

Shortlist:

Flares, Grade II Listed Building (Ralph Ockendon, West Midlands)

Flora Finching, *Waking Up in 2012, is Offered a Library Book* (Jenny Dawson, Lincolnshire)

For what we are about to receive (Julia Deakin, Yorkshire)

His Last Hour (Geraldyn Pinto, India)

Louisa Gradgrind (Roger James, Kent)

The Forgotten Nelly (Nancy Charley, Kent)

Report:

With over 50 entries, drawn from across the world, choosing a shortlist was no easy task. The quality of the entries was very high and I was presented with a wide variety of styles, forms and subjects. There were however, two major trends in the entries, and this shortlist represents the best of both.

Firstly, numerous entries took on the voice of Dickens' characters – sometimes just to get under their skin, sometimes re-telling their stories from a different angle. *Flora Finching, Waking Up in 2012, is Offered a Library Book* by Jenny Dawson (Lincolnshire), *His Last Hour* by Geraldyn Pinto (India) and *Louisa Gradgrind* by Roger James (Kent) are poems that achieve great things through this medium.

Secondly, there were entries that tried to take on Dickensian themes and issues outside of the stories. Some told the story of Dickens himself within this context, and others examined the characters of today – the type that Dickens might well have written about if he were around. The shortlisted poems *Flares, Grade II Listed Building* by Ralph Ockendon (West Midlands), *For what we are about to receive* by Julia Deakin (Yorkshire) and *The Forgotten Nelly* by Nancy Charley (Kent) follow this path.

3rd place:

Flora Finching, Waking Up in 2012, is Offered a Library Book (Jenny Dawson)

The relationship between Arthur Clennam and Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit* is rumoured to be based on one of Dickens' own relationships with a sweetheart of his youth called Maria Beadnell. Both Dickens and his character Clennam are separated from the youthful beauties they remember so fondly. When reunited with them 20 years later, each is struck with a sense of revulsion at the people the women have become. The character of Flora Finching is described as “broad, and short of breadth”, “diffuse and silly” – becoming one of the tragic-comic characters of the story.

This poem speaks in the voice of Flora, and re-examines her relationship with Arthur from her point of view. Rather than she having become “silly”, he has become “straight-faced. Not

a laugh in him”, “grey and over good and solemn”. Reflecting on how she is portrayed by Dickens, the poet presents Flora as a complex, sympathetic and likable character whose minor role betrays a much more personal relationship between author and text.

2nd place:

Flares, Grade II Listed Building (Ralph Ockendon)

This is a brilliantly complicated poem, built up in layers of images of working class heritage. These are made all the richer with a little research, opening up numerous levels of potential understanding for the reader willing to work for it.

It begins with a quote from Thomas Gradgrind, the utilitarian educator in *Hard Times*, who believes in the principles of logic and rational engineering to solve social problems. In this vein, and in true Dickensian spirit, the poem reads as a potted ethnography of the working class communities of Broad Street, Birmingham and the ways they have been stereotyped (in good faith) at different times. It is located around a former Calvinist missionary church (conjuring thoughts of the famous Calvinist work ethic) – a place people would have passed on their way when, on the 27th December 1853, Dickens performed the first ever public reading of *A Christmas Carol*, specifically for a ‘working class’ audience of 2000 strong. From this spirit of morality and education for the masses, the church is now a nightclub, where the stereotyping takes on a more contemporary feel.

1st place:

Louisa Gradgrind (Roger James)

The utilitarian Gradgrind has a daughter, Louisa – a girl educated according to her father’s belief in logic and rationality, where things such as poetry and fiction are seen as destructive influences. The character of Louisa struggles within this context to articulate emotion, and eventually has a breakdown, whereupon her father realises the error of his ways. It is within this context that the poem triumphs. It is Louisa’s voice trying to convince her father of this error; trying to express how she feels about herself and their relationship. The wording of the poem reflects her education in rational, formal expression, and the fact that she must use the only language her father understands.

Because of this it is a deeply touching poem, conveying huge amounts of emotion in unemotional language. It is a poetic testimony to the man who believed poetry to be so destructive.