

Jon Paul Roberts wins inaugural Spread the Word Life Writing Prize for his essay '1955 – 2012'

Judges Blake Morrison, Dr Katy Massey and Margaret Stead praise life writing essay of “elegance, restraint and honesty” that tells the story of the author’s relationship with, and the death of, his father.

From 700 entries entered for Spread the Word’s inaugural Life Writing Prize, ‘1955 – 2012’ by Jon Paul Roberts has been chosen as the winner, winning him £1,500, an Arvon course, membership to the Royal Society of Literature and a meeting with an agent. Judges Blake Morrison, Dr Katy Massey and Margaret Stead selected the winner from an astounding field of entries from across the UK and announced the winner at a special event at Goldsmiths in London.

Blake Morrison commented: “What looks initially as if it will be a coming out story becomes something else, a son’s account of his relationship with his father - whose illness and death, and their impact, are tenderly evoked. There’s humour too, to balance the sense of sadness and loss.”

Katy Massey added: “The winning story demonstrated a great deal of sophistication in the clever way the author gradually revealed the focus of his story. The relationship with the father was very touching – I became moist-eyed reading it. And he achieved all this with elegance, restraint and honesty. It is a very worthy winner.”

Jon Paul Roberts is an essayist, journalist, and screenwriter from Chester. In his essays he hopes to find the line between his experiences and the forces that influenced him, whether that be film, television, family, or friends. Jon Paul is currently working on a ‘memoir-in-essays’, tentatively called *Blue Roses*, after *The Glass Menagerie*, about who and what made him, including his parents, Grandma (who is the strongest woman he knows), the men he’s fallen for, the places he’s travelled to, and the various anxieties he has.

He described the feeling of having won:

“I don’t think it’ll settle in for some time still. At risk of outing myself as some oddball dream believer, I had two dreams the week I was expecting to hear back. In the first, I got an email that said I was on the longlist and in the second I got an email about being on the shortlist, so as corny as it sounds I didn’t even dream I’d win. As it happens, I spend a lot of my time watching Oscar acceptance speeches on YouTube when I’m trying to avoid writing, so I know it can be quite annoying when someone keeps saying they truly didn’t expect it, but I actually didn’t. It’s so thrilling and such an honour to have won. I really am over the moon.”

Eleven other writers are also celebrated, including two highly commended writers: Claire Lynch for ‘The Year Dot’ and Kerri ni Dochitargh for ‘Mudlarking’ who both receive £500 and mentoring from Amy Liptrot and Hannah Lowe. The three shortlisted pieces are: Cathy Galvin for ‘The Missing Sixth’, Kathy Hoyle for ‘Scab’ and Gill Haigh for ‘Singing to Seals’.

Six longlisted pieces are: Topher Campbell for ‘BATTYMAN: Growing Up Black and Gay in the UK’, Sara Jafari for ‘The Knob Head Question’, Kashmir Tutt for ‘Thin Lizzy’, Lizanne Davis for ‘Attack of the White Van Woman’, Deirdre Shanahan for ‘9 Days – Modes of Distraction’ and Kaveri Woodward for ‘Nomad’.

Blake Morrison says: “The sheer volume of entries for a Prize that’s in its inaugural year shows how popular a genre life writing has become. For writers who want to tell their own stories, or the stories of people close or important to them for some reason, fiction can seem a copout - what’s needed is the charge of authenticity, the scars and bruising of the real. The twelve pieces on the longlist are wide-ranging, evoking experiences that are diverse in terms of age, gender, nationality and ethnicity, as well as varying widely in style, structure and content. Some are funny, some sad, some traumatic, and all have much to commend them.”

Established by Spread the Word in 2016 thanks to a [philanthropic donation](#), the Life Writing Prize is open to emerging life writers based in the UK for previously unpublished complete or beginning extracts of life writing of up to 5000 words. Judged anonymously, the Prize was free to enter in its inaugural year and offers a total of £2,500 in prize money and an array of writing/ publishing support. The Life Writing Prize will showcase work by the talented writers celebrated by the Prize at: www.spreadtheword.org.uk/projects/life-writing-prize/ from 19 May. The Prize receives partnership support from

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Goldsmiths Writer's Centre, Arvon and the Royal Society of Literature.

The next Life Writing Prize will open for entries in Autumn 2017 at: www.spreadtheword.org.uk/projects/life-writing-prize/ where you can also sign up to the mailing list to be kept informed.

- ENDS -

For further information or to arrange interviews, please contact
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NOTES TO EDITORS

About the Life Writing Prize 2017 winning writers:

Winner:



Jon Paul Roberts is an essayist, journalist, and screenwriter from Chester. He worked as an editor for a Liverpool literary magazine *In The Red*, as well as contributing to various sites and local publications within Liverpool. He has run events including launch parties, open mic nights for writers, and other readings. In his essays he hopes to find the line between his experiences and the forces that influenced him, whether that be film, television, family, or friends. He aims to find silver linings in darker moments by writing about them because, as his hero, Nora Ephron, said, *everything is copy*.

Highly commended writers:

Claire Lynch is a lecturer in English at Brunel University London. Claire lives near Windsor with her wife Bethan and their twin daughters. She enjoys running, which is lucky, as life with two toddlers provides plenty of practice.

Kerri ní Dochartaigh is a writer living in a very north-westerly part of Ireland, where the sky is grey and unbearably beautiful; where the land is folkloric and full of swansong. She read English Literature and Classics at Trinity College, Dublin. Her work has been published in some blogs and journals and she is currently shortlisted for the National Memory Day Poetry Prize. Her favourite bird is the curlew, her favourite Undertones' song is 'Get over you' and her favourite cup is mint green with a pale blue handle.

Three writers were shortlisted for this year's Prize. They were:

Cathy Galvin for 'The Missing Sixth'. Cathy Galvin has roots in Connemara and England. A journalist, she has worked on staff for *Newsweek* and the *Sunday Times*, where she founded the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award. She is founder and director of the UK's leading promoter of short fiction, the Word Factory. Her poetry has appeared in journals and anthologies. 'The Missing Sixth' is part of a larger work set in England and Ireland, exploring her mother's short life.

Kathy Hoyle for 'Scab'. Kathy Hoyle is a mature student at the Open University, currently studying for a degree in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared on the Birmingham radio 'Tall Tales' programme and in the Firefly literary magazine.

Gill Haigh for 'Singing to Seals'. Gill Haigh is based in Hackney, London. In 2013 she won the Commonword Prize for Diversity in Children's Literature for her YA novel, *Out of Water*. Gill retired from wage-slavery and these days she enjoys reading, writing and sleeping.

Six writers were longlisted for this year's Prize. They were:

Topher Campbell for 'BATTYMAN: Growing Up Black and Gay in the UK'. Topher Campbell is a filmmaker, theatremaker, writer and actor. He has directed plays at numerous theatres across the UK. For BBC Radio Drama he established the Norman Beaton Fellowship. In 2000 alongside artist-photographer Ajamu he established [rukus! Federation](http://rukus!Federation) creating the UK's first and only BLGBT Archive. Topher has written articles for outlets including Sable, Gay Times, Attitude Magazine and The Guardian and he is currently a Patron of Switchboard.

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Sara Jafari for 'The Knob Head Question'. Sara Jafari has been published in Syrup Magazine, Tales Magazine, Flight Journal, and in gal-dem magazine. She also works as an Editorial Assistant at HarperCollins, and runs literary/ arts magazine TOKEN Magazine.

Lizanne Davis for 'Attack of the White Van Woman'. Lizanne Davis has lived in the East End of London for most of her life. She has been writing for 17 years, about the same length of time she has been a professional driver.

Kashmir Tutt for 'Thin Lizzy'. Kashmir Tutt arrived in Birmingham, England aged 2. She recently gave up a twenty-five year career in the commercial sector to take up life. Kashmir is currently writing a humorous memoir set in the 1960's and '70's (when the greatest music was produced), featuring a bilingual brummy upbringing, and a passion for the rock band *Thin Lizzy*.

Deirdre Shanahan for '9 Days – Modes of Distraction'. Deirdre Shanahan has won the Lightship publishing Novel Award and has been shortlisted for awards including the Willesden Herald Competition and Elle Magazine.

Kaveri Woodward for 'Nomad'. Kaveri Woodward has had a life long love of words. She has read her work to audiences at the Barbican & Tate Britain and her poetry and short fiction have been published in anthologies and magazines.

Life Writing Prize judges 2017

Blake Morrison was born in Skipton, Yorkshire, and educated at Nottingham University, McMaster University and University College, London. After working for the Times Literary Supplement, he went on to become literary editor of both The Observer and the Independent on Sunday before becoming a full-time writer in 1995. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and former Chair of the Poetry Book Society and Vice-Chair of PEN, Blake has written fiction, poetry, journalism, literary criticism and libretti, as well as adapting plays for the stage. His best-known works are probably his two memoirs, 'And When Did You Last See Your Father?' and 'Things My Mother Never Told Me'. Since 2003, Blake has been Professor of Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths College. He lives in south London.

Dr Katy Massey is a writer and researcher specialising in life-writing and non-fiction. She regularly works for festivals and arts organisations, leading workshops and organising arts activities. She also founded and runs Tangled Roots, an Arts Council England-funded project founded in 2013 about the past and present and future of racial mixing in the UK. Tangled Roots' photography exhibition, two print anthologies and live literature show have been very well-received, both in the UK and the US. She previously worked as a freelance journalist, writing about banking and finance for national newspapers and magazines, before gaining a PhD in Creative Writing from Newcastle University in 2010 which focussed on biography and memoir. She is currently working on 'Who Are We Now?' an examination of post-Brexit Britain from the perspective of its non-white, non-indigenous residents.

Margaret Stead was publishing director of Atlantic Books from 2010 – 2016, where she commissioned literary fiction and non-fiction, and was responsible for the acquisitions strategy for Atlantic Books and its commercial imprint, Corvus. Books she published at Atlantic include: The Iceberg by Marion Coutts, shortlisted for the 2014 Samuel Johnson Prize and winner of the 2015 Wellcome Prize, The Unravelling by Emma Sky, shortlisted for the 2015 Samuel Johnson Prize and Orwell Prize, The Lightless Sky by Afghan refugee Gulwali Passarlay, who made the journey alone to Britain aged 12, and Lu Spinney's heartbreaking, powerful memoir Beyond the High Blue Air. Other authors include the brilliant Patrick Flanery, whose third novel I Am No One Atlantic published in February 2016, AN Wilson, whose biography of Queen Victoria was the source material for the recent ITV dramatisation of the young Queen's life, Irish novelist Ruth Gilligan, Vince Cable, Christopher Hitchens, Christos Tsoalkias and Damon Galgut. A New Zealander by birth, she is the daughter of poet and novelist CK Stead and sister of novelist and journalist Charlotte Grimshaw.

Spread the Word

Spread the Word is London's writer development agency, helping London's writers make their mark on the page, the screen and in the world. They kick start the careers of London's best new writers, and energetically campaign to ensure mainstream publishing truly reflects the diversity of the city. They do this by supporting the creative and professional development of talent, by engaging those already interested in literature and those who will be, and by advocating on behalf of both. It runs the Young People's Laureate for London programme, the London Short Story Prize, Flight 1000 development for emerging writer/ publishers from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in publishing, published fiction publishing research Writing the Future and runs a raft of craft and career development opportunities for writers.

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