

## 2014 *takahē* Short Story Competition

### Judge's Report

As the judge for *Takahe's* 2014 story competition, I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to dive into so many different worlds! I was struck by the wide variety of both settings and styles amongst the entries. It's impressive to see how many writers we have who are unafraid of experimenting, whether it's with narrative voice, structure, or both.

The gritty humour and clear-eyed realism for which Kiwi filmmakers are renowned are clearly also strong elements in our fiction. In addition to this, many of the stories were extremely moving. In spite of large-scale backdrops, there tended to be a focus on close and sometimes claustrophobic relationships, and the attendant emotions such as jealousy or grief: wonderfully powerful engines to drive short fiction.

I was particularly drawn to stories that in some way embodied the maxim *Come to a scene late, leave it early*. In other words, I was looking for a story that catapulted readers straight into a scene, revealing character and back story through dialogue and action rather than description – and that wrapped up with a satisfying but not-too-tidy resolution.

Confidence and creative energy were what made certain stories stand out. For these reasons I chose *Thief* (by Anahera Gildea) as the winning story. Each time I read it I was struck afresh by the confidence of the narrative voice: deceptively casual, colloquially slangy, yet underlaid with an unfaltering authorial control. The story is pitched perfectly between a rough, almost brutal insouciance and something close to pathos. The beginning is arresting and strong, the ending delicate and unexpectedly quiet. There's also some great original imagery here. This is one of those works that takes an ordinary setting and illuminates it in such a way that it sears itself into our memories.

*Freedom* (by Kate Mahony), in second place, displayed a similar ability to launch us directly into the middle of a protagonist's life. In just a few pages we're offered vivid glimpses into three different worlds, and we see the chance moment at which these worlds intersect. The narrator's claustrophobic life situation and suppressed rage is skilfully woven into the present-day scene. This is a deft portrayal of familiar everyday life and the tragedies – potential or actual – that lurk beneath. Characters are convincingly drawn with a few vital brushstrokes. Ambiguity is key here, and it's dealt with beautifully.

The two Highly Commended stories, *The Girl Behind The Bar* and *Step on a Crack*, both display a blend of restraint and intense emotion. *The Girl Behind The Bar* (by Patricia Bell) keeps the focus tight. Most of the story takes place in an ordinary Irish pub, a low-key setting for some startling revelations. There's a nice understated humour here, as well as a use of rhythm and repetition that shows a love of and care for language. *Step on a Crack* (by Eileen Merriman) is a

contemporary coming-of-age story – a familiar genre that’s lifted above the ordinary by the springy style and the fresh unexpected images.

**Sarah Quigley**

### **Results**

1<sup>st</sup> Place: “Thief” by Anahera Gildea, Island Bay, Wellington

2<sup>nd</sup> Place: “Freedom” by Kate Mahony, Hataitai, Wellington

Highly Commended: “The Girl Behind the Bar” by Patricia Bell, Remuera, Auckland

Highly Commended: “Step on a Crack” by Eileen Merriman, Mairangi Bay, Auckland