

Spilt Ink Competition 2020 – Short Fiction
Judge's comments prepared by Emily Paull

First Place: Golden Time

On its surface, this story is a snapshot in the life of the protagonist, Anne, as she navigates a challenging day; but on a deeper reading, this story contains multitudes, and so does she. Using analysis of poetry and art, the story takes us into an established situation which feels fully fleshed out and real, and the reader can easily pick up on the tensions between characters, and the internal struggles they are facing just to get through the day. Riffing on themes of motherhood and womanhood, this story immediately stood out to me. The characters are rounded and multi-dimensional, yet the writer does not waste words introducing them to us, belying the time they have taken to choose their words so that not a one is wasted. It feels as if these events could have been happening alongside real life.

Second Place: Almost

This story immediately takes the reader into the action, and grounds it in the world of today, as protagonist, Eva, heads to the hospital in an Uber to have her baby. As more and more is revealed about the circumstances of Eva's pregnancy, the author builds sympathy for this young woman who is rapidly losing control. There is a sharp edge to this story, a sense of wry humour which comes through in the description of the world around us, and balances the tragedy of the plot. The story examines contemporary motherhood and class and the shock of the ending leaves room for a multitude of interpretations, paving the way for important conversations about mental illness and the trauma of birth.

Third Place: The Most Dangerous People in the World

This story stood out for its rich, sumptuous description of its historical setting, which was completely unlike any of the other entries. While most of the story takes place in dialogue, and is of a more philosophical nature, the exchanges between the two characters flow and have a musicality to them, making this piece a delight to read. While the ending is of a kind which has been done before, it is done well and fits the eerie tone of the story.

General comments

There were 28 entries this year, varying in length and covering much thematic ground. Common themes included nostalgia for times past, motherhood and femininity, husbands and wives and travel. The best stories had well-developed concepts and characters, and were economical with their use of words, so that more could be explored in the short word length. Some of the stories which were not selected as winners had excellent bones, memorable characters and fascinating situations, but were let down by 'saggy' endings. The stories which left the strongest impressions showed evidence of having been polished and revised over time.