

North West Words Autumn/Winter 2014

Connie Roberts winner of the Boyle Poetry Competition 2014



<http://connierobertspoet.com/>

Writing competitions are one way of getting a beginning writer's work noticed. They help build your reputation. And you don't have to win a competition for this to happen. Making the long or shortlist will put you on the literary radar (who among us hasn't scoured those lists looking for not just our own name but other poets we may know, if only on the page?).

On the other hand, winning a writing competition, especially a prestigious one, is an important milestone in the career of a poet or a fiction writer. I love how in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's bio you'll find her Patrick Kavanagh Award win right up there next to her CAN \$75,000 Griffin Poetry Prize.

You have to ask yourself why you would like to win a particular writing competition. Is it the prize money, the prestige, a chance at publication or wider readership? Now that I think of it, for me, personally, there's a bit of the Prodigal Daughter impulse that drives me to enter writing competitions. After all, I only ever enter contests in Ireland, despite living in the States for 31 years, which is a little odd when you think about it. After growing up in an industrial school in the Irish midlands, I suppose that *attagirl* pat on the back you get after winning or placing in a competition in Ireland allows you to hold your head up just that little bit higher. Sure, the prize money is nice, but for most of the contests I've won, the money was spent on the airfare home to the awards ceremony. It's also important to me, given my subject matter—I often draw from the orphanage well—to share my history with other Irish people.

People—in the literary community or otherwise—take you more seriously as a writer once you have a few writing awards under your belt. And I suppose you take yourself more seriously as a writer. God knows, when you're up there in your garret scribbling in

your copybook, the internal (infernally?) critic will beat you down to size. But then along comes a lovely phone call from Rosaleen Kearney up there in Monaghan regarding the Patrick Kavanagh Award or Eilish Wren down there in Listowel about the Writers' Week Prize and you boot that little bugger out the back door.

Your poem has to stand out from the crowd. It has to be well-crafted, unique and unforgettable. It must possess that elusive authentic voice. It can help if the subject matter is outside the box. The opening lines must be zingers, and pull the judge by the lapels into the poem. I read aloud all my poems before sending them out. I use the voice memo on my iPhone to record myself. I check for rhythm, sound, or anything that seems off kilter. I'm not a particularly great reader of my poems, but you don't have to be to recognize when something is amiss in your work.

You have to wear two hats as a writer: one when you're creating and another when you're administrating. You're a poet and an executive assistant. You must do your homework before you send your work out. Check out the contest's website—this will often highlight an organization's professionalism (or not). Research the judges: read their biographies and their work. Look up past contests they've judged; see what they chose as winners. Look up the previous winners of the competition you're entering.

I know judges are supposed to be impartial when judging writing competitions—and I'm sure most of them are—but there's a part of me that thinks, rightly or wrongly, hey, they're only human, they have preferences like the rest of us: a certain poem might appeal to them more than another (provided of course that the poem is a strong contender in the first place). Consequently, oftentimes, I'll send a particular poem out to a contest thinking (read: hoping) it'll catch the judge's eye. Who knows if this armchair psychology had any bearing on the judges' decisions in any of the contests I've won. Although, I have to admit, I don't think anyone but Dave Lordan would've picked my poem "Litany"—a blasphemous rant against God and his saints—for the Dromineer Festival Poetry Award: I'd sat on that poem for years, never sending it out to contests or journals. But when I saw Dave was judging the Dromineer Competition, I dusted it off and sent it on its merry way to Tipp. Now, if say, Billy Collins was judging the Dromineer that year, "Litany" would still be in the drawer. Bottom line: Target the right judge and the right contest.

You also have to think that although you might have a strong poem or short story, your style of writing or your subject matter or whatever might not be everybody's cup of tea. Doubtless it stings when you don't win or place in a competition (anyone who tells you otherwise is kidding themselves), but you really have to slough it off.....and move on to the next competition. There are so many factors at play, not the least of which is that there can only be one winner. I'm always delighted when I place anywhere in a poetry competition—it means I've got the goods, as have all my fellow poets on that long or shortlist.

I prefer poetry competitions that state the judge will read all submissions. I know that's not possible in the larger contests. I'm partial to contests that allow for larger submissions, say 3—5 poems or a 10-page manuscript.

Practice good housekeeping when it comes to keeping track of your submissions. Over the years, I've made a faux-pas or two in that area: once I actually won a competition, only to discover, after checking an old log book, that I'd published that particular poem 12 years earlier. I'd forgotten all about it. I had to inform the organizers and withdraw my poem. To say I was mortified (and crestfallen) is an understatement.

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Full essay here:

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