

Sonia Overall

Save As Competition – Judge’s Report

Because I teach creative writing to undergraduates, I am used to coming up with criteria for judging stories and poems. Of course, I am given a set of assessment guidelines for marking students’ assignments – but what is more interesting is talking to those students and working out what it is that makes good writing. We discuss what we want from a story as readers, and how to achieve this as writers. We usually come up with a checklist of ideals – a gold standard for writing, if you like.

It is hard to tick all of the boxes with one piece of work. A lot of writing doesn’t tick any of them. What delighted me about the selection I made from this competition is that some of the stories had several ticks, and one, I feel, ticks them all.

So what was I looking for? Well, lots of things, but here are some particulars:

A strong start.

The first lines of a story are where you, as the writer, set out your wares, and invite the reader to buy. I want a first sentence to be like looking into a cake-shop window and not being able to resist going inside. I could be late for an appointment, or about to miss a bus, but if I don’t follow through and buy that cake I will regret it. A writer that achieves this, and hooks the reader, is off to a flying start.

Ambition.

This is the element I nag my students about the most. I want to read something that takes risks; that has edge. If you don’t take risks as a writer, you are in danger of treading water. It doesn’t matter if you falter, but it does matter if you don’t try.

Specificity.

A good story conjures a world, and it does this through particulars, not abstracts. The most improbable and absurd ideas can feel authentic and credible if they are supported by good, specific writing. This doesn’t mean troughs of description, but the use of well-observed, well-timed details. When I read a story, I want to live in its world. This is something that the shortlisted stories did, and some of them did it extremely well.

Closure.

I want a story to end well. This doesn’t mean gift-wrapping a conclusion: a good ending is often an open one. Many short stories end obviously, or abruptly, or don’t seem to know when to stop. A good story makes you feel as if you have been somewhere, and a good ending makes that visit memorable.

With these criteria in mind, I have shortlisted the following stories:

'76' by Gary Studley

'Baby Blue' by Fiona Scoble

'Homesick' by Sara Green

'No Talking After Lights Out' by Geralyn Pinto

'The Raft' by Gillian Laker

Before I announce the winners, I would like to say something about the two shortlisted stories that deserve honourable mentions.

'No Talking After Lights Out' by Geralyn Pinto

There were several stories that aimed to be humorous, and many of them genuinely made me laugh. There were also stories with unlikely narrators. Although I have read (and written) stories with narrators who are dead, I had never before come across a narrator who is literally 'speaking from the grave'. The audacity of this was what made Geralyn Pinto's story, 'No Talking After Lights Out', really stand out. Although it is clear that the narrator is dead and buried, the oblique references to her neighbours and their varying states of decay are darkly humorous, and I very much enjoyed this element of the story.

'76' by Gary Studley

Some subjects are hard to write, make for uncomfortable reading, and are often overlooked in pursuit of more accessible ideas. Few writers can convincingly convey malice, or threat, without falling into overstatement. In his story '76', Gary Studley creates a palpable sense of danger through his use of stark language and specific details. Perspective, and the use of 'off stage' action, is also a strength in this piece. The sinister final image of a crowbar - which may or may not have been put to violent use by an angry mob – resonated long after I had finished reading.

And now for the big three:

3rd prize - 'Homesick' by Sara Green

The third prize-winning story clearly ticked my 'opening line' box. From there, I was drawn in by a strong narrative voice and a litany of details. This is a story that revels in objects, and cares about what objects can represent. It is a moving coming-of-age story, and it matches form to content well:

set in a contained environment, on board a ship, the structure of the narrative is tight, too. But from this small world, and from the perspective of a child, the writer explores ideas of vastness and greed, both literal and metaphorical. The story is ripe with imagery and it has a terrific last line. So third prize goes to Sara Green, for her story 'Homesick'.

2nd prize 'Baby Blue' by Fiona Scoble

The second prize goes to a story that has ambition in spades. This is a superb example of how absurdity and surrealism can work for a writer. I read this story several times, laughed aloud with each reading, and didn't want to leave the narrator's world at the end. The element which sealed the prize for this story was its use of dialogue, offset by internal monologue. The protagonist, obsessed with the idea of having a child, half-listening to his mates' bizarre conversation about body alopecia, muses on how best to obtain a baby. The result is hilarious and oddly moving – which pretty much sums up the story. So for absurdity and ambition, and a very neat twist with an octopus, the second prize goes to Fiona Scoble for her story 'Baby Blue'.

1st prize 'The Raft' by Gillian Laker

Which takes us to the first prize. This is the story that had everything I was looking for. It has a stunning first line, which is matched throughout with sophisticated, rhythmical prose. The narrative voice is clear and consistent, packed with imagery and specifics. Phrases such as 'the small circular scar' and 'unsung agrarian poor' suggest that this is a writer who understands how to cross-pollinate poetry and prose. There are wonderful details in this story: one character is described as wearing 'a starched dress over a limp slip and shoes like gondolas'. This is writing that knows how to push words around and make them work, and yet it retains a graceful understatement, conveying shocking events with a minimum of fuss. It also has a beguilingly strong structure – apparently effortless, yet highly effective. It ends so well that after the first reading I went straight back to the beginning and read it through again. For these, and for other reasons that will be apparent on reading, the first prize goes to Gillian Laker for her story 'The Raft'.

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February 2013