

CINNAMON PRESS ANNUAL SHORT STORY PRIZE, 2016

PREAMBLE:

Much like the novels we're so often told we should be writing, the death of the short story has been much talked of over the last forty years or more. Yet it remains one of the most malleable forms available to a writer, able to be twisted and reshaped into containing a startling diversity of narratives, from a heart-warming tale of 'everyday' life in a women's magazine, through the mainstream literary stories of Chekov or Carver, to works that might only tip the wink as to their nature by the fact they're not very long. And these are just some of the shapes encompassed by Western short stories: tales, sketches, fables, short narratives, &c, &c, &c, are found in many cultures from across the globe: the short story is as universal as it is flexible ...

Although the received wisdom from some writing magazines, books and courses is that writers shouldn't waste their time on short stories because people don't read them (which is to say mainstream publishers' accountants have decided they can't make enough profit from short story collections, other than regular Greatest Hits compilations and repackagings of the likes Hemmingway or Borges or Oates), short stories and short story collections continue to be written and published, and people *do* read them. Despite the reports of its redundancy, the short story is still with us and seems to be thriving. Partly, this is because the smaller scale of the short story makes it a good place to hone craft and get ready to jump off into the novel. But the discipline's (small) scale also makes it perfect for taking chances and focusing on a single idea — as you'll see from some of the winners of this year's prize — and there are clearly folks out there who have adopted the short story as their primary form of writing: they're not passing through, they're staying ... and exploring. And that, perhaps, is where the problem of the contemporary short story lies: it's got history, a past, traditions ... and rules. What we often think of as being a 'proper' short story — naturalistic, epiphany if not a definite ending, illuminating something of the human condition, whatever that is — is simply a slew of conventions that grew up in a particular place and a particular time and serviced the needs and shared worldview of a certain section of readers (and writers), conventions which have ossified into Standards and Values: yesterday's way of writing has been canonised as The Best Way. Which, perhaps, it was. Then. But now ...?

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Judging anything is, of course, largely a matter of taste. Which is to say my shortlist for this year's Short Story Prize isn't necessarily someone else's. We received a large and mostly strong field of, for want of a better term, traditional (Realist) short stories: I've largely eschewed these, choosing only those that struck me as being particularly good, in terms of voice and sureness of concept, if not always technique. Instead, I've been attracted to, and hearted by, those writers who have attempted to step beyond the 'rules' and commonplaces of the short story as we (in the Anglosphere, anyway) reflexively think of it, adopting an unusual narrative approach, a heightened realism that borders on the fantastic, or which springs from a viewpoint that is personal enough to mark the author as being particularly individualistic. In their own way, these stories *do* shed some light on that thing, the human condition, but they do it in unusual, startling, or disturbing ways, and the shape and flow of their stories are never simply the templates around which their tales are hung, they're integral to the piece:

their structures are part of the narrative, reflecting its tone and content. This strikes me as a Good Thing.

I was also very heartened that we received entrants from beyond the UK and USA. Simultaneously privileged and cursed by being fluent in English, it's easy for us to be unaware of the wealth of great writers in the world at large. To do so is not only to risk missing out on some good reading, it's dangerous because, in accidentally insulating ourselves inside our 'common' language, we run the risk of not only exhausting our concepts of what the short story can do and should be, through using our linguistic dominance as an echo chamber that reassures us what we are doing is the best of all possible worlds, we also forget that the 'human condition' is more than being caught up in the FA Cup, or whatever's happening on *I'm a Former Prime Minister, Get Me Out of Here*, or that there used to be fewer self-service tills in Morrison's: the human condition is simply breathing and trying to get on with things and making some sense of all this breathing and trying to get on with things and being alive. It's universal, which is more or less where we came in ...

THE RESULTS OF THE CINNAMON PRESS ANNUAL SHORT STORY PRIZE, 2016

FIRST PLACE:

Omar Sabbagh: 'Dye'

At once fiercely within the Realist tradition yet transcending it into a metaphorical world of philosophic debate, 'Dye' succeeds in being charming, beguiling, vivid and very funny. The language eschews the conventional 'transparent prose' beloved of creative writing tracts: a rich, almost Baroque style that instantly transports the reader into a narrative that is almost too real to be real, where a conversation on whether or not to get a your hair dyed is mirrored by a debate on the fundamental nature of our reality. Wonderfully audacious, this story turns trite ideas of writing about the 'human condition' upside-down and presents the reader with something all too rare in contemporary media: compassionate, intelligent characters who are genuinely concerned with how we live our lives.

SECOND PLACE:

Jez Noond: 'Squirrel Therapy'

An accomplished and disturbing exploration of inner space, the shifting of many crucial human interactions to digital and computerised systems, and the increasingly inhuman nature of our communal environments. Partly a caustic satire, the piece also has the unblinking matter-of-factness that marks the best speculative fiction. The prose is dry, gently sardonic and taught, conjuring almost instantly an air of despair and dissociation that only deepens as the central character is forced to withdraw further and further from an anonymous and inhumane world. Compassionate and culturally savvy, this is exemplary contemporary writing.

THIRD PLACE:

Balvinder Banga: ‘Sita in the Forest’

Vivid and powerfully told, this is a fine example of the ‘slice of life’ strand of Realism — indeed, it demonstrates why Realism continues to have such a hold over creative writing and why it will continue to do so. The evocation of place and culture is accomplished and the characterisation sparingly but effectively drawn. Any (minor) inconsistencies of style and technique are more than made up by the overall strength of the story and the writing. An admirable piece of work.

RUNNERS UP:

Jane McLaughlin: ‘Trio for Four Voices’

Spare and oblique, this story of a bystander’s dilemma is quietly resonant. At face value, its premise of the lone traveller drawn into events they would rather walk away from is familiar enough to be hackneyed, yet the author’s voice, measured prose and open ending bring a freshness that is beguiling. Images from the story linger after its end and the piece as a whole nags and teases, refusing to fade or offer a straightforward explanation to the events it portrays. The theme of the bystander reluctant to intervene is particularly apposite in the present British political climate, yet this only adds extra resonance to a skilful and assured piece of work.

Diana Powell: ‘(W + D – d) TQ/MxNa’

Fascinating look into the mind of a woman suffering from acute insomnia. The use of the terms from the titular equation to structure the piece is well done, as is the repetition of ideas and phrases, which give the piece an obsessional, increasingly desperate air. The gradual fragmentation of the prose wonderfully mirrors the central character’s crumbling mental state: a good example of how the style of a story can describe and inform more than any passage of exposition. Where it falls down, sadly, is at the end, which edges too far into the melodramatic — and, having said that, will no doubt turn out to have been based on true events. However, an excellent and daring piece of writing.

Jacqueline Haskell: ‘Acts of Cruelty’

A well written story, ostensibly in the conventional, Realist mode. Description and characterisation are well rendered, and the juxtaposition of long-standing grief and the vulnerabilities it causes with a more ambiguous view of life is interesting. The ending lingers, although, like ‘(W + D – d) TQ/MxNa’, there’s a sense of the melodramatic to it that initially conflicts with the tone of the story up to that point. And yet I see this as undermining only our expectations of what a ‘good’ story should do, these expectations being artificial: real life is not a story and, as true to life as it is, ‘Acts of Cruelty’ is a story, albeit one that examines some of the deceptions we use to deal with life.

Jenny Holden: ‘On Plymouth Hoe’

A well-crafted story in the Realist tradition, offering a snapshot of someone drifting through contemporary life, alienated and filled with a profound sense of ennui. The strongly subjective viewpoint lifts it out of the ordinary, as does the prose, which is vivid and honed. The commentary on racism is particularly apt, but the story overall offers a scathing condemnation of the emptiness of life in this consumerist paradise and that, ultimately, is the flaw in this story: the tradition it inhabits is so

deeply committed to being faithful to the society it critiques it cannot avoid becoming a part of that society and, implicitly, reinforcing its hold, because the act of recreation suggests that this is how things are and, bad though they may be, they are inescapable. So, it would have been refreshing if the story had pushed into much more subjective or contrary areas, but, as it is, this an accomplished piece of work.

HIGHLY COMMENDED:

Eva Sharwood Smith: ‘A Lament from Solento’ and ‘Mum’

Interesting and, at times, striking interweaving of fact and fiction, quotation and narrative. Both pieces have definite strengths and are pushing into areas that are clearly becoming increasingly important in contemporary writing. The use of stream of consciousness-like passages, and the emotion this creates, is effective and ultimately, even if neither story quite succeeds, these are daring and ambitious pieces of work.

COMMENDED:

Mina Bancheva
Kevin Carter
João Cerqueira
Tricia Hagan
Bruce Harris
Catherine Hokin
Ian Holland
Mandy Huggins
Frances Hurd
Joan Iozzi
Ag Jones
Peter Kettle
George Kowalik
Erik Lofroth
Rodger David Lyall
Kate Mitchell
Emma J Myatt
David Olsen
Jonathan Page
Louisa Adjoa Parker
Jo Reardon
Iselin Remoy
Jen Syrkiewicz
Justine Taylor
Bryan Thomas
Anne Thomson
Diana Wallace
Nicola Warwick
David Wiseman
Judith Wilson