

# Competition Results

## 2008

### 2008 Competition Results

Winner George Brant, a recent graduate of the James A. Michener Center for Writers, for the play "Elephant's Graveyard."

Brant's play was chosen out of 51 submissions in drama, poetry and fiction. In addition to the Keene Prize, it earned the 2008 David Mark Cohen National Playwriting Award from the Kennedy Center. Produced at the university last fall, it was honored as Best New Play by the Austin Critics' Table.

"'Elephant's Graveyard' is a strikingly original and imaginative drama," said Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, chair of the English Department and of the award selection committee. "Brant uses the true story of Mary, a circus elephant who killed an handler and was executed by hanging, to create a dramatic portrait of small-town Tennessee life in 1916. Employing choruses of townspeople and circus performers who speak directly to the audience but never to each other, Brant transforms a bizarre historical incident into a moving and metaphorically resonant narrative in which the elephant, her loyal trainer, and the ballet girl who makes her entrance wrapped in Mary's trunk, command our sympathy."

Finalist Smith Henderson, master of fine arts candidate at the Michener Center, for his short stories "Number Stations" and "Muscles." The committee singled out Henderson's stories, which are set in his native Montana, for their combination of wry humor, rich detail, convincingly terse dialogue and emotional depth.

Finalist Domenica Ruta, a recent graduate of the Michener Center, for the opening chapters of her novel "Edgewater." The committee praised the novel's large cast of idiosyncratic characters and artful interweaving of scenes, which gradually create the back story of a mysterious murder.

Finalist Sarah Smith, master of fine arts candidate at the Michener Center, for three stories: "The Wild Girl of Western Pennsylvania," "The Bigtime" and "Night Shift at the Don Knotts Memorial Hospital." The committee commended Smith's quirky, poetic voice, and her sharp powers of observation and comic inventiveness, which create intriguing characters.

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### 2007 Competition Results

Winner Will Dunlap, master of fine arts candidate with the Michener Center for Writers, for two short stories "Pastoral Sonata" and "Devotion."

The quirky, mysterious and original "Pastoral Sonata" vividly evokes an old woman who mourns her drowned husband through a bizarre charade of blindness, and imagines his spirit lives on in her pet goldfish. "Devotion," a disturbing story set on the nineteenth-century frontier, has its origin in a historical incident, the murder of a group of defenseless Native Americans by white farmers. Dunlap brilliantly recreates the prose style of the period through the journal entries of his narrator, an itinerant preacher.

"Dunlap's writing has great emotional sensitivity and power," said Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, chair of the English department and a member of the selection committee. "He has a musician's ear for language together with a gift for effective story-telling. And the complexity of his characterization is remarkable: the old woman in 'Pastoral Sonata' turns out to be a musical critic

and an accomplished actress, while the reader slowly realizes that the narrator of 'Devotion' is unreliable and capable of self-deception. Our committee was impressed by Dunlap's versatility: his two stories are completely different in period, style and tone."

Finalist Kate Hagner, master's in creative writing ('07), for "Pear (and other stories)."

Hagner's characters experience mysterious obsessions and undergo strange metamorphoses. Her stories are remarkable for their poetic language, which vividly evokes colors, shapes and textures. "Pear," "Birds" and "Agave" are precisely observed but highly imaginative representations of the interaction between human beings and nature.

Finalist Smith Henderson, master of fine arts candidate with the Michener Center, for his short stories "Twelver" and "Blooms."

"Twelver" was singled out for its command of both poetic and colloquial language, its ingenious mathematical structure, and its imaginative use of motifs like buffalo nickels, dying cows, and exploding volcanoes. His witty account of the culture clash between California and Montana and his excellent evocation of a particular place also drew praise.

Finalist Kevin Jones, master of fine arts candidate with the Michener Center, for his three short stories in "North American Male."

All these stories impressed the committee with the energy of their narrative voices and the author's assured use of dialogue. Judges praised the conceptual originality of "Parts," and the vivid humor of "Uncle to the Rescue."

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## **2006 Competition Results**

Winner Brian Hart, master of fine arts candidate with the Michener Center for writers, for the fictional narrative, "The Dog With the Broken Teeth, The One That Fetches Rocks."

"The wonderful dialogue and closely observed world of Brian's work won us over," said Richard Lariviere, former dean of the College of Liberal Arts. "The quality of the applicant pool was astonishingly high. It was hard to choose, but the consensus of the selection committee was strong."

Finalist George Brant, master of fine arts candidate with the Michener Center, for his play "N O K."

Finalist Seth Harp, economics senior, for his essay "Leaving Iraq."

Finalist Michael McGriff, master of fine arts candidate with the Michener Center, for his poem "Where Light Falls, the Last Detail Becomes the World."

Finalist Jake Silverstein, master of fine arts candidate with the Michener Center, for his novel excerpt "Golden State."