

## Bank of New Zealand Essay Award Judge's Report

It is an honour to have been asked to judge this competition, and I have enjoyed the experience a great deal. I was entertained by the extraordinary range of interests and obsessions in these 109 essays — from the lessons of molecular biology to the sensual enjoyment of the fruits of the earth; from the origins of the great war to the lives of the ancestors to the imminent end of the world. I was impressed by the industry of the writers and by the variety of approaches.

It has also been an interesting test of my preconceptions. I have read many, many essays over the years, from ancient and modern classics to volumes of *Best American Essays* and *Best Australian Sports Writing*. I'm sure I spend more hours reading essays than anything else, if I include in the calculation publications like the *London* and *New York Reviews of Books*, and the postings on Arts & Letters Daily and arts.journal.com, which I check (*very quickly*) every morning.

There is no possible definition which can cover such a broad territory, but the quality I enjoy most is I think summed up by the title of a book by the American essayist Joseph Epstein, 'A Line Out for a Walk' (a line Epstein borrowed from Paul Klee). 'A line out for a walk'. I like the sense of setting out with a direction but no prescribed destination. I like the relaxedness — and also the possibility that things might get very strenuous. Above all, I like the sense of an essay as good company.

Sure enough, as I read I found that the harder an essay tried to persuade me, the less persuaded I was. I noticed too that essays that set about answering narrowly-defined questions, or were couched in specialised 'insider' language, didn't hold my interest for long.

Nevertheless, very few of the 23 essays I took forward for a second, more intense reading turned out to be 'personal' or 'writerly' essays of the kind I thought I might find. Most were in fact expositions of specialist subjects, or had a case to argue. It was good to be reminded that knowledge and passion are essential for good writing; and I decided that what distinguished these essays from the other entries wasn't good writing — or *only* good writing — so much a balanced personality. These were voices that you didn't mind talking in your ear, that carried their learning lightly and mixed their passion with a bit of humour.

My winner is 'Parochialism and Identity' by 'Kate Lawrence'. This is a song of praise for Otaki, which is also an argument about the effects of local body amalgamation on small-town vitality. It begins as a story — as memoir — and its larger themes unfold very naturally from that story. I can't escape my personality any more than an essayist can, so as an editor I do find myself wondering whether, for publication, the personal element mightn't come back more strongly in the closing paragraphs? As a reader, I find myself wondering why I'm only really aware of the ward system during the run-up to the election of the Wellington City Council. It is to this essay's credit that these are the questions it provokes.

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