

Short Stories - Judge's Report Sonia Overall

I was delighted to be asked to judge this competition for a second year. I was impressed by several of last year's entries, but the quality of writing this year meant I had a very difficult time making the final selection.

There were several technical elements that I looked for when selecting a shortlist. I expect a story to open and close with strong lines, to have structure, strong characterisation and a powerful voice. I also like writing that takes risks, whether in its choice of narrative point of view, theme or delivery. Ultimately, these criteria helped me to decide which stories made it into the shortlist.

There were many very competent short stories from entrants, but I was looking for something more than a well-oiled piece of writing. I wanted something from the winning stories that I felt I had never read before: something unsettling, that whetted the appetite and left me wanting more – not in the story itself, but from the same hand.

My shortlist of seven contains the stories that I read and reread. These were the ones that haunted me. Of course, I made my selection and wrote my comments for this report before seeing the names of the shortlisted writers: but in some way it is little surprise that a couple of these writers appear twice in the list. If I found more than one of their stories compelling, they are clearly onto something.

The shortlisted stories (alphabetical by title) are:

- 'Derma' by Anna Maconochie
- 'Hearing the Song' by Eugene Bales
- 'How Beautiful' by Maria McCarthy
- 'If Not Yourself, Who Would You Be?' by Anna Maconochie
- 'In the Wheat Field' by Petra Mcqueen
- 'Ritual (Those were The Days, My Friend)' by Gary Studley
- 'Whatever is said, it will not pacify' by Gary Studley

Before I announce the three winners, I would like to say something about each of the shortlisted stories. There are many entries which I would like to praise for specific strengths, but I feel that these four 'honourable mentions' deserve particular attention.

('In the Wheat Field')

I was strangely affected by the story of a young girl and her mother making an extended summer visit by the sea. It is clear from the outset that the pair are hiding something, although exactly *what* remains unspoken. There is an extended feeling of suspense and unease in this loss of innocence story, and the nostalgic, almost idyllic setting is beautifully conjured. Description is a great strength here: the rooms of the house are fairly bursting with the sound of children running, squabbling and stumbling through the days. This is a carefully wrought, well-structured story: it is 'In the Wheat Field' by Petra Mcqueen.

('If Not Yourself, Who Would You Be?')

What starts out as a fairly standard tale of internet dating takes an unexpected turn in this well-paced story. The characterisation here is excellent, and the dynamic between the characters builds convincingly, making the crushing denouement highly effective. The final scene stayed with me and replayed in my head at unexpected moments, the sure sign of skilful writing. The story is 'If Not Yourself, Who Would You Be?' by Anna Maconochie.

('Whatever is said, it will not pacify')

The next shortlisted entry immediately gripped me with its breathless first person narrative. Although it felt like the beginning of a larger story, this glimpse into a world was effective and affecting. I wanted more of this hard-edged but lyrical prose, which contained some genuinely stunning lines. This is extremely promising writing which I very much hope is the beginning of a novel. If that is not the writer's intention, then I throw down the gauntlet now. The story is 'Whatever is said, it will not pacify' by Gary Studley.

('Derma')

I was disturbed and entranced by the next quirky, edgy story. A young office assistant's seemingly banal affair with her boss quickly reveals a darker tale of self-loathing and self-harm. The first page impressed me with its natural dialogue, but when the protagonist's fur-collared coat shape-shifted into a talking fox, things got really interesting. Surreal and disturbing, this is accomplished writing: the story is 'Derma' by Anna Maconochie.

Now for the top three.

(3rd prize - 'How Beautiful')

The first of these prizes goes to a skilfully underplayed story of technological dystopia. This was another of those stories that stole up on me: at first I admired the fluidity of the prose and the amusing situation, but as the story grew I realised that there was much more to it. This is a well-structured, deftly handled, nightmarish story, with echoes of George Saunders' surreal 'other-worlds'. The unsettling ending is deliciously written, balancing dark humour and wry observation, with a striking final image that is truly chilling. **Third prize goes to the story 'How Beautiful', by Maria McCarthy.**

(2nd prize -'Ritual (Those were The Days, My Friend)')

Second prize goes to a story bursting with sensory detail. This is high energy prose, every line popping with atmosphere – rhythmic phrasing, alliteration, delicious lists of childhood treats and traumas. Even though this a very short, slice of life narrative, a whole credible world sings off the page. This is a voice that makes the reader run to keep up, and I would happily have kept running for many more pages. It is exactly the kind of writing I relish reading. So many congratulations and a silver medal to **Gary Studley for his story 'Ritual (Those Were The Days, My Friend)'.**

(1st prize - 'Hearing the Song')

The first-prizewinning story is hard to define, and this is one of its many strengths. Although the prose is simple and naturalistic, the whole story has an enigmatic quality. The choice of protagonists and setting – an obese 'twenty-seven year old boy' and his grandmother on holiday in Disneyland – could make for an easy comedy. Instead, what emerges is at times funny but also challenging and unsettling, and ultimately delicate and poignant. The characterisation in this story is so deft, and the images of the protagonists moving through the story so complete and cinematic, that I still find it difficult to accept these are just fictional characters. There are some striking lines and images in this story – 'she smiled, showing teeth as white as new dice' for example, and the dialogue flows convincingly, exposing and exploring the complex relationship at the heart of the story. The ending is unexpected and, given the inevitable investment a reader makes in these characters, quite devastating. **The winner of first prize is the story 'Hearing the Song' by Eugene Bales.**