

Adult short story section. Comments from lead judge Ruth Wishart

The first thing to say about the entries for the Neil Gunn awards in 2019 is how wonderfully eclectic the subject matter was. Not only did the submissions cover an extraordinary range of topics and issues, but also ran the full gamut of human emotions.

The judges were by turn moved, amused and never less than fully engaged by those entries which survived into rather a long short list!

I have to admit to some apprehension in taking on this task for the first time, only too aware that three judges with differing tastes, possessing their inevitably subjective judgement and interests could well come to verbal blows before the emotional balm of freshly baked scones arrived.

In the event there was a remarkable degree of consensus, the only area of contention being the final order of the winners and commended entries rather than any disagreement as to which deserved recognition.

When I re-examined my own original notes I found that virtually all of my choices concurred with the final outcome though, as Eric Morecambe once remarked of his somewhat idiosyncratic version of Grieg's piano concerto – all the notes were featured, but not necessarily in the same order.

The short story is a very particular form of literature as we all know, and every novelist I have encountered has pronounced it one of the most challenging of disciplines.

A short story, far from being an edited version of a longer tale, requires a complex structure and ability to encompass a very great deal within a very tightly drawn environment.

There is too, I now understand, a great variation in how the term short story is understood and undertaken. Some of the entries were really quite brief; others lengthier and meatier.

On now to the result of our deliberations. So impressed were we by the sheer quality on offer, that we have two commended entries, two highly commended and three prizewinners.

The first commended entry is **Corner Shop** by Halia Baillie who lives in my home town of Glasgow. It displayed an originality in the way in which the five main characters were introduced and in how their paths subsequently intertwined.

The second commendation goes to Rebecca O'Hara from Culbokie. **OUR FATHER** brought alive in a very vivid way the tragedy whose centenary we have just commemorated –the sinking of the Iolaire off the shore of Lewis.

To lose these men within sight of home after all they had enduring in the first world war, was the cruellest of fates, but Rebecca's story invests it with a clever family drama involving one of the survivors.

Now the first of our Highly Commended entries. S.A. MacLeod's **PRIMAVERA** was one of the stories offered to the judges which provided a highly original take on contemporary issues, in this case both child abuse and body image. It is a disturbing tale, but tautly written with strong, credible dialogue.

The power of this story lies in its structure, building tension, laying a trail of half buried clues drawing the reader into speculation as to what has happened to so disturb this troubled young soul.

One of the early passages hints at unspoken menace:

"She had stopped getting the bus to school and now she walked every day so that she didn't have to face people. But recently the moss had been bothering her. It seemed to be everywhere, strange and green and rootless, spreading up the walls."

The next highly commended award goes to **FRETTING OVER THE YELLOW SUN** by Douglas Bruton from West Linton .

A beautifully observed piece about the anxieties of a young girl over poverty and her longing for a father of her own. The enchanting way in which these are resolved brings the threads together in a very satisfying conclusion. This piece was particularly strong on physical description.

And now to the three prize winners.

In third place is Janet Killeen whose story **THE DOORKEEPER** was much admired by us all, not least for the way in which the writer evoked the atmosphere of the Grecian village in which most of her story is set. But the tale has a dramatic twist which turns a gentle holiday encounter into a familiar rite of passage where a young woman recognises that she has outgrown the friendships of her earlier life. And all recounted with considerable skill and confidence.

The second prize goes to Heather Reid from Abernethy for **IN THE PASSING**. This is a truly touching entry detailing the last hours and passing of an elderly man and his young nurse. She pays tribute to him by taking a life affirming dip in the cold water of Loch Mallachie at sunset – where she knew he had wandered as a lad.

She had whispered to him of her plan to take him there as he lay dead and Heather imagines him watching his nurse in the loch. "you'd like to call out, to thank her for the invitation, but you know that the distance between you is too great. Night's not far away, then just a blink till sunrise, the shortest of passages."

And if you read this story and don't have a wee greet, I worry for you.

Message from Heather Reid

I was thrilled to learn that both a poem and a short story of mine had been highly placed in the Neil Gunn Writing competition and I'm very sorry that I can't be at the presentation to meet the judging panel and the winners and other finalists. My poem was inspired by walking my dog around the village where I live which is surrounded by farmland and has great views over the Carse of Gowrie. The short story took its inspiration from my job working in a day centre for older adults, some of whom have conditions which make communication extremely difficult if not impossible, and from my time living in Speyside, an area I love. Although the story is a little bleak, I hope people will see the ending to be a positive one for Murdo.

And so we come to this year's top award.

We all loved **THE UNDERTAKING** by Susan Grant. It had so much going for it. A clever plot with a clever twist, some wonderfully drawn characterisation, and, not at all least, vivid use of the Scots vernacular.

"Ye ken us, div ye sur" enquired Eekie of Sandy. His yellowed teeth showed as he grinned. His buddy nodded and gave a bit of a smile too.

"Weel Mr Mitchell sur, it's oor uncle, auld Mattie. He's no verra wee, verneer, doon the brae, and we'd kind like tae be ready if the warst cam tae the warst like. Ken whit Ah mean."

Being ready, it transpired was buying a coffin in advance. A concept about which Sandy, the undertaker, was clearly underwhelmed.

"Ah see. By ordnar Ah dinnae usually sell the kist without it being pairt o a deal fur the hale caboodle" was his response.

But to tell you more would be to spoil a quite ingenious ending. Suffice it to say the judges would challenge you not to laugh out loud.

I may say that when I read this, I was convinced the author was male, which shows you how much I know.

At any rate Susan Grant from Colinsburgh in Fife is a truly worthy winner and all the judges congratulate her most warmly.

I'd also like to take the opportunity to thank Marilyn Sneddon and Kenny Taylor for nursing me through the Neil Gunn judging as a virgin. And not many folks my age get to say that.

I'm very privileged to have played a part in this year's process. I've learned a lot. Not least that I've got a long way to go as a writer before I'd dare tackle a short story.