



Shortlist Discussion Guide



2024 Shortlist

The Barber of Erice
by Will Boast

Hamlet, a love story
by Lucy Caldwell

Pieces
by Manish Chauhan

Ghost Kitchen
by Ross Raisin

Nice Dog
by Vee Walker

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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 19-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 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 2024.

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

The Barber of Erice

by Will Boast

Summary

In a small Sicilian town, Giuliu the barber is hardly keeping his business afloat. When he finds an immigrant, Baba, is giving stunning haircuts to everyone in town, he is furious. However, when Baba comes to him for help, Giuliu realises that Baba may be the key to restoring his business – and, over time, Baba helps him to reframe his opinions about the value of immigrants in society.

Questions

- What is Boast saying about immigration? How does Giuliu's opinion change by the end?
- How does Erice compare with other parts of Sicily and Italy?
- How does the tourist experience of Erice compare to the reality, and how is this shown in the scene of the sunset?
- How does men's hair act as a symbol for a changing society in this story?

Discussion points

"As a boy, Giuliu had seen grown men, pillars of Erice, sit in the chair and sorrow and confess and even weep, especially when the grappa came out. Men used to come to the barber for bloodletting, to have teeth pulled, for all sorts of ailments. Even now, his father had instructed, cutting hair is not the only service we provide."

In this story, Will Boast uses the role of the barber to examine masculinity in a small Sicilian town. A business that he has inherited from his father – and a place where Giuliu reflects on his relationship with his father – Giuliu's barber shop is also a kind of refuge for the men of the town, where they can come and talk and express emotions. The barber's shop is a place where boys have their hair cut for rites of passage such as their confirmation, a place where, at one time, all the boys and men of the village would visit.

What is Will Boast saying about masculinity in *The Barber of Erice*? What might the barber shop symbolise at the start of the story, and how has it changed by the end? How do Marcu, Baba, Giuliu and Father Barale compare as men?

What to look out for

In *The Barber of Erice*, Boast makes excellent use of sensual imagery to evoke the physicality of barbering. Giuliu and Baba's work – like Giuliu's father, before him – is artistic, but the process is also relaxing and grounding. Going to the barber is a therapeutic activity for the men of the village, both physically and emotionally. We can see this in lines such as:

"With a scalding towel straight from the warmer, Baba wiped the foam away with quick, hard strokes. Then he molded another towel over Giuliu's scalp and started rubbing with skull-thrumming vigor. Giuliu

felt every capillary opening, every follicle letting in heat and oxygen and a strange pulsing energy."

By concentrating on evoking the senses of touch, texture, smell and sensation, Boast gives the reader a sense of immediacy and connecting with the atmosphere of Erice – the sunsets, the piazza, the gritty texture of the rain – as well as the barber's shop, and the sensual and physical experience of haircuts, shaves and male grooming. This draws the reader into Erice, Giuliu's world, and his memories of his father, creating a memorable immersive reading experience.

Next steps

Read a selection of real-life accounts of people who have survived wars, displacement and other causes of immigration. Make some art inspired by those stories – respectfully, of course. Resist the urge to make refugee stories solely inspiring and ignoring the pain in people's lives. How can you present a balanced experience? What are the important realisations for someone who is lucky enough not to have experienced war, persecution and having to leave your country and family?

Alternatively, write a journal or diary as Giuliu's father. What are his hopes and dreams, for Giuliu and for the barber shop? What would he think of the immigrants in Erice? What did he love and hate about his town and the people there?

Discussion guide

Hamlet, a love story by Lucy Caldwell

Summary

Sonya has just finished a run of a Choose Your Own Adventure version of *Hamlet*, devised with her now-deceased husband, Spence. After the afterparty, she sleeps with the show's star, Callum, and, in so doing, starts to process the loss of Spence, remembering their relationship and reflecting on the play and its resonance for life, death and loss.

Questions

- What impression of New York do you get from the story? Why?
- Did the first line of the story intrigue you as a reader? Why?
- How does the afterparty scene compare to a wake?
- Spence is created for the reader entirely from Sonya's memories. What challenges exist for a writer when one of the main characters in a story is already dead?

Discussion points

In describing their "Choose Your Own Adventure" version of *Hamlet*, Sonya explains the play could be different every night. The play could "loop" multiple times over, repeating one scene, or even changing the ending.

"His farewell to Ophelia, Claudius at prayer, Poor Yorick, for instance – each can be repeated, as if each time he might finally notice an escape route that's eluded him

before... Nobody knew in advance [...] which way it was going to go... And there was a further catch – if he looped an Ophelia scene after Ophelia has died, she – I – would come back soaking wet, hair plastered down my back and gown drenched, as if I really was summoned from the dead."

Discuss how this format acts as a metaphor for memory and the experience of Sonya processing her grief. Does acting in the play that she devised with Spence allow Sonya to move through some of her feelings? Or, does it keep her trapped in her past with Spence? How does the repetitive nature of the play reflect Sonya's thought processes and the experience of grief itself? And what effect does Hamlet dying at the end of the play in their final performance have?

What to look out for

In Caldwell's story about bereavement, she chooses the Shakespearean play *Hamlet* as a framing device. *Hamlet* is a deeply dramatic and emotional play with themes of death, violence and revenge – a fitting backdrop for an event as traumatic as Spence's sudden and tragic death from a brain tumour. Yet, in Spence and Sonya's version of *Hamlet*, Hamlet and Ophelia are in love, rather than embroiled in a violent and abusive relationship as could be inferred.

Similarly, Sonya is unlike Ophelia, who dies by suicide, having been

driven mad because of the actions of the men around her. Sonya finds solace in Callum, and is rational enough to take their time together for what it is rather than trying to engage in a relationship with him before she is ready.

By referencing a deeply resonant text such as *Hamlet*, Caldwell imbues her story with a sense of doomed love, tragedy and the death of young lovers. At the same time, she places the narrative point of view with her female character, enabling "Ophelia" to have a voice and a mature, three-dimensional outlook, rather than the simplistic and two-dimensional reach of Shakespeare's original character.

Next steps

Write a review of the play, as if you were a theatre reviewer for a newspaper. Look at theatre reviews to get a sense of their style and any theatre-specific language and jargon. How long is a typical review? What kind of headline should it have? Look at what information tends to be included in a review – does it mention the actors, the venue, the length, etc? Will your review be positive or negative?

Alternatively, write an entry from Callum's diary as he reflects on his time in New York. Perhaps he is now in California, shooting his commercial. What are his thoughts and feelings about his new career, about Sonya, about the play?

Discussion guide

Pieces

by Manish Chauhan

Summary

Jamila and her husband Shah take in a refugee, Rafiq, to be their lodger. Jamila enjoys having Rafiq in the house and enjoys looking after him, especially now that her own children have grown up and moved away. Yet, when Jamila, a strict Muslim who converted to Islam to commit to Shah, finds Rafiq with a man in his bedroom, she asks him to leave. The experience makes her examine her homophobic views, and, as Rafiq moves on with his life at her sister Mary's house, Jamila finds compassion for him and makes amends for her behaviour.

Questions

- What relevance does the subplot about Jamila's mother have in the story?
- How are Jamila and Mary different?
- Do you feel sorry for Jamila? Why, or why not?
- Jamila likes Korean soap operas for their sense of justice. Does Chauhan's mention of this foreshadow what happens later between Jamila and Rafiq – and, is "justice" always kind?

Discussion points

Jamila and Rafiq bond over food when he begins living with her. Jamila shows her initial affection for Rafiq by taking his meals up to

his bedroom and making him warm milk with honey at night. They cook together, and Rafiq tells her about a meal he loved from childhood that his grandfather used to make. Later, after Rafiq has gone to live with Mary, Jamila makes the recipe he has told her about and takes it over for him.

What significance does food hold in *Pieces*? What is Manish Chauhan trying to say about food and culture, nourishment and our humanity?

What to look out for

In *Pieces*, Manish Chauhan explores the intersection of sexuality and religion – specifically, homosexuality and Islam – in Rafiq and Jamila's story. Jamila is a convert to Islam, but even though she is a "Textbook Muslim" according to her sister-in-law, she never feels entirely accepted by Shah's family or the Muslim community. Rafiq, as a gay man, is not accepted by Islamic State and by his religion in general. He finds solace and happiness in his new life in Britain, but Jamila – who was once Jane – is the one in his new life who cannot accept him.

Chauhan deftly exposes Jamila's religious intolerance and contrasts her with her non-religious sister Mary, with Shah, and even her own children, who are surprised at her lack of compassion for Rafiq. He also highlights Jamila's expectations of Rafiq as a refugee, and her disappointment when she discovers that she is not Rafiq's

sole source of refuge and comfort. In this way, Chauhan also highlights Jamila's hypocrisy and her selfish motivations in helping Rafiq in the first place.

Next steps

Write out a much-loved family recipe and distribute it to your friends. This might be on social media or in print form – you could send the recipe by post as a lovely surprise gift, or even make up a book of family recipes in collaboration with other members of the family. Include images, hints and tips, and perhaps memories of the person in the family who you got the recipe from.

Alternatively, write the story of Mani and Rafiq's romance from Mani's point of view. What does he think when he first meets Rafiq? What is he feeling when they go to buy paint together? What of their shared dinners with Mary, and his knowledge of Rafiq's past? Paint a thorough, first-person account of their relationship, deciding what Mani's voice should be like: kind, straightforward, evasive, romantic, cool, anxious? How can you create his personality on the page?

Discussion guide

Ghost Kitchen by Ross Raisin

Summary

Sean, working as a food delivery person, begins working in a food preparation kitchen. He notices that two of his colleagues, Dougie and Mehmet, are bullying one of the other workers, Ebdo. At the same time, we discover that Sean is processing a traumatic accident with his brother, Frank. When Dougie and Mehmet's bullying of Ebdo intensifies, Sean steps in.

Questions

- Why does Sean put his hand in the fryer?
- Who are the “ghosts” referenced in the story's title?
- Why do you think Ebdo doesn't respond or retaliate to Dougie and Mehmet's bullying?
- How do you think Sean feel about Frank?

Discussion points

In *Ghost Kitchen*, Ross Raisin depicts the relentless isolation of Sean's app-driven delivery job, where he can go for days without having a meaningful interaction with another human. Most of his interactions are mediated through technology: his work comes through the app and he dials up his voicemail to listen to his mother's voice rather than speak to her directly. He is alienated and dehumanised, living alone in his bedsit – perhaps choosing

to be that way because of what happened with Frank.

Yet, when Sean encounters Ebdo, it's the first time in a long time that he relates to another human being. Discuss Sean and Ebdo's relationship. How does Ebdo's situation compare to Sean's, and why do you think Sean develops compassion for him? Does the event with the fryer represent some kind of turning point for Sean, and why? What is Ross Raisin telling the reader about both characters by showing how they react to Dougie and Mehmet? What do Sean and Ebdo symbolise for each other?

What to look out for

Ross Raisin presents readers with a bleak and inhuman urban environment for Sean, the protagonist in *Ghost Kitchen*.

“But there was nobody about, the air dead except for the muted rumble of traffic girdling the city and the occasional noise of a train distantly behind him.”

Indeed, even when nature is mentioned, it's with a sense of grief and loss: *“sunlit clearings of abandoned ground had filled with long grasses, burrows, solitary poppies.”*

The environment of the story reflects Sean's state of mind: abandoned, solitary, alienated, lonely and unwelcoming. By constructing a dominant impression of the environment in this way,

Raisin sets the tone for Sean's emotions and inner life by reflecting it with the setting, using the technique of pathetic fallacy with great effect.

Next steps

Write a short memoir about a job you've had, or one you have. How did you feel, doing it? What were the people you worked with like? What were your responsibilities? Is it a funny story, a sad one, poignant in some way? Did this job teach you something important about life?

Alternatively, write a fictional short story set in a workplace in the future. Has all work become automated? What is the role of AI? Or has technology as we know it been superseded by something else?

Discussion guide

Nice Dog by Vee Walker

Summary

Dubi the chihuahua lives in Nice with his owner, Papa Rémy. Life is good until disturbances in the town start to threaten Dubi and Rémy's peace.

When their friend Toile is shot, they discover that Toile has been dealing drugs, and there is a bigger drug problem in the town than they realised. With the help of the other dogs in Nice, Dubi hatches a plan to catch Toile's would-be assassin, and, in so doing, prompts a great surprise for Papa Rémy too.

Questions

- Was Papa Rémy an interesting character?
- Were you invested in the Dubi's crime-fighting plans? Did you find the story kept you wanting to know what happened next?
- Did you predict the twist at the end of the story?
- Who was your favourite dog character? Why?

Discussion points

Though *Nice Dog* has a charming and light-hearted feel, it does nonetheless deal with the serious theme of drug dealing and its effect on a local community.

How does Walker represent cannabis use, growing and dealing in *Nice Dog*? How are the complexities of the issue dealt

with – Toile mentions the use of cannabis in treating joint pain in many of his clients, for instance, yet his dealing of other drugs has led to vandalism and violence. How does drug dealing affect Nice – its young and old, its environment and its people?

What to look out for

It is unusual to read a short story with the narrative voice of a dog. As the point of view character, Dubi presents the reader with a chihuahua-sized perspective of the world, frequently mystified by the odd behaviours of humans, and obsessed with the smells of Nice – both the doggy *messages-pisse* but also the general sensual detail of the city:

"After the cleansing deluge, the palms release a sizzling blast of petrichor as they soak up the water while the starlings strut and shriek and preen among the steaming fronds above. When the sun returns, the heady accumulation of fresh canine messages-pisse begins all over again. I trot joyfully from tree to bench to lamp post as slowly as Papa Rémy will permit, snuffing and whiffing and catching up on how my friends are doing."

Using a dog to tell this story means that Dubi's narrative voice is naïve and might possibly fall under the criteria of being an "unreliable" narrator, but his character is appealing, loyal and clever. Even though Dubi is a dog, Walker makes

us identify with him: we have sympathy with Dubi and understand his idiosyncratic way of seeing the world.

Next steps

Think of some other stories – film, TV or novels/short stories – that are narrated by or feature animals in the starring role. A crime fighting theme with a dog main character isn't too unusual within the genre, either: Think *Turner & Hooch* with Tom Hanks, *Paw Patrol*, the children's TV series, *Beethoven the St Bernard* in the movie of the same name, or *Scooby Doo*. Write the summary of your own story featuring a dog that fights crime. Is it serious or funny? Can the dog communicate with humans, or do they interact more realistically? Do they have special powers, or is it just their doggy qualities that win the day?

Alternatively, write a poem about a town, village or city you know, focusing on its smells. Smell is such an evocative sense and Vee Walker uses it to great effect in *Nice Dog*. How can you evoke a sense of place with your descriptive writing?

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.

Find out how to enter plus creative writing resources for students and teachers at bbc.co.uk/ywa

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