

Cinnamon Press Short Story Competition 2015

Jeremy Worman: Judge's Report

A striking feature of the shortlisted stories was their range and ambition, for example: a fictionalized piece about the Piltdown Man hoax, the impact on a child of her prostitute mother; the suicide of a father, and much more.

Francine Prose makes the point that 'Great writers painstakingly construct their fictions with small but significant details that, brushstroke by brushstroke, paint the picture the artist hopes to portray [...] of which they hope to convince us.' The best stories here knew when to pause the action, to emotionally and visually intensify through detail, but also when to move on, so as not to dilute, or divert, the central focus of the text. 'Face Values', for instance, is a touching story in which a girl moves from resentment to respect for her father, but it is diminished by an opening paragraph that tells too many details, without leaving emotional space for the reader to imagine the scene, and the paragraph tips into melodrama. Such small technical oversights often made the difference between those stories selected for the anthology and those not.

Endings are the key structural feature of a short story, the point to which writer and reader are urged, and the promontory from which the reader looks back to test if the shock, or surprise, of the ending has been justified, but also gazes forward into the unknown future. Many very good stories, 'Fair Game' for example, just missed out on an anthology place because the ending did not quite manage to raise the level of drama necessary to a really convincing conclusion.

I want to make another tentative distinction between those excellent stories in the anthology and the very good ones on the shortlist: those in the anthology exhibited more

confidence in the narrative voice of the story. I trusted the writer because I was won over not only by the plot but by the authority of the writing. This was their story and they knew just how to tell it. I often gained this first crucial impression by the end of the first paragraph.

Joyce Carol Oates makes a shrewd point about the short story: 'My personal definition of the form is that it represents a concentration of imagination, and not an expansion.' Each of the stories in the anthology fulfilled this condition and the three winners did it with particular flair.

First Place:

'The Day I Met Vini Reilly' by Will Kemp has a pop buzz feel from the outset as the male narrator, an infatuated fan, sets off to see a concert of his hero Vini Reilly, guitarist and leader of the Manchester band The Durutti Column, formed in 1978. The reader is absorbed into the enthusiasm of the author. Light-touch social commentary, ironic personal reflections, sharp dialogue and insights about the author and his hero, fuse history and autobiography to create a bravura narrative that rescues from obscurity a cultural and personal moment.

Second Place:

In 'Common Ground' by Jane McLaughlin the solitude of the narrator, living in a country cottage after the breakup of a relationship, is striking for its ironic lack of self pity. The originality comes not from further self analysis but through meeting a travellers' family who have made an encampment at the edge of her land. She is drawn further into their life and through helping them, in a highly charged conclusion, finds a kind of emotional release for herself.

Third Place:

The dramatic first paragraph of 'Eclipsed' by Kat Mitchell really grabbed my attention: a successful middle-aged couple, barristers, are on a cruise ship when a young man comes to their dinner table and says hello to the woman, with whom he has had an affair. The social and psychological entanglement is well drawn out, the dialogue and details crisp and controlled, as the story skilfully constructs the various elements to bring the narrative to a chilling conclusion.

Runners Up (included in the anthology):

'Driving Blind' by Jennifer Bailey is set in a tense urban environment and this well controlled story tells of the emotional drama between a father, his grown-up daughter and their strange neighbour Michael, which twists to a satisfying ending.

'Restoration' by Aoife Fitzpatrick has a tone reminiscent of William Trevor and the first-person voice of an elderly uncle reveals, through strongly felt imagery, unresolved family feelings after the death of his sister.

'This Is For You' by Erik Löfroth is a psychological story of a woman who reflects on the trauma caused by her piano lessons as a girl and reaches a taut yet subtle climax.

'Pink Knickers' by Mandy Huggins is a cheeky, touching narrative about a moment of teenage romance that has unforeseen consequences and delivers in the ending what is promised at the start.

'Les Petites Curies' by Jane Austin is written in the first-person voice of Madame Curie's daughter; set in 1914 France, it combines historical and personal drama to great effect.

‘Whatever Happened To Sarah-Jayne?’ by Kathryn Lund is a daring, experimental, funny, Kafkaesque story that traces and undermines the identity, or non identity, of Orson as he disappears.

The international feel of ‘From Where You Are In The Machine’ by Rosa Campbell, set in contemporary hi-tech Saigon, about a couple’s complex relationship, intriguingly weaves together social, personal and historical narratives.