

Viva La Novella IV – Selecting the novella

By Tom Langshaw

The selection process for Viva la Novella consumed my life during January, so most of my reading took place against a summery, optimistic backdrop. But looking back through the marginalia I scribbled at the time, I realise the pathos of the enterprise: how generously you begin, and how brutally you finish it. The final judgement required me to pit excellent pieces of writing against each other, to begin with an open mind but close it, gradually, like a noose around the winning entry.

If you'll excuse the brutal analogy, it captures not only my predicament as the Viva judge, but the brutal demands of the novella form. Given the word limit – between 20,000 and 50,000 words – writers were asked to make sacrifices as they crafted their novellas: no sprawling cast of characters; few (if any) subplots; committing to a mood, a style. The novella doesn't honour the middle ground, and certainly doesn't accommodate a novel-length narrative trimmed to 49,999 words.

My first round of reading the entries – over 100 of them – involved separating the 'maybe' from the 'no' pile to arrive at a (very) longlist of nearly half. The second round brought me to a shortlist of six novellas – the 'yes' pile. In the third round, I made my final verdict.

The first round was by far the easiest: a simple thumbs up, thumbs down. To make the longlist, writers needed to observe some basic narrative housekeeping: show, don't tell; establish a clear voice; immerse readers in a scene detail by detail, building the novella's world from the ground up.

I also needed to accept the premise of the novella – the frame within which I would eventually be editing it – and many suffered by comparison with other entries, wading into familiar territory: naturalistic writing styles in the vein of much of Australian literary fiction; first-person narration in a confessional voice; writing that was too meta, self-aware or deeply figurative to build the foundations of character or plot. Deviating from the perspective of a middle-aged white man – the most common narrator trope – was a plus.

If the first round meant reading the novellas collectively, as a cohort, to reach a shortlist I needed to read each one individually, on their own terms. As I made my way through the entries, I moved from a distant posture of reading a group of prize entries to considering them within a hypothetical realm as their editor: what would my structural and copy edits look like? Those that I felt would benefit from my editorial intervention made the final six.

For these reasons, the novella I ended up choosing stood out from the crowd and, more importantly, works well on its own terms: a decidedly unrealistic setting, firmly rooted in the spec-fic genre tradition; dreamlike and eerie in atmosphere – a novella that takes risks.

I mentioned that I needed to close my mind to arrive at a longlist, a shortlist and a winner. I hope these notes also, paradoxically, show that I allowed myself, with each new (re)reading, to open my mind to the possibilities and puzzles that each story presented.