

Bridgend Writers Circle Short Story Competition 2018

Judge – Dave Lewis

Winners:

1st Prize – Dandelions

2nd Prize – The Scorer

3rd Prize – A Champagne Celebration

Almost...

4th - Tourists Don't Know Where They've Been, 5th - Storm Damage

Judge's comments:

First of all I must say how delighted I was to be asked to judge this year's contest and also how good the stories I read were. Every writer had something to say and the subjects dealt with were as diverse as one could hope for, although this in itself made the judging much harder.

There were stories about aliens, dogs and censorship. Others dealt sensitively with the death of a miner, an internment camp in Cuba and sex behind the cricket pavilion. I saw a new perspective on fake news (past and present), learnt about cider drinking in the countryside and there was much urban strife. I enjoyed every one but it was those that made me think, and more importantly, made me feel that I was drawn back to - the stories with a real human element.

What did I look for in judging? Easy. The same thing I would want to see in a great poem – passion. A good writer has to make his/her audience feel. I wanted to find a good opening word, phrase or line. I wanted a twist at the end, a revelation perhaps, and I always like to see 'show don't tell'.

Well, the winning entries certainly ticked these boxes for me and it was very difficult to separate them out into first, second and third place. So much so that I'd be happy if all three above shared the accolades, or would that make things awkward for Bridgend Writers Circle, lol?

Dandelions

I liked the opening, very good, 'That boy in the grey hoodie, he don't exist, no.' The way the story slowly builds a picture, it keeps us reading, makes us want to learn more. The repetition of certain words and phrases – the 'weeds', the 'yellow' colour throughout, delicately dropped in, almost casual but in actual fact serving a very effective purpose - it keeps the reader hooked. There is clever use of internal dialogue that *shows* us the character of the young homeless lad – 'some charity woman?', 'Some perve?', 'She's got some sort of thing about vitamins...'. His

lack of education yes, but also the fact that he has learned, the hard way, to be very cautious and street-wise.

Then the crying, the flashbacks to a painful, abusive childhood, more 'yellow', more 'stink'... the pace is excellent. A brief glimpse of kindness 'Miss Thomas she's kind', - absolutely wonderful line that *shows* us the protagonist's humanity but then, all too quickly lost, as life overwhelms our impromptu gardener.

Then the story's speed quickens again, more sadness, '...all ended the same.', 'so-called stepfather...', 'jagged edges.', until eventually a small crumb of redemption is offered in the newspaper headline, '*Thank you.*' - maybe there is hope for the future?

But then a further twist, the best bit of the story is still to come. The writer has made us feel sympathy for the man so there must be a chance of a happy ending. Maybe there is something the homeless youth can keep hold of and treasure after all - the newspaper article? He finally has something positive to cling to in this cruel world... but no, alas, the reality of living on the streets means that you'd burn a million pounds if it helped you stay warm and there is no final salvation, just more of the same misery. An excellent story and well worthy of first place.

The Scorer

Another excellent story that I could easily have awarded first place to. A love story within a love story that highlights the fact that we only get one shot at life. A story of young love shattered as it unfolds amidst the backdrop of a seemingly innocent, very *British* sporting venue. The tentative, immature teenage fumbblings that are clinically brushed aside by a more experienced animal.

This is a tale with subtle, yet beautiful use of language, 'hormones to organise themselves', 'More kisses.', 'Stillness.', 'Silence.'. The image of hair, threaded skilfully through the narrative, weaving the story together, the connection between a mature, confident mother ('as if she were a flower' / 'offered her mouth') and pubescent daughter ('...lips... dry and jittery').

The hesitant teenage possession ('My Tony') overshadowed by the expert handling of the affair by an experienced woman ('upstaged... urgent and practised scene'), followed by the disgust ('Oh, I didn't want to know.') and the perceived maternal betrayal ('blubbing').

The carnal act described sympathetically, the colour 'green' everywhere - the cricket field, the 'racing green', the inexperience. The 'queen on a throne', surveying her domain, the well-established world order, before jealousy ('envied her') - that ever-present emotion of youth, and finally the auburn hair (not grey or old yet!) crowned as the winner.

A Champagne Celebration

A very ordinary opening scene is deceptively complex. The contrast between expensive wine and beans on toast, the 'wrist started to ache' reveals a tired lady, old before her time, perhaps due to lack of fulfilment.

The harmless chat with the checkout girl, the desperation, the hunt for happiness and the lies begin - 'All the family are coming round', and then again

later, 'her proud mum and dad', 'everyone laughing'. Thinking money equals success, 'Oh, he's something in the City,', then the contrast again - 'gloves' (cold hands), 'get the coins out of my purse' (poverty). The fear of not being liked ('I didn't want her to think badly of me.').

The building up of tension is excellent, the loneliness, wanting to belong 'like she was my friend'. The happy, smiling couple in the store-bought photo frame (like *Phoebe* in the TV show *Friends*). More desperation on return to the empty house - 'bought a hat at the charity shop' / 'my favourite chair'. Everything is pointing towards isolation, mental illness and breakdown. Loneliness is a symptom of modernity.

The great remedy against loneliness is feeling that you are part of something bigger than yourself - a family, a friendship group, a community, a club etc. Even a community with little in the way of material resources finds some contentment in being in a group of people who are all in it together.

The story moves faster, 'wedding I never had', 'that girl' (the only friend ever?), the music and dancing that never was. Clinging on to anything or anyone that might make her existence a little less depressing - 'Sunita... I can't imagine any of it without her.'

Then the hint at violence, a sad end ('scald myself'), before the writer leaves us with a foreboding, the threat of alcoholism perhaps, one avenue of escape, a fantasy life... A very moving story and easily worthy of a top place in any competition.

Dave Lewis, May 2018