

**2025 Shortlist**

**Yair**

by Emily Abdeni-Holman

**You Cannot Thread**

**a Moving Needle**

by Colwill Brown

**Little Green Man**

by Edward Hogan

**Two Hands**

by Caolinn Hughes

**Rain – a history**

by Andrew Miller

# 2025

# Shortlist

# Discussion

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# Introduction



**The BBC National Short Story Award with Cambridge University** (NSSA) is one of the most prestigious awards for a single short story, with the winning author receiving £15,000.

Over its 20-year history, the award has celebrated established writers such as Hilary Mantel, Zadie Smith, Deborah Levy, Sarah Hall, Jackie Kay and William Trevor, and new stars such as Ingrid Persaud, Caleb Azumah Nelson and Saba Sams.

Each year the award is judged by five expert judges. The judges select a shortlist of five stories from approximately 1,000 entries, considering the originality and excellence of the prose, the story structure and the overall impact of the story on the reader.

The judges' chosen shortlist is announced in September and the winner in October during a special edition of BBC Radio 4's *Front Row*, live from BBC Broadcasting House.

The shortlisted stories are recorded by professional actors, and interviews with the writers are broadcast too.

... and now  
you can be  
a judge too



**BBC Student Critics with Cambridge University** challenges you to join the judges to read and critique the shortlisted stories. Read or listen to the stories, discuss them as a group, choose your favourites and then host a listening party to hear the winner announced live on *Front Row*. Taking part will encourage you to read critically and build confidence in expressing your opinions. It will also introduce you to a diverse range of exciting new writing. Your response as a reader or listener to a short story (or a novel, piece of music, work of art or architecture) is unique and valuable – and it's fun to discuss and debate your ideas with friends.

*Please note that the shortlisted stories for the BBC National Short Story Award may contain adult themes.*

## Listen!

Visit [bbc.co.uk/nssa](https://www.bbc.co.uk/nssa) or search 'short stories' on BBC Sounds to listen to the stories and interviews with the writers.



**This resource will introduce you to the five stories shortlisted for the BBC National Short Story Award 2025.**

**Each of these five stories is very different, and shows what the short story form can do.**

**Here, you'll find a discussion guide for each story, to help steer you through the reading and critiquing process. There are suggestions of things to look for in the text, questions to consider, and talking points for you and your friends.**

**You'll also find activity ideas following on from each story. If you've been inspired, have a go at some creative writing yourself!**

# Discussion guide

## Yair by Emily Abdeni-Holman

### Summary

**A young woman, who previously lived in Lebanon, is looking for an apartment in Jerusalem. She enlists the help of a local Israeli estate agent, Yair, who takes her to a number of properties. As they spend time together, it becomes apparent that Yair is attracted to her, but when he makes a pass at her, she refuses.**

### Questions

- How are the various apartments that Yair and the protagonist visit symbolic of her internal state?
- Why do you think Yair finds the protagonist so attractive?
- How does the protagonist of this story belong and not belong in the various neighbourhoods she visits – and in Jerusalem?
- What impression do you get about Jerusalem from the descriptive writing in the story?

### Discussion points

Among other themes, *Yair* explores what it means to be a young woman in the world today. In the story, we see how the protagonist is disrespected because she is young, a woman, and a foreigner. When she visits an apartment where Yair speaks to workmen about her in Arabic, she says:

*“Yair and the men made jokes; the atmosphere was lighthearted.*

*I was the one who was left out, not by language, but because I was a woman,”*

Similarly, Yair – a married man and father – apparently feels entitled to make an unwanted advance towards the young woman, pressing himself against her and trying to persuade her to have sex with him. It becomes clear that the moped ride was also a pretext to be physically intimate, without her consent. Even though she enjoys the experience of riding on the moped, she also realises that there is an unspoken undercurrent of sexual attraction.

Yair comments later in the story that he has admired the protagonist's legs, and, earlier, she is told to cover them up by an older woman. Her body – while she only wishes to dress for comfort – seems to be a thing almost separate from her which others seek to press their interpretations upon. Yet she also has a strong sense of herself, and draws strength from her friendships and from the natural world.

Discuss how Abdeni-Holman constructs her character's 'womanness' and how that identity operates within the story. Is it a strength, a liability, or both?

### What to look out for

In *Yair*, Abdeni-Holman uses long sentences and paragraphs often with a stream-of-consciousness-style narration that immerses the reader in the act of reading: we feel

as though we are witnessing the busy mind and deeply introspective nature of a young woman wrapped up in her own complicated and sense-rich inner world.

The long sentences and paragraphs create this effect by presenting the reader with a mesh of sometimes rambling allusions and memories that form an impressively woven internal reality, rather than an illusory impression of clarity that few people actually experience in the noise of their own thoughts and feelings.

Though this style may initially be more difficult to read, it arguably represents a more realistic *humanness* than the more common, artificially cohesive constructions of selfhood that readers are more likely to find in fiction.

### Next steps

Create a piece of descriptive writing about a place you have visited that moved you. What was it about the landscape – or cityscape – that elicited an emotional reaction? Describe the colours, textures, sights and smells. How did the place make you feel? Did you make any big decisions while you were there, or have any important realisations?

Alternatively, paint or draw an image of the same place. Can you imbue your picture with the emotions you felt when you were there? How can you convey a feeling with colour, shape and shading or line?

# Discussion guide

## You Cannot Thread a Moving Needle by Colwill Brown

### Summary

**Shaz recounts the story of her rape by two boys in her friend group, and the years after the horrific event where she tells no-one, but suffers from an eating disorder and from the effects of post-traumatic stress. Finally, on seeing both boys perform onstage, she enacts some small revenge by injuring one of them with a pint glass.**

### Questions

- How much influence does poverty have on what happens?
- Are Rach and Kel good friends to Shaz? Why, or why not?
- After reading the story once, how does the first line read when you look at it for a second time?
- What is the relevance of this story's title?

### Discussion points

In *You Cannot Thread a Moving Needle*, Brown hangs a short story between two major dramatic moments: Shaz's rape, and her throwing the glass. Unusually for a short story, the scope of the story itself covers many years in-between these events.

Shaz's story shows the impact of one event on the years that follow. She narrates the time passing by repeating “*you don't say owt*”, indicating the times, over and over again, where she refrains from telling her story, until something in her snaps.

How does Colwill Brown build the sense of tension and hint at what has happened to Shaz? How effectively does Brown reveal the awful truth? How effective is it in conveying Shaz's feelings? How does the use of time work in the story, and how does this reflect on Shaz's memory of the event?

### What to look out for

Stylistically, probably the most noticeable element of Brown's story is the use of a strong dialect in the narration. Shaz's story is written in a Yorkshire accent on the page, providing an immersive experience for the reader, and a relatively unusual reading experience.

As well as giving the reader a strong sense of how Shaz's voice sounds, and making the reader feel empathy for the character, the choice to tell the story in such an idiosyncratic manner takes on an ideological focus when one considers the importance of listening to rape and sexual assault victims. By crafting Shaz's voice in such a specific way, Brown ensures that we hear *her*: her specific, individual story, her character and her thoughts, as well as her experience.

By making the language unusual on the page, the reader has to pay more attention. As a result, Brown makes us focus and listen to Shaz: a gift women like her rarely receive.

The representation of a working-class regional dialect purposefully confounds the more common literary tropes of stories written

(in the UK) in middle class English voices, with no noticeable accent or indicator of class. By telling Shaz's story – including the restrictions of class and poverty on her life – Brown is also representing a part of British society that is all too often overlooked in literary fiction.

### Next steps

Write a story in a regional dialect of your choosing. It might be a UK dialect or one found in another country. Think about how the dialect sounds and how you might spell words. What choices will you make in terms of how you represent the dialect on the page? Will you drop in the occasional regional term to give a general impression, commit to a total phonetic representation, or somewhere in-between? Will the theme of your story be relevant to the dialect used, and, if so, why is it relevant? How do accent and dialect help create character? Are our assumptions about people based on those things always fair?

Alternatively, write a diary entry from Rach's point of view about what she thinks has happened when Shaz goes off with the boys – or, a series of entries as Rach ponders what is going on with Shaz and/or her boyfriend. Is Rach supportive, bitchy, caring or uninterested? How might you be able to represent her character via her thoughts?

# Discussion guide

## Little Green Man by Edward Hogan

### Summary

**Carrie, who is getting over a relationship breakup with her girlfriend Bridget, works in the Parks and Gardens department of her local council. When she's asked to supervise a young temp worker, Ryan, for the day, she is resistant, as Ryan seems rude and disrespectful. However, as the day passes, Carrie discovers more about Ryan, his family and his hopes for the future, leading her to reflect on herself and the situation with Bridget.**

### Questions

- How does the first line in Hogan's story set up Carrie's character?
- What function does The Secret Sound of Derby radio competition perform in the story? What does it show the reader?
- How are women represented in the story? Does Carrie influence Ryan's thoughts about women?
- What does the setting of the graveyard in one of the scenes in the story suggest about the emotions of both characters?

### Discussion points

Carrie is a kind character, as we can see from her interactions with Ryan – when she realises he doesn't have any money, she buys him lunch, and she defends him against his father. She also cares about her work, making the cemetery and

the children's park safe and tidy for people visiting them. However, Carrie spends the story mulling over her relationship with Bridget, and we get the sense that Bridget represented a challenge of some kind to Carrie.

Do you think that Carrie should have pursued a relationship with Bridget and left with her to go travelling? Why do you think that she didn't? Was it because she knew that Bridget wasn't a good match for her and that they were essentially quite different people, or did fear of the unknown – and, perhaps, low self-esteem – prevent her from a wonderful adventure? Was Bridget a good person, or was Carrie right not to follow her on her travels?

### What to look out for

In *Little Green Man*, Hogan creates terrifically three-dimensional characters in both Carrie and Ryan.

Because the story is told from Carrie's point of view, we get her internal dialogue, which helps Hogan to build her character and give the reader a sense of intimacy with her thoughts and feelings.

However, it's the 'show don't tell' moments in the story that work so well at giving the reader a connection to Ryan, a character who is initially quite monosyllabic.

The scene where Ryan dances in the graveyard is unexpected and personal, and this sudden insight into Ryan's private world –

the reader observes him through Carrie's eyes, unnoticed – shows us that Ryan has a more creative side than the image he projects when watching porn in the truck.

Similarly, the phone call from his mum about his baby son, and the interaction with his father, all show us Ryan's life and character in a far more effective way than if Hogan had merely described them in a top-line and impersonal overview.

Hogan shows us the internal reality of Ryan in a very effective way without needing his point of view narration.

### Next steps

Fathers are a key feature of *Little Green Man*. Ryan is a young father, Carrie's father has passed away and Ryan has a difficult relationship with his dad. Write a poem about your father, or a person in your life who has been like a father to you. Make a list poem, listing all the good (or bad) things about them, or use a poetic form like a sonnet or even a villanelle. Does writing the poem help you focus on what is most important to you about that person?

Alternatively, with a friend, try a 'show, don't tell' writing challenge. Give each other a keyword emotion or personal quality for a character – sad, excited, hopeful, thoughtful, grieving, etc – and challenge each other to write a short piece where you show your character embodying that quality, without saying it.

# Discussion guide

## Two Hands by Caoilinn Hughes

### Summary

**After a car accident, a woman takes a driving lesson to regain her confidence, accompanied by her husband, who was traumatised by the experience. On the motorway, they encounter another dangerous driver, and pull to the side of the road and regroup. The moment of tension brings unsaid truths to the surface, allowing them to communicate and find some closure.**

### Questions

- What is the significance of the quote from *War and Peace*?
- How does the driving instructor's personal tragedy relate to Desmond and Gemma's?
- When Gemma says "All some people have is the little tunnel ahead of them. If they need to light it, they need to light it." what does she mean? What is she saying about Des, or herself?
- Gemma and Desmond's Fiat is a left-hand drive vehicle, making it difficult to drive on Irish roads. How is this symbolic of their difficulties re-integrating into Irish culture after living in Italy?

### Discussion points

Desmond talks to the driving instructor about his specialist interest in the Roman city of Herculaneum. The driving instructor understands without being told that

being in the car again with Gemma is stressful for Des, and so he asks questions about it, purposefully distracting Des from the fact that they are on the motorway where their accident happened.

What is the significance of Herculaneum within the context of the story? How does a historical city buried by a cataclysmic and traumatic event relate to what has happened to Des and Gemma? When Des talks about the careful efforts by archaeologists to extract materials from the site, is there a correlation with what has happened between him and Gemma – both in the car crash but also more generally in their relationship, and moving from Italy to Ireland?

### What to look out for

Hughes' use of sensual detail is a key feature of her short story, evoking texture, mood and feel with immediacy and precision. Frequently, her sense imagery references seismic incidents, impacts on rock, glass and rubble: Lines such as "they're stuck behind a huge articulated hauler, dry-icing them in rubble dust" and "He still looks for fragments of the accident, the blue glass that freckled her for so long after." and "like a rock that's been fracked" stand out as impactful, referencing the key theme of sudden destruction in the story.

Other lines, like Gemma's observation of the Irish countryside

they are passing, reflects the sombre mood of the couple:

*"Nude trees like shadow puppets against the low-lying sky. Oversize boom-era housing in the distance; out of sniffing range of the road but not the silage."*

With a deft hand, Hughes gives the reader a specific feeling of sorrow and dread in this story, while evoking the shock and trauma of the car crash, and the aftermath where Gemma and Desmond must rebuild their lives.

### Next steps

Imagine that the driving instructor writes a daily letter to his dead wife. What might he say after his experience with Gemma and Desmond? What might he reflect upon or feel after talking to them, spending time with them and having an insight into their relationship? What details might you be able to weave in about the instructor and his wife's relationship?

Alternatively, write about yourself when you learned to drive. What did you hope driving would give to you as a life skill? If you don't drive, think of another skill that you learned, and how it has impacted your life. How has it made life easier or given you more opportunities? Or, was it a negative experience?

Write the piece as a list, with each line beginning: When I learned to drive, I... (or sub another skill).

# Discussion guide

## Rain – a history by Andrew Miller

### Summary

An unnamed man goes out for a walk in the rain, and then to a community meeting at the local church. Four people in the village have died and the village seems to be experiencing an environmental calamity, but it isn't clear exactly what has happened or why. There is, however, a hint that the unnamed man's son may have been involved. At the end of the community meeting the villagers begin clapping, perhaps because they do not know what else to do.

### Questions

- What impression did you get about the protagonist?
- What does rain represent to you? What atmosphere does it create?
- Did the clapping remind you of clapping the NHS during Covid – another unexpected disaster? What else might the clapping symbolise in the story?
- What is the significance of the woman in the green van?

### Discussion points

As the protagonist of the story walks along, he thinks:

*"On the radio there were people with theories about it all. In the pub, or stood under umbrellas in the road, people had their own, wilder theories."*

In *Rain – a history*, Miller builds a mystery by hinting at some kind

of crisis that is going on, without ever revealing what it is. Miller suggests that it has been going on for some time.

What do you think is happening within the story, and what evidence supports your theory? What do you think has happened to the four people who have died? Where and when in time might the story be set? What does the title suggest?

### What to look out for

A sense of folk horror imbues Miller's story: folk horror is a genre of fiction, usually rural and set within a secretive community connected to old ways of doing things – particularly to ancient myths, legends or pagan practices. Usually, there is an overriding feeling of doom or threat, and either a murder, cataclysm or even a supernatural event – *The Wicker Man*, for example.

In this story there is a mystery seemingly set in a small English village where something terrible has happened, but we do not know what. Villagers meet at the candlelit church for an unexplained but ominous purpose, and the unnamed protagonist seems very worried about some wrongdoing of his son's. All the while, a mysterious and what feels like cursed rain falls.

When he described his house:

*"It squatted, hunched under the weather, as it had for two hundred years or more. Brown stone, grey stone, undistinguished, solid. And*

*then the transition again – stepping in, stepping out of the weather, closing the swollen wood of the door and standing in the particular air of the wood store, looking for a moment at the tools that hung, curiously primitive, from hooks and nails on the wall."*

The reader feels a sense of brooding threat, created by the rain, the descriptions of wood rotting and swelling, the graves of the recent dead. Word choices such as *hung*, *primitive*, *swollen*, *squatted* and *hunched* all contribute to the dominant impression of the story being of something terrible and inescapable.

### Next steps

Write a story in which you allude to something that has happened, but don't give the reader all the information. Think about how much information is enough to create a mystery in the reader's mind. Decide on the dominant impression you want your story to evoke: is it sadness, dread, or perhaps excitement or uncertainty? Think about what kind of language would be fitting.

Alternatively, write a poem inspired by rain. Try using onomatopoeia, assonance, repetition or rhyme, and use concise but visual imagery to invoke sense detail: smell, taste, touch, sound and visuals. Think about how you lay the words out on the page – can you make a poem about rain look like rain, or a poem about a storm look like a storm?

# What next?

Find out more about **BBC Student Critics**, including tips, recommendations, resources and videos – plus more short stories to read and discuss at [bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqd3](http://bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqd3)

## Looking for more?

Teachers and librarians can express an interest in signing up groups of 20 or more for an enhanced Student Critics experience.

Each year, up to 600 students will receive:

- an invitation to the premiere of an online Student Critics event with BBC National Short Story Award judges and writers
- a free copy of the BBC National Short Story Award anthology

- an opportunity to receive a visit from a shortlisted writer or judge from the BBC National Short Story Award or BBC Young Writers' Award (this may be filmed).

Find out more at [bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqd3](http://bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqd3)

## What's your story?

If you have been inspired these short stories and would like to share some of your own writing, why not enter the **BBC Young Writers' Award with Cambridge University**? Young people aged between 14–18 years are invited to submit original short stories of up to 1,000 words.

Find out how to enter plus creative writing resources for students and teachers at [bbc.co.uk/ywa](http://bbc.co.uk/ywa)

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