

The Bigger Picture - Reflections on the Great War

SaveAs Writers' International Writing Competition 2014

When reading this year's entries, I was struck by the high standard of writing which made the compilation of a shortlist - let alone the selection of winners - an extremely difficult task.

I was not only delighted with the diversity of genres which included the supernatural, science fiction and even erotica but also with the remarkable ingenuity with which writers dealt with a subject that has had a huge amount of exposure. It is extremely difficult to find an unusual angle for such a popular theme but, without exception, these entrants succeeded.

The setting for these pieces ranged from the battle-front (**Beyond, A Letter from Kriemhilde Stellung**) to the war at home (**Restoration, Canary Song, Building 4**). One ambitious story, inspired by Rupert Brooke's poem "IV The Dead", provided a panoramic view of both elements in a mini-saga which followed a farmer to the battlefield and home again.

The subject of disability was touchingly covered in **Dredged Up** in which a wounded soldier tries to come to terms with his disability unable to appreciate the deadly effect that working in a munitions factory has had on his fiancée.

The shortest of all the entries **Muddy Hell** has some of the most vivid imagery, describing the all-pervading mud of the trenches and the moral dilemma of soldiers unable to put a comrade out of his misery.

Another, highly emotive piece was **Last Letter from Somewhere**. The chalk caves of Arras are the setting for this epistolary piece: a letter to be delivered to his wife in the event of the narrator's death, the written text being cleverly interspersed with the writer's private thoughts.

The effect of war on women featured in several stories. Two in particular – **Canary Song** and **Building 4** – focused on the women working in munitions factories who suffered appalling illness as a result of working alongside deadly materials. **Building 4** emphasised the fact that women, too, could become the victims of lethal explosions every bit as deadly as those suffered at the Front.

While many focused on the British Tommy, the story **Field Pumpkin** views the war through the eyes of an Indian soldier whose story, in old age, is recounted for the benefit of a young journalist. There are references to Gandhi and his attitude to India's involvement in the war as well as to the nursing homes in Brighton which treated wounded Indian soldiers. This piece offers a refreshing and unusual view of the Great War from a Commonwealth perspective.

Like **Field Pumpkin**, stories such as **A letter from Kriemhilde Stellung** and **Catheters and Catharsis** provide a retrospective view of the War with the main characters, now old men, remembering events from a point in the future.

Other pieces like **Thomas (Tommy) – A WW1 soldier** and **The Yeoman Soldier** take a straight, narrative approach. Recounted in the first person, they incorporate a considerable amount of historical fact. I have long been fascinated by references to the Mons Angels. In **The Yeoman Soldier**, I discovered that the scientific explanation for this phenomenon was even more extraordinary – and macabre – than the vision itself.

Shot at Dawn, the only ghost story among these entries, introduces the reader to a young man spending a last terrified night in a prison cell prior to execution. Condemned to die for desertion, he discovers an unexpected source of comfort.

Two pieces – **In Limbo** and **I Vow to Thee My Country** – took the novel approach of incorporating the verse from which they took their inspiration into the main body of the prose. **In Limbo** describes Siegfried Sassoon's period of recuperation at Craiglockhart, conveying a real sense of the anger and disillusionment felt by the poet at the senselessness of war.

Perhaps the most unusual approaches to this competition were the futuristic **The Westminster Battalion** which describes a girl taking leave of her mother as she goes to war and **Reflections**, an erotic piece which recounts the meeting between Maurice and his lover, Cesar.

Shortlist: (In alphabetical order)

A Letter from Kriemhilde Stellung – ROBERT WALTON

Beyond – JUIAN GYLL-MURRAY

Building 4 – TRINE V IPSEN

Dredged Up –JASMINA SVENNE

Field Pumpkin-GERALYN PINTO

Last Letter From Somewhere-NORMA ANN COLEMAN

Muddy Hell – HELEN CHAMBERS

Restoration –GILL LAKER

Shot At Dawn – JEFF JONES

Untitled – (Rupert Brooke – IV the Dead) –FIONA BLADON

Winners:

1st Prize: Restoration

Highly original. Beautifully constructed and well-thought out. Lovely interweaving of related themes. Juxtaposes the restoration of an old painting, The Rokeby Venus, and a young man's body. The vital link is Henry Tonks, the artist whose work inspired this piece who, we are told, not only painted wounded soldiers but had actually trained as a surgeon. This is an excellent example of a short story: a clear beginning, no sagging in the middle, a strong and meaningful end.

2nd Prize: Beyond

A soldier's lyrical reflection on what lies beyond the top of his trench. A real departure from the usual images of mud, blood and bullets. It contemplates the real meaning of earth, boundaries, No Man's Land and territory. The image of the worm will stay with me forever. An extremely ambitious piece as this kind of philosophical narrative is extremely difficult to write and can run the risk of

losing the reader's interest. Not a bit of that here. This is an extremely accomplished, beautiful piece of writing.

3rd Prize: A Letter from Kriemhilde Stellung

An engaging short story that grips the reader's attention right up to the last minute. It begins with an old man in a nursing home asking for paper and pencil. We are then taken back to the cause of his request. Unlike any of the other stories, this actually describes a combat scene. The style is lean, mean and pacy with sparing use of adjectives. Arranged along a double timeline with good use of scenes, crisp characterisation, realistic dialogue and a good plot with a twist in the tail.

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