

# Judge's Report: BNZ Katherine Mansfield Awards, Novice category, 2009

It was with mixed feelings that I discovered that the number of entries in this year's novice category had swelled to a record breaking six hundred and sixty-two. On the one hand, it is fantastic that interest in creative writing, and the BNZ Katherine Mansfield competition in particular, is on the rise. On the other hand, I found myself facing the steep slope of reading six hundred and sixty-two stories; a daunting prospect.

Firstly, I think it worth congratulating all the entrants. The very fact of getting a story down on paper defines a writer, as opposed to the many people, who think about, and frequently talk about, their desire to become a writer but never quite commit to paper. Although it is inevitable in the novice category that the age and experience of the entrants varies widely, all the stories that found their way to me were proof of effort and crafting. I congratulate each and every entrant.

From that original six hundred and sixty-two, I was able to produce a long list of fifty. From this fifty came a short list of fifteen. These fifteen showed a pleasingly wide range of style, cultural influences, and subject matter. As New Zealand becomes increasingly culturally diverse it is gratifying to see this trend reflected in our writing. Of the fifteen stories and their characters, Maori, Samoan, Fijian, South African, central African, and New Zealanders of European descent are all represented. Also duly present in these stories are male and female, rural New Zealanders, urban dwellers, middle-class and working class, teenagers, octogenarians, and both gay and straight.

If there is one thing that defines the final ten stories it is consistency. Consistency throughout the course of the story in sentence structure, imagery, plotting and theme (and yes, even punctuation, spelling and grammar). Each of the final ten writers make very few missteps in creating what are fully realised works of fiction. It was a pleasure to read all of them.

## The final ten stories are:

10<sup>th</sup>: *La Maison De La Petite Souris* by Jane Woodham

A story that uses the intriguing opening image of a weeping Frenchman in Timaru to hook the reader and which then reels you in through small realistic details and the momentum of a comic but potentially disastrous car journey. Finally there is a satisfying and upbeat conclusion.

9<sup>th</sup> *Sea Legs* by Daniel Preston

This story is firmly in the realist tradition of New Zealand writers such as Frank Sargeson, even sharing with that writer some often visited touchstones of location and theme – the bach and the rowboat, the undercurrents of male violence. Still, it is very much this writer's own story and it is successfully suspenseful in its depiction of a young boy observing his father's act of jealous and petty retribution.

8<sup>th</sup>: *Angry Hands* by Karley Campbell

The best opening salvo of the lot. "My uncle came over today. He broke dad's arm. Dad asked him to do it 'cause he didn't want to work anymore." This is a sobering tale of poverty, crime and family violence. The writer cleverly avoids alienating the reader and instead commands empathy. A story that lingers in the mind long after reading.

7<sup>th</sup>: *Tell Me About the Love of Your Life* by Feby Idrus

Although, in the hundreds of entries, there were many stories about the elderly (most of who seem to have nothing better to do than die) this story avoids the usual pitfalls. A former World War Two soldier is asked about the love of his life by his grandson. He starts to talk about his wife but his thoughts circle back to another young male soldier he loved for a fleeting moment during the war. Original, moving and memorable.

6<sup>th</sup>: *Mea Alofa (Things of Love)* by Sasha Ripley

A simple but emotionally charged account of a young Samoan man who, while on a brief stop-over back in New Zealand, returns home to visit his aunts in Otara. The story is full of rich dialogue, evocative details and overflows with the laughter and warmth of the characters. It is pleasantly joyful and life affirming.

5<sup>th</sup>: *On the Bench* by Michael Gray Hughes

This story is one of the two top ten stories that are set in Africa. It is an affecting story of racism, inequality and injustice told from the point of view of a young boy caught up in events he does not understand, but which he comes to feel responsible for. The characters are fully realised and the plot rolls forward with a sickening inevitability. It is testament to the quality of the writing that the reader desperately wants to intervene.

4<sup>th</sup>: *My Name will be Eve* by Richard Barry

Coming, as it does, from the point of view of an African child-soldier, this story had the potential to feel poorly researched or insincere. It is, however, to the writer's credit that all the details ring true and that the tale is genuinely engaging. The voice of the young African girl violently recruited into a jungle militia is spot on, and the writer employs a rewarding circular structure.

3<sup>rd</sup>: *Popcorn* by Helen Mae Innes

This story perfectly captures the voice of a teenager from the bottom of our socio economic pile. There is not a misstep in the entire piece. It manages to be technically accomplished in structure and very cleverly creates a disparity between the narrator's perception of the events and the average reader's take on what is happening – particularly with regard to the character of the narrator's mother. Is she really a great mother or a complete no hoper? Likewise, it is telling that the reader comes to sympathise with another character the narrator actively dislikes. There is excellent emotional shading here. A very satisfying whole from a writer of undeniable talent.

2<sup>nd</sup>: *And the Magpies Still Mock* by Paula Marshall

This is the story of a young woman with a young family who has no expectation that her relationship with the children's father will last. A family visit to a neighbour's pool on a hot day hints at secrets but shows her that perhaps the future does offer some hope, after all. Rich and evocative in its details, it feels authentic in its rural setting and natural in the telling. Technically, the structure and pace of the revelations are skilfully handled and the story moves easily and effortlessly between the present and the past. The writer could easily have stumbled and revealed too much too soon but did not. A very close contender for the top prize.

And my choice of winner of the BNZ Katherine Mansfield Competition, Novice Category for 2009 is:

*The Visit* by Karen Philips

A very simple story, shorter than many, but full of subtle emotions. An elderly man waits alone in his seaside home for the arrival of his distant daughter and beloved grandson. Although it is domestic in its details and nothing overtly dramatic takes place, everyday events are used to build real tension that breaks at the conclusion of the story like a swell on the beach where the central character lives. A story that brings a tear to the eye and a smile to the lips. *The Visit* is a deserving winner that could hold its own with some of the best of New Zealand fiction.