an overseas student in Australia as she works in the laundry of a nursing home and prepares for exams. The characters and settings the protagonist navigates are neatly described, with chemical reactions serving as a metaphor for her experiences.

**Commended: 'Miss Lilly' by Jenny Hetherington**

Full of pastels and sugar, this is the story of a mother, Jo, who questions her beliefs after seeing the effects of religious teaching on her daughter. The use of sensory detail enhances the heavy and almost sickly-sweet quality of specific scenes, and the episodic presentation of Jo's changing attitude towards the benign 'Bible Lady', Miss Lilly, leads to a well-earned ending.

Thank you so much for inviting me to judge this year's competition, and best of luck to all the entrants in their future writing projects.

Brooke Dunnell

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