

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Primary schools section

Chief judge Janet Macinnes, co-judge Sya Bruce

Primary School Results and Commentary

As with all competitions, getting to the last dozen is far easier than getting to the one, two, three. We have first chosen four stories to commend and comment on:

Commended

Mascot by Callum Craig, Auldearn Primary School

Now they are on a rampage!

Here was a writer who loved his subject – the game of rugby - and made us feel his passion. We felt the joy of the conversion and the glory of the win. I still don't know if this story is based on fact or fiction, nor do I need to. I loved it. Thank you.

Magical Mythical Forest by Robert Sutherland, Craighill Primary School, Tain

Muscles as big as rocks and the height of the Eiffel tower.

This has clearly been written by someone who loves to play with words and ideas and this playfulness inhabits the whole story. We particularly loved the boat dispenser and would like to request a car dispenser for Janet. This story was a particular favourite of Sya's.

Abigail Macdonald by Hannah Loughray, Spean Bridge Primary School

The freezing cold water engulfed me and the pain stopped. They didn't find my body. Only my beautiful locket washed up at the shore.

Here is a good ghost story trying to get told. The idea of a ghost following someone across an ocean is well conveyed but we both felt that the writer would benefit from reading more and having someone to help shape the story from start to finish. One of the benefits of Writers in Residence in schools is that they are able to help budding authors in this way.

The Legend of Marlos by Jake Sessions, Spean Bridge Primary School

Some water Dragons went to visit their distant relative Nessie, whilst Medussa went into a forest to let her hair slither on the trees.

This writer has a wonderful gift of language and phrasing. We liked the idea of Medussa (sic) going into the forest to "let her hair slither on the trees".

Highly commended

These are stories with beginnings, middles and ends as well as wit and good use of language

Thinking Outside the Box by Matthew Halle, Castletown Primary School, Thurso

Hello...hellooo? Yelled Tom, a talking cardboard box.

This story does exactly what it says on the tin. The use of dialogue is brilliant and the whole story is very visual. We enjoyed this story very much and laughed out loud on more than one occasion.

The Wide, Wide Window by Pippa O'Neil, Smithton Primary School

She swung round and was about to hit the thing when...

This story is highly commended because it has a beginning, a middle and a twist in the tail...

We particularly like the details of "his skinny but quite hairy legs".

Evacuation by Rachel Pearson, Castletown Primary School, Thurso

The smoke soon cleared and bodies arose from the cloudy powder.

While we felt that the word "arose" could have been better replaced with "appeared" in this quote, this is a minor detail when looked at in the context of a story that is both moving and evocative. It contains clever use of contrasting language and the writer has the gift of making her character very real.

Seven Red Houses by Fern Mohan, Craighill Primary School, Tain

Mia took her favourite paperback book, a photograph of her and her family and her Grandmother's wedding earrings.

We liked the idea of saving small personal items. We could clearly see the seven houses, identical from the outside but so different inside. While the writer should watch out for Mia and Lila getting mixed up, this story is lovely and resolves beautifully.

Winners

These were the three that were hardest to put in order. We would have happily given all three first place were that possible.

Third Place

Home? By Louise Tod, Castletown Primary School, Castletown, Thurso

His window had been left open, leaving a whistling draft echoing around his empty bedroom.

The first sentence of this story sets a tone that is carried right through to the end – no easy feat. The writer has implied a back story to this family, suggesting a past that the reader wonders at throughout. While the story is complete in itself, we were left wanting to know more about the family. Stories such as this, which both satisfy and intrigue are often tricky to write yet delightful to read and require a true writer's ability to produce. Well done, Louise.

Second Place

Lost by Alexander Koprulu, Croy Primary School

After the ship set sail in a blare of noise, the pair walked home in silence.

This is a story in which the character embodies the title of the piece. Again, Lost implies a fascinating, if somewhat sad back story which adds depth and body to a piece of writing that effortlessly makes the leap from the practical to the supernatural without ever losing sight of its heart. The happy ending was delightful but almost unnecessary, so well was the core of this story written.

First Place

The Flies by Millie Wood, Helmsdale Primary School

He looked in the mirror at the top of the stairs,

Who was this boy with a fresh black eye and absent stare?

This is a writer whose work we would like to see more of. The writing is clever and, dare we say it, even slick. There is also an inherent humour and sense of the ridiculous which delights. The ability to write not only a poem that reads well, but that also tells a funny and cohesive story is not to be underrated. We will be smiling about this well-deserved winner for a long time.

