

Results of the Reader's Short-Fiction Contest

Written by No Author
Tuesday, 15 April 2003 18:00

- [Buy OEM Infinite Skills - OS X Server 10.6 Snow Leopard Training](#)
- [Buy Cheap SnagIt 11](#)
- [Buy Cheap Microsoft Expression Encoder 4 Pro](#)
- [Buy Cheap Adobe Photoshop CC Student And Teacher Edition MAC \(Full LifeTime license\)](#)
- [Buy Cheap Microsoft Visual Studio Professional 2012 \(32-bit\)](#)
- [Download Lynda.com - HTML5 First Look](#)
- [99.95\\$ TamoSoft CommView 6 Full cheap oem](#)
- [Buy OEM Microsoft Money 2007 Home & Business](#)
- [199.95\\$ Autodesk AutoCAD Inventor LT 2010 cheap oem](#)
- [29.95\\$ Efreesty MagicTweak 4.11 cheap oem](#)
- [Buy Nero 9 Reloaded \(en,cs,da,de,el,es,fi,fr,hu,it,nl,no,pl,pt,ru,sv,tr\)](#)
- [Download AppZapper 2 MAC](#)
- [Buy Cheap Rosetta Stone - Learn German \(Level 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 Set\)](#)
- [Buy OEM Autodesk Inventor Professional 2014 \(32-bit\)](#)

The River Cities' Reader's first-ever short-story contest generated a tremendous response, with 86 entries, including one from halfway around the world (Australia). Most of the stories came from right here in the Quad Cities, though. Writers generally kept their stories close to our 250-word limit, but the third-place winner, Jeanette Sendry, came in at a concise 64 words. (And her story wasn't even the shortest. That distinction went to Moline's Frank Bell Jr., whose "Anger Management" came in at 22 words. Alas, it didn't make the judges' cut.) Sendry gets special notice for her clever response to the contest prompt, Augusto Monterroso's seven-word epic.

Here we offer you 15 of the best stories, three winners and 12 other notable tales. You might disagree with our choices for the top three stories, but we feel they're all worth reading. Enjoy!

First Place **The Boyfriend**

Teresa Mesich, Rock Island

Mrs. Marriot searched her daughter's face for some clue to her feelings about this boy she spoke of. He wasn't the first. Angie's smile and good looks attracted attention.

"He's very smart, Mom, and guess what? He's written a book. You can buy it in the bookstore."

Oh, dear. A writer.

Angie talked on but Mrs. Marriot was stuck. Her expression was neutral as she zipped around this fact. Be positive, she thought. He'll be observant, intelligent, sensitive ... Her eyes crinkled with concentration ... wounded, obsessive, broke ... Hmmmmm.

Angie didn't give too many details but revealed they had dated six months. Mrs. Marriot began to feel nervous. We may need to take this one seriously.

Results of the Reader's Short-Fiction Contest

Written by No Author
Tuesday, 15 April 2003 18:00

He unfolded himself from the car. The black leather jacket and dangling pocketchains didn't necessarily put her off, but her eye was sharp and caught the gangly clumsiness that was somewhat endearing.

Mrs. Marriot sat back for the nice-to-meet-you chitchat, ready to read between the lines. His eyes and mouth were wide. His manner was open, and he was funny. His delicate hands fluttered continuously as he spoke, smoothing his hair, rubbing his chin ... like nervous birds. Then one found a resting place. He addressed a quiet word to her daughter.

"How are you? Are you doing okay?"

His thumb gently rubbed the back of Angie's fingers with a soothing, continuous stroke. Mrs. Marriot smiled and opened her heart.

Second Place

Beef-a-Roni, Mon Amour

Chris Gulley, Rock Island

J. was the loneliest guy in the world. At least he was the loneliest guy in Mimosa Falls. Everyone around him paired up long ago. He'd go to their homes for dinner and end up wishing he'd stayed in his cramped studio apartment over Feeney's Hardware, eating Beef-a-Roni out of a can. His friends meant well. They even kept cans of Beef-a-Roni around the house just for him, but somehow that wasn't enough and J. began to wonder if it ever would be.

One day J. met H. She passed through town with a traveling carnival troupe. If you landed three ping-pong balls into the brandy snifters at her booth, she'd hand you a stuffed snake or gorilla of your choosing. Something in the way she invited J. to "step right up" made him lose all self-control.

After a gin-soaked flurry of romantic fervor, J. quit his job as night auditor of the local blood bank and withdrew his meager savings from the Mimosa Falls Savings & Loan. Luckily, the operator of the Zipper, Roderigo Q., had recently been found guilty of first-degree murder, so the job was J.'s for the taking.

The next several months were unlike any that J. had known. The travel and adventure of "a carnies' life" suited him. His co-workers had become like family, and always, there was H.

And after a while - L.

Third Place

Just Scratching an Itch

Jeanette Sendry, Rock Island

"'Upon waking, the dinosaur was still there.' Honey," Mrs. Monterroso said, "I know you didn't mean to write about sleeping dinosaurs awakening, you were writing about the fact that we have a dinosaur in our backyard. Now re-write that letter to Jerry Springer. There must be a way

Results of the Reader's Short-Fiction Contest

Written by No Author
Tuesday, 15 April 2003 18:00

to get something out of this! Then go buy some more hay.”

Left

Keith Meyer, Davenport

Jerry Larkin worked with his hands and had a lot of gloves. Like everyone, Jerry occasionally lost gloves, but only left-hand ones. He searched his drawer in much the same way a person keeps going down into their pocket in search of lost keys. No lefties.

At a sale Jerry bought a basket full of used gloves with two thumbs that could fit either hand. One thumb was tucked in. In a couple of weeks Jerry began taking the thumbs out of the right-hand gloves.

One night, drinking beer with his friend, Ronald Means. Jerry brought up his experience with losing left-hand gloves. “That’s funny,” said Ronald. “I lose right-hand ones. We should trade.”

Suzy Littlesmith knew Jerry Larkin but had never met Ronald Means until the three of them ran into each other at Saddle Up, a country western bar with a rodeo bull.

“How’s the left hand?” asked Ronald as he sat his beer down, got on the bull, and gripped with his right-hand glove.

“What are you talking about?” asked Jerry.

“The gloves. The gloves we traded. Is it working out okay?” Ronald folded back as the coins kicked in.

“What’s with you guys?” demanded Suzy, probably because she was trying to decide which direction to move.

Ronald picked himself off the floor and explained. Suzy left and went home with a guy nicknamed Straight.

Every time I lose a glove I think of this story but it doesn’t help a bit.

The Guy on the Grate

Timothy Vogel, Durham, North Carolina

As is frequently the case in life, what’s missing is all too often most noticeable as we pass our allotted time on earth.

The sole quality I ever noted about him, other than his constant presence in acutely uncomfortable repose, was never witnessing him in motion as he reclined on his steam-belching grate in front of my office.

Passing at all hours of the day, arriving in the morning, leaving at night, on my daily foray to

Results of the Reader's Short-Fiction Contest

Written by No Author
Tuesday, 15 April 2003 18:00

"FourBucks" for coffee, I never once saw him move. Not a muscle.

There were always subtle clues that he had moved in the very recent past, the prime example being a perpetually lit cigarette dangling from his nicotine-stained fingers in a distinctively detached sort of way.

Few smokers I know can keep from taking an occasional puff. Yet the presence of a lit cigarette apparently afforded him as much comfort as actually smoking it, since I never saw him do so. And certain that he lacked a personal valet coming by every seven minutes to light him a new one, I concluded that he simply must move occasionally.

So, on the day I rounded our shared corner, the shock of his absence from that steaming grate was palpable. In one fell swoop he changed, for me anyway, from living statue to missing landmark.

It shamed me to realize how much easier it can be to lose another human being to apathy than discover one in empathy.

My Own Business

John Robert McFarland, Sterling, Illinois

Last night I'm in Ramone's Tropical Lounge & Sanitary Restaurant. There's a beautiful young woman at the end of the bar.

This young Adonis goes swaggering up to her. Robert Redford 20 years ago, only better-looking. Bronzed muscles rippling in a white tank top, teeny-weenie stonewashed jeans halfway down his buns. I know I'll have to work fast. I start down the bar.

I'm five-eight and bald. I wear a white plastic belt, green shirt with red parrots on it, orange and blue plaid shorts, thong sandals with yellow argyle socks. Everyone stops what they're doing to admire my outfit.

Adonis says, "Hey, bay-bee, have I got a night planned for us. Dinner at M'sieur Creep's, dancing on the roof of Chez Haus. After that, maybe you'll get lucky."

I snort through my nose, which isn't easy, because of the hair. Bugs don't try to fly up a nose with hair.

She flutters her eyelashes, runs her tongue around the rim of her lips.

I say, "I just want to go to bed with you."

She sighs, picks up her purse, takes my arm, we walk out. Everyone stops what they're doing to admire her good taste. The bartender hands Adonis her bill.

In the parking lot I hold the door open on her silver BMW. She slips in gracefully, opens her

Results of the Reader's Short-Fiction Contest

Written by No Author
Tuesday, 15 April 2003 18:00

purse, gives me four Abe Lincolns.

That's the Old Guy's Stud Service going rate for getting rid of a jerk.

The Truce

Forrest Clingerman, Rock Island

The red button's purpose was unknown. Alan, who five years ago allowed a blue Chevy to pass through the gate without stopping it, decided that it was not worth pressing the button. "Do I want to get my ass chewed out again?" He had learned, smartly and quickly – don't screw up.

A yellow truck with a sign on the door stopped at the gate. It was cold, and as Alan got up from his seat and turned away from the black-and-white TV, the button started blinking. Quickly. Alan talked with the driver, asking which building. Then the truck entered the bubble. His shift would be over soon, and Calvin was walking up. Calvin was always slightly early for the late shift, like he really wanted to be there. "Does he know how much of an asshole he is?" thought Alan.

"What is this button for?" Alan yelled over to Calvin before Calvin could even see the new control panel that Cerrotech 2500 had installed. "How should I know?"

"You don't know?" Alan trailed off as he looked down at the button. It had stopped blinking.

"Does it say anything in the book? You know, that book they gave us?" Calvin now was walking faster, ready to take over. That's why everyone hated him. That, and the fact that he always showed up so damn early for everything.

Alan stopped, and spit out the shell of a sunflower seed. "I haven't looked yet."

Relocation

Becky Cook, Davenport

We moved to the suburbs to get away from the chaos and weirdoes. Last week an extended family bought the house next door and unloaded their boxes and furniture under a full moon. My husband, Perry, has been watching them with binoculars through the bathroom window and thinks they're peculiar.

Perry invited them over for cocktails. I knew he was up to something when he put all of our mirrors in the living room. He made them Bloody Marys and passed a tray of fresh garlic to snack on. They smiled uneasily, but accepted our strange gifts.

"Tank you," they replied.

Perry even led Grandpa Diaz, the raven-haired patriarch, to a large mirror perched over the fireplace.

"Do you like the mirror?" Perry asked. "It's been in my family for generations." We bought it last

Results of the Reader's Short-Fiction Contest

Written by No Author
Tuesday, 15 April 2003 18:00

week at Kmart.

Grandpa reflected and Perry seemed disappointed. The children grew restless and their mother took them home. Perry watched them closely, anticipating usage of their shapeshifting talents, but it didn't happen.

"We moved from a small town in northern Spain," said Antonio.

"We miss it," he said. "But my company paid me well to relocate." Perry had that "I don't believe you" look on his face and left the room. Antonio politely excused himself to help with his children.

I heard Perry hammering a crucifix above the toilet. I think he needs a vacation away from the house.

Spontaneous Human Combustion

Paul Lewellan, Bettendorf

Lloyd Llandough sat motionless in the green leather chair by the pink marble fireplace. He wore a hand-tailored charcoal-gray suit. His only daughter, Ginny, wore a short jeans skirt, boots, and a black T-shirt advertising her band, Industrial Strength Dirt. She'd shaved her head since they last spoke two years ago. "Your mother's death was a shock," he told her.

"Suicide," she answered. "She swallowed 20 Prozac and drowned in her bathwater. And she wasn't my mother."

He winced. "She was family"

"Not like you're family" Ginny reached for her glass on the walnut end table. It was empty.

His glass was empty, too, but a Chivas bottle rested on the silver tray beside him. She knew in a moment he would reach for it. Alcohol anesthetized him, forcing him to seek stronger stimulants. She had been one of them since she was 12.

Lloyd Llandough once rowed crew at Northwestern, but his youthful body had slumped into middle-aged corpulence. "You disgust me," she whispered as she waited for the next tick of the rosewood clock. Ginny waited for him to rise from the chair, waited for his hands to grab her, waited for his body to press against her. She waited with the still faint hope he would burst into bright white flame, purifying him and her and leaving only soft white ash on the green leather chair.

See Dick Run

Jeffrey Glasen, Rock Island

Formal inquiries failed.

Results of the Reader's Short-Fiction Contest

Written by No Author
Tuesday, 15 April 2003 18:00

Informal now. Business as usual.

By experience Victor knew informal queries were life's manna; the characters were more interesting. His client though was broke, and he was just making good on a marker.

"This cow's dry."

And the world had changed.

"Fucking Internet!"

"Resistance is futile," he grumbled.

Apprehensive fondling of the mouse drew the attention of Jennifer Sapphire. Porn star? No, "Digital Resources Specialist." The library was quiet that afternoon – early spring weather.

His ineptness was charming. Her hushed laughter sang. Jenny was a godsend. He gawked as she typed, moused, and Googled. The decades between them melted as she teased and he blushed.

"Map what?"

"MapQuest."

After a long, goddamn drive into BFE Victor found his man. So he thought.

Gibson is known as "that place north of nowhere, where nothing happens, never will."

The Kwik Shoppe manager said Dick's shift started at 10. He liked the night shift. "Sneaky bastard." What's more, one of Gibson County's four deputies was usually hanging about shooting the shit with Dick.

"Nothing turns out like you expect" – to Victor, a universal truth.

With the compass at 180 degrees he drove home thinking of Jenny.

He hoped to get laid.

Spider in the Sink

R.J. DePaepe, East Moline

The snowy porcelain had a dark space at its center, encircled by a shiny chrome ring, which appeared to be a silver collar that encompassed the heart of a black hole. That black hole led to oblivion.

A small brown object suddenly drew his attention. Joseph stared down at it, trying to make out

Results of the Reader's Short-Fiction Contest

Written by No Author
Tuesday, 15 April 2003 18:00

what it could be.

A long-legged wood spider was lying upside down on the rim of the drain, its legs folded tightly to its abdomen in death. Joseph stared at it, wondering where it had come from. Why had it ended up lying there, at the very lip of the drain hole? Precariously balanced, it appeared to be falling even as it remained motionless. The dead spider seemed to be waiting in anticipation. Joseph wondered if there was as much to wait for in death as there was in life.

A sudden movement above it caught Joseph's attention. His eyes were drawn to a single drop of water at the end of the spout. The drop of water was building under the lip of the faucet, getting ready to fall. Finally gravity took its toll.

He saw the water droplet strike its target squarely and flip the dead spider into the center of the darkness. It slid quickly and effortlessly into the drainpipe, suddenly vanishing while fragments of the drip lay splattered and broken on the porcelain. They shimmered all around the chrome ring, looking weak and small.

Bushfire Moon

Tressna Martin, Australia

We'd been driving down a 500-mile road – only one lane built five foot above swamp with sporadic widenings for passing. The only folk who use it are station hands going into the nearest town for their monthly "piss-up," and the huge cattle road trains – with three or four trailers hooked up, swaying their trailers alarmingly along the highway.

A bushfire moon rose – a huge, mesmerizing orb. The plains were unlit – nothing for miles – black except for the eerie red light of the moon.

Seeing headlights, I try to remember when last the road had widened – how long did I have before I reached another? I kept driving, hoping I'd find one before the car reached me.

Suddenly, I realize the "car" is a road train – thundering down the highway. Would it stop? No.

The lights are larger now ... the road train is bearing down on me ... I can see the outline of it now – black against the red moon ... I glance at Peter one more time and prepare to swing our car over the edge. The road train looms, I can hear it only 50 yards ... I get ready ... hold my breath ... and ... the road widens!!! We roar past each other – the trailers thunder, then pass and the road suddenly narrows

We're driving across the plains to a bushfire moon. I have tears of relief running down my cheeks. Peter half-wakes. "Everything okay, love?" he murmurs.

"Yes love, fine."

The Widow

Amber Quinten, Davenport

Results of the Reader's Short-Fiction Contest

Written by No Author
Tuesday, 15 April 2003 18:00

Heidi caressed the empty page to the right of Bill's last entry. She promised herself she wouldn't smudge his handwriting, yet one tear slipped out. Ink bled down the page, resembling the mascara streaks that trailed the rest of her tears chinward. Bill hated heavy eye makeup, and she had been sure to wear plenty to the funeral.

She was in love with his words. Now that he was gone, she wasn't sure if there was anything else she loved about him. Most of the time Bill annoyed her, but every time he handed her a finished page, she ached with love for him. Now there were merely words and Heidi merely ached. She lay her cheek on the blank page and sobbed, leaving a print of her tiger-striped profile on the once-pristine paper.

By sunset, Heidi's cheeks were raw and the page she lay on had dried into a bumpy relief of her face. She would have fallen asleep there were she not overcome with the feeling that some invisible force was cradling and soothing her. She felt her neck stiffen to examine the watercolor smear.

Heidi grabbed Bill's favorite pen. As her hand guided it across the page, she was surprised to note the handwriting was familiar, but not her own.

Time

D.L. Smith, Adel, Iowa

It wasn't long enough and she knew it. That last second between breathing and not, her heart beating and not I saw the flicker of panic just before she closed her eyes. I was helpless and she knew that too.

I thought of ballads in the dark, kisses on skinned knees, cookies before dinner because I was good, no dinner when I wasn't, laughing. And her crying, whenever she thought I wasn't listening. Crying because of him and him and him.

Only later did I know she loved dancing, long hair but her mother always chopped it off, and she didn't want to marry my father but it was easier than living with the pain. She wanted a job but I was more than enough to deal with, she didn't want to divorce him but did because it was easier than living with the pain, and she took on that string of serial nightmares because it was easier than living alone. And lonely, with him and him and him, was all she ever felt. She hurt me because she thought I would stay longer if wounded. I didn't, didn't call, didn't visit, avoided her with distance and my own string of serial nightmares.

It was all in her words, on tape and in letters. I played them, read them over and over. And I cried because it was easier than holding onto the pain. It wasn't long enough for her, but now I still have time.

The Search

Jill Pearson, Rock Island

He has been searching the cold streets for three hours tonight and swears his brain is frosted

Results of the Reader's Short-Fiction Contest

Written by No Author
Tuesday, 15 April 2003 18:00

over.

Snow masks familiar things. To his amusement, fire hydrants have flopped over and become ice-cream cones. Cars parked along the street resemble a giant white locomotive snaking into the darkness.

But this much he has not forgotten – the dog has vanished. Gone for two days. He hasn't slept.

Back home, wind pulls the front gate hard against its hinges. He'll be sure to oil it when spring comes.

In the warmth of the house, he climbs upstairs – feet numb, head swimming. Finds her submerged in the tub. Steam rises from the floor and through the door to greet him. He swears he can hear his skin cracking like tile as it thaws.

"I shaved my legs," she says absently, white raisin toes splayed toward him. "Feel them."

Editor's note: *Pearson is a regular contributor to the River Cities' Reader and was therefore ineligible to participate in the competition.*