

Finest 500 Writing Prize 2021: Judge's Notes

Thank you for having me judge this competition, and for letting me read your work. It feels very timely to have a theme like *The Times They Are a Changin'*, and the responses were stories that spanned thousands of years, and ranged in tone from reflective to rapturous.

I have awarded the first prize to *Swimming with Sharks*, a beautifully tender piece about vulnerability, bravery and change, orbiting around the twin themes of the natural world and the narrator's child, introduced through the terrific line: 'Back when my youngest daughter was a boy...' Moving and delicate, it is a piece that has its hand on the tiller at all times. The result is complex and elegant.

Second prize goes to *Ignis Fatuus*, a rollicking conversation between the starry-eyed narrator bent on fame and his sneering friend. This piece is testament to the anchoring power of a great first sentence: 'In the mosh pit of his mind Pete was a star...', and to the rhythmic thrum of the length of a good radio hit, '*three minutes and thirty glorious seconds.*'

Third prize goes to the character piece *We All Die*, following a sniper hitman returning to the scene of the crime to bask in the responses of the crowd. This is a piece that wants a bit of a rework: it ends with a cliffhanger, with the sniper choking on what might be a date stone from his scone, or might be a shard of bone from the man he shot outside the bakery a few days prior. The story is crying out for the writer to commit to this notion and to follow it through, rather than clipping it at the end as a throwaway. Rather than spending two paragraphs on the classic 'time to pack it in and retire' trope, I'd love to see this piece rewritten so that the sniper is allowed to feel real arrogance in the quality of his work, so that him being undone by the results of his own actions can resonate. This award is a good reminder that a reader will often prefer a work that feels expansive and messy over one that is tidy but flat.

A few more general notes:

In a piece this short, it's good to have a real sense of where you want your story to go in the time you have. You might drill down hard into a single moment, avoiding the temptation to range forward or backwards in time. You might focus on a profound shift in a character or situation. Several of these pieces felt like a fragment of a larger piece, and I wanted the kind of rigour and editing that lets a piece this sort feel concluded. *Swimming with Sharks* is a great example of this — it covers a fair amount of ground, but never feels distracted. It achieves this through taut writing trimmed of all its fat.

Several pieces contained kernels of something truly original, that I wanted to hear more about. I read *Times Four* to my partner, and when the protagonist meets Jimmy, the ruler of twenty subjects who live in vats on a dying earth, he mused that you could easily write a whole show about this one encounter. The idea of a jovial ruler over nothing much at all contains so much potential for comedy and absurdity. I wanted a whole story about him.

I also wanted to note that care needs to be taken when you're writing in a strong character voice, especially when that character speaks in slang or other socially coded colloquial

English. If your character drops their gs, you have to do it consistently. One piece has a character who says 'looking', 'readin'" and 'nothi', all in four paragraphs. That's three separate forms of approach to an 'ing' ending to a word, and the lack of consistency makes the character feel unreal. It's very, very hard to write as a character who misspells, is under-educated and has a strong, slangy character voice. Even the best writers often fail at it. One way to make the voice feel more consistent is to literally use your voice: put the text down, and record yourself telling the story in character, without referring to what you've written. You'll likely find that you're more likely to use character-appropriate language and phrasing.

Finally, a note on titles. Titling work is incredibly hard, and I wanted to share a comment made by a friend of mine, Jordan Prosser, who is a terrific and award-winning screenwriter. He says that a good title should take on a different meaning when you've finished engaging with the work than it did when you started. He uses the example of the film *Chinatown*, which you first think just refers to the place, but by the end of the film it's representative of a whole system of corruption and abuse. I find that idea, 'what's a title that can shift meanings by the end of the piece?' to be helpful for titling my own work.

Sarah Walker, October 2021