

Charting the stumbling strides of secret midnight wanderings

Dorothea Mackellar poetry awards give creative voice to Australia's youth



Dorothea Mackellar's *My Country* is the most widely recognised poem in Australia but few people realise its first stanza, comparing England to Australia, has been lost over the years.

Ensuring the craft of writing poetry doesn't suffer a similar fate are the Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards, which celebrate Mackellar's legendary work while giving creative voice to school students from across this wide, brown land of ours.

Sponsorship by the NSW Department

of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and links to National Literacy and Numeracy Week saw competition organisers, the Dorothea Mackellar Memorial Society in Gunnedah, receive more than 12,000 entries this year – not bad for a competition that started with about 300 local submissions in 1984.

So successful are the awards that last year the event received an award of its own, the competition was recognised for enriching Australian cultural life by the prestigious Manning Clark House National Cultural Award.

Queensland authors Sue Gough and Prue Mason judged this year's awards. They looked for poems that showed an original twist and expressed something fresh and exciting. The awards ceremony was held on 5th September marking 100 years since *My Country* was published in *The Spectator* in London.

Hobart's Elizabeth College student Caitlin Richardson won the competition's senior secondary category with her poem *Naked*, described by judges as "a cunningly subtle poem that explores the dangerous self-exposure of the writer".

Excerpt from *Naked* by Caitlin Richardson

"She could have weaved a poem

From strands pulled off

The blue nylon jumper she wears.

Instead,

She lines the page

With threads unpicked from the stitching

Of her heart:

Her words.

Like the squiggle of a heart-rate monitor,

Her words pulse with her blood,

Charting the stumbling strides

Of secret midnight wanderings

From joy to sorrow,

And back again by sunrise..."

Caitlin said poetry was among her favourite writing styles.

"I love its precision, the clarity of the images it conveys, the way in which each and every word is charged with meaning," she says.

"I enjoy the challenge of writing economically; writing in this style forces me to use words in new and different ways.

"*Naked* deals with the idea of vulnerability.

"After two years without doing any significant creative writing projects, sharing my work in English Writing at school this year initially made me feel somewhat apprehensive," Caitlin said.

"I felt exposed as my personal stories were scrutinised by my peers and teacher. While it's tempting to write hollow, superficial stories and poems, taking the courage to present honest, personal insights makes for meaningful pieces of writing. When shared, these pieces help forge real emotional connections between people based on a sense of understanding."

The winner of the Lower Secondary award was Jack Burnham from Caloundra Christian

College who used mythology to conjure *Moffatt Dragon*; a poem which judges say “takes the breath away”.

**Excerpt from Moffatt Dragon
by Jack Burnham**

*“Cerulean skies meet azure ocean depths
Primeval currents swell, pulsing
rhythmically
Beating their salty tattoo against the sandy
shore.
Waves ebb and flow, returning sand to
pristine perfection
Smoothing, filling, finally erasing a
massive sandy depression...
And taloned three-toed footprints.”*

Chasing Rainbows by Emma Dell from Brooke Avenue Public School in NSW was selected as the winner of the Upper Primary Category, impressing judges with its avoidance of sentimental grandmotherly images and dazzling them with honesty that “reaches right into the heart”.

**Excerpt from Chasing Rainbows
by Emma Dell**

*“She told me stories, in rasping and wheezing,
Of her, taming lions, devouring fire,
Swimming into the sunset – always,
Fingers groping wisps of memory, so skilful
at evading her spindly clutches.
Yet I missed her chortling magpie warble,
And the way it frolicked from her wizened maw.”*

Eight year old Rory Burg from Victoria’s Kingswood College won the Lower Primary category with *The Red Lion*, taking the reader on a journey of pace and tension described by judges as “both frightening and exhilarating” in its description of a bushfire.

**Excerpt from The Red Lion
by Rory Burg**

*“Red Lion rests, luminous in cloud
kingdom.
Scarlet eyes flickering in smouldering
sunset skies...
He drifts on crystal ice creams
And silver slinking continents
Of Serengeti sand.
His clan are mixed up monsters
Meteors, machine monkeys of my
imagination.
A rasping, ravenous roar shakes baking
ground,
Famished the fiendish family
Prepare to pounce on the bush below!”*

Rory also took out a special Community Relations Commission Award for A Painting of the Universe judged as the best poem highlighting the value of cultural diversity within the Australian community.

Special Education Primary category was

awarded to Drago Kalinic from Katherine School of the Air in the Northern Territory, with his clever entry *Barramundi Dreaming* that shows a timelessness that seems to link past, present and future.

**Excerpt from Barramundi Dreaming
by Drago Kalinic**

*“With silver, metallic, lustrous, golden,
balancing fins.
Shining so dazzling, bright –
Golden, orbit eyes as big as the moon.
With scales so aligned –
Swimming,
Agile.”*

The Special Education Senior entry by Elizabeth Smith from Pennant Hills, NSW, was awarded first place for her entry *Malicious Subtext* about random thoughts and inner conversations.

**Excerpt from Malicious Subtext
by Elizabeth Smith**

*“You’re funny, you’re so, so, so, so
Funny.
You know that?
I could laugh out loud you’re so
Funny.
I could fall to the ground in violent fits
of hysteria
Twist your words around my little finger,
laughing all the time.”*



Award winner Caitlin Richardson

Finally, Redeemer Baptist School, North Parramatta, NSW won the Schools’ Award for the entries that demonstrated a high overall standard.

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