

## **Black Dog Institute Essay Competition, 2006**

### **Comments by the Judging Panel**

In 2004, the Black Dog Institute held an inaugural writing competition, inviting people to submit essays on the history of the term 'Black Dog' as a description for depression. The response to the competition was outstanding, and attracted 267 entries.

In 2006, the Institute hosted its second competition, in which people with mood disorders, family members and friends were asked to write about their experiences in living with the 'Black Dog.' The essays were to provide inspiration, helpful ideas and encouragement to others who live with depression. This time there were 634 entries from people whose ages ranged from 14 to well over 70.

We found the standard was exceptionally high, so that judging the winners became a challenging but energising task. People wrote about their experiences and shared their ideas with honesty, courage and a remarkable empathy for the plight of others. So many emotions and reactions were revealed. Grief, despair, denial, love and hope. Humour was sometimes black, other times gently funny. Family members and friends gave both tender and tough accounts of how they learned to understand the illness and to provide ongoing support. One man described his family as living in a 'Monty Python' world.

Acceptance of medication and the role of health professionals were high. Acceptance of responsibility for one's own journey was almost universally quoted as the first stage in learning to live with the 'Black Dog', including for many, an ultimate acceptance that the 'Black Dog' was likely to be a companion for life. People named their black dogs, wrote amusing and helpful training manuals for them, loved them and, at times, hated them. A few entrants said the analogy left them cold. Others simply chose not to utilise the analogy in their contributions. Many of the entries were very practical, giving strategies that had worked for the writer, yet at the same time acknowledging these may not work for others. Friendship, humour, physical and other enjoyable activities featured strongly.

Each story was different, yet shared a common ground with others in revealing the extraordinary resilience of the human spirit. Reading the entries revealed there is no one 'correct' pathway to pursue. Each individual's experience of mood disorders is different, and lodged not just in medicine but also in the person, which is why that great humanist psychiatrist, Oliver Sacks, evokes such strong response, and why story is such an important element in understanding mental illness.

We hope these particular stories will be widely read, and thank everyone who participated in this competition for providing such inspiration, such wise counsel, and such hope.

***Anne Deveson, Margret Meagher, Leanne Pethick***  
Judges, 2005/06 Black Dog Institute Writing Competition

<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media/eventscal/index.cfm>

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