

SaveAs Writers International Prose Competition 2011

Results

Adjudicator's report:

There were 47 pieces submitted for the prose competition, ranging from flash fiction to fully-fledged short-stories, with about a third of the pieces making the first sift for the three awards. Each of these stories had commendable qualities: good writing, particularity of place and time, poignancy without sentimentality, dialogue that contributes to narrative development, authentic characters. On subsequent readings, some were ruled out: language choice not as effective as it could be; problems with narrative voice; not enough interaction between characters; nothing significant happens—there is no change, no questions emerging, everything too neatly tied together; unsatisfactory ending. So what were the elements I was looking for?

Fundamental is language that avoids abstraction. In a similar way to lyric poetry, short stories are a condensed form, which means that every word counts, and the language needs to be precise. In quite a few cases, the language was pedestrian and predictable. In particular writers chose words which were abstract, general, or judgemental. This kind of lexis gets in the way of reading, because the reader cannot embrace what the character is experiencing. Don't tell me the room stinks—say it smells of mouse droppings, or formaldehyde, or over-ripe Munster cheese. This is really just another way to say show, don't tell. Using concrete language and giving significant details are crucial for lifting your prose to the next level.

A second requirement has to do with voice. Voice provides a powerful tool for a writer to explore the life of another. Those stories which stood out for me contained characters whose voices announced who they were, revealing crucial aspects about the time and place they lived, their attitudes, their moods, their confidence (or lack of) toward their material—all seemingly without their being aware of it. Too many of the stories contained flat characters that just didn't lift themselves off the page. I want to care about a character—even if I don't like them very much. They need to be memorable—so that after a day or two, I catch myself musing: *So what is it Maggie needs so desperately to tell her mother?* The work of the story is not to give me all the answers, but to raise the questions.

Perhaps the most important choice a writer makes is point of view. Very often these stories employed a type of authorial narration, where the narrator acts as a stand-in for the author. Prominent but aloof, this narrator assumes a role 'above' the narrative. The problem with this choice is that it does not seem very realistic, and tends to involve long passages of narrative report, which is just another way of telling, not showing.

So having made these general remarks, I'd now like to talk about the stories that stood out:

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In third place is **'Day Lilies'**. This story concerns a couple who stroll through an unnamed, presumably English town on an insufferably hot day. The sense of place plays a large role here with acute attention to detail; the description is both eloquent and expressive of character, particularly Eva's. However, when the same syntactical structures are used again and again, the reader longs for the human voice. Yet this story stood out from the rest in capturing the distinctiveness of ordinary experience, and in its portrayal of tumultuous emotions that lie just beneath the surface.

'Magnets' was selected for 2nd place. Narrated by an aviation screening officer, the story quickly draws you into its world. The protagonist is an aging passenger who is stopped and questioned on his way to Thailand for surgery on his terminal cancer. The character of Mr Spandler is fully realized; the features of his discourse are recognizably East End Cockney, in stark contrast with Ray, the narrator, whose utterances are rendered as stilted and inauthentic. Despite Ray's possession of 'institutional' power though, in this conversational battle of wills it is ultimately Spandler who wins because of his linguistic dexterity. Conflict is at the core of good characterisation—fresh and forceful, these characters enabled me to live outside of my own skin.

And now (drum rolls): First Place: 'A Tea Party'. I loved this story on first reading, and I loved it even more with each subsequent reading. It is an intimate tale of an Irish family in England. The home is full to bursting with children, until the mother withholds sex, and the father takes a mistress. All of this is witnessed with unflinching tenderness through the eyes of a child. As her impressions accumulate, we build up a complete picture of the family's life, their secrets and circumstances. Tightly-wrought, the point of view is skilfully developed and sustained, bringing the reader to a logical (but not predictable) conclusion. There are no concessions to nostalgia or sentimentality here--it is charming, funny, truthful, quirky and deeply moving.