

The secondary school section, on the theme 'He loved the darkness', attracted 73 entries - mainly prose but also several poems. Encouragingly, the theme produced a very diverse range of approaches, both in literary style and subject matter.

My fellow judge, Sya, and I first of all read all of the entries ourselves before meeting up for a preliminary discussion on judging criteria etc. After this, we each produced our own shortlist before meeting again to finalise selection. Remarkably, out of a total of 16 entries on the shortlists, 13 were common to both.

Making the final selection was not easy because of the great diversity mentioned earlier and the contrasting merits of the various pieces of both prose and poetry. However, after much discussion, final placings were agreed - all 10 selected entrants should take encouragement from the fact that they were in contention for one of the main prizes.

Therefore, before commenting on each piece individually, I would like to congratulate all the winners of both prizes and certificates for producing such a range of interesting and, in some cases, challenging work. We both enjoyed reading your prose and poetry. After the judging was complete, we were then told where each of the winners came from and were delighted to discover 6 different schools were represented.

Congratulations not only to the writers of the winning entries but also to their teachers who have clearly taken time to encourage them. Despite all we hear about falling literacy standards, creative writing is alive and well in some Highland secondary schools.

I would now like to invite all the winners to come out when their name is read out.

Prize List and Comments

Commended (in alphabetical order)

Tomos Dargie, Fortrose Academy - his poem, 'The Spirit of the Mountainside' read well and had a good rhythm; it captured the atmosphere of the north-west highlands and was reminiscent of McCaig's 'A Man in Assynt' and his questioning of 'who owns the land?'

Abbie Lamond, Millburn Academy - her story, 'State of Mind' might fairly be described as a dark and violent tale but it stood out for the quality of its writing. A horror story which was well told through some graphic images that were disturbingly real.

Caitlin-Jane Lockhart, Millburn Academy - in this entry, we are amongst the horrors of the wartime trenches. By clever use of flashbacks, the relationships

between a young soldier and both his mother and his uncle are revealed and create a strong image of the central character, Private Bell and his passion for the night sky.

Daniel Mackay, Millburn Academy - 'The Night in Dusseldorf' reads like a true story told by the grandfather of the narrator. Again set in wartime, it creates a very plausible picture of a personal story told and re-told many times by an elderly relative. It made us wonder if it was indeed a 'family story'.

Highly Commended (also in alphabetical order)

Christina Hitchmough, Culloden Academy - 'The Silent Musician' reminded both judges of The Phantom of the Opera. Christina displays a real talent for creating a tense atmosphere and vivid images. She delivers this ghostly tale cleverly and manages to maintain tension throughout, while still leaving questions in the reader's mind.

Aurora Macpherson, Dingwall Academy - 'He Sits' is a short and, seemingly simple poem. However, we thought its message was much more than it appeared on first reading and raised a powerful question 'What do blind people see?' in a clever manner.

Donald Morrison, Millburn Academy - Donald's story 'The Peat Stack' was unique in making the judges laugh, telling the tale of a crofter who puts an arrogant incomer in his place by building an impressive peat stack with the help of his neighbours. A very enjoyable and humorous interpretation of the theme.

Prize Winners (starting with 3rd)

3rd Adam Weir, Dornoch Academy - of all the entries we read, Adam's entry, 'Theory', was perhaps the most challenging and left several questions for the reader to ponder. It can best be described as a surreal IT fantasy - or maybe 'love in virtual reality'. Very modern in style, it contains some clever imagery and memorable phrases such as '*My chest a rusty accordion, I arise from the shore of snores, trailing pungent weeds of decaying dreams*'. Adam shows evidence of a vivid imagination and a fascination for all aspects of technology and social media.

2nd Imogen James, Glenurquhart High School - 'Selfish' is very well told story which opens with a graphic description of an attack on the narrator's house. '*The silence is cut, as glowing sticks fly past, a blurred mirage of pointed white outfits, swaying my grandfather in his rocking chair.*' While they are not named, it is clear that the attackers were the Ku Klux Klan. Graphic images of hatred and horror unfold as the story progresses and we can readily identify and empathise with the victims of racism. In this story, 'darkness' is the self-image of the black Americans and their fight for freedom is well depicted and culminates in a powerful ending that offers hope for the future '*as I saw a black man, just like me, sitting at the same desk as Johnson did when he granted us our freedom, and signed America into his hands*'.

1st Rachel Desmond, Millburn Academy - in choosing the title, 'The Darkness' for her entry, Rachel identifies the central element in her story - the darkness of the night and how that darkness provides cover for both the human hunter and a fox. From the beginning we are absorbed in the winter scene ' *as the boy's bones seemed to gnaw his insides and his fingers burned with the searing pain that only came with a cold north wind chill*'. As the story unfolds, we are led through dark woods where ' *The fox lay still in his dark pit in the ground. His breathing warming the small space. Hues of rust and gold majestic against the earthy brown walls.*' Later, we are enthralled by the contrasting description of the gypsy camp full of colour and life. This is a story full of images and atmosphere - it could well be the beginning of a longer tale or the opening sequence of a film which both judges would look forward to seeing.

School Winner - with the first prize winner of the competition, four winners of Highly Commended or Commended certificates and a number of other creditable entries, it will come as little surprise to hear that the judges choice for the school prize is **Millburn Academy**. Well done to all of the entrants and to the teacher or teachers who has clearly encouraged each student to develop their own ideas rather than providing a narrow template for them to follow.

Congratulations once again not only to the winners of prizes and certificates but to all the schools who made the effort to enter and provided us with a rich and varied selection of creative writing in response to Neil Gunn's quote 'He loved the darkness'.

JCF 22/5/2017