

Overall Summary re the 31st Blackened Billy Verse Competition

Due to the longevity of its running -- 1991 onwards to the present -- and the high standard of its judging and co-ordination, the Blackened Billy ranks at the top of the competitions for written bush verse in Australia. To retain its reputation and standards, annually the 'Billy' is run according to strict guidelines and adjudicated on merit by a team of three qualified, experienced and accredited judges.

Respect for the Billy and its standing is reflected in the caliber of entries with poets deeming it important enough to submit their finest work, pouring their hearts out and expressing their thoughts and ideas with great talent and intensity.

Over the years, this iconic competition has retained its need for poems to be about Australia, Australians and our way of life. The more traditional poems about our historical and colourful past, the bush, war and the outback are all welcome but the Billy has expanded its dimensions to incorporate all aspects and issues of modern Australians living in city, coastal, rural, riverland, mountain and desert regions. This encouraged diversity of subject matter is reflected in the broad spectrum of entries received annually and this year has been no exception.

Additionally, while the need for the twin pillars of the Australian Bush Poetry *genre* – accurate rhyme and metre – remain as the initial criterion for success, this competition also allows and gives credence to experimentation with both these aspects of poetic form. Together with accreditation being given for story, imagery, language, flow and impact, this ensures that the Billy is in harmony with, and accepted by, the wider mainstream community.

The legacy of the Blackened Billy has passed down from the originators and long-term custodians – Jan Morris and the Tamworth Poetry Reading Group – through the Australian Bush Poets Association and on into the impassioned care of the current co-ordinator, Janine Keating of Gladstone.

The location of the Billy presentations has gone from Tamworth to Orange to Zoom but the surety is that, with the continued dedication and determination of all involved in its running and with the continual support of the bush poets who enter, The Blackened Billy Verse competition will go forth into the future as a prime showcase for our unique and culturally significant literary heritage.

Penned with thanks and for the love of poetry.

Brenda Joy

Blackened Billy Winner 2015, 2016

Blackened Billy Co-adjudicator 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021

2021 Blackened Billy Report

The consistently high standard of the majority of poems in this year's Blackened Billy created a real judging challenge because about sixty per cent of the 75 entries revealed an excellent command of metre and rhyme, and dealt persuasively with a range of issues. Topics covered included: the horror of war and its aftermath; the major problems, past and present, faced by our indigenous people; the stories of well-known historical figures; personal tragedy; convict settlement; the travails of life on the land; politics; and prospecting. And, as a break from serious matters, there were also a handful of rollicking humorous entries.

Usually in bush poetry competitions it's considerably fewer than half of the entries that come into serious contention, so it is a testament to the reputation of the Blackened Billy and the dedication of the organisers behind the scenes that so many well-written, carefully structured poems were submitted. Given the struggle to break through into the public consciousness that our traditional verse often has these days as the ranks of those of us who grew up reciting the poetry of Dennis, Lawson and Paterson decrease by the year, it is vital that competitions like this one continue to grow and prosper.

With that in mind, I'd like to spend a little time with some specific advice regarding the forty per cent of entries that didn't make my first cut. Apart from requiring appropriate language and "impeccable spelling and punctuation", the guidelines specify quite clearly that "accuracy of rhyme and metre is a predominant requirement". It is almost always the case that the weaker poems fail in their attention to rhyme and metre. The simplest rule with both is to establish a pattern in the first stanza, and then stick to it. Whatever structure you use, and there are many, it's important to show that you are in complete control of what you are doing. This is a test of skill, and should not be taken lightly.

With metre, it's a good idea to check the syllable count as you go, ensuring that the stresses are consistent within the structure you've chosen. For example, if you're working with masculine line-endings, where the stress is on the final syllable, don't suddenly throw in some random feminine line endings, where the stress is on the second-last syllable. You can get away with it in a performance competition, but on paper in black and white such variations suggest carelessness if they're not part of an obvious pattern. As I said before, control is essential in a written competition.

Likewise, near-enough rhymes will not pass muster. To take just a few examples of rhymes that don't work from this year's entries: "luck" and "rack"; "Hume" and "noon"; "name" and "comb"; "church" and "curse"; "hope" and "coped"; "here" and "bear"; "on" and "one"; "crocodiles" and "smile"; "passing" and "gasping"; "window" and "lingo"; "gully" and "dally". In a hard-fought competition like this, such errors will probably mean a waste of the entry fee.

As will basic mistakes with spelling and grammar. If these aren't your strength, ask someone else to check your work. Commas are a particular problem, with the "toss them around like confetti" approach quite common. A comma indicates a brief pause, so should only be used for that reason. For example, consider this line from an entry: "The culture in the forces, is a trial and a test..." There is no need for the comma after "forces" as there is no pause. Reading aloud what you have written can help sort out this problem.

And it's not enough to get the rhymes right and ensure the metre is consistent, for good bush poetry needs to flow smoothly, without obviously forced rhymes or lines where the

grammar has been strangled in order to fit the metre. If, in reading the poem aloud it doesn't sound natural, then change it till it does. This requires a lot of hard work and careful attention to detail. Anybody can put a few bouncy lines together with some "rhymes" here and there...the rappers do it all the time...but that's not competition-standard bush poetry. There are no short cuts to success.

Then, of course, there's the story. When up against dozens of other entries, many of which will focus on common themes such as war or drought, it can be an advantage to write about something out of the ordinary, or take an unusual approach to an old idea. The guidelines refer to the importance of "evocative impact"...or the "wow" factor. This can include anything from an innovative structure or rhyme scheme through to an imaginative use of language.

Finally, well done to those who have made it to the winners' list...you've really earned it! And to all others I say read the winning poems to see what sort of standard is required to meet the highest levels of a written competition, learn from them...and try again next time!

David Campbell
Blackened Billy Winner 2007, 2009, 2012, 2019
Blackened Billy Co-adjudicator 2021

2021 BLACKENED BILLY VERSE COMPETITION JUDGE'S REPORT

It was my great privilege to be included as a member of the adjudication panel for the *2021 Blackened Billy Verse Competition*, and I'd like to sincerely thank the hardworking organisers for giving me the opportunity to read such a wonderful selection of poetry from so many immensely talented wordsmiths. Special appreciation, as always, goes also to the tireless Jan Morris, who with her passion and dedication keeps the flame of this unique and prestigious *Billy* constantly burning.

I know only too well how much of a poet's heart and soul goes into crafting a poem, so can fully appreciate the enormous effort involved in the writing of the 75 extraordinary entries received. My thanks and respect therefore to all entrants, and I can assure you that each and every poem received the considerable amount of time and careful attention it truly deserved.

The standard was very high indeed, so selecting a final list seemed like an impossible task at first; however, in the end I had to remember that no matter how enjoyable a poem is at first read, or how much it might speak to the heart emotionally, the final list must come down to a combination of both this and technical excellence in order to be fair to all. The latter requirement meant that sadly, I was forced to slightly penalise a couple of poems that were initially in my first selection, due solely to a tiny oversight in rhyme, syllable count, spelling or punctuation.

Included in this year's entries were several interesting, well-researched poems about historic Australian characters, as well as some highly entertaining yarns. Thoughts on war featured as always, with a noticeable focus on the tragedy of returned soldiers suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. The environment was represented, along with hardships faced by farmers and settlers both past and present, politics, Aboriginal legends and injustices, and reflections on the past year of restrictions. A few notable works re-

quired just a little more development, whilst others could have benefitted from stricter revision. The most common discrepancy of all was in the metre and syllable stress, whether throughout the entire poem or just on the occasional line and/or minor word. It is important to remember that no matter which metric pattern is chosen, the consistency and natural flow must remain faultless throughout so that there is no doubt or confusion in the mind of the reader.

Interestingly, many poems had capital letters at the beginning of every line, even when the previous sentence ended with a comma. Bear in mind that nowadays this is unnecessary and down to artistic choice only – in which case, extra care must be taken because sometimes they can actually interrupt an easy flow of words. Slight inversions and repetition of words were present in a few works too, so I encourage you to remember that the *Thesaurus* really is a poet's best friend, as there are often several options available for changing words and sentences around in order to avoid these traps.

Perhaps most delightfully apparent to me in many entries was some of the outstanding imagery presented, which successfully transported me to various places and times by using not only words, but all five of the senses. It was very obvious in such cases that the words had been painstakingly selected in order to create exceedingly impressive analogies and similes, which were a great pleasure to read.

The poems selected here represent works that not only held my attention from beginning to end, but also managed to flow effortlessly whilst maintaining exceptional construction and technique and engender smiles and/or powerful emotion. My sincere congratulations to all award recipients in this year's *Blackened Billy*, which remains one of the most prestigious and challenging competitions on the poet's calendar for anyone with a passion for the traditional rhyming style. I encourage all of you to hold onto the inspiration and passion that drives us to capture our unique stories in this way, and in so doing continue to uphold our wonderful heritage and keep it alive for future generations.

Wishing you ever more passion for poetry and power to your pens!

Catherine Lee
Blackened Billy Winner 2011, 2018, 2020
Blackened Billy Co-adjudicator 2021