It was a huge pleasure to judge this year’s SaveAs fiction prize, sponsored this year by the University of Kent.

The University of Kent offers well-established and popular programmes in Creative Writing at all levels, from UG, to our MA programmes in Canterbury and Paris, to Practice Research PhDs in Poetry, the Novel, and Narrative Non-Fiction.

Across all of our programmes, at all levels, we value ambition, experiment, and bold, original writing, and we share with the School of English as a whole a deep sense of commitment to the difference that stories can make in the world – how important, indeed, literature is in a failing world, as Gary said! The School’s involvement with initiatives such as Refugee Tales, which shares the tales of those held in immigration detention, and the recent award of a Nobel Prize to our Emeritus Professor Abdulrazak Gurnah, are testament to that commitment.

Our teaching staff are all established, practising writers working across a range of forms, including poetry, novels, creative non-fiction, TV drama, journalism and criticism; our students have gone on to publish acclaimed novels and poetry collections. We are a diverse, active, collegial and supportive community of researchers, practitioners and students.

Staff and students are involved in Canterbury’s lively literary scene, hosting a variety of regular events and working with writing groups, including a long-standing connection with SaveAs, as Luigi mentioned.

I’m delighted to represent the University and the School of English in supporting this competition, which does so much to put Canterbury and Kent on the literary map while attracting such an impressive range of submissions from all over the world.

We received over 100 entries for the Fiction competition, and the standard was bewilderingly high. The prompt, ‘Horizons’, generated responses of all kinds, thinking about boundaries, borders, stillness and movement, aspiration, loss, and distance, the sensation of looking out across space or time; this seems to me a very apposite and indeed pressing theme for today. There was a tremendous range of stylistic approaches on display and it was a genuine pleasure to read through this rich and various selection of stories – and agonising to choose between them!

In the end, in making my choices, I looked for a strong, original, distinctive voice, and writing which surprised me at both the narrative and the sentence level. I was looking for a story that I hadn’t read before; and, which is a particular interest of my own as a writer, a strong sense of place, which registered either explicitly or more suggestively or figuratively the idea of a ‘horizon’.

The shortlist, in alphabetical order of surname:

Monica Corish - Acacia Horizon (Ireland)

This beautiful, nuanced, delicately observed meditation on the nature of hospitality and custom offers a rarely seen perspective on migrant experience and what it means; the horizons in this story, both internal and external, near and far, are devastating.

Frances Gapper – Lawn

I loved the fabular weirdness of this, the queer erotics of it, the strange and familiar world of it, and the unexpected turns that it took; and most particularly, the distinctive and peculiar narrative voice.

Felicia Henderson - Head in the Clouds (Australia)

A beautifully constructed story, which evocatively conjures a sense of place, and which manages to ask rich and complex questions about family and value, in a way that feels deft and lightly worn.

Anthony Levings - The Noises Inside of Us

This took some unexpected turns that made for a very satisfying read; I particularly enjoyed the dark atmosphere and acerbic adolescent voice. I was put in mind of Shirley Jackson, which is never a bad thing.

Tadhg McCullough – Tidal

A very moving, meditative piece, concerned with love, memory and time, and displaying an impressive command of narrative structure, so that a whole life together is contained in the moment of looking out at the horizon.

Nina Milton - Clean Round the Bend (Wales)

This portrait of a mind unravelling immediately grabbed me, with its worryingly measured first person voice and striking imagery. It’s deeply unsettling but ultimately, deeply sympathetic.

Geralyn Pinto - This Telephone Number Does Not Exist (India)

A story about lives that are often overlooked, which evokes the material conditions of those lives in wonderfully vivid and visceral detail. I loved the physicality of the language, here, the rich complexity of the narrative, and the sense of injustice that drives it.

Diana Powell - His Horizons Became My Horizons

This was a gorgeous, lyrical homage to Derek Jarman and his garden on the Kent coast at Dungeness. The spareness and economy of the structure evokes wonderfully the landscape, the beauty of Jarman’s work, and the painful retreat from life that it depicts.

Catriona Shine – Christening (Norway)

A very striking opening; I am interested in memory and its relation to narrative, and this was a fascinating exploration of that subject, and of sibling and familial relationships.

Gordon Simms - The Track to Maputo (France)

This was a compelling and well-observed story that builds to a powerful conclusion. It is sparely told, and its arresting, measured voice makes it all the more deeply felt.

It really was an almost impossible task to rank these, and I want to reiterate my huge admiration for all of the shortlisted authors.

The winners:

1st Monica Corish: Acacia Horizon

2nd Frances Gapper: Lawn

3rd Geralyn Pinto: This Telephone Number Does Not Exist