

Amy Stewart answers some questions after being chosen Short Story Winner of MCA 2022:

**When writing the story, what came first: the topic, the character, or maybe the feeling?
How did the idea start?**

It was the setting that came first, I think: this classic poolside scene and all the trappings of that, everyone enjoying their own separate holidays in a communal space. I was fascinated by that idea, all of these individual, contained stories playing out against that nondescript backdrop. We can be right next to someone day in, day out and never really know what's going on with them. For example, you'd never know all of the things going on in our narrator's mind just looking at her - on the surface, the story is simply about her diving to the bottom of the pool and coming up again. But underneath that, there's much more going on - her dissatisfaction with her marriage, her fascination with the water, her striving to make things better somehow. The deeper she goes into the pool, the more we learn about what's driving her, and by the time she comes back up I wanted to leave the reader with the feeling that while things haven't necessarily changed, we're re-emerging into a subtly different story. But it all started with the setting, with the water. With the pool. And quite seriously, I think I'm just desperate to go on holiday, and that all leaked out and onto the page!

Reading your Short Story we could find multiple details that helped to bring the story to life. How did you build this scene? Is your writing based on your personal experience?

I think starting with the pool resort meant that I was working within a set of established parameters and playing with motifs that would be familiar to a lot of people: the sun loungers, the tiled pool, the cocktails. I chose a few of these details to help conjure the scene near the beginning, but also wanted to leave it fairly general (for example, we don't know what country we're in) so that a reader might project their own individual experiences onto it. The story is quite static, in that the action doesn't really move around (apart from the thoughts inside our narrator's head) and so once I had established the scene every detail I added was building on that specific set-up, which I hope added a realism and depth. This story wasn't drawn from my own personal experience, but rather the characters seemed to arrive fully formed in my head. I love it when that happens, because they begin to feel very real to you very quickly.

What made you decide to participate this year?

I was lucky enough to be shortlisted for the award last year, and had such a positive experience that I knew I wanted to enter again this year. I love that the award has such close ties to the Belfast Book Festival, and it's always really exciting to hear the winners being announced as part of the festival programme. Being placed in this award is such a huge confidence boost and can be a real addition to your writing CV.

Any advice for anyone considering entering the next round of Awards?

I think the most important thing is to write a story that feels true to you. This doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be written from your own experiences, but I think it is important to try to capture the essence of something that feels honest or central to your values, whether that's

through a feeling or a situation or a character, rather than writing something you think someone wants to read. I think the judges of any kind of award can recognise that kind of authenticity in storytelling. Secondly, don't be afraid to keep submitting a story you really believe in. I'd submitted *Big Breath* to a number of different awards this year and had no success until I found out I'd won the Mairtín Crawford. Writing is such a subjective thing and what one judge may pass on, another will really resonate with. If you really love a story, don't give up on it.