



2026 Fresh Fiction Writing Competition Winners

Winning entry in the 7–12 category: [Saisha Bagchi](#)

Winning entry in the 13+ category: [Bridget White](#)

Half of Me by Saisha Bagchi

I feel a sharp tap on my shoulder before Chrissy yells, "Sam's in!"
I sigh. Talk about unfair!

From the house, I hear Mum call, "Dinner!"
"C'mon, red-head," Chrissy says, grabbing my wrist.
I roll my eyes. "Zip it, Christina," I growl in my most-threatening voice.

We head towards the house, and I can already smell Mum's classic burgers.

"G'day, Margery," I say to the painting of a grey dolphin hanging in the hallway. I named her Margery years ago. Mum never told me where she came from. Then again, I never asked.

We all sit at the dinner table: Mum, Aunt Ginna, Uncle Shawn, and my cousins, Chrissy, Pete and Simon.

Mum and Aunt Ginna have the same bright-red hair as me, but somehow, all my cuzzies ended up brown-haired. Totally unfair.

Mum shovels another burger onto my plate even though I've already had two.

"Eat up. You don't know how much they're gonna feed you on this trip."

Year 6 was heading to Port Macquarie for an overnight excursion, and we were pumped.

Chrissy was coming too since she's with me at Forster Public.

"Wasn't that where Mitch was from?" asks Uncle Shawn.

Mum answers with a stiff, "Hmm."

She hates questions about Dad.

He left when I was two, and I barely know anything about him.

Aunt Ginna shoots Uncle Shawn a 'not-now' look.

The bus-ride feels endless. After too many nursery-rhymes, and a million "are we there yet?" moments, we finally reach Hibiscus Cabins. I'm rooming with a few mates, and, of course, Chrissy.

No time to settle in.

The teachers herd us back to the buses for our first stop:
Sea Acres Rainforest Centre.

We split into groups of four, each with an Aboriginal tour-guide. Ours is Henry, who's hilarious and knows everything.

On the boardwalk, we spot four water dragons, two kookaburras, and one very lazy iguana, who we nickname Bonza.

After the walk, Henry hands out stickers. The teacher do a roll-call.

"Benny Michaels, Robert Stevenson, Samantha Idol," calls the teacher.

I raise my hand and walk into an art gallery filled with dot-paintings, and portraits of turtles, sharks, stingrays, and—

Hang-on, is that... Margery?

I blink hard. But there she is. An exact replica of my dolphin painting.
“What are you doing here?” I whisper to it.

“Ahh, yes. The Gurparr,” Henry says. “A totem animal in the Birpai culture. Beautifully painted.”

There’s a photo beside the artwork. I read the name underneath it.
Mitchell Idol.

My stomach drops.

No. No, it can’t be!

“Sam... is that your dad?” Chrissy whispers.

No, no, no.

I’m Scottish. Mum’s Scottish. Nan and Grandad are Scottish.
How can I be a red-head and Indigenous?

I skim the write-up. The words hit me hard:
Proud Birpai Man.

Then, another line:
The original copy of Idol’s artwork remains in a family-member’s household.

Margery!

My head spins as questions pile up faster and faster, all demanding answers.
From Mum.

The rest of the trip blurs by. I just want to go home.
When the bus pulls up at Forster Public, I grab my bag and trudge home.

“See ya, Sam!” Chrissy calls out.

I take a deep breath and open our creaking door.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Mum calls. “How was it?”

“Oh, amazing, Mum,” I say sarcastically. “We learned heaps. And, I also discovered that I’m Indigenous.”

Crash. A bowl shatters somewhere in the kitchen.

"Samantha... what did you say?" Mum's voice is low and dangerous.

"Oh, not much. Just that my mother has been lying to me for ten years," Crash. Another bowl.

I know I'm being rude, but the anger boiling inside me is too much.

"Sam. I— I meant to tell you," Mum starts.

"But you didn't, did you?" I snap.

"Sam, you don't know how hard it's been since your father left!" Mum yells.

"Hard enough to keep my heritage from me?" I shout back, tears stinging my eyes.

"The questions, Mum. The questions about Dad that I could've answered, but I didn't know!"

"Please, Sam," Mum begs, but I'm still going.

"I've been so lost, all these years, not knowing. Margery, Mum. I've admired and wondered who made her. Turns out it was my Dad all along!"

"Samantha! I didn't think it mattered!"

"Of course you didn't, Mum. But it matters to me because he's my Dad!"

I run to my room and slam the door. And then I sob and sob and sob.

Knock, knock. Mum enters and wraps me in a tight hug.

"I'm sorry, Sam," she whispers.

Six Weeks Later...

"Are you sure about this?" Mum asks as we head up Bintin Avenue.

I give her a look. She stops asking.

We stand in front of number 19. An old man sits on a rocking chair on the verandah.

Mum nods.

I step forward, heart pounding. "Excuse me... are you Benjamin Idol?"

He nods. "Yeah."

I smile, hopeful yet nervous. "Then, I'm your granddaughter, Samantha Idol."

And, just like that, something settled inside of me.

The red-hair was only half of me.

Now, I've finally found the other half.

Undertow by Bridget White

May loathed the ocean.

It's not that she was a bad swimmer. She was far from that, in fact. Her uncle used to call her a seal, because of the way she dipped in and out of the water. He said it was like if cursive had legs, if smoke could meet water and dip under the surface of its ripples. He could surf, too, and so could most of her family, ducking beneath towering waves with the ease of breathing.

May had decided she hated it for good reason – for the plastic fishing wire that seemed harmless until it sliced into the green flesh of an innocent meandering turtle, the billowing rubbish bags that covered its sand.

That was what she told people, at least.

The truth was harder.

Yet here she was, feet sinking into rippling dunes. Her phone had hummed earlier that morning with a message from her brother.

Couldn't afford the movers' pricing for the home. Out of town Saturday, think you'll declutter a bit?

May hadn't been to the old beach house in years and had no intention of going back for a hundred more. She assumed the collapsing roof and salt-eaten weatherboards had already surrendered to time.

Still, she knew that if she shuffled a few dusty boxes to the room's corners, she'd be home before dark.

Now that she was here, the place was smaller than she remembered.

Older.

Buildings, she realized, aged like people. Some simply did it more quietly.

The walls were coated with a thick, grainy yellow paint her mother had thrown onto them a decade earlier, laughing every time the ladder wobbled beneath her. She'd worn a lemon dress almost the exact same colour - so the paint wouldn't stain as badly - its colour bright against the pale sand while the old casuarina steadied the ladder with its crooked trunk. Now the paint had faded into an undesirable teak colour. The tree bent with terrible posture, as though the sea's bitter winds had spent years whispering it to the ground.

May expected the inside to be different. Almost prayed it was unrecognizable – but little had changed.

Dust motes swam through the shafts of setting light and flickered gold before settling over stacked boxes like snowfall. They were all taped shut except for one containing a frayed embroidery piece, chipped children's toys, bracelets made from threaded shells... And a note. Nothing elegant. Just paper ripped hastily from a notebook. May shuffled over to it, smoothed the edges.

Tide's low. Look for shells. If you're bored, come find me.

Mum

The words seemed to hollow something inside of her. She folded the note carefully, slipped it into her pocket. Outside, the casuarina branches scraped the caving roof softly. May hesitated, thought of going back.

It was getting darker, colder...

Instead, she followed the path towards the beach. Her path, the old one, etched by the same meandering feet every day for years. Grass had swallowed most of it. But even the wild tussocks couldn't hide the memories unearthed with each footstep. May's brother sprinting ahead with a bucket already heavy with shells and high hopes. Her uncle with a surfboard balanced under his arm.

The tide was low today.

Rock pools shimmered beneath the fading sky, with tiny fish flickering like fractured shards of mirrors. Hermit crabs shuffled between stone crevices. It looked cleaner now. Her mum had always wanted it this way.

Still, there was room for improvement. The odd faded rope and brown plastic still tangled in seaweed.

Some scars didn't wash away.

May found herself observing the waves before she realized she was doing it. One. Two. Three...

She stopped.

She hadn't counted them in years.

Near the edge of a rock pool sat a tiny blue spiral shell, glistening like sapphire. The curled edge was wet, licked by the pool's water, but still it radiated a strange kind of glow. She stared.

"I remember you."

The words escaped her mouth. It had been the first shell she'd ever refused to leave behind, one like this.

Her mother had laughed. 'The ocean will always make another one. It'll come back.'

Maybe shells did. Memories never did.

May turned the creation over in her palm, her thumb drifting over the spirals. The sea breathed forward, cold water brushing her shoes before retreating in a tired exhale.

She closed her fingers around it.

It had been here that afternoon. The wind had carried everyone's voices away. The undertow had swallowed her mother's.

Hours later, the ocean had brought her back.

But by then, there was nothing left to say.

People knew that May's mum was head sick. She wore worry on her wrists, echoed endless storms through watery grey eyes. But no matter what happened, she never lost sight of the sea – even when her gaze blurred everything else together.

May had spent years convincing herself she hated the water.

She had practical reasons, because somewhere along the way she was taught that made her feel valid. It was easier than admitting she hated that life could change in a single wave - especially to people who didn't deserve it, like her mum.

She had loved the water. So why did it take her?

Another ripple curled around her ankles, and she unfolded the note once more. The paper crackled gently in the breeze.

They had never found this little blue shell together.

There hadn't been enough time.

Carefully, May slipped it into her pocket beside the note.

Maybe it was never the sea she hated - only the silence after it. Maybe it hadn't stolen her mother, but only taken what was already gone.

The tide reached her feet again, rippling around her ankles. This time, she didn't move away. She stood there until the last light disappeared beyond the horizon, finding her once lost love for the ocean and listening as it breathed in and out, carrying nothing away except the day.