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Ode to South Auckland wins National Schools Poetry Award 2021

Caitlin Jenkins, a Year 13 student from Papatoetoe High School in Auckland, has won the 2021 International Institute of Modern Letters (IIML) National Schools Poetry Award with a poem that celebrates the rich cultural histories of South Auckland.

The announcement comes as Aotearoa New Zealand celebrates [New Zealand Poetry Day](#).

Judge Tayi Tibble says the winning poem ‘South’ “cleverly explores the relationship between people and place, tangata and whenua”. She adds, “The poem reminded me of a chant, or a prayer. It hit a perfect chord of being both staunch and critical but also forgiving and hopeful.”



The 2021 National Schools Poetry Award is organised by Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington’s IIML with the support of Creative New Zealand, and sponsorship and promotional support from Wonderlab.

Caitlin Jenkins, who is of Tongan (Village Fatai), Niuean (Village Toi) and NZ European descent, receives a prize of \$500 and her school library receives a book grant of \$500. She also receives a package of literary prizes provided by Read NZ Te Pou Muramura, Victoria University Press, *Sport*, *Landfall* and the New Zealand Society of Authors. As part of the prize, Caitlin will attend a poetry masterclass with Tayi Tibble, along with the nine other poets shortlisted for their entries. The current COVID alert level has pressed pause on the masterclass, which will be held online if necessary.

Caitlin says, “I’m feeling very honoured and grateful to receive this award. ‘South’ is a poem dedicated to my Pasifika and Māori communities of South Auckland. We have forever been taught to accept the mould the rest of New Zealand has put us in, but this poem is proof that only we can shape us, that we *can* reverse the damage and grow from it something beautiful. Please take this poem and welcome it into you, and when you enter our streets, remember us by it.”

There were more than 200 entries this year from senior high school students. Many of the poems that impressed the judge wrestled with multiculturalism in New Zealand. “I am blown away and completely inspired by how freaking cool teenagers are these days,” says Ms Tibble.

“They’re whip smart and passionate. They’re generous, thoughtful, keen, and respectful. They are funny and warm. What always impresses me the most, like, literally makes my jaw hit the floor, is their socio-political awareness and responsibility. They care about the world around them and the people that society affects, targets, isolates, and disenfranchises.”

Ms. Chris Price, senior lecturer at the IIML says “The winning and shortlisted poems make it clear that the future of poetry, and of Aotearoa itself, is in very good hands.”

The other nine finalists are: Ruby Buffett-Bray (St Dominic’s College, Auckland), Grace Fakahau (Palmerston North Girls’ High School), Janet Guo (Hillcrest High School, Hamilton), Jackson McCarthy (St Peter’s College, Auckland) Darcy Monteath (Logan Park High School, Dunedin), Ella Paterson (Tauranga Girls’ College), Penelope Scarborough, (Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu), Holly Willis (Wellington Girls’ College), and Angelina Zhou Narayan (Burnside High School, Christchurch).

All finalists will join Caitlin at the poetry masterclass, as well as receiving prizes from Read NZ Te Pou Muramura and *Sport*, and \$100 cash.

The winning poem, the complete judge’s report and all the shortlisted poems are available on the National Schools Poetry Award [website](#).

For more information contact Chris Price, Senior Lecturer, International Institute of Modern Letters on chris.price@vuw.ac.nz

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