

CINNAMON PRESS ANNUAL SHORT STORY PRIZE, 2017

PREAMBLE:

The short story, for me, remains one of the most vital areas of literary fiction — vital in its central position within the craft and practice of writing, but also in the sense of the vibrancy and liveliness of the form. Unlike the novel, with its large-scale structures and more sustained pacing, short fiction's brevity encourages a speed of thought and execution that make it an ideal place for the developing writer to practice and hone his or her craft. Conversely, short fiction also demands an economy of thought, structure and execution that only an experienced writer can bring to bear and so some of the greats of literature have done their greatest work in short form.

A question begs itself, though: just what do we mean by 'short story'? You may have spotted that I've deliberately used terms like 'short fiction' and 'short form' in that opening paragraph. A thing's strength often comes from its unwillingness to conform (or succumb) to easy definition, its very blurriness opening possibility spaces and allowing in all manner of weird and wonderful things. And yet, when we say 'short story', there's often a rough image in our heads, something like a condensed novel, a 'rattling good yarn' with identifiable characters being made to dance through an identifiable structure of Beginning, Middle and End. Yet this is an odd thing to have assumed ubiquity, given the dozens upon dozens of alternative approaches out there — models of writing that thrive in those blurry areas on the edge of definition. Since short form fiction encompasses the 50 word 'narraticule', the 40,000 word novella and all points between, a blurry definition is inevitable but I would argue that the very lack of constraint and certainty is what helps the shorter forms of writing remain vital and beguiling. The reason why Cinnamon's annual short *story* anthology is morphing into an annual review of short *fiction* is to explore and revel in this very murkiness of definition and potential for constant mutation.

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Any competition is a hostage to fortune — like being blindfolded and asked to rummage in a sack, you never know what's going to end up in your hands. We had a smaller number of entrants this year compared with last year and, if anything, that made the process of judging the entries harder since the smaller field meant that even minor variations in tone or structure affected a story's ranking considerably.

And this year's entries are very much 'stories', as opposed to the more experimental feel of last year's competition, and stories in a largely realist mode — in itself interesting when one considers the avowedly anti-realist slant of politics, commerce and media discourse in this 'Post Truth' age of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts', although hardly a big enough sample for anyone to draw any conclusions. That aside, my selection of entries shows the flexibility of the 'story', displaying a considerable range of tone, setting, characterisation and narrative style — writers who, in other words, have embraced the inherent fascination and power within the short form.

THE RESULTS OF THE CINNAMON PRESS ANNUAL SHORT STORY PRIZE, 2017

FIRST PLACE:

Linda Ruheman: 'How Like a Winter'

Textured and highly atmospheric, this is a delicately drawn character study that successfully leaves most of the narrative unsaid, conjuring time, place and emotion with a high degree of control and sensitivity. Economic of means — thanks in part to a deft use of pathetic fallacy to conjure the emotional confinement felt by the central character and those around him — this is archetypal realist short story writing that leaves the reader with more questions than it answers and so lingers long after the final line.

SECOND PLACE:

Omar Sabbagh: 'Bad Faith'

There is a sense of the hyper-real about Omar Sabbagh's stories of 'that university in the desert', as reader's of 'Dye', his submission to last year's competition, will know well. But whereas, say, a Chuck Close, gives us the harsh surface of consensual reality, Sabbagh's world is philosophical, complex and deeply layered. Baroque and matter-of-fact by turns, 'Bad Faith' asks a moral question about our competitive, institutional lives and offers a darkly witty reply in return.

THIRD PLACE:

Maeve Henry: 'Her Last Words'

Humour is a difficult medium to work in at the best of times and black humour harder still. Henry's entry tackles death and poverty with a good degree of surety of touch and it's final twist is underplayed enough to be both effective and not jar against the (relatively) lighter tone of the beginning of the story. With three strong top-three contenders, it was hard to place them in any order besides joint first, so that 'Her Last Words' coming third is not a great reflection on the writing but more a tribute to the over all quality of this year's top stories.

RUNNERS UP:

Ashleigh Davies — ‘Could Be Anything’

Catherine Edmunds — ‘The Cullen Quartet, After Teresa’

Helen Farish — ‘Back into the Wild’

Jason Harman — ‘The Berlin Demonstration’

Barry Hogan — ‘A City of You’

Diana Wallace — ‘Llyn Fach’