

Ada Cambridge Biographical Prose Prize 2021: Judges' Report

So many lives, so many experiences, so much talent, so hard to judge! The 49 entries for this year's competition, drawn from writers across the Victoria, were a pleasure to read, both gripping and beautifully written. It wasn't easy to arrive at final decisions.

Biographical prose is a strange genre, imposing constraints but also allowing diverse interpretations. It may focus on the writer's own experience or on that of someone else – a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, a whole family, a historical figure, and more. And the story may take various forms. Whether recounting a single episode or encompassing an entire life, it must draw in the reader with the vitality and authenticity of its telling. To bring alive the experience of individuals, times and places, to make them interesting, demands a unique perspective. And that is far from easy to achieve.

Inevitably, memoir was the dominant genre in the current entries – evocation of the past, of tangled emotions (loss, above all) and seeking to understand. But there were many variations: some painful, some funny, some bizarre. Or Locations and characters were diverse too: ranging from the familiar to the exotic, from present day to distant past. And every story had its own structure, not always successfully managed. Creating a convincing narrative was often problematic. A number began with great flair, then failed to sustain momentum; or were too limited in emotional range, too imprecisely written, to maintain interest. Nevertheless, several of those not included in the shortlist of ten were extremely promising – we regretted having to omit them from our final selection.

'The Harder They Fall' by Natalie Fraser was our Winner. This compelling story of one of 'life's victims' elicits sympathy and understanding without mawkishness. No reader will forget the laconic, self-knowing consciousness of the narrator, stationed on a footpath, begging for booze-money: "*The view I get of the world is mostly people's feet... The more expensive the shoe, the less benevolent the person wearing them.*" Not a word is wasted in a tale that gives a voice to the usually voiceless, that explores a life on the fringes of society with humanity and self-deprecating humour.

Runner Up was Fran Collings' 'Crossing Bridges'. Narrative is finely controlled in a story that reflects on human connections with subtlety and understatement. Events in the narrator's family history are linked thematically by combining the crossing of bridges, metaphoric and actual, with the intuitive 'sixth sense' of animals. Childhood memories of a long-gone country farming community in the Mallee and the drama of a sudden flood are particularly memorable.

Our choice for Highly Commended was Anne Hotta's 'Frank'. In this moving story of a long marriage under the strain of dementia, much is conveyed through dialogue between the protagonists, interspersed with the inner voices of the husband, Frank, and the family doctor. Set in a regional Australian town where everyone knows everyone else's business, the tale unfolds through several episodes decades apart, dramatising the complex emotions – joys and regrets – of an enduring partnership.

The two Commended stories also had great merit. Maya Linden's 'Dust Figures' is an unflinching portrayal of the claustrophobic intensity of an obsessive relationship. Dissecting emotional complexity and ambiguity with an almost forensic attention to detail, this inwardly focussed reflection on sexual compulsion is at once confronting, poetic and analytical.

Also Commended, James Walton's 'The Big Gas, 1973' ranges broadly across time, place and character. Re-creating a Fitzroy share-house of almost 50 years ago and its disparate collection of inhabitants, it is infused with nostalgia for times gone and a lyrical sense of the passing seasons. A world in the process of change and broadening horizons is rendered with humour and compassion.

The five shortlisted pieces had us asking right up to the last minute if perhaps one or two ought to be in the above categories. 'Walking in the Dark' by Pamela Baker plumbs hidden depths to tell a subtle tale of unacknowledged love and pain. Penelope Bingham's 'The Other Jenny' is a poised, compassionate account of a woman dealing with her husband's dementia and its weird manifestations. 'Bindoon' by Sam Elkin is an absorbing piece of writing that impresses with its truthfulness, openness and honesty. Zach Pryor's 'Champagne Problems' captivates with its sharp humour, insights into urban gay culture and a clever structure that leads to a devastating ending. 'One Hell of a Day' by Diane Williamson, told from the lugubrious point of view of its long-suffering narrator, is a funny, wryly observed story of the torments of two women on an ill-fated fishing trip with an oblivious young man.

Combined, all the pieces make for an engaging, sometimes challenging, reading experience that explores diverse lives. We hope you enjoy them as much as we did.

Judges: Elisabeth Grove & Dmetri Kakmi