**Ruth Armstrong**

**On winning the AAWP/ASSF emerging writers’ short story prize**

I am very grateful to the Australasian Association of Writing Programs and the Australian Short Story Festival for creating this prize, which is, I think, in its first year. It’s a huge boost for an early career creative writer to have her work recognised with any award, but the AAWP/ASSF prize is particularly beneficial as it serves as a welcoming mat for the winner, to a rich and diverse writing community. The whole of this prize is much greater than the sum of its parts, because you have effectively given me yourselves!

The first part of the prize was fully sponsored attendance at the Australian Short Story Festival held in Adelaide in early November. I have tended to see my impulse to write short stories as a bit lightweight, or perhaps representing a developmental writing phase that I was stuck in, but at ASSF festival I finally found my tribe.

I encountered a lively, engaged, empathic, often ideologically-likeminded group. There were intense discussions, interspersed with much hilarity, as we got stuck into enjoying and sharing our craft for two densely packed days. It was truly inspiring being in the room with a number of writers whose work I have studied and admired and, of course being introduced to the work of talented writers I hadn’t encountered before.

Here are just a few gems:

* From Tony Birch I learned not to write after taste testing your teenagers’ party drugs, that combating climate change is easier than teaching creative writing and that (if you’re really clever) you can turn a plenary into a discussion about intergalactic colonialism.
* From Carmel Bird I learned that if you can be funny (or funny enough) people will take strength from it. I also re-learned the words of *I like Aeroplane Jelly*.
* From Lynette Washington and Susan Midalia I learned that a conversation about structure can seamlessly turn to a conversation about love.
* From Roanna Gonsalves I learned that the short story can be a perfect vehicle of breaking through stereotypes with mischievous, laugh-out loud situational humour.
* And I got my fix of doctor-writers, of whom I am one, from the inspiring Melanie Cheng and Peter Goldsworthy.

 The second and equally valuable part of the prize was AAWP membership, including attendance at the AAWP conference. The three-day conference plunged me gloriously out of my depth in terms of its academic content, providing an intriguing window into a smorgasbord of creative scholarship. Importantly, it introduced me to the diverse group of people who make up the community of writing programs in our region.

 I particularly enjoyed the way the elective sessions were structured around often loose themes that came together with moderation and discussion. Being invited to read from my work was thrilling and humbling in equal measure.

 At both events I was warmly welcomed and looked after by Julia Prendergast, Katrina Finlayson, and the team from the ASSF, led by Anna Solding. Special thanks go to Julia, who managed every step of the competition with enthusiasm and genuine warmth. She is gold!

 And of course the prize just keeps on giving. I am currently enjoying my subscriptions to *Overland*, *Review of Australian Fiction* and *Meanjin* (just in time for everyone’s bumper end-of-year issue – thank you very much!).

 My writing at the moment is focussed on travel: what *else* happens on that holiday or trip, as we move between places with our people, but recently I was drawn to write a story set in my own suburb in Sydney.

 ‘Makes sense,’ someone said to me. ‘Eventually we all have to come home.’

 As sentimental as it might sound, I think this speaks to what the AAWP has created with this prize: an inclusive, scholarly, supportive, and delightfully eclectic home for emerging writers.