

This year's adjudicator: Linda Ruhemann runs the BA Honours in Creative Writing at the University of Wales, Newport and has just been awarded a PhD in Creative and Critical Writing. She has published articles and reviews in *The English Review* and *New Welsh Review*. Her story, 'Mines', was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 2007 and long-listed for the Bridport Prize. She has recently completed a new collection of short stories entitled *The Spare Ground*

Adjudication for writing by adults Abergavenny Eisteddfod June 2011

Stories

It's quite a challenge to create an interesting narrative in 1000 words but this year's competitors rose to it in a range of ways.

Openings

In such a small space you need to engage the reader straight away, and there were some good arresting openings that took us straight into a situation. I liked, for example, Touchwood's, which deftly sketches a character's world and hints at the underlying issue right near the start, as did Katie Simpson's and Sam's. There were some intriguing beginnings: 'Seeing Marge Off' was quirky and humorous, and 'Leaving Plaka Beach' suggestive.

Narrative shaping

In the best stories the promise of the opening was matched by good story shaping. You need to know where the heart of your story is, where it's moving up to (it can take several drafts to sense this) and not spend too many words on anything that is not key to the build-up. But in a short story you don't need to aim for a big pay-off – we just need a sufficient sense of a key moment, even a comic one. Pale Face and Bertram Mills, for example, did not attempt to fit a quart into a pint pot but focused on a telling fragment of a life with a hint of a turning point.

There were several pleasingly written memoirs that were not quite shaped as stories: some poignant, such as Llawchwith's, some amusing, such as Coaster's, or simply full of evocative detail, like Withy Hill's. We also had some straightforward comedy (Cwm Custard) and some off-beat, allusive little narratives such as 'Lait d'Annésie'.

The writing

There was often a great sense of place conjured by local references and vivid observation of both rural and urban scenes. 'Moving On', for

example, gave us some lovely moments: ‘Red tractors ploughed fields in the valley, the old earth crumbling as the blades turned open seams of fresh damson-coloured soil.’ There were also well-observed details in Philip Richards and Dorcas Jones.

Effective use of images also helps to take us into the story world: I liked the holy pictures falling out of the prayer book in ‘Funeral Rites’ and the wonderful vividness of the curtains in Touchwood’s story: ‘The red and black shapes were banners or riot shields today... Sometimes they seemed like people dancing and throwing flowers as if at a fiesta.’ The extended image of keys in Megan’s piece was suggestive.

These help to give life and substance to events and characters, though (especially in a 1000-word limit) they need to be handled sparingly. Lots of beautiful similes can sound overblown and strained. The best writing was economical, direct and quite natural, avoiding lots of adjectives and adverbs and long-winded constructions. (Someone once told me to remember you are writing for the reader, not to show off your own credentials as a writer.)

Narrative technique

The old adage of ‘show, don’t tell’ is basically good advice, allowing characters to come alive through scenes. This, for example, lets us see vividly:

The door swung open – this one didn’t knock – and in came a green-overalled woman.
‘I’ve just got three more to do,’ she told her mobile ’phone. ‘OK. I’ll catch you later,’ then, ‘Sit up, Mavis.’ She pulled open the top left drawer of the polished mahogany chest and took out the blue plastic comb. (Touchwood)

Some writers were pleasingly bold and inventive: the direct address from the hanged to the hangman in ‘Through the Trapdoor’ was eerie, and I enjoyed the skilful use of overheard conversation in Temple Meads’ ‘Leavings’.

Endings – getting out in time

In a competition with the title ‘Leaving’ the importance of endings has a special emphasis. The writer needs to ‘get out in time’, not be anxious to be sure the reader has understood his or her point. This was really well done in Pale Face’s story.

The winners

As is usual, it was a challenge to choose winners from such an array of different stories, but in the end I fixed on the following:

Third is 'Leavings' by Temple Meads. I enjoyed its inventive use of overheard conversation interwoven with the character's recollections of the lead-up to his leaving. Here's an example:

'But Em, listen to this. The very next day he ended up in hospital...he'd been hit by a car, terrible injuries, coma and all. Jackie said there was only a spark of life left in him. He always had to leave something. They had him in inventive care for weeks.'

This was a neat little tale with good controlled writing and an ear for dialogue and humour.

In second place I chose Touchwood for the restrained and poignant story of a woman escaping from a residential home to climb her beloved Bloreng. This was a well-dramatised story (example above) with lots of good local touches and a convincing sense of how things are, as well as of the yearning to transcend this.

The winner is Pale Face's piece for its energy and engaging narrative voice which takes us vividly into the world of a child who imagines escaping from home. This was a refreshing perspective on the title ('Leaving'), and was well written, with lots of effective economical touches of detail:

I thought my knees were just dark but when I rubbed the one with the flannel there was skin underneath, all white, and the scar from last week showed up again.

At teatime I put a piece of bread and butter in the pocket of my frock and no-one saw me do it. I could eat that later when I was far away – maybe even in France or America.

The story is beautifully shaped, covering the few hours between playing out and going to bed, and capturing a great outward and return rhythm in the tension between home as constraint and home as safety. Well done.

Poems

Again there were lots of good moments in the poems: vivid images, well-observed details, pleasing rhythms and play with sound patterns. Some also had a good sense of overall shape. The best poems avoided the temptation to *make a Serious Point* and trusted the reader to respond to the resonance of their music and pictures. It's worth noting that R.S.Thomas towards the end of his life lamented that he could think of plenty of *ideas* for his poems, but no *images*. The meaning of a good poem is often oblique, and direct statements of theme are crushing. As with stories, 'the writer must know when to leave' as the Poet Laureate himself, Andrew Motion, said to me recently (at a University event!); often the last line or quatrain could well be cut.

Good moments

These included birds 'claiming/the landscape' in Aderyn y to's 'Birds', the vivid snapshots of different birds in 'We live in separate spheres', such as 'The nuthatch on the garden feeder swooping away', the robin as 'Winged victim of the burning ember' and the question 'What is it like to be the air beneath its wings?' in the 'The Seagull'.

Poetic form, rhyme and sound patterning

There were some rhyming forms used – the most successful being Jim Corvid's 'A Twitter to My Grandson' with its regular quatrains. There was some pleasing use of feminine near-rhyme 'flitting/seeking/pecking' in 'Long Tailed Tits', and great use of internal rhyme and assonance in 'Homers'. On the whole rhyme is best handled subtly in serious poetry; regular rhyming can be a trap for the writer, forcing you into badly-formed sentences and artificiality.

Some writers needed to pay more attention to rhythms – a set metre is not necessary, but listen to your lines and work for a kind of music.

Just a note re lay-out and punctuation: the modern convention favours capitals at the start of lines only for beginnings of sentences, proper nouns, etc.

The winners

Two poems share the third place: Katie Simpson's 'The Birds', which has a pleasing sense of shape, contrasting exotic globe-trotting and wild birds with the constraints of cage and arm chair, and Bethan's 'Birds', notable for some striking lines, such as 'guarding with greedy eyes/the blanched, broken bones/of abandoned buildings'.

In second place is Anne East's 'Birds', an imaginative narrative of an eccentric schoolteacher. I loved

We stifled our mirth as we pictured them
Canoodling on the Essex marshes, clinging together in a secret
hide.

The winner is Angela Weaver with 'Homers'. This had a witty title, lovely bold concentrated sound patterns and excellent rhythms. It's hard to pick examples, because the poem is full of them, but here's the opening:

Five hundred miles on a fistful of millet,
arrowing homeward, following sun or stars,
lodestone or ley lines,
who can say?

I also loved the 'fiendish avian psychologists' who 'appended a series of handicaps and hindrances' to the hapless (and 'mapless') birds.

Limericks

The successful limerick to my mind relies on playing off a certain predictability in form and content to amuse and delight by subtle surprises. A little flexibility in rhythm can be effective, but not huge deviation.

Some entrants turned out quite a few well-formed verses, and people found an astonishing range of rhymes for the middle line given as well as for local place names. Jonem rather delightfully had 'From the look on her face/She won't finish the race', while Angela Weaver pluralised the line to refer to Adam and Eve: 'But the looks on their faces/Betrayed their embraces'. Abercan rhymed 'Govilon', 'pylon' and 'nylon'; Mick Eril heroically managed 'y Fenni', 'Croesenni' and 'penny'. Feminine rhymes I think must be true rhymes or all vary – so Pale Face's 'win it' and 'bin it' worked well, but not with 'love it'. Fairfax's 'spinster', 'against her' and 'convinced her' was allowable, I thought. Lady Di started effectively with a limerick about plagiarism, though narrative and rhythm broke down a little. Llawchwith attempted a whole satirical narrative in linked limericks, an ambitious idea that needed more attention to the form and its possibilities.

The winners:

In third place: Angela Weaver's 'In the sweltering desert the Sphinx...' wittily plays on the Sphinx's legendarily impenetrable expression and rhymes 'Sphinx' with 'drinks' - irresistible.

Second: Abercan's 'In Havana the one thing to fear is...' has a nifty double rhyme (on Daiquiris, keeping up the drinking theme!)

In first place: Angela Weaver triumphed again with 'An archbishop, long past his youth'. The old staple of randy ecclesiastic and prurient virgin is successfully re-functioned here with its beautifully adroit last two lines with their clever lineation, internal rhyme, and verbal play:

...the look on his face
Said His Grace was a trace
Ecumenical here, with the truth.

Linda Ruhemann

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