

How to win short story competitions



Dave Haslett and Geoff Nelder

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by

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ideas4writers

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About the authors

Dave Haslett [D] is a former IT Project Developer who wrote his first book at the age of 13. He founded ideas4writers in 2002 as an outlet for the thousands of story and article ideas that were filling his brain but which he would never have the time to use. He is the author of *The Fastest Way to Write Your Book*, and occasionally edits, proofs and publishes books for ideas4writers members – most of those books have won awards. He has organised and judged two ideas4writers short story competitions, each of which attracted hundreds of entries.

Geoff Nelder [G] is a former teacher who is now the British editor for Adventure Books of Seattle, the publisher of novels and anthologies with a science fiction or adventure theme. He has read thousands of short story submissions for the science fiction anthologies at Adventure Books of Seattle, and wrote a critique for each one. He has entered many short story and novel competitions and has won or been highly placed in several. He is the short fiction judge for the Helen Whittaker Prize (2009 and 2012), and has written many non-fiction publications, mainly on climate and cycling. He has a science fiction trilogy being published in 2012.

Introduction (by Dave)

I've known Geoff for many years – he's a very good writer and joined ideas4writers within the first few weeks of its opening. He has been an active member ever since, always taking part in forum discussions, critiquing members' work, and passing on excellent advice. We've met a few times too, at various writing conferences – usually in the bar, of course.

Having judged two ideas4writers short story competitions myself, I had a pretty good idea of the most common mistakes people make – I even wrote a couple of articles about it at the time. So when Geoff said he was going to be the judge for the 2012 Whittaker Prize and had also judged the 2009 competition, I leapt at the chance of picking his brain and turning my earlier articles into something more substantial. Happily, Geoff relished the chance to pass on his knowledge too. I knew he would!

So Geoff caught a train down to Devon and we went to the seaside. It was raining. So we installed ourselves in the hotel's dining room and chatted away for a few hours about short story competitions – pretty much everything we know about entering, judging and winning them. This book is the result of that conversation: basically the transcript, but with a bit of editing. We hope you find it useful.

[D] So, Geoff, let's start by talking about why magazines, websites and other organisations run writing competitions.

[G] In particular I can talk about the Whittaker Prize, which is a fairly new competition – it's been running for about five years.

Many interest group forums on the internet go through a life-cycle. And by the third or fourth year much of the interest has flagged. Even if it was meant to be a critique forum, you often find that the reading and analysis diminishes. One way to liven all that up is to hold a competition. And in this case the members of The Write Idea forum suggested to the new owners that they could have a competition. But it had to be quite a strict competition where there was a fee to enter, and with a cash prize at the end of it. Because it was a critique forum, they wanted feedback on their stories, and to have it scored. This is because one of the annoying things about some competitions is that you can enter and never get useful feedback. For The Write Idea forum members the feedback was more important than winning. So The Write Idea organised the Whittaker competition and named it after Helen Whittaker, who founded the forum – and she's a good writer herself.

For some other companies and magazines it also raises their profile and makes people more aware of them.

[D] It gives the press and media a newsworthy reason to mention them that they might not otherwise have. That's why we ran writing competitions ourselves at ideas4writers – to get that press attention, and more specifically to get the ideas4writers website mentioned in the writing magazines.

[G] That's right, and I remember John Ravenscroft won one of your competitions. He's a well-known short fiction writer, and it was good to see him at ideas4writers.

Competitions also stimulates writing and creativity amongst the members of that organisation, and it raises funds.

[D] Ours didn't actually – that was never the intention. We deliberately made them free to enter. But on the other hand we didn't give feedback or critiques. If we were to run another one, we would definitely offer feedback because we now realise how important it is. But there would obviously need to be an entry fee to cover the cost of doing that. In our case we wouldn't be aiming to profit from it, only to cover our costs, so it wouldn't be a fund-raising exercise. I know it can be that for other groups. But what's more important to us is the publicity we get from running it, because that attracts new members and increases sales of our products.

[G] The Write Idea needed to raise funds because the whole thing is voluntary. Funds were needed to pay for the competition prizes, the judges, and to raise enough to pay the internet fees and so on to run the forum – and it does. It's a relatively low-cost entry fee – £10 or £15 to enter both the poetry section *and* the fiction section. When you consider

that each competitor can submit up to nine stories for that amount of money, that puts it at less than £2 an entry.

[D] That's very good value – and even more so since they get feedback as well.

[G] Yes. So that's the main reason why people run writing contests. They have to be masochistic to do it though, because it's a lot of hard work.

[D] Yes, it is. I found that myself. It's a huge amount of work, and very time consuming. And that was without giving any feedback.

[G] Giving feedback *is* time-consuming, but I found it okay. The stories are 2,500 words or less, and it would take me about 15-20 minutes to read them, and then it would take me another 15 minutes to write the feedback. I'm used to writing feedback – I was a teacher for 30 years. In fact for many years I was the only teacher of Information Technology (IT), which meant I had two projects from each of 200 pupils to grade every year, as well as many geography projects. They weren't supposed to be, but many of them were fiction! And of course I had to write teacher's reports – most of which were fiction too!

Besides that I used to be an editor on the BeWrite community forum. The forum doesn't exist any more, but BeWrite Books is a fine literary small press publisher. I read and critiqued thousands of short stories on that, so I was used to critiquing.

I also do a lot of my critiquing work at a website called [Café Doom](#), which is a serious critique group, mostly for horror writers, but for writers of science fiction and fantasy too. We do a lot of critiquing on that, and it's quite strict, well-coordinated and organised. Many of the members have been to Borderlands, which is an American critique organisation – it's like a boot camp for writers. Several of them have been there and have learnt the hard knock way how to do critiquing. Some – including John Ravenscroft for example – have been to the Alex Keegan boot camp, which is a tough British training ground for writers. But they come away as competition winners, as John showed.

[D] What do you think writers get out of it if they win a competition? Apart from the prize money, of course.

[G] They get a lot of kudos. Self-esteem. Publicity for themselves. And, most importantly, all writers should have a CV (Curriculum Vitae or résumé) and add their competition wins – or their runners-up – to it. It's important.

[D] If you were entering a competition yourself, would you enter one that charged a fee but *didn't* give feedback?

[G] I might do now. All my stories receive feedback because I belong to critique groups. If I have a story that I feel might stand a chance in a competition, I would know whether

it has flaws in it according to the critiquers. So I *would* enter a competition now that didn't have feedback. But I would encourage new writers to always enter those that do.

[D] And are you in favour of entry fees?

[G] As a rule, I am, because it cuts out entries from people who aren't serious about their writing. Some entrance fees, of course, are very high indeed – we're talking about hundreds of pounds. And that's a bit tough, even for a prestigious competition, if you don't get any sort of feedback as a result. I think anybody wanting to pay more than about £10 an entry, for any sort of competition, would like to have feedback, so that at least they get some of their money's worth.

[D] If the competition you're entering doesn't give feedback, where else could you get it? You mentioned online critique forums – which ones do you recommend?

[G] There are so many competitions that it won't be hard to find one that gives feedback. But I would definitely recommend joining a writers' group as well. If you're lucky, your town will have a writers' circle you can join. And if you're very lucky it won't be a happy-clappy one. These groups will listen to you read your story and then they'll clap at the end of it. But they don't ever say, 'Ah, but you didn't use any colours in your story'. It's sometimes painful to do this, and you can cry a bit, but it's definitely what you need.

If you don't have a real-life writers' group in your town (or even if you do), join the many that are on the internet. ideas4writers has its own critique forum, though it's a little quiet these days. Café Doom is an active critique group. There are others – there's one called Critters, which is meant for science fiction. The Alex Keegan Boot Camp is a tough online critique group if you want to hone your work to a sharp edge. You have to pay for your tuition there, but it's certainly one in which people come away as good writers. And there are many others. JBWB (Jacqui Bennett Writers Bureau) have competitions. I'm sure if you do a web search for writers' critique groups you'll be swamped with a large number of them.

[D] Now, some feedback is going to be better than others, isn't it?

[G] That's right, yes. Some competitions insist that the judge writes a reasonable amount of feedback – I would say at least 50 words. At least one of the feedbacks I wrote for the 2009 Whittaker Prize was as long as the story that was entered – but I got carried away, and I felt that the writer deserved to have the analysis. But I know there have been complaints in some competitions that the feedback is bizarre, or unfair, or written in a way that doesn't help the writer. For example, I know of a competition where the judge wrote things like, 'The humour wasn't to my taste.' Well, what does *that* mean? I think feedback has to be specific if it's going to be helpful.

[D] We've both been short story judges, but you've done it much more recently than I have, and in much more depth, so could you describe what it feels like?

[G] It's a privilege, and an honour, to be able to read so many other people's ideas. After all, what I'm doing is sampling their heads, their imaginations.

I'm getting the benefit of all that – their best attempts at turning their imaginations into something worth reading and winning a competition. And I'm being paid to do it. Of course, it's hard work as well, having to make the time to do all the reading, and writing the critiques – and making sure my critiques don't have any grammatical errors and that sort of thing, though I can't always guarantee that! It was something I was pleased to do.

[D] And how did you become involved in judging the Whittaker Prize?

[G] Like any other job, I applied for it. The Whittaker competition is run by The Write Idea, which is a web-based forum for writers who aspire to literary excellence. They wanted judges for the 2009 competition, so they rushed out an advert that went to many literary sites. I thought, this is something I could be interested in doing. I knew the organisers – not that that gave me any favours – and I'd judged competitions before, some years ago. Those competitions were also for short stories, but they were mostly horror, run by Eros and Rust from America. In this case I was short-listed, and then awarded the job.

The competition was run like most literary competitions, in that I didn't get to know who wrote what. The competitors sent their stories in to the organisers, who cut off the names and any other clues about who wrote them, and then sent them to me via email. I read them by printing them off and taking them into my conservatory, or to a café somewhere, or sometimes putting them into my pannier and going off for a bike ride, and then reading them on a hillside or by the seaside. I like to be quite relaxed to be able to read the just over two hundred stories that I eventually read.

End of preview

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