

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Comments on Adult Short Story Section

Michel Faber, Lead Judge

For the short story section, my fellow judges were Ann Yule and Marilyn Sneddon, and I thank them for their help.

Unlike the poetry section, which attracted many entries that were of a consistent standard, the fiction section attracted a number of stories that were impressive in one or two respects but let themselves down in others. Some had good dialogue but no story; others had a strong theme but artificial characters; some had a dynamite idea but humdrum execution. I got the impression that many of the entrants felt so exhausted or so relieved after getting the first draft down that they didn't want to go back for more toil. But one of the wonderful things about writing, as opposed to painting or sculpture or film-making, is that you can rewrite a text endless times and it doesn't get ruined or cost more money. Rewriting can be the best, most exciting part of creating a poem or a story – the precious opportunity to turn something merely promising into something truly special.

Perhaps the most assured and well-crafted piece we commended was by Martin Campbell, who can't be with us today because he's working as a science lecturer at the University of St Andrews. His story, 'The Fank', shows clear signs of having been revised up to a consistent standard. It's a wry account of two sheep farmers in Lairg pulling the wool over the eyes of a visiting inspector. It's not a flashy tale, and it takes its time, and some readers may be defeated by the technicalities and legalistic of sheep farming and crofting, but arguably that's all to the good of the plot, as Ewan and Davie exploit their mastery of the situation to their own corrupt ends. There's some nice touches in the prose too, as the author manages to combine laconic matter-of-factness with a deeper empathy: "*Lifetime crofters died quickly in the old folks homes, like wild birds put in small cages. First the plumage went dull and feathers fell out, then the will went.*" I also enjoyed the humour, such as the reference to "*wiry brown carpet that looked like it would stop a bullet*". We commend 'The Fank' by Martin Campbell.

Neil Gunn's quote about the salmon of wisdom running deep inspired one writer to conceive a story told from the point of view of a fish and then from the point of view of the fishermen who try to catch him. We follow the convoy of salmon from Svalbard in the Arctic Ocean to the lochs of northern Scotland. Naming our fishy hero "Solomon" was a stroke of devilish wit on the author's part, neatly combining the two Neil Gunn elements of 'wisdom' and 'salmon'. However, the density of fishing jargon – up to a dozen unfamiliar terms per page – might snarl some readers and impede them from getting carried away in the stream. But we all enjoy a tale of narrow escape, and inwardly cheer for Solomon when he finds a weakness in the net and, with "*a vivid flick of the tail, in a flash, he streaks away.*" We commend 'The Convoy' by Mary Paterson.

The rise of Islamist extremism in our troubled world inspired two of the shortlisted entries. One was an intriguing story which we kept debating whether we should

commend but ultimately decided not to because none of us could work out what happened or what it was really about. Mystery can work in a story's favour but if there's too much of it, the reader merely feels frustrated. The other terrorism-inspired story was 'The Coat We Do Not Wear'. This was ambiguous and slippery too, perhaps in keeping with its difficult subject, but we felt it landed on the right side of confusion. What particularly lifted it to a higher level was the would-be suicide bomber's visit to his sharp old grandmother in a Glasgow nursing home:

"You're like your da, you know," she says for the hundredth time. It's the last thing he wants to hear. "He was secretive tae. Look where that goat 'im!"

Here is a glimpse into the complicated personal and familial dynamics that lie underneath the clichés of radicalisation. The giving of blood at a donor centre by a man who has just shed blood in an act of violence; the automatic blame of a dark-skinned woman who is, in fact, an innocent victim – these are just a few of the troubling elements in this quietly chilling study of individuals and ideologies: We commend 'The Coat We Do Not Wear' by Karen Hodgson Pryce.

The last of the Commendeds, 'Cullen Skink', would have benefited from more work on the prose, as it includes some hackneyed language and a distracting error on page 2 where the author says the opposite of what's intended. But we were all touched by the story itself, of a grandfather ever-so-gently steering his grandson away from the profession that claimed his father's life. Quite a few of the fiction entries tried to pull off grand or clever conceits, but this one offers its modest recipe for dealing with grief: making soup with your grandson, allowing the present moment to take its rightful place alongside the past. We commend 'Cullen Skink' by Kenneth Steven, who can't be with us today.

Now for the three winners.

A common misjudgement made even by very good writers is that they underestimate how much they've already achieved in the earlier parts of a story and therefore make things too obvious at the end. This prevented our Third prize winner being our Second or First. Her story crafts a deceptively casual but thematically tight tale of a university student who comes home to the Highlands supposedly to study for a resit of an exam. His auntie innocently calls it a "reset", and this is indeed what the young man needs to do with his life – re-set himself. This becomes abundantly clear as he volunteers to do any sort of manual work instead of reading *Foundations Of Fluid Dynamics*. First he helps his uncle do the 'wee job' of building a structure which the story does not identify but which becomes less and less 'wee' as the job goes on. Before we know it, our aspiring student is also feeding lambs and tending hens. The imminent erasure of his academic future is symbolically hinted at when Callum admires the beauty of the fading dark wave-lines on a glowing pale sea "*like a whiteboard scrubbed of its dry marker squiggles*", and when the seagulls scatter "*like scraps of paper thrown on the wind*." Ideally, the story would have ended with Callum still in the landscape which he's destined, moth-like, to head towards, rather than adding a superfluous paragraph set in the city, where this destiny is spelled out. Nevertheless, a finely observed piece – Third prize to 'On An Earth Uniformly Covered By Sea', by Laura Morgan.

The author of our Second Prize story was actually the First Prize winner in the last Neil Gunn competition – Douglas Bruton. He can't be with us today and we wish him

well celebrating his son's 30th birthday. His story, 'Oh, To Shake The Magic Eight-Ball', is told in the voice of uneducated teenage girl who offends against the sexual code of her close-knit repressive community. Thinking of her judgemental yet equally sinful father, she reflects: *"I want to tell him it was nothing, what I'd done. It was nothing and no-one need know and it's just what girls these days do and these days are not like their days, not like the days of daddy and mam."* The tone falters in a couple of places but mostly this is a vigorous portrayal of a girl dragged down into a deadly quagmire of hypocrisy.

Now, the winner – which brings me to a little story of my own. The shortlisted fiction was sent to me in two lots – one parcel containing what I thought was all of the stories, and another, later, parcel containing the shortlisted poetry... plus one lone clump of fiction. I had, by that stage, already given a lot of thought to which stories should be awarded the top three places. My first reaction on glancing at this latecomer, this straggler, and I saw words like "*warst*" and "*hoose*" and "*drookit*" was "Oh God, it's in dialect." Despite living in Scotland for almost a quarter of a century, I've always found stories in dialect more difficult to read than stories in standard English. But as soon as I started reading, I could sense that here was an author with the skill to make a thoroughly Scottish life universal. The prose here is economical, not a word wasted, but still manages to convey a vivid picture of a simple working man's hard life in the early 20th century. The author pulls off that difficult challenge, of having a protagonist who doesn't talk about his feelings but whose feelings nevertheless radiate between the lines. Our hero is a forestry worker: here is how the story handles the one fleeting moment when the wider world takes any notice of him: (please forgive my hopeless attempt to do the accent:) *"Ae day there was a photographer there, an the boss came an asked him if he'd lift up a log an put it on his shouther. So he lifted up a guid big lang tree, an the boss stood beside him, an the mannie took a photograph. It was in the Press and Journal. Him stannin there wi a tree on his shouther. He cut the photo oot o the paper but he didna ken fit happened tae't."* This story is pitch-perfect; our man's unspoken hopes, his stoic frustrations, his poignant fate: it's all handled so affectingly, without crossing the line into sentimentality. Once I'd finished reading it the first time, I found myself thinking: "Have we got the winner here?" And indeed we had: 'On The Hill' by Richard Bennett.

Finally, before we finish here today, I want to tell you why I came. I travelled 635 miles to Dingwall, by plane and train, from where I currently live. Less than a year ago, I was living just 25 miles up the road, in Fearn, and could've nipped down here in half an hour. So why now? Well, again, there's a tale to that.

The Neil Gunn prize has been quite significant in my personal history. My wife Eva won it in 1995, not long after we emigrated to Scotland, with her short story 'Family Business'. I won it in 1997 with 'Half A Million Pounds And A Miracle'. The Neil Gunn award, along with several other awards I won around that same time, helped to launch my subsequent career as an internationally published writer. My wife had no such ambitions for a literary career; she was happy being a secondary school teacher. She could get around to writing more stories when she had more time, maybe after she retired.

But let's fast-forward to twenty years later. My wife got sick. In 2014, she died. And she left behind lots of unfinished short stories. Some of them almost complete, some of them half-way there, some of them just sketches or scribbled notes. In the years to come, I hope to finish those stories for her, so that they'll be in a state where people can read them. Obviously, it would have been better if Eva could have finished them herself, while she was alive. Her voice was unique.

What I want to say to those of you who didn't enter the Prize this year, or who entered and got discouraged not winning, is this: your voice is unique, too. If you have a story to tell, or a deep feeling to express in poetry, then tell that story and express that feeling. There weren't as many entries this year as there should have been, given that the Neil Gunn awards are open to anyone anywhere. Neil Gunn himself believed in encouraging unpublished and upcoming writers. Some of you have the potential to embark on a career as writers; others may simply have one thing which is trapped in your brain, which is waiting for you to find the right words to give it an existence outside of you. So, in the days and months and years to come, I hope you will find those words.