

JUDGE'S REPORT – JOHN GAVIN WRITING COMPETITION 2023

Brooke Dunnell

I was extremely impressed by the quality of entries submitted to the John Gavin Writing Competition across both the Schools and Open categories in 2023. Regardless of age or genre, all the writers who entered this year's competition showed engagement, creativity and commitment in responding to the theme.

Our contemporary understanding of the circumstances at the Pollard farm and the criminal case makes the John Gavin story ripe for creative exploration. The circumstances of another Pollard child having died in the months before George's murder along with the evidence given by Mrs Pollard at trial invited some writers to imagine different perpetrators and/or offer a variety of inciting events. One common quality across the submissions was a tone of compassion for a young convict sent across the world to the heat and tedium of a settler farm.

Entrants approached the story from a wide range of angles. Submissions took the perspective not only of John Gavin, but also relatives, fellow convicts, gaolers and officials, and even animals and Death. The physical setting was often Fremantle and the Roundhouse but also ventured from the Pollard farm at Dandalup back to the prison on the Isle of Wight and the boat journey to the Swan River Colony. In terms of temporal setting, writers depicted events that took place prior to, during and after the murder all the way to the present day, with characters impacted by the unceremonious burial in the Fremantle dunes.

As a reader, I was impressed by the range of genres used in approaching the John Gavin story. Some prose works were presented as just dialogue, letters or diary entries, while poetry came in the form of free verse as well as more traditional ballads. School-aged writers made use of the prompts provided, offering time travel, ghostly hauntings and surprising twists.

Having judged short and flash fiction competitions before, one feature of this year's entries that stood out to me was the quality of the endings. It's difficult to end a story as brief as 750 or 500 words, but many of the writers who submitted were able to offer final paragraphs and sentences that brought the narrative or poem to a thoughtful close.

Because of the high quality of the submissions, it was difficult to select the top entries in each category. My choice of two highly commended pieces in the Open category is designed to reflect this strong standard. Those writers who weren't recognised this year should be rightfully proud of their attempt and look out for the prompt in 2024.

In choosing the top entries, I am aware that the prose pieces each utilise the first-person point of view, while the poems take on the quality of the ballad. Of course, these creative choices are not objectively better than the third-person viewpoint or other poetic genres. In the case of this prompt, however, inventing a narrator with some relationship to John Gavin allows the reader swift access to the situation's context and complexity as well as immersion in the historical setting. The ballad style of poetry also reflects the era in which the case occurred, while also paying tribute to its narrative elements.

Finally, as pointed out in the Schools' prompts, it's important to remember that "Two people lost their lives in the case of John Gavin; George Pollard, the victim, and John Gavin himself." In addition, as several writers identified, Gavin was only the first European person to be hanged in Western Australia; the Aboriginal people who lived on this land for thousands of years prior to colonisation were put to death and suffered severe maltreatment by white officials long before the events of April 1844.

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RESULTS – SCHOOLS CATEGORY

First prize: 'The Bottom of the Pack' by Ziva Taylor

This story, written from the point of view of a fictional dog that accompanies John Gavin on the voyage to the Swan River Colony, cleverly embeds animal motifs into its narrative. The relationship between John and the dog, "two runts", lends reasoning and emotion to Gavin's crime, and the brief but vivid descriptions and deft use of dialogue are commendable.

Second prize: 'A Borrowed Murder' by Saoirse Farrell

'A Borrowed Murder' imagines an Aboriginal friend of John Gavin who considers the murder to be a form of justice for the atrocities white settlers have committed against the native

population and the land. Here, the narrative voice is distinct and sombre, and the writing style has a restrained quality that is highly sophisticated for a young writer.

Highly commended: ‘Voices’ by Piper Seear

This poem uses four-line stanzas with an ABCB rhyming scheme to enter into the mindset of the convict in the lead-up to and during the crime. Overall, it presents the story of John Gavin in a highly readable way, with the ballad style suiting the content well. Some of the rhymes are very clever, too.

RESULTS – OPEN CATEGORY

First prize: ‘The Southern Dunes’ by Emily Robertson

In this short story, a fellow Parkhurst boy talks to an older man about John Gavin as they dig his grave in the sand dunes. The writing style here is strongly controlled and the narrator’s language feels natural, absorbing readers in the scene. I found the ending to be particularly moving as it underlines the grim reality of the protagonist’s situation.

Second prize: ‘A Mother’s Vigil’ by Pip Brennan

Told from the viewpoint of John Gavin’s late mother, this story covers the unfortunate circumstances of his life and death. The vocabulary and details give context and allow for fifteen years to be covered in 750 words. The writer’s achievement is in using the mother’s voice to give readers a clear-eyed but compassionate impression of her “wicked bairn”.

Highly commended: ‘The Second Son’ by Stephen Scott

This is a foreboding tale that follows George Pollard’s younger brother, Thomas on the day of the murder. ‘The Second Son’ uses both violent and religious imagery to depict the mindset of a character driven mad by jealousy, dogma and heat. Readers are drawn into the world and ‘logic’ of Thomas, a highly—and dangerously—unreliable narrator.

Highly commended: ‘Send Not For Whom the Bell Tolls’ by Claire Watson

Also written as four-line stanzas with an ABCB rhyme scheme, this poem depicts the scene of John Gavin’s hanging and burial. The poet has given particular attention to the event’s Easter setting, evoking the sound of the church bells along with other religious motifs to explore the meaning and ongoing impact of Gavin’s execution.