

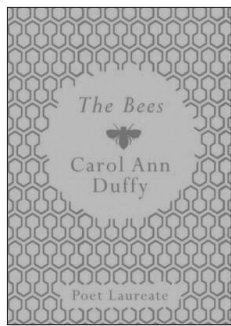
T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry

the shadowing scheme

WINNER

Liam O'Brien on *The Bees* by Carol Ann Duffy

Shakespeare. Don't we all remember one charming ability of English teachers, to drag the works of that brilliant genius down into the tedium of 'who-what-where-when'? Carol Ann Duffy, our poet



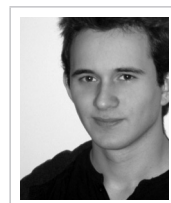
laureate, as clever, insightful and witty as ever, encapsulates the frustration of Year 9 English students across the nation, in this vicious little dagger: 'Mrs Schofield's GCSE'. Structured beautifully into a Shakespearean sonnet, Duffy has a stab at the unimaginative fact-based English teaching with which we are all familiar: 'Who said/Is this a dagger which I see? Which Tragedy?' As a student fresh out of my GCSEs, I need no reminding that 'Nothing will come of nothing'.

She mocks Mrs Schofield, an external examiner at Lutterworth College, who complained about Duffy's controversial poem 'Education For Leisure'. It was reported that this powerful and intriguing piece 'glorified knife crime', so it was banned from the AQA GCSE syllabus. In a stroke of creative genius, Duffy responds to this outrage in 'Mrs Schofield's GCSE' by making allusions to a great number of Shakespeare's plays, with a special emphasis on knives: 'You must prepare your bosom for his knife...Whose blade was drawn which led to Tybalt's death?' With a dazzling lack of subtlety, Duffy shouts the question: if Shakespeare is allowed to do it; why can't I? So it appears the pen is stronger than the sword – I don't think that Mrs Schofield will be bothering her again.

'Last Post' is impossibly different. 'There's coffee in the square/warm French bread'. It is so deeply moving to find war poetry that dares to rhyme the everyday with the catastrophic: 'and all those thousands dead'. Words that express that which seems so trivial, 'a lad plays Tipperary to the crowd', so insignificant, 'and light(s) a cigarette', and yet, creates a realism that surges over the reader. It acts as a foundation for an exposition of the true horrors of war. Everyone has seen footage of the 'lines and lines of British boys', and heard of how the 'shrapnel scythed you to the stinking mud...', but Duffy tells this tragic story with a twist.

We now live in a time, where the 'undo' button on our word processor means no more mistakes. The 'trash' folder in our email client means nothing is ever lost. The 'rewind' key on our remote control means that the story need never end. Carol Ann Duffy explores the idea of reversing the march of thousands of young recruits to their death. The result is euphorically devastating: 'you get up, amazed...and all those thousands dead/are shaking dried mud from their hair... your several million lives still possible'. Unfortunately, she must remind us that this was not the case: 'If poetry could truly tell it backwards,/then it would'.

These poems shocked, entertained, horrified and moved me. I believe that Carol Ann Duffy is an incredible inspiration; this is why I feel that her works should be credited.



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