

NEWS RELEASE Thursday 27th August 2009

And The Last Bear Wins

An air of tense anticipation imbued the Studio Theatre at the Edinburgh International Book Festival as author, journalist and broadcaster Brian Morton welcomed the audience and assured those shortlisted for the Robin Jenkins Award that he would endeavour to make the proceedings as painless as possible for them. Sitting in the reserved seats at the front they smiled valiantly.

The other three judges, Professor Isabel Murray, Alan Taylor and Katie Wood were seated on the platform. Brian thanked Forestry Commission Scotland, sponsors of the £5000 Award to highlight the connection of forestry and the environment as an inspiration to modern writers in Scotland. Brian recalled one of the first stories he had written as a young boy, a historical story of people living over a thousand years ago, existing on potatoes, and assured the audience none of the books shortlisted had made such mistakes and all had been very well researched. He spoke briefly, and warmly, about his friend, and former English teacher at Dunoon Grammar School, John Robin Jenkins before, in the eminently skillful manner expected of this seasoned broadcaster, conducting a conversational question and answer session with his fellow judges. This was designed to bring out the criteria for the award, the environment, trees and forestry in Scotland, and their thoughts on how these had been met by the submissions. Comparisons with other authors such as Lewis Grassick Gibbon and Hermann Hesse were mentioned as the judges gave their impressions, the critical discussion lightened by elements of humour and some dissention between judges about whether one particular book by Jenkins had been one of his best or one of his worst.

Michael Russell, Minister for Culture, recounted giving the first Robin Jenkins

Memorial lecture at Cowalfest in 2005 and his unveiling of a sculpture, commissioned by Cowalfest, in Benmore Botanic Garden in 2007. Certificates were handed out to all the shortlisted authors before the envelope containing the title of the winning entry was opened, the Last Bear by Mandy Haggith, published by Two Ravens Press. Mandy then gave a short and moving reading from her work.

Speaking about the award, Minister for Culture Michael Russell said: "The Robin Jenkins Award celebrates the close links between Scotland's natural heritage and our culture and I was delighted to present Mandy with the first ever award and to hear her eloquent recital of the winning work.

"Jenkins truly is one of the greatest novelists and this award is a fitting tribute, which not only highlights the key role nature has had in shaping our culture, but I hope, reawakens interest in Jenkins"

"It's a huge honour to win this prize," said Mandy, " and I'm delighted that the spirit of Robin Jenkins' work is being kept alive through this award. My novel looks back a thousand years seeking to understand why we destroyed our woods and to contemplate a society that lived alongside bears. Re-establishing our forests is not just about planting trees - it's also about nurturing a culture that is closer to nature. I am thrilled that the story of The Last Bear has been recognised as part of that effort."

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Photographs available

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