

PRESS RELEASE

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Winners Announced — 2024 Annual Wapsie Writing Contest

(Cedar Falls, Evansdale, and Oelwein Writers)

Fairbank, Iowa native and award-winning novelist Betty Brandt Passick announces the winners of the 2024 Annual Wapsie Writing Contest—selected by judges who are published authors, poets, creative writing teachers, and avid book readers. The annual contest aims to provide an opportunity for people of all ages to express and share their creative writings.

This year, over 30 stories and poems were submitted in the three age categories: adult (19 years and older), youth (12-18 years), and child (11 years and under).

The winners are judged to have poems and stories that are the most creative and original and demonstrate a quality of beauty and intensity of emotion for their age category.

The ability to convey ideas through narrative and writing is a fundamental skill in so many fields—even in this new era of ChatGPT and artificial intelligence. Through this annual contest join me in celebrating the achievements of these talented and creative people, and thank all the entrants (and their families) and the judges for their participation.



Alyssa R., 11 years (Child Category)

Cedar Falls, IA, St. Patrick Catholic School

I am a writer, and I love writing, and I write multiple stories per month, and through the process of writing, I get to explore the characters' lives. I most enjoy positive stories where I can help my characters achieve good outcomes and that is what inspires me to write. As a young author, I'm proud to share my work with a broad readership. This contest means that I can join a community of writers, and tell stories that have never been told before.

“Mistake”

Mistakes are a common thing. Some mistakes are bigger than others. Some people make more mistakes than others. I, Abigail Swarthenberg, age twelve, have made a lot of mistakes, but my most recent one is the one that I most regret.

I was at the public library, reading a book. It was an adventure novel, which is my favorite type of book to read. I was very deep into the book. So deep, in fact, that nothing could pull me out of the realm of the book.

Then an announcement came on over the library loudspeaker.

“The library will be closing in five minutes. Please take your books directly to the book checkout and exit the building. Thank you for reading with us today,” the voice in the loudspeaker said, then ended with a “click”.

Oh, whatever, I thought to myself. It isn't like I need to hurry or anything. I'll just finish this chapter and then go check out. They're just trying to rush everybody out of the library so they can finish their work earlier than usual.

So, I kept on reading. Every minute, the loudspeaker protested against my not going to check out my book, but I didn't care. The book was too good to put down! I just had to finish the chapter and then I'd go check out. There were

only eight more pages, and I'm a very fast reader. I could finish on time. At least, that was what I thought. But now I know very well that I'd overestimated my reading skill.

"The library is now closing," the loudspeaker finally said.

Click! After the final announcement had been made, I stretched, closed the book, got up, and walked over to the check out. The lights were off, and there wasn't a soul to be found in the library but me.

"I wonder where everyone is," I said to myself. "Oh, well. The librarians probably haven't left yet, and even if they have, I'm sure there's someone on duty to make sure that nobody is stealing any of the books."

So, I walked to the book check-out counter. There was a computer that was used to scan the code on a book and check it out. The computer was turned off. I pressed the power button, but it wouldn't turn on. Frantically, I swerved the mouse around. What if I wasn't able to check out my adventure novel?

Finally, I just gave up. I walked over to the counter where there was usually a librarian. Nobody was there. I walked behind the counter to search for a librarian to help me with the check-out computer. Still no one. There weren't any cars in the parking lot, since I had taken the city bus there.

That was when I decided that I would just have to check out the book next time and I would have to leave. No one was there to help me and the computer wasn't working, so what else could I have done?

I walked over to the door and pulled on its handle. I wouldn't budge. I hadn't thought that they would lock the doors after closing hours. I pulled on it again and again. It wouldn't move. After that, I tried the other doors. They were all locked, and there wasn't a key in sight! What was I going to do?

I had to find a way out. I'd promised my parents I'd be home by seven. It was just about seven o'clock right now, and at this rate, I wouldn't get home until tomorrow morning! The situation seemed hopeless, until I saw one way out. And that was not an easy way. More like a dangerous way, if anything.

The library had a second floor, which had windows, which might not be locked, and the fire escape was just below one of the windows! I would have to jump from the window to the fire escape, and then climb down. It was the only way, and if there was a way to get out, I would do it. I had no choice. Well, I did have another choice, and that choice was to sit in the library until tomorrow morning.

I ran up the stairs to the second floor. I found the window above the fire escape, and it seemed to be a miracle that it wasn't locked. I quickly opened it, then sat on the window sill as my heart pounded wildly. The fire escape seemed much farther beneath me than I had remembered. Maybe that was only because I was scared, though.

Oh well, here goes, I thought. I jumped.

I fell about six or seven feet before I reached the fire escape. I'd fallen on my leg. It hurt, but I hadn't broken it. The metal fire escape was very slippery. It had rained a while ago when I was reading my book.

I slid down the slippery fire escape until I reached the bottom. The bus wouldn't be in service until morning, so I had to walk all the way home. When I got there, I told my parents the whole story, and from then on, I always left the library at the five minute warning. After that, I didn't make so many mistakes.



Kaileigh J., 13 years (Youth Category)

Evansdale, IA, Waterloo Community Schools District / Bunger Middle School

The inspiration to write my story came from Luna. This little kitten that I had when I was nine. I was struggling to figure out what I should write my school essay about while I was sitting in literacy class in November. It was a personal narrative and I've always struggled with thinking of things to write about. I thought, "What significant things have happened in my life that changed how I think?" And I thought about Luna. She was the sweetest little kitten, and I still miss her a lot. Winning this contest means a few different things to me. I'm very proud of myself, but at first I was shocked when my favorite teacher called my mom and I and told me I had won. This story was difficult for me to write, not because of deadlines or requirements but just the pure emotion that came with it. I'm very grateful for my teachers that helped me with this and my parents as well. Thank you!

“Luna”

That day just felt different. I don't know if it was the fact that I woke up late, or that I couldn't find my hairbrush, but something about that day was... off. I walked to the driveway, and I slipped on the ice on the sidewalk. I cursed under my breath and got back up to walk to the car. It was freezing outside, given it was mid-January. I hopped into the car, possibly as cold as the outside.

My dad got into the car, buckled his seatbelt, and before I knew it we were at Poyner already. It felt like time was going at double speed, but the snow was falling in slow motion.

I walked into the school, and maybe my body was there but my mind wasn't. I was thinking about normal fourth-grader things, like what we were doing in class and what would happen at recess.

“...Kaileigh?” Mrs. Mason asked me. She put the phone down, the phone I didn't notice she had picked up.

I wasn't paying attention, “Er... huh?” Yet again, I wasn't there, and couldn't focus. My mind was blank.

“Go to the office with your things.”

I grabbed my backpack. “How come?” I stuffed my folder and the book I was reading into my bag.

Mrs. Mason looked up from her desk and said, “Your parents are here to bring you home, they called you from the office.” I stood up and slung my backpack over my shoulder. A few of my friends look over or turn to me, curious about what's happening.

“Lucky!”

“No fair, can I come with?”

“Where are you going?”

I felt a bit confused like something was off. I assumed it was a doctor's appointment that my parents forgot to tell me about or something along those lines, “I have no idea.”

I distinctly remember one person saying, “Have fun!” I shrugged it off and opened the classroom door, waving to my friends and teacher. As I was walking to the office I felt my stomach drop a bit. I thought about the worst things, a family member dying or something being wrong with one of my nephews. I was overthinking the whole way to the office, dead silent as I walked into the small room to see my dad standing there with a half-effort smile.

“Something’s wrong, something’s wrong.” I kept telling myself. It was strangely quiet when my dad signed me out of the office, he only said a few words to the secretary. We finally got outside, and by then my breathing was a bit heavy and my mind was racing at the speed of light to make up new scenarios about the worst things that could happen.

I was worried, to say the least. My dad and I reached the car, and to my surprise, my mom was in the car. Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no. I was thinking even faster, anxiety off the charts.

My mom was there too, and it was a rare occurrence that both of my parents came to something as unimportant as a doctor’s appointment.

“What happened?” I asked my dad, getting into the car and buckling my seatbelt.

My mom looked at me with a sad expression, and I noticed her tear-streaked cheeks.

“Kaileigh, we have to tell you something,” I nodded and prepared for the worst. “Luna…”

She cleared her throat and I knew. I knew that our kitten, Luna had been sick for a while. I knew that it had been getting worse. I knew that she could barely eat, and she always threw up.

“No…” My voice was quiet, pleading.

My mom continued. “We… we have to put her down, she’s really sick,” and my tears started falling. A choked noise came from my throat, and I was crying, hard. “Please, no… Luna,” I cried, in an attempt to voice my distraught through my tears. My dad put a hand on my shoulder, and my mom sighed. Thinking back on it, this must have been so hard for them, to keep tough faces for their crying ten-year-old.

I must’ve cried for a good five minutes before my dad cleared his throat. “Sweetie, she’s really sick,” his voice broke. “We don’t want to let her suffer.” I swallowed, nodded, and didn’t say anything. My heart felt like it was breaking into a million pieces. My dad drove out of the school driveway, and the whole ride was silent. Time moved in slow motion. My head was resting on the cold window, but at that moment I couldn’t care any less.

We got to the veterinary, and my breath got stuck in my throat. I rubbed my eyes with the sleeve of my pink coat, and my nose, throat, and eyes burned from crying so hard. I opened my door slowly and climbed out of the car. My heart ached, and I could barely breathe at all. We walked into the vet, and my parents talked to the receptionist. My chest tightened and tightened like I was going to explode. We walked into a different room, and then waited and waited. It felt like an hour just sitting in the little room with 2 chairs, a bench, a counter, and a few paintings of cats and dogs. I sat on

the bench with my head in my knees, completely silent. My mom rubbed her hand up and down my back in an attempt to comfort me.

What felt like hours passed, sitting in that little room that smelled like NyQuil. Finally, a man with blue scrubs on walked into the room with a bundle of blankets in his arms. He said a few words to my mom, and I looked up from my knees, shifting so my feet were on the floor again. Inside the bundle of blankets was a sad little kitten, with huge eyes. I started bawling and held the tiny cat in my arms. My dad looked really sad and was petting Luna with his index and middle finger on the top of her head. Her black, orange, white, and brown fur stood up slightly, she looked scared. I held her for a long time, then kissed the top of her head and whispered “I love you.”

The vet took her into a different room, and I walked outside the glass sliding door. Outside, it was beyond cold. It felt as if the tears were freezing on my face. Snow fell into my hair, my eyes, all over my face. I hadn’t noticed my dad was out there too until he hugged me. I hugged back. I kept thinking and thinking, “I knew something was wrong, I had a bad feeling, and it was right.”

The drive home was possibly one of the saddest moments in my life. Mixed thoughts of “It was my fault,” or “I knew something was wrong.”

Should’ve listened to my instinct.



Beth K. (Adult Category)

Oelwein, Iowa

I wrote Friday Night Lights in my head driving home from my job at the Readlyn library one beautiful fall evening when I could see so many lights of all kinds in the darkening sky—streetlights, distant stadiums and towns,

nearby farms... I wrote it down as soon as I got home. I'm excited to have won! I'm busy and don't make time to write as much as I should, and I need to work on that. Congratulations to all of the other winners. Keep on writing.

“Friday Night Lights”

The last Friday	visible only by the halo
of September	of stadium halogens
I shut down the computers	still miles away.
extinguish the fluorescents	Farms; flickers of brightness
let the authors rest.	in a sea of dark.
I step from the dark library	An open window, a tv flickering
into the rising night	the soft glow of a barn aisle
Indigo and violet	the blue-white glare of a machine shed
the last hint of dusk.	lit up
Small town	in the gathered dark.
streetlamps along Main.	Here and there
The cross on the church	bright bursts of worklights
illuminated by the highway	cast arrays of bins and silos in
The harvest moon	a daylight brilliance--
Hangs in the east	Cornfield Cathedrals.
Luminescent.	The spool of silver road
Asphalt unspools in the headlights	curves along the river
Gossamer fog in the valleys, silvered by	into the silvered night.
the lunar glow.	I turn down a dusty road
Wagons and combines in the fields	Watch for deer
move through an aura of platinum dust	Wonder at the flicker
cities of light.	of a high-above airplane, headed for Dallas or Denver
Here and there	And watch for the welcoming yard light
other small communities	of the home place.

Betty Brandt Passick is an independent, self-published author who's won Notable Indie Book Awards for her historical crime novels in the gangster series that are largely set in her hometown of Fairbank, though she incorporates historical stories, people, and places from other communities in northeast Iowa. The author currently resides in the Twin Cities.

"I've been writing since I was a young girl, and my hope in originating the Wapsie Writing Contest is to stir an interest in writing of all kinds, especially by children and youth," she said. "I often sat cross-legged on my bedroom floor, blank sheets of paper strewn at my feet, when my brain pondered learnings and contemplated profound thoughts."

The 2024 entries came from well beyond northeast Iowa: California, Minnesota, Wisconsin—even England. The topics varied from cats, personal loss, domestic abuse, harvest, heroes, technology, and Covid-19 to political strife between the Palestinians and Israelis.

Adults made up 42 percent of the entries; 44 percent came from youth; and 14 percent came from children.

Watch for the 2025 Annual Wapsie Writing Contest to be announced in early January. Contest rules are posted at BettyBrandtPassick.com.

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