

Sentinel Annual Short Story Competition 2015

Adjudication report by Alex Keegan

At the last count I had judged more than 40 short-story competitions, including The Fish Prize and Sentinel.

No judge expects every submitted story to be wonderful and in larger competitions he or she will receive either a long-list or a short-list, so isn't required to read the lower-scoring attempts.

For Sentinel I read every story entered, and when I say, "read" I do mean *read*, properly and right through. As well as reading I wrote editorial comments and marked each using the Boot Camp Critique Grid. This is an important discipline as it makes the critiquer justify every final mark with comments and marks on nine elements:

Opening; Character; Dialogue & Voice; Plot; Theme; Seduction (Show-Tell, Drama etc); Language; Pace & Pacing and Ending. There is also a bonus section for "oddities" that don't come under other elements

Every story was read one-and-a-half times (or more). What that means is it was read, "gridded" and then those stories well off the top dozen were quickly checked again before being consigned to the "No" pile. Thirteen stories (the top 13 as shown by these marks) and a few below (just to be safe) received at least two reads and a *second* grid score. The prize-winners and highly-recommended stories were read at least three times.

I am a tough-love person but this is not the time for that. For those interested, that goes on day after day in Boot Camp Keegan, and the process has produced well over 160 First Prizes (I've lost count).

I have said that this is not the time to be critical, but I must mention one important element and that is what I call THEME (or Premise). Theme is the story's "weight", what it "says", what the story leaves you with, its essence, the *point*. If you read a story that conclusively proved to the world there was a God, it would score mightily on theme. The story *matters*. If you read a story, no matter how well-written and your responses is "So what?" that's a low-scorer on theme. In Boot Camp we say, "SFW".

"Par" for theme is 12. A story with 9 par elements (a total of 106) is *almost* good enough to make it into a small paper publication, but usually a story needs a tad more. So a theme of 13 is more or less required. Writing skill is

necessary, a decent plot, good characters, but please, *please*, you need to write stuff that matters.

The Winners.

I was unable to split the top two, which were very different stories, each with merits, each with faults, and if the competition rules had allowed me, I would have been tempted to award a joint First Prize

The three highly-recommended stories were very different (and difficult to separate) and three more stories were worthy of a mention/commendation: Grapefruit Moon (Colin Watts), Bean Counter (Dianne Bown-Wilson), and Breathless (D.R.D. Bruton).

Highly Recommended

Marie Chambers - *In the Kingdom of Complaint.* (106)

This featured a bunch of arty-types in an expensive LA restaurant and ached with ennui and/or nihilism. I was seriously frustrated by this piece because it had more promise in the attitude, voice, sheer narrative detail than any other story, but it was slice of life and failed on plot (and to some extent theme). The author (as most) needs to learn that less is usually more.

D.R.D. Bruton - *Thirteen Wedding Dresses.* 106

This is a simple story about a woman arriving on a Scottish island to be married tomorrow but her dress has been lost. What happens next is neat and warm. The story is a little overwritten in places and could do with the Less is More adage applied, and would benefit from a close examination of redundancies, repetitions and stray metaphors. But to get something schmaltzy-romantic past me is quite a feat! Well done!

Chris Heyward - *Getting Started* 107

I agonized over this story and I think it just missed moving into a higher class altogether, but like so many entries it lacks that extra weight of a theme which really says something. The idea that a man wakes every morning with no memory but regains that memory as the day progresses has a lot of philosophical "edge" that could have been exploited more. An excellent idea, competently written, but it's when you consider what a thing *means* is when you strike gold.

The Winners

I found the top two stories to be virtually inseparable. Both had merits and faults. One scored more highly for its theme, the weight of what it was trying to say, but may have slightly over-reached itself. The other was far “slicker” but its theme was “easy” and expected.

Had the competition rules allowed me to do so I would not have split the two, but we need a winner so I have to decide.

Third Place

Paul McDonald - *Touched for the Very First Time* (108)

The idea that you turn up at the doctor’s surgery and find your new doctor is Madonna, is, well, whacky. This is another story that could be improved with a good edit and a few tweaks but is one of the few that actually caught the eye. That the author made a convincing case is to be applauded. I genuinely “went with it”.

I have no idea why the author chose to change tack half-way through (a pointless deviation) or why the finish was so ambiguous (not in a good way) but most-importantly, there was *story* here for the most part which genuinely captured the judge’s interest.

Second Place

Lynne Voyce - *Star-Gazing With the Green Man* (113)

Nothing too complicated here. A hyped up, lunch-rushing, no time for anyone, stereotypical woman-in-the-city (but originally a country lass) goes star-gazing one evening on a whim, meets a bloke, things happen, she gets changed for the better.

It’s hard to write about some stories without spoilers.

This is close to a romance. I will never live down picking TWO romantic stories in my top nine. The writing was smooth but a tad over-written in places: malachite eyes; sanguine smile; delineate our sense of disquiet... and occasionally I became aware of the writer writing.

The various character movements are perhaps a little “too easy” but this was one of very few stories that felt like it had a proper “arc” with a satisfying finish that felt right.

First Place

Daniel Knibb - *Extractions*

This story was scored 114 in the first round with a red-circled “BUT!” in the top corner. *Extractions*, through the life of one dental surgery goes from 1903 to 2025 (yes into the future) and shows care versus money, the launching of the NHS, modern “spin” and BS, the insidious ingress of ever more private health-care.

This is the only story to manage 14 on theme. It “says something” but that doesn’t mean it says it perfectly throughout. It begins with a young dentist in 1903 (born in the 1870’s?) and his father-in-law who could have been born in the 1820’s.

We see differing attitudes to dental *care* and the dental *profession* which are fine but the author tries to do too much in such a short space, and is forced to “push” the characters and sometimes have them speak for the reader’s benefit. The future element read like an addendum and I believe the story would be stronger finishing in 2015, not 2025. But, note that the weight, the meaning of this story, made it feel more worthwhile, and a worthy winner even if only by a short-head.

Administrator’s Note

Many thanks to Alex Keegan for the thorough job of judging the Sentinel Annual Short Story Competition 2015. Alex is a highly skilled professional who deals with helping short story writers get better at the craft on a daily basis. Like many such trainers/teachers/coaches, he may come across as if his emotion chip is switched off, but this is sometimes needed when the best is desired.

Please note that this competition, like all Sentinel competitions, was judged blind. I have inserted the names of the authors in the report before publishing it.

As Alex has mentioned in his report, all the stories entered received thorough reading and critical comments. If you entered this competition and would like

a full critical feedback on your story provided by Alex, please let us know by writing to office@sentinelwriting.com

Alex was charged to find three prize winners, five highly commended, and five commended. By his method of assessing the stories, he could not in honesty, and in his opinion give us those numbers. What he has come up with are the three winners, three highly commended and three commended stories. As there are only three highly commended stories instead of five, we will have to revise the prize money for highly commended stories from £55 to £91.67 each.

As I reflected on the poetry winners earlier today, it was a pleasure to see that quite a number of poets on the winning list have won prizes in earlier Sentinel poetry competitions dating back to 2009. Similarly, some names from this year's short story competition are previous Sentinel prizewinners. These include:

- D.R.D Bruton, first prize winner, Sentinel Literary Quarterly Short Story Competition (January 2011)
- Daniel Knibb won first prizes in both the Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry and Short Story Competitions in December 2012.
- Lynne Voyce, third prize winner, Sentinel Literary Quarterly Short Story Competition (November 2014)
- Paul McDonald, first prize winner, Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (June 2013)

This is quite humbling and shows that our supporters and competition entrants trust us, and it is important that we don't let them down. In fact the evidence of the goodwill extended to us by Sentinel supporters is like a tonic that will help us improve what we do and further entrench the Sentinel Writing Competitions series in the UK and International competitions calendar.

Congratulations all.

Nnorom Azuonye
Administrator