

Judge's reflection on the challenges and joy of writing – and why stories matter, and overall reflection of reading the stories and poems for the second BookNest Writing Competition.

First up, my thanks to the convenors and readers of the competition – I was thrilled to be asked to take part again with this fantastic group of people whose excellent organisation once more made the process of judging a pleasure and I really appreciate the special opportunity you've created for writers in the Murrindindi shire.

A big thanks, too, to the entrants for putting their trust in the convenors and myself with their labours of love. I know how much it means to have others read your writing, but it can make you feel vulnerable as well because you can't ever be sure how your writing will be received. The more experience you have in putting your work out there, the more you understand that your readers will understand your work in their own ways and not necessarily how you intended. But that's part of the journey, and this is also exciting and liberating – your story or your poem isn't 'you' – or if it is, then it is only for those frozen moments of time while you're writing. Once you share it with others it becomes a bigger story woven together with their own stories – wherever that reader is in their time and place. Remember that the word 'text' comes from 'textile' – threads woven together to make material. And so it is that your writing becomes part of the fabric of your community and perhaps even the fabric of others' lives in other places far beyond.

Although I wasn't involved in the judging of the school-aged categories, thinking about all the younger writers and the question 'why do stories matter?' made me recall my earliest memories of reading. I remember getting Enid Blyton's *The Enchanted Wood* and *The Magic Faraway Tree* for Christmas when I was about seven or eight. In those days we didn't get a lot of presents and so the memory is clear: me sitting in the lounge room holding the books – these wondrous objects – knowing that when I opened them, I was going to be transported to another, magical world. Of course, reading as a form of travel is a familiar idea – it's what I hear students in my creative writing classes say year after year: I read to escape into a different world. But taking this idea further, these other worlds also come back into our so-called 'real worlds'. I played a game that went on for years with my best friend in primary school. We called it 'Beach girls' and in this enacted story we transformed the school grounds into another world: the asphalt sports ground was the sea, and we were able to breathe underwater by eating a snack bought from the canteen called 'Chimpanzees' (similar to Cheetos); the timber ramp to the school building was our house; the oval was the country where we visited an aunt on a farm, and witches lived on the boundary of the tennis courts. When the bell rang to go back to class, we called this our sleep time until we were let out at recess again to begin another day as characters in this world. Looking back on this extended improvised story, I see a writing practice starting to form, which I'll come back to later.

Just as I was last year, this year I was impressed by the array of subjects explored in the stories and poems submitted. I was a bit like that child with her Enid Blyton books, filled with anticipation: where were these writers going to take me? I wasn't disappointed. Each story and poem had an energy or something distinctive about its voice. Some of the elements that stood out to me aren't necessarily skills that can be taught, for example

'voice' and how a writer achieves this is intangible to some degree. From all the submissions I read, although they could have been made stronger with more time, experience and drafting, distinctive voices were emerging and some other notable feature such as structure, plotting, description, dialogue. I encourage you to keep honing your submissions. Your voices are there and that's the most important part.

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In her 2002 book, *Negotiating with the Dead: A writer on writing*, Margaret Atwood tried to distil the huge array of reasons writers write. These were so varied that she formulated another question instead: what does writing *feel like*? Out of this came the tentative answer:

Possibly, then, writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light.ⁱ

And so, in this spirit I want to share with you some of the lights I found in my reading of the poems and stories.

I saw a lovely attention to rhythm – a certain way of connecting images making the different settings contained in the stories flow into each other the way they do in vivid dreams. Another light was perspective – the way a writer created intimacy with the reader via the meandering thoughts of one character as they watched others. Or a dry humorous voice emerging to show us the way people are; the everyday things people say suddenly transformed by their presentation in an unlikely context. Another light was subtlety – the power of understatement or a simple observation of something in the narrator's surroundings conveying so much about what was happening in the narrator's interior, for example, an incredible yearning for something or someone. Stories give us access to what people *don't* talk about in their everyday conversations and this access to the interior is a compelling reason to read fiction. And this formed another light: how people feel about their changing bodies and how out of this strange experience of transformation comes a kind of celebration in that the writer, through the narrator or speaker, says I am here and I'm inviting you into the world as I see it. Yet another light: the way a writer can lead us a certain way and then surprise us without tricking us at the same time, which could compromise the pact we have made with our readers. Or how a whole story can emerge from the definition of a word. Or by presenting a connection to the earth and the lifegiving force of trees. It's not surprising in an environment like this where our writers are writing from to have trees so present in many of the submissions – I read once that people write like the places they live or grew up in.

And a special word for the poets now – in the introduction to his 2016 book *Attention equals life: The poetics of everyday life since 1945*, Andrew Epstein describes poetry as 'a form of attention at its most intense'ⁱⁱ. In the face of what's been argued about for years now concerning the problems of diminishing or distracted attention including, Epstein writes, 'the effects of new media on the human brain', Epstein also suggests that this so-

called crisis of attention is profoundly connected to another widespread feature of our culture: 'a preoccupation with the everyday'ⁱⁱⁱ. Bound up in this Epstein suggests is

the idea that attention is such a crucial aesthetic, and human faculty that in some ways it is life itself, if only because it alone has the ability to provide proof and documentation of human existence.^{iv}

I looked for this kind of attention in the submissions: a sustained attention to whatever subject the poet was exploring. Speaking to the stories as well now – often writers write about very dark experiences and sometimes we ask why would we want to read about this? A writing friend said to me the other day that when faced with bleak subject matter he asks what is interesting about the characters involved? Each one of the submissions showed me something interesting about the speakers or characters and the places that formed them.

It's easy to be disheartened when our writing gets knocked back by a publisher and it took me a long time to come to this realisation – at least by submitting you *know* you didn't get in rather than wondering if you would have or not. And remember to come back to the reason you probably started writing in the first place: because you enjoy the act of going into that time-altering space.

Going back to my 'Beach girls' story, I saw a practice forming in the fact that this was written or rather enacted over several years. Writers practice in different ways and it doesn't matter how long you've been writing, it can be tough to form a practice. It can be made easier though if we make times to write and write to time not quality – to not have expectations about how good the writing is. Outside of these writing blocks we can do more to absorb the forms we're interested in: if you're writing short stories then read as many short stories as you can as well as about writing short stories. Same goes for poetry: read poetry and about poetry writing, not just to help absorb the different ways of structuring your work but to be exposed to different kinds of language. Read out of your comfort zone. Notice how other writers begin and how they end and perhaps more importantly what kind of speed gathers in the middle of their writing?

Coming back to the question, why do stories matter? They're a way of giving others the gift of our dreams. Here is my imagination: my way of seeing the world through others I've imagined; my way of seeing what the world could be. The joy of asking 'what if' and putting this down on the page. It is the gift of your attention on whatever it is that you're writing about, the picture you're creating for others to share. How precious that is in this world.

Josephine Scicluna 16 November 2023

ⁱ p. xxiv

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