Publishing the ITT Short Story Competition without a budget

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Abstract

Since 2016, the Library at IT Tallaght (ITT) (now TU Dublin – Tallaght Campus) has been running a short story competition in conjunction with South Dublin Libraries' Red Line Book Festival, open to anyone in the world over the age of 16. From the start, library staff felt it was important that the ten shortlisted entries from each year should be collected in an anthology, both as a document of the event and a means of promotion for the IT Tallaght and Red Line Book Festival brands. Since funding for the competition did not extend to a major publishing project, the staff chose to explore the opportunities provided by online self-publishing services to gradually nurture interest in the competition and expand its reach globally.

This paper gives a brief outline of the origins of the competition, explains how the authors came to choose Kindle Direct Publishing as a platform and shows how the publishing element has become an integral part of the annual library workflow. The authors conclude with the view that the continued appearance of the stories in print will prove to be a key element in establishing the competition within the global writing community.

Keywords: Library publishing; Self-publishing; Short stories; Competitions; Anthologies.

Origins/background

The IT Tallaght Short Story Competition was first discussed in earnest at a meeting of the Red Line Book Festival advisory committee in 2015. This festival was launched in 2012 and is run by South Dublin Libraries, hosting literary events in the South Dublin County Council area. It had been suggested that the local Institute of Technology might run a short story competition in a user survey that same year. After a discussion at the library, it was decided to submit a proposal for funding for what became known as ITT Shorts. The proposal was submitted to the head of the Humanities Department, progressed from there to the Senior Management Team, and was signed off by the Institute President in 2016.

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*Figure 1: Background to the competition***.**

Two library staff members were assigned to the project and it was decided to use online services where possible to manage the competition. SurveyGizmo (https://www.surveygizmo.com/) has been a feature of library activities for quite a while and the competition administrators opted to use this to gather entries and record consent. It allows entrants to upload their submissions in Word or PDF documents. Once the competition had been launched and entries began to be submitted, a set of guidelines for shortlisting was devised in order to create a selection of ten for the consideration of the overall judge; on this occasion, the literary scout Vanessa Fox O'Loughlin of Writing.ie (https://www.writing.ie/).

When logistics were being discussed with the festival organisers, the latter had offered to source and sponsor the competition judge, allowing the library to keep the bulk of its internal funding for prize money. This, however, left nothing in the budget for publication of the shortlisted stories. It was felt that the added enticement of future discoverability in print would be essential in generating interest in the competition and maximising the numbers entering. With this in mind, the administrators set about

exploring the various platforms available for self-publication, with particular focus on functionality, cost, and whether or not copyright had to be surrendered.

Platform selection

At the time, there was a dazzling array of e-publishing services available online, including CreateSpace (https://www.createspace.com/), Smashwords (https://www.smashwords.com/), Lulu (https://www.lulu.com/), BookBaby (https://www.bookbaby.com/), Nook (https://press.barnesandnoble.com/), iBooks Author (https://www.apple.com/ie/ibooks-author/), Kindle Direct (https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/), Lightning Source (https://www.ingramcontent.com/publishers/print), Issuu (https://issuu.com/), Blurb (https://www.blurb.com/), Vook (no longer exists) and eBookIT (https://www.ebookit.com/tools/bp/Bo/eBookIt). However, as it turned out, in this instance the absence of a budget simplified the selection process considerably. Accordingly, platforms demanding an upfront fee were quickly ruled out, as were those requiring payment for editing and design services. By contrast, there was a gravitational pull towards those providers working with simple file formats and user-friendly templates which could facilitate the books being designed and put together in-house at no extra charge. Naturally, the proposed royalty rate was looked at, though not discussed in any depth. Since a primary goal was to find the largest audience possible for these stories, of greater interest was the reach of distribution promised by a given organisation.

Financial considerations aside, the only other factor which was non-negotiable had to do with the protection of the individual authors' rights to their stories along with the

library's limited permission to collect and disseminate them. As it turned out, very few of the organisations in question were looking for exclusive rights to the work published.

PLATFORM	Create Space (Amazon)	Smashwords	Lulu	BookBaby	Nook Press	iBook Authors	Kindle Direct Publishing	Lightning Source	Issuu	Blurb	Vook	eBookIT
CATEGORY	E-book distributor	E-book distributor	E-book distributor	E-book distributor	Single Channel Retailer-	Single Channel Retailer-	Single Channel Retailer-	E-book distributor	Single Channel Retailer-driven	E-book distributor	E-book distributor	E-book distributor
UPFRONT FEE	✔	✘	✔	✔	✘	✘	✘	✔	✔	✔	✘	✔
ROYALTY RATE	Sales channel - 40% + €0.60 + €0.012 per page.	Publisher - 40% of list price & 55% of library sales.	Print books - 20% commision from net. E-books 10%.	0%. Sales through Bookshop - 15%. Retailers % unspecified.	Deduct $: 0.99-2.98 - 40%; 2.99-9.99 - 65%; 10.00 199.99 - 40%.	Deduct 30%	Customer - 35%, all territories; 70%, designated territories (incl. USA & Europe).	Customer - 45-70%, print books (less manf Costs); 40%, e-books.	Not found.	Deduct Amazon 15% + $1.35; Ingram's - 22-55%; Apple - 30%.	Deduct: 0% (for now); Amazon 30%; iBooks 30%; B&N 50%; Kobo 30%; Google Play	Deduct: 15% of Net Sales; Trade discount - 25% or 55%.
AUTOMATIC PRICE	✘	✔	✔	?	✘	✘	✘	!	✘	!	✘	✘
RIGHTS	Non-Exclusive	Non-Exclusive	Non-Exclusive	Exclusive	Non-Exclusive	Exclusive	Non-Exclusive	Non-Exclusive	Non-Exclusive	Non-Exclusive	Non-Exclusive	Non-Exclusive
FILE FORMATS	PDF	Ms Word	EPUB	PDF	Any software - Save or Export	EPUB	Ms Word, EPUB. MOBI.	EPUB; JPG & PDF - print.	PDF	PDF	Ms Word	Ms Word, PDF
ISBN INCLUDED	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✘	☐	✔	✘	✔
E-ISBN, ASIN, FAN	✘	✔	✔	✔	✔	✘	✔	✘	☐	✔	✘	✔
STYLE GUIDE	✔	✔	✔	✘	✔	✔	✔	✘	☐	☐	✔	✔
PRINT-ON-DEMAND	✔	✘	✔	✔	✔	✘	✘	✔	✔	✔	✘	✔
DISTRIBUTE STO	Expanded distribution to bookshops and libraries possible.	iBookstore, Kobo, B&N, OverDrive, Scribd, Tolino, Baker&Taylor, Inkera, WH Smith, FNAC, Yuzu, Gardners, Browns, Hive, Axis360, Blio.	Kindle, iBookstore, Kobo,	Kindle, Nook, iBookstore, Kobo, Google Play.	Nook, Barnes & Noble dot com.	iBookstore	Kindle	Kobo, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Chapters/Indigo, Apple, Blackwell, Book Depository, Libraries, Coutts, Foyles, Waterstones	Google Play and App Store	iBookstore, Amazon, Ingram	iBookstore, Kobo, Google Play, Amazon, Barnes & Noble	Kindle, Nook, iBookstore, Kobo, Google Play, Ingram, scribd, EbookIt.com, Baker & Taylor
SUPPORT	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)	Via systems only (E-mail, Chat, Call Centre)
NOTE	$79 Kindle conversion charge			Fee for cover design: choose a design package and send designer ideas.				Distributes print books too. Cover design template. Can be contacted by telephone. Distinguish between Ingram's Lightning Source and	Additional fee for POD. Distributes e-books through Issuu site and apps. ISBNs? Style templates provided. Most suitable for publication of illustrated full colour magazines.	Price control? Contactable by phone. Design: tools, templates, tutorials provided.	Rebranded as Pronoun. JPG for cover. Link to Canva.com for cover design.	Request quote for print books on site. $25 upfront. Cover design service: E-book - $99; print - $295 - $395.

Figure 2:   Selection process

Following a period of review and discussion, the process came down to a choice between Smashwords and CreateSpace. The latter had the advantage of feeding directly into Kindle Direct Publishing and the Amazon platform at no cost. Furthermore, there was a problem with Smashwords - the online forms required for US tax clearance proving impossible to complete - and so in the end CreateSpace and KDP were settled upon.

The first publication took much longer than anticipated because of issues with getting the tax clearance certificate submitted to the IRS. This was eventually achieved with

the Institute Finance Officer and the Systems Librarian sitting down together to complete the application online within the CreateSpace account set-up area. This initial setback aside, it was felt that the kind of service provided by CreateSpace was the best option for the time being at least. It allows for the creation of orders as needed - for authors, for legal deposit libraries and promotional purposes - without the commitment of a large print run. In addition, the electronic version of each volume of the anthology is readily available for download on the Amazon website. Furthermore, it is hoped that the Smashwords submission will eventually be processed for wider distribution across the international library sphere.

Timeline 2018

Figure 3 - Timeline to the 2018 competition.

The importance of the freedom afforded through CreateSpace / KDP is perhaps best illustrated by a closer look at the various stages in the running of the most recent competition. First came a meeting at Tallaght County Library with staff of South Dublin Libraries and representatives of BoxRoom Productions on the 11th of June 2018. Plans for that year's Red Line Book Festival, and the short story competition's part in

it, were discussed. Most importantly, a possible judge, the writer Deirdre Sullivan, was proposed by one of the librarians involved who offered to contact her.

Returning from the meeting, a slightly different approach to the two previous years was decided upon. While the policy of not imposing a specific theme on prospective entrants still seemed a sound one, on both occasions the minor problem of coming up with a suitable title for a somewhat disparate selection of stories had remained. In a spirit of experimentation, it was decided that, come what may, the 2018 anthology would be called Stand Fast!, and that this would be advertised in the competition guidelines to see if it was possible to observe any impact on the quality and variety of entries.

The next step was to begin publicising the competition. A link to the revised guidelines and application form was made available on the ITT Library website (https://library.it-tallaght.ie/) and posts were created on the library blog, Twitter and Facebook pages. The dark web was leveraged to communicate with writing groups and cultural organisations. Social media activity ramped up even further when the competition officially opened for submissions on the 2nd of July.

Over the next six weeks, many of the same general queries and technical difficulties arose as during the previous competitions. These included automatic confirmation emails not being received, entrants not knowing how to attach their Word or PDF document to the entry form, and entrants asking to resubmit, having mistakenly sent an earlier draft of their story or forgotten to include a cover page. Enquiries also came from writers slightly below the minimum entry age of sixteen, or others who had simply missed the deadline, both wanting to know if exceptions could be made. For the administrators, queries such as these underlined the value of having clear and consistent rules in place to guide the decisions one needs to make on a project of this kind. At the same time, submissions were monitored as they came in via SurveyGizmo and entries were immediately discounted that were without a cover page, incorrectly formatted or simply too chaotically organised.

Once the competition had closed on the 13th of August, the business of whittling 240 entries down to a shortlist of 10 began in earnest. This has become considerably easier with time. Having been through it twice before, one is more sensitive to stale plots, hackneyed expressions and worn-out devices, and quicker to seize upon the writer that radiates a sense of control, knows how to deploy an unexpected flash of wit, and can convey genuine empathy.

The shortlist was decided on the 31st of August and the ten stories uploaded to Turnitin (https://www.turnitin.com/) as a precaution against plagiarism. The competition judge was contacted on the 14th of September and the printed stories, with author details

removed, were sent to her by post. A little over two weeks later, her decision was received as to the top three. The following day, the shortlisted authors and South Dublin Libraries were contacted, and the shortlist was posted on social media. The names of the three prize winners were withheld pending their announcement at a reading and award ceremony on the 11th of October at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght, to be emceed by Deirdre Sullivan and attended by the President of ITT and as many of the shortlisted authors as were able to attend (seven, as it turned out).

By this time, the library had entered into one of its busiest periods as the students of ITT were preparing for Christmas examinations, so the process of proofing and editing the anthology had to take its place alongside a host of other duties. Difficulties adjusting to the new KDP template notwithstanding, the electronic version was ready and uploaded to Amazon on the 21st of December.

Publication: CreateSpace to KDP 2018

Aside from the change in approach as regards setting a theme for the competition, the other notable difference in 2018 was the way in which the anthology was edited and published. Previously, in order to publish with CreateSpace and have it flow into KDP, thus enabling display on Amazon, it was necessary to create an account with both CreateSpace and KDP. Accordingly, the first two collections were edited and designed entirely within CreateSpace using their templates. By the following year, CreateSpace had migrated entirely to KDP.

Thankfully, the tax clearance seems to have carried across. Furthermore, the new template appeared less problematic, especially in relation to section headers and page numbering. However, it was disappointing to find that the same cover layout as the first two years was no longer available, thus breaking continuity with the previous volumes. Aside from that, the churning process of editing, loading, identifying errors, re-editing and reloading the document remained much as before. Despite the inevitable headaches, it is gratifying to have a series of works on Amazon now, with the e-book for each provided by KDP and print-on-demand for those who want hard copy. In addition, KDP allows access to statistics on sales. Royalties are paid when sales of an item reach a set minimum. A PayPal account has been set up to receive these, but sales are still some distance from achieving the numbers required.

Global response: starting to build a community

While sales of the anthologies have been negligible, it has been interesting to observe the extent to which the competition has already expanded awareness of both the IT Tallaght and Red Line Book Festival brands globally. In 2016, it attracted 134 entries from 14 countries. The following year, this had increased to 193 stories from 36 countries. Communicating with author groups and bloggers via e-mail and social media have spread the word globally, and 2018 saw submissions leap to 240 entries from 24 countries.

With the introduction of GDPR, it was decided to create a Google Group for those interested in the competition as it moves forward. 2019 will show whether or not this has done anything to boost the profile of what has now been rebranded as the TU Dublin Short Story Competition, following the integration of three of Dublin's Institutes of Technology to form the Technological University of Dublin, Ireland's first technological university.

It is hoped that the community of interest around this competition will continue to grow. For the library, the possibilities are exciting, in a constantly changing, ever more integrated working environment, for the increased dissemination of these stories on (virtually) no budget.

Conclusion

It is entirely practicable, and worthwhile, for a small library with limited resources in time, staff and finance to run an international writing competition leveraging online technology: specifically, web survey tools, anti-plagiarism software and self-publishing services. While the possibilities for expansion are still being explored, this combination of skills and resources has already proved its value in broadening the horizons of the library, taking it into the orbit of new communities and stakeholders across the globe.

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