

2020 STUART HADOW SHORT STORY COMPETITION – judge’s report

by Nigel Featherstone

-

Short stories are a tricky beast: on the surface they appear simple enough, but, as is the way with literature, things are always more complex than they first seem.

Indeed, literature is *always* about complexity. Literature is *always* saying life is more complicated than we originally thought – but we will keep muddling through, because what other choice do we have?

Short stories, by their very nature, require brevity, but they also need to allude to layers of life and experience, of context and history. As others have said, a short story can be like an iceberg: we only see the tip that shows above the surface, but we know there is so much more – bulk and weight, and danger – beneath the surface. Short stories also need to get going, by which I mean have narrative movement, from the opening paragraph, preferably from the opening sentence. As is the way with great fiction, in the first sentence we find the DNA of the entire story. To mix my metaphors, it is as though the story ripples from the energy – the plonk of character and conflict – that can be found in those initial words.

Because of their compression, writing a short story is akin to writing a poem. Every word must be exactly right; indeed, if the story is to have depth and resonance, more often than not every word must do more than one thing at a time. Wordsworth said that poetry is ‘the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge’ and an ‘impassioned expression’. Short stories do the same, or similar, work.

It was in this context that I had the privilege of judging the 2020 Stuart Hadow Short Story Competition. To underpin my assessment, I established eight key elements that I was looking for: *emotional resonance* (does it move me and is it likely to move other readers?); *focussed* (is there a sense of the writer knowing exactly what they were wanting to explore and express?); *complete* (does the story have a clearly

defined beginning, middle and end, enabling it to offer the suggestion of a larger world?); *technical proficiency* (especially in terms of grammar, sentence structure, characterisation, plot development, and resolution); *playfulness* (is there a sense of the writer enjoying the process of creation rather than simply telling a tale?); *a lingering nature* (does the story and its people and dramatic energy continue to live in my mind, meaning they are likely to live in the mind of other readers?); *effortlessness* (good writing appears on the page as if the writer has simply conjured it out of the air, even though we know they worked hard, breaking a sweat, waking in the middle of the night, rewriting and editing and polishing, and rewriting some more, fussing, worrying, until every mark on the page is exactly where it needs to be); and *a sense of bravery* (being bold, taking creative risks). No doubt a different judge would look for different elements, but those were the elements I looked for.

On the whole I was impressed by the stories submitted, especially in terms of the range – from domestic dramas to politically motivated narratives, as well as a scattering of both historical and speculative fiction.

Alas, with a competition, there can be only one winner, and this year it is ‘Blitzkrieg’ by [*insert author’s name*]. This story – of love, albeit fleeting and unrequited – is marvellously fresh and adventurous. There is a deliciously strange quality to the drama, and the characters are vivid. A distinct sense of creative risk-taking pervades the work, especially in the way it is presented almost as a poem. I have not forgotten the story and its people, and I am sure others will not forget it either.

I congratulate all those who submitted work to this year’s competition, and I encourage everyone to keep writing, exploring, and being brave, especially in an era when it feels like there is so much change and there is a need – perhaps even a *desperate* need – to find new ways of expression and connecting, to actively facilitate a diversity of voices, and unearth life in all its wondrous complexity.

[*NOTE: this report is not to be edited in any way without the written permission of its author.*]