Report on savers writers prose competition 2022

I’d like to start by paying tribute to all the entrants, who created pieces of such high overall standard this year. And gave me a very, very hard task Indeed. The theme of myth proved extremely fruitful. Perhaps unsurprisingly the classical Greek and Roman gods featured in a variety of guises. Zeus as a powerful Elon Musk type figure, Cassandra as a modern Internet soothsayer, Persephone as a climate campaigner, Midas as Simon Cowell, Medusa as a vengeful wife from the pages of the Daily Mail. But there were also pieces that drew on Norse sagas, Celtic folklore, Arthurian legend, Scottish history, Indian mythology and a multitude of other sources.

I would now like to introduce the thirteen pieces on the shortlist, in alphabetical order going by the writers’ surnames.

Rose and the Daemons by Isobel Bond

This is a supremely cleverly constructed piece of writing that is also very affecting. It offers us two alternative scenarios as an elderly woman approaches the end of her life. In one she suffers terribly while living to the age of 96, in the second she slips gently into unconsciousness at the age of 93 before her illness worsens. Two mysterious daemons are imagined as holding the balance between a life ending in confusion and pain and a merciful death that spares the woman three years of suffering.

Isabel Bond will now read an extract from ‘Rose and the Daemons.’ In her recording you will hear the opening paragraph about the daemons followed by a later section of the story in the voice of the doctor.

‘Pruning Shears’ by Phoebe Bush.

Pruning Shears is set on a university campus, a recognisable everyday environment in which inexplicable but meaningful things happen in the best traditions of magical realism. I hope I'm not giving too much away by saying it concerns a young man with vines sprouting from his flesh. I loved so many things about this story. The convincing first person voice, the use of one of the tropes of Greek myth as a stepping off point, the way in which the vines becomes a metaphor for the student’s anxieties, the emotional power and upward trajectory of the wonderful ending.

I’d like to ask Phoebe Bush to read an extract from ‘Pruning Shears’.

‘Red Hair and Fishing’ by Neil Foster

I found this story of the tender relationship between a son and his father very moving and on the right side of sentimental. It has many of the elements of a children’s story – a secret impossible pond on the other side of a garden hedge, small people who appear from the green depths of the countryside. But it is informed by an adult knowledge of the frailty of human relationships and the restrictions under which we have to live. It captures the inevitability of change, a moment of transition as the son enters a new phase of life and the father finds the freedom which has been denied to him.

I’d like to ask Neil Foster to read an extract from ‘Red Hair and Fishing’.

‘The Wrong Gods’ by Ellen Freeman

What a brilliant idea for a myth-themed story! A *Viking* warrior, whose death in battle is graphically described, finds himself in the *wrong* afterlife, taken down by the ferryman to the *Greek* underworld. There is some marvellously comic to-and-fro between the gods as they discuss how to sort out this unprecedented situation without any of them losing face. It is a story which defies categorisation, that begins as an epic account of courage and bravery, skirts farce and ends as a description of disintegrating mythologies, a mingling of beliefs. ‘There is a shift occurring’, says the Valkyrie, ‘boundaries are blurring’.

I’d like to ask Ellen Freeman to read an extract from ‘The Wrong Gods’.

‘Water Baby’ by Maggie Holman

There is a Korean story about a girl, Sim Cheong, who sacrifices herself to the sea in order to save the sight of her father. ‘Water Baby’ is based on this tale but brings it into the present day. The writer cleverly intermingles the realistic with the supernatural throughout the story and leaves us guessing at the end.

I’d like to ask Maggie Holman to read an extract from ‘Water Baby’.

‘The Labours of Joe’ by D S Kastle

This is very much written in the spirit of Joyce’s Ulysses, a story where everyday incidents in the modern world are transfigurations of the events in a myth. Reading the story the first time, I loved the stab of enlightenment when I realised the hidden mythic undercurrent. The character of Joe himself, an unlikely stand-in for Heracles, is very engaging as we read for example about his problems with the gang known as the three dobermans, otherwise the three headed dog Cerberus. I loved this story from that first time of reading it.

I’d like to ask D S Kastle to read an extract from ‘The Labours of Joe’.

‘Three Sisters’ by Lizzy Lister

As soon as I started reading Three Sisters, I was drawn in by the rhythms of the writing and the power yet fragility of the first person narrative voice. The reader inhabits both the world of gods and goddesses and the modern world. The writer experiments with time and place, mingling myths of incest among the Greek deities with a story involving a children’s home and a placement in a commune for the sisters and their brother. I believe Joyce would very much have approved of this.

I’d like to ask Lizzy Lister to read an extract from ‘Three Sisters’.

Aequidiale by Jay McKenzie

I haven’t exactly identified the myth that’s the source of this story but Google at least reveals that it is based in the folklore of the Baltic nations. The story has all the elements of a folktale including a miraculous mirror which allows different worlds to touch each other and a reluctant young woman forced into marriage by her father. However, the crystal clear writing and the emotional impact of the ending make this old scenario fresh and vibrant and meaningful.

I’d like to ask Jay McKenzie to read an extract from ‘Aequidiale’.

The End of War by Patrick O’Brien

The majority of the text is written in an impersonal style giving factual information in the manner of a coroner’s report or a secret service file on a suspected spy. However, the final section is in the epic style of an Irish legend, telling of the life and death of Conall, the great warrior. This use of different styles mirrors Joyce’s Ulysses, although in the much smaller scope of a short story. The reader is fascinated by the parallels between modern and myth and by the unsolved mysteries without ever, I regret to tell you, a full revelation. Such is life.

I’d like to ask Patrick O’Brien to read an extract from ‘The End of War’.

‘Renegade’ by Geralyn Pinto

The renegade of the title is a yamadoot, a messenger of death in Hinduism. Yamadoots are sent to collect the unworthy dead and carry them to the underworld. It is a marvellously told story in the slightly sardonic but also deeply humane voice of this one independently minded yamadoot. In one of my favourite parts of the story, the yamadoot meets his opposite number, the Grim Reaper, such a fascinating and inventive idea of the writer’s. The yamadoot is not suited to his role because he has “a heart that feels”.

I’d like to ask Geralyn Pinto to read an extract from ‘Renegade’.

‘The Boy Merlin’ by Fil Reid

King Vortigern is a man with a problem. The walls of his fortress keep falling down as it is being built, his ex-allies the Saxons are approaching in battle readiness, his priestly advisers seem incapable of finding a solution. In a nearby part of the land, the boy Emrys is being exhibited in a freak show. Skilfully, the writer brings these two characters together in a fateful meeting. This is an example of great story-telling, of a cleverly constructed chain of incidents which lead to the fine ending.

I’d like to ask Fil Reid to read an extract from ‘The Boy Merlin’.

‘The Threesome’ by Greta Ross

Many of the shortlisted stories contain elements of conedy but none appealed to my sense of humour more than The Threesome. No, it’s not about a bawdy coming together. The three characters are based on ‘the grey ones’ from Greek mythology, a trio of old women who share one eye and one tooth between them. The story is laid out as a play script with interventions from the director as it veers between farce and the tragedy of impotent old age.

I’d like to ask Greta Ross to read an extract from ‘Threesome’ with help from myself and Mary Anne.

Nothing Like Ice Cream during Ragnarok by Katy Wimhurst

Ragnarok is the Icelandic mythic version of the end times. In fact, the action of the story takes place in the everyday humdrum modern world but with large helpings of magical realism. Strange materialisations of old machinery begin to appear in homes, streets, parks – everywhere in fact..Seen through the eyes of the elderly Hilda, these strange events are both comic and mystifying. In fact, the story is a parable of the non-stop consumption of machines by our ever-greedy throwaway civilisation.

Katy has asked me to read an extract for her.