

# **Judges' Reports**

## **2010**

## Short Story Report

I have never had reason to read so many short stories in such a brief period of time and I found it surprisingly entertaining and instructive. I was impressed with the variety of themes chosen by the entrants and by the general liveliness of the writing. A couple of complaints did arise. I often found myself wishing that entrants had thought more carefully about their endings. Many good stories failed at the final hurdle, either by fading away in an embarrassed murmur, or, more egregiously, by spelling out, with leaden seriousness, the 'significance' of what had gone before.

I was also disappointed by the paucity of humour. By humour, I do not mean knock-about farce, or ba-dum dum one liners (although those would have been perfectly welcome) just some acknowledgment that the human experience is funny, as well as sad. This year's writers experimented with all sorts of tones and moods - brutal, meditative, grim, melancholy, wistful, whimsical, erotic - but very few of them took the risk of striking a comic note. 2011 entrants, please take heed: making a reader laugh does not compromise your claim to being taken seriously as a writer of literary fiction.

I know it is customary for judges to say that the judging process was difficult, but in this instance, I must confess, it wasn't very. There were one or two moments of anguish when it came to choosing ten runners-up. (I would have been much happier if I could have expanded the list to include at least four more stories.) But when it came to awarding first, second and third prize, the decision was relatively simple. There were many stories in this year's group that had sparks, or passages, or sometimes whole pages, of brilliance, but relatively few that managed to sustain the precision of their language and the sureness of their voice throughout. It is a wonderful feeling when, somewhere in the fourth or fifth paragraph of a story, you realize that you are in truly capable authorial hands, that you can stop worrying whether the next sentence is going to come out well, and simply give yourself over to the pleasure of the narrative. The winning authors were so consistently deft and alert and confident in their command of their material, that choosing them was really no choice at all: they more or less demanded to win.

Top prize goes to '*The Woodcutter's Wife*', a dense, dream-like fable, that manages to combine the poetry and strangeness of Hans Andersen with the gimlet-eyed wisdom of Alice Munro. Its prose is consistently inventive and fine, without ever passing over into preciousness. Several of its more gorgeous passages were zinging around my head for weeks after I had first read it. I wish I had this author's chops.

Second prize goes to '*God's Instruments*' - a coming-of-age story, I suppose, albeit a horribly bleak one. It offers, among other things, an excellent lesson in how to use something small to convey something large and complex. Its devastating ending made my eyes smart.

Third prize goes to '*Underskirts*', a weird and enthralling tale of sexual transgression, told in a series of prose-poem monologues. Robert Browning meets Adrienne Rich: terrific.

Zoë Heller

## Flash Fiction Report

The flash fiction category makes the short story seem a positively relaxed, languorous affair. To create something in 250 words that isn't a mere fragment, seemed to me such a difficult task, that I didn't have particularly high hopes of this year's submissions: I was delighted to have my expectations confounded. Of several fantastic entries, the two that impressed me most were '*Glass Flowers*' and '*Shipments*'. They both use their extreme brevity to beguiling advantage, while achieving radically different effects. '*Shipments*' is a melancholy sort of poem; '*Glass Flowers*' is a miniature saga. They share first prize.

Zoë Heller

## Poetry Report

That an awful lot of people write poems, many more than actually read them, is a familiar complaint from judges of poetry competitions. But actually, it's not one of mine. The unexamined life, after all, is not worth living. I'm in favour of more people writing poems. I think of it as analogous to, say, cricket - anyone who wants to can play and you can play at any level. No need to be especially talented - week after week you bat at the bottom of the order, but occasionally you'll startle yourself by executing a perfectly timed drive or you may somehow manage to block out the last few overs. Even if you never bowl, there's always a chance that one day a difficult catch will stick. And so what if you have no great success? You pay your match fee and make a valid contribution to the game. Why should you give it up if you enjoy it?

Not, in fairness, that I had to read all the submitted poems. Far from it. But I did receive a dauntingly large box through the post, a substantial pile of entries expertly filtered by Candy Neubert and her team of experienced readers.

After my prolonged engagement with this strong long list, Michael Hofmann's preferred definition of a poem as 'a machine for re-reading' seems to me especially apposite. Because more significantly maybe than all the lovely technicalities of the art-form, a poem is a piece of writing that expects to be read in a very particular way - slowly, open-mindedly, alert to the syntax, the music, the qualities and texture of the language, the overall shape; always, and especially if in any doubt, aloud. The poems that went on to reach my final shortlist have had to survive multiple re-readings. Or, to put it more positively, the better I've got to know them, the more I've found in them to enjoy. And whatever the theme or procedure, enjoyment - both the reader's and the writer's - is crucial; in William Carlos Williams's famous words, 'if it ain't a pleasure, it ain't a poem'.

So those that ended up in my reject pile on balance didn't give me enough pleasure, just didn't reward me enough for the close reading. I'm still very glad to re-read any of my thirteen choices, all the typescripts now sprinkled with my pencilled ticks for particular felicities - for instance, the 'neatly ruined walls' and that cunning line-break between 'English Heritage' and 'card' in '*Tours*'; the detail in '*Emma's Porch*' of how the brightly coloured passing cars 'bobble the patterned glass of the front door'; and the self-mockery of 'nice', the humour of the 'hang glider' in '*Although We Never*'. But three winners are required. Working through the pile for the nth time, you have to notice - to calibrate exactly - the quickening of interest, the anticipation of pleasure that each poem provokes in you, and probably in the end it's that sort of gut-feeling that you have to go on.

So my third choice is the intriguingly titled '*There's Another Graveyard*', in which the grass tastes good to the sheep and the grandmother's back is to the wall. But it's an act of memory so precisely

realized, so naturally expressed that it becomes its own resonant 'jar of quietness', a stay against untold pain and grief.

'*Snipe*', the second prizewinner, urgently weighs the experience of seeing snipe in flight against the darkness of the time and place. The real 'numbsculling' north wind, the dead reeds hissing, the broken glass of the ice and the sodden mosses become metaphors for all the things that 'do not bear thinking about'. Against these the poem presents us with the snipe, in all their linguistic vitality, still 'ahead of us'. And leaves the question at the heart of the poem for each one of us to answer - strangely not 'Who wouldn't....?' but 'Who would feel a lift of spirit like that?'

The overall winner is '*This Morning*', a consummately measured act of mindfulness. To write in such simple transparent language is probably in itself one of the most difficult of poetic disciplines. Is it the spare details of the kitchen - only the clementine described with any particularity - that make it so hospitable and universal? The initial surprise of the spring sun strengthening and weakening, 'coming and going like an old mind' foreshadows its transformation in the final verse into the unexpected grandmother's exemplary acceptance.

Michael Laskey