

Linda France wins National Poetry Competition for her poem '*Bernard and Cerinthe*' – a 'strange narrative' of plant-life and seduction.



Out of over 12,000 poems entered for this year's award, Linda France's poem '*Bernard and Cerinthe*' has been chosen as the winner of the National Poetry Competition.

'If a flower is always a velvet curtain
onto some peepshow he never opens,

it's a shock to find himself sheltering
from the storm in a greenhouse,

seduced by a leaf blushing blue
at the tips, begging to be stroked'

Extract from '*Bernard and Cerinthe*' by Linda France

Judges **Julia Copus**, **Matthew Sweeney** and **Jane Yeh** worked tirelessly to find a winner from a bumper batch of 12,085 entries from a massive 77 countries – making it one of the world's biggest international open poetry competitions. Ultimately the 'strange narrative of a man being seduced by a plant charmed the judges with its vivid imagery and linguistic wit' said Jane Yeh. She added the poem was:

'Truly imaginative and richly musical, '*Bernard and Cerinthe*' is as much a pleasure to read on the page as it is on the tongue, and as such was the unanimous choice of the judges for first place in this year's **National Poetry Competition**.'

Linda France becomes the 36th person to win the Poetry Society's National Poetry Competition (first prize £5,000). Since it began in 1978 the competition has been an important milestone in the careers of many of today's leading poets, with previous winners including Helen Dunmore, Ruth Padel, Philip Gross, Carol Ann Duffy, Jo Shapcott and Tony Harrison. The Competition which this year attracted entries from a record number of countries across the world, recognises an individual poem, previously unpublished, in an anonymised judging process. The judges only discover the identity of the winners after making their final decision.

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LINDA FRANCE was born in Newcastle and lives in Hexham. She is the editor of the seminal anthology *Sixty Women Poets* (Bloodaxe) and has published seven poetry collections including *The Gentleness of the Very Tall*, *The Toast of the Kit-Cat Club* and *You are Her*. She regularly collaborates with visual artists and musicians.

On what inspired the poem, Linda said:

‘I remember very particularly the day I wrote this poem, actually. I went to visit a friend of mine who has the most beautiful garden. It was the end of August and there was a plant I'd never seen before: *Cerintho major 'Purpurascens'*; and I was just astonished by it. It's a very intense blue and the leaves are a silvery green... they're quite thick, almost waxy, fleshy. That's one of the things I'm drawn to about plants, they express this tremendous "Otherness", but they just stay there and let you respond to them, unlike a bird or animal that disappears. A plant remains for you to give your attention to. I love that. I got absorbed in this flower and my sense was that it was very sexy, as many of them are. *Cerintho* conceals and reveals at the same time, it has a flirtatiousness about it that's very seductive. I don't know how Bernard came into the story, but faced with this out-and-out flirt of a plant, he doesn't know what to do. So that's how it happened, really. Obviously it didn't all come fully formed, but it arose from looking at the flower.’

Linda has been on somewhat of a winning streak lately, with the National Competition being her third first prize in the past year. On hearing the still-secret news about her National Competition success, she described winning as being ‘like an odd dream, and not being able to tell anyone enhances that sense of unreality – like being at a funfair, but being the only person there.’

The judges awarded second place to **Paula Bohince** (USA) for ‘Among Barmaids’ (£2,000) and third place to **Josephine Abbott** (Derby) for ‘Love on a Night Like This’ (£1,000). Commendations went to Elaine Gaston, Carolyn Jess-Cooke, Debbie Lim, Danica Ognjenovic, Ken Taylor, Tom Warner and Patricia Wooldridge, who come from a geographically wide range of places including Norwich, North Carolina, Northern Ireland and Australia.

The next National Poetry Competition will open at the start of May. Entry forms can be downloaded at www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc. The closing date is 31 October 2014.

– ENDS –

For further information and/or to interview Linda France, Paula Bohince or Josephine Abbott contact Robyn Donaldson on 0207 420 9886.

High quality images of the winners receiving their prizes at the awards ceremony are available.

Notes to Editors:

NATIONAL POETRY COMPETITION WINNERS

Linda France is based close to Hadrian's Wall, near Hexham in Northumberland. She is currently concerned with writing about plants, visiting Botanic Gardens in the UK and abroad. Since 1992 she has published seven poetry collections with Bloodaxe, Smokestack and Arc, including *The Gentleness of the Very Tall*, *The Toast of the Kit-Cat Club*, *book of days* and *You are Her*. She has worked on a number of collaborations with visual artists and musicians and around forty Public Art projects. Linda also edited the ground-breaking anthology *Sixty Women Poets* (Bloodaxe 1993).

Paula Bohince is the author of two poetry collections, both from Sarabande: *The Children* and *Incident at the Edge of Bayonet Woods*. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Poetry*, *The TLS*, *The Irish Times*, *Granta*, *Poetry London*, and elsewhere. She has received the George Bogin Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America and the "Discovery"/The Nation Award, as well as the Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship and a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2014, she was a Fellow of Hawthornden Castle. She lives in the U.S.

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Josephine Abbott was born in Manchester, studied Latin and English Language at Sheffield University, and now lives in Derby where she has led a variety of poetry and creative writing projects over the years. She has had poems published widely in magazines, including *Acumen*, *Agenda*, *The Frogmore Papers*, *Staple*, *Stand* and others, and has won prizes and awards for her poetry, including an East Midlands Bursary, Lancaster LitFest 2000, a runner-up prize in the Bridport Competition 2009, and a commendation in the National Poetry Competition 1999. Her collection *Trying Not To Levitate* was published by Blinking Eye (2006).

The seven commended poems are:

- 'Push-Bike' by **Elaine Gaston** (Ballycastle, Northern Ireland)
- 'Hare' by **Carolyn Jess-Cooke** (Whitley Bay, Tyne & Wear)
- 'Gift of the Sloth' by **Debbie Lim** (Sydney, Australia)
- 'Birdfall' by **Danica Ognjenovic** (Otley, North Yorkshire)
- 'crepuscule with nellie (take six)' by **Ken Taylor** (North Carolina, USA)
- 'CCTV Central Control' by **Tom Warner** (Norwich, Norfolk)
- 'I Stop Wearing the Mini-skirt, 1972' by **Patricia Wooldridge** (Petersfield, Hampshire)

NATIONAL POETRY COMPETITION JUDGES



Julia Copus is a poet and radio dramatist. Her latest collection *The World's Two Smallest Humans* (Faber) was shortlisted for both the 2012 T.S. Eliot Prize and Costa poetry prize. Her previous collections, *The Shattered Eye* and *In Defence of Adultery*, were PBS Recommendations. She won First Prize in the National Poetry Competition (2002) and the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem (2010). In 2011, her sequence of poems about IVF, *Ghost*, was adapted as a BBC Radio 3 play entitled *Ghost Lines*. She is a Lecturer for the Royal Literary Fund, and in 2008 was made an Honorary Fellow at the University of Exeter.



Matthew Sweeney was born in Donegal in 1952 and is currently based in Cork, having previously been resident in Berlin, Timișoara and, for a long time, London. His collections include *Black Moon* (2007), *Sanctuary* (2004) and *Selected Poems* (2002). A retrospective selection, *The Night Post*, was published by Salt in 2010. His new collection, *Horse Music* was published by Bloodaxe in 2013. A satirical thriller, set in the world of contemporary poetry, co-written with the English poet, John Hartley Williams, was published in November 2012 by the Muswell Press under the title *Death Comes for the Poets*.



Jane Yeh was born in America and educated at Harvard University, the Iowa Writers' Workshop and Manchester Metropolitan University. Her first collection of poems, *Marabou* (Carcanet, 2005), was shortlisted for the Whitbread, Forward, and Aldeburgh Festival poetry prizes. Her latest collection, *The Ninjas*, was published by Carcanet in 2012, and her poems appear in anthologies including *The Best British Poetry 2012*. Currently Senior Researcher in Creative Writing at Kingston University, she also writes on books, theatre, fashion, and sport for publications such as the *TLS* and *The Village Voice*.

NATIONAL POETRY COMPETITION FILMPOEMS

In a collaboration between the Poetry Society and artist Alastair Cook, the ten winning poems of the National Poetry Competition have been reimagined as film-poems. The poetry films of the top three winning poems will be shown at the Hidden Door Festival in Edinburgh, 5 April, and available to view on the Poetry Society website from 28 March at www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npcfilm poems. All ten of the films will feature at the Film-poem Festival in Antwerp, 14 June, in partnership with the Felix Poetry Festival (please see www.film-poem.com for more information) and at London's Southbank Centre in July, and will be available to view on the Poetry Society website from June.

- 'Bernard and Cerinthe', by Linda France. Film-poem by **Alastair Cook**.
- 'Among Barmaids', by Paula Bohince. Film-poem by **Idil Sukan**.
- 'Love on a Night Like This', by Josephine Abbott. Film-poem by **Kate Sweeney**.
- 'Push-bike', by Elaine Gaston. Film-poem by **Robert Peake**.
- 'Hare' by Carolyn Jess-Cooke. Film-poem by **Melissa Joan Diem**.
- 'Gift of the Sloth', by Debbie Lim. Film-poem by **Marc Neys**.
- 'Birdfall', by Danica Ognjenovic. Film-poem by **Adele Myers**.
- 'crepuscule with nellie (take six)' by Ken Taylor. Film-poem by **Ginnetta Correlli**.
- 'CCTV Central Control', by Tom Warner. Film-poem by **Chris Hurst**.
- 'I Stop Wearing the Mini-skirt, 1972', by Patricia Wooldridge. Film-poem by **Alicja Pawluczuk**.

NATIONAL POETRY COMPETITION EVENTS

The winners of the National Poetry Competition will perform at events and festivals around the UK throughout the coming year. These include: A celebration of the National Poetry Competition at NCLA, Newcastle upon Tyne, 5th June; Poeticabotanica, an event with Linda France at Keats House Festival in London, 9th June; National Poetry Competition winners' event at Ledbury Poetry Festival, July; and an event at the Poetry International Festival at the Southbank Centre, London, July. For more information about these events, and for news of further events as they are programmed, visit www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc.

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THE NATIONAL POETRY COMPETITION

The National Poetry Competition was founded in 1978. The prize money this year totals £8,800. The top three prize winners' poems will be published in *The Poetry Review*, Britain's leading poetry magazine. Previous winning and commended poems can be read on the Poetry Society website at www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc. The Ledbury Poetry Festival features an event with National Poetry Competition winners and judges every July. To enter the National Poetry Competition visit www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc.

THE POETRY SOCIETY

The Poetry Society was founded in 1909 to promote a "more general recognition and appreciation of poetry". Since then, it has grown into one of Britain's most dynamic arts organisations, representing British poetry both nationally and internationally. With innovative education and commissioning programmes and a packed calendar of performances, readings and competitions, the Poetry Society champions poetry for all ages. It publishes the magazine *The Poetry Review*, runs the National Poetry Competition, the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award and the youth performance poetry championship SLAMBassadors UK. www.poetrysociety.org.uk

FIRST PRIZE NATIONAL POETRY COMPETITION

Linda France

Bernard and Cerinthe

If a flower is always a velvet curtain
onto some peepshow he never opens,

it's a shock to find himself, sheltering
from the storm in a greenhouse,

seduced by a leaf blushing blue
at the tips, begging to be stroked.

He's caught in the unfamiliar ruffle
of knickerbockers or petticoat, a scent

of terror, vanilla musk. If he were
not himself, he'd let his trembling lips

articulate the malleability of wax;
the bruise of bracts, petals, purple

shrimps; seeds plump as buttocks,
tucked out of harm's way, cocos-de-mer

washed up off Curieuse or Silhouette.
But being Bernard, he's dumbstruck,

a buffoon in front of a saloon honey
high-kicking the can-can. Can't-can't.

He attempts to cool himself, thinking
about seahorses, *Hippocampus erectus*,

listening to the rain refusing to stop,
soft against the steamed-up glass.

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