

The Florida Writer

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2019 Florida Writers
Conference Wrap-Up & Photos

Current Trends in Traditional
Book Publishing: Fiction,
Nonfiction and YA



2019 Candice Coghill Award Winner

The Candice Coghill Award is given to the Youth Royal Palm Literary Award winner who receives the highest number of points. Here's this year's winning entry.

Fluorescent Freedom by Jenna Mather

Going to the fair had always been an outside dream of mine. Most kids I knew took it for granted, running in with their friends and taking the joint by storm when it came once a year. They would gorge themselves on fried food, dare each other to ride that zipping spinner, laugh as they wasted five more dollars on a carnival game that was impossible to win.

Each year, they would plan to take me with them. To show me how the galaxy could fall into a couple square miles and make it a wonderland. And, each year when the fair dropped by, my body seemed to decide to take another bite out of me. Always.

First it had hit my lungs, smashing the notion that this cancer type only hit those who smoked. We didn't catch it quite soon enough, and soon cancer was rushing through my blood. My veins were canals, through which cancer's warships gained the power to invade and conquer every part of my body.

Now, I was stage four and feeling the terminal label that came with it. In truth, I was done. Done grappling with life like I had been for the last seven years. Done seeing the entire world as a white room, people always looking and poking and checking my vitals. Done wearing those blue paper gowns that never warmed against my skin. Done being radiated, only to find that cancer had claimed yet another region of my body as its own.

Last week, I basically signed my own death certificate. My mom argued it was creative suicide; I argued it was a direct path to freedom. It was either choose when I went, or let the cancer complete its horrific work in its own time; in other words, waste away in the hospital, weak and disintegrating from treatments that did nothing but make me feel even worse.

No, it was better that I knew when. It was better that I could live my last day in a dream, in a place I had always felt with my heart but never seen with my eyes.

I stepped out of the Expo Center, flanked by my closest friends, Jamie and Matthew. Under me, my knees felt shaky, though I couldn't tell if it was another cancerous victory or just the excitement vibrating through my nerves. This would be my last night, but it would also be my best.

I barely dared to look up. Jamie looked at me with a face like melting butter, her eyes wide and sad. Matthew just stared ahead, like the raw, unfiltered happiness I had shown on the ride over was a dam about to shatter. One more droplet, and I would burst with depression.

Not today, so not ever. Nowhere in my dreams were there tears on this day.

I raised my eyes, and the whole universe seemed to land in front of me. The world was my meal, and I was the hungry patron who got to savor it all.

Against the backdrop of the night, the fair around me became a star. Fluorescents and neons glowed brightly against the darkness like bioluminescent, jeweled orbs. They blinked and swirled, forming borders and patterns in the air before the ride spun or the sign strobed, sending the lights off in another direction.

Roosters crowed in a nearby tent, touting their first-place wins. People shrieked with delight as rides cast them into the air, their feet brushing the sky. Fryers sizzled and coasters zipped. Over it all, people chattered; they pointed, laughed, and ate, crunching on anything this fried paradise offered.

The heavy scent of smoke and gasoline fell over me, traveling with the warmth that radiated from nearby vendors. It coupled with the buttery, carb-loaded aroma of everything fried. Together, the combination was distinctly human.

It was beautiful.

I took a step forward and my legs wobbled. A few feet away, a family turned in unison to gawk at me. When



I met their gaze, they turned away, pale cheeks flushing red with shame. Maybe I should have been mad, but I wasn't. My gaunt frame and smooth head clearly labeled me as a cancer kid, and I knew that if I was them I'd look at me too.

Joy vibrated down my spine. Jamie led the way to the ticket booths, half dragging me past the rows of food vendors and little tents selling strangely random knick-knacks and nothings. Rides surrounded me, glittering against the sky as they spun, twirled, flipped, and fell.

My own mind seemed to go through the same motions. I had wanted this for so long, and now that it was happening... I was wandering through a forest of candy without a clue of my position.

Matthew nudged me toward the window, his hand on my shoulder. I didn't need to look back to know that he and Jamie exchanged a sorrowful glance as I stepped forward. I hated to leave them, and they knew that, but sadness wouldn't change a thing. If anything, maybe something good would come of my absence: Jamie and Matthew had been dancing around a romance for about as long as I'd known them.

Behind the window, the woman dressed in the charcoal shirt of the fair employees pulled a green wristband from the box at her feet. When she straightened up and her eyes met mine, her face contorted with pity. I gave her a wide smile, my dull eyes sparkling like the rides at my back. She squeezed my hand, then wrapped the band around my thin wrist. I turned away; sometimes the pity was as overwhelming as the radiation.

When I pulled back, Matthew and Jamie each clasped one of my hands, and before I knew it, I was whisked off into the excitement myself.

"Aimery, come on!" Jamie laughed as a ride called Magnum slowed to a stop beside us. We piled into a cart,

and soon our hearts had left our chests and our stomachs were at our feet, and we were flipping, spinning, laughing. The world was a rainbow blur, and we were soaring, our worries and fears abandoned with every twirl of the ride.

Tomorrow would be hard to face, but tonight the world was ours.

We jumped over puddles and raced over the dirt. Jamie's blonde hair streamed behind her like a brilliant flag as she weaved her way through the crowds ahead of Matthew and I in search of the best place to get fried Oreos.

On the sky ride, we squeezed three to a tiny seat, laughing as we squished on top of one another. Below us, the fair buzzed, alight with the energy of pure bliss. It was a mini city, lights just as dazzling and brilliant as I had imaged them. Even more so.

Cold air kissed my cheeks as our feet touched to the ground on the other side of the fairgrounds. The moon had risen above our heads, a glowing, white lantern in the ebony sky.

I felt like I was in a dream. A place back in time where a creaky ride was all that was needed to slip someone's face into a smile, to force their thoughts away from the hardships of their tomorrow. And, when I was here, amid a rainbow of life and lights and laughter, it was all I needed, too. ✨

Jenna Mather, a junior at Jupiter High School, recently completed her first novel and has career aspirations of becoming an author. When she isn't writing, Jenna enjoys reading fantasy and science fiction.



"People say, 'What advice do you have for people who want to be writers?' I say, they don't really need advice, they know they want to be writers, and they're gonna do it."

R.L. Stine

