

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

Firstly, my thanks to the award committee for inviting me to read and judge this category of the award. I feel a great fondness – and debt – to the BNZ Katherine Mansfield Award, since in an earlier writing incarnation (as Kate Flannery) one of my stories had some luck in the ‘adult’ section. This was in 1991, in the very early days of my writing and that success – that powerful endorsement – gave me a great injection of confidence and renewed energy for writing. I think awards have an important place in a writing culture for that reason. And they’re especially important for young and emerging writers...they’re something to aim for – a deadline, a benchmark, some guiding criteria. On a prosaic level they operate as a place to send your piece when you’ve signed off on it; they allow you to put a fullstop to a story... and perhaps move on to the next one.

There were nearly 600 entries in this category – an enormous increase, apparently. Three cheers for the teachers around the country who encouraged their students to enter; and, three cheers for the students who committed themselves to the task of *completing* a story...it’s no easy task, within the current demands of the high school curriculum and the plethora of extra-curricular activities that compete for students’ attention.

And three cheers, particularly, to Laura Kroetsch, who was the all-important pre-reader for this section, and whose task was I think the greatest...reading *everything* and creaming off the top for lucky me to read and think about...

There were some interesting – and occasionally dispiriting – commonalities and themes in the submitted stories, which reflected variously, the particularities of adolescent life, the reading predilections of a large chunk of high school students – or, the *lack* of reading – and (this is the dispiriting bit) some of the grim realities of actual adolescent experience. *So*, there was rather a lot of unmediated, unshaped emotional outpouring about aloneness, about being misunderstood, about unrequited yearning, about the irredeemable ghastliness of the world as we know it now. All this is genuinely felt and a necessary and legitimate part of youthful writing – and, of course, often directly from the writer’s experience...but, I think of it as the stuff of journals and diaries...to become story that *communicates* to a reader, that startles and changes a reader, it needs what Jane Yolen calls ‘the sandpaper of art’. It needs to be approached from new perspectives, to be shaped and reworked with a rigorous attention to language and voice.

Similarly, the many stories that paid tribute to the writer’s most loved reading experiences in the fantasy and thriller genres. It is unquestionably a necessary part of a writer’s development that he or she takes on – imitates, salutes – the voice and techniques of the writers most loved: but too many of these stories were unimaginatively imitative, locked in by the clichés and limits of the forms. The best stories in this sub-category were the ones that riffed on fantasy and thriller, that played with or parodied the forms.

A judge reading through entries in a writing competition will inevitably have in mind a list of craft qualities they prize and that help them sort special – and winning – stories from the also-rans. My list runs something like this:

*technical accuracy in both subject and form (I like to think grammatical inaccuracy is not a fatal flaw, but the horrible fact is that it often does diminish a story's effectiveness, it prevents it *communicating*)

*story architecture – a shapeliness to the story's development

*an avoidance of cliché, in either language or ideas

*imaginative use of language – fresh, startling imagery, muscular nouns and verbs; ways of describing and characterising that make me pause and re-appreciate, *think* anew

*believable characterisation

*credible dialogue

*a variation in sentence length and rhythm – sentence-making that has *music*

*writing that *shows* rather than *tells*

*a sense of place

*a narrative 'voice' that commands attention, that persuades, that makes me want to read on and on, no matter what is – or isn't – happening...

In many respects the last of this list is the most important for me – a story may be utterly competent in all other respects but lack the throat-grabbing voice that makes me care, makes me want to commit myself to a narrative and go along for the ride.

I also bear in mind a couple of less tangible notions that were beautifully articulated by the American short story writer, Raymond Carver. Carver said, variously, that a good story 'relates what it's like to be out there' and, that it tells us 'what everybody knows but nobody is talking about.'

Plot, as such, is not a pre-eminent consideration when considering short stories and for good reason: with a 1,500 word limit there simply isn't the room or the time for much action, for the leisurely unfolding of events that rely on the '*and then, and then, and then*' imperative. The best stories in this competition concentrated on a smaller moment within a larger context, on a revelation of character or relationship; they telescoped in on the proverbial 'slice of life', distilling and intensifying it.

The better stories dived in to the meat of their story; they didn't muck about; they grabbed this reader – by way of voice – and said: listen; pay attention to this moment, this relationship, this intensely felt experience.

The better stories often rose straight out of such deeply felt experiences or beliefs, sometimes commonplace and physically based events or rites of passage, sometimes those abstract ruminations or moments of alienation that have been felt over and over by human beings through the centuries, but here were made anew, realised with diamond bright freshness because the writer trusted the validity of their own singular experience and emerging world view.

Or, the best stories took those deeply felt experiences and transplanted them interestingly – to a different historical moment, or place, or by using the conventions of a particular genre. They *played* with familiar experiences and emotions, tweaked them a little, invited us to consider them from a slightly different perspective.

The best stories also – and crucially – trusted the reader's intelligence; they demonstrated the authors' understanding that the act of writing is only fully completed when a receptive reader takes in the story – and can supply intelligence and imagination when reading, can bring all their experience and education to the full understanding of the story. In other words these writers knew there was no need to be painfully explicit about every little thing. They knew what to leave out.

(Of course, the best stories were over-written at times, a little extravagant, a little extreme, a little purple and over-egged – like this sentence. But that is the privilege of a young writer – indeed it is, I think, a very necessary ‘failing’. As the English orchestral conductor, John Barbirolli, once said of the great cellist, Jacqueline du Pre – in response to criticism that she was excessively emotional in her playing – ‘I *love* it. When you’re young you should have an excess of everything...otherwise what are you going to pare away?’)

The best stories showed a love of language. And most importantly, they showed *curiosity* – about human nature, about place, about feeling, about relationships, about self. They showed that their writers had a sensory engagement with the world; that they lived in the world in a *noticing* way – which is an important task of the writer. The best stories showed, too, the impact of being a *reader* – a *wide* reader, not a reader addicted to one form or genre....a wide and hungry reader’s lessons show in their writing: they have instinctual understanding of sentence music, of character nuance, of dialogue, of story architecture, of subject possibility...they have a vocabulary equal to their reach and curiosity.

I am sure, too, that the better stories had at their back – somewhere, sometime, somehow – and usually against the odds – an alert, an involved, a *passionate* English teacher: a teacher who has drawn attention to the craft aspects I’ve elucidated, by showering their students with examples of the form, by unpacking the meat and technique of story, by insisting on story’s singular gift to us: the chance to see again and again in myriad forms, what it is to be human...

The winning story has many of the features I’ve talked about. First up, it had an arresting structure and voice. It’s an epistolary story; (which is kind of nice, for the KM, now that I think about it). We are plunged into one side of a correspondence between two girls...the warmth and effervescence and longing and regret and sense of loss are beautifully and economically conveyed across nine letters, spanning seven months. A friendship – and perhaps an unprofessed love – have been interrupted because one of the girls has had to go overseas. The correspondent’s voice is very skilfully wrought; it conveys personality, place, relationships, a sense of displacement, and an irrepressible enthusiasm for life – (the latter horribly ironic, given what is to come.) This writer has a sophisticated sense of concision (crucial to the short story): she (I’m guessing a she) knows (almost exactly) what to leave out.

But the real kicker in this story – its particularly clever stroke – are the dates at the top of the letter, and the place where the letters are posted from. Our correspondent is in Japan and the date of the first letter is March 1945. Immediately, the reader is alert, and anxious, knowing – as the writer *expects* they will know – their 20th century history. I think this is what I liked most about this story: the writer’s intelligent expectation of the reader; her assumption of the reader’s knowledge and experience, and its necessity for the proper understanding of this story.

So, we’re hooked from that first moment, knowing the wider context of this otherwise very personal story, knowing where at least part of this story is going. It’s a bitter knowledge that the writer exploits beautifully to both heighten the impact of the personal loss – *and* give it proper perspective. A personal loss is placed against an act of hideous destruction, and so the reader must reconsider, reconfigure the personal and the political...think again – and anew – about something well-known but doubtless filed away in the private dustbin of history.

There is no tidy end to this story – how can there be, given the national and global and personal traumas at issue...and I like particularly that the writer knows this...I would respectfully suggest that the writer goes one letter too far (this is the Du Pre over-exuberance perhaps)...better to end, maybe, with the fabulously controlled, limpid but beautifully – and chillingly - freighted lines of the penultimate letter from Hiroshima – dated, August 6, 1945:

'It's early morning here and it's nice. The air's clearer, not so polluted, and it's got that crisp morning feeling to it. Because when the sun comes up properly, it's hot. Pant-like-a-dog hot. Japanese summers are a lot hotter than summers back home, I can tell you. I think it's because –

Absolutely beaut. Congratulations.

Kate De Goldi