

2021

Shortlist Discussion Guide



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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 15-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 Lucy Wood.

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 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 2021.

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:

All the People Were Mean and Bad by Lucy Caldwell

Summary

A woman returns to London from Canada with her young daughter, to attend her cousin's funeral. Talking to the man sitting next to her on the plane, she questions the strength of her marriage, and reflects on the meaning of life.

Questions

- How does the episode of *Hey Duggee* that the main character entertains her daughter with at the funeral compare with the Noah's Ark picture book they look at together on the plane?
- '...even if there's no real metric to grief, there is, must be, a hierarchy of loss.' How does Caldwell represent the experience of grief in the story?
- Did you sympathise with the main character's husband? Why? Or why not?
- What is Caldwell saying about the role religion plays in death and bereavement?

Discussion points

In Caldwell's story, a woman meets a man on a plane while travelling with her young daughter. She feels a connection, and considers having some kind of an affair with him. We learn that her husband frequently works away from home, and the couple are finding it hard to maintain their relationship in the way they once did. Motherhood is lonely,

difficult and tiring and the main character has lost her sense of who she is, having given up her job.

On the plane, removed from her everyday life, while talking to her fellow passenger – who is divorced, older and has grown-up children – she reflects on love, family, relationships and whether what we do in life really matters. Her mother's religious morality, as expressed in the book she has given her grand-daughter, represents one side of the argument, but the main character instinctively feels that people are not mean and bad by nature.

Are people naturally good or bad, or just doing their best? Discuss your thoughts, and think about the protagonist. Is she a bad person for considering the man from the plane's offer?

What to look out for

Caldwell writes with precision and compassion about motherhood and the experience of looking after a young child. Her intimate descriptions of the relentless tiredness and physicality of motherhood feel very real, from the scene where she doesn't order coffee for herself at the airport because she won't be able to carry it – and yet sources milk for her daughter – to the description of the weight of her daughter as she sleeps on her, uncomfortably, on the plane.

Yet, there are also touching moments that recognise the sweetness and simplicity of life with a young child: the return home, letting her daughter press all the buttons in the lift and joyfully break all the eggs in making a cake.

These ordinary daily experiences and the themes of the meaning of life, bereavement and love may seem on one hand to present a contrast, but in fact Caldwell seems to suggest that life is only in the moment. The details – whether a children's cartoon, making a cake, the passing kindness of strangers, or the decisions we make in each moment – are the only real truth.

Next steps

Write a descriptive piece about a child in your life. As well as their appearance, think about their favourite phrases, toys, food and drink. Who are their friends? What are their favourite books or TV shows? What do they think about the world? Incorporate some metaphor and simile in your writing. Who or what might you compare them to?

Alternatively, write about a memorable journey you have taken, and what you thought about or experienced. Did you talk to a fellow passenger? Do you remember worrying about something in particular, or learning something new? Embellish the facts and make your memory into more of a story, or keep it as a memoir.

Discussion guide:

The Body Audit by Rory Gleeson

Summary

A group of teenage boys at an Irish language school assess each other's bodies and offer tips for making improvements, ahead of a disco.

Questions

- Did the story surprise you? Why?
- How does Gleeson build a sense of tension in the story as Greg's assessment approaches?
- Did you feel that Damien's analysis session was ultimately good or bad for him? Or neither?
- What did you think about Greg's character?

Discussion points

In a story with this title, we might expect to see a group of girls comparing their bodies – perhaps bemoaning their lack of perfection, or being judged as in a traditional beauty contest. Yet, in 'The Body Audit', it's teenage boys that tactfully – and even affectionately – assess each other's physical attributes, and respond in a responsible and caring way to Greg, the boy in the group with the least self-confidence. As readers, we perhaps feel a sense of foreboding when Greg's scrutiny begins, fearing a *Lord of the Flies*-type victimisation of the 'weakest' member of the group. Instead, the boys take pains to reassure Greg that he looks good, and 'don't be

giving all this shite about being fat. You're a big lad, and girls like that.' At the end of the story, the boys all swagger off to the disco in their best clothes, looking forward to the night ahead, with Greg included.

Discuss Gleeson's modern depiction of teenage boys, both individually and as a group. How has the experience of being a teenage boy changed with regard to body image in recent years? Would this moment have happened ten or twenty years ago? Or have teenage boys always been quite aware of their bodies and appearances and supportive of each other in this way?

What to look out for

Gleeson's sensual description of the boys in their bunk room begins with smell: of sweaty, sea-and-sand infused towels that haven't been washed for weeks, but instead sprayed with Lynx Africa, and of 'dried sweat and burps and acne cream and fake aftershave and mouldy sandwiches and tang'.

In this way, he focuses the reader's attention on the boys' physicality in preparation for their analysis of each other's bodies – for instance, Vinny's assessment of Damien includes the observation that Damien is skinny, but not in a bad way (like a neglected baby) and that his shoulders are too bony and could do with more muscle. The boys' analysis of each other – like Fanning having 'great hands' shows both a kind of kindness

within the group, but also a way of objectifying the body borrowed from the misogynistic ways society has looked at women in the past, but reducing them to body parts to be assessed and judged.

Yet, overall, the boys' analysis session seems to empower and galvanise the group. Gleeson's use of dialogue is natural and full of jokey affection, demonstrating the bond that the boys have formed.

Next steps

Imagine a similar scene featuring a group of girls the boys will meet at the dance. Do they get ready together and comment on each other's appearance? Write a similar story about the girls, either in the third person encompassing a number of points of view, or told from the perspective of one girl. How does she feel about the process – positive, negative, or a little of both?

Alternatively, write some entries from Greg's diary. How does he feel after the events of the story? What happens afterwards? Perhaps he goes to the dance feeling good, but has a bad experience with a girl that sets him back. Or maybe he has a great night with the boys – and perhaps a girl too – and sees the night as a personal turning point. Write about what happens in Greg's voice.

Discussion guide:

Night Train

by Georgina Harding

Summary

A woman takes an overnight train trip from Lvov to Kiev after the death of her mother. As she travels, she talks with Iryna, her companion in the train compartment, about her mother's death, revolution, life and war.

Questions

- In the first few paragraphs, what mood does Harding evoke about the train and the station? Why might she do this?
- What does the format of a train journey allow Harding to do in the story?
- What do you feel about Alice? Why?
- How does Harding explore ideas of identity in the story?

Discussion points

Alice's train journey allows her to step outside her ordinary life and travel through her memories. On the train, normality is suspended and she can enjoy feeling free, with no responsibilities: 'She realises as she speaks that she might tell this stranger anything, here on this train. She might say she is a businesswoman, a pianist, a spy. She could tell her a fiction and it could seem just as true.'

However, for Iryna, the train journey is a routine one, as she carries pots

of her mother's honey to sell in a market in Lvov and brings quilts back to Kiev to sell for weaponry, supporting soldiers involved in a revolutionary war.

Discuss how Iryna and Alice contrast with each other. How does Harding describe them physically? Pay particular attention to her mentions of colour in the story and think about what she is saying about each character and the life they are leading. What bigger themes are happening in both women's lives, and how might they relate to each other?

What to look out for

Quiet moments of silence and reflection punctuate Alice's train journey, allowing her time to reflect on her mother's final days suffering from dementia, and her death. Harding sensitively draws the reader's attention to the ways that conversation ebbs and flows in situations like the train journey: 'In her experience as often as not you expect a journey to contain pauses like this, moments of emptiness.'

In the final minutes of their journey, as the train pulls into the station, Alice feels she can speak more freely because time with Iryna is limited. Yet, Alice also remembers a time towards the end of her mother's life in which her mother's ability to enjoy a private moment to herself had been curtailed by her illness.

Alice reflects on the passing of time as she remembers her own childhood and compares her grey hair to the blonde curls of her youth; she remembers her mother's starlet good looks and how she looked in a brief moment as she smoked a cigarette outside a cinema. 'Night Train' reminds us that, in different ways, we are often unprepared for how little time we have – in life, in a moment, or in a chance meeting.

Next steps

Iryna suggests that Alice should keep a travel diary, but Alice feels that she wouldn't know what to write. Try writing a travel diary yourself, either next time you go on a trip, or documenting a more mundane journey you take, such as the route to school or college. How can you record even a small journey in an original way every day if you are repeating it? Read some travel diaries or memoirs and take inspiration from them. You could try incorporating a daily playlist of music you listened to, add in drawings or sketches, take photos, make collages, or collect things – restaurant menus, beer mats, food wrappers, postcards or tickets.

Alternatively, find some books that chronicle a revolutionary or civil war (either historical or contemporary) from a personal perspective. What do you learn from a memoir or a diary format that you don't from a non-fiction overview?

Discussion guide:

Toadstone

by Danny Rhodes

Summary

A man returns to his rural home town while waiting for a cancer diagnosis. During his visit, he revisits his grandparents' house, helps out with a local nature group and meets a young woman who pursues a relationship with him.

Questions

- How is Julian's relationship with his parents portrayed? How does it compare to his relationship with his grandparents?
- How do you feel about the place that Julian returns to? Is it pleasant or stifling? What gives you this impression?
- What did you think about the scene in which Julian goes to the hospital?
- How is Dawn portrayed? What feeling do you get about her as a reader?

Discussion points

The symbolism of toads is interesting in this story. In many cultures, toads represent transformation and change, or a new phase, based on the series of transformations in a toad's life, from spawn to toadlet to toad.

The toadstone seems to represent a kind of good luck charm to Derek and Julie, and the main character steals one of the stones from which he feels a kind of healing energy.

Then there's toading, where a group of local people band together to help toads get across a busy road, where they might otherwise die. All of these themes – of peril, possible death and transformation – seem to come together to reflect back on the main character, Julian, who is facing a perilous potential cancer diagnosis. Later in the story, Julian dreams about operating on a toad and removing a tumour from its head, reflecting his own preoccupation with his pending diagnosis.

We sense that Julian is experiencing a major transitional phase. Though the diagnosis looms somewhat ominously in his future, he is optimistic about a possible relationship with Dawn – and the end of a rather lonely period. The toadstone is, perhaps, a portent for healing and a happy life ahead.

Does Julian's story make you feel hopeful or sad? Has Julian made the most of life, or is there a kind of melancholy in him? What are your feelings about his future?

What to look out for

Julian's nostalgic memories of childhood create a rich world for the reader in which all the smells, tastes and textures of summers with his grandparents, in particular, are rendered. He describes being taken to the sweet shop, where his grandmother would buy him white sugar mice in a paper bag, and then his grandmother's kitchen, with the

sound of the radio and the tick of the clock, and the smell of baking and of grandmother's cigarettes. When Julian visits his grandparents' bungalow, he 'catches the scent of lavender where there was no scent.'

Nature seems almost like a character in 'Toadstone', whether it's the familiar landscape behind Julian's grandparents' bungalow or the woods where the toading takes place, which are captured with a knack for spare but effective description. Derek's reverence for toads and their folklore also adds a subtly eerie element to the story, reminding the reader of the wealth of other folklore surrounding nature and animals.

Next steps

Write about a house that you remember from childhood – perhaps a grandparent's home, or the house of a childhood friend. If it's a house you haven't been inside for a long time, see what you can remember and what you can't. Were there particular smells, colours, or furniture arranged a certain way? Does the sight of particular type of crockery or carpet take you back there? Write as if you are re-entering the house – what do you see, hear, touch, taste, smell? Are there particular memories attached to the house for you?

Alternatively, you might look for a local wildlife or animal conservation group to join – perhaps even a toading group!

Discussion guide:

Maykopsky District, Adyghe Oblast by Richard Smyth

Summary

Three men conduct a botanical and topographical survey of the Maykopsky District part of the Russian steppe in 1949, as part of the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature. By the end of the research trip, two of the men must make a sudden and important decision.

Questions

- How does Smyth use the imagery of the Demoiselle cranes? What do they represent? What do they seem to represent to Shirikov?
- What is the significance of the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature in the story?
- What do you think about Nikitin, and what can we learn about him from the story?
- How does Smyth use humour?

Discussion points

In the last part of the story, Shirikov confesses 'I tell you, Comrade, I am condemned, one way or another,' and Pavlichenko reports that 'Note was taken of a certain pain in the eyes of Comrade Shirikov.' This might be a reference to the knowledge that being a gay man in Russia would condemn him to the authorities just as much as his apparent wrongness of thought regarding Lysenko's theories of forestation.

What do you know about Stalin and Russia in the 1940s? How does modern Russia's ideas about homosexuality (and all LGBTQI experience) compare to the country's time under communist rule? Discuss how things have changed – or not changed – since Stalin.

What to look out for

Smyth's story follows the format of an official report, which lends it an interestingly formal feel for the reader, yet one that is able to capture telling small details. In accordance with its status as a report detailing a scientific expedition, the entries in the date-annotated report note flora and fauna sighted by the men, which also give the reader an insight into the vast, primal beauty of the steppe, with its grassland as far as the eye can see, and eagles flying overhead. Shirikov also admires the Demoiselle cranes he sights, describing them as better than ballet. In fact, the romantic sweep of the great outdoors becomes a sympathetic setting for a charged encounter between Shirikov and Lieutenant of State Security M.A. Pavlichenko, the 'Operative' named in the report – a place outside of the usual repressive restrictions of the state, where people can be true to their own natures.

As the record of an undercover government operative, the story also records the men's dialogue in

an attempt to investigate whether one of them is a traitor. Thus, within the unconventional context of a formal government report, we get a sense of the men's characters, from dreamy, romantic and nature-loving Shirikov to the coarse and vulgar Nikitin, who swears, drinks to excess and seems to hate nature, and also of Pavlichenko, who is only named at the end of the report. Pavlichenko's inclusions and omissions are telling: sometimes, he seems unable to stop himself from noting his more personal observations of Shirikov, from a conversation about a moth looking for love to two occasions where he admires how knowledgeable and accomplished Shirikov is.

Next steps

Write a story where it is appropriate to use a similar report format – perhaps set in a prison, a hospital or a school. What can the format give your story, and what can't it supply? Does your report have one author, or is it co-written – full of arguments in the margins, and one writer editing another?

Alternatively, write a story that details the follow-up events at the NKVD when Pavlichenko's report is found, and Pavlichenko and Shirikov are missing. What happens to Nikitin? Is he questioned? What does he say? Who are the people in chagre and what are their intentions? Refer to Pavlichenko's report in your story.

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/zxhqdp3

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/zxhqdp3

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.

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