

Judges' Reports 2011

Short Story Report

I would like to thank all those who entered the competition for this year's Bridport Prize. This involved writers in making a commitment to a form which is remarkably demanding - short fiction. For pieces to succeed in such an exposed and unforgiving environment, they must offer the condensed observation and musicality associated with poetry and prose at its finest and display a carefully nuanced approach to narrative, voice and character psychology. An effective short story, or piece of flash fiction, delivers the impact of a novel in only a few thousand words, or only a few hundred. It is a singularity, a moment of remarkable meeting between reader and writer.

We can't be surprised, then, that even the tiniest misstep, or failure of tone, or the most minute dissonance in a phrase will be enough to undo a piece entirely. As an author myself, I would always hope this kind of mishap would be something I can catch before the work leaves me for the wider world, but every one of us has times when we let something slip and allow it be past recalling. I mention this because the pieces I have read in the course of judging were often of a very similar standard. The differences between winning and being commended, or being commended and going without mention were sometimes quite small.

Perhaps because entrants realised that the stakes were high within a short piece, many of them selected what might be considered naturally dramatic subjects - fatal illnesses, deaths, fractured family relationships, or mental states. The overall tone of the entries was dark and there was a sense of personalities and comforting roles being lost or badly damaged. This may, in part, reflect that we are living through disturbing times. And, most assuredly, dark and challenging topics can be very rich for exploration in short prose. I would point out that in the weaker pieces submitted, writers seemed to be relying on their choice of subject matter to do a good deal of their work for them. Almost anything can be dramatic, if the author makes it so. And almost anything can seem two-dimensional if it is handled poorly. Here and there, a writer had taken on material that was too difficult for them to currently master. Although this led to a degree of failure, I would want to make it plain that failing in this context - because of daring, an ambitious narrative, a drive to exceed one's limitations - need not, in the long term, be in any way a bad thing. Overcoming our fears and having expectations of our abilities can be key to our growth as writers.

Some authors fell down with clumsy phrasing, or with passages which didn't make their meaning sufficiently apparent and another pass might have placed them among those I'll be mentioning later. It is almost impossible to over-emphasise the importance of re-writing as an aid to any author. The process is sometimes appalling, sometimes tedious, but also deeply educational. It is in re-writing our own work that we actually discover who we are on the page and who we may come to be next time.

Having said this, I am delighted with and for my winners and hope their success pleases them and leads them on to greater things.

The flash fiction pieces were extremely penetrating and confident. Becky Dean's "Meeting the Lobster" genuinely takes the reader through a journey of increasing emotional identification and the title works well. (A number of writers seemed to have real difficulty finding a title that would help them.) "More Like A Sister" from Robert Maslen again works from title to final, beautiful line and establishes an unquestionable voice. "The Christmas House" is another piece full of well-realised voice and character with a neat pay-off. Congratulations to everyone.

Barry de Lara's third-placed short story, "Dinner At Benutti's" handles complex events and a large cast with clarity and assurance. It establishes a little world with its own habits and language and is entirely convincing. The denouement is presented without inappropriate sentimentality.

"Trying To Think In the Bantustan" by Kevin Parry approaches a vast area of political conflict, simply and meaningfully - partly through incident, partly through use of a young observer and partly through a very nicely created tone. Significant images and actions are highlighted skilfully. The final passage brings the piece to a proper conclusion.

"Arrivederci Les" is one of the few stories to exploit humour - always a quicksilver asset - with real dexterity. Kitty Aldridge finds a unique voice for her character and the interaction between the narrative and the narration is highly enjoyable. There's a real feeling here of someone relishing the act of writing in a generous, rather than a self-indulgent way. This is a pleasure the reader can share. The balance of black humour, observation and emotional impact is very satisfying.

Once again, my good wishes for the future to the winners, to those who have been Highly Commended and to those who were not, on this occasion, successful.

AL Kennedy

Poetry Report

I hugely enjoyed reading the final list of poems for the Bridport Poetry Prize 2011 and was seriously impressed by the range and vitality of the poems, which I hope is reflected in my selection of 14 terrific poems. The 'top three' poems could all - on different days as I read and re-read them - have received first prize. 'Endowments' always entranced with its beautiful litany of images for ageing, its balance between elegy and love poem; and yet managed to sign off, audaciously, with a last-line laugh. 'Caesarean' has real poetic authority; a physicality of language which indicates the presence of a genuine poet. 'Queen' would have pleased the late Ted Hughes with its intensity of noticing, its scrupulous witnessing, and was thrilling to read. All three winning poems display risk, originality and the sense that they were necessary to write and I warmly congratulate their authors and also the other poets represented here.

Carol Ann Duffy