

## **KSP Memoir Competition 2017 – Judge’s Report by Rachel Robertson**

### **Youth Category**

It was a great pleasure to read these short pieces of memoir written by young people between 14 and 18 years old. There was a real freshness to the work and an engagement with place, people and memory.

I’ll start with the Highly Commended stories before moving onto the winner.

A Day in Walpole by Shannon Hussey, WA is Highly Commended. This tells the story of when the narrator was 12 years old on holiday in Walpole, going for a bushwalk with her mother. They set off with eagerness, enjoying the afternoon light through the trees. But suddenly, they realise they are lost and our narrator panics, running down the forest path, trying to find her way back home. Of course, they eventually do. As well as evoking the natural environment very well, this memoir really causes the reader to feel the narrator’s emotions. There are some lovely sentences here and a great use of narrative arc.

A Day in Boranup Forest by Courtney Minto, WA is Highly Commended. This is an imaginative rendition of a walk in Boranup Forest in winter, a poetic evocation of the deep stillness and majesty of the place. Trees are cast as giants, the mist as a seamstress, the flowers as sentient beings. It is an attempt to write memoir in an innovative way and shows the author’s passion for language and imagery.

A Day in Subiaco by Jasmin Pradhan, WA is Highly Commended. A series of memories of dancing in the Nutcracker ballet in Subiaco, this work evokes a young person’s excitement and awe at being involved in a serious production. There are lovely moments here, recreated with details like the ‘smell of scented hairspray’ and the soft feeling of the pink party dress. The ending adds a touch of sadness as the narrator tells us she no longer dances.

The winner of the Youth Category is A Day in Starvation Bay by Grace Bettison, WA. While less eventful than some of the other memoirs, this piece was outstanding in its use of observation and language. The story of the day is told backwards, starting with the night sky and moving towards morning. At each stage of the day, the narrator’s way with words is demonstrated. The beach and water, eating fish for lunch, the sunset and night sky, all are evoked with concrete sensory details and well-structured sentences. As a reader, you want nothing more than to spend the day with the narrator in Starvation Bay.

### **Open Category**

It was a tremendous pleasure to read all the entries for this Prize. They ranged very widely in topic, style, theme and language. I gained many fascinating insights into other people’s lives. I particularly enjoyed some of the childhood stories from times that pre-date my own childhood. There were some humorous stories and some very sad, moving stories. I thank everyone who submitted work and KSP for giving me the honour of reading all these works and choosing winners.

In choosing a winner, I was looking for excellent writing, a good structure, an underlying theme, and a strong setting and/or characterisation. These things are what distinguishes a memoir from an

anecdote. For me, the best memoirs combine scene and summary or showing and telling. I was also looking for interesting, fresh language, good dialogue and a self-reflective narrator.

There were a number of very strong entries, but there can be only one winner, of course.

I'll start with three Highly Commended works.

Scars by Ashleigh Hardcastle, WA is Highly Commended. This is a powerful work written in the third person, which is unusual for memoir but works well as a distancing narrative technique in this instance. The story is about a young girl and her descent into anorexia and then eventual recovery. The writing is spare and strong, without any wasted words. The author has a lovely mastery over tone and language. The author creates empathy for the young woman without in any way glamorising anorexia, in my view a very ethical way to approach the topic.

On Island by Rachelle Rechichi, WA is Highly Commended. In this work, we are privy to the narrator's thinking as she waits for a flight off Christmas Island. We know it is for an important reason but we don't know much more until the end of the work. This work evokes Christmas Island, its beauty, its dangerous coast, its complex history and the tragedies of asylum seeker deaths at sea and on the rocks around the Island. It does so without preaching or judgement of others, but rather suggests the power of the natural environment and the futility of the human belief that we can control it.

In the Heat by Catherine Johnstone, VIC is Highly Commended. This memoir tells of a mother taking her two young girls to visit their father in rehab for the first time. It is a delicate exploration of family dynamics and the narrator's fear and grief and how she must manage her own feelings for the sake of the rest of the family. It is a powerful snapshot of one moment that also tells of a much larger and longer story.

Going Home by K.W. George, QLD wins Second Prize. This terrific work starts, 'I stand over the hand basin cleaning my father's false teeth.' We soon discover that the narrator is visiting her father with dementia in an age care facility. The work carefully unpacks the relationship between the narrator and her father, moving towards a resolution of sorts. It is gentle, understated but very effective writing. I liked the way the father is represented in a fully rounded fashion and, although he is frail and confused at times, the representation of him is never cruel or lacking in respect.

The Visit by Andrew Levett, WA is the Winner! As it happens, The Visit also explores a father-child relationship within a residential care setting, though in a different context. The narrator here visits his father in a mental health facility, confronted both by the environment and by seeing his dad so unwell. This is an excellent piece of memoir, establishing setting and character very effectively and giving us access to the narrator's feelings in highly economical ways. The dialogue is particularly well written. This work challenges us to think about things we may not want to consider. It addresses an important and very topical issue for our time in a powerful way.