Rebellion proved to be a popular and stimulating theme - there’s obviously some strong revolutionary undercurrents in East Kent - and I had 49 entries to read. Only one or two went into the discard pile on first reading, so I was left with difficult choices.

There seemed to be three types of ‘rebellion’ story. There were ones where a father, mother, husband, wife or boss was the repressive figure. The problem for writers there was to escape from stereotype, from two-dimensional domestic tyrants. There were stories about repressive institutions – care homes, companies, the state. And there were stories about actual rebellions, whether in imaginary situations or based on historical fact. And of course there were one or two enjoyably quirky riffs on rebellion which fell into none of these categories.

I was looking for all the usual things - imagination, style, plot, strong beginnings and endings, characterisation, pace, narrative technique - and I found them in profusion. There were stories I read which impressed me on first reading but seemed a little flat on re-reading. There were subtle stories which came into their own on the second or third reading. There were all the tricks of the short story trade, unreliable first person narrators, twists in the tail, stories told through journals, tightly structured stories, deliberately unstructured stories… In the end I had to rely on a simple question to myself: which stories would I want to keep and read again in a year or a decade from now?

And the nine stories I’ve chosen are ones that satisfy that criterion. It’s a personal choice. But I do believe that the top three stories cannot be easily challenged.

I’d like to mention a random selection of stories that made me regret that the shortlist couldn’t be longer. They have well-drawn characters, characters like Mrs Peggy Edwards who wouldn’t give up her seat on the bus; Christina who came back to her Scottish island home and settled old scores with her teacher; Sarah who found her rebellious spirit with her teenage daughter in Istanbul during the attempted coup; the mysterious manipulators of two stories about the hidden controllers of our lives in the Internet age. The boy who realised his father was a revolutionary hero in Tolpuddle or the wives of the husbands who fought in Bossenden Wood. And different from those, there was the description of two landscapes which embodied neglected issues of injustice.

I could go on. There are many stories which will remain in my memory and I’d like to thank everyone who entered for giving me the pleasure of reading their work.

ASCENSION

This is the story of an elderly inmate of a care home who is seething with rebellious anger, even to the point of violence and self-destruction. The writer skilfully portrays her from the outside and from the inside, both as a feeble old woman and as she imagines herself, a powerful sorceress. Her determination to be free energises the writing.

HERE THEY ARE SAAR – MY BREASTS

At first I thought that this story was the product of an over-heated imagination. The writer takes us to a fiefdom of late eighteenth century India where the women of the lower caste are forced to bare their breasts unless they can pay a breast-tax and to submit to a life as an easily discarded concubine. Then I googled ‘Travancore’ and discovered the historical fact that the fiction persuasively brings to life.

From the very beginning of the narration, the sinuous writing style impresses. The inner instinctive urge for freedom of the main character, Nangeli, is embodied in the mysterious girl who appears to her. And the whole story inevitably leads to the shocking act of ultimate rebellion and sacrifice.

This is a superb story.

EXCERPTS FROM THE SPIRITUAL JOURNAL OF STEPHEN COLDSTREAM

This is a superb example of the art of the dramatic monologue. It’s all about ‘voice’. The writer creates a narrator who wonderfully lacks any self-awareness. Through the faulty perceptions of this naïve man we see the reality of his situation. The ending left me wanting more - what is the reaction of his wife to the two incongruous gifts her husband, Stephen Coldstream, has chosen for her? Will his reluctant rebellion against his instinctive moral inhibitions end in disaster?

The writer extracts the full comic potential of the situation he creates.

THE VERGE

The title refers not only to the verge at the side of the highway but also recalls the phrase ‘to be on the verge’. For me, it also suggests the suppressed feelings, the irrational impulses, which we push to the side but which sometimes take over the drive of our lives.

On the surface, it’s a straightforward story about a woman who, frustrated by the opinionated personality of her dominating eighty-nine year-old father, abandons him at the side of the main road and drives away. But it’s not as simple as that. There are hints that the woman is on the verge herself. That her father is seen by others as loveable despite, even because of, his obdurate character.

The story generates immense tension as the woman at last turns back to look for her father. What will she find?

THE LAST PAP

The narrator has been subjected to constant media scrutiny by the good fortune of a compensation payment for some unspecified injustice. When the attention turns nasty, he rebels against the media - a brave and dangerous act in today’s world. However, his actions lead to further complications and ultimately to a tragedy which ironically thrust him back in the limelight.

The voice of the fictional narrator is consistent and convincing. This is a writer who knows what is important to his story and what he can safely leave out. At the beginning of the tale, the reason for the compensation is never specified; at the end, the consequences of his actions are left hanging.

It’s a gripping story which is expertly told.

THE GIRL WHO HID THE NUTS

This story stood out for its originality and sensitivity as it deals with the difficult subject of eating disorders. The narrator, an anorexic, rebels against the regime of the institution where she finds herself. As readers we are inside her mind, giving food an exaggerated importance, participating in her deceptions as she fools her carers.

There is a twist in the tail. I appreciated the preparation, the carefully inserted hints, gathering in strength but never fully revealing the secret until the conclusion.

This is a story which places us in an uncomfortable sympathy with the narrator.

YELLOW SHIRT

This is part adventure story, part political fable, part the story of a father-son relationship. It is based on the divisions between the ‘red shirts’ and the ‘yellow shirts’ in Thailand although I don’t have enough knowledge to judge how accurately it represents the situation. The ideas of the story about democracy and freedom, where those who advocate democracy may not be the ‘good guys’, extend beyond the boundaries of any specific state.

Similarly the conflict between ideology and personal relationships engages any reader. Perhaps in places the story is over-dramatised or the ‘evil’ characters are stereotypes but overall this is a well-paced adventure with important ideas at the heart of it.

REBELLION

The premise of this story is that Britain is still under Norman French-speaking rule in the mid-twentieth century. Winchester is the seat of government and power. The English speaking under-class are forbidden to embrace any form of progress which would disturb the ancient hierarchies. When the small village of Manchester adopts mechanical forms of weaving, the revolution is suppressed.

The creation of this contra-factual convincing world is a feat in itself. Add to this a love story with a rebellious female lead, an idealistic scholar-revolutionary and a villainous Norman baron.

This is both an exciting and a thought-provoking story.

MATRYOSHKAS

This is the story of three Russian sisters, one executed for her part in an assassination, one a passionate imprisoned revolutionary and one who places love and personal connection before politics. It takes the reader back into a world of fierce intellectual and political argument and revolutionary belief. The two surviving sisters are well-drawn three-dimensional characters and also representatives of opposing positions.

This is a writer of many talents. As well as giving a voice to these pre-Communist arguments, she is able to evoke in a compelling phrase ‘ the cruel, secretive laughter of faceless little girls.’ The story ends with a telling moment where Manya, the less political sister, despises the pity of the prison guard and proves her toughness.

This is a story that stood out from the first time that I read it.