

Evesham Literary Festival Short Story Competition 2021

Judge's Report

One of the delights of judging an open-themed competition is the sheer variety of tales I get to read. Of course, the downside is that it can feel like you're comparing cabbages and oranges. How do you judge a historical story against one set in the present day, or even something futuristic?

But it doesn't matter when a story is set, or what its theme is. A good story will always be entertaining and thought-provoking. And sometimes, it's the thought-provoking elements that resonate most.

First:

Regeneration is a tale that wouldn't leave my mind. Over a week later, I was still thinking about Jonny's emotional turmoil: the joy of becoming a father for the first time, the overwhelming sense of responsibility, and then the sheer horror of Jen's sudden blood loss. Not only is responsibility suddenly thrust upon Jonny, but so is the fear of becoming a single father. Despite such heart-wrenching twists and turns, as a reader I was left with the best feeling - one of satisfaction - that Jonny was going to be just fine.

Second:

Handprints carefully interweaves past and present to explain how Bina comes to be in the situation she is, and why she has the wisdom and pride to accept her fate. (I'd have taken the opium!) This slow burning story (pun-intended) carefully gathers pace as you realise the situation Bina and the other wives are heading towards. This is also a story of loyalty, on many different levels, some of which only becomes powerfully apparent in the last line.

Third:

Home from Home is a touching story, about Eliza coming to terms with a new change in her life. Sometimes, though, it's not possible to move on (physically and emotionally) until you've settled those internal worries and concerns. It can be difficult

to know when to end a story, and at first, I thought this had ended too soon. I wanted to know of Billy's reaction when he discovers the news. But, with each subsequent reading, I agreed with the writer - this ending was right. Eliza's made her decision. She's moved on. That's what is important. Anything that comes after would be a bonus as far as Eliza's concerned.

Congratulations to the winning entries, and also to those who were long-listed and shortlisted. These were all engaging tales and a fascinating read. Getting the long-list down to a short list was harder than I imagined it would be.

Many thanks to the Evesham Literary Festival for inviting me to judge this year's competition.

Simon Whaley