



**THE
JUDGES'
REPORTS
2024**

THE JENNIFER BURBIDGE SHORT STORY AWARD 2024

CHARNIE BRAZ *and* HELEN CERNE

'Nothing About Us Without Us' (*Recognising the Rights of People with Disabilities* — UN Chronicle)

THE JENNIFER BURBIDGE SHORT STORY AWARD FOR A STORY OF FICTION OR non-fiction (no more than 3,000 words) exploring the theme of disability was founded by our late friend, Williamstown Literary Festival writer and supporter, Dr Mary Burbidge (1948-2022) in honour of her daughter, Jennifer, who died at 21. From the 34 entries, we were privileged to read, shortlist and award the best stories about living with a disability in an Australian setting. We chose memorable stories that were emotionally compelling, had a strong voice, a fresh perspective on disability, used vivid language and had an interesting structure.

The judges were delighted with the overall standard in submissions and diverse scenarios exploring different aspects of living with a disability. The subjects ranged from mothers narrating the ups and downs of caring for a child with a disability, to individual physical, psychological and mental challenges, such as those that face people with dementia, to engrossing examples of neurodiversity in all its wonder and complexity. The shortlisted narratives were insightful, consistent in style and content and had a fresh take on the theme. Some stories were also thought provoking, with well-delineated, rich characters plus pertinent, confronting scenes. Several entries illustrated effectively the importance of acceptance and inclusion for those living and working with emotional, intellectual, mental or physical challenges. The winning story, narrated from an engaging first-person perspective and using the present tense, gave the reader an immediate sense of immersion.

Overall, the content and subjects chosen portrayed courage and compassion, hope and optimism in approaching life with disability. The trials, persistence and determination of the protagonists were well represented and demonstrate the importance of equity and representation in society. More confronting narratives depicted the harsh reality of discrimination and disrespect in an indifferent or even callous world, which showed rather than explained the crucial nature of community and family support.

Some entries had a lot of potential but needed further editing to make them tighter or create a defined ending rather than reading like an excerpt from a longer piece. Others were inconsistent in tone, predictable or used inappropriate language. A couple of stories addressed other issues, rather than focusing on disability and its impact on an individual or family.

We thank all the authors for giving us the opportunity to share their moving, inspiring and challenging stories. We look forward to reading more next year. Best wishes with your future writing projects.

FIRST PRIZE

‘Mum’s a Mess’ by Roshelle Franco A compelling, credible first-person account of a young mum with Multiple Sclerosis coping with two young children; poignant and inspiring. The story opens with a dark tone but finishes with hope.

RUNNER-UP

‘Invisible Disability’ by Amanda Perlinski A fresh take on a young man’s disability that places the reader behind the protagonist’s eyes. It details effectively the young man’s everyday struggles, and the ways those struggles push him into social marginalisation. Effective dialogue exchanges between protagonist and police and the ending packs a punch.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

DSM p235 by John Toohey A memorable story about an architect whose OCD is his superpower. It is a warm and humorous account and a well-paced narrative.

COMMENDED

‘A Physical Thing’ by Christine Johnson A well-crafted short story of shared trauma, told in a way that is beautiful and raw. The story uses dialogue and a clever plot device to unfold through the accounts of bystanders until the reader gets to experience the heart of the tale through the protagonist’s own words.

‘Grand Final’ by Patrick Arulanandam Effective first-person narration and repetition of ‘you eat the lemons’ by a father, who uses a wheelchair, as he navigates family life with young sons. This optimistic and ultimately hopeful story has an exhilarating final image: ‘He was living.’

SHORTLIST

‘Grace’ by Linda Atkins A mother’s perspective on the life experiences of her daughter, who has Tourette’s syndrome. The story documents the good and bad days and speaks of love, compassion, and the patience it takes to raise a teenager.

‘Silence’ by Margaret Brennan A well-structured commentary on the ways society can misunderstand living with disability and the arresting experience of being confronted with conflicting views.

‘Away with Words’ by Penni Giuliani This is a moving account of a woman’s progression into dementia, told with a keen wit and an effective structure.

‘The Perfect Piece’ by Sandra Thom-Jones This piece is fascinating for its exploration of perspective and metaphor. It speaks well to the concept of ‘Nothing about us, without us’ and challenges the precept of who gets to decide how any group within society is represented.

‘Design Flaw’ by Susan Webster There is an arresting opening to this confronting first person narrative, which provides an insightful take on the breakdown of a mother whose son has a disability. The story has an interesting structure, and a moving last line: ‘After 17 years I am crying.’