



Senior Secondary School Short Story Award

Judge's Report - Annette Trevitt

Thank you for submitting your short stories. It's always a pleasure to read your stories. I read each story twice and I read the shortlist of stories three to four times.

Every year I see new ideas and themes. This year's stories showed a lot of compassion towards characters who were lonely or who found themselves trying to cope with, often unforeseen, distress.

The stories that captured my attention had good story structure – beginning, middle and end.

Short stories show us how a character copes at a point of change in their lives. The character experiences a crisis and is forced to realise something new that they hadn't known about themselves or their situation. This realisation could only come from the events in the story. The character is irreversibly changed. Often the reader is altered, too.

Ways to capture a reader's attention are to set up a problem or situation early for the character, so the reader will want to read on to see what will happen to the character next. Reveal early who

your character is, and what they want that's hard to get and go on to show what gets in the way of the character getting it. It's also good to know what's at stake for your character.

In a story, I look for:

- a point
- a flawed or troubled character who wants something that's hard to get
- scenes I can imagine
- well-controlled structure
- a consistent tone
- clear and visual sentences
- precise and relevant detail
- originality
and
- a nugget of truth that is evident by the end.

To write as close as you can to the way you talk is better than to write how you think you have to write. You don't need to develop a 'writer's voice'. The point of fiction is to communicate with an audience, rather than to showcase your vocabulary. Stay with your own voice. It's this voice, which brings a story to life and readers to want to read more.

Read your sentences out loud. You will hear its voice and if you can change words or remove them. Stay with strong nouns and verbs and be sparse with adjectives and adverbs as they can be distracting and get in the way of a good story. Varied sentence lengths add liveliness to fiction.

Thank you again for sending in your stories. I love to know you are writing stories. It's a great way to create something of your own and to give you focus in a world of increasing distractions.

Commended

I would like to commend two stories:

A Tag? By Megan Sweiden

A tag is a story about a character who questions her behaviour when she was 12 year-old school girl and therefore faces her shortcomings. She showed how the ungenerous actions of her cliché affected a lonely and isolated student. The story's point is important.

Beggar's Memories by Caleb Gering

Beggar's Memories is a well-controlled story that moves between the present and the past. Scenes in the present story trigger unwanted memories for the character and force him to relive his past.

First Place

Prequel to Neighbours by Tim Winton: *The Old Neighbour* by Macy Tofler

Prequel to Neighbours by Tim Winton: The Old Neighbours is a well-written story about a young Polish couple moving to a new neighbourhood. The story doesn't shy away from the complexities of living amongst strangers.

The story is grounded in its setting and this gives it authenticity. The detail is precise. The language is clear and the tone is consistent. A thoughtful story that captures the couple's struggle with the young woman's pregnancy and with their new neighbours. The end is poignant as it's all tied together and takes an unexpected turn.

Senior Secondary School Short Story – *First Prize*

Prequel To “Neighbours” by Tim Winton: The Old Neighbours

by Macy Tofler

The Polish newly-weds had recently relocated to the neighbourhood. As the first flowers of Spring began to bloom, the young woman found most mornings begun with her head over the toilet bowl, hurling up last night’s dinner. She held out the urine soaked stick and squinted in the hazy, morning light that peeked its way through the bathroom blinds. Her feet felt unsteady on the cold, checker-tiled floor. Positive.

The neighbourhood had never been a convivial place, with conversation only taking place when a complaint was to be made. But, as the sweltering sun continued to rise each fresh morning, the neighbours rose with it. They hurriedly hosed their yellowing lawns and the young couple found it increasingly difficult to avoid small talks with the other new folks on the block.

The Macedonians had just moved into the grand house across the road. The young couple found it peculiar that a mere family of four had chosen such a large house. With their thick Polish accents and the Macedonian’s inability to speak any softer than a rooster squawking at sunrise, relations were strenuous. It took the young man weeks to realise that the Macedonian woman’s screams and shouts were her feeble attempt to talk to him and that she was not in fact ranting aggressively at him at 6am every morning.

When the Macedonian woman found out about the young couple's pregnancy, she boasted, shouted across the cracked road that it would not be long before her eldest child would be carrying one of her own. She would then proceed to stroke the young woman’s lump of a belly, while giving advice that she had picked up from her pregnant days. The young woman felt revered, vexed, nurtured, pissed off.

By late Summer, the young man grew to resent his long hours labouring with wood and drywall. He returned to his home as the sun began to set each night, only to be scolded by the Macedonian woman and then his wife for staying out so late. The young woman’s family ran a demolishing business which he dreamed of one day taking over. The hours would be much more agreeable with his wife.

The young man turned off his watering hose and began clearing the amber leaves, still speckled with some hues of vibrant green, from the path. When Autumn truly blew in, the young woman demanded full time care and the young man made tending to his wife, and her now watermelon size stomach, a full time job. He watched and waited by her side, jumping to attention at any sign of discomfort or request. The young woman's month was truly filled with rust-coloured nothingness.

Before long, the eldest Macedonian child was pregnant. The soon-to-be father was a boy from their local Greek Orthodox Church and threats of her father's shotgun ensured they would swiftly be married. The Macedonian woman was thrilled, exhilarated by the thought of little Macedonian voices, echoing playfully through the house once more. She sensed it was just what their recently acquired house needed, to truly be able to call it home. She longed for the chance to teach her future grandchildren to pluck and slaughter the plump Muscovies they had just bidden on only a few days before. She shared all this with the young man while he feverishly tried to take out the trash. He nodded along but wanted to scream.

But, when the young woman reached her third- trimester, the young man's ability to meet her ever growing needs faltered. The midwife paid weekly visits to the neighbourhood. However, it was the Macedonian woman who insisted on expertly rubbing the swollen ankles of the young woman, gave them oils to pack in their hospital bag and helped elongate her breaths, stopping the shortness of breath that had unfortunately become too familiar. The young man found himself looking upon her with admiration.

As the rain began to fall on the misty winter afternoon, labour finally arrived. The young woman was hustled onto a hospital bed and was rolled through ward after ward, wheels screeching as the young man jogged to keep up. His bright blue shirt flew out behind him as he shouted words of encouragement. Beads of sweat dripped down her face, her hair a bird's nest as the cries became louder. The bed began its final turn into the harshly lit delivery room. The contractions sped up. Tears of joy trickled down the young man's cheeks as he watched his wife sitting in a pool of urine, sweat and tears, being strapped to fetal monitors and IV drips. She pushed, thrashed and flailed, in order to propel her baby out. She wanted it out and he watched on, in awe. She bawled and howled, howled and bawled for an epidural. Until silence.

The Macedonian woman entered the private quarters of the hospital, baring traditional sweet Mekici and knocked softly on the grey door. The rain pattered down on the hospital roof and the wind whipped violently, shaking the window panes as she entered the labour ward. She cried out as she saw the man sink to the ground. His knees cracked against the unforgiving floor and his eyes focused only on his wife's lifeless face as his newborn daughter let out her first cry.

Senior Secondary School Short Story – *Commended*

A Tag?

by Megan Sweidan

If there was a word that could describe myself as a 12-year-old, I cannot think of anything more accurate than to say that I was a **tag**. “A tag?” you query. Well yes, a tag I was. A naive, senseless little tag named Claire Walker, with a strange, strange conception of the world.

Tags. They come in many different varieties. There are bread tags and price tags, labelling tags and... tag-alongs. These things have obvious differences, but really, they all serve quite similar purposes. Tags are nuisances; they are either not really wanted or not really needed, and sometimes, both. At first, one will always take a glance at the tag, but they are often ignored: invisible. Their existence isn't important in the grand scheme of things; they are just there. So, what's the point of tags? What's the point of tags, if their fate is to be cut off and forever forgotten? However, what if the tag is what holds everything together? Is everything really the same when you lose the tag?

I was a tag. A tag-along. The loose end that would soon fray off. Whatever you call it. But at least I had a beginning; Nina Fine certainly did not. Nina was that new girl who never really fully settled in. Sitting alone at lunch and recess was a norm for Nina. She was a meek, shy girl who when I studied deeper, was clearly hurting. Her pink, dangly earphones were constantly plugged into her ears, blocking her out from the world entirely. She was aloof to the activities that surrounded her. I don't know what she was listening to through those headphones – who knows if she was listening to anything at all – but it certainly helped camouflage her into school life. She wasn't the type of girl to sit at the back of the classroom, nor was she the type to sit at the front. She was squashed somewhere in the middle, somewhere discreet, somewhere sandwiched between the overconfident sycophants and layback troublemakers. She went unnoticed to most, but not to me.

Nina wasn't exactly the most interesting to study. She never spoke in class: not to ask questions, not to be asked questions, not even to go to the bathroom. She ate a pre-packaged lunch and walked to and from school every day. I never saw her smile, and never saw her cry; her emotions were unreadable. However, there was a strange pull I felt to Nina, as we were more similar than I'd considered.

My clique was quite exclusive, but so is the mind of a teenager. It is only now that I can look back and see how narrow-minded I was. How I let myself be manipulated. I do not really remember most of the girls I went to high school with, and frankly, I prefer not to. I was always very reserved, and that is how I stayed, but this only made me vague and distant. I lived really close to a girl named Kat Ainsworth, and this unfortunate coincidence shaped my social life for years on end. Kat was, how do I put this, one of the most *well liked* girls at school, only, she was also the biggest bully. I was just the girl watching in the sidelines, the one too vulnerable to get involved, the bystander. Not only did I let Kat intimidate others, I also let myself be ensnared. Living close to her meant that I was a useful asset in her route to and from school. Whenever her parents couldn't take her to school, I was the one she resorted to. Whenever her parents were "out", I would suddenly be added to a party invite list, and asked for a ride there and back. And this was only the start of it. Kat invited me over to her house occasionally, only to "help", or more specifically "complete" her homework. Her demands were unpredictable, but there was always something she needed or had to rant on about. Worse is the fact that I was not the only tag, adding to her power. I never really understood power, why it made Kat feel so fulfilled. I don't see the fulfilment in making others' lives dreary. Ironically, we were all "Kat's", chasing her big, righteous tail.

Morality confuses me. How can one assess what's right, and how can one assess what's wrong? And if there is something 'wrong', what do you do about it? This was something I could never figure out, and my moral compass was something that needed much direction. Nina Fine and I were similar in the way that we, both introverts in one way or another, both shared one important thing: potential.

The number of times Nina was left to sit alone at lunch are uncountable. The number of times she was murmured about are uncountable. The number of times she was given that unforgivable cold stare are uncountable. But most disappointingly, the number of times I didn't step in are uncountable.

Then it was too late. Nina stepped up. And she stepped out.

One day, Nina wasn't at school. Maybe she was sick, or on holiday, or someone passed away. The answer is D – none of the above. She wasn't there the next day, or the next. She'd left the

school, as abruptly as kids rushing out of school at the sound of the school bell. Her disappearance although acknowledged, was left ignored. It was just another socially disorientated kid wanting a clean slate. For me, this was not the case. I felt guilty. I held the potential to make a friend, to open my mouth and say something. And Nina, she had the potential of reaching social consciousness. Ol' Mornington High allowed no room for potential.

The girls I grew up with, the opportunities I wasted; they are all regrettable. Everyone is a bystander, everyone is a tag, but everyone has potential, and that is one thing I can take away.

Senior Secondary School Short Story – *Commended*

Beggar's Memories

by Caleb Gering

The American Embassy in Lagos stood a short distance to his right. The bald eagle emblem glowered at him. It knew he was shackled to the ground, flightless. It knew that afterward she would return to the maze of corrugated iron and mud brick homes.

The beggar turned to the queue stretched out before him, eyeing each person critically. He selected a young man, draped in a characterless suit. Holding out held out his enamel pan, he croaked, “money, sir?”

The air bore down upon his shoulders. He paid no notice, instead focussed on the rumbling in his belly and the countless knots and blue-black bruises that twisted the sensation of each step into a dull, rhythmic ache. Necessity pushed him onwards.

“Money, sir?” A man with black rimmed glasses stood before him, dressed plainly. A woman and two boys huddled behind the man, as he rummaged around the pockets of his jacket.

One of the boys reminded him of his brother. Of a bloody, lifeless body. Of how he was young and there was nothing he could do. His heart pounded, vision unfocused. He backed away from the man, and the boy who looked like his brother.

“Wait! Sorry, I was distracted. Have this,” the man said. A 200 Naira note drifted down into the enamel pan.

The beggar muttered a thank you, God bless you. His eyes were wide with awe, his heart still beating in terror. A steel firearm flashed in his mind. He remembered his father standing tall, his face hard. He remembered the night before that moment, and his father's words: “Always have the courage to follow your heart. Be courageous and be brave.”

The crackling gravel under heavy boots alerted him. Men in tan uniforms walked from the back of the line. Their backs were straight, but their shoulders relaxed. Guns slung comfortably near

their waists. The steel rifles flashed in his mind again. The soldiers sauntered down the line. The eagle emblem viewed them from its lofty perch, pride in its cold concrete eyes.

The beggar began to skulk away, ignoring the pain shooting down his legs. If he didn't move it would be worse. The same animal instinct flickered in the eyes of the other beggars, and they moved cautiously movements backwards, creating a barrier between them and the danger. Their hands went to their scars that lined their bony limbs, their flesh cracked from lashings.

A soldier shouted behind him. He strode faster, though in his peripherals he could see the man with the black rimmed glasses recoil. He turned to see the man frantically searching his jacket. "I have them, I swear!", the man cried out, then was thrown to the ground. The boy who looked like the beggar's brother stood, frozen in place.

His brother had stood still, a gun raised in front of him. The night before he and his brother had heard his uncles yell at his father, calling him a uzuza, an idiot. His father said they had to be brave, that they had to stand up for what was theirs. At dawn, soldiers approached the house. One had a steel firearm.

The man was now being whipped, as if his lack of papers meant he was a worthless street dog. A crowd was forming around him. The black rimmed glasses had been knocked off his head.

His father had told them it was his land. He had bought it. The soldiers shouted that this was General Abacha's land, they had told him before. But his father stood defiantly. The soldier raised his rifle and fired.

The whipping continued, the black rims now crushed under the soldier's heel. The beggar stood behind the soldier. He could do something.

Viscous blood sprayed in the air, his mother screaming. The gun fired again. His brother stood beside him, frozen in place. But he ran, unable to help, unable to do anything.

The beggar heard his father, the voice ringing in his mind. "Have courage to follow your heart. Be courageous." The man caught his gaze, his eyes pleading, screaming. But the beggar

remembered going back to say goodbye to the bodies of those he loved. The bloody lifeless bodies. His heart thumped in his chest. The whip struck.

The man looked back up. The beggar was gone. Plastic black rimmed shards lay on the ground where he had been.