

Judge's Report, Fremantle Round House John Gavin Writing Competition 2024

The John Gavin Writing Competition explores a significant moment in colonial history, here on Whadjuk Noongar country. I'd like to begin by acknowledging Noongar elders past and present.

It was a privilege to judge this year's John Gavin writing competition, nearly two centuries after young John Gavin was executed for murder in the Swan River Colony. Many thanks to the Fremantle Volunteer Heritage Guides Association for entrusting this task to me.

I found the process both enriching and challenging because I enjoyed and admired *all* of the inventive submissions. Before I comment on the prize-winners, I'd like to commend everyone who submitted an entry. While I can only award a limited number of prizes, every piece shone and spoke to me in its own way.

I'd like to celebrate our youngest entrant in this year's competition—Angus McKenzie, aged nine—who wrote a thought-provoking poem full of creative rhymes and ideas. *Who is John Gavin?* reminds us that while we focus on one young man's crime and punishment in this competition, none of us is immune to misfortune. It is also worth remembering that while John Gavin was the first European executed on our soil, he was not the first person to suffer at the hands of colonial authorities. As another entry, *Church Bells and Chains of Civilisation* by Jane Lawton, reminds us, too many Indigenous people have lost their lives here without having committed a crime like Gavin's, if any crime at all.

Many aspects of composition are subconscious, but others require us to make creative decisions. As writers, we can decide which details to emphasise, whose perspectives to explore, how deeply we'll dive into their internal landscapes, and how close we'll get to the action. I loved the variation in the perspectives chosen by competition entrants. Among them were the viewpoints of government officials, a postmaster, a young bystander, John's victim George Pollard, several ghostly narrators, John Gavin himself, a bird lost in his own migration nightmare, and the walls of the Round House, bearing witness. The variety of forms was also noteworthy: we had short stories, ballads, rhyming poetry, a letter, a diary, and a script for the stage or the screen.

Within those different forms, our writers found many creative ways to approach John Gavin's story. Some found rich terrain in combining the horrors of his crime with the competition's nightmare motif, while others sought to understand his crime by examining the harrowing conditions he endured during and after his transportation to Australia. Some stories imagined Gavin to be innocent of the crime while others posited him as motivated by revenge, trauma, or self-defence. Some entrants created tension and curiosity by exploiting the gap between what their characters feared or wanted, and what a reader today might already know about unfolding events.

In the midst of all this creative energy and diversity, the winning entries were those that carried me along in sure hands and kept me engaged by appealing to as many of my senses as possible and by drawing on the competition themes in inventive and engaging ways. Mastery of craft elements went a long way: sentence-length variation, originality and clarity

of expression, controlled word and tense usage, careful editing, and specificity in anchoring the piece in its setting. A hearty congratulations to all the prize-winners and commended writers, and to all of you who worked hard to bring John Gavin's crime and punishment to life on the page.

WA STUDENTS CATEGORY

1st Prize

***Inner Turmoil* by Charlotte Lund** is an engaging exploration of a criminal's interiority as he remembers his crime while in his cell. The first-person point-of-view allows readers to access John Gavin's troubled thoughts in his dream-like state. Variation in sentence lengths creates an engaging rhythm and a sense of immediacy, while an erratic, disrupted rhythm towards the end reflects Gavin's spiralling thoughts as he runs out of time. Past and present seem to collapse in on each other as the pace accelerates towards his execution. This sophisticated use of form to reflect internality, together with a strong use of similes, creative word choices, closely observed details, haunting imagery, and a well-crafted voice, set this piece apart as the first-prize winner.

2nd Prize

***Rag Doll* by Flynn Mills** is a poem voiced by a bird, lost in his own 'migration nightmare' and witnessing the harrowing transportation of John Gavin and his peers to Western Australia. A striking use of imagery and phrasing in this piece is both engaging and evocative. For example, 'straight to the dungeon of the paddocks, with no reward for charm,' creates an immediate understanding of the punishing fieldwork the Parkhurst boys would have endured. In this compassionate take on Gavin's story, the bird-narrator empathises with Gavin as he is robbed of his innocence, and dreams of a better future for all the young men transported to the colony. The bird's eventual freedom provides a stirring contrast with Gavin's captivity and execution.

Highly Commended

***Nightmare* by Delilah Grinham** is a vivid recreation of John Gavin's execution through the eyes of a young bystander of around Gavin's age. Clarity of expression, deft characterisation, a well-paced delivery, and some closely observed historical details made this an engaging read, from the shocked point of view of a sheltered young man born into relative privilege.

Highly Commended

***The Knot of the Noose* by Adele McWaters-Smith** makes good use of sensory details and imagery to create a vivid sense of place as John Gavin faces his final night alive, in his cell. Readers are drawn into Gavin's inner monologue that touches on his motive for killing George Pollard and uses similes to engaging effect.

Congratulations to the prize-winners and highly commended writers in the WA Students category!

OPEN CATEGORY

1st Prize

***The Boy in the Dunes* by Marie McLean**, vivid dreams and a vision link the first European hanged in Western Australia (John Gavin) to the last (Eric Edgar Cooke, executed in 1964). The story includes vivid details and a strong sense of place, particularly in its depiction of the Round House itself. Witnessing Cooke's execution in the light of Gavin's hanging 120 years earlier, we are invited to contemplate degrees of guilt, evil and culpability. Haunting imagery and lyrical, evocative prose, combined with deftly incorporated historical context, made this an original, compelling, and prize-winning response to the competition's topic and themes.

2nd Prize

***Quarantine* by Emily Robertson** is an intriguing and well-composed take on the character of John Gavin, through the eyes of a fellow Parkhurst boy transported on board *The Shepherd*. Set before Gavin's crime, this story uses strong sensory and historical details, measured prose, and a well-controlled pace to depict Gavin as a quiet, coiled risk to all who would challenge him. By having the narrator experience a premonition of a farmland covered in blood, the writer creates tension in the gap between what readers already know and what the narrator can't yet see, namely, just what Gavin is capable of.

Highly Commended

***May God Have Mercy* by Lynn Cairns** is an internal monologue in the engaging, conversational voice of an imagined John Gavin. Haunted by his victim, George Pollard, Gavin expresses his shock at having killed him and laments over the lost world of home. In a piece rich with disillusionment, John reminisces about daffodils, greenery, and his mother's affection back home, comparing it to the heat, loneliness and confinement that characterise his life in the colony. Close attention to detail, a sustained accented style, and John's visceral reaction to his crime made this a commendable submission.

Highly Commended

***All Their Worlds* by Wendy Beach** is a script for stage or screen in which John Gavin and George Pollard are in love, exchanging flirtatious banter and dreaming of a new world together. When Mrs Pollard discovers their secret, she is enraged, taking steps to ensure that their future world is lost forever. Dialogue and stage directions bring the story, characters, themes, and dream/nightmare motifs to life in creative and original ways, offering an alternative history to the one accepted by the court in 1844.

Congratulations to the prize-winning and highly commended writers in the Open category!

Again, I'd like to thank the John Gavin Writing Competition Sub-Committee and the Fremantle Volunteer Heritage Guides Association of the Fremantle Round House for giving me the honour of judging this year's John Gavin Writing Competition. And to all those who submitted an entry: thank you, well done, and please keep writing.