

TALK BY PAULA WILLIAMS – FROME FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION JUDGE.

I have been lucky enough to have been asked to judge not one but two short story competitions recently.

The prizegiving for the **Frome Festival** was on Sunday July 11th. It was a lovely occasion and such a thrill for me to meet not only the lovely **Kate Harrison**, whose novels I enjoy very much but many of the talented writers whose stories gave me so much pleasure.

As I can never remember who said what about whom on these occasions, I thought I would put the transcript of my talk here.

TRANSCRIPT OF FROME FESTIVAL TALK

I experienced a whole load of emotions when Alison asked me to judge this year's local short story competition.

1. Pleasure. And surprise.
2. Panic! Who am I to judge anyone's work? I can't even tell if my own is any good.
3. Guilt - at not telling her up front that making decisions is not really my thing. Not my fault, I'm a typical indecisive Libran. It takes me until lunchtime to decide what to have for breakfast but to decide between one story and another? But by the time I'd decided to come clean and 'fess up... It was too late.

So, judging this competition has been agony. In the nicest possible way of course. Having to choose between such very good - and different - stories has been, to say the least, difficult.

Things I look for in a story

1. **A good opening** - and one that fulfils its promise! Should provide info about character, setting and problem.
2. **A viewpoint character** that I can warm to, or at least care what happens. If you can create a character the reader can empathise with, then that reader will care about what happens to the character and keep reading.
3. a story that **goes somewhere**.
4. a **satisfying ending**, not necessarily a Happy Ever After one, but certainly one with a bit of hope.

Other things I enjoy:

1. **Humour**

Things that turn me off.

1. 'Fancy' writing. Too many adverbs or adjectives. Seasoning. Use sparingly.
2. Poor punctuation. Boring, I know, but punctuation is an important part of a writer's tool kit. Learn to use it.
3. Stereotypical characters

And finally, I look for that special ingredient - a bit of sparkle. (with a nod to the lovely Lynne Hackles!)

To put it another way, it's what I say to my husband when I'm wandering around M&S and he keeps asking me what I'm looking for.

"I don't really know," I tell him, "But I'll know it when I see it."

And, in the case of this competition, I did!

Note: The stories were, of course, judged anonymously.

Highly Commended (no particular order)

Pink Crocs

Good intriguing title. A recently divorced woman adjusting to life as a single woman on her first holiday on her own. Very well written scene when she throws one of her pink crocs into the sea and a dog, whom she has befriended, chases into the sea to retrieve them. I really worried with the character when she thought the dog was swimming out of its depth. Nice optimistic ending too. This writer created a problem for her main character and showed her solving it in a very satisfying way.

No Dreaming

A beautifully written, unusual and touching love story with a 25 year age gap. Older woman who, years earlier had been the victim of a horrible sexual assault and younger man. Theirs is a love born out of friendship, with a very well written scene about the first time their friendship turned to something deeper - and more physical. It ends with Edgar moving on, as she knew he had to. The writer uses some striking and very effective imagery. Fine poetic writing.

The Wall

This story appealed because of its lovely touches of humour. Poor Doug has just left home for a job in the city but is crippled with shyness. - and loneliness. He falls for Sarah, the only person in the office who seems to notice him.. and there are some sad/funny scenes where he attempts, but usually fails, to strike up a conversation with her.

Who hasn't done that thing where you rehearse how a conversation is going to go only to be thrown when it goes off at a completely different tangent?

But this is a tale with a modern twist - Doug reinvents himself, via Facebook and ends up with 502 imaginary friends (including Jordan) but he is so busy with them he finds he doesn't need real ones - not even when Sarah asks him out. There's a neat twist at the end when Doug is accused of a robbery he couldn't possibly have committed.

Equal Second

1. Nighties under Anoracks.

Again, a very good, intriguing title, this is a charming, beautifully written story. There's a lovely bit where the main character is looking back on her childhood.

"Guilt used to be part of her life then too. It used to twist through her as naturally and effortlessly as the brook flowing at the bottom of the garden. Guilt for stepping on a ladybird, for washing a fly down the plughole, for crushing the masses of tiny red spiders on the wall in order to draw with them."

That tells us so much about Esme, the little girl - and the adult she became. (and is a superb example of the oft repeated mantra: show, don't tell)

The story is about guilt, too. Esme is having an affair with a married man and she feels guilty because he has a child. It also has something I like, a circular ending. (Librans aren't just indecisive, they like balance and harmony).

It begins with Esme as a child wearing her anorack over her nightie to go out into the garden and listen to the dawn chorus with her father. It ends with Esme, sitting alone, having just finished with her lover.

The story ends:

"Shivering, she closed the window and reached absent-mindedly for her running jacket. Huddled with her knees drawn against her, she felt pitifully alone. And then suddenly she caught sight of her reflection in the window and smiled. She was wearing her nightie under her anorack."

Nice, neat, rounded off ending to a lovely story, well told. Well done.

2. The Grey Wave

This one made me laugh! It opens with:

'Miss Iris Dart heaved for what she hoped was the final time over the rail of the Oceania.' Poor Iris is not really enjoying the cruise with her lifelong friend, Betty. Some lovely phrases: *'taking her friend's arm she lurched determinedly across the deck'*.

There's a touching flashback to when the two women first met, in a railway carriage as evacuees during the war and Iris describes: *... 'so many children, luggage labels fluttering like little butterflies on coat collars'*. What a poignant, but vivid picture.

As part of the ship's entertainment, Iris and Betty go to see Sandra the Psychic who, she claims, can speak to the dead as well as drawing pictures of them.

'The frizzy hair was a mistake,' Iris comments, 'Hair like that needed mastering, not encouragement.' I could hear my friend saying this. Strangely enough, her name is Betty.

But this is where the two women's friendship is stretched almost to breaking point. Iris has never married and Betty is widowed and hoping to hear from Arthur, her late husband. The psychic draws a picture of the man coming through who Iris insists she does not recognise although Betty is looking a bit uneasy.

Things have been strained between them but as they come into port, Betty says:

'It was him she drew, wasn't it? It was... my Arthur.'

'Yes.' Iris felt her stomach heave. 'Yes, it was.'

The port grew closer. Betty's eyes were wet. Tears or salt spray, Iris didn't know.

'It was such a long time ago. It was nothing.' Fretfully she reached out for Betty's arm. 'It was always you he really loved. You we both loved.'

Betty nodded, gulping a little, fussing with her scarf.

Iris bit her lip.

'Sorry isn't good enough, is it, Betty?' she asked.

Betty leaned on the rail, then rested her hand on Iris's.

'It's a start.'

A lovely story told with a delicate touch and generous sprinkles of humour. Touching, moving, quite sad, too, as Iris looks at her life and realises how little she has.

3. An inheritance

This is a 'growing up' story. The characters are very well drawn and it's good to see how Sarah, the main character, changes (and grows up) as the story progresses. Much of the conversation is between Sarah, (in her first year at uni) and her younger sister and these characters come across very well indeed.

Sarah has inherited a brooch from her grandmother and is thinking of selling it so she can go on holiday with some of her better off new friends at uni. I found myself really caring about what she was going to do and not wanting her to sell the brooch in an effort to keep up with her new - and not very nice - friends.

The story is written in the present tense and it works well. Gives it a sense of immediacy. Some nice touches, too. There's a little scene where she tries, unsuccessfully, to borrow some money off her mother who refuses and says she can go on holiday another time.

'Anyway, you can't afford to lose that holiday job,' Mum says 'You're lucky to have it, what with the recession and....'

Sarah stops listening. She already knows the rest of the speech.

The writer doesn't need to describe Sarah's tutting, rolling the eyes, all those other things that teenagers do.

But when Sarah is looking for other things of her grandmother's to sell on ebay along with the brooch, she finds a box and, in talking to her mother, discovers her grandparents were pawnbrokers. And in the box was a collection of things that had never been reclaimed by their owners. None of it very valuable. But Sarah's brooch, the one she was about to sell, was one of those things and it had a sad story attached to it, a family with TB, the brooch pawned to pay for the doctor, the funds never found to redeem it.

And Sarah realises there's no way she can sell the brooch for something as trivial as a holiday.

A lovely, moral tale with a modern slant. Congratulations.

THE WINNER

The Other Side

This was my M&S moment. The story that ticked all the boxes for me.

It's set in a garden of a retirement home. The main character is visiting her grandmother, who is seriously ill while the other is an old man, one of the residents, with whom I fell instantly in love.

I said at the beginning I didn't like stereotyped characters and the writer has managed very skilfully to avoid drawing a stereotypical old man. Instead there are some very deft touches that bring Tom delightfully to life.

We're told he has *'skinny ankles sticking out of the end of his too-short trousers'*. He has straggling eyebrows that twitch. Pockets bulging with pens, paper and a fox-edged paperback. Wispy white hair that stands up like puffs of Travellers Joy.

He calls himself Tom the Rhymer and tells her how he writes what he calls 'silly verses.' And says for her to think of a subject and he will write her a verse about it. She opts for the door that was once in the wall in front of where they are sitting. He challenges her to write a story about the door and says he'll swap his poem for her story.

So, reluctantly, and only to take her mind off Gran's worsening condition, she starts to think about the door and what could be on the other side of it.

The next time she sees Tom, (his eyebrows *'quirking'*) she tells him about her story, remembering stories her Gran used to read to her and tells him about a beautiful meadow beyond the door. He asks her if she believes it? She says probably not. It's just something she made up. not true.

"Oh I don't believe in truth," Tom says. "Only stories."

The story ends with the main character (we never know her name) going into the garden. Alone. For the last time. Gran has obviously died. This time, she sees in her mind's eye the blue door.. and ends...

The door swings slowly open and beyond the meadow is sun-dappled, the long grass starred with a million flowers that brush Gran's white nightie as she passes by. Her slow pace picks up with a skip and a hop and suddenly she's dancing and laughing, arms outstretched as she spins and twirls.

I stand there watching, glowing inside to see her so happy, all aches and hurts melting away until there's nothing left but joy. The rain washes the tears from my face when finally the door begins to close once more and I raise a hand in farewell.

It's only as I walk away that I remember Tom never did give me my poem.

Lovely ending because of course Tom did give her her poem. He gave her the push to see her own poem and, in doing so, some comfort at the death of a dearly loved grandmother.

A touching, beautifully written, sincere piece of writing which, as I said, ticked all my boxes. And left me feeling:

DAMN. I WISH I'D WRITTEN THAT.