

Final Chapters winners announced

First ever public writing competition to take death as its subject provokes mass response

The winners of the first ever public writing competition to take death as its subject have been announced, after a massive response of almost 1,400 entries.

The Final Chapters Competition was launched in January 2012 by the Dying Matters Coalition, to encourage writing around the experience of dying and bereavement and, in doing so, to take a collective step towards breaking the final taboo. The winners were announced at an awards ceremony hosted and supported by BT and chaired by Carmen Callil as part of Dying Matters Awareness Week 14-20 May 2012.

London based writer Christopher Owen won first prize for his short story 'An Honourable Life'. The 1,400 word story painfully evokes the final days of an elderly married couple, who struggle and fail to maintain the dignity of a loving relationship as dementia and death strip away the existence of a man who, for decades, so carefully nurtured the ethics and principles of living 'An Honourable Life'.

Second prize was awarded to Rebecca Goss for her profoundly moving poem 'Ward at Night' about the death of her daughter Ella, aged 16 months, whilst third prize went to Alison Wassell for her wry and emotionally stinging short story 'The Mother Thief'. A number of entries were also recognised as being highly commended.

Roger Kirkpatrick, chair of the judging panel and whose idea the competition was, said:

"This was the first time that people had been given the opportunity to write about dying and death in a public creative writing competition. The flood of entries has shown the hunger that the general public has to articulate emotions associated with dying, death and bereavement. Contributors were frequently prompted by raw and painful experiences. Many entries were strikingly original and some - not being professionally polished for effect - were particularly affecting. Several contributors remarked on the comfort of writing. As Chair of the Judges I have been very impressed by the high quality of entries."

The other judges were playwright Nell Dunn FRSL, poet and academic Yasmin Gunaratnam, and author Diana Melly, widow of the legendary Jazz Musician George Melly.

The prize-winning and highly commended entries have been published in a Final Chapters Booklet, available from Dying Matters, priced £7 including postage.

First Prize: Christopher Owen for his short story 'An Honourable Life'.

Christopher has been an actor and writer for over fifty years. He trained at RADA in the late 1950s and subsequently worked extensively in theatre and later in television and films. Christopher has

written a number of stage plays, some of which have been produced and toured on the London Fringe.

Second Prize: Rebecca Goss for her poem 'Ward at Night'.

Rebecca is a poet based in Liverpool. Her first full length collection *The Anatomy of Structures*, was published by Flambard Press in 2010. Her poems have appeared in many magazines and anthologies and broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Rebecca was awarded an Authors' Foundation Grant from The Society of Authors in 2011 to aid with the completion of her next collection, about the death of her daughter Ella, aged sixteen months, in 2008.

Third Prize: Alison Wassell for her short story The Mother Thief

Alison, a former primary school teacher, is now an aspiring writer and voluntary charity shop worker. Her competition entry is a heavily fictionalised piece inspired by events surrounding her mother's death six years ago.

Eve Richardson, Chief Executive of the National Council for Palliative Care and the Dying Matters Coalition said:

"End of life care is one of the biggest issues that each and every one of us will face. By talking about the type of care we might want and where we would want it, we can individually and as a society move a step nearer to living and dying well. The Final Chapters writing competition is one way of lifting the final taboo around death and giving a voice to ordinary people to articulate their most profound thoughts, feelings and experiences."

Caroline Waters, Director of People and Policy for the BT Group who supported the awards ceremony said

"At BT we're absolutely delighted to be supporting the first ever Dying Matters creative writing competition and to have hosted the awards ceremony during Dying Matters Awareness Week 2012. All of us can benefit by communicating more openly about dying, death and bereavement, which is why the Final Chapters writing competition is such a great idea and why BT became a member of the Dying Matters Coalition last year. There are few certainties in life but dying is one of them, and unless we are more open about end of life issues we will never be able to provide the support needed to those who are ill, to their carers and family members and to those who have been bereaved."

Judges' biographies

Nell Dunn's plays include *Home Death*, *Cancer Tales*, *Sisters*, *The Little Heroine*, *Steaming* and *I Want*. Television includes *Every Breath You Take* (1985) and *Up the Junction* (1963), directed by Ken Loach. Film includes *Poor Cow* (1966), directed by Ken Loach; and *Steaming* (1985), directed by Joseph Losey, with Vanessa Redgrave, Sarah Miles and Diana Dors. Books include *My Silver Shoes*, *Grandmothers Talking to Nell Dunn*, *I Want* (with Adrian Henri), *Poor Cow* and *Up the Junction* (winner of the 1964 John Llewellyn Rhys Prize).

Yasmin Gunaratnam, a senior lecturer in the Sociology Department at Goldsmiths College (University of London), has been doing research on palliative and end-of-life care for over 15 years. The research grew out of her experiences as a carer for her mother and father. Yasmin has a particular interest in qualitative research methods and is author of 'Researching 'race' and ethnicity: methods, knowledge

and power' (2003) and has jointly edited a book with David Oliviere on 'Narrative and stories: in health care illness, dying and bereavement' (2009). Yasmin is currently working on a book based upon her research on transnational dying (to be published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2013). She is a published poet.

Roger Kirkpatrick is a social campaigner with a distinguished publishing career. He has been enterprise manager at Shaw Trust, the largest national charity helping disadvantaged people into employment; managing director of Berlitz Publishing; marketing director of the Random House group and a member of England's Library & Information Services Council. Before publishing he held a fellowship at Stanford.

Diana Melly has written two novels, some short stories and a most recently a memoir. She is a patron of Dementia UK and Dignity in Dying, and has written extensively on dementia and end of life care. She cared for her late husband, jazz musician George Melly, who had dementia and lung cancer. Diana and George talked about and planned his wishes and as a result he had a peaceful pain free death at home.

Notes to editors

1. The Dying Matters Coalition (www.dyingmatters.org), led by the National Council for Palliative Care, has over 16,000 members across England and carries out a wide range of work to raise awareness of the importance of talking about end of life and letting others know your wishes.
2. Winning and highly commended entries have been published in a booklet from the Dying Matters Coalition, available for £7 including postage from Dying Matters.
3. For all media enquiries please Joe Levenson, email: j.levenson@ncpc.org.uk at the Dying Matters Coalition and the National Council for Palliative Care on 020 7697 1520 or 07795 158003
4. Follow DyingMatters on Twitter and tweet using #DyingMatters
5. To donate, please visit www.dyingmatters.org