

The Jennifer Burbidge Writing Prize 2021: Judges' Report

From the entries for the Jennifer Burbidge Short Story Award the judges looked for a well-written story exploring aspects of living with a disability, a story with shape and development, with individual characters speaking in their own voices, and with engaging language that illustrates the experiences being explored and the interactions that give the story strength and interest. Thus, we selected narratives that were emotionally compelling, had a fresh take on disability and its impact, with a deft use of language and dialogue, a clever structure and a strong voice.

We were not disappointed in what we read, and the more successful shortlisted stories were strong, insightful narratives, consistent in style and content, that approached the topic of living with disability in a fresh way. They were well structured and emotionally arresting, with a pertinent voice or perspective. Many stories had potential, as they made an effective impact, but needed further editing to make them tighter and more unified.

We thank all the authors for giving us the opportunity to share their stories and look forward to reading more next year.

Winner

No Returning

This engaging story of resilient survival is memorable and inspiring. With its effective repetitions, “no returning from the spinal injury” it shows well the impact of disability on family relationships with insights such as “My fall clearly damaged more than just my T8 vertebra”. This story highlights supportive positive attitudes and a renewing bond between the parents of a spirited girl, with a strong first-person adolescent voice and proactive characters as illustrated by the descriptive language: ‘murderball flips in wheelchair’.

Runner Up

The Date

By the clever use of three juxtaposed voices and a strong, dialogue-driven narrative, this story shows the overwhelming impact of mental illness through the internal voice of the protagonist. It maintains tension throughout and builds to an outcome that offers the promise of hope but not a glib too-easy solution.

Commended

Perseverance

This inspiring first-person story of survival and success with increasing visual loss over decades tells of a lifetime of self-improvement and an educative positive attitude to finally become a lawyer. Part of its strength lies in the insights about the ‘invisibility’ of some disability and the strategies devised to deal with this in the workplace.

Commended

Readied: Good use of first-person, present-tense narration illuminates the debilitating effects of severe chronic anxiety on the ability to move on with every-day life. An unexpected development that forces action offers an uplifting, hopeful ending.

Commended

Who I Am

A well-structured and emotionally involving story that stresses the importance of seeing and relating to the individual first rather than the disability. The protagonist retains a distinctive, personal inner voice that is juxtaposed effectively with two carers' perspectives, one indifferent and the other sensitive.

Helen Cerne and Mary Burbidge

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