

*Deb Hunt, Under the Silver Tree competition, 2022.*

I love reading short stories. That thrill of anticipation when you read the first sentence, hoping it will take you into a fully formed world with its own place and time, and its own unique characters. It amazes me that so many stories can be written, and each one be as individual as a fingerprint.

The best short stories feel like stepping into a world where anything can happen, where you can trust the truth of the setting, the action, and the characters, and where past and future exist beyond the snapshot of the story. Most of all, I look for something remarkable to happen in a short story. That 'something' doesn't have to be big or dramatic, but it must make a difference in the life of the protagonist. What I most enjoy is when I can sense change coming, without knowing what it might be. And of course, all that must happen within the space of a few short pages, without it feeling forced or awkward.

Short story writing is not for the faint hearted!

I was delighted to act as one of the judges for this competition, especially when I learnt there were over 50 stories to read. What a treat.

I read all of them at least twice. Discarding any story is difficult, but a few clearly weren't working. Some writers get in their own way, trying too hard to impress with fancy language, unreal characters, and stilted dialogue. It was relatively easy to discard around 20% of the entries.

It was much harder to set aside the next 60%. These stories had a kernel of truth that made me want to know more. In most of them, I could sense 'something' was going to happen, but for whatever reason the writer chose to wander in a different direction, or they tried too hard to make it happen, or they'd submitted a first draft that needed more work. In some cases, they didn't respond to the brief, or they simply ran out of words before they'd said what the story needed to say. That's always a challenge when you have a limited number of words in a short story competition.

That left the final 20%. These were the stories I kept coming back to, re-reading them to enjoy the world the author had created, to marvel at the truthfulness of the setting and the authenticity of the characters, and to watch for that spark of something that, as a reader, you know will change the protagonist's world. Of course, eventually I had to stop reading and choose the

winners, which is when all the joy went out of the job of judging. Choosing a winner from the final three in each category was an extremely hard task. So, to those writers who turn out to be runners-up, please know that there was very little to choose between the final three. Your turn will come. Keep writing.

In the end I chose writers who had most closely responded to the initial prompt, and who had crafted their stories with obvious care and attention to detail. It also came down to those writers who made me believe utterly in the world they had created, who made me feel connected to their characters, and who made me care about what happened to them. The judges agreed on the final selection in all three categories.

Before announcing the winners, I want to thank Under the Silver Tree – especially Jean Farry – and West Darling Arts for supporting the competition, also John Wren at the Silver City Cinema and Totally Addicted to Hair for their support. I'd also like to thank all the writers who entered the competition and who shared their stories.

In the Under 26 category I'd like to mention a couple of runners-up. I was drawn to a story called *Stop*, for its ambitious response to the story prompt. I also enjoyed *A Thousand Funerals* for its tender exploration of love and loss. The winner in this category is *Aliaheim the Gryphon*, a story of mythical creatures whose fate hangs in the balance during a raging storm. The world was fully realized, the writing beautifully clear, and the dramatic tension was held right to the end.

The local entries demonstrated the depth of talent that exists in Broken Hill, with nearly all of them making it into the top 60%. Special mention to *Full Circle*, for the writer's creative imagination and sharp dialogue and *Jeb Jockman*, a heart-breaking story of humanity and hope. The winner in the local category was *Deliverance*, with its restrained prose, its clever use of dialogue, and the way it built to a climax, with so much unspoken yet fully understood.

And finally, in the main category, the two runners up were *The End is Round*, with a unique point of view that took me by surprise, and *Mirror, Mirror*, for its roller-coaster ride of creative imagination that never once lost its way. The winner though, was *Take Me Back to the End*, with writing as sharp and clear as the light in Broken Hill. The writer found the perfect tone and pace to tell the story. It was honest and direct, and the setting was vividly descriptive. Bravo, and congratulations.