

# Australian Association for Infant Mental Health Inc.

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## Introduction to the Ann Morgan Prize

It is a happy synchronicity that each year the Ann Morgan Prize is announced at the beginning of the Writers' Festival in Melbourne, and it is with great pleasure that we celebrate our third Ann Morgan Prize winner.

My name is Julie Stone and it has been my privilege and honour to administrate the prize since its inception in 2010. The AAIMH Vic branch committee feel very proud to be able to support and facilitate this prize in honour of Dr Ann Morgan and all she has given our field. Many have benefited directly from Ann in her roles as mentor, teacher, supervisor; all of us has benefited indirectly from Ann's lively contribution to our thinking about the infant and her experience. Ann continues to stimulate and enrich our understanding with her ongoing contribution at many levels and in many ways. Thank you Ann.

After the first year of the prize we realised the word 'essay' had been a stumbling block for some, so we took it out of the prize description. And after last year's prize, in our endeavour to entice a more diverse and wider field of writers, a small subcommittee worked together to develop a clearer statement of "what the judges are looking for." We also offered an evening writing course at the Writers' Centre, and those who attended were enthusiastic about the information and the encouragement they were given. We plan to offer a similar evening event again this year.

Perhaps these measures made some contribution to ensuring that the 2012 Ann Morgan Prize Winner was selected from the richest and widest field to date: we had submissions from five states and writing in a variety of forms: prose, poetry, a dramatic piece and one with pastel illustrations. This wide and diverse field made for a lively and interesting debate and discussion among the judges.

Before I tell you about the judging and get to the important moment of handing Nichola the envelop to announce the winner and to invite the winner to read the prize winning contribution, I would like to tell you a little about my role of administrator and what happens to the Ann Morgan Prize entries.

The invitation to submit is extended to all members of the Australian Association for Infant Mental Health Inc. The request is for entries to be sent electronically to a

### Guidelines for contributors

AAIMHI aims to publish three editions per year in March, July and November. Contributions to the newsletter are invited on any matter of interest to the members of AAIMHI.

Referenced works should follow the guidelines provided by the APA Publication Manual 4<sup>th</sup> Edition.

All submissions are sub-edited to newsletter standards.

Editorial inquiries: Shelley Reid. Articles are accepted preferably as Word documents sent electronically to the AAIMHI Secretary.

secretary@aaimhi.org

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special Ann Morgan Prize email address. This means the submissions are delivered, so to speak, to me at my computer. We have been using the same address since the beginning and it was a source of consternation and disappointment that this year we had some delivery notification failures for the first time. These were sorted but I regret the hiccup for writers.

As each submission arrives, I contact the author, and acknowledge receipt of the entry by thanking the author for their entry. I read each submission to ensure there is no identifying information. When there is, I attend to it and our judges receive a hard copy of each submission with a front page saying simply: entry 1 or entry 2 and so on.

Each year all the submissions have been reviewed blind.

For the third year in a row, our judges were Ann Morgan, Campbell Paul and Joanna Murray-Smith. Working with these three stellar individuals makes my role a joy. Co-ordinating four diaries is the biggest challenge. This year Joanna hosted us at a fire-side meeting in her lovely home and, as ever, there was a lively discussion about the merits and responses to each piece. The judges take their role seriously and read each entry thoughtfully. It is a privilege to listen to the judges' discussion and to frantically take notes. This year, for the first time, when I wrote to entrants after the judges meeting, I included some feedback of the judges' comments for writers. This year the judges arrived at consensus for a short list and then a winner harmoniously and with relative ease.

Having hinted to me in the past, this year Ann confessed she found the role of judge excruciating. As those of you who know her will understand, she wants everyone to receive a prize! So, we hope that next year Ann will read the entries and join us at the judges meeting, but her role will be simply to give her blessing as we have promised to relieve her of the responsibility of judging from here on.

And now, Nichola would you please introduce our audience to the winner of the 2012 Ann Morgan Prize.

Thank you.

Joanne MacDonald is a West Australian. She graduated as a Speech Pathologist in 1984. She began working in both Neurosciences and Child and Adolescent Mental Health. Her interest in communication in families where children presented with emotional difficulties led to broadening her skills first with a Family Therapy Training, and then completing a Masters in Counselling at Edith Cowan University (ECU). Joanne has worked clinically in a range of agencies across Child Development and Disability, but primarily continued in Child and Adolescent Mental Health, where she developed and pursued her specific interest in Infant Mental Health.

This interest was further inspired when she took on a role within the Family Early Intervention program from 1999 until 2004. In 2007-8 Joanne completed an Infant

Observation through the Association of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy WA. She is an active and longstanding committee member of the AAIMHI WA branch - on the organizing committee of the 2011 joint National AAIMHI & RANZCP conference *Growing Up Solid* and the forthcoming workshop *Observation, Reflection, Containment* - to be presented by Ricky and Louise Emanuel in the coming week in Perth. Joanne's primary role is as a Lecturer in the psychodynamically-oriented undergraduate and Masters Counselling courses at ECU. In addition, in 2011 and 2012 Joanne has led the Perth Infant Observation seminars for the University of Melbourne postgraduate Infant Mental Health program.

Joanne's prize-winning entry is titled *The World at his fingertips*.

## The World at his fingertips

Joanne MacDonald

It was in his hands, this was the way I first sensed his experience, through his hands. Little movements - spidery twirling fingers, tender caressing of his mother's skin, the scratching sound of fingernails against flannelette sheets. I became immersed in the language of his hands, his fingers. Here were the seeds of gestures which blossomed as he grew, ripening into meanings unique to Baby J and his world.

Over 18 months, in an Infant Observation training programme, I was charged with observing Baby J as he developed. Through sounds, eye gaze, facial expression and body movements, I imagined Baby J's beginning conversations with the world, shaped in the context of his family. I anticipated thinking about feeding, sleeping, making sense of the world, turn taking and reciprocity, activities all accompanied by his mother. I imagined his mother as primary to his meaning making. However, I was unprepared for the clarity this observation space provided to witness, so early, the subjectivity and self of Baby J.

With some trepidation and an enormous sense of privilege I met Baby J and his parents when he was two days old. In the newness of becoming a family, I was quietly welcomed. After an early and traumatic birth, they were determinedly home. In becoming parents, the world had irrevocably changed and these well educated and well resourced young people seemed somewhat stunned, as they cradled and wondered over their little boy with silky fair hair and milky translucent skin. They moved quickly to re-establish their competencies with new routines.

With early success in establishing breast feeding, in his first week of life Baby J's mother declared him a "good feeder". Sequestered in a warm room, far away from the cold outside,

*J lay on a cushion on his mother's lap. Stretching and squirming, relaxing into the cushion and then as if alerted by some internal physical sensation, he wriggled again. His whole body appeared involved in the task of digesting his food. Occasional rumbling sounds emanating from his belly. His mother sat, admiring him, one hand either side of his body, lovingly stroking his downy head. The ambience was one of calm, peaceful attentiveness.*

Quickly the picture changed. Baby J screamed and anxieties rose. I watched him squirming uncomfortably against his mother's body, his face scrunched and reddened. The nursing couple seemed locked in a battle against an unknown force. Determination to identify the foe, bewilderment and a growing exhaustion seemed written on this young mother's face as she tended to her baby. In each of them I read bewilderment as they persisted, innately clutching and grasping, reaching - feeding an experience incomplete in nourishment and satisfaction for them both.

*Gradually the intensity of the atmosphere in the room*

*built up. J physically became increasingly tense – he was now clutching, white knuckled, onto his mother's shirt with one outstretched hand. He alternated between losing grasp of his mother's nipple in his mouth, as his protest built into a cry, to then shaking his head from side to side as he burrowed back into the breast attempting to latch on. His mother kept talking to him – short phrases in a low reassuring voice, "I know" and "Yes, it's hard", her spare hand cradling the back of his head.*

J's mother relayed to me her experiences of screaming sessions, while the baby lay sleeping in her arms. I felt such empathy for this strong, competent and tearful young woman. I sensed building anxiety as this everyday drama melded with the complexity of many other stresses in her life. Lack of sleep and worries about feeding consumed her. Evidence of everyday battles etched in her face, in the puffy dark circles under her eyes. A reminder ordinary is not necessarily uneventful. This ordinary, strong, resourceful family suddenly engulfed, reminded daily of life's fragility, as well as that of their baby boy. Baby J remained scrunched up, eyes and fists tightly closed. His part in the battle seemed to be to keep the world out.

Yet there were other moments, contrasting images...

*Baby J now looked completely relaxed, draped over his mother's shoulder. He looked toward the outside sunshine through a window he was facing, behind his Mother. His eyes were open, but fixed. He seemed internally absorbed – a bit dreamy. His arms were lengthened either side of his head, his long fingers stretched, then curled repeatedly. Gradually the curling and uncurling of his fingers became more languid as he grew increasingly drowsy.*

His first six weeks in the world, her first six weeks as a mother, a major adjustment for all. Yet it became increasingly difficult, more grinding, unrelenting. A tiny vulnerable, unhappy baby, he was content only when cradled in his mother's arms or hiding in snatches of sleep. His eyes locked on her, his hands clenched in fists.

*Baby J's mother followed me into his room standing in the doorway. I sensed a feeling of disappointment – and immediately wondered if this was her feeling or my projection. She gazed down at J and then said somewhat wistfully "It's not about me... we'll just see how he goes... he's had 2 months, that's a good start".*

Over the morning, I registered this meant trialling formula in place of breast milk. I watched tentative experiments in feeding, as different formulas were introduced. Behind the mask of science, the diligence and industry, was the quiet desperation of a young mother, who wanted all to be well for her son. Baby J watched and waited.

*She props him up a little, placing an extra towel behind his head. J quietens and focuses on his mother. His gaze is intense and his body stills, seeming to target all his energy and concentration on her. His mother is talking*

to J, her language still aimed at problem solving. *“What seems to be the problem – you are having difficulty sorting yourself out – have we changed too many things at once...”* I wonder if she is musing aloud for her own purposes. She pauses and smiles at J who continues his fixed gaze on her. I think, he is *“drinking her in”,* and wonder how this relates to the change in his mode of feeding.

Still things got harder. Something painful intruded and for weeks I heard Baby J *“scream all the time”*. Questions, a paediatric referral, medical investigations, a confirmed diagnosis of reflux, a query regarding lactose intolerance, perhaps other intolerances – without all the information, I felt information overload. With only weekly peeks into J’s life, I didn’t really understand. I observed J through a fog of competing concerns.

Amidst the swirling, a serious Baby J watched and sometimes too, he closed his eyes tightly. Gradually, he seemed less internally preoccupied. He began looking. He looked to be wondering and curious, in a studied and somewhat sober sort of way, about the world. I saw him peeking out from the storm, and the fraying cocoon of his relationship with his mother. I treasured glimpses of a little boy becoming. I wondered if for him this meant less internal turmoil, less churning, if there was a smoothing of the path ahead. Was this a renewed energy?

*I thought to myself as he fed voraciously, “So, here you are J”. His fingers began intertwining – unevenly interlocking in prayer position, exploring each other. It occurred to me that his fingers would not be stretching and touching each other in this way if he were breastfeeding – his body position being oriented toward his mother’s breast would not allow this. His eyes looked to a new sound from the air conditioner in the room.*

In the following week’s hints of disappointment lingered. Sometimes something gentle just out of awareness, sometimes something questioning, with perhaps a bitter edge. Again I wondered, *“Where was this coming from? Was this experience the mother’s, Baby J’s or mine?”* I struggled to keep sight of the baby. No time for processing or sorting feelings, the adults remained fully engaged in the business of fixing. The world seemed a constantly moving feast – was he keeping up, was he benefitting from this adjustment? In the desperation to get things right, was it good enough for him?

*Mother then proceeds with Baby J to the lounge room, placing him in the bouncer, as she had on the previous visit. J’s eyes are focussed on the bottle – he sucks strongly, rhythmically and efficiently, without pausing and occasionally making little vocal grunts accompanying the suck and swallow.*

*As per the last time I had seen him feed this way there was no direct eye contact with his mother. Mother makes occasional encouraging statements to him, “Good boy ... Yes, you were hungry ... That’s a good boy”. She sounded distracted.*

*Then J moves to raise his hands and touch his mother’s wrist where she is holding the bottle. His fingers are long and spidery in their movements, proceeding slowly but continuously and not resting on any one spot. He looks to be connecting physically with his mother’s body (her hands) although he doesn’t look toward her. His fingers seem to be exploring the parts of her hands and wrist that are close to the bottle.*

Initially, to be an observer at this point felt painful. It began with a pervasive sense of loss, a grudging sense of making do, a perfunctory fulfilling of the requirements of this daily task. This snapshot, in this moment, felt hard.

My bias, I pondered – no closeness, no holding, and no drinking from each other’s eyes. The soft *“nk nk nk”* of Baby J’s swallow against the silence. Was this my projected sadness, of loss – the sensual warmth of flesh to flesh, the heavy tingling, and ducts full of champagne bubbles that come with letdown. Let down - I wondered if this mother felt both letdown herself, deprived of providing from her body, and perhaps feeling she had let down her baby.

As a newborn I remembered Baby J pawing blindly and greedily at his mother’s full breast. Now, that longing for fusion seemed stretched out, a gesture elongated into a request of sorts with the meeting of hands.

There was something else in the room, another sense in the silence of the *“nk nk nk”*. In beginning to feel my way into Baby J’s mind, I sensed the stirrings of an independent self. The hands were now entwined. Like a vibrant green vine pushing through the cracks in a wall, the strength of this connection showed itself.

Nothing about Baby J suggested being let down. With intention, he studied the hands in front of him, the hands holding that bottle. With clear intensity his blue eyes examined what was in front of him. In his fingertips he reached for the heat of her body, sweeping tips like whippers over her skin. A fluid intimacy and such coherence in the direction of his movements. This trailing gentle touch sought her out. The tender examination persisted through the length of the bottle. I heard Baby J silently beckon to his mother.

J was present, emerging from the chrysalis of his early months. In his gestures and touch, his will and intention, seemed clear. While for his mother there seemed some sense of resignation, for Baby J, the world was still inviting. His mother’s body still a wonderland for exploration. The ballet of those trailing fingers a symbol, a marker of this couple.

Later that same morning, on the same mat, lying in front of the television:

*His mother senses the shift in his attention, moving to kneel in front of him – blocking out the screen. He smiles, almost immediately vocalising in response to her. She is talking to him about what she is planning to do for the day – making soup for lunch, “but first we need to*

*change your nappy". J seems happy, satisfied, full – never more so than when his mother is this close in front of him. His blue eyes are completely focussed on her, locked on, smiling at her – as he murmurs his responses to her speech, with his mother allowing room for this, he is putting his fingers and gradually one fist into his mouth. Saliva is dribbling from the corner as he sucks and chews on his hand. His mother wipes the saliva from his mouth, and I think, "He's almost drooling – finding this interaction with his mother delicious".*

Over the year I continued to notice Baby J's hands – micro meanings in micro gestures, accumulating and morphing into new meanings. At first, something so inherent to the relationship bond, responses automatic, intimate, a mutually assumed knowledge. Gradually movements coalesced into cultural shapes recognised by others. Pleasure and delight in hand extensions, or signals of enough, stop, with a tilt of the wrist. Felt tension and strain when clenched, and banging or inviting and playful in a reach toward the other. I read excitement in circling wrists, splayed fingers. Demanding his mother's attention, he grabbed handfuls of her jeans; he pulled himself to stand, stretching, insistent on being picked up.

At bedtime, Baby J rhythmically scratched the sheets. A slow repetitive scraping of nail against flannelette, a barely perceptible sound, a private opening and closing, a wave to consciousness as he floated down through layers toward sleep. This slow scratching was also often the first signal of J waking, a personal gesture of greeting between states of being.

Later, with his mother's encouragement, Baby J waved goodbye to me, a formal signal acknowledging our relationship. After the very first time though,

*J crawls from the kitchen toward me, then pauses, sits up and looks up from his position opposite me – his gaze is now part of a clear "friendly" demeanour. He is smiling, he moves to bring his hands together, casually interlacing some of his fingers, as if he is about to start clapping. Instead he raises his right arm and makes a big loose waving gesture. As he does so he is looking down at the floor and then up at me. There is something of the shy coquette, a Lady Diana-ish quality in his smile. His mother responds "XX's not going yet!" But it crosses my mind that J is remembering me waving goodbye to him from the previous week. I think to myself he has found the referent for me in his gesture – the action that names my place in his internal map of the world.*

When J was 14 months old the emblem of the couple intimacy is retained amidst more change. J is in the same lounge room, where he was observed as a new infant, with his mother, now also with his newborn sister, who is 12 days old. The new trio are sitting on a sofa facing the television.

*J is cruising around the coffee table – keeping one hand in contact with his mum's legs. If he moves beyond being able to reach back to touch her, he returns to this point.*

*His mother is holding the baby with her left arm, as baby feeds from her breast. She holds out her right hand, resting it on her knees. J touches and holds her fingers individually, each in turn. She wriggles them in response. I am remembering the significance of his mother's hands to J – how he held and fondled them as a baby, and when he began bottle feeding.*

*If he is in close enough contact with her leg rather than her hand, his mother uses her hand to touch him, stroking the hair on the back of his head. As J continues cruising, his mother keeps talking to him, encouraging him to toys on the floor in front of the table or referencing back to actions on the television screen. I marvel at the acting out of his mother's capacity to hold two babies in mind. In noticing the commentary and her use of touch – efforts to maintain a constant connection with him, while also holding and feeding a newborn – I feel a poignancy in the tenderness of this dance.*

Two weeks later, perhaps taking advantage of his mother's limited ability to follow him, unchaperoned, J explored his own bedroom. His mother was around the corner, down the hall, pinned on the sofa, breast feeding his sister. After exploring several objects, including the intercom, he balances between pieces of furniture.

*He reaches forward with his hands, stepping between the change table and the cot. Standing at the corner of the cot, J reaches in between the bars and pulls out his dummy. Holding his hand out, he shows it to me. Then he puts the dummy back into the cot, pauses pointing toward it, before opening and closing his hand waving goodbye, and then clapping his hands together. As I am watching this sequence of gestures I am amazed – I feel like I am watching his growing self thinking out loud. He clearly links three ideas ... strong evidence he is forging ahead. He then walks across the carpet – 10 steps, before dropping to the floor.*

Now a toddler, J seemed to be farewelling his exclusive relationship with his mother, waving goodbye, perhaps, to some of his dependency. I saw him growing up fast. But there was also pride in his action, in his mastery, autonomy. I joined in, admiring his sturdy self. Again, he seemed equipped with some resilience in the face of life's imperfections and inevitable disappointments. He seemed, a self, wanting to find his way forward.

Reflecting on hundreds of pages of observations, I chose to ponder Baby J's hands. The experience of observation provided a privileged space, and a window into recognising the exquisite and intricate subjectivity of another. J's hands pointed and led the way.

#### **Post script**

Today, after several years, I visited J. Now, he is 5 years old. His mother's eyes glisten as she reads the essay. J's long elegant fingers twinkle with delight and indecision as he pauses over which cupcake to choose for morning tea.