This was a big year for the Dorothea MacKellar Poetry Awards, marking its 29th birthday with a very healthy turnout; 10,000 budding poets from over 700 schools submitted work of a precociously high standard, another ringing endorsement of poetry’s popularity among young writers.

Winners were announced at the National Presentation Ceremony, which was held at Gunnedah on Friday 30th August, the town from where Dorothea MacKellar drew much of the inspiration for her iconic verse.

The judges this year expressed their amazement at the standard of work submitted, which both delighted them and made the task of selecting a winner for each category that much more difficult.

Entrants were given the option of writing to a theme, ‘Wherever the Wind Blows’ or on any topic they wanted. As a result there was a vast array of topics and forms submitted for judging.

Author Sally Murphy, a well-known figure in children’s literature and judge of the secondary schools category said, “Because poetry is, by its very nature, subjective, what appeals to one will not necessarily appeal to others, because poetry is successful when it speaks to the reader or listener in some way. “

“The poems which rose to the top in this year’s awards were those which offered the reader (in this case, me) the chance to look at something in a new way, or experience something new. This happens via two means: what is said about the subject, and how it is said. Together those two elements combine to create a third: an impact on the reader.”

Judge of the primary section Glenda Millard, who returned for a second time this year, was equally impressed

“The poems which I selected for awards of commended or higher ranged in topic, in form and in length. There were lengthy poems and haiku, highly rhymed and structured forms and free verse and experimental.

“This being my second year as a judge, I am better acquainted with the awards, and so in some ways I was more prepared for the deluge of entries as they arrived. But I think it would be impossible for me to ever be prepared for the joy I feel when I read an entry which is unique and well-written.

“Like precious jewels, cut and polished until they gleam, they excite and inspire and remind me of why I agreed to take on this task once again. I must admit to feeling awed at the quality of some of this year’s poems.
Junior Secondary Category
WINNER
Elisabeth SULICH, 12
SCEGGS Darlinghurst
Darlinghurst NSW

Where Poppies Grow (excerpt)
The young larks fly over rusted wire
Over the fields where guns did fire
Over the fields where diggers fell
Over the fields, the gates of hell

The young larks fly over poppies red
Over the fields where the young men bled
Fly over the hills where shots rang out
Over the hills where poppies sprout
The young larks fly over crosses white
Where sleet lashed down in the cold, dark night
Over the land where blood did stain

Learning Assistance and Special Education Secondary Category
Learning assisted WINNER
Benjamin GIBSON, 17
Redeemer Baptist School
North Parramatta NSW

Salute To The Fallen (excerpt)
The bravest field that’s ever been
Will wear a cloak of scarlet
For all the blood that on her flowed,
For all the death she met.

So listen well, who’ve yet to hear
The story of this flower,
Whose fame was born in war and strife
In this world’s darkest hour.

Petals caught the blood of heroes
The soldiers’ stories go
Though now stained red as ruby,
Were once as white as snow.

Just as life seeped from dead men’s bones
Then into soil dark
The land still cries in pain from wounds
A battle’s dreadful mark.

When on this poppy’s bloody colour
Next time you turn your gaze,
Remember all those Aussie men
Who died in smoke and haze;

For on that field there died the men
With courage like no other.
They were prepared to give it all
They fought to save their brother.

Upper Primary Category
WINNER
Jarrod HOY, 11
Curl Curl North Public School
North Curl Curl NSW

Letters and Numbers (excerpt)
Green and black systems,
Intricate wires weave like lines on a map.
The roads beat with ancient, solemn, knowledge,
Speaking secrets never told.

A city of silicon,
Battery towers and buildings hung with marvellous wire tapestries
Pulsing and glowing
A universe built of perfect numbers

There is a galaxy of electricity
Nebulae and fire,
Dust and wind,
Endless possibility
A map I cannot read
Alien images, a code that cannot be broken
Circuit boards sparkling with meteors of knowledge that I can never reach.

Lower Primary Category
WINNER
Josiah MAY, 9
Knox Grammar Preparatory School
Wahroonga NSW

Images of Australia (excerpt)
The wind takes us on a rainbow of many colours-
to the rich orange of the outback
reflected in the wilderness of the sky
with fingers of gold stretched across a canvas
of burnt red.

Giant clouds painting the sky like a bucket of spilt paint and...
below
a single tree, a green twisted shape, taunted by its aloneness. and
the breeze moves on...

Down below
the land stays gold
for thousands of miles
before seeping into reds greens, yellows and browns.
Becoming a quilt of many patterns...
white dimples on brown stems,
illuminated leaves trailing down,
stained hills of scrub
seamed by wooden stitches.
and yet... the breeze moves on...

Past horribly twisted ghost gums,
subjects of paranoia, laughing and cackling
as they glow underneath the pure white moon and point their cold contorted fingers
upwards
surrounded by frozen plants who,
beheld their icy souls,
and, themselves, were paralysed.
with a shudder, the breeze moves away...
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senior secondary category

winner

jobelle rosicas, 16
rosny college
rosny tas.

hiroshima

at 8:15 in the morning
on august 6th, 1945
the clocks froze
in hiroshima.

i can’t remember
at what temperature
the air boiled that morning
when the day had barely begun,
but i know it was hot enough
for the fathers stepping out of their homes
the mothers kissing their husbands goodbye
the children on the street
to instantly turn
to ash.

when death shuffled along the road that day
collecting souls in his arms,
he walked quietly and carefully
not knowing who it was he was stepping on.
even he shed a tear.

how deceiving the dust of humans looked
dancing through the air
falling on half-melted roofs
like snow.

on a wall somewhere,
the outline of a person
still remains.
the only reminder
they left behind.

no, hiroshima.

God was not punishing you

for whatever sin you may have committed
once long ago.
no amount of sin could equal this tragedy.
this was made by people
just like you.

i bet those men in their tin cans, slicing through
the air,
cradling that bomb in the belly of their plane
that morning, had no idea
how devastating this could be.

yet three days later
they dared to drop one more
on nagasaki.

and if they knew,
i know they’re kicking themselves now.

sometimes i can hear those men crying
on the lips of their mothers
asking, what did we do?
what have we done?
hiroshima, i imagine your streets in the days
that followed.

how the ashes waltzed in the breeze
and formed hands outstretched like wings,
how shadows on walls
rose to their feet and walked instinctively
home, closing a door that was once there
on the day
they wish never happened.

there is word in japanese
that literally means
‘explosion-affected people.’

years later,
we are writing your stories.
we are thinking of you.
we are all
hibakusha.

“I must reiterate how very difficult it is to judge entries of this magnitude and quality. Because of this, it can be as little as a spelling mistake or a typographical error, which distinguishes one poem over another,” she said.

A stirring piece on the Hiroshima bombing from Jobelle Roscas took out the Senior Secondary prize and is a good example of the evocative, sensitive work submitted. It is powerful stuff, on which the judges commented, “This is a poem which is spine tingling. To be able to deal with such a disturbing topic in a way, which embraces the reader shows great maturity. Images of fathers, mothers, children turning instantly to ash are wonderfully powerful, made more so by little details such as

a kiss on the cheek which make these real people rather than simply numbers.”

As an indication of the breadth of topics and variance of form of the poems submitted, Alpay Filizkoks ‘Bees’ which won the Learning Assistance and Special Education Primary Category, captured its subject in a perfectly-formed seven lines.

“The poet has used wonderfully graphic language. Is tornado the collective noun for bees? If not, it should be. Wonderful!” was the judge’s comment.

Prizewinners in recent years have been presented with individual mementoes, designed and crafted by members of Gunnedah’s art community. This year’s trophy is a linocut ‘Blowing in the Wind’ by Gunnedah artist Anne Pickett who works in ceramics, watercolours, pencil and printmaking.

The awards’ overarching mission is to propagate poetry in schools and the resources for teachers on the website offers some invaluable advice from some of our best authors in how to approach the writing and teaching of poetry, see http://www.dorothea.com.au/resources.php

this year’s winners

senior secondary – jobelle rosicas tas
junior secondary – elisabeth sulich nsw
learning assistance and special education, secondary – benjamin gibson, nsw
upper primary – jarrod hoy nsw
lower primary – josiah may nsw
learning assistance and special education, primary – alpay filizkok nsw
community relations commission (nsw) award – mele fifita nsw

the sheelah baxter award for primary schools

oxford falls grammar, oxford falls nsw
schools’ award, secondary
youth education centre cavan sa

this year’s runners up:

senior secondary – rani jayasekera vic
junior secondary – simone engele vic
learning assistance and special education, secondary – theophilus din nsw
upper primary – prajusha mukhopadghaya nsw
lower primary – elaine hansen act
learning assistance and special education, primary – snigdha singh nsw

schools’ award, commendations

saturday school of community languages, smiths hill high school keiraville nsw
mlc burwood nsw
hornsby girls’ school hornsby nsw
mackellar girls’ high school manly vale nsw
redeemer baptist school north parramatta nsw
griffith public school griffith nsw
tamworth public school tamworth nsw
st patrick’s parish school gundagai nsw