Brenda Strathern Writing Prize
Recipients 2001-2026 with Jury Comments

2026 Jam Michael McDonald for *This is Afterlife!*
"From the very first long and strong sentence, I was pulled into this story. It is romantic but with weight and blood and grief. I read not knowing where the next sentence will take me but I trust this writer because the writing is strong, the structure of the story, solid."

"This writing explores the crossroads for two men in a comfortable relationship, searching for meaning in a complicated world. This writer is committed to emotional stakes."

2026 Honourable Mention: Allison Dempster for *Lost Quarry*
"A strongly written Alberta Badlands story with promise of secrets, romance and discovery. All the promise of an excellent novel."

"This writing is smooth and exhibits a sense of humour that, along with excellent pacing, fully engages the reader. This writer is committed to craft."

2026 Honourable Mention: Liana Hwang for *The Wolf*
"An important document of a worldwide pandemic. What sets this one a part is its Prairie setting and that the reader gets inside a doctor's world. The non linear timeline makes this Covid-19 tale fresh."

"This writer approaches a covid story with a stealthy gaze, and, through effective use of 2nd POV, asks the reader into a slaughterhouse. Ultimately, this writer is looking for answers."

2025 Tanya MacIntosh for *Recipes from Beyond the Grave*
"The writer carefully combines clever language, deft character work and a strong voice to concoct this incisive and funny short story."

2025 Honourable Mention: Kathleen Brown for *City Disappearing (Excerpts from)*
"A slow moving - as if in water-- poetic experience of Calgary's 2013 flooding: the city, nature and characters unmoored with the rising current of the river."

2025 Honourable Mention: William Austin for *My Life as played out on Desert Island Discs*
"This writer takes us back in time with a quirky, detailed, stream-of-conscious piece about family, displacement, hypochondria, galenic crystals, and more. Structurally interesting."

2024 Anna Shannon for *The Lady Wife*
"From button jars to lining papers, this is a story experienced through seductive details. The reader is situated immediately into another time, 1932, in the dead of winter in Calgary, a city both familiar and nostalgic where women toil and worry and make sure both daughters and family secrets are protected. The writing is beautiful, replete with passages evoking masterful imagery and impact."

""The Lady Wife" is a subtle and compelling story of a woman's life in 1930s Calgary, as she faces invisibility. Hints of betrayal emerge. The writer's deft handling of both historical and emotional arcs is admirable."
annawordsgood.com

2024 Honourable Mention: Victoria Bailey for *Petals*

2024 Honourable Mention: Lorna Carley for *The Wheatfield*

2023 Melanee Murray-Hunt for *Moesha's Mass*
""Moesha's Mass" is a story that takes leaps of faith. The voice is strong. The writer plays with language and form, and asks the reader: what do you want? This writer is ambitious."
www.melaneemurray.com

2023 Honourable Mention: Jennifer McDougall for *Offshoots*
""Offshoots" is a story about family that invites you into their celebration. Contribute, as best you can, there is space for you here at the table. This writing has emotional depth, slowly drawing the reader into the centre of family life—connection. This writer cares."

2023 Honourable Mention: James Sheasby for *Quiver*
""Quiver" is a romp of a story that pulls you into an alternate world. The main character is rebellious and vulnerable. The writing is energetic and persistent."

2022 Linda Schulz for *Where the Hopes Go*
"From its first sentence, "Where the Hopes Go" seduces the reader with quirky characters, startling sentences and a humorous defamiliarized perspective. The author's energetic prose lifts each page right into the reader's heart."

"This writer takes risks."

2021 Carmen Wittmeier for *Walls*
""Walls" impressed the judges with its sophisticated and imaginative depiction of the slow, inexorable disappearance of community into complete societal isolation. An apt and unsettling metaphor for the present pandemic, but also for a society as a whole."

"Complex, subtle, and compelling writing. In the deft hands of an accomplished writer springs a story of the walls that confound and block us, that inspire and force us to face that which is essential—human connection. This writer is wise."

2021 Honourable Mention: Brenda Damen for *Footage*
""Footage" is a chilling look into the depraved minds of two men driving down remote logging road. The driver's young daughter, forced along, narrates in a matter-of-fact voice that leaves the reader shaken long after the last page is turned."

"Footage is terrifying. In the writers capable hands, we follow a young girl on a journey into evil. Cinematic in form and function, the story barrels to the jump-nervous conclusion that someone is out there, watching. This writer is brave."

2021 Honourable Mention: Linda Schulz for *Not Dead Yet*
""Not Dead Yet" is a dialogue-driven fast-paced two-step whose energetic off-the-wall characters dance their rendition of historic Calgary."

"Risky, humorous, energetic writing that demands the reader follow up, down, and all around The Palace Hotel. Cinematic in style, this writing has great potential. This writer is ballsy."

2020 Jennifer Warriner for *The Apocalypse was Nearly Here*
"An entirely convincing and wonderfully engaging depiction of an adolescent girl who wants to break free of the domestic restrictions imposed by her single mother and gain the acceptance of her school-age peers. The dialogue sparkles, the storytelling is replete with narrative momentum, and the similes are well chosen

without seeming contrived. This is a nicely polished piece of writing by an author who has obviously worked hard at their craft."

"A restless, rebellious 13-year-old girl named Annie seeks freedom from her nearly appointed and mystifying title of social outcast by befriending a religious boy obsessed with building a tower. Annie thinks he knows something she doesn't but discovers an important lesson about faith in fellow humans. Thanks to the writer for taking me back to my 13-year-old self with a curiosity for the nuances of a girl coming of age in her confusing, nuclear bomb obsessed world."

2020 Honourable Mention: Linda Schulz for *Not Dead Yet*
"This imaginative and humorous story, set in 1950s Calgary, involves a large cast of vivid and interesting characters as they prepare for 'The Last Best West' Tea Dance at The Palace. Royalty is expected. This energetic story, with shades of Wes Anderson movies, takes risks, and asks the reader to have faith that all will be revealed. Of interest, the history of Germantown is explored."

2019 Cari Frame for *Fertile Ground*
"A skillfully crafted account of a woman taking stock of her life and finding little to cheer about except that she raised a daughter she can now call upon in times of need. With effective use of imagery and descriptive detail, the author uses the confessional outpourings of her guilt-ridden protagonist to paint a vivid picture of pain, regret, loneliness and grief."

2019 Honourable Mention: Donna Williams for *Transplant*
"This submission shows deft use of language, character, and includes exquisite detail. The author has a strong command of voice, tone, and a keen instinct for theme. The judges hope to read more from this talented writer."

2018 Barry Thorson for *Dust*
"Making striking use of religious and literary allusions, while injecting occasional dollops of welcome humour, this writer introduces us to a likeable, fully-realized, flawed character that one would like to meet again in other stories. Sam Barrow is a former actress currently making a modest living as a liberator of trapped souls. Most of her clients are prisoners of faith communities who want to be set free. But today's client is different: a disillusioned Franciscan friar who wants to revivify his vocation. The two have a stimulating conversation under the stars about life, love and one's purpose here on Earth until both achieve an epiphany of sorts. An added bonus for the reader (and listener) is the author's nod to an unidentified snatch of song on the radio that turns out to be (but not revealed by the author) "The Lass of Aughrim" from James Joyce's haunting short story, "The Dead." On many levels, a most satisfying read."

"This deftly crafted short story starts off dark and sardonically; then surprises the reader by taking a serious dive into the nature of religious faith, creativity, and doubt (among other things!) There's a lot to digest and contemplate and I admire the writer's ability to weave very big questions together in a manner that didn't make my eyes glaze over. The banter between the narrator and her clients is terrific and occasionally made me laugh out loud; the writer is to be commended for expertly written dialogue."

2018 Honourable Mention: Sherryl Melnyk for *Shithawk Eggs*
"The sense of wonder and awe that a seven-year-old girl feels when she finds 28 newly-hatched chicks in her grandmother's barn is nicely captured in this excerpt about spring life on a Manitoba farm. What to do after finding the birds? The writer offers up a succession of imaginative solutions for the seven-year-old to try. They allow her to protect and nurture birds while simultaneously attempting to keep her actions hidden from her grandmother. Through describing this process, the writer expertly crafts an authentic voice to highlight a child's way of seeing the world."

"I loved the voice of the young narrator, and her love for the baby birds. The writer beautifully evoked life on the farm in prose that was attentive to detail but never verbose, and very sensory. (I could almost smell the milk that makes the narrator gag.)"

2018 Honourable Mention: Cara Violini for *Sidewinder*
"While a 1970s' pop-rock soundtrack thumps pleasingly in the background, the writer grabs the reader quickly and never lets go. The tale starts with a dramatic account of a drunk-driving highway accident after which the author propels the story forward with elan, energy, vivid dialogue and a strong sense of urgency. This takes the reader to the inevitable dire consequences of a teenager's dumb decision to get behind the wheel after consuming three times the legal limit."

"Mere pages into the excerpt from the YA novel Sidewinder, the writer had me engaged and empathizing with the main character, Dexter, a young musician who, having already experienced a great deal of dysfunction and heartbreak in his life, brings on more when he steals his father's vintage car after a night of drinking. I liked how the rhythm of the sentences mirrored the fractious relationships in the story, and the general staccato nature of adolescence. I wanted to know more about all of the characters and look forward to reading the completed story."

2017 Laura Nicol for *Watershed*
"Watershed, a novel excerpt filled with resonance and beautiful language, presents the sharply-etched story of Flora, an intelligent disgruntled 13-year-old, hauled, along with her three younger siblings, into the dystopian dreams of her embarrassing hippy step-dad and mom. Every sentence thrills as setting and suspense ably intermingle and Flora's already-tenuous world reels deeper into chaos."

"With a sharp eye for description and effective use of similes, the author offers the reader a gracefully written account of a dysfunctional family where the father – who thinks most city dwellers are unenlightened – sets out to create his own society in a ghost town where he expects the few remaining residents to share his idiosyncratic view of the world."
lauranicolca.wordpress.com

2016 First Place: Patti Edgar for *Personal Flotation Devices*
"This story provided an interesting and complex portrayal of mother-daughter relationships. With crisp writing infused with both humour and heartbreak, this author pulled me in, wanting to know what would happen to the characters after the story had ended. The author showed a strong ability to convey characters and emotions subtly, revealing through actions and dialogue, letting the reader draw their own conclusions."

"With economy of words, careful attention to the smallest of details, and vivid descriptive passages, this writer effectively captures the hopes and dreams of a pregnant 19-year-old who looks forward to escaping to

something better after spending her life on a float home moored to a small island off the West Coast. The writer seamlessly weaves into the story a compelling portrayal of the lingering tension between the 19-year-old and the flaky mother who abandoned her as a child."
www.pattiedgar.ca
Published: "Anna, Analyst"

2016 Second Place: Lila Z. Rose for *Shooting Under the Influence*
"This author showed a willingness and capacity to play with the elements of fiction, providing a fresh and hilarious look at pop-culture through a non-traditional narrator. The story read like a cross between a reality TV show and magic realism - a refreshing read!"

"A pill-addicted Cupid goes to Malibu on Valentine's Day to crash a wedding and spread love all round. A clever, amusing, energetically written and highly imaginative merging of classical mythology with contemporary pop culture."

2016 Third Place: Barry Thorson for *Helden's Cascade*
"While stories about religion and life in the priesthood often fall into cliché, this author showed a willingness to delve into perhaps uncomfortable subjects in fresh, unapologetic, and novel ways. The Catholic Church's views on sexual dreams, aggression, vices, money, and astronomy are all interesting fodder for a novel, especially one, like this in which the writing is strong. Certainly, this excerpt left me, the reader, wanting more."

"The forbidden pleasures of the monastic life – self-gratification and material possessions – are explored with empathy and avoidance of moral judgments in this engaging piece about the residents of a Franciscan retreat centre. A rare look into the life of a sheltered community that remains inaccessible to most of us."
Published "Unbalanced: The Rise and Fall of Anglo the Juggler" and "The Stepmother's Story"

2016 Honourable Mention: Rosemary Bussi for *Bleets*
"This excerpt showed the writer's potential to experiment with structure, form, language, and character. The author shows an awareness of the basic concepts of creative writing and both a willingness and a capacity to subvert them for the story's purpose."

"With a few deft strokes, the writer brings us an eclectic and impressionistic collection of memories from childhood, adulthood and old age with a psychologist's insight and a poet's command of language."

2015 First Place: Douglas McCormick for *Gift of Mercy*
"This excerpt is very polished in terms of language and is the work of a writer who is aware of the power of specific detail – there is definitely a sense of craft and meticulousness in this work. The writer's skill is further reflected in the story's pacing which draws the reader in immediately. As a judge I was particularly impressed by this writer's ability to subtly and sensitively portray a foreign setting and culture without relying on excessive explanation. This writing has terrific potential.

This was an engaging story that demonstrates how this author can play with language and experiment with other elements of fiction, such as time and structure. The language was polished and the setting detail was rich. The story started with immediate drama and tension and engaged me as a reader; the tension was then drawn out, compelling me to read more. I look forward to reading more from this author!"

2015 Second Place: Heidi Grogan for *The Shape of a Boy*
"This excerpt does a very fine job of marrying form and content in a way that is unusual, unpredictable, and refreshing."

"The unusual, experimental use of "hunger" as the narrator drew me in and allowed for an interesting angle on a difficult, but societally relevant subject matter that needs more attention - anorexia in males and the impact of an eating disorder on families."
www.heidigrogan.ca

2015 Third Place: Erin Butler for *The Half-Life of Desire*
"The characters in this novel excerpt are sharply rendered as they grapple with their various situations, and the setting is compelling and immediate."

"The tension and urgency of the story drew me in, as did the interesting relationship dynamics between the narrator and her two male friends, along with the narrator and her complex family situation."

2015 Third Place: Jacqueline Bell for *Small Measures of Mercy*
"This work experiments with chronology and form in a way that is distinctive and engrossing. Flitting back and forth between memory and present day was an interesting choice that drew out the tension as to what really happened to the narrator, letting the reader discover details along with her. The author told the story with rich details about the church setting and its characters."
www.jacquelineabell.com

2014 Jennifer Myers for *Girl Farm*
"It was clear that the author is aware of the different ways to push the boundaries in fiction and creatively explored genre, subject matter, and point of view (employing both first and third points of view for different characters within the same novel). The willingness to take risks is a good sign in terms of this writer's potential. Both primary characters were round and interesting, and I wanted to know how they would intersect. This piece used vivid sensory details, such as the rotting smell of decaying produce, the bloodied sheets, the infant with her arm "poked forward, then up in a furious salute," the skin sticky with birth fluid. The tension was well maintained through switching point of view just as Homer steals the infant."

2013 Kat Main for "Odin's Girls" and "Hocus Pocus" from a novel in progress titled *The Hanged Man*
"The rich characterization, authentic dialogue, interwoven humour and pain, and sensory details revealed a great deal of potential from this author. The two excerpts complimented each other well, and the narrator's unique point of view and brutal honesty made her both relatable and human. I look forward to reading more from this author."

2012 Rea Tarvydas for *21:23*
"This story plunges the reader into a wholly unusual and surprising barroom world of midnight confessions and scrap currency. The story is both risky and darkly humorous. It is unquestionably original. It is both topsy and turvy. Conversational and confident. Yes, these qualities make for an unconventional story, but it is a memorable one. And that is why I look forward to reading the rest of this tale, in its entirety, in book form. Congratulations to the author, that blank face at the end of the bar, whoever you are, and thank you for sending it to this contest."
www.reatarvydas.com
Published "How to Pick up a Maid in Statue Square"

2011 Maria (Marika) Smythe for *Little Mother Goose*
"A wonderfully subtle and yet energetic story that unfolds the off-balance world of children and their parents. The writing is fresh and evocative with a restrained pitch that is nevertheless replete with suggestion and ominous surmise. This is a remarkably incisive writer who knows the lineaments of language and dialogue, character and its disposition."

2010 Marika Deliyannides for *Scar Tissue*
"Replete with keenly observed details and a gentle narrative thrust, this is a skillfully told story about an adult daughter coming home to help her parents move into a seniors' lodge. Long-buried skeletons topple out of the closet as the woman recalls some of the often painful and guilty memories of her childhood with a younger sister from whom she is now estranged, and an old-country father with a heavy accent who used to make her feel embarrassed when she was among friends. The specificity of details in this piece draw the reader in to a warm and quirky world that is full of surprises."
www.marikadeliyannides.com
Published "Bitter Lake"

2009 Rita Sirignano for *RATS*
"With clever and imaginative digressions, and deft touches of humour, the author takes the reader on a daydreamy nostalgia ride back and forth from the atmosphere of mild exasperation and sense of isolation that define the narrator's current domestic life to a time when her life in the big city was enriched by art,

music, highly-charged emotions, and the quest for lasting love. Particularly amusing are the author's images of an Inuit fisherman composing an essay about the blues roots of the Rolling Stones, and the narrator's future husband presuming to correct the grammar in a Dylan song title. At the end of the chapter, the reader wants to find out more about the lover she lost and the reasons she settled for a self-absorbed pedant."

2008 Athene Evans for *Saturday Dinners*
"This story presents a handful of vivid and interesting characters negotiating alliances across the dinner table. The author individuates the numerous voices well, presenting the characters chiefly through dialogue with understated skill. When the Playgirl loving grandmother squares off against her husband for loving National Geographic the result is witty exasperating, and, ultimately, credible."

2007 Elaine Morin for *Castration Lessons*
"The final selection was ultimately chosen because of the varied and dynamic writing style, layered storyline and immersive detail. The author demonstrated a strong command of both language and narrative. Rich landscapes, both geographical and emotional, interweave in rare honesty and quiet, but potent beauty. The characters and the story's vivid, authentic details of place linger. This is a writer of genuine promise who creates a rich and disconcerting tension between belonging and dislocation, and who handles rural and urban details with equal skill. The work shows someone with already significant mastery of her craft."
www.eedeemorin.com

2006 Christopher Ratcliffe for *Kvas* excerpt from a novel in progress
"This year's winning story excelled by plunging the judges into its ruined, semi-urban landscape where defamiliarized detail yielded tragic lovable characters slipping into their idiosyncratic fantasies in an attempt to usurp the grip of monotony on their lives. This entry captured the convoluted nature of desperation and the minimalism of hope with humour and sophistication. While there were other strong entries, and while no entry was without its shortcomings, this story's emotional impact was unmatched. We ultimately felt that this story encapsulated the spirit of the Late Bloomer's Award."

2005 Jane Chamberlin Grove for *Tramontane*
Tramontane offers a complex and rich character who wryly makes her way through a narrative filled with unusual and intriguing situations. The Judges were impressed by the compelling voice this writer presents and the strong love of language demonstrated in these sections.

2004 Kari Strutt for *Birdied*
Birdied showcases a skillfully crafted comic voice that treats the grave subject of infertility with characterization while juxtaposing the game of golf with the difficulties of the body produces a fiction that is as fresh and disarming as a hole-in-one.

2003 Lucille Gnanasihamany for *Nothing Personal*
"*Nothing Personal* is a wonderful short story encompassing the unraveling complications of family dynamics. The story skillfully yet subtly uncovers how one's own frustrations and prejudices erode a family unit, and ostracize the holder of such feelings from those central to his life. The strength of the story lies in the fact that the author resolves these intricacies neither easily nor neatly, thus drawing the reader into unnerving complicity."

2002 Fran Kimmel
"The quirky and the domestic collide in this year's Late Bloomer's fiction winner. Rather than succumbing to the neatness of closure, Fran Kimmel defies predictability, celebrating the unexpected, the unusual, the murkiness of the everyday. Her writing cuts through the mundane, invites a complicity with betrayal. Her characters struggle in shallow waters, all the while urging readers to plunge head-first into the deep end."
www.frankimmel.ca
Published "The Shore Girl," "No Good Asking," and "Cattail Lane: A Novel."

2001 Rona Altrows
"Rona Altrows writes about women with uncommon grace and honesty. In the tradition of Grace Paley, Altrows' stories capture deep philosophical issues within everyday physical details and events, often with a wry astuteness that made me want to laugh and cry and sit down with these people for a talk. No matter what her circumstance in life, each character in these stories shines with the dignity and beauty that come with compassionate observation. In a style that is at once spare and elegant, oral and physically palpable, Altrows pens stories that resonate far beyond the page."
www.ronaaltrows.com
Published "At This Juncture: A Book of Letters," "A Run on Hose," "Key in Lock," and "The River Throws a Tantrum," a children's picture chapbook, illustrated by Sarah-Joy Goode.