

Case Study: The Short Story Competition

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Introduction

The challenge for many amateur writers is far more difficult than simply producing quality writing; it is a matter of penetrating a saturated publishing industry and, in many regions of the Commonwealth, an underdeveloped one. It therefore is important to have alternative ways of acknowledging writers and exposing the talent pool of Commonwealth writers to a wider audience. The Short Story competition, administered by the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association with funding from the Commonwealth Foundation, aims to increase people's appreciation of other cultures and to give writers' greater recognition for their work.

Background

Each year, out of approximately 3000 entries, 26 stories are chosen to be performed and recorded on CD for radio broadcast across the Commonwealth. The short listed entries are judged by a three member panel of judges all from diverse literary backgrounds. One overall winner is chosen, five regional winners, and twenty highly commended stories. Whilst there is no restriction on theme the author must live in the Commonwealth and the story must be no longer than six hundred words. Authors can be of any age and entries can be from either amateurs or professionals. Winners of the competition receive a sum of £2000, regional winners £500, and each highly commended author receives £100.

Impact

The following is based on a questionnaire sent out to past Short Story winners in 2006. Beyond the benefits of a monetary prize, winners have reported a number of different advantages to winning the short story award:

- Exposure in overseas markets
- Media attention
- Recognition amongst their literary peers
- Increased confidence in writing abilities
- Better sense of validation as a writer

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There was also a general consensus among respondents that continuous rejection from publishers is one of the biggest challenges of being a writer. It was felt that having literary awards such as this one are important as it brings attention to new work and gives writers a feeling of validation.

In many areas of the Commonwealth, it is difficult for emerging writers to break into the literary market where there is a limited literary tradition. In some cases, winning the short story competition has been a stepping stone in launching the career of several writers.

- Anietie Isong, a Nigerian writer got a job with Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria on the basis of winning a prize in the competition. Since then he has also been a winner in the Olaudah Equiano prize for fiction. Anietie is now doing further studies in the UK. Other winners have gone on to enter other writing contests, write first novels, get jobs at newspapers, get published in magazines and even write screenplays.
- Usha Rajagopalan, after winning the competition has since published an acclaimed first novel 'Amrita' and is now writing her second novel.
- Chimamanda Adichie, a Nigerian writer, after winning the short story competition for 'Half of a Yellow Sun', was shortlisted for the Orange Prize and winner of First Book Award for the Commonwealth Writers Prize for her novel 'Purple Hibiscus'.
- Laurie Kubuitsile, a Botswana writer, who received a Highly Commended award in 2004 for her short story, 'A Pot full of Tears' has since reached international markets, winning a prize in the John Reid/Tom Howard contest (USA) and getting published in the UK magazine, Mslexia.

While some writers strive to win to get their foot in the door, for others, the importance of the competition has been to test their potential and open up a creative outlet. Ed Brown, a Canadian winner points out that 'Without that favorable judgment on my small story I doubt if I would have continued to write at all and so would have missed what has become a worthwhile and enjoyable part of my life.'

Lessons

- Literary awards are an effective incentive for first time writers by awarding them with recognition for their creative writing
- For many amateur writers, getting their work recognized is a primary measure of their artistic worth and helps to affirm their status as an author
- Winning literary awards can help writers launch a promising career.

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- In areas of the Commonwealth where there is an undeveloped publishing industry, writers need alternative methods to getting their writing shared globally.