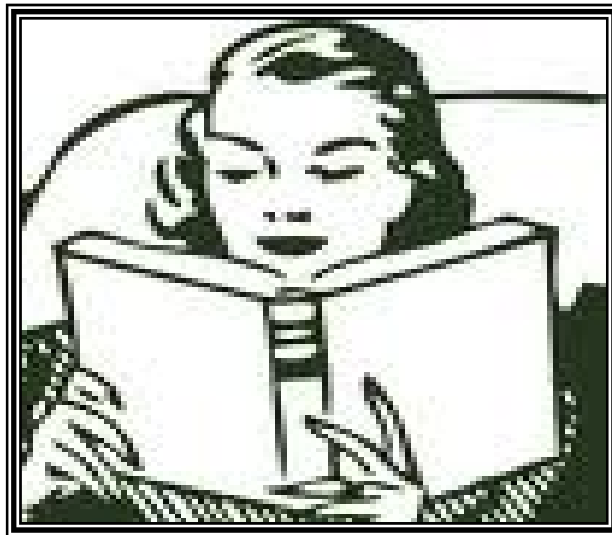


2010 HASSRA Literary Competition



Results Brochure



2010 HASSRA Literary Competition

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2010 HASSRA Literary Competition



Introduction

This is the ninth year that HASSRA has staged the HASSRA Literary competition and, as usual, all of the entries were of an extremely high standard. Thanks once again to all the entrants for making this year's competition another success. I hope that everyone enjoyed the chance to demonstrate their passion and skill for writing. I would also wish to offer my special congratulations to the winners, runners up, highly commended and those entrants with a special mention whose entries are reproduced within this booklet.

I would also like to pass on my special thanks and sincere appreciation to our competition judge, Jacqueline Wilkin, who had the unenviable task of assessing each contrasting entry and comparing style, the effectiveness of the writing and the engagement of the reader. This difficult job, coupled with the sheer volume of material, was a major undertaking and one which was very much welcomed with Jackie willingly stepping-up to the task once again this year.

I very much hope you enjoy the examples reproduced from this year's competition and that they inspire you to put pen to paper.

Tracy Hennah

HASSRA Corporate Services

Judges Details



Jackie Wilkin

Before her retirement in 2008, Jackie lectured in literature and creative writing for Manchester University, Bolton University and the WEA. She continues to lecture in ARCA adult residential colleges up and down the country.

Jackie writes for magazines nationwide, including the regular book page for *WI Life* magazine and is currently working on a radio play about Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Bronte.

Judge's Overview - Poems

The poems were a pleasure to read with an enjoyable variety of subject matter, everything from reflections on love, marriage and mortality to nude sunbathing (***Back to Nature* Andrew Barton**) and the guiltily bizarre ***Death by Chocolate* (Debbie Cartwright)**. Humour was a welcome diversion. I especially liked **Neal Jackson's** wry account of commuting in ***Voyeur Voyager*** and **Susie Cooke's *Jessica 3***, starring the three-year-old from hell who terrorises her primary class and makes the 'neighbourhood children [stay] in till dark'.

Sometimes the poetry of lives lived in Thoreau's 'quiet desperation' was immensely moving: here **Leon Searle's** poignant line 'Faded playground hopes and wishes' stood out. (***A Watched Clock Never Boils***). So too did **Jackie Blake's** fine image in ***Lines***:

With every glance my childhood hopes and dreams

Are stored in boxes labelled 'unachieved'

Many of the poems were written in rhyme. Their success depended partly on how far the writers had mastered the beat and how far they were able to find rhymes which earned their place in the meaning and weren't just chosen for their sound. Have a look at Thomas Hardy for some pointers about how to do this. Or spread your wings a little further and explore the possibilities of the ten-syllabled, unrhymed line of English blank verse which suits the English voice so well. Have a look at Philip Larkin or Carol Ann Duffy's poetry for some fine examples of a modern take on this.

The best poems had something to say and a mastery of the basic techniques of writing a poem – the right word in the right place.

Well done again, HASSRA members.

Winning Poem

Humphrey J. Hardy (CSA Taunton)

Chew Green

1. On a midsummer night, by a fading light, I went to make my bed.
From a forest brown, through Bellingham town, Byrness and Coquet Head
I had walked that day on the Pennine Way with a spirit young and keen,
When I made my camp where the Roman camped on the hill upon Chew Green.
2. Though the past I'd seen that yestere'en when atop the Roman Wall
I had trod on the sod that the Roman trod when I stood there twelve feet tall,
It was naught to the light of the stars at night that shone in the fading e'en
Where the dew was damp where the Roman camped on the hill upon Chew Green.
3. On the Way I went and I pitched my tent to sleep on ancient ground
Which none could mar, except from afar there came a fearful sound
Of an English gun in the rising sun, for the flags had hoisted been
To make life cease and destroy the peace of the hill upon Chew Green.
4. It's a new command to destroy the land which once was sheep and croft
And the way is hard and black and tarred where Gamel's path was soft
No more is the love of the stars above nor peacefulness serene
Where the dew was damp where the Roman camped on the hill upon Chew Green.
5. It's a khaki band in Northumberland is spreading death and fire
And a shadow host from the North Sea Coast to the borders of Roxburghshire.
Though the guns at last may burn and blast that ancient Cheviot scene
May they spare, by God, where the roman trod on the hill upon Chew Green.

Judge's comments

The Chestertonian rhythms of **the winning poem, Humphrey J. Hardy's *Chew Green*** really created the sound of feet marching, both his own and those of the ghostly Romans who had trodden the way before him and the present-day soldiers who march there still. The poem's passion for the landscape is deftly created by a few bold strokes: the 'fading light' of a 'midsummer night' in the 'forest brown'. The excellent use of contrast in the fourth verse, reinforced by a precise use of internal rhyme, was especially satisfying.

A worthy winner, tackling a difficult poetic form.

Runner-Up Poem

Richard Barrett (Trafford Contact Centre)

Dedication

I see my initials there

Thanks / It was nice of you

to write that poem for me

It's a nice poem

If you ever publish a book

will that poem go in it?

I really think it should

Like I said: thanks

You do know however

don't you – I'm sure you must

- that one year from now

we won't still be together?

That's it dead – this

...what to call it...'thing'

that we've had going on?

It's a really great poem / I am

pleased – Thanks, so much

Come on, let's go for a drink

Judge's comments

The runner-up, Richard Barrett's *Dedication* created the story of a whole relationship with great simplicity and an elegant forward movement. He caught precisely the difference between the surface of what we say and the truth of what we really mean. The command of versification was particularly subtle, each line ending and each pause halting at exactly the right place.

Highly Commended Poem

Graham Brown (Newport, Isle of Wight JCP)

Motherland

In Motherland

I am permanently fourteen years of age.

In Motherland

sausages, beans and mash

are always on the menu.

Apparently my favourite.

In Motherland

my hair could do with a trim,

even the bit that is growing thin.

In Motherland

I must take care after dark,

even though I left home

the best part of thirty years ago.

In Motherland

there will be new jumpers

for birthdays and Christmas

(which I will wear on my next visit

before quietly donating them to Age Concern)

In Motherland

I am a national hero
despite all my faults.

In Motherland

the flag flies high,
striped with familiarity, safety and protection.
Long may she reign.

Judge's Comments

Graham Brown suggested much from little in ***Motherland*** with its persuasive central image and its harnessing of the power of repetition. Here the poet has realised that the best poetry always suggests more than it states, shows us the tip of the iceberg but only suggests the vastness of the ghostly shape beneath.

Highly Commended Poem

Yvonne Brown (Newport, Isle of Wight JCP)

Extra Terrestrial Thoughts

What would you do if an alien visited you?
Would you welcome them with open arms
Take them to your family
Explain our customs and lifestyle
Exchange cultural information
Treat them as guest and friend?
Or would you meet them weapons at the ready
March them off for interrogation
In some secret underground bunker
Experiment on and dissect them
In the interests of science?
Either way it is fear that rules
We say we want to learn more
About the possibility of life on other planets
But do we really?
Or is it merely the desire to expand our empire
And prove the superiority of the human race?
Our environment may no longer be safe
Because of what we have done to it
Global warming, climate change,
We are driven by the need to expand
Find another world to populate and destroy.

Judge's Comments

Yvonne Brown in *Extra Terrestrial Thoughts* realised one of the other powerful techniques of poetry, the immediately involving first line. Here the reader is drawn in by the line to reflect more deeply on our obsession with life on other planets: 'What would you do if an alien visited you?' What indeed!

Author	Title	Location	HASSRA Region
ANDREW ALLPORT	SALVAGE YARD	STEEL CITY HOUSE, SHEFFIELD	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
ANDREW ALLPORT	THURSDAY 5 TH NOVEMBER	STEEL CITY HOUSE, SHEFFIELD	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
RICHARD BARRETT	CAN YOU NOT JUST STAND THERE, PLEASE!	CONTACT CENTRE, TRAFFORD	NORTH WEST
RICHARD BARRETT	DEDICATION	CONTACT CENTRE, TRAFFORD	NORTH WEST
RICHARD BARRETT	THE MANCHESTER POLICEMAN	CONTACT CENTRE, TRAFFORD	NORTH WEST
ANDREW BARTON	BACK TO NATURE	WISBECH JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
ANDREW BARTON	HERE I SIT	WISBECH JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
ANDREW BARTON	IN IT TO WIN IT	WISBECH JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
RON BAXTER	THE GARDEN	BLACKPOOL NORTH JCP	FYLDE
RON BAXTER	JANUARY SALES	BLACKPOOL NORTH JCP	FYLDE
RON BAXTER	NORTH ATLANTIC 1941	BLACKPOOL NORTH JCP	FYLDE
NICOLA BECKETT	THE LEDGE	BOLTON BDC	NORTH WEST
NICOLA BECKETT	THE RED SHOES	BOLTON BDC	NORTH WEST
NICOLA BECKETT	SHE'S IN THE SEA AGAIN	BOLTON BDC	NORTH WEST
CHERYL BHAGWANDIN	JOURNEYING ON	WELLINGBOROUGH JCP	EAST MIDLANDS
CHERYL BHAGWANDIN	THE LISTENING STATION	WELLINGBOROUGH JCP	EAST MIDLANDS
CHERYL BHAGWANDIN	TODAY	WELLINGBOROUGH JCP	EAST MIDLANDS
JACKIE BLAKE	GROWING PAINS	NORCROSS	FYLDE
JACKIE BLAKE	LINES	NORCROSS	FYLDE
HELEN BLUNDY	HEROES OF THE WORLD CUP	GREYFRIARS HOUSE, SHEFFIELD	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
GRAHAM BROWN	BASINGSTOKE-ON-SEA	NEWPORT ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST

GRAHAM BROWN	MOTHERLAND	NEWPORT ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
GRAHAM BROWN	ORIGINAL HERO	NEWPORT ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
YVONNE BROWN	EXTRA TERRESTRIAL THOUGHTS	NEWPORT ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
YVONNE BROWN	MEMORY LANE	NEWPORT ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
YVONNE BROWN	UTILITY	NEWPORT ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
DANIEL BYRNE-FRASER	GREY BLOCKS	WARBRECK HOUSE	FYLDE
DEBBIE CARTWRIGHT	DEATH BY CHOCOLATE	LEITH JCP	SCOTLAND
DEBBIE CARTWRIGHT	ETERNITY EXAM	LEITH JCP	SCOTLAND
DEBBIE CARTWRIGHT	THE OFFICE	LEITH JCP	SCOTLAND
CHARMAINE CHAPMAN	DREAMER	BASILDON JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
MIKE CHORUSCHYJI	THE SUN IS OUT	CSA TRAINING, BIRKENHEAD	NORTH WEST
DEAN COGHLAN	THE CASTLE	TORQUAY JCP	SOUTH WEST
SUSIE COOKE	THE COST OF THE FIGHT	ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
SUSIE COOKE	JESSICA, 3	ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
SUSIE COOKE	NOT GOODBYE	ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
MICHELE DAY	IT HURTS	IPSWICH JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
MICHELE DAY	WHEN (DONALD'S POEM)	IPSWICH JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
PETER DENNINGTON	A MALTA BUS RIDE	NORWICH, KINGFISHER HOUSE	EAST OF ENGLAND
THERESA DERWIN	ALWAYS	PERRY BARR BDC	WEST MIDLANDS
THERESA DERWIN	A DOZEN RED ROSES	PERRY BARR BDC	WEST MIDLANDS
ROBIN EARLE	THE ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT	TAMWORTH JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
ROBIN EARLE	IT WASN'T ME	TAMWORTH JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
ROBIN EARLE	THE LEPRECHAUN	TAMWORTH JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
JOY FRANCIS	A BAD DAY IN APRIL	WARBRECK HOUSE	FYLDE
JOY FRANCIS	TO BE A SWAN	WARBRECK HOUSE	FYLDE

LYNNE GREEN	DAD'S BIG PLATE	CHELMSLEY WOOD JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
HUMPHREY J HARDY	CHEW GREEN	TAUNTON CSA	SOUTH WEST
SAMANTHA HAWKINS	THE SPARKLE	DARLINGTON JCP	NORTH EAST
AMANDA HAYES	BEING ADOPTED	BIRKENHEAD CSA	NORTH WEST
NICK HEARDER	A VALENTINE POEM	EXETER JCP	SOUTH WEST
KAREN HEMMINGS	THE HAIR NIGHTMARE!	OLD TREE COURT PLYMOUTH JCP	SOUTH WEST
ANGELA HESKETH	THE LISTENER	FLEETWOOD JCP	NORTH WEST
ANGELA HESKETH	RESILIENCE – WHAT'S YOUR SECRET?	FLEETWOOD JCP	NORTH WEST
WAYNE HOPKINS	MODERN LIFE IN 40 LINES	NORCROSS	FYLDE
DAVID JACKS	GONDOLA	WIGAN KING STREET JCP	NORTH WEST
MARTIN JACKSON	A DREAM OF ROBIN HOOD	RETIRED	FLYDE
NEAL JACKSON	VOYEUR, VOYAGER	NOTTINGHAM STATION STREET JCP	EAST MIDLANDS
STEPHANIE MARKHAM	THE ABUSED WIFE	DUDLEY CSAC	WEST MIDLANDS
STEPHANIE MARKHAM	SIGN OF THE TIMES 2009	DUDLEY CSAC	WEST MIDLANDS
RAMZAN MIAH	BLACK HISTORY MONTH	WEST BROMWICH JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
RAMZAN MIAH	LIGHT IN MY LIFE	WEST BROMWICH JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
VINCE MIHILL	EVOCATION OF THE BEAT SURRENDER	LEEDS EAST JCP	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
PAM NICHOL	STICKY FINGERS	TYNEVIEW PARK IPC	FYLDE
MICHAEL PAINE	HOPEFUL	NOTTINGHAM BDC	EAST MIDLANDS
MICHAEL PAINE	OUTLOOK	NOTTINGHAM BDC	EAST MIDLANDS
MICHAEL PAINE	WEDDING	NOTTINGHMA BDC	EAST MIDLANDS
LINDA PALMER	THE MARKET	LEAMINGTON SPA JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
LAURA PAPE	REMEMBERED	QUARRY HOUSE, LEEDS	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
MELISSA PINKNEY	THE DAY	STOCKTON BDC	NORTH EAST
LISA QUIN	GOODBYE	MALTBY JCP	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER

LYNN RISHWORTH	IF YOU CAN MAKE IT PAST 29	SHEFFIELD HARTSHEAD SQUARE JCP	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
LYNN RISHWORTH	INDIVIDUALITY	SHEFFIELD HARTSHEAD SQUARE JCP	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
KIM ROBINSON	MY DAUGHTER'S CHRISTMAS	CSA BIRKENHEAD	NORTH WEST
SARAH RYE	AM I LOUD?	COSHAM BDC	SOUTH EAST
SARAH RYE	MY GARDEN	COSHAM BDC	SOUTH EAST
SARAH RYE	TRUE LOVE	COSHAM BDC	SOUTH EAST
KIM SALMON	THE GARDEN	CLACTON-ON-SEA JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
PAUL SCOTT	HOPE	LETCHWORTH JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
PAUL SCOTT	LIFE AND DEATH	LETCHWORTH JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
PAUL SCOTT	WOMAN	LETCHWORTH JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
LEON SEARLE	A WATCHED CLOCK NEVER BOILS	EXETER JCP	SOUTH WEST
JOHN STAPLETON	THE THIEF	PLYMOUTH CSA	SOUTH WEST
NATHAN STONE	TEARS GIVE MORE ROOM FOR RUIN	NOTTINGHAM BDC	EAST MIDLANDS
NATHAN STONE	WHEN THE CLOCKS STOP	NOTTINGHAM BDC	EAST MIDLANDS
GRAEME VINE	HOPE	BASILDON BDC	EAST OF ENGLAND
GRAEME VINE	LAUGHING	BASILDON BDC	EAST OF ENGLAND
GRAEME VINE	PUZZLE	BASILDON BDC	EAST OF ENGLAND
VANDA WALKER	MOVEMENTS OF MY MIND	CARDIFF CSA	WALES

Judge's Overview – Short Stories

Christmas stories, ghost stories, children's stories, sailors' yarns, tales of love and hate and chronicles of office life – again, the scope of HASSRA members' imaginations made the adjudicator's task a very pleasant one indeed.

This year saw a noticeable improvement in the cutting and shaping of storylines and plots, vital if the reader is to be engaged. Concrete detail and control of atmosphere is also gaining in strength – after all, if you can really imagine every room, every street, every landscape, your reader will be able to imagine it too and your story will be that much more convincing.

A weaker area is still character drawing. There isn't much room in a short story but characters do need to be more than a name: have a look at how skilfully Chris Westlake has used just a few salient details to create Rees Llewellyn in *Welsh Lessons*, this year's runner-up.

Winning Short Story

Anthony Musgrave – Hull BDC

The Train Set

Jennifer gazed out of the car at the crisp December morning and the cottage that was her family's new home. It was perfect, and she knew exactly how she would decorate for the forthcoming festive season. Olde-world style, with a real tree, candles, wreaths and all sorts of Victoriana. A proper old-fashioned Christmas in an old-fashioned cottage. White-washed Mock-Tudor plaster walls with their blackened oak timbers, the protruding gallery windows upstairs and the cross gables all gave the cottage a sense of times gone-by, re-enforced by the large '1853' carved in stone above the door.

She had known immediately that this was the home for them. A large garden provided a safe place for her six-year old son, Matthew, to play in, whilst, inside, a warren of rooms would give him adventures galore as he ran around them when it was too wet to play outside, his young imagination creating worlds of fantasy and fun.

Jennifer looked at Matthew, standing outside the cottage with his father. His small form looked frail, and an empty sleeve hung down on his left hand side. She shuddered as memories came flooding back of the car that had hit him when he was just four years old, when he had managed to get away from her and had ran onto the road. The doctors had said it was a miracle he had survived, but they had been unable to save the arm that had been crushed by the wheel of the car. Matthew had spent six weeks in hospital, but had seemed to adapt to the loss of his arm with no problems, sometimes wearing the tiny artificial one that he had been given, but usually preferring to manage without. Truth be told, the move to this quiet village had all been as a result of the accident, Jennifer too terrified to stay in the busy city, worried sick that Matthew would be involved in another accident.

Paul smiled at her as she got out of the car and joined them.

'Happy?' he asked.

'Definitely,' she replied.

'Me, too,' shouted Matthew. 'This looks great!'

'Well, son.' said Paul, unlocking the door. 'Why don't you go and explore? See what nooks and crannies you find.'

'Are there ghosts?' asked Matthew, fearlessly, with the natural curiosity of any young boy.

'There might be, never thought to ask.'

'Cool,' shouted Matthew, and ran through the door.

Paul laughed, and Jennifer did, too. She crossed her arms and gave her husband a mock stare.

'Now look what you've done! I hope he doesn't find one, I didn't even think about ghosts.'

'Wooooooo,' said Paul, lifting his arms into the air and wiggling his fingers.

'Oh, stop it,' said Jennifer, laughing at him, and they walked into the cottage, eager to unpack.

Eight hours later, most of the hard work was finished, and empty boxes and packing cases had been placed in an outbuilding, ready to be collected by the removal firm. All that remained were half a dozen or so boxes that needed to go in the loft.

'Tell me again,' said Paul. 'Why these boxes were stuck in our old loft, ignored for years, and now had to be brought here to go in our new loft? If we never touched them in all the years they were up there, are they actually anything that we need?'

'Of course, they are!' exclaimed Jennifer. 'There's all sorts in them. Memories, souvenirs, that sort of thing. Not stuff that you need to hand, though, so quite safe in the loft. Now, get up there and shift them!'

Paul tugged his forelock. 'Yes, ma'am. Right away, ma'am. Sorry to 'ave been so cheeky, ma'am'.

Going up to the landing, Paul opened a nearby cupboard, searching for something to get the hatch and ladder down with. Sure enough, inside was a pole with a small hook at the end.

Glancing at the hatch, Paul saw it was one with a push catch, and gave it a jab with the end of the pole. It slowly opened, revealing the end of a ladder, which Paul hooked and pulled down.

At least that was easy, he thought to himself. Picking up the first box, he climbed the ladder and poked his head into the loft, putting the box down in front of him. A quick search revealed a cord hanging down and he pulled it. The loft was poorly illuminated by a meagre bulb that hung from its centre, the pale light that it threw out unable, or unwilling, to reach the furthest corners. The loft was filthy, and dust shimmered in the air as the feeble light hit it, whilst cobwebs swayed in the draught that came through the hatch. The dark eves where the light had given up seemed black and cold.

'Hello?' enquired Paul. 'Anyone in? Baron Frankenstein? Count Dracula? Old mad brother of the previous occupant left forgotten and alone?'

There was no answer. Paul smiled and went back down, bringing the other boxes up one by one. He decided to store them in one corner of the loft and started to move them. He was surprised when he got there to see two boxes already in occupation. They were two trunks, covered in dust and looking untouched for years. He knelt down in front of one and opened it.

He jumped as a sigh, like an exhalation of air, almost of breath, escaped the trunk. A draught hit him in the face, as if the trunk itself had blown the air towards him, and he caught a smell of coal, steam and long ago days. Shaking his head, he looked into the trunk.

There, gleaming as if it had just left the shop, lay a train set, the like of which he had never seen before. The steam locomotive sparkled, its black and red livery unscratched and pristine. The carriages, long, red and with grey roofs, were perfect. Even the insides, which could be seen through crystal clear windows, were immaculate, the seats upholstered in a purple cloth, wood panelling lining the walls. Strangely, despite there been four carriages, there was just one passenger. He sat upright in the first one Paul picked up, a man in a green herringbone-pattern jacket, bearded, with glasses and a salt and pepper hat with a feather in it. It was an incredible model, the detail of the pattern on the jacket as clear as day.

However, it was the sheer size of the set that impressed Paul. He had had a train set as a kid, just a normal Hornby kit, the Flying Scotsman, in double 'O' gauge, but this one was much larger. He saw a book in the trunk and picked it up, skimming through.

'Lehmans of Germany,' he read. "G' gauge Railway Set, produced 1970. Well, Happy 40th Birthday, train set. I think you're going to be a big surprise for a certain little boy!'

With a great deal of effort, Paul managed to get the two trunks down from the loft, although he did have to get a rope to help lower them down to the landing, taking the opportunity to tell Jennifer to keep Matthew occupied for a while. They were both quite large, and further examination showed the second trunk to be full of track and some buildings, whilst further track was in the first trunk under the engine and the carriages. Paul put them into an empty room and left them, locking the door behind him.

'You ought to see it,' he said to Jennifer, as they relaxed over a mug of hot chocolate, their son now safely asleep in his new bedroom. 'I don't know what it's doing up there, but it's fantastic. I think it's meant to be an outdoor set, but as we've got such a big living room, I think we'll manage with it up in there for a few days over Christmas. I could look at putting it up outside permanently in the New Year.'

'Who's is it, though? How did it get there?'

'How should I know? The estate agent said no one had lived here for years until it was bought by a developer. I can only think that everyone who went up there missed them, hidden in the corner. It was dark up there. I only stumbled on it because I was putting our boxes there.'

'But it must belong to someone, Paul. You can't just take it.'

'Look, if I can find anything out, I'll happily give it back to the rightful owner. From what I do know, no one has lived here since the late Eighties. It's not very likely I'm going to find the owner, is it? In the meantime, if I can get it working, there's no reason we can't have some fun with it.'

Over the following days, Paul tested the train set in the spare room. It worked perfectly the first time he set it up, as if it was fresh from the factory. He was amazed that it could be assembled and in full working order after who knew how many years of idleness. Still, he thought it best to check the locomotive over and oiled and greased any parts that needed it, but, apart from that, there was nothing else he could do.

He also tried to find out what he could about the previous owner of the cottage. Making himself known at the village pub, it didn't take long to find out that the last live-in owner had been a German woman, a Frau Meister, who, after losing her husband, had lived alone for nearly 20 years. She had been a recluse, hardly seen in the village and, to the best of everyone's knowledge, there had been no children, or, indeed, any other relatives. With no visitors, she had lived out her days as the cottage decayed around her until her death in 1989. Indeed, this had been the reason why the cottage had stood empty so long, as solicitors had tried to find an heir. No one had been able to trace an owner for it and, eventually, the house had been taken by the State and sold at auction to a developer.

One old man had a vague recollection of Herr Meister, and that he had been interested in trains, so the assumption had to be that the set had been his. The villagers all said that they couldn't see anyone causing a fuss about it after all this time; it seemed obvious that the train set must have been stored in the loft by Frau Meister and forgotten about. Everyone told Paul that 'the little lad' might as well get the fun from it. Matthew had been an instant hit in the village - well-mannered, polite and 'such a brave little soldier', as the old ladies said, that the villagers had all taken him into their hearts.

Paul explained this to Jennifer, who admitted she couldn't really argue against the whole village.

'Alright, alright,' she said to Paul. 'You can give it to him on Christmas morning. Don't ask me how you're going to wrap it though.'

'Wrap it? Don't be daft, I'll just put the trunks in the living room with a 'Merry Christmas' banner on them.'

'You could always set the track up for him once he's gone to bed.'

'What, and spoil it? Putting it together is half the fun!'

Christmas Eve arrived, and was spent as many families spend it: last-minute preparation, fun and games, watching the television, until it was time for Matthew to go to bed. Jennifer leaned over to the tree and picked up a present. They had a tradition that had started on Matthew's third Christmas and it wasn't going to stop just because they were in a new house.

'Here you go, Matthew,' she said. 'Your Christmas Eve present.'

Matthew laughed. 'Thanks, mum. It's a bit big for Christmas pyjamas.'

Holding the parcel down with one knee, he ripped the paper off, and saw that, as well as his usual new pair of pyjamas, which his mum always got him for Christmas (Dalek ones this year!), he also had a new dressing gown as well. It was blue, with red piping around the edge and a train embroidered on the left breast pocket.

'Hey, you're going to look smart in those in the morning,' said Paul. 'Night, son. Sweet dreams.'

Matthew kissed his dad goodnight, gave him a hug and Jennifer took him upstairs.

Later, in their bedroom, Paul turned to his wife.

'That was a crafty idea.'

'What?'

'A dressing gown with a train on it – very subtle!'

'Just showing you that I can have good ideas as well.'

Ten hours later, the alarm clock went off.

'What time is it?' asked Jennifer.

Paul glanced over at the clock. '7.30. Time we normally get up. That's why the alarm went off.'

'On Christmas morning? I would have thought Matthew would have had us up by now.'

'He's probably gone straight down to open his presents. You know what kids are like.....hang on, listen.'

From downstairs, they could hear the sound of a toy train going around a track.

'See? Told you.'

'Okay. Let's go down and see how he's got on.'

Putting their dressing-gowns on, they sneaked downstairs, hoping to surprise Matthew. As they got to the bottom of the stairs, they could see that the living room door was open and, to the sound of the train getting louder, they went in.

It was an unbelievable sight. The whole room seemed full of track, the train and carriages whizzing around it. Buildings had been erected at various points, and stations stood ready to receive passengers. In the dim morning, with the curtains closed, the set's own lights glowed from the windows of the stations, the carriages and from the front of the locomotive itself. Smoke even came from the funnel, filling the room with the smell of steam and coal.

'Paul!' exclaimed Jennifer. 'That's incredible. It...it.. looks amazing. Wow, I'm glad you decided to put it up for him before you came to bed.'

'Me? I didn't do this. Matthew must have done it. He must have been up for hours, the little begger.'

'Matthew couldn't do all this on his own. With one arm? It would take him days to make this without help. Where is he anyway? Matthew! Matthew! Where are you?'

There was no reply.

'Matthew!' shouted Paul. 'Where are you, son?'

The only response was the clickety-clack of the train as it continued its never-ending journey around the track, winding in and out of different pieces of furniture, under tables, under chairs, the smoke effect puffing rhythmically from its funnel.

'He must have gone back to his room for something,' said Jennifer. 'I'll go and find him.'

Matthew was not in his room. They searched the house, but there was no sign of him. Worried, Jennifer rang the police, and then insisted they should go out to look for him. Perhaps because they now lived in a village, word spread quickly, and soon most of the villagers were out searching. After five hours of hunting, the village pub opened up to provide hot food and tea for everyone, and to let people co-ordinate further plans.

As Paul and Jennifer sat at one of the tables, the landlord brought them each a hot cup of tea and a turkey sandwich.

'Here,' he said. 'Eat this. You need to keep your strength up and it's pointless keeping the turkey for dinner, no one feels much like eating at the mo.'

'Thank you,' replied Jennifer. 'But, I really don't think I could.'

'He's right,' said Paul. 'No point making yourself ill.'

'It's an odd thing, this,' said the landlord. 'Just like when Herr Meister disappeared.'

'Disappeared?' Paul looked incredulous. 'I thought he died. I thought Frau Meister lived in the cottage alone after losing her husband?'

'Well, she did – in a way. Maybe that was someone's idea of a joke, saying she'd lost him. He just vanished, like Matthew has, on Christmas Day 1970.'

'That's a hell of a coincidence. What was supposed to have happened?'

'Just what I say, melted away into thin air. Oh, we looked for him. He was always easy to spot, especially with that hat!'

'What hat?'

'Well he was German, wasn't he? He had one of those alpine-style hats, you know the type – had a feather in it. And a green jacket – I always wondered if he would appear in the pub one night with a pair of those lederhosen on!'

Paul jumped out of his chair, a strange look on his face. He ran to the door and out into the street. Jennifer, apologising to the landlord, got up and ran after him.

'Paul! Stop! What's the matter? Where are you going?'

She saw him running into their cottage, and, panting for breath, speeded up a little to catch him up. She found him in the living room, sitting on the floor. The train now lay on its side. Paul was crying, hugging one of the carriages to his chest and shaking his head.

'Not possible.....it's not possible...can't be..' he muttered to himself, as he swayed backwards and forwards.

'What is it, Paul?' said Jennifer. 'What is it?'

Wordlessly, he held out the carriage he was holding. Puzzled, Jennifer took it off him. She looked at it, but couldn't see what had upset him.

'Inside', whispered Paul.

Jennifer looked.

And then she saw. The man was sat at the front of the carriage as he always had, his green jacket and salt and pepper hat with the feather signifying his resemblance to the missing Herr Meister, but Jennifer's eyes opened in horror at the figure sat next to him.

A small boy, in a blue dressing-gown with red piping, the left arm of which dangled empty at his side.

Judge's comments

This year's winner was strong in all three areas. The plot was carefully constructed and the ending felt both inevitable and satisfying. The use of concrete detail ('Mock-Tudor' excepted) was precise and convincing – notice the paragraph about the loft ladder and the vivid use of colour which comes to a climax in the last paragraph. Paul, Jenny and Matthew are all credible characters and the narrative point of view moves capably between them with phrases like 'memories came flooding back' or 'he thought to himself'.

An accomplished and shapely story. Congratulations, Anthony.

Runner-Up Short Story

Chris Westlake – Oldbury JCP

Welsh Lessons

The tiny village chapel was packed full of mourners. Everywhere I looked there were tears and smears of black mascara. The singing was loud and boisterous and yet sad and soulless. I stared at the order of service, which shook uncontrollably in my hand. The words stared back at me, big and bold on the faded paper.

We are gathered here today to celebrate the life of Mr R Llewellyn

I was fourteen when Rees Llewellyn entered my life. I lived in a tiny coastal village just off Bridgend in South Wales. Only a dozen or so children caught my school bus, so naturally I noticed when he boarded a couple of stops after my own. He had a strong build and dark hair cut in a fringe. His white shirt hung loose from his trousers and I noticed a ring through his eye brow. The boy made no attempt to make eye contact or start a conversation with anyone; he just sat down and contentedly stared out of the window.

He caught the bus every day for the next week, each day he was just as anonymous as the first. He was in my class for a few subjects, but he sat at the back and did not contribute. At lunchtimes he was alone. He did not appear to have any attitude, but he hardly gave the appearance of being a victim either. His head was held high and there was a swagger about his walk.

A Thursday lunch time, I made my way to the playing fields for our usual kick-around when my path was blocked by a group of lads from the year above. They were always hanging around looking for something or someone to pass their time. Today that someone was me. My bag was pulled from my shoulder. I swung around, blonde hair covering my eyes, sweat forming on my forehead. The bag was passed from boy to boy, surrounding me in a circle. I made a desperate lunch, but next moment I was down on my knees, wet, dirty and humiliated. I was panicking, aware that this could get *really* bad.

“Leave him.”

The boys turned around to face the intruder, giving me just enough time to get to my feet. They stared in disbelief. The largest and most aggressive stepped forward, shoulders hunched, fists clenched. His forehead pressed against the other boy, eyes bulging theatrically.

“Or *what*...?”

A group had formed, both boys and girls, excitedly watching the events unfold. Steam seemed to rise into the air from the two boys, heads locked in battle. There was a pause, a moment of silence, everyone watching with bated breath. The second boy, the intruder, spoke no more words. Instead he took a step back, raised his arm, connected with his fist, and the bully, my tormentor, fell to the floor. Blood flowed from his mouth and the boy lay in a shell, arms and hands protecting his face from any further onslaught.

“Just *leave* him.” The conqueror turned on his heels and walked away, all eyes following his swagger.

I caught the bus that evening and there was Rees, sitting at the front as usual, no different from any other day. I needed to say something to him, *anything*. Just before his stop, I got up and nervously tapped him on the shoulder.

“Err, just wanted to say thank you for earlier. I could have got a right kicking there.” I held out my hand.

His face was motionless for a moment, as it had been for most of the previous week, but then he smiled. He shook my hand; his grip was firm and strong.

“No worries. What a bunch of morons.”

I think it was the first time I had properly even heard him speak, and I was amazed just how *welsh* his accent was. My mouth started working faster than my brain.

“You fancy coming down the beach later? Could meet at the entrance to the car park at five?”

He was already standing up, ready to get off the bus. His eyebrows narrowed for a moment, as if wondering whether he had anything better to do.

“Sure. See you there.”

I was a bit nervous. What I knew of the boy, he was not exactly the life and soul of the party. He had also saved me from a certain humiliation earlier in the day, and so I felt indebted to him. I waited in the car park in the freezing cold, keeping myself warm by jumping up and down on the spot. At ten past seven he appeared, wrapped in a navy duffel coat with a hood.

“Alright,” he nodded.

“Alright,” I nodded.

We wandered down to the beach in silence. It was late September and the nights were drawing in. The waves looked fierce as they crashed against the pebbles. I could just make out Somerset across the ocean through the developing fog. We walked down to the river and skimmed stones across the water.

“So where you come from?” I asked.

“Merthyr Tydfil. It’s just me and my Dad. It’s nice down here, don’t you think? It’s better than all the black mountains in Merthyr.”

I looked around at the seagulls and the green field full of sheep grazing and the castle in the distance, and for the first time I realized that yes, it was nice.

We stayed there on the beach, skimming stones until the night sky turned completely black. We strolled back up the narrow spiralling lanes to where Rees lived, a large cottage with a thatched roof.

“Terrah, then,” he nodded.

“Terrah,” I nodded back.

I turned to walk home, my hands deep inside my coat pocket, when I heard a commotion from the cottage. A man with a beard, short dark unkempt hair and a protruding belly staggered towards Rees.

“Where the bleeding hell have you been?” His words were slurred, his manner confused.

“It’s alright Dad,” Rees said, his words calm and soothing. “I’m back now.”

I gradually saw more and more of Rees over the next couple of weeks. No longer did he sit quiet and alone on the bus; now he sat quiet and next to me on the bus. I spoke to him in classes; he was quick with the one-liners and proved to have a dry sense of humour. Rees did not even attempt to show academic interest; instead he stared blankly into space or pencilled impressive sketches on sheets of paper. Welsh lessons were the only exception. In these lessons he was keen and he was interested. He raised his arm and responded to the teacher in a clear and distinctive Welsh accent. The boys mimicked his accent – but only behind his back - exaggerating the l’s as if to clear their throats. The girls seemed to find him interesting; I guess they thought that he was mystifying.

I asked Rees why he did not bother in lessons. He shrugged his shoulders and said that he was not really interested. I contemplated his response and thought – okay, makes sense. I asked why then he was interested in Welsh. He narrowed his eyes and gave me a look as if to say ‘stop asking silly questions.’

“It’s where I’m from, isn’t it.”

Rugby was the school sport and Rees was brilliant at the game. He played in the first team and would terrify the opposition defences by charging straight at them. At lunchtimes we played football. It was so much less physical and demanding than running around with a rugby ball. Rees never wanted to play football, he would joke that football was for English boys and that ‘rugger’ was for proper Welsh men. And yet when I did manage to get him involved, nobody could get near him. He had awesome natural ability and skill.

One evening I called at his house unannounced. We usually arranged to meet at a mutual place, but this night I was bored at home and just wanted to see if he was up for passing some time.

When he answered the door, he looked a bit awkward. He hesitantly asked me inside. His Dad was there, beer can in hand, belly hanging over his jeans, mouth open wide in a crooked smile.

“*You*, young man, are a good boy,” he said, putting his arm around me.

He seemed friendly and harmless enough to me. Rees ushered me away and into his room and avoided eye contact. I was feeling brave when I asked my next question:

“So what happened with your Mum, Rees?”

He continued to avoid eye contact. His head was bowed. I was worried that he might hit me.

“She left him. He drinks. He is a good man but my mum...” he finally looked up and caught my gaze. “My mum deserves more. She is kind of special.” He pulled on his coat and we were out of the house. I did not ask any more.

Rees became a real part of my life over the next twelve months. Every morning we would catch the bus together and most evenings we would meet up, just strolling through the countryside by foot or on our bikes cycling along the coast. He mixed with others in the school more but he never made any real effort. He was known as a joker but not somebody to mess with. I was the only one that he seemed to give a damn about. I liked to think that I was his Welsh lesson and all the other pupils were all the other lessons. He even joked that I was his ‘best boyo.’

One evening as the days were drawing out, we wandered down to the beach, just as we had that first time. I saw a faintly recognisable figure down by the river head. He had a beer can in his hand and he seemed to be singing loudly.

“It’s been a year today since she left him.” Rees spoke fast and there was unfamiliar panic in his voice.

“Why did she leave him?” I asked, trying to catch up, my breathing fast. Rees jumped down off some rocks and turned to face me.

“He was a mess; *he* is a mess. He used to be a hero of both of ours. He played football for Cardiff and got injured. He never could cope with being a failure. Now he drinks so that he cannot remember what he once had.” He skipped over some pebbles and moved away from me.

We drew close and his father turned around. His face was blotchy and his cheeks were swollen. He held out his arms for Rees.

“Son,” he drawled. “Your mother was the most beautiful lady in the whole of Wales.”

They were the last words that he spoke. He stumbled and fell back into the flowing water with a thud. Rees jumped in after him, but he had already disappeared under the current.

Now as I stand in the chapel, my hands shaking, the image is fixed in my mind. However hard I try to get rid of it, it is there. I feel the salt from the sea as it blows into my face. I can see his face, desperate and lost. And I can hear the splash as he disappeared into the water.

And yet despite my trembling, I stand next to my best friend and I feel strong. The words of the priest echo around the small hall.

We are gathered here today to celebrate the life of Robert Llewellyn. A good man...

I turn and watch Rees. For once he looks immaculate in a black suit, white shirt and black tie. Next to him is the most beautiful lady in the whole of Wales. They are holding hands and whispering agreement with the words from the Priest. I do not know what they say, for they speak in Welsh.

Judge's comments

The story is greatly enhanced by the writer's ability to create memorable scenes. The exposition takes us briskly into the action with not a word wasted as the filmic opening scene at the funeral dissolves smoothly into flashback.

Rees is deftly established by salient description and, even better, by action when he takes on the playground bullies. Dialogue is convincingly brief throughout – teenage boys don't waste words.

Development is confidently handled: 'I gradually saw more and more of Rees' or 'One evening I called at his house unannounced'. The resolution is less convincing (why doesn't Rees drown too?) but the story comes to a neat end with the resumption of the funeral scene and the appearance of Rees's mother.

An excellent story which was a real contender for the top spot.

Highly Commended Short Story

Ron Baxter – Blackpool North JCP

No Time For Superstitions

Caleb Angus McLeod had no time for superstitions, which of course was his right. However, he carried his belief that they were all stuff and nonsense far too far! Why he even refused to go 'first footing'. To his mind, as befitted an Elder of the Kirk, all superstitions were either relics of those dark days before 'the Protestant Wind' had swept those 'Black Beetles' who called themselves priests, those....those....when he thought of Rome's priests he as close to swearing as he ever did. Anyway a left over from before the Reformation, or even worse, if possible, they were pagan rites! No, he had no time for them. The Bible, the Bible alone held all the truths and guidance a man needed. Where did any of the Prophets or the Gospel writers say "don't walk under a ladder?"

Now don't think Caleb was a kill joy like those miseries of the 'Wee Frees', who Caleb vowed were "Agin everything". He liked his pipe and a wee dram, though not of course on the Sabbath. He enjoyed a good sing, particularly songs by Robbie Burns, discounting of course his lewd ones. All in all he was astern, but not severe. As for women! He was defiantly a follower of John Knox! Was it not Eve who had tempted Adam into sin and brought evil into this world? Why the Good Lord had seen fit to create such creatures he just could not fathom. But as women were, unfortunately needed for procreation that is what they must be used for. His wife, a wee scrap of a woman, who lived, not in fear of him [for she knew how to get her own way, as women all over the world do] but with resignation. To Caleb she was a child baring machine; they had six children, and a house keeper. She on the other hand, loved her children, and as Caleb was away from home for ten months in a year she could put up with him for the other two.

Caleb was a fisherman, who, after 30 years in the trade had a chance to own his own vessel, and at a bargain price. The 'Stella Marie' had run aground the previous winter and been abandoned as a 'constructive total loss'. Now all the experts said it was impossible to salvage her, so when he made Lloyds an offer for the hulk, a very small offer mind, they accepted it with alacrity.

I can't say how he got her off but he did, and towed her into port to be refitted. Within a month all the big jobs were done, she was checked and passed A1 by the Lloyds Surveyor. And then it all began.....

Caleb declared he would have to rename her because he wouldn't sail in a vessel with a 'Papish' name. At that the chief shipwright pointed out that changing a ship's name would change its luck, and until she ran aground, and that was her skipper's fault and not her fault, she had been a very lucky one, making good money for both her owner and crew. Well this statement was like a red rag to a bull. "A name doesn't change anything" he roared, then he declared she was to be called 'The Sow and Boar', he'd have her painted green, and register her number as 13! Neither the Shipwright nor anyone else who heard could believe it! The name of beast that gives pork must never be mentioned on board a trawler, green of course is the colour of disaster, why skippers had been known to send a crew man home to get changed if he as much as turned up to sail wearing a green gansey. In vain folk pleaded Caleb "change your mind". They might as well have tried to turn the Pope Protestant.

Things then went from bad to worse. Caleb announced to all and sundry that he'd prove once and for all, that all those stupid superstitions were stuff and nonsense, for he vowed he'd sail on Friday 13th.

As that date approached, the talk in shops, pubs, aye, and even in the Kirk was of nothing but Caleb's insanity, for the general consensus was that he'd gone stark staring mad! They shook their heads "it'll all end in tears, not only for Caleb, but for any loon willing to sail with him." Even Mr. Armstrong, the Minister, was uneasy, for was not Caleb, in a way, "Tempting the Lord your God"? He raised this with Caleb, but all he got for his trouble was Caleb telling him he was a doddering old fool!

On the 13th the Minister, despite Caleb's insults resolved to have one last try persuade him, at the very least, to wait to Saturday before he sailed. Now he knew, as a 'man of the cloth' he'd be breaking one of the fisherman's taboos by seeing him on sailing day. However Mr. Armstrong thought, on balance, this was the lesser of two evils.

As he approached the quay he stopped in his tracks, for there, by the “Sow and Boar” was Mrs. McLeod, up to her elbows in a dolly tub washing clothes! Washing clothes! What was she thinking about!

“No washing upon sailing day, for if you do that you may wash him away” Then in horror he saw that festooned in the rigging were pig’s bladders, ears, and tails, along with some rabbit skins. Rabbits are similar to pigs, never to be mentioned at sea. One of the Dockers called out “Mr. Armstrong, will y’no gi a blessing to that ijit?” Caleb heard and snarled back that he’d read the 23rd Psalm to, more correctly at, his crew, and that was all the Lord required. And so they sailed. They were incidentally blessed by Father O’Brian, as he stood on the steps of “Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow”.

Now you may, or may not, have any time for superstitions, and I’m not taking sides but you can’t alter the facts. That night the sea was calm, the wind slight, and the visibility perfect. Caleb was at the helm as he swung the “Sow and Boar” to starboard to enter Barra Sound., but when he tried to steady her on to her new course the rudder refused to move. With it jammed hard a’ starboard she continued to turn, ‘til at eight knots she ran onto the rock. This time they never got her off.

Caleb still has no times for superstitions, but if you sail with him never mention the beast that gives you pork!

Judge’s Comments

An unusual story which benefited as did Ron’s other submissions from a real knowledge of the fishing industry. Other worlds are always interesting and the background detail made this offbeat story very convincing.

Caleb is broadly but still memorably drawn and the storyline has a pleasing inevitability. I enjoyed the touches of irony – Caleb’s wife, for example, who manages him so expertly or the figure of Father O’Brian ‘on the steps of Our Lady of Sorrows’ both blessing the boat and prefiguring its end.

Special Mentions

Theresa Derwin – Perry Barr BDC

Becoming

You know it's time to get a bra when you're running down the road and flesh slaps against flesh in a steady rhythm. That distinctive gentle thudding lets you know that there is more under your t-shirt than pancakes and yes, it really is time to sort it out. But you have to fight through the irrational fear and the embarrassment first. The question *is*, who do you tell?

Your Mom died when you were three and your sister is still a child herself. There is no *woman* in the household to hold your hand and tell you it'll be okay, that you don't have to be ashamed. So, the question remains, *who do you tell?*

You're looking in the mirror while you're thinking this, staring in fascinated awe and brimming horror at the small mounds of pink flesh poking out from your frail chest, which doesn't seem to match the rest of your body. Fine wisps of dark wiry hair have started to grow in that moist space between your legs, and your belly, *well*, that's slowly pushing out, forming, blossoming. You're an *almost-woman* and it scares the hell out of you. And there is no one to share it with.

Except Dad.

So you bite the bullet, throw on a vest, knickers, shorts and a t-shirt and say to Dad "I need new underwear", willing him to understand what you are trying to say as he gives you a puzzled frown. Something finally clicks, as he watches you hop impatiently from foot to foot in a merry dance. A light dawns in his eyes and his cheeks begin to burn red and he reminds you of Santa Claus – a bright red, big jowled face. He muffles a few indistinct words, grabs your hand and takes you across the road.

There's a Post Office/knitwear/clothes shop across the road, so you can get stamps, a woolly jumper and a bra if the mind takes you. That was the mood of the day, only minus the woolly jumper. First, Dad asks for a stamp. Jenny, who runs the shop, is about your Dad's age

and has her own kids, looks knowingly at Dad and smiles a sweet, gentle smile as he shoves £10.00 into her hand and says “She needs underwear, I’ll be back in 10 minutes”.

Then something almost like pity crosses her features and you don’t want pity. Pity is the last thing you want. You want a fucking bra – and you want your Mom who’s lying in a coffin, food for the worms, a rotting corpse. You want someone to hold your hand and tell you it’ll be okay – the changes are normal... You want to scream your pain and make it live. You want Jenny, who you happen to like, to throw her pity at her own children who have both parents. But what good are two when one is a drunk?

You’re thinking all this as she wraps the tape measure around your ripening chest, picks out a pale, pink cotton bra, throws it into a pink bag and chucks you out of the door to your Dad. He has stood all this time waiting around the corner, growing redder, and redder and redder.

And as you see him, and you clasp the pink bag tightly between your fingers, you go up to him. And suddenly, it’s all okay.

Special Mentions

Jackie Blake - Norcross

Short Queue/Big Shop

She chose the longer queue as it was largely populated by shoppers who had apparently just popped out for a “few bits”. The other queue was shorter but contained the “doing a big shop” brigade and therefore, she figured, would take longer to clear.

Till Operator Gilbert was about a hundred and three. Customer Care training had clearly taught him to assist with packing and he carefully placed each item in a bag and chatted amiably with his customers. Kylie on the other hand, on “short queue/big shop” raced through her customers, barely stopping to chat, save the odd

“All right doing your own packing love?”

Long queue/few bits was held up whilst Gilbert buzzed for a price and then helpfully advised a woman that an item was buy one get one free. He called for change and rang his bell three times for assistance.

She'd had enough. Witnessing the speed of Kylie she switched. It had to be quicker.

Damn!!!

“Lightening Kylie” went on a break to be replaced by “Rather Be Somewhere Else” Sharon.

Long queue/few bits was now medium queue/few bits. Gilbert seemed to be getting into the swing.

Eureka!! The woman in front was ready to pay.

“Mum!” a teenage girl pushed past her. “I've picked up a few more bits”. The few more bits comprised two large bottles of vodka, five multi-packs of crisps and several tins of spaghetti.

She threw the items onto the conveyer belt only to see one of the bottles of vodka fall to the floor and smash.....

.....Sharon rang her bell.

Enough was enough!! Medium queue/few bits was now no queue/Gilbert yawning. She switched back.

She was at the front!

It was her turn!!

“Sorry love, I’m closing” apologised Gilbert.

Short queue/big shop was now deserted

No queue/Gilbert bleeding..... wasn’t.

Judge’s Comments

Both stories were beautifully constructed and showed their writers’ awareness that less is more in storytelling. The excellent opening of *Becoming* draws us in immediately to the separate worlds of the characters, not only the poignant mixture of loneliness, anger and fear of the narrator but also the deep embarrassment of the father. Both are created by precise detail (look at paragraph three for instance) and by credible action and dialogue: ‘She needs underwear, I’ll be back in ten minutes.’

Short Queue/Big Shop has the advantage of immediate reader identification. A neat touch was the choice of a third person narrative rather than a first. This gives the reader a clear observation point, rather like a camera positioned just above the characters’ heads.

The dry humour considerably enhanced the story: the second paragraph was a particularly good example (note the effect of the adverbs ‘clearly’, ‘carefully’ and ‘amiably’) but my favourite sentence came later when ‘Lightning Kylie’ went on a break to be replaced by ‘Rather Be Somewhere Else’ Sharon.

We’ve all been there!

Conclusion

Keep writing and, top tip, learn to be your own best editor!

Author	Title	Location	HASSRA Region
LINDSEY ARCHER	SKIN AND BLISTER	ROMFORD PS	LONDON
ANDREW BARTON	THE CREEPING HAND	WISBECH JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
ANDREW BARTON	THE GOLDEN GIRLS AND THEIR HIDDEN TALENTS	WISBECH JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
RON BAXTER	GO AND GET A BREW	BLACKPOOL NORTH JCP	FYLDE
RON BAXTER	HORNIE'S NINE INCHES	BLACKPOOL NORTH JCP	FYLDE
RON BAXTER	NO TIME FOR SUPERSTITION	BLACKPOOL NORTH JCP	FYLDE
RACHEL BELL	THE BOY WHO LIKED TO HIT	DOH – QUARRY HOUSE	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
JACKIE BLAKE	NO LOOKING BACK	NORCROSS	FYLDE
JACKIE BLAKE	SHORT QUEUE/BIG SHOP	NORCROSS	FYLDE
JACKIE BLAKE	WHISPERS	NORCROSS	FYLDE
GRAHAM BROWN	THE ACORN AND THE OAK TREE	NEWPORT ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
GRAHAM BROWN	ONE GIANT LEAP	NEWPORT ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
GRAHAM BROWN	GOLDMAN AND RUST	NEWPORT ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
DANIEL BYRNE-FRASER	THE MEETING	WARBRECK HOUSE	FYLDE
HANS DE ZOYSA	A NIGHT REVEALED	TRAFFORD CONTACT CENTRE	NORTH WEST
THERESA DERWIN	BECOMING	PERRY BARR BDC	WEST MIDLANDS
THERESA DERWIN	THE CONTINUITY ZONE	PERRY BARR BDC	WEST MIDLANDS
MARGARET GHLAIMI	AFTER THE STORM	DOH – WELLINGTON HOUSE	LONDON
ELIZABETH GOURLAY	THE BLACKOUT CURTAINS	FRASERBURGH JCP	SCOTLAND
ASHLEY HODGSON	WASTED DAYS	WARBRECK HOUSE	FYLDE
WAYNE HOPKINS	LOVE THROUGH THE EYES	NORCROSS	FYLDE

Author	Title	Location	HASSRA Region
JULIE HOWARTH	A RETIRED GENTLEMAN	NORCROSS	FYLDE
JULIE HOWARTH	TUESDAY'S RIBBON	NORCROSS	FYLDE
WENDY HUMPHRIES	RIA 1	CANNOCK ROGERS HOUSE JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
STEPHEN KAYE	THE HOME VISIT	TRAFFORD DEBT CENTRE	NORTH WEST
BRIAN McGUINNESS	BLIZZARD'S WAKE	LIVERPOOL ICE	NORTH WEST
VINCE MIHILL	DEMISE OF A DREAM OR EIGHTIES SCENESTER ON THE DOWNWARD TRAIL	LEEDS EAST JCP	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
ANTHONY MUSGRAVE	THE TRAIN SET	HULL BDC	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
HELEN NUTTALL	THE WAITING ROOM	LEICESTER PS	EAST MIDLANDS
LYNN RISHWORTH	THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS	SHEFFIELD HARTSHEAD SQUARE JCP	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
PETER ROGERS	SQUIRREL AND MOUSE	BENTON PARK VIEW	FYLDE
TRACIE RYAN	THE BEST JOB	SHEFFIELD KINGS COURT	YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER
PAUL SCOTT	THE TRAIN	LETCHWORTH JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
NATHAN STONE	ECHOES	NOTTINGHAM BDC	EAST MIDLANDS
MINAL VACHHETA	UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER	DENMARK STREET JCP	LONDON
REHANA Wafa	CIRCLES	NOTTINGHAM BDC	EAST MIDLANDS
CHRIS WESTLAKE	FOR THE GOOD OF THE TEAM	OLDBURY JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
CHRIS WESTLAKE	WELSH LESSONS	OLDBURY JCP	WEST MIDLANDS