

Judges Report

2016 Rees Prize for Young Writers

It was a great honour to be asked to judge the Rees Prize by 2016 FAWWA President Belinda Hermawan. This year marks the very first year that the prize has been run, giving those writers who are at the very beginnings of their writing journeys a place to send their work out into the world and see what happens. The writers who entered this year's prize took a leap of faith in entering their work, and maybe for some of them, it was the first time that they had done so—the first time that they had sent their writing out to a competition. I hope that it won't be the last time. Unfortunately, the nature of a competition means that I cannot give an award to every single writer who entered the Rees Prize, but I hope that I can encourage these young writers to keep writing. You are all writers, imaginative beings who can channel entire universes with the powers of your minds. I was very impressed by the range of different voices, styles and approaches that I came across in the collection of stories I was asked to review.

This year's theme was 'Mars and Beyond', a theme which quite naturally gave rise to a number of different speculative fiction stories. It is no small achievement to be able to create an entire piece of genre fiction in only one thousand words, and I felt like many of these stories could have been expanded out into longer pieces, or even novels. There were several common themes in these pieces, which were quite topical and I was impressed by the maturity that these subjects were dealt with. Many of the stories used space exploration and the evacuation of the earth as a way to talk about seeking asylum, or the environmental decay of the Earth. While it has been said that there are no new plots out there to be had, each writer who entered this year's competition found a way to play with the familiar tropes of the genre, to bend the theme of the competition to suit their own interests and to make the stories their own. There were many stories in the mix which I really loved which I was not able to award a prize to this time around, but I have no doubt we will be seeing those writers' names in print one day too.

These writers were from all around Australia, and I hope that some of the West Australian winners may be here with us tonight. If they are, I would like to invite them to come up after I announce the winners of this competition and give us a reading from their piece.

So without making you all wait too long, here are the results of this year's Rees Prize.

In the Under 15s Category, Highly Commended goes to:

Escape from the Earthlings by Lydia Colla from New South Wales

Those Stars of Mine by Sarah Petersen from Queensland

In the 15- 17 years Category, Highly Commended goes to:

Saving Tomorrow by Katha Villanueva from Victoria

Silence by Radheya Jegatheva from Western Australia

This story shows off a beautiful use of language. The writer takes a very witty, ironic look at modern life from the point of view of someone floating in space and suddenly facing their own insignificance head on. I would love to see this developed into a longer piece. It works really well as a monologue as well, and I think there's a lot to be said about experimenting with different types of fiction. Well done, Radheya.

In the 18-21 Category, Highly Commended goes to

Salvation by Stephanie Liddlelow from Western Australia

In this story, we are forced into the perspective of a scared child, being sent away from Earth to escape an unknown threat. The use of this point of view is beautifully done and the story pulls at the heart strings. The story is well on its way to making an incredible potent statement about the seeking of asylum, and was a real wake up call in the midst of reading many, many stories about Martians. Congratulations Stephanie.

We Were Once Immortals by Anne Feng, also from Western Australia

Now, I have to say a special thank you to Anne because she was one of only two writers who didn't take Mars to mean the planet Mars. When you have to read twenty four stories about space and aliens and journeys on rockets, even if they are as well written as these were, you really sit up and pay attention when someone thinks a little bit differently. We were Once Immortals plays with Roman mythology. Anne's writing is crisp and intelligent and it was a joy to read. I applaud her lateral thinking on the theme—it is this sort of approach that will take you a long way in writing, so well done and keep going.

Our two place winners were both judged across the board, and tonight I am very pleased to announce that Second Prize has gone to 'The Price of Immortality' by Alexandria Walker from Queensland. I knew when I read this piece early on that it was a stand out. The story is a creation story that feels more magical than religious, about the loneliness of an immortal being, and their desperation to make a connection bringing a whole planet into existence. This was fantastic, and

the writer expressed themselves extremely well. I could see this being an animated short film, but it works brilliantly as flash fiction as well.

Our inaugural winner of the Rees Prize for young writers goes to a writer whose work reminded me of Ursula K. LeGuin's novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness* in its tone, and a little in its subject matter. I was completely blown away by this story. In fact, I couldn't fault it. I had a list of what I was looking for in these stories, whether it be character, pacing, dialogue, the way it used the theme, and this writer was making all of those things work for them. As I said before, it's very difficult to get a powerful story across in only 1000 words, but this writer did that in style. The story would work as a longer piece, but it doesn't feel cramped at its current length either, and that's something writers who have been doing this for a very long time struggle with. Right from the first line, this piece had a clear narrator, and a completely fleshed-out internal culture. I am very pleased to announce that this year's winner of the Rees Prize for young writers is 'The Seven Travellers of 1184' by Jennifer Worgan, from New South Wales.

Thank you very much to everyone for being here tonight. I would now like to invite Radheya Jegatheva, Anne Feng and Stephanie Liddlelow, if they are here, to come and read to us. I hope you all enjoy the rest of the evening, and I encourage you all to keep practising your craft because I am sure that these two prizes will be back again next year.