

2020 has indeed been a strange year. The global pandemic has changed the way we live, the way we work, even the way we interact with our loved ones. For writers though, not much has changed except a larger portion of the population now know what it's like to work in your pjs and push that elusive shower to the afternoon.

During the first lockdown a lot of people joked about all the new writers that will emerge from the woodwork and, if writing competitions are anything to go by, that appears to be true as most are declaring 2020's results with 'most entries ever'—although I suspect a lot of those folk who've always thought they had a book in them are finding out a lack of free time isn't their only barrier to the Nobel prize in Literature.

Writing competitions can be an important part of an up and coming writer's career. Some writers love them, some hate them, but most will agree that they can be a necessity in trying to build your profile. Even so much as a shortlisting can elevate a writer's career and be a fantastic entry on a CV and, when the time comes to submit a novel to an agent, it helps to have some accolades or publications under your belt.

In May of this year I entered a story in the 2020 Mairtín Crawford Award. For those of you who don't know, the Mairtín Crawford Award is a yearly competition for Short Story and Poetry, run by the Crescent Arts Centre as part of the Belfast Book Festival. The winning entry this year (*The Wife* by Sarah Gilmartin) received a £1000 prize and a three-night stay at the wonderful River Mill. Runner-Up prizes were £250.

Not only is it a highly prestigious and respected award, but the advantage to this competition is that it is only open to those who have not yet published a full collection of poetry, short stories, or a novel. You don't even have to be published to enter and, as the stories are judged blind, you have as good a chance as anyone else. It's a level playing field and for that reason, it is worth entering alone.

'The Space Above the Wardrobe' was the story I entered. It was one of the few I liked. It was personal to me, it said something I thought needed to be said, and it was from a POV often ignored. It had also been rejected 13 times. It's always difficult to watch rejection after rejection ping into your inbox—it's part of the job but that doesn't rob it of its sting—and I had all but given up on this story. I worried the narrative was too personal, the format too experimental, the

voice too disruptive for those in search of flowing, flowery prose. I thought I'd give it one more chance.

Most writers have a story like this hidden away in a file somewhere. That most loved yet unwanted child. It always seems to be the favourite that struggles the most—sometimes there's so much poetic irony to being a writer that I am convinced the scientists are right, we do live in a simulation. I wonder if there is some elevated species currently playing some advanced version of The Sims or (I'm showing my age here) Sim City and have gotten so bored with the mundanity of the game they've clicked on the disasters tab and unleashed a global pandemic for the craic. We're not too far from them finding the alien invasion button. At least that should be fun to watch before we're all disintegrated.

So, I sent my story off on one last journey to be evaluated like a mutt at Crufts while I mulled over a career change. I tried to forget about the little story that couldn't and moved on to writing the next one. Weeks passed and then one morning, while I was in the depths of despair like every other writer on a Tuesday, I got an email. I had made the shortlist. I was buzzing. Someone liked my story. I couldn't wait to tell the world. I re-read the email to make sure it wasn't a mistake. It wasn't but it did say not to post anything on social media until the official announcement—at least the aliens knew, it might have been the very thing that held their cursor away from unleashing the next wave of disasters.

There was a couple of weeks to go before the winners were announced but I was happy to be on the shortlist. I tried not to think about it. I went on writing with a greater sense of self-worth. I submitted with more confidence. I had a little more faith in the words clacking from the end of my fingers. Then, another email pinged into my inbox. The results were in and I had been named runner-up. I couldn't believe it. I had placed in a competition. It was a turning point in my career. I worried it might be the peak. I had no idea what was to come.

Being named Runner-Up immediately raised my profile. I got a few more stories published. Then, one day, I was procrastinating on Twitter as usual and I noticed the longlist for the An Post Irish Book Awards Short Story of the Year was out. I clicked the link. It was an incredible longlist filled with some of the biggest names in Irish literature. Then I saw my name. I assumed there must be another writer out there called Chris Wright. It's a common name. I debated for an hour. Then I decided to email them and check, just in case—I know, the arrogance!

It turned out to be my name after all and the story that had got me on the longlist was 'The Space Above the Wardrobe.' My wee story, the one that struggled to find its place in the world, had now been longlisted for a major award. I found myself on a list with the best of Irish writing talent, names such as Kit de Waal, Louise Kennedy, and June Caldwell as well as up and coming Irish writers such as Ronan Hession, Naoise Dolan, and Louise Farr. I had read their stories, savoured their books, they were people I looked up to and there was my name, nestled amongst them like a tick in the fur. It was an incredible feeling. It was not only a privilege to be there, but it pushed my career to the next level and opened my writing up to a much larger audience I would never have had access to before. People were reading my work. It was exciting and mildly terrifying.

Recently, I have been submitting my first novel to agents and it is my placing in the Mairtín Crawford Award as well as being longlisted for short story of the year that they have most remarked upon. It has made me a safer bet. I have been rated by respectable competitions. I have the CV to prove it. This is the game we play, and I am finally feeling like a contender. That's how much these accolades can mean to a new writer.

So, if you're thinking of entering, my advice is, just do it. If you're not in, you can't win. Be brave. Be bold. Believe in you. Dust off an old story or write a new one. Take that story that hasn't found a home yet and get it in. You never know. 2021 might just be your year. You could get that email that makes your heart jump. One exciting enough to stop an advanced species unleashing world-ending catastrophes upon us. I'm not saying you'll save the world like I did, but you just might take that next step, the one that truly starts your journey as a published writer.