

Aurealis Awards 2009
Horror
Judges' Report

Panel members

Dianne De Bellis (convener), Kimberly Chandler, Joe Marsden, Jason Reed, Rowena Specht-Whyte

Number of entries

Novels: 11

Short Stories: 90-100

Judging criteria

We looked for good writing, engaging characters, some supernatural or speculative element and a sense of mystery or the uncanny.

Overview of entries

The panel was impressed with the number and strong quality of entries in the 2009 horror category.

Finalists

Novel

Honey Brown, *Red Queen*, Penguin Australia WINNER

Peter Ball, *Horn*, Twelfth Planet Press

Stephen M. Irwin, *The Dead Path*, Hachette Australia

Tracey O'Hara, *Night's Cold Kiss*, HarperCollins Publishers Australia

Kaaron Warren, *Slights*, Angry Robot Books

Review of finalists

Honey Brown, *Red Queen*, Penguin Australia WINNER

Red Queen by Honey Brown is the standout horror novel in 2009. It is gripping from start to finish with well drawn characters and an inescapable feeling of suspense and impending danger. The post-apocalyptic setting provides a near future speculative world that is believable and feels very close to our own. The quick reversion by some survivors to little better than beasts; the menacing nature of the bush; the weather and the fear of a deadly virus provide the horror. The relationship between the three main characters in their isolation is skilfully portrayed, making a strong comment on the effect of social strictures on sexual interaction. The writing is brilliant with not a word wasted.

Peter Ball, *Horn*, Twelfth Planet Press

Horn, with its hard boiled language and female detective gives us a book that, while short, is scary, disturbing and horrifying. The idea of turning the supernatural creature of the unicorn - which usually resonates with such a strong image of innocence - into a subject of horror, is original and sinister.

Stephen M. Irwin, *The Dead Path*, Hachette Australia

The Dead Path is a spine tingling story. Opening with a poignant tragedy, the reader is taken on a journey with the core character as he returns home to a community in the Queensland town of Tallong to deal with his loss. The family relationships are believable and the creeping horror of the forest is maintained throughout. The menace created by Irwin is palpable and the climax shocking. As a debut, this novel is impressive.

Tracey O'Hara, *Night's Cold Kiss*, HarperCollins Publishers Australia

Night's Cold Kiss offers the right mix of vampire romance and horror with a slight "pulp" element that keeps the story grounded. In the crowded field of supernatural/horror romance with a strong female at the centre, O'Hara's characters and story stand out; the development is strong and the story arc is satisfying to the end. O'Hara has created a world that is believable and exhilarating. Unlike many novels in this subgenre, the story is told from various perspectives, which gives the reader an insight into each character's motivation and adds depth. The romantic relationships are realistically passionate and add to the thrilling violence and horror of the tale.

Kaaron Warren, *Slights*, Angry Robot Books

Slights is well-written, creepy and sad. The narrator's just off-kilter point of view is well crafted and the mundane is juxtaposed eerily with her violent thoughts and actions. Even though the jacket pronounces loudly that the protagonist is a serial killer, the creation of her character and the unveiling of different elements is engaging. The reader really wants to know what drives this girl, although it seems inevitable that the mess of rage and self-loathing would lead to killing.

Finalists

Short story

Paul Haines, 'Slice of Life - A Spot of Liver', *Slice of Life*, The Mayne Press JOINT WINNER

Paul Haines, 'Wives', *X6*, Coeur de Lion Publishing JOINT WINNER

Felicity Dowker, 'Jesse's Gift', *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* #40

Christopher Green, 'Having Faith', *Nossa Morte*

Andrew J. McKiernan, 'The Message', *Midnight Echoes*, Australian Horror Writers Association

Review of finalists

Paul Haines, 'Slice of Life - A Spot of Liver', *Slice of Life*, The Mayne Press JOINT WINNER

Paul Haines, 'Wives', *X6*, Coeur de Lion Publishing JOINT WINNER

'Wives' by Paul Haines in *X6* is cleverly crafted to force the reader to adjust from known parameters to the story's world, starting with a very simple image of a man in love with a girl in a country town, then, with hints and whispers, revealing that this world is not our own. The story is of a boy's coming of age as he tries desperately to assimilate his upbringing and his mother's values - that women are not simply property - within a society where property is everything. The real danger of the Australian values of mateship and mates before dates is shown in stark reality. The dialect and language are appropriate to the scene and set the distance between today's Australia and a future where we are more isolated and "countrified". It is a story of

isolationism and the ease with which those who are cut off learn hate for "the other". It comments on the brutality of mutilation and the reaction of our protagonist when he discovers he has no pity or empathy, just bitter resentment for his own loss. It is a story of despair— a mother's despair and the despair of giving up hope when love fails. This bleak story is haunting, and the realism of this unreality is truly horrifying.

'Slice of Life— A Spot of Liver' by Paul Haines was one of the boldest entries in the horror genre for 2009 and delves into the darker side of humanity. The story of a man with a good job, a mortgage and a sound-proofed basement is well written and readable. He lives alone, indulging in the pleasures of good red wine and freshly cooked liver. The revelation of his secret is caused by his mother coming to stay for a few days. The unfolding horrific elements have a very high "yuck" factor but are unashamed and raw. Haines has a wickedly dark sense of humour and has written a story that is immediately engaging with vivid imagery and clever word play.

Felicity Dowker, 'Jesse's Gift', *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* #40
—Jesse's Gift is a very disturbing story. The image of the Ice Cream Man is nightmarish and vivid, using the awful tension of a horror character in a child's world. The relationship between the two children is very believable, bringing a strong sense of poignancy and fatalism to the horror.

Christopher Green, 'Having Faith', *Nossa Morte*
'Having Faith' is one of the growing number of stories written from a female perspective. What at first seems to be a simple story, fast becomes a relentless journey into the unknown depths of religion, sex and possession. The idea that a tattoo will scar deeper than just skin is carefully crafted from the tattooist's point of view. This is a powerful and surprising entry that stays in the mind long after the story is over.

Andrew J. McKiernan, —The Message, *Midnight Echoes*, Australian Horror Writers Association

—The Message is an old tale done very well. The ambience and loneliness of a single motel room is used to good effect as the story unfolds. The mysterious messages add to Marion's despair, but lead her to realisation and ultimate action.

Conclusion

The entries that made both the novel and short story lists of finalists distinguished themselves. The panel was pleased to see entries that departed from the current craze of vampire stories, and those that were —blood-sucking— at least adding some original elements. The finalists are unafraid to explore a genre that has been misunderstood and neglected, but is becoming a growing power in Australian speculative literature. They evoked powerful and uncomfortable imagery without resorting to 'shock tactics'. The stories were unsettling, frightening and occasionally disturbing, but all with a purpose.