**Canterbury Festival 2023**  **Fiction Prize** **Truda Borthwick-Stevens V5**

The theme of this year’s competition - All in the Mind – paid tribute to the 100th anniversary of the publication of Freud’s seminal work ‘the Ego and the Id’. Writers were asked to consider how the unconscious might affect daily experience.

It was not an easy task. However, I was really impressed by the variety of themes and approaches to this subject. It was an inspiring demonstration of imagination and creativity. The standard was very high and, out of all 85 entries, there was not a single bad one. Having judged these competitions before, that was a first for me. Well done all of you. You should be proud of yourselves. You all deserve the title of writer.

However, there are a few common failings that all writers need to address. So, I’m going to start with a few general points.

Punctuation, grammar and spelling are the essential tools of a writer’s trade. They oil the wheels of a story and help it to run smoothly so that the reader can follow it without distraction. They add to the impact and sense of your writing. They do not detract from it. Without these elements, promising stories will not achieve their full potential.

First sentences and introductory paragraphs are also crucial to the impact and success of your story. Not to polish them until they shine is like someone going to a job interview in a smart suit and dirty shoes. Initial impressions are critical to success.

Every story, however brilliant as a concept, will always be improved by editing. I would go so far as to say that editing is 50% of being a good writer.

Edit your story several times and, most importantly, read it aloud to yourself. This will help with rhythm and pace and often highlight mistakes that would otherwise be missed.

In fact, editing is so important that I am considering giving a workshop on it next year.

Now, to the stories themselves.

The inner workings of the mind were explored with a wide range of emotional responses. Some stories were clearly based on personal experience which lent them additional depth and impact. However, stories are primarily works of the imagination. They have to combine creativity, insight and good writing. Above all, they have to engage the reader.

I am now going to read the shortlist in alphabetical order with a brief comment on each story.

1. The Cigarette by Tabitha Bast

Written from the perspective of two characters, Mae and Daf, this intimate portrait captures the fragility of a relationship and the trust on which it is founded. It describes how an action, as seemingly insignificant as smoking a cigarette, can fracture a relationship.

1. The Great Escape by Helen Chambers

Set in an old people’s home, this story conveys the sense of anger that many people feel at the indignity of growing old. It describes how two residents attempt to regain their independence with results that are both sad and comic.

1. The Lido by Donna Ferguson

This is an intimate description of grief. The protagonist, a keen swimmer, is trying to come to terms with the loss of her mother. The familiarity of the setting - a swimming baths - adds to the intensity of the story with its portrayal of loss and longing.

1. Scissor Happy by Frances Knight

It’s difficult to find humour in a mental breakdown. However, comedy can still be found in a situation. And that’s what this author has achieved. It is a warning to anyone travelling by plane not to let their seat down too far.

1. The Ministry of Amnesia by Eugene O’Toole

Unexpected revelations sometimes follow a death. In this story, the main protagonist discovers a clue to his mother’s character which finally offers an escape from the bleakness of past experience.

1. Whalebone Collars by Geralyn Pinto

In this interesting story, clothes provide the outward expression of inner feeling. A journey to personal emancipation is tracked through gradual changes in dress which express emotion and belief, repression and liberation.

1. Alison in Wonderland by Sam Szanto

This is an insight into the life of a young girl diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy. It describes the problems she has with her peers at school and how she becomes isolated and mistrustful. It is very enlightening and I’d like to see it reach a wider audience, possibly as a play.

1. My Brother, He’s Family by Matthew Thomas

This is a brave attempt at a very difficult, almost taboo, subject. It deals with the effect of mental disability on other family members, particularly a young sibling. Initially describing anger and resentment, this story follows a route to loyalty and acceptance.