

The first commended story, *The Lottery* is a tender tragicomedy, it zooms in on the interior life of a profoundly isolated man whose misplaced affections for an adolescent girl lead him to finally engage with the external world, yet with distressing results. What makes this story so good is the complexity of the authorial insight into the paradoxes and limitations of her protagonist, and the writer's compassion. And I was delighted to discover recently that **Jodi Kewley** wrote this story. Jodi was also the winner of Albury Short Story competition I recently judged.

The other commended story, *Whale Sharks* by **Suzi Green**, is also a poignant tale of a personal crisis and retreat from the world. But here the retreat is intentional, and most likely temporary. The grief of the protagonist, a recently bereaved wife, is complicated by feelings of guilt. Unwilling to receive sympathy, she retreats into the solitude of nature. But despite the emotional darkness this tale describes, it does so with energy, vividness and gentle humour that mirror just how multidimensional our lives are, even during the highest highs and the lowest lows.

Karen Hollands is the winner of the third prize with her bold, even defiant, story *Nereus's Daughter*. Karen's story explores the so-called ordinary daily discontent of the urban middle class and does so daringly, with surprising turns and twists. Its protagonist, a wife and working mother of two young daughters, plagued with the usual daily hassles, endures them stoically just because everyone else does, until one day she doesn't. Instead, she makes the kind of monumental decision that men sometimes do and are forgiven for, but women never are. I love the uncomfortable mirror Karen holds to motherhood, not an easy one to digest, but a needed one if we want to be honest about this often idealised human experience. I applaud the bravery of the author.

And the second prize goes to... **Jodi Kewley** again! Jodi who keeps showing her wonderful gift for storytelling. Her story *Found* gripped me from its very first words, which are: 'Is there anything quite as humiliating as getting to the checkout and finding you don't have enough money?' This conversational yet never simplistic way of addressing the reader already beguiles and the voice remains consistent throughout the entire tale of Shell, the sympathetic, and sympathetically flawed, working class protagonist struggling to make ends meet as well as maintain her marriage and her uncertain relationship with her daughter. The hard-done-by Shell, though, is never a cliché, nor is she simply the sum of her difficult circumstances. The power of *Found* lays in the singularity of its narrator, a singularity that I

have noticed in the protagonists in all three stories of Jodi's I have read. She really has a gift for getting under the skin of her characters and rendering them into unforgettable individuals rather than case studies.

And now I'm about to announce the winner. But first I want to make a quick detour and say that, in my observation, Australian short fiction is generally healthy and thriving. But if there is one thing I often miss while reading our short stories is strong narrative tension. The winner of this year's first prize, the aptly named **Jacqueline Winn**, achieves just that in *The Remains*, a disturbing murder mystery masterfully and succinctly told. Once again, I'd like to read the start of the story. It begins: 'The day after my father's remains were found in a shallow bush grave, the oddball from two doors down went missing. The following morning the police found him, dead of an overdose, propped up against a rock face only metres away from my father's grave.' In less skilful hands, such a dramatic beginning could fast develop into a melodrama. But Jacqueline does just the opposite. Her harrowing tale, narrated by a grieving daughter, offers us not only a compelling riddle, a taut narrative and a surprising twist at the end, but also an emotionally authentic portrait of two deeply conflicted men, and a sharp critique of a society that stifles diversity, and diversity of desire in particular. Congratulations, Jacqueline, on your marvellous, page-turning winning story!