## The SaveAs Writers’ International Prose Prize, sponsored by Dr Geralyn Pinto

**Theme: Post-Apocalypse**

**Judge: Sonia Overall**

*Riddley Walker* sets the bar high for post-apocalyptic fiction. When we first discussed celebrations for the anniversary of publication, back in 2017, we couldn’t have envisaged that we would be doing so in a time of pandemic, in an uncertain political landscape, and with a daily menu of misinformation and mistrust.

It’s not surprising that we are soaked in alternative futures and speculative disaster narratives right now. Given how much of this we can read and watch, it’s not easy for writers to find an angle that feels fresh and surprising.

Ultimately, that’s what I was looking for when judging this competition. Originality; confidence; precision. An ability to play with form and language; to surprise the reader. And a complete story, whether told in full or glimpsed obliquely, closed or open-ended.

This year’s shortlist achieve those things in very different ways.

**The Full World - Joanna Backhouse**

In ‘The Full World’ Joanna Backhouse offers us a menu of contemporary politics, a crazed vision of a private, bunkerhouse dystopia and a glimpse into the creation-myth-making of a skewed future. The language is playful, the voice is active and direct, and the action whips along, covering both ends of several generations of fallout in under 4000 words. It’s an extraordinary achievement, and the kind of story that will stay with you, teasing and puzzling, long after reading.

**Colour Blind – Nick Barton**

Nick Barton’s very short story ‘Colour Blind’ makes excellent use of the flash fiction form with some economical, understated prose. We jump straight into the point of crisis, and watch as the couple caught in an end-of-world countdown wait for, and ultimately embrace, the inevitable. It sounds bleak, but this piece is also beautifully wrought and strangely affirming, speaking to what humans need and cherish.

**There is Life at this Level- Tabitha Bast**

It’s not easy to write about disaster when you’re in the middle of it; time and distance are the writer’s allies. Despite this, Tabitha Bast uses her short story ‘There is Life at this Level’ to face up to the here and now of lockdown experience. This is a patient, contemplative piece that deals with loss and grief, offering hope in the form of nature without resorting to sentiment or polemic. It’s deftly-written too, with an unusual use of the ‘ticking clock’ structure to keep the reader, and the protagonist, on their toes.

**A Heartbeat Away - Eamon Harrigan**

Eamon Harrigan’s flash fiction ‘A Heartbeat Away’ makes powerful use of reverse chronology. This is a minute-by-minute countdown to disaster, beginning at the end. There is extreme violence at work here, and with it, a sense of awe at the scale and poetic possibilities of destruction. It’s a bold piece of writing that examines an individual experience in the context of mass disaster.

**The Cult of Kurt Russell - David Kerekes**

‘The Cult of Kurt Russell’ by David Kerekes is proof that a good title goes a long way. It’s also a brilliantly funny story, offering a vision of the future based on a past vision of – the future. There’s a wry dig at the pervasiveness of popular culture here, and at reverencing the retro. The piece is sharply-written; satirical and succinct. I wasn’t expecting comedy when reading the entries, so this was a very welcome surprise.

**The Book of Mavis – Frances Knight**

‘The Book of Mavis’ by Frances Knight is a charming and, frankly, bonkers story. Mavis shares her desolate Kent landscape with strange acrobatic creatures, dodging aggressive Godreps and beaming recipes into the ether in a hope that they might offer cheer. It’s a riot on the page and enormous fun to read. Following a Marguerite Patten recipe will never be the same again.

**Touch – Gillian Laker**

‘Touch’ by Gillian Laker is a decidedly spooky story, etched in landscape and channelling folk horror elements to subtle, chilling effect. This apocalypse is a quiet, private one, but there are world-changing events unfolding in the small community of this story. The prose is gorgeous, a strong mesh woven from fine threads: every line carefully weighed, with not a word wasted. It’s no surprise, in retrospect, that the writer is a poet.

**The Wipe - Anthony Levings**

‘The Wipe’ by Anthony Leavings stands out for its ambitious and highly unlikely choice of point of view. It takes the reader a while to realise that the community of this story is – spoiler alert – a microscopic one. The inhabitants of the tale face their own epic quests, and are, like us, subject to the commands of organised Religion, Science and History, and tempted by the lure of storytelling. It’s a bold fable, and a darkly comic one.

**Not John – Jon Geoffrey**

‘Not John’ by Jon Geoffrey is a haunting story of grief and guilt. The apocalypse we glimpse here is personal and cultural, a figure that comes knocking, like the ghoulish Fetch of folklore, to confront us in own homes. The domestic is beautifully rendered in this piece, making the sudden paranormal intrusion very chilling indeed.

**A Belly Full – Abby Walker**

‘A Belly Full’ by Abby Walker is set in countryside subject to extreme drought. It’s an eco-disaster story that slips seamlessly from realism to the hallucinatory as the protagonist loses their bearings. This tale reminds us how dangerous it is to take the everyday for granted, while the strange encounter at the end speaks of the levelling power of necessity.

WINNERS

The shortlist contains very strong work, but I had to make a decision. Ultimately, I selected the winners based not only on the pieces themselves, but also their fit with the theme and its possibilities.

**3rd prize**

Third Place goes to a piece that literally explodes reader expectation through its bold use of structure. This piece shocks, surprises and stays with you, as all good flash fiction should. ‘A Heartbeat Away’ by Eamon Harrigan.

**2nd prize**

Second Place is for a piece that impressed me with its ambition, bringing together shades of *Riddley Walker* and kidnap narratives. It’s a powerful and original combination. ‘The Full World’ by Joanna Backhouse.

**1st prize**

First Place goes to a piece that stood out from first reading for its originality, confidence and deft balance of Sci-fi world-building and social commentary. I absolutely loved this story, and it gives me great pleasure to award The SaveAs Writers’ International Prose Prize, sponsored by Dr Geralyn Pinto, to David Kerekes  for ‘The Cult of Kurt Russell’.

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**Shortlist: in alphabetical order by author surname**

The Full World - Joanna Backhouse

Colour Blind – Nick Barton

There is Life at this Level- Tabitha Bast

A Heartbeat Away -Eamon Harrigan

The Cult of Kurt Russell - David Kerekes

The Book of Mavis – Frances Knight

Touch – Gillian Laker

The Wipe -Anthony Levings

Not John – Jon Geoffrey

A Belly Full – Abby Walker

Third Place – A Heartbeat Away- Eamon Harrigan ( Ireland)

Second Place – The Full World – Joanna Backhouse

First Place - The Cult of Kurt Russell. - David Kerekes

Longlist extras

Children of the Hum – Penny Blackburn

Winged Victory - Malcolm King (Australia)

White Time – Michele Sheldon