

**Aurealis Awards 2009**  
**Fantasy Novel**  
**Judges' Report**

**Panel members**

Alex Adsett (convenor), Chris Anderson, Sarah Fairhall, Anita Gibson, Cathie Tasker

**Number of entries**

31

**Judging criteria**

The judging panel were looking for books which excited us. Although we each had our own ways of approaching the judging process, we were all keen to find something that inspired and challenged us. Some considered literary merit of prime importance while others looked more for an enjoyable reading experience, while others looked to the characters and world building.

We came together in our deliberations, concentrating on originality, world building, pacing, plot, characterizations and overall reading experience. The finalists were all titles that mastered some or all of these criteria and inspired passionate champions amongst the judges.

**Overview of entries**

There was a broad range of titles in this year's entries, showing the depth of talent in Australian fantasy fiction. Classic high fantasy was well represented, along with fresh new approaches to the genre, rollicking adventures, lots of magic, and paranormal romance. It was also great to see so many new authors entered, as well as established authors continuing their high standard.

**Finalists**

Trudi Canavan, *Magician's Apprentice*, Orbit WINNER

Peter Ball, *Horn*, Twelfth Planet Press

Glenda Larke, *The Last Stormlord*, HarperVoyager

K. E. Mills, *Witches Incorporated*, HarperVoyager

K. J. Taylor, *The Dark Griffin*, HarperVoyager

**Review of finalists**

Trudi Canavan, *Magician's Apprentice*, Orbit WINNER

*Magician's Apprentice* was a unanimous winner. A traditional high fantasy, the great strength of this book is in the wonderful characters, the development of their relationships and the characters' growth within the story. The quality of the writing is strong and it was a clear champion in our field. The development of a young apprentice magician, with her background in medicine and passion for healing as she is drawn into a complicated world of politics and war, is well told and developed, with the depth of characters drawing us in and compelling us along.

Peter Ball, *Horn*, Twelfth Planet Press

This was a standout of the year and a breath of fresh air, but generated much debate in our judging panel, some of which was a consequence of trying to compare a novella against traditional fantasy epics. In the end, the merits of this short work won out. The world building is excellent, and we loved the hardboiled feel and language. The combination of classic fantasy being subverted by classic noir grittiness is original and well executed. It was wonderful to explore the possibility of unicorns as malevolent and depraved creatures who need to be stopped by a gun toting, hard drinking, fast talking PI.

Glenda Larke, *The Last Stormlord*, HarperVoyager

This was an excellent addition to our shortlist of titles. Again, a solid high fantasy, but in an originally executed world, that plays on very real fears of all Australians. This is set in a world where every drop of water is rationed for survival. Cities are built with water as currency and the poor need to sacrifice everything to survive. When the Stormlords, who control the rainfall, begin to die out, it becomes a race to find previously untapped talent for society to survive. The society and politics are intriguing and well built.

K. E. Mills, *Witches Incorporated*, HarperVoyager

This is a rollicking adventure of a book. It is great fun and, again, it was the characters that made the story believable and made us laugh out loud. Set in a new but familiar 19<sup>th</sup> century with magicians making up the public service, bureaucrats and international tensions, it is a world where competitive cake baking is the very serious pursuit of women of leisure, and espionage is rife. The story features the continuing adventures of Gerald and the exasperating and likeable troupe of characters from *Accidental Sorcerer*.

K. J. Taylor, *The Dark Griffin*, HarperVoyager

Another hotly contended entry, *The Dark Griffin* is a book of complex, believable and dark characters - both humans and griffins. This is another strongly original story; the creation of the griffins as sentient creatures but not human in their reasoning or their responses was particularly new and exciting. In this world, the behaviour, reasoning and emotional responses of griffins are strongly based on the instinctive behaviours of birds - particularly birds of prey. This does not make them particularly likeable - it's hard to like someone who eats their siblings because they are hungry - but it is a fascinating insight into a different moral universe. Through the fall from grace of the young Griffiner, his friends' and colleagues' changing perception of him, and how he rebuilds his own sense of self, *The Dark Griffin* examines the darker side of human nature and makes interesting links between racism, slavery, elitism, and animal cruelty.

## **Conclusion**

The judging panel appreciated the breadth and depth of this year's entries, where we were taken from Ancient Rome to a thousand years in the future, from political intrigues, waterless worlds, war, magic and adventure. It demonstrates yet again the strength of Australian fantasy and the wonderful writers who continue to contribute to this genre.

It was particularly good to see the strength and quality of some of the independently published titles. Although none of these made our eventual list of finalists, it was in some cases a very close decision not to include them and the underlying quality of these self published books was as strong as many books that appear on bookshop shelves.

Congratulations to all the entries, the finalists and winner. There were a number of books that unfortunately could not make our list but that had won champions amongst the judges, and inspired passionate debate. We felt this demonstrated how close the entries were in quality, and the strength of the year's finalists and winner to stand out from the field of 2009's fantasy works.