

# **introduction**

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THE SHORT STORY has been compared to many things: a photograph (Lorrie Moore); soft shadows and faint footprints (Haruki Murakami); a microcosm (Isabelle Carmody); the ultimate close-up magic trick (Neil Gaiman); and even fiction's R and D department (Walter Kirn). But the truth is that the short story can be some of these things, none of these things, or all of these things at once. While a novel can take its time, develop subplots as well as plots, take detours, and have the occasional lull

in the narrative, a short story can't afford a wasted word; plot, character, setting, theme, tone, atmosphere must all be established almost simultaneously. What might take a chapter in a novel could be a paragraph, or even a line, in a short story, or it may not even be shown, but only suggested, glanced at, under the surface. What I'm trying to say is, writing a good short story is *hard*.

The stories selected for this anthology from the 240 entries in the Margaret River Short Story Competition are not only good but also, often, much more than that. It has been my pleasure to be the editor for this year's anthology. I would like to offer my thanks to the judges, Donna Mazza, Brooke Dunnell and Omar Sakr, for their hard work and excellent taste in selecting a longlist for the competition, out of which I selected the seventeen stories that are included here. My own selection process was quite simple. I read each story on the longlist, then reread it, reread it again, and reread it once more. One of the marks of a good short story is that it not only survives multiple readings, but also gives more to the reader with each reading. Many of the stories in the longlist started well but could not sustain momentum all the way through. Others picked up steam as they went along but ended on an unsatisfying note; while others seemed to lose their way, or were freighted with too much plot and too many characters, so that they collapsed under their own weight. These stories fell away after a first, second, third, fourth

reading, until I was left with the shortlist, and the difficult task of choosing the winners.

The first prize in the 2018 Margaret River Short Story Competition has been awarded to Andrew Roff's 'Pigface' and the second prize to Cassie Hamer's 'Habitat'. The first time I read these stories, I made a notation beside the titles on my notepad. The notation simply said '!'. Though only an exclamation mark, it signified quite a lot: that both these stories were beautifully written; that when reading them I forgot I was a judge in a short story competition, and I was simply a reader, caught up in a story; and that after reading them, I sat in silence for a few moments thinking about them. Though very different in point of view, style, theme and setting, what 'Pigface' and 'Habitat' have in common is that each element in the story works, and works brilliantly. Like the best short stories, they are like gems; each gleaming facet can be examined singly, but all contribute to, and are inseparable from, the beauty of the whole. (I am describing the winning stories only in general terms here, as I don't wish to spoil your experience of reading them.) There could, unfortunately, be only one winner, and in the end 'Pigface' edged its way to the forefront, and I offer my congratulations to Andrew, and to Cassie, and also my thanks for making my job so challenging and rewarding.

Awarding the South West Prize was much easier; of the stories that qualified, 'The Chopping Block' by

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Tiffany Hastie, a moving story of loneliness and resilience, was the clear winner. Among the other shortlisted stories, I would like to highly commend 'Descent' by Fiona Robertson, a tender story of disillusionment, 'Bounds' by Tee Linden, a haunting study of grief and transformation, and 'Le Micocoulier de Provence' by Sue Robertson, which achieves the tricky task of writing about writing in a humorous and unpretentious way. In each of the stories in this anthology, there is much to enjoy, and it is interesting to trace the themes that recur throughout, all treated in different ways, from grief ('On Either Side' and 'The Sea Dragon') and childhood ('Ring-Pull Art' and 'The Fate of Angels') to fractured or damaged relationships ('No Harm Done', 'Soap' and 'Setting Sail'). There is also a pleasing contrast between stories told in a realist style, in recognisably Australian settings ('Small Fish' and 'Cracked Head'), and those that explore themes that are out of the ordinary, and even bizarre ('Living with Walrus' and 'Foodies').

George Saunders once wrote: 'When you read a short story, you come out a little more aware and a little more in love with the world around you.' That's what these stories did for me, and I hope that's what they'll do for you.

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