

Judges' Reports

2015

Short story report 2015 by Jane Rogers

The first thing a short story needs to do is to make me – the reader – turn the pages. My curiosity needs to be aroused, maintained and satisfied. It is only at a second reading that I really become aware of the craft in the writing; the *ways* in which the writer is engaging me – the language, the structure, the voice, the characterisation - the techniques which are in play. And then (assuming of course it is a good story) my understanding, enjoyment and admiration deepen.

On a second reading, there were seven Bridport entries which really stood out for me, and to be honest, any one of them would have been a worthy winner of this prestigious competition. All are very fine stories. Selecting first, second and third was very difficult indeed.

In general the standard was high and I really do congratulate all entrants. It's hard writing and polishing a story and sending it off with all your hopes into the blue. I know, because I have done it myself many times, and often it has been like chucking a pebble into the sea. My stock response then is to blame the judges for poor taste, and I quite understand if you want to do that. Nevertheless, I will offer my thoughts on what made some stories weaker than others. A number of stories described a character who is lonely, bored and unfulfilled, and whose life feels rather pointless. I admit to feeling like this myself on a regular basis, but it isn't interesting and there's no suspense. A number of stories presented the viewpoint of an unfairly treated or misunderstood child. Again, this is true-to-life, but it has to be exceptionally well-handled to make it interesting. (See the winning story for this exception.) A number of stories featured violent, cruel and abusive men – but a good story needs to do more than shock and horrify; it needs to move toward some sort of resolution or catharsis, it needs a *shape*.

And my final complaint concerns tenses. The present tense is popular, but it does not work if the writer lets past and even pluperfect come crashing into it at random. Choose a tense and stick to it, please (except when the story shifts in time, obviously).

And now to the winners ... 'Ping at the Zoo' is deceptively simple; an adopted Chinese girl feels isolated in America. But we are in the hands of a very skilful writer. The narrative voice is third person, restricted point of view, shifting between Ping and her mother Meifen. Ping's sections are written in such simple clear language that we can believe it is the mind of a child; and the child's observations are so precise that we can identify things for which she has no name – like the food she is served in the morning, 'tiny, hard, sweet dumplings floating in milk from a cow, which quickly go soggy.' Ping thinks a lot about food, and the reader understands this to represent many sorts of loss. It is a fine illustration of Flannery O'Connor's command that a short story should operate by showing not by saying, and by showing the concrete. The child's story is heartbreaking but there's not a scrap of sentimentality in the writing. Cutting back and forth in time, the tragic history of Ping's family is revealed with impressive economy. We are already sympathetic to the poor mother who is forced by the birth of a son to give away her daughter, before that moment comes. When it does, and Ping is taken into a house, a single sentence relates, 'Meifen watched the closed door until it disappeared in the dark, the whimpering baby hanging from her hollow chest.' A lesser writer would have told us how Meifen felt, or that she cried. Here one word, 'hollow', does it all. In short story, especially when dealing with emotion, less is always more. As Raymond Carver says, 'Get in, get out. Don't linger.' Amongst many other pleasures, I loved the way images of trees and references to their beauty and their strength are woven through the fabric of the story.

'Mannington May be Mad' is written in a very different way. It is third person again, but from the point of view of a highly educated, language-loving adult who revels in alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, complex sentence structures – every literary trick in the book. But the story does not feel tricky. Instead it succeeds in making the reader see and hear language afresh, making

connections and revealing meanings which are more commonly furred over into cliché by thoughtless daily use. And there is a sly humour which is as built into the choice of language as it is into the hall-of-mirrors subject matter of the story itself. Very slowly, very gradually, do we come to realise the similarities between our hero and his enemy, as tiny revelations are drip-fed through his perfectly-paced account.

In third place is 'LOL' which did indeed make me laugh out loud, and was my favourite story for quite a while. It could be described as science fiction, but it reads more as a satire upon the present, than as future fiction. Dystopian visions are generally gloomy, but here the potentially terrifying subject matter is handled with a delightfully light touch. I loved the use of text salutations, and the references to blinking. If I say anymore I will give the game away, and you need to read it yourself to understand and be amused by its cleverness.

The Highly Commended stories speak eloquently for themselves, but I would like to draw attention to the wonderful variety of their subject matter (from the polar bear hunter to the teenager trapped in her high-rise Bangkok bedroom). There is also impressive variety in the types of short story here, from the futuristic, experimental style of 'The Bad Sex Awards' to the highly conventional but blackly funny crime story 'Pig Swill.'

Congratulations to all the winners. The imagination, skill and craft in your writing makes your work a joy to read. I'm pretty sure most of you are already published writers; if not, you will be soon.

And congratulations to all the entrants. After days of reading your stories my head is crammed with new ideas, images and voices. I have been privileged to enter a fantastic range of imagined worlds. There are many many stories here which contain elements of a good story, and we all know that it is incredibly hard to get *all* the elements right, so you are at least part of the way there. Keep writing, and may you go from strength to strength.

ROGER McGOUGH - Poetry Report

This year the standard of entries was so high that not one of the poems I submitted anonymously reached the top 50.

I jest (about my submitting poems, not the high standard). Although it must be said that Candy Neubert and her team of readers, to whom I'm grateful for sifting through the initial 7002 entries, thought that the standard this year was disappointingly low. And if I may quote from Candy's report 'I was once told that a really fine poem "feels like a cat climbing up your leg". Sometimes there are a goodly handful of these in the final 200 but this year they feel more comfortably curled on a lap.'

However, I was more than happy to receive my box of kittens and found the judging process immensely pleasurable, and felt privileged to witness the joys and tragedies unfolding before me. I smiled, I cried, I occasionally yawned. Yes, yawned, for as many a judge will confess, giving careful reading to poem after poem can be wearisome. Not that any poems in themselves induce fatigue, but rather, the sheer volume (reflecting the success of the competition) can result in feelings of *déjà-vu*, and emotional overload.

One must also guard against subject and title prejudice. I remember being with a small group of judges (a dictum? a doom?) sifting through our final selections and one dismissing a poem I favoured with the words 'Cricket! I can't stand cricket. I don't care how good the poem is, it's about bloody cricket.'

I did wonder too if the time of the year and the weather can affect one's judgement? For instance, would a poem filled with summer sunshine set on a Greek island have greater appeal when read on a cold night in February? I've no idea. However, I do know that I received my bundle of poems at the end of July and that I took a hundred or so on holiday with me to Majorca in August. They were in need of a holiday. We became a familiar sight in the bars and cafes of Deia, the poems and I, inseparable, and the 25 amigos I brought home bore the smudged fingerprints of sun tan oil and vino tinto.

When Kate Wilson had asked me last year to outline to prospective competition entrants what I would be looking for, I said that I hoped to see poems that I wish I had written, and I wonder now if that was not the best advice to give. For I suspect that some poets submitted poems 'in the style of' (me) which I would never have written, nor wanted to. In other words, forget who is judging, just submit your best poem as if passing it on to a sympathetic reader.

Liz Lochhead in her Poetry Report last year noted that 'Very, very few poems were in anything other than free verse,' and that 'Most poems were about image rather than sound.' And the trend continues, rhyme being such a rarity I found myself gasping for a villanelle or the whiff of a sestina. And sad to say, the few that did appear offered more in style than content.

Content? Cancer and old age unsurprisingly, engaged the minds and hearts of many poets, and stepping inside such poems often seemed like an intrusion into a very private grief. But if grief there was, where was the rage? Politics did not engage our poets. No voices crying out against poverty and injustice, migration and global warming. Our politicians can sleep soundly in their beds, the poets are not assembling in the street outside.

Many of the poems, and this is not a criticism for I think many of my mine fall into this category, are like short films. Small surreal dramas, often funny sometimes scary, which makes me to wonder if they might have been contenders for the Flash Fiction prize. (Short story or poem? Discuss.)

The First Prize goes to 'An Elegy for Lace' which is very much a poem and a carefully crafted one. Inside the honeyed stone of the cloister walls the nuns are making lace that will adorn the necks of comtesses, perhaps a queen.

'Bone and ivory bobbins click like needles,
The clink of ship's masts at their mooring, as we link
Meshed nets of grenadine.....' Meanwhile, in Paris, the tumbrils are

being filled, the guillotine erected.

'I grow afraid, Sisters, I grow afraid.'

My Second Prize-winner, the intriguingly entitled 'The division of labour in pin manufacturing' offers advice to the emasculated job-seeker:

Nobody writes a killer pitch on a Happy Baguette napkin. Pretending to work only makes you good at pretending. 'Camouflaged as a dead person' he wastes his days in a local cafe. He must return to work before life loses interest in him

It's now a race against cappuccino, pastries and insignificance.

The Third Prize goes to 'How can I tell if the bluebells in my garden are Spanish?' which I imagine is the spirited, witty response to a question on Radio 4's Gardener's Question time. It may be a one-trick pony but from the opening:

They will be more flamboyant-their skirts flouncier, ...to the close:
Complete strangers-bluebells you hardly know
Will say hola to you.

...it doesn't put a hoof wrong .

Perhaps on another day, or at another time of the year, I might have awarded the first three prizes from others on my list of the ten highly commended.

'Eel', 'The Kung Fu Master's Resume', 'British Bulldog', or 'Michelangelo's David' might have edged in. Congratulations to you all.

David Gaffney - Flash Fiction - Judge's report

Reading flash fiction is like listening to chamber music. It feels close up. You can hear and see all of the different moving parts, shift focus from one phrase to the other easily, see the relationship between the instruments and the different elements of the composition. *Listen*: that's the squeak of the musician's sweat as his fingers slide along the neck of the cello; that's the tap of a shirt-cuff button on the body of a violin. When reading flash fiction the efforts of the writers are exposed in the same way; the pipes and wires are on the outside. Sometimes this is good, and sometimes not so good. Working in the close-up form you have to get everything right, every sleight of hand will be noticed, every over-emphasised pause, every unwarranted furbelow, every unearned tug on our emotions. And in a competition, we assume this is the final draft and that by this stage, any walls or pillars that are not load bearing should have been taken down. In the batch sent to me by the Bridport Prize this year I am pleased to say that many entries stood up to this close examination and it was tough to choose just six from the thousands sent in.

Crushing Big is a lovely story in which the crush of a schoolchild is mirrored in the parents who flirt and tease each other with promises of intimacies that never happen. I like the line 'I can see down her clean throat, glimpse her beating heart'. But it is more than just a description of a nascent love affair. It takes a turn, and a rather sinister one; the man steals the woman's coat and stows it under his mattress as a kind of fetish trophy so that he can feel her shape beneath him as he sleeps. He thinks about what is in the pockets - the bus tickets, the fluff. The strong last line hints at things to come in a tantalising way. *The Witness* is entirely different. It's an intriguing and disturbing examination of a war atrocity which we learn partway through takes place in the concentration camp Belzec. Horrifying details are unfolded casually, in an almost offhand way, from the point of view of a worker who has been tasked with writing a hygiene report on procedures at the death camp. It's a big subject for flash fiction and demonstrates that the form is able to bear the weight of solemn, historical themes such as this. I like the line 'memory, a stone in its depth now'. *Sense of Smell* could have ended up as an over-tricksy point-of-view reveal story, but here the reader learns who is talking early on. It is being told to us by a baby still in the womb, and is a study of the effects of the sounds and tastes and smells on the developing embryo - brilliantly described, especially that of distantly perceived tobacco from a group of schoolboys the mother walks past. It's a simple story as such and doesn't drive ahead much plot wise - but it's compelling and the story's movement is all about our growing realisation of the strange and unique point of view. And it's got one of the best last lines I've read - 'Let's begin.' *The Price of Truth* caught my eye because it's a blackly humorous piece about the way us writers can often appear to be cold distant creatures who harvest stories from the souls of those around us with an eye only on novelty, entertainment, and self-aggrandisement. It does this with a neat little plot with a banging punch line. Next - well, we've all been left in a car outside a pub with nothing but a packet of crisps for entertainment - it still

happens to me now, in fact. *Good at Crisps* is a great description of this childhood memory, with some nice accounts of the many different ways you can ingest fried potato snacks. In *Encounter*, a hitchhiker gets a lift from God and is transfixed by the different ways God chooses to present himself to the world, all in the space of a few minutes.

All in all it was a pleasure to read such a varied bunch of short-short stories, and congratulations to the winners.