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Writers' FORUM

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

This month Douglas McPherson explains why he had to take the twist out of the serial story he was writing, at the editor's request. We're often told that stories should be full of surprises and reviewers are careful to avoid spoilers. But studies show that people enjoy reading the same book over and over again precisely because they can relive the feelings of enjoyment without the worry about where the plot is going. 'Surprises are foolish things,' Jane Austen wrote in *Emma*. 'The pleasure is not enhanced, and the inconvenience is often considerable.' It's why writers are able to keep reusing the 'hero versus monster' plot, even though the readers know that good will prevail in the end. Real life has shocks and uncertainty, and an unknown outcome. We can be forgiven for seeking comfort in an old and well-worn story.

Write soon, Carl



Don't miss issue #190 on sale from 13 July

Writers' Forum

Select Publisher Services Ltd
PO Box 6337
Bournemouth BH1 9EH
TEL 01202 586848

PUBLISHER Tim Harris
EDITOR Carl Styants
CHIEF SUB Wendy Reed

Photography and artwork
With thanks to Shutterstock
COVER IMAGE Tithi Luadthong

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AD SALES MANAGER Wendy Kearns
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CIRCULATION MANAGER Tim Harris
PRODUCTION MANAGER John Beare
IT MANAGER Vince Jones

Subscription rates (12 issues)
UK £38, EUROPE £49, ROW £56
SUBSCRIPTION MANAGER Chris Wigg
EMAIL chris@selectps.com

PRINTED BY
Precision Colour Printing, Halesfield 1,
Stirchley, Telford TF7 4QQ
DISTRIBUTED BY
Seymour Ltd, 2 East Poultry Avenue,
London EC1A 9PT

Registered in England. Registered Number
5450559. Registered Office: Princecroft Willis
LLP, Towngate House, 2-8 Parkstone Road, Poole
BH15 2PW. A catalogue record for this magazine
is available. British Library. ISSN 1467-2529

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newsFRONT

The latest in the world of books, the internet and publishing – written by you

Follow the money

● *Trainspotting* author Irvine Welsh says young writers who want to make a living should consider writing for TV.

Welsh made his name and fortune with his novel about heroin addicts in Edinburgh – but admits he's one of the lucky ones.

He told *The Times*: 'I'd say to any young writer, 'If you want to write novelistically, write for long-form TV or write genre, if you aim to make money.'

'I know a lot of young writers don't want to write genre but their publisher or agent says, "Build a brand with the same character in every book," or "Make this into a thriller – that's what people are buying."

'It is very hard to say now, "I am going to write literary fiction,"' he added.

But Welsh admitted that writing had been good to him. He recounted telling his friend, the actor Richard E Grant, that he regarded himself as upper class. He said: 'The middle class have jobs to worry about. They have to go into the same office week in, week out. They have rent, and bills. I don't have any of that. It's that upper-crust thing:

VAT rules change for ebooks

● UK consumers could end up paying less for ebooks following a European Parliament vote to allow individual EU countries to align the VAT rate of ebooks to the rate applicable to printed publications. Ebooks are currently taxed in the UK at the standard rate of 20 per cent, as rules have only allowed a reduced rate to apply to printed publications. Printed books are currently rated at zero per cent VAT in the UK.

Alan Peace, from accounting, tax and advisory practice Blick Rothenberg, said the publishing industry will be waiting with 'baited breath' to learn what the new UK Government decides to do on this issue. 'There are a number of possible scenarios,' he said. 'To reduce the VAT on ebooks to zero, reduce the VAT on ebooks to five per cent but at the same time increase the VAT on printed books to five per cent, or simply leave the rate for ebooks at 20 per cent.'



getting paid to do your hobby – a leisureed life.' **Dawn Fraser**

Hobby hopes

● New writers are among the large group of people who have been turning their hobbies into income streams in the last few years. A study from insurance company Axa has found that of the two million new businesses started in the UK in the last three

years, an increasing number are based on a past-time or passion. Forty per cent of 2016 startups said they developed their business out of a hobby, compared to just 17 per cent of those who started up five years ago or more.

The most common hobby-based businesses involved selling collectible items online, such as vintage records. Next were those selling their own arts and crafts. Writing, including blogging and copywriting, came third, followed by games development and photography.

However, the study found just four in ten of those who had turned a hobby into a business in that time have managed to make a full-time job out of it – most remain spare cash or part-time.

Axa MD Gareth Howell said: 'The economic pressures that fuel the gig or freelance economy are well documented, but our study highlights that there is a very real pursuit of happiness and liberty going on here too. People want to do something that gives them a sense of pride and craftsmanship, as well as to make money.'

Audiobook grant

● Audiobook giant Audible has launched the UK's first writing grant exclusively for audiobooks. The 'Audible New Writing Grant: The Crime Edition' invites promising crime writers to submit an unpublished thriller of 50,000 words or more to a panel of experts. Entry is free, and a shortlist of three candidates will be announced in early 2018. The winning author will be selected by a judging panel that includes crime writers Mark Billingham and Sharon Bolton, audiobook narrator Clare Corbett, *Daily Telegraph* crime critic Jake Kerridge, and Audible's director of content, Laurence Howell.

The winning author will receive a £10,000 advance against royalties for an exclusive Worldwide English audio publication deal, as well as mentoring from the judges.

To enter, applicants must email (in Word or PDF format) a copy of their manuscript, a submission letter and a synopsis of the story to crimegrant@audible.co.uk by

'Library' book wins debut romance prize

● Lancashire-based author Kate Field has won the Romantic Novelists' Association's prestigious Joan Hessayon Award for new writers, with her contemporary novel *The Magic of Ramblings* (Accent Press). Field was presented with her award and a cheque for £1000 at the RNA's Summer Party in London.

The book was selected from a shortlist of 11 – all debut novels that have been accepted for publication after their authors passed through the Romantic Novelists' Association New Writers Scheme. Each year 250 places are offered to unpublished romance writers.

In Field's book, heroine Cassie sets up a community library in a remote Lancashire village. It was inspired by the writer's own volunteer work with a community library in her local village hall.

midnight on 30 November 2017.
Visit www.audible.co.uk/CrimeGrant for full details.

PLR extended to ebooks

● New legislation has extended Public Lending Right (PLR) to remote loans of ebooks and audiobooks. Authors will now be able to receive PLR payments for books and audiobooks whether loaned in the library or online. This will be welcome news to many authors – there are around four million ebook loans per year.

PLR are currently updating their systems to allow authors to register their ebooks and e-audiobooks. It is hoped that more information on the registration process will be available in the autumn of this year. PLR payments for ebooks and e-audiobooks will only apply to loans made after 1 July 2018 and the first payments will be paid, in arrears, in early 2020.

Sally Jenkins

CWA libraries champion

● The Crime Writers' Association has appointed its first Libraries Champion, Irish historian and crime author Ruth

Mapping out characters

● It's enough to induce a severe case of writer's block – the thought that a piece of fiction might accidentally libel someone. But now blockbusting author Jilly Cooper has shared her secret method of ensuring that doesn't happen: using the names of towns and villages for characters.

Cooper, 80, has written a string of bestsellers featuring a host of characters who make a habit of misbehaving. She told family history website *Find My Past*: 'You have to be very careful not to use real people's names by mistake, as they might sue you if they behave badly in the story. I find it safer to use local towns and villages for surnames.'

The *Daily Telegraph* suggested her characters inspired by place names may include polo player Bas Baddingham (Badingham is in Suffolk) and Lysander Hawkley, the title character in her novel *The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous* (Hawkley is in Hampshire). However Cooper admitted she doesn't always follow her own advice, naming one naughty fictional goat after a writer who gave her a bad review. She said the woman took it 'very well and said it was such a nice goat that she didn't mind'.

It's not a foolproof system, of course, as many real people share the names of towns and villages, such as Michael Bolton, Alex Kingston, Tony Blackburn and Barbara Windsor.

Dawn Fraser



Dudley Edwards. The CWA aims to work with libraries nationwide to support the public library network, promote the value of reading for people of all ages and from all backgrounds, and promote crime writing.

Ruth Dudley Edwards said: 'I'm delighted to have this chance to build on the already close relationship CWA members enjoy with librarians throughout the United Kingdom. I've never met a crime writer who didn't love libraries.'

Anne Frank poem sold

● A handwritten poem by Anne Frank has sold for \$155,000 – and the seller has donated \$50,000 for a Holocaust memorial.

The signed poem, dated 28 March 1942, is addressed to 'Cri-Cri', Christiane van Maarsen, who later gave the poem to her sister Jacqueline, because she had been closer to Anne.

Jacqueline said that at a lecture a young girl had once asked her: 'What would you ask Anne if she

were here with us right now?'

Jacqueline replied: 'I would ask how she feels about the fact that her diary is one of the most important documents focusing attention on the 1.5 million Jewish children who were murdered by the Nazis. And what she thinks of me, her introverted friend, who now regularly appears in the spotlight to talk about her.'

The memorial will feature the names of more than 102,000 Dutch Jews who were killed in the Holocaust.

Cathy Bryant

ODD SPOT BY HUGH SCOTT



With the arrival of his niece, Derek realised that his writing schedule was well and truly scuppered.

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Please send items to news@writers-forum.com You can cover any topic that will be **useful, interesting or amusing** to writers. The subject should be big enough to appeal to a national/global readership although local news might still inspire or entertain writers in other regions. Get writing and good luck!



Start it Write it Finish it

Douglas
McPherson gets
some writing
tips from
lawyer-turned-
crime novelist
Neil White

Write what you know is a maxim that worked for Neil White, who spent ten years writing a couple of crime thrillers set in America but only got a publishing deal when he rewrote them and changed the setting to Lancashire, where he lives.

'The view of the publishers was, why would you want an English person writing an American thriller when there are plenty of good American thriller writers?' says White, a criminal lawyer who has since authored ten crime novels including the 2011 bestseller *Cold Kill*.

'A publisher commented I didn't have a feel for the tone and language of a book set in America. It's probably a subconscious thing. When you write dialogue you reflect the people that you hear and I suppose I wasn't getting those American rhythms. I relied too much on television cliché.'

White got his love of America from a childhood spent listening to his dad's Johnny Cash records. In fact, his first non-crime book, *Lost in Nashville*, is a fictionalised account of a 50th birthday trip to the States to visit places pertinent to Cash's career.

'I remember sitting in a little house in Wakefield listening to songs about being in a boxcar, rolling across the plains. It was always stories about this mysterious world on the other side of the Atlantic that to me sounded really exciting.'

In his teens, White was an avid reader of Stephen King and James Herbert.

'I enjoyed the feeling of being frightened by books but eventually I found myself being not quite as frightened – and that was the whole point of reading them.'

He later turned to crime novelists like John Grisham and Lee Child.

'A crime novel poses a question and your curiosity demands to know the answer;

that's why you hang in with them. Plus, a lot of what happens in a crime novel could be true. You often find worse things happen in real life crime than in fiction.'

White began writing soon after beginning his legal career in the mid-'90s. His first effort, *Salem*, was inspired by the historical Lancashire case of the Pendle Hill witches. White used the idea as background for a present-day thriller set in Massachusetts.

'I was reading a lot of American crime fiction at the time,' White explains. 'As a lawyer, if I spotted legal errors in a British book it spoiled the story for me, whereas an American book could be full of errors and I wouldn't know!'

The manuscript netted him an agent, but they were unable to find a publisher. Having parted company, White self-published 1000 copies of *Salem*, most of which he admits ended up as insulation in his attic. He did, however, send some of the books to agents and secured fresh representation by Sonia Land of Sheil Land Associates.

By then, White was working on a new novel about baseball players being shot in Indiana. Again, it failed to find a publisher.

Because of his day job and young family, White's writing time was limited and by that point a decade had slipped by.

'I'd told myself I'd write three books and if I got nowhere with them I'd take the hint that whatever I was doing wasn't good enough,' White recalls. 'Because I'd got an agent early on, then another agent, I always felt like I was nearly there. But having written two books, I was struggling to find motivation to write the third.'

Then his agent suggested he rewrite his baseball story with an English setting.

At first, he admits he didn't find his local scenery as appealing as small-town Indiana. 'But I started to look around



and what I initially saw as just industrial grime, I started to see more romantically. You start to see it as a setting.'

Reworked in a couple of months, the result was *Fallen Idols*, which now concerned the murder of English footballers. One of the place names from the original draft lived on, however, in the surname of the novel's sleuth, crime reporter Jack Garrett.

With *Fallen Idols* snapped up by HarperCollins, White found the motivation to complete his third manuscript, which became his second novel, *Lost Souls*.

For book three it was suggested he reset *Salem* in the Lancashire landscape of the Pendle Hill witches, which had originally inspired it. So his initially rejected and then self-published story was eventually published as *Last Rites*.

It was with his fifth novel, *Cold Kill*, that White achieved bestseller status, topping the ebook chart throughout July 2011.

'That was the year that Kindles became big,' White reflects. 'Publishers learnt how to exploit pricing. So I rode that initial



I asked myself what would be the biggest scoop for a crime reporter

wave. I think I probably got in there at just the right time.'

Now contracted to write a book a year, White likes to begin with the characters.

'For the Parker brothers series, which began with *Next to Die* (Sphere), I met the publisher to discuss the idea of a new series and literally on the train down I came up with two brothers: one's a defence lawyer and the other's a police officer. You've got conflict there, straightaway.

'Then I'd think of the background for a murderer and put the murder within the framework of the defence lawyer and police officer in conflict.'

For *Dead Silent*, a title in White's first series, the plot came directly from his

main character, Jack Garrett.

'I asked myself what would be the biggest scoop for a reporter, and decided it would probably be to find Lord Lucan. So I came up with the idea of a Lucan-type character who agrees to come out of hiding if the reporter proves his innocence first.'

Other villains are inspired by real-life monsters such as the American serial killer Dennis Rader, on whom White based the murderer in *Cold Kill*.

One of White's trademarks is to have two protagonists working on the same case from different directions. It was a technique he developed in *Fallen Idols* with Garrett and his girlfriend, a detective.

'It drives the plot, because you have people who are attached but permanently in conflict,' the writer explains. 'But it's also good because you can alternate between the two perspectives and I hope that as the reader is reading about one character they want to find out what the other one's doing. So flipping back and forth keeps the pages turning.

'Another tip is to end each scene or

chapter with a question: *Why have they run out of the room? What news have they had?* End it so people want to go back to that strand and find out what happens.'

Asked how much he knows about his characters when he begins, White says: 'With the Parker brothers, I always thought the lawyer was a slight version of me, because I'm a lawyer. What would I be like if I was single and 32 years old? I can just transplant me into that scenario.

'With the detective it was, what if he was a more staid version of me? Perhaps the married me? I meet a lot of police in my everyday job, so I can usually think of someone I know.'

White recommends the character template in writing software Scrivener as a good way of focusing on physical details and motivations. But he warns against planning characters too much in advance.

'Writing things like character profiles and character arcs can often be a way of putting off starting. You think you're writing a book, but you're actually thinking about writing a book.

'I would say start the book and develop the characters as you're writing. The one I'm writing now, for instance, I'm two-thirds through and I've just discovered one of the villain's motivations. So when I come to the end I'll go back to the beginning and add things that shape that character to reflect that motivation.'

White takes the same approach to plotting. 'I'll have some idea of the climactic finish: a chase across the moors or something. But I'll often be halfway through and think, I know where I want to be, but I don't know how to get there. That's the worst bit, because by then it's too late to go back and scrap it.

'But now I'm on my eleventh thriller, I don't panic any more. I tell myself, just take a few days off, sit there with a bottle of wine and a pen and pad and something will come to you. And it always does.

'The best advice I've ever had,' White concludes, 'is start it, write it, finish it. So many people find an excuse not to start, or never stop finessing it. But no one ever said, "I hated that book but there was one really good paragraph on page 37," or, "I loved that book but it just needed an extra sentence on page 38."

'Obviously try to make it as good as you can, but don't spend the rest of your life trying to make it perfect. Get it out there and let people read it.'

• Neil White's new novel *From the Shadows* is published by Bonnier Zaffre on 10 August (paperback) and available now for Kindle. See www.neilwhite.net

Writers' CIRCLE

Your news and views, writing tips and funny stories

TITLE DEED

Georgie Moon (Letters, issue #188) wrote in about not being able to start writing without a title. I use *Working Title* when stuck. Other starter titles Georgie might consider are *View from X or X*; *Tales from the Sixties/Seventies* etc for school memoirs, or *Sailing in X* for the holiday piece. Hope these suggestions remove the writing block.

Helen Gaen, Oxford

BOSS BABY!

Who knew an 'accountability buddy' could be so effective – and found so close to home? I shared with my seven-and-a-half-year-old son that I was writing a radio play. He showed real interest in it and even asked to read it out loud with me. Ever since, I've been getting a daily reminder that I should be writing the next scene.

If I suggest watching TV, he's there, complete with a trace of irritation in his voice. 'Scene 8, Mum!' Unlike the piles of discarded toys and games which captured his imagination for a day tops, his focus on the play is laser-light. The characters have really come to life thanks to chatting about them with my son. Now writing and family feel like compatible goals.

Nicky Torode, via email

BOX CLEVER

A news item in issue #188 lamented the rising popularity of the video boxset and its detrimental impact on reading habits. I'd like to point out that it's not all bad news – there has been a similar increase in

MOTIVATION

Send your letters to Emily at mentor@writers-forum.com



Emily Cunningham of The Write Factor publishing agency helps you find the way forward with your writing

THE MENTOR

I hate writing

I am writing to you with a curious problem in that the answer seems plain, but it isn't to me. My problem is that I don't enjoy writing. You would think that the solution would be simply not to do it, but then I would feel as if I had let something that is important to me go. What should I do?

Emma, Fishguard

A thorny conundrum, Emma, and one that I can relate to. Without wanting to steal your thunder, this is a battle that I have struggled with all my writing life, so I completely understand the difficult place you find yourself in.

You can see that you have a talent for

episodes of hysterical self-congratulation as you fleetingly believe you've nailed that particular sentence and are surely destined to join the ranks of the immortals, only to be confronted the next morning with an appalling string of clichés that no sane human could read without cringing.

(*Guardian Books*, 3 March 2009)



to change your perspective about the process, I've been nodding about brain-training recently and boggled at how the brain is far more plastic than we know. We generally believe that our feelings about things are fairly static; that their foundations were laid down years ago and are non-negotiable. Now, neuroscientists have discovered that these foundations are malleable. For example, in your case, you have the thought process: 'Writing makes me unhappy, therefore I don't want to do it.' This has developed because your brain has formed a neural pathway between the concept of writing and the emotion of unhappiness. The two have become linked (probably due to a negative early experience of it) so whenever you think about writing you feel down.

The great news is that you can renege your brain so it forms a new neural pathway, this time between writing and satisfaction. The secret is to go outside your comfort zone and approach writing differently. Try a writing exercise that is easy and fun for just two minutes. Reward yourself afterwards. Rinse and repeat. This will help carve a new pathway in your brain and you will discover that writing is not the grind you anticipate.

In conclusion, Emma, the fact that you have written to me for help suggests that you want to find a way around this problem, rather than abandoning your writing altogether, and this means that there is hope for the future. Take a deep breath, pick up your pen and start writing once more.

Tips to take away

■ Try Lorna's strategy and start emailing a friend. Use this to develop characters, plots and vignettes. The joy of the new arrival in your inbox will help you stay motivated.

■ Give your brain-training a nudge by looking back over work you feel proud of. The sense of achievement will help forge positive associations for your writing.

■ Add writing to your daily routine: brush teeth, empty dishwasher, veto for

I no longer feel dwarfed by the enormity of the task

never replace the value of writing for you because, as you said yourself, you would have let something important to you go. You recognise that it would be a loss not to write. I don't mean a loss for other people – although I'm sure that's true! I mean for yourself. You would not be appreciating yourself fully or acknowledging your ability. As the American saying goes, you wouldn't be 'your best self'. When I mentioned my ambivalence towards creative writing to my colleague Lorna Howarth at The Write Factor, she was quick to applaud the contribution.

too, that although it feels unpleasant at the time, it does reap dividends. Writing is a way of processing your thoughts and crystallising your point of view. Will Self said: 'Fiction is my way of thinking about and relating to the world; if I don't write I'm not engaged in any process, and lose all purchase.'

A second benefit is that you feel a sense of pride that you have created something. You didn't shy away from it, you soldiered on and achieved. Perhaps one way to approach it is to think that there are hundreds of tasks you dislike doing but

consumption of ebook 'boxsets'.

As with TV, readers love binge-reading a complete series from a favourite author or a genre set of standalone novels.

These ebook series do particularly well on Kobo and the field is wide open to self-publishers. Get writing!

Sally Jenkins, Sutton Coldfield, W Mids

ART LESSON



I have friend who's a very talented artist, and over the years I've enjoyed watching her work evolve and grow. I've seen how paint on a canvas, when added in layers (and sometimes scraped back), brings an artist's work alive. And I've learnt how the same technique, when applied to writing and especially fiction, can bring stories to life.

Like paintings, stories start with some basic form – an idea, words scribbled on paper, a beginning, middle and end. But it's

only when we add 'layers' to our stories that they really begin to take shape.

I've discovered that when something I've written isn't working, even though I believe in the story, the something that's missing is layers. And it's not always about adding an extra character to push the plot along, but something as subtle as tapping into the senses we're blessed with, adding atmosphere and depth. It can be frustrating, but very rewarding when we get the layers right!

Judith Caine, Donvale, Australia

LIMBO LEAP

As a recent graduate (of anthropology) I'd entered limbo. In other words, I had no idea what I wanted to do. Four years at university taught me that I loved writing essays, and I contributed articles to the university website. I have been keeping a blog about my travels

and also one for children's poems (I look after children part time).

After spotting a poetry competition for a children's anthology in your magazine, I decided to send in one of my silly Gruffalo-style poems. Guess what? It was chosen and published! I now have the confidence to enter more competitions and to perhaps have a pop at this whole writing thing.

Amy Buxton, Mickleover, Derbyshire

LOVE HATE

I loved Emma's question for The Mentor regarding her hatred of writing (#188 issue). Emily Cunningham's response was brilliant, with examples of quotations from famous writers who have had the same problem.

Writing is such an unusual hobby and I think the dislike can come from the issues surrounding it. There is the fear of people ridiculing you, self-doubt and, worst of all, wondering if it is a



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waste of time. I think these are what can steal your joy.

For me, I find a certain amount of guilt attached to my writing. There's a million other jobs I should be doing, but instead I invest some spare time for this hobby, working on small goals that might amount to nothing but will be part of my apprenticeship.

Many other hobbies such as building a shed, planting seeds and keeping fit do offer results, but sometimes the millions of words we write might never receive any recognition. As Emma indicated, there is a sense of loss when not writing and I think this loss is more painful than the rejection and scepticism of others. I wish Emma good luck!

**Cindy Shanks,
Todmorden, Lancs**

PEN FRIENDS

As I'm sure your readers are aware, writers can be very particular in the equipment they use. Sylvia Plath used a Sheaffer fountain pen, Dylan Thomas a Parker 51, and John Steinbeck used Blackwing pencils, to name but a few.

Many famous writers have chosen to use a pen or a pencil in preference to a keyboard, finding it more creative to push and pull something over a piece of paper. Stephen King described his Waterman fountain pen as 'the world's finest word-processor' and said that it forced him to slow down and think about every word. Graham Greene said: 'My two fingers on a typewriter have never connected with my brain. My hand on a pen does.'

The Writing Equipment Society is an organisation for people who are interested in all types of

writing equipment. The majority of members are interested in fountain pens, both vintage and modern, and many have extensive collections. Others collect ball pens and propelling or mechanical pencils, inkwells, letter-openers, blotters, writing slopes, stamp boxes and so on.

The society maintains an extensive library full of historical information relating to writing equipment that members can access. We have experts who are frequently called upon by auction houses to advise on authenticity and valuations. The society also runs training courses and creates DVDs on fountain pens so that these heritage items can be used in the future. There are members who will service or repair items for a small charge.

Additionally, WES produces a quality magazine full of interesting articles. Membership is £35 per year. If you wish to know more, you can find us at www.wesonline.org.uk or contact me by email: steven.hinchliffe@wesonline.org.uk

**Steven Hinchliffe,
Writing Equipment
Society**

LUCKED OUT

So many articles and responses to readers' queries in writing magazines end with 'Good luck!' I don't find this encouraging at all – rather the opposite.

Perhaps we should be wished, 'May your printer not pack in the night before the deadline,' or 'May your competition judge arise from the favourable side of the bed.' These I understand, but 'Good luck'? I don't get it!

**Pauline Barnett,
Stockport**

FIRST DRAFT

Oh dear, it looks like Neil Gaiman was having a bad writing day. Can you spot the 20 errors in this 'first draft' of *American Gods*?

Shadow had done three year in prison. He was big enough, and looked don't-fuck-with-me enough, that his problem was killing time. So he kept himself in shape, and taut himself coin tricks, and thought alot about how much he lived his wife.

The best thing – in Shadows opinion, perhaps the only good thing – about being in prison was a feeling of relief. The feeling that he had plunged as low he could plunge and he'd hit bottom. He didn't worry that the man is going to get him, because the man had got him. He did not wake in prison with a feeling of dread; he was no longer scarred of what tomorrow might bring, because yesterday had bought it.

It did not matter, shadow decided, if you had done what you had been convicted of not. In his experience every-one he met in prison was agrieved about something: there was always something the authorities had got wrong, something they said you did when you didn't – or you didn't do quite like they said you didn't. What was important was that they have got you.

He had noticed it in the the first few days, When everything, from the slang to the bad food was new. Despite the misery and the utter skin crawling horror of incarceration, he was breathing relief.

Sent in by Shona Small, from Hendy, Swansea, who wins £25

Corrections
I done three years (plural). 2 and 12 convicted of or not (missing word). 13 everyone he met (no hyphen). 14 agrieved (spelling). 15 quite like they said you did (not 'didn't'). 16 they had got you (wrong tense). 17 in the first few days (the) repeated. 18 days, when everything (no capital). 19 food, 20 utter was new (missing comma).
had brought (spelling).
sare (spelling). 10 yesterday going to (wrong tense). 9 no longer he (missing word). 8 the man was relief (spelling). 7 plunged as low as opinion (apostrophe). 6 feeling of wife (spelling). 5 in Shadow's (separate words). 4 he loved his taught (spelling). 3 thought a lot

£25 Could you ruin a passage from a modern novel? Send your error-ridden First Draft (around 250 words), and the 20 solutions, to firstdraft@writers-forum.com Please note that entries are accepted via email only. We pay £25 for the best published.

GET STARTED

Slay the dragon

Douglas McPherson shows you how to use the oldest plot in the world



- He's given special or magical weapons, and embarks on a long and hazardous journey to the monster's lair.
- The hero fights the monster. He's outmatched or captured and his death seems imminent.
- The hero escapes and kills the monster with a combination of his special weapons and the monster's single vulnerability or blind spot.
- With the threat vanquished, the hero is rewarded with treasure, status and/or marriage to the princess.

To reinvent that plot for a new audience, all you have to do is insert a new setting and monster.

Space opera

In *Star Wars*, for example, the exact same plot is transferred to outer space:

- The monster is an evil Empire personified by Darth Vader, who happens to be holding a literal princess (Princess Leia) captive.
- The plucky hero, Luke Skywalker, is called to rescue the princess from the monster.
- He's given magical weapons in the form of a light sabre and 'the Force', and embarks on a long and hazardous journey to the monster's lair – the Death Star.
- Luke fights Vader's forces but he's outmatched, captured and his death seems imminent.
- Luke escapes and destroys the Death Star using his special weapon – the Force – and the Death Star's one vulnerability or blind spot.

According to Christopher Booker's landmark book, there are only *Seven Basic Plots*. So if you're stuck for a story, why not use one of those off-the-peg plots that appear time and again throughout the history of storytelling? Plenty of other authors have, after all, whether knowingly or not.

That last point is important. Booker's plots are so ubiquitous that, once you recognise them, you will probably find that you have already used some of them unwittingly.

That being the case, it makes sense to begin writing with one

of the seven templates in mind. This way, rather than having to figure out the plot as you go along, you will already know which elements to include – and when.

It will also stop you missing out a vital ingredient that the reader has come to expect from such a story, and therefore could mean the difference between success or rejection.

Dragon's den

The oldest written story, discovered in poem form on a clay tablet 5000 years old, is that of slaying the dragon or defeating the monster. You

will be familiar with folklore versions such as St George and the Dragon or Jack and the Beanstalk, in which the monster is a giant.

The plot is far from restricted to sword and sorcery tales of knights and dragons, however. You could set it anywhere.

That 5000-year-old first poem, and all the variations since, unfolds as follows:

- A monster presents a threat to a large community or kingdom. As an optional extra, the monster may also be holding a princess captive.
- The plucky hero is called to kill the monster/rescue the princess.

The monster should be ruthless, heartless and implacable, with no redeeming features whatsoever

War story

Alistair MacLean's novel and the subsequent film, *The Guns of Navarone*, transfers the plot to the Second World War:

- *The monster is a pair of giant German guns that threaten the safe passage of thousands of Allied troops through a narrow strait.*
- *The hero(es) are a small band of commandos called to destroy the monster.*
- *They're given special weapons (explosives) and embark on a long and hazardous journey to the monster's lair - a cliff-top cave.*
- *The heroes are outnumbered by the German defenders, and face imminent death.*
- *But they escape to exploit the guns' single vulnerability - the sentries' blind spot - and use their special weapons to destroy the monster.*

Maclean, not incidentally, describes the guns as *like some nightmare monsters from another ancient world*, and refers to them as *evil* and *sinister* - which

is exactly what a monster should be.

Bond film

An example of how easily this plot can be adapted is that it forms the structure of almost every James Bond film:

- *The monster is an evil madman bent on world domination.*
- *The spymaster, 'M', calls Bond to kill the monster.*
- *He's given special weapons in the form of a gadget-laden Aston Martin etc, and embarks on a hazardous journey to the monster's lair - an underground cavern.*
- *Bond is outnumbered by the villain's forces, captured and faces imminent death...*
- *...but he escapes and kills the monster with a combination of his special weapons and the madman's single vulnerability.*
- *His reward, of course, is the rescued 'princess'!*

Your turn

To write your own dragon-slaying story based on this

timeless formula, all you need are a fresh setting and characters. Even the basic qualities the characters need are a given.

The monster should represent a threat to a large group of people, so it's not just the hero's life at stake but the wider community. That could be the coastal town menaced by a giant shark in *Jaws*, or the entire world threatened by alien invaders.

The monster should be utterly ruthless, heartless and implacable, with no redeeming features whatsoever. We must want the monster to be killed.

Make it truly monstrous: physically repellent, even when in human form, although it could take any form from an animal to a robot or virus. It could be an organisation, but if so, like the Empire in *Star Wars*, it should be personified by a single leader who can be killed (like cutting the head off a beast).

Importantly, the monster must have a single vulnerability that only the hero gets close enough to exploit. That could be Dracula's weakness for stakes and garlic, or a human failing such as overconfidence. He'll also need a formidable 'lair'.

The hero, meanwhile, should be the polar opposite of the monster. He's good versus the evil. Where the monster is self-serving, our hero is altruistic, risking his life to save others.

Don't forget to give him a special weapon; a hazardous journey overcoming progressively bigger obstacles; a princess to rescue, and a reward for his bravery!

Next issue

We'll look at four more ready-to-use plots.



TAKE THE STEP

Lesson 1

The oldest plot in the world has been used over and over again. You just need a new monster and setting.

Lesson 2

The monster in a dragon-slaying story doesn't have to be a dragon. It could be a giant octopus, Triffid, madman, alien, or something grounded in reality such as a particularly formidable submarine.

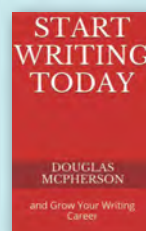
Lesson 3

The monster should almost win, before the hero escapes to snatch victory from the jaws of death.

Homework

Create the most terrifying monster you can think of. It could be human, alien or supernatural, but make it a threat to a town, a country or the world. Then create a hero, a plucky David to your monster's Goliath, and arm him with a special weapon to exploit the monster's single weakness. Follow the template and write a dragon-slaying bestseller!

• *Start Writing Today* by Douglas McPherson is available as an ebook to download from Amazon now



TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Douglas shares writing tips he's learned through experience

#30 Give your hero a feminine side

Ever wondered why so many stories end with a wedding, or at least the union of hero and heroine? It's because the most satisfying stories depict a journey to maturity. Through their tests and struggles, the hero or heroine grows up. A wedding represents their newfound adulthood. But a wedding also symbolises the way the characters grow, by uniting the male and female qualities within themselves to create a balanced whole. A hero needs the 'masculine' qualities of strength and courage, but also the 'feminine' qualities of compassion and love to make him a force for good. Without them he'd be a self-ish villain. The heroine, meanwhile, may need to find her 'masculine' strengths in order to progress, or become more open to her femininity before she can accept love. Let your characters join to form a whole, but also let them bring out the whole self within each other.

- If you have a question about getting started as a writer, please email Douglas at gettingstarted@writers-forum.com



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Tales of my GURU

by Hugh Scott

This month the mystery mentor explains why questions are dangerous

The ship heaved, and something soft and heavy bumped against my back, clutched my shoulder and breathed: 'Sorry.' And clinging to me was the Venus de Milo before her arms fell off.

'Let me buy you a coffee,' she said, and we swayed into the coffee bar, swayed while we collected the coffee, and swayed while we sat trying to keep the coffee level.

'What I want to know,' she breathed, 'is, is it better to use an extensive vocabulary or a simple vocabulary?'

For a moment I was baffled by 'is, is', then I was baffled by the literary question, as opposed to a more natural 'My name is Venus,' or –

'My name is Venus,' she murmured. 'Is it better –?'

'Ahoy, there,' murmured a voice, and down sat an old sea dog who had *I AM YOUR GURU* printed on his T-shirt.

(For new readers, my Guru is a spirit of the universe especially created to advise: me on my amateur writing, and to interrupt when I am bought coffee by a goddess.)

'Any chance of a bun?' he asked her, and she was back in a blink with another coffee and some buns. 'The question concerning vocabulary is not valid,' my Guru told her. 'It implies that an extensive vocabulary is better than a simple vocabulary, or vice versa. It implies that somebody knows better than everybody else about this and has the right to decide.

'Some writers,' he said, 'do take it upon themselves to tell you which is better. They will also tell you that you shouldn't use adjectives. They will declare that short sentences are better than long sentences, and that short paragraphs are better than long paragraphs and that dialogue is better than narrative, and show is better than tell...' My Guru hesitated. He nibbled his bun. He sipped his coffee. He looked me in the eye. 'Even though,' he said, very, very quietly, 'they don't know the difference between *show* and *irrelevant detail*.'

(This, I should mention, refers to an ancient stand-off between my Guru and certain writers.)

Then he bit his bun more enthusiastically and continued: 'And they will tell you that short stories are harder to write than novels; that writing for children is easy,



that one particular typeface is better than others, that you shouldn't use the word *pink*! Oh, and so on! The questions that receive these answers are literary versions of "How long is a piece of string?"

'Are you saying,' said Venus, 'that we shouldn't ask? I do want to know the answers, my dear.'

'The answer to all these questions is: *It depends*. Sometimes an extensive vocabulary suits the story, and sometimes a simple vocabulary. Sometimes a short sentence is apt, and sometimes a longer sentence is preferable. And so on. It really does depend.

'And certainly, you must ask. Asking is valid. The questions are not, because each question implies that there is a right answer and a wrong answer, whereas there is no definitive answer. If you get a definitive answer, the person answering is wrong, because the answer always is: *It depends*.

'If you are writing for a particular magazine, someone may say that a simple vocabulary is necessary, and short sentences in short paragraphs are essential – and that answer will be right; but only for that magazine. It is not applicable to writing as a whole. You, as the interlocutor, must be aware of who is answering your question because that person may be a magazine writer and not a writer of ponderous historical novels.

'You see, my dear,' I raised an eyebrow at this reciprocation of Venus's use of

the same possessive phrase; but I was comforted by the sly glance she gave me. 'The danger in a one-sided answer is the implication that any other answer is wrong.

'And,' said my Guru, gulping coffee and absentmindedly eating a bun that I had selected for myself, 'a greater danger lies in accepting such answers without consideration, and using them until you are unable to write in any other way. If you accept that a simple vocabulary is all you need, you may not have the words for an extensive vocabulary. If you write only short sentences, you may have difficulty writing long sentences when your story demands. And so on.'

'Corks,' said Venus, and she tilted her beautiful head at me, but said nothing; though my toes curled and my underwear started to singe.

Then the ship's engines roared, and we swung against the pier at our destination, and my Guru, with uncharacteristic sensitivity, vamoosed, leaving me with the goddess and a spare bun.

She said: 'This is where I get off.'

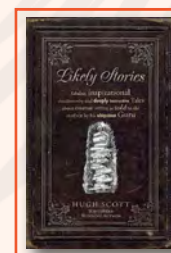
And I said: 'This is where I get off.'

And we stood up, and the ship obligingly swayed us towards each other and we bumped again, and somehow continued to bump all the way down the gangplank where my wife was waiting with a look on her face.

Use it or lose it

Talking about extensive vocabulary, the use of unexpected words should be effortless.

If you can locate a book by Michael Innes or Edmund Crispin you will find words like *meacock*, *indurate*, *festinate*, *mumpsimus* and so on, all used elegantly and unselfconsciously. If such words are dotted around your manuscript like flies on a slice of ham, then you're not using them properly.



The early adventures of me and my Guru are published in a super-beautiful hardback, *Likely Stories*, published by How To Books for less than a tenner – that's the price of five coffees. Treat yourself.



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THE WRITERS' IDEA STORE

I'm in joke-writing mode today because it's that time of year again – time for putting together the village pantomime. (Oh no, it isn't! Sorry.) And it's not going well. I've written myself into a corner and everything's shuddered to a halt.

To be accurate, it's not me I've written into a corner but Wild Bill Hiccup. He's currently

our village hall will not be packed with fellow writers. And this is a writerly joke.

A writer was interrupted one morning by the unexpected arrival of a friend. 'Come in,' the writer said with a beaming smile as she led her friend into a kitchen that sparkled and gleamed like an advert for floor polish. 'I've just made

Paula Williams has been wishing for help from a fairy godmother

at front stage left and needs to be back stage right in order to rescue Calamity Wayne from the clutches of the evil Yarley Hill Mob, led by the notorious outlaw Scary Mary from Castle Cary. Unfortunately, said stage is crowded with as many members of the cast as we can squeeze on because they're singing this really big number and we need all the voices we can muster.

You may have guessed from the names that I don't write 'normal' pantomimes. (My granddaughter has still not forgiven me for *Snow White and the Seven and a Half Doodahs*.) But that is what I love most about writing panto. Anything goes. For me, it all starts with the characters' names, as it does with my stories. My characters never start talking to me until I've found their names.

Panto writing's a bit of a rollercoaster. Most of the time I love doing it – that's when

the story, and the jokes, flow. But at other times, like now, when the characters aren't where they should be and I know the leading lady's going to complain that her part is 'too lightweight', it's like wading through treacle.

This is when I turn to those nearest me, read out something I've just written and ask, 'Do you think this is funny?' Most of the time the answer's a blank stare. But this is the fifth pantomime I've written and I know my audience. When in need of a laugh, I either make a comment about the people from the next village, or insert a rude sound effect. And if I want to bring the house down (and our village hall could do with rebuilding) I do both at the same time. The rude noises go down particularly well at matinees.

But here's a joke I've written (or to be strictly honest, rewritten) that's not going to be in the pantomime, because I'm pretty sure

coffee from some beans I've roasted and ground only this morning. And I've got a lovely homemade chocolate cake to go with it. It's good to have someone to share it with.'

'Oh dear,' her friend said, eyes brimming with sympathy. 'The novel's not going well then?'

I've just had one of those procrastination moments myself, thanks to Wild Bill and his location issues. It was only when I found myself reading the updates to eBay's terms and conditions that I realised how very far down Procrastination Highway I had meandered.

I'm sure I'm not the only writer to suffer from this condition and I'd love to hear some of your procrastination moments. Who knows, I might even be able to use them in my next pantomime. If I ever get asked to do another one.

Procrastination is often caused by a fear of failure and I recently read a brilliant blog post entitled *Rejection and Failure: Why there's a difference and why neither means you should quit* by Ruth Harris on Anne R Allen's excellent blog, Writing about Writing (www.annerallen.com/2017/04/rejection-and-failure-theres-a-difference).

Ruth makes the point that rejection is a temporary state and is an integral part of a writer's life, but a sense of failure can make people want to give up. Her post is full of wonderful advice and I have bookmarked it for future reference. Do check it out.

Rejection happens to most writers, and one of the most famously rejected of all time has got to be JK Rowling, who said that at a time in her life when things were as bad as they could possibly be, 'rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life'.







That rock bottom moment made her go back and take another look at an idea she'd had hanging around but had not taken any further. And that idea, of course, was about a young wizard called Harry Potter...

I'm happy to say I've solved Wild Bill's location issues. There's a side door to the left of the stage. He can slip out, run round the back of the hall and back to stage right. Sorted! Provided it doesn't rain on the night.

As always, you are welcome to write to me at ideastore@writers-forum.com

FICTION SQUARE

Roll a dice to find all the ingredients for your next story – or use each of the squares as a daily prompt this month

	1st & 2nd roll Characters	3rd & 4th roll Traits	5th roll Theme	6th roll Location	7th roll Object
	1 Cowboy	7 Excitable	13 Revenge	19 Village hall	25 Wedding video
	2 Monk	8 Attention-seeking	15 Friendship	20 Forest track	26 Pocket watch
	3 Bank robber	9 Gregarious	15 Rescue	21 Castle ruins	27 Mirror
	4 Orphaned child	10 Fierce	16 Fantasy	22 Football stadium	28 Telescope
	5 Single mother	11 Cowardly	17 Tragedy	23 Polluted river	29 Car battery
	6 Singer	12 Imaginative	18 Pursuit	24 Lifeboat	30 Church bell

WRITING4CHILDREN

FROM CLOWNING TO CBBC Tommy Donbavand explains to Anita Loughrey how his *Scream Street* series came about

I started out in the only career possibly more unpredictable than writing – acting. I went to drama school, planning to become a serious thespian, and emerged two years later as a balloon-modelling, magic-show-performing clown named Wobblebottom! I had taken a summer job working with kids at a local play scheme and loved it so much that it changed the direction of my entire life.

I spent the next four years entertaining children at various UK holiday camps, moved to cruise liners for three years and then – in a sideways leap back into acting – spent eight years in the West End musical *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story*.

That's when I started to take my writing seriously. I wrote three books, including *Boredom Busters* and *Quick Fixes for Bored Kids*, filled with the games and activities I had amassed during my time working with children. Those books bombed, and are now out of print. But I had publishing credits, which helped when I applied to write Egmont's in-house spooky series, *Too Ghoul for School*.

That led me to meeting agent Penny Holroyde, who rejected the book I had submitted (looking back, it was awful!) but asked if I had anything else. I told her about my idea for a street full of haunted houses, and *Scream Street* was born.

To create my fictional world and characters for the *Scream Street* series I started, as I always do, with what I like to call a 'brain dump'. I filled notebook after notebook with scribbled ideas for character types and names, story ideas, themes, differences between



Tommy Donbavand



with
children's author
Anita Loughrey

our world and that of *Scream Street* and much, much more.

This took me several weeks, and I went into as much detail as I could – drawing maps, sketching residents (I am no artist), researching creepy tales and traditions from other countries and cultures, and so on. I wanted to give the characters a twist – so the zombies like eating brains but only barbecued and accompanied by a cold beer. The vampires get their blood from a third tap in their kitchens, and the goblins' farts are used to power a lot of the community's machinery.

I spent a lot of my time working on my three main characters – Luke Watson, Resus Negative and Cleo Farr. I knew that Luke would be a werewolf who would do anything to lose that curse.

I figured that Cleo (a mummy) would have been bored stupid from hanging around in a tomb for thousands of years, so I gave her a strong sense of adventure and – because she keeps her internal organs in a casket at home – almost no awareness of danger.

Resus was the hardest protagonist to nail down. At first, he was dedicated to vampire lore and tried to educate his friends about the history of his kind, but it just came across as bossy. Eventually, I figured out that he needed to be the opposite of Luke – a 'normal' kid, who wants to be a real vampire, like the rest of his family.

He's not just called Resus Negative as a pun – he contrasts Luke perfectly. He has to dye his blond hair, wear clip-on fangs, and he can never



master the magical properties of his vampire cape. He's also a bit of a coward (but please don't tell him I said that!).

It isn't necessary to have an over-arching series conflict, but it can help to get your readers coming back for more. My original deal with Walker Books was for six *Scream Street* titles, which was doubled to 12 once feedback started to come in from booksellers and test readers. It wasn't long before my editor realised we were only one book away from the spooky 13 – so we dropped a new book seven into the middle of the series, which linked together the two quests the characters have to undertake. By having a cliffhanger at the end of each book (along with a satisfying conclusion to the current adventure), I was able to keep readers coming back for more.

Having a strong villain – Sir Otto Sneer – allowed me to maintain a constant threat to the characters and their families, although I also gave my trio a separate monster to battle in each book. This

occasionally forced them to call a truce with Sir Otto and team up with him in order to fight this new menace. Of course, once the terrifying monster was dealt with, Luke, Resus and Cleo immediately went back to dealing with whatever nastiness Sir Otto had cooked up to torment them with next.

This did mean that the books had to be read in order – which wasn't easy if book shops didn't have all 13 titles in stock. I included a page at the beginning of each book called 'Previously on Scream Street', which explained what had happened in the story so far, and that helped a bit.

With my next series – *Fangs: Vampire Spy* – I kept the adventures as standalone stories with the same characters in the same world, so they could be read in any order the reader wished. That was fun, but the series wasn't quite as gripping. So, there are pros and cons to both choices.

The biggest tip I can give is to spend time making your world as 'real' as possible,



even if it includes werewolves and vampires. There will still be rules in your new reality (such as vampires getting their blood from a third tap), and science that may be exclusive to your characters and their adventures. (In the *Scream Street* books, magic is real but spells are locked into single-use disposable wands.) The more time you spend getting the details right, the more chance there is that someone will see potential in your series.

Don't ever fall for the notion that writing for children is 'easy' or a 'stepping stone' to writing 'real' books. Kids are incredibly smart and very critical when it comes to the media they consume. Remember, your story is battling with DVDs, computer games and literally hundreds of TV channels – both on and offline. Slapping together some half-hearted nonsense because 'it's just for kids' is likely to backfire spectacularly.

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Dear Della



Need advice on writing and publishing? Novelist and short story writer **Della Galton** can help



I need a partner for my dance book

Q PRIZE LETTER I wish to write a book on modern ballroom dancing and the world of competition, having experienced the trials and tribulations for many years. As I also run a business, I don't have the time to write it all myself, or the experience to know which aspects would be of interest to others. Rather than simply pick a name from an advert, could you point me in the right direction?
Charlotte Fitzgerald, via email

A When looking for a ghostwriter it's great to get personal recommendations if you can. The next best thing is to ask on online writing forums, or Facebook or Twitter (search for ghostwriters) and ask for unbiased recommendations. This might sound like a 'work-intensive' approach but in my experience it's the best way to get current suggestions. Readers of this page may also be able to help.

Once you have a shortlist, use this checklist to narrow down your choice:

- Talk to the writer in person. You need someone you can communicate with well – you'll be spending a fair bit of time with them. They will need not only to understand just how you want the book written, but also be able to write it in your voice as much as possible.
- They will need to know if you have enough information for a book, as well as what kind of market there will be for it; in other words, they will need to know about publishing as well as writing. This applies even if you are planning to self-publish.
- It is helpful, but not essential, to find someone who understands your subject.
- Make sure they also understand that you, not they, have the final say over what goes into your book.
- You need to be confident that they are discreet and will not discuss what you tell them with any third party. This is particularly important if the information you are sharing is sensitive.

■ They should be happy to sign a contract once you have agreed terms regarding deadlines and payment.

It's worth taking time over this. For further information you might want to seek advice from the Society of Authors. Also check out Andrew Crofts' website (andrewcrofts.com). He is a well known and respected ghostwriter. Good luck.

Q I belong to an online writers' forum where we criticise each other's work. There is one member who often says other writers' work is 'overwritten' but she cannot really explain what she means by this. Can you please clarify?
Tess Conner, via email

A In creative writing terms, 'overwritten' is usually used to describe pieces of prose that are written in an elaborate or burdensome style. Or to put it more simply, there are too many words. Usually there are too many adjectives or adverbs, and often there are too many long words as well. In my experience this tends to happen when the writer is trying too hard to describe something. For example:

The tall man with the wild brown hair and the incredibly long jean-clad legs blundered clumsily into the room and threw a sweeping glance around him at the vast array of colourful pictures, mostly landscapes depicting the Cotswolds, that hung in various sized frames on every available wall space.

It's too cluttered, isn't it? Removing some unnecessary words will help. It's up to you which ones they are, but here's my version:

The tall man with the wild brown hair blundered into the room and glanced at the landscapes that covered the walls.

Hopefully version two gives the reader a clearer picture of what's going on, even

though there are only half as many words.

To avoid overwriting you might find these three rules helpful:

- Never use a long word if a short one will do.
- Keep adjectives to a minimum.
- Try to aim for one adverb per 1000 words!

It's very difficult to overwrite if you follow these rules. If you still overwrite in your first draft you can change that when you edit – or indeed add a little colour back in if it now feels a bit too bland.

Q I want to get feedback from other writers, preferably in person as opposed to online, but there are no writers' groups near me in Glossop that do this. Can you help?
Anne Torrent, Glossop

A The obvious solution may be to start a group yourself. I have a friend who did this. She put up a poster in the library, stating what she planned to do and what the aims for the group were, which in her case were to give and receive feedback in a friendly and supportive environment. She also put an advert in the free paper in her town and one on the noticeboard of the venue where she planned to hire a room.

It took a little while and she started with just three members. But today she has a thriving group of eight or nine and they've been meeting for more than ten years. She charges a small fee to cover the cost of the room and tea or coffee, and uses any surplus to ask an author or tutor to do the occasional workshop. It works very well. Good luck.

Win Della's book!

Each month the best question or most helpful letter wins a copy of Della's book *The Short Story Writer's Toolshed*, available from Amazon in paperback and Kindle formats.



THE MAGAZINE SCENE

Adam Carpenter gives a round-up of launches, trends and other magazine news

Online opportunities at *Time Out*

Time Out has been thriving as a free title and now operates a digital-first model, which means there's scope for contributors...

- Ideas are invited for the *Time Out* blog. It publishes 12 posts a day and is described as 'the best friend who knows all the cool things that are happening in London'. So if you've found a new secret haunt that you wouldn't mind people knowing about, or there's an interesting exhibition that could benefit from more publicity, it's worth a pitch.
- Themes are broad and it is a case of anything goes, especially in a city as big as London. The team appreciate exclusivity if you are pitching something new. One subject in particular has been popular in recent times. UK Head of Digital Mark O'Donnell explains: 'Gin continues to be a big win for us in any form – whether it be the opening of a pop-up gin bar or a new gin hotel.'
- Don't stop at London. *Time Out* publishes a variety of editions, both nationally and internationally. Trust levels among readers are high so it is important that you are genuinely passionate about the place or event you are writing about. Features editor Gail Tolley says of the readers: 'They are people who are ready to book something. I think 95 per cent of people actually do something after reading *Time Out*.'

Visit: www.timeout.com

New writers welcome at *Art Monthly*

Art Monthly is the UK's leading magazine of contemporary visual arts. There is an extensive list of contributors but they are always happy to receive submissions from new writers.

- The title prides itself on showcasing contemporary developments in the art world, which is a reason why they welcome new writers into the fold. If you have knowledge of a new scene that is growing in popularity and influence locally, then you could be well placed to provide a thorough insight for the magazine. It could simply make a news item for their newsletter or you might find yourself asked to develop it into a full-blown feature for the main edition.
- Interviews have always been a key part to the magazine, so if you have access to anyone in the art world, there is scope to profile rising stars and leading figures alike.
- In recent years, bucking the trend of other publications, the title has been commissioning longer features, so feel at liberty to think of ideas for these. Some of the issues *Art Monthly* has tackled more recently include: the rise of the curator and the crisis in criticism; the politics of beauty; the relationship between art and politics; and the impact of globalisation on art.

Recent coverlines: *The listener* – Lawrence Abu Hamdan interviewed; *Accelerationism*; *Performance art report*; *Rules of engagement*

Visit: www.artmonthly.co.uk



MARKET NEWS

■ If you think that print media is largely becoming the domain of PRs rather than journalists, have faith in the views of Marco Cobianni, an Italian journalist, and founder and editor of the website #Truenumbers. In a recent interview, he commented on the PR industry's focus on always sending out stories that will only be of interest to people in the client's field, and how most PRs don't seem to understand that newspaper editorial is in the business of publishing news rather than promoting private companies. 'They should start reasoning in a different way,' he stated. 'The "true client" is the newspapers. If they really want us to publish their stories, then they should provide interesting news.'

■ With Amazon having launched Prime Reading as a rival to online magazine streaming site Readly, is it a further nail in the coffin for print mags? In one corner, *Country Life* editor Mark Hedges disagrees, saying: 'Too many magazines are being diverted by publishing houses focusing too hard on the digital aspect. I think they would see much better sales if there was greater focus on the magazine.' Meanwhile the *Independent* – which went digital-only in May 2016 – took just a matter of months to go into profit after shedding print and distribution costs. Editor Christian Broughton said doing away with the traditional print/digital teams within the newsroom also brought gains 'We just are one team,' he said. 'That's a really obvious thing to say but it makes such a massive difference.'

INSIDE VIEW

PATHFINDER magazine

For those who have to contemplate the transition from a long career in the armed forces to a civilian life, it can often be an unsettling, stressful process. Helping to put people at ease and offer good, practical advice is *Pathfinder* magazine. We spoke to editor Mal Robinson

Tell us about *Pathfinder*...

Pathfinder is a magazine covering armed forces resettlement, and it goes out to over 25,000 readers in the forces. It started in 1991 and is distributed via the Ministry of Defence, and it focuses on an array of topics to benefit the service leaver, including training and education, pension advice and recruitment.

What sort of feature ideas are you looking for?

We seek submissions from subject matter experts in their field in any industry that could be of interest to service leavers. We are always looking for advice on finance and investment, and we always like to hear from former service personnel who have made the transition to civilian life.

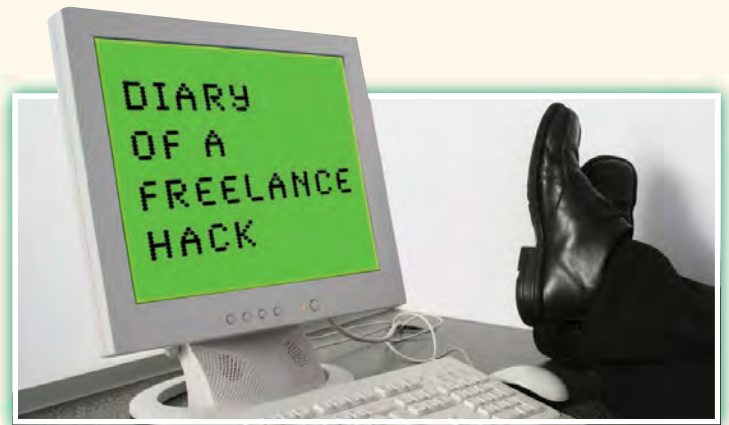
Do you offer fees?

We do not currently pay for freelance submissions. However, we do offer the opportunity for the writer to include a short career biography, which is good PR. (Ed: For writers with a book or services to sell to the readership, perhaps – but don't make a habit of giving your work away for free.)

Recent coverlines: *Cyber security – be fast, be flexible; The military mindset – your competitive edge in the world of business; The Forces Pension Society clears up confusion on lump sum choices*

Submissions to: MRobinson@balticpublications.co.uk

Visit: www.pathfinderinternational.co.uk



SELL, SELL, SELL

Another busy week in the life of a freelance hack draws to a close, and I haven't written a word. So what have I been doing with myself? Well, apart from the obvious distractions of going to the supermarket, mowing the lawn, taking a few naps and boiling the kettle a million times, I've been pitching articles like a farmer throwing bales on to a haystack. It's surprising how long it takes sending the same idea to a dozen different editors, subtly tweaking it for each mag. Multiply by a dozen ideas, and the time flies by.

Sending emails also brings incoming messages, as editors ask for more details. So that's more emails to send.

I also did a mass email-out to my PR contacts, telling them about a new mag I've started working for – did they have any story ideas? That brought a plethora of press releases, some suitable, some not, but gave me another batch of ideas to pitch.

I've also been hitting the phones. I'm not sure if anyone uses a phone to make calls any more. Some of my contacts answered with a hesitancy that suggested their landline hadn't rung in years. In an email culture, however, ringing someone up and putting them on the spot can be a great way to get an answer.

By Wednesday, I'd sold five articles, and had three more pending a decision at forthcoming editorial meetings. Hopefully, some of the unanswered pitches will be translated into sales when I follow them up next week.

One of my successes, incidentally, was one of those 'right time, right place' sales that tend to fall your way when you start calling people. The ed didn't want the idea I was offering, but could I do an interview tomorrow? He'd been due to do it himself but was too unwell. (He was actually working from his sofa, recovering from surgery, and wasn't supposed to be working at all, but just as the show must go on, the magazine has to go out...) The interview was with a singer I'd never heard of – although I told the ed I was a huge fan – so that meant spending most of Thursday boning up on him ahead of the evening phone interview.

I also used my week on the phones to get two stalled articles out of the mire. One was awaiting photos, the other an interview. Both had been frustrated by ineffectual PRs for weeks, but after calling about six different people in each case, I finally got the pics and lined up the interview for Friday.

So next week, it looks like I'll have plenty of writing to do.

INSIDE STORY

Asked to make changes to his '70s-inspired serial, Douglas McPherson learns when NOT to use a twist

The best way to pitch a serial is to send the first episode and a synopsis of the rest. That way, you can save yourself writing many thousands of words that a magazine wouldn't want simply because they don't like the idea or have a similar story in the pipeline.

It also means that if the idea is rejected and subsequently accepted by another mag that uses different length episodes, you can write it to their format from the outset, rather than chopping or extending a finished piece.

Another reason is that an editor can ask for plot changes before you begin.

Despite knowing the above, I wrote all three episodes of my serial *Queen of Memphis* and submitted it complete, simply because once I'd started writing I couldn't stop!

Set in 1978, the story concerns an American woman whose life revolves around the demanding Jack, until she gets a call from an English music promoter who tells her a record she made 20 years before has become a surprise hit in Britain.

Lauren and Lightning, as the promoter is nicknamed, set off on a UK tour and fall in love.

It's a Cinderella story complete with the ticking clock that says Cinders must leave the ball at midnight – or, in this case, go home to Jack at the end of the tour.

The twist is that we're led to believe Jack is Lauren's husband when he's actually a dependent son with learning difficulties. Lauren keeps him a secret because she fears

Her behaviour made sense in the final reveal but, at the time, seemed odd. And I'd turned a blind eye

Lightning won't accept him – but of course he does, which paves the way for a happy ending.

The editor's decision

I sent the serial to *My Weekly* and was gratified when fiction editor Karen Byrom said she liked the nostalgic setting and 'sympathetic characters'. She did, however, have a reservation.

'My big but,' Karen emailed, *'is that we are deliberately misleading the readers by allowing them to think Jack is Lauren's controlling husband. That sort of deception often works in a short story, but we can't sustain it over three instalments. While I was reading, I kept wondering why her child was never mentioned, and I'm sure readers would be doing the same.'*

Given the '70s setting – 'a time when people with special needs weren't often understood or tolerated' – Karen reckoned the story would work just as well if Lauren continued to keep Jack a secret from Lightning but the readers knew his identity from the beginning.

Response

It's always hard to kill your darlings, and at first I was reluctant to lose a twist that I'd built the whole story around. On reflection, however, I decided that Karen had made a good call, because one aspect

of the story had always nagged me as not quite working.

Namely: if we believe Lauren is trapped in a marriage to a controlling man, why, at the end of Part Two, would she break off her romance with Lightning to go back to him? Why wouldn't she just leave him for Lightning?

Why, for that matter, wouldn't she tell Lightning about her spouse?

Her behaviour made sense in the final reveal but, at the time, seemed odd. I'd turned a blind eye to the oddness for the sake of my twist, while inwardly knowing plot-driven writing is never as satisfying as character-driven prose.

In retrospect, it made much more sense for us, the readers, to know why Lauren acted as she did – so we could understand her dilemma – even while her actions remained baffling to Lightning.

Moral dilemma

As I reread my manuscript to see what alterations I would have to make, I also wondered if the change Karen wanted had a moral subtext.

If we believe Lauren is married, then when she falls for Lightning and has what she thinks will be a one-night stand with him, she appears to be cheating on her husband.

That was, of course, intentional. I thought letting

the readers believe she's having an affair would add a thrill to the romance. Also, because her marriage is supposed to be so bad, I figured we wouldn't blame her for cheating – we'd be cheering her on.

But the notion of Lauren being unfaithful doesn't fit very well with *My Weekly's* guidelines, which state its fiction must uphold traditional family values.

Even though it would eventually be revealed that she wasn't cheating on anyone, we wouldn't know that at the end of Part Two, when it looked like she was.

I could see that some readers would find her actions distasteful and stop liking her at that point. They may even stop reading before they got to the end of Part Three and found she was innocent.

So, given the market I was writing for, knowing she's not a cheater would make her a more appealing character.

Compromise

My suspicion that this was about morals rather than misleading the readers was somewhat confirmed when I asked Karen if we could compromise by keeping the illusion that Jack is Lauren's husband until the end of Part One. At that point she would have had a couple of tempting thoughts about Lightning, which preserved a small illicit thrill, but she wouldn't have actually done anything.

Karen agreed, and I was happy because I'd still have my twist.

In fact, I thought the reveal worked better at the end of

CONCLUDES
TODAY

queen of memphis

Was it time for Lauren to forget about dreams of stardom?

By Julia Douglas

Memphis, 1978

Mrs McGuire! Are you with us?" "Huh?" Lauren realised the principal was staring at her with beetled eyebrows, as was everyone else at the staff meeting. "We're discussing the new music room," the principal said with laboured patience. "...something I thought you of all people would be interested in." Lauren put a hand to her temple. "I'm sorry, Mr Deadwood," she said weakly. "I'm not myself today." "Evidently!" her superior snapped.

Lauren was still stinging from the principal's words an hour later as she drove her Oldsmobile out through the gates of Jefferson Elementary School in West Memphis.

But who could blame her for letting her mind wander back to England?

Two weeks ago, she'd been standing on stage with a scarlet skirt and frothy white petticoats swirling around her knees, singing rock'n'roll to a hoard of jiving teenagers in brightly coloured teddy bear suits – or teddy boy suits, or whatever they were called.

It didn't seem real. She turned on the radio and heard Barbara Mandrell singing about thinking single in a double bed.

The words brought back a hot memory of her last nights in London with the English promoter, Barrie 'Lightning' Bolt. She punched a different station and got the Bee Gees singing *Night Fever*.

She turned the radio off. There was no rockabilly on the airwaves in America, even in Memphis, the town where Elvis invented it; just country, disco or the headache-inducing heavy rock that her son Jack loved.

Her friend Martha was just about the only person in the country who knew that Lauren was in the British charts with *Tongue Tied Gal*, a song she'd recorded as Lori James, twenty years ago.

As the forty-year-old music teacher swung the Olds into her magnolia-lined street, the British rockabilly revival seemed like a different world.

And that was how it had to stay, she reminded herself, as she pulled onto the sun-baked drive of her neat timber-frame house.

Lightning didn't love her. He was besotted with Lori James, a footloose

Back in the cool, she was glad as always of the hour or so she'd have alone before Jack got home.

When she'd left for England, it had been ugly. Things had been thrown and smashed. Martha had done a wonderful job straightening the mess before she got home. That woman was worth her weight in gold.

Since she'd been back, Jack had settled down quickly, as she knew he would. After twenty years, Lauren knew how to manage his mood swings.

The only blip had been when Lightning phoned unexpectedly one evening. It must have been the small hours in England and his husky voice in her ear did strange things to her.

She'd had to quickly get rid of him, as Jack yelled from the lounge, demanding to know who she was talking to.

Everything would be smooth as long as she didn't go away again

20-year-old cutie trapped forever in time on the cover of a 45rpm single.

For three short weeks, Lauren had shared his fantasy that she was still that girl. She wouldn't have missed it for the world. But in the long term, a fantasy was all it could be.

Memphis was hotter than usual, without a breath of breeze. The humidity stuck her dress to her back and flattened her golden hair in the short walk from her car to her front door.

"It was just Mr Deadwood, from school," she said, nervously.

"At this time of night?"

"No rest for the wicked!" she quipped and darted for the kitchen to hide her pink cheeks. Jack grunted and turned back to the TV.

The secret with Jack was routine. If his dinner was on the table, his clothes were washed and he knew where she was at all times, he was content.

Everything would be smooth as long as there was no talk of her going away again.



Dinner was almost ready and Jack was due any minute when the phone jangled in the hall.

"Hey Lori, guess what?" Lightning's excitable English accent went through her like, well, a lightning bolt. *Tongue Tied Gal* at number two!

"Wow!" Lauren's mind reeled from prawn risotto to the British charts. The lurch made her seasick.

"You've got to come back for more gigs!" Lightning enthused.

"I can't!" she squeaked. "I have a job..."

"You get a half term break or whatever, don't you? Give me the dates and I'll start booking shows."

"Lightning..." She tried to interrupt, but his enthusiasm was unstoppable.

"We need new material, too. An album

and a new single. I've talked to Dewey

and he's going to book a studio..."

Lauren's head was spinning. She hadn't

recorded in twenty years.

England was supposed to have been a one off – a crazy holiday. She hadn't expected any fans to show up, well less that she'd end her tour on *Top of the Pops*!

"Have school..." she protested.

"That's okay, we can record in the evening after work. Look, I'll be coming over in a couple of weeks, I've found some great songs for you to cut."

Lauren's heart began to pound in panic. There wasn't a day when she didn't miss him. But that memory belonged in London.

This was Memphis, where she had a grown-up son with emotional problems, who Lightning didn't even know about.

And her risotto was starting to burn! "I'm sorry, Lightning." Her mascara was running. "I can't do this..."

"...but you'll have to take some time off for a proper tour, soon," he was saying, as if he hadn't even heard her. "I'm getting calls from France, Germany, Sweden..."

"We'll make a fortune!"

Lauren exploded. "That's all you want me for, isn't it? Records, tours, money! I'm just a cash cow to milk!"

"Lori, that's not fair..."

"I'm not Lori!" She screamed. "I'm Lauren!"

She smashed the phone down and burst into tears. Then looked up fearfully, as Jack's key turned in her front door.

Dewey Williams was an old school producer. He liked to record a vocalist singing live with the band. That was what put the spontaneity in the hits of the fifties.

But studio time was expensive. Without a singer, he had no choice but to start recording backing tracks. Lauren would have to overdub her voice later.

That was if she showed up. Lightning joined the silver-haired producer in the control room. Dewey was dressed as expensively as ever in a pinstripe waistcoat and pink silk shirt, worn open at the neck and with the sleeves folded up his tanned forearms to show a chunky gold watch and bracelet. The cool air-conditioned room was scented with his cologne.

Lightning glanced through the glass window to where a longhaired double-bass player and a guitarist were tuning their instruments.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Be going great if I had a singer," Dewey drawled, pointedly.

"I phoned, but there's no answer."

Lightning tugged his leather jacket from the back of a chair. "I'm going over to her house. Something might have happened to her."

Dewey watched the Englishman rush off, and wondered if he should warn him. But the look in Lightning's eyes said he wouldn't listen. Twenty years ago, Dewey had booked Lori on all the big TV shows in New York. The exposure was set to make her the female Elvis.

But she left him standing at Memphis airport with his bags and two plane tickets.

Continued overleaf

Part One than at the very end of the story.

The first instalment's cliffhanger originally read like this:

She waited until she had her plane ticket and her bags were packed. He'd explode, but there'd be no time for him to wear her down and stop her going.

Heart pounding, she stood outside the living room door, fists clenched.

He was sitting on the couch, feet up, a beer in his lap, watching TV.

In a dry voice, she said, 'Jack, I have something to tell you...'

To that I added two lines:

He looked up, annoyed at the distraction. 'What is it, Mom?'

The first ending depended on our sharing Lauren's dread that Jack's reaction was going to be bad and possibly violent. I'd spent the whole episode stoking that expectation.

So that unexpected 'Mom' right at the end was quite a bombshell, I thought. Having been completely thrown off the trail, the reader would

really want to read the next instalment to find out what was going on.

Tweaks

Because Jack barely appeared in the story except in Lauren's thoughts – which I'd kept deliberately ambiguous – the rest of the serial needed little more than a couple of tweaks.

At the beginning of Part Two, for example, Lauren reflects that it would have been impossible to take Jack with her to England because of his disruptive behaviour. The suggestion is that she's thinking about her husband. So it needed only a couple of lines to clarify that he's her son, and why she tends not to discuss him:

Living with Jack's condition was hard to even talk about without getting funny looks.

As Lauren and Lightning grow closer, I had her reflect on previous dating experiences where the men backed off after learning about Jack – hence her decision to keep him secret from Lightning. The rest of the

story remained unchanged, although we'd now read it in a different way.

I did wonder if knowing Lauren was single would rob her love scene of drama. But although Part Two would no longer end on the shocker of 'Oh my god, she's having an affair!' the clinch would still be loaded with the sense of tragedy that she loves Lightning but is about to leave him and can't bring herself to tell him why. In fact, the emotional jeopardy would be heightened by our knowing what was actually going on.

New light

There was also a mini-cliffhanger in Part Three when Lightning goes to Lauren's house and it looks like he's about to walk into a confrontation with her jealous husband. I left the scene unchanged because, although we'd now know he was going to meet her son for the first time, it was still a cliffhanger: how will he react?

The final scene where Lightning confronts Lauren with his knowledge of Jack,

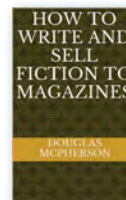
and she breaks down and reveals her reasons for keeping him secret, was also left unchanged.

Although her secret is no longer a surprise to us, Lauren is still bearing her soul to Lightning for the first time – and the fact we aren't reeling from a sudden plot twist allows us to focus more on the emotion of the scene; we can share Lauren's relief at unburdening herself of feelings we know she's been holding in all along.

Lesson learned

The moral of this story is that, while twists and misdirections can be entertaining in themselves, if you are aiming for a more emotional story, being open with your reader may be more effective than misleading them for the sake of a writerly trick.

How to Write and Sell Fiction to Magazines by Douglas McPherson is available to download from the Kindle store.



The importance of **TONE**



Barbara Dynes explains why tone matters in your writing and how it differs from style – then sets an exercise

Do you ever think about the tone of your work? By ‘tone’, I mean the overall effect of the story, rather than the style of it. ‘Style’ is usually defined as the way the piece is put together – the words you choose, formation of sentences, paragraph length and suchlike. It is unique to you; the more writing you do, the quicker you will develop your own individual style.

So, if style is how you knit the whole thing together, what is tone? Tone is the sum of

those elements, giving an overall picture. It expresses the writer’s attitude towards the subject matter: formal, aggressive, chatty, comic, cynical or whatever.

The following excerpts clearly show the tone of two classics:

Mary had neither genius nor taste; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached.

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*,

Oh, Mr Bumble, sir!’ said Noah: ‘Oliver, sir, – Oliver has –’

‘What? What?’ interposed Mr Bumble, with a gleam of pleasure in his metallic eyes. ‘Not run away; he hasn’t run away, has he, Noah?’

‘No, sir, no. Not run away, sir, but he’s turned vicious,’ replied Noah. ‘He tried to murder me, sir; and then he tried to murder Charlotte...’

Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*

Of course, we have to take into account that the authors were writing at different times (Austen lived 1775–1817, Dickens

1812–1870) but those passages, taken at random, are examples of contrasting tone.

Austen’s is reflective, refined, contemplative; Dickens writes in a chatty, lively, character-driven way. Open either book at any page and you pick up that author’s particular style and tone.

When we begin to write fiction, tone is not our first consideration. We just want to get the story down, concentrating on character, plot, dialogue, etc. But it’s as well to give this aspect some thought.

Tone is important for three reasons. It needs to be:

- Right for the market you’re aiming at
- Right for the type of story
- Right for the characters

The market

If you are writing a short story, the overall tone must suit your intended market. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking an emotional, reflective pitch will suit any of the women’s magazines, for example. It will not!

Some magazines demand strong social themes illustrating contemporary issues; some prefer only gentle, pleasant stories. Your work must acknowledge this. And the best way to pick up the individual requirements of a particular magazine is to keep reading its fiction.

After you’ve studied a number of up-to-date copies, you’ll catch their elusive ‘tone’ – and your chances of selling to that magazine will shoot up.

This does not mean that you cannot write what you want to write, but if you want to sell your work you must be aware

of your market. Write it in your own way, in your own style, but be flexible; you might have to alter what you've written later to achieve the right tone.

The type of story

If you're writing a crime novel, your tone will probably be snappy, tense and plot-driven. If it's a romance, it might be emotional, warm and reflective.

Yet individual books in the same genre can have very different tones. Women's fiction, for instance, varies greatly, from light 'chick-lit' to serious literary fiction. Both Jane Austen and Charles Dickens use humour to great effect yet in very different ways.

I recently wrote a short story with an emotional, serious theme, aimed at one of the women's magazines. As a result, it was a bit (maybe a lot!) downbeat. I decided it would not sell like that because I'd noticed that the fiction in that magazine had changed. Most published stories were not exactly flippant but heading that way. So I rewrote the story, lightening the tone. Difficult, but do-able, even given a serious theme.

If you are writing a novel you will, to a certain extent, adopt the style and tone that suits you. The sheer length, plus the time it takes to finish a novel, means you must like what you're doing or you'll never reach the end. As you write, you will develop a style that expresses something about you which, in turn, will create a certain tone.

Characters

The viewpoint you use can help here. If you use first person – where you, the author, are in the mind of the 'I' character, experiencing life as him or her – you will create the tone of the story in that way.

A light, humorous story works well in the first person, especially if the 'I' is a quirky character, thereby creating a funny overall tone. Third person point of view, though not quite so intimate, can be just as effective, with the reader drawn right into that character's thoughts and actions.

Dialogue

Direct dialogue contributes a lot to the general tone, though it is often difficult for fiction writers to convey exactly how a person said something.

Pages are silent. There are no actors speaking the lines; no one to request 'more emphasis on that word, please,' which could change the concept completely. Authors can get across the effect they want by putting words in italics to show emphasis, using repetition or changing sentences around. Or sometimes a shift in tone can work simply by inserting a paragraph break pause.

But in the end, we are reliant on the reader – how he or she hears the words.

Non-fiction

Tone in non-fiction varies greatly, depending on the subject matter. Who is your audience, what are they expecting? If it's a medical article, readers will expect an overall seriousness, but if you are writing for a property guide you could probably lighten it. That's not to say that buying property is a frivolous act, but the facts can be got over in a more light-hearted way, so that you are entertaining as well as informing.

Using 'you' or 'your' throughout can also introduce a friendlier approach; addressing the reader directly gives the piece a more personal, helpful feel, as does inserting questions now and again. The information seems less 'distant'. But first check the magazine's style.

Summing up

Perhaps the most important factor towards getting the tone right, then, is your proposed market. A wonderful story, article or novel could be rejected merely because the tone does not suit. If you want to sell your work, market study matters a lot.

Barbara Dynes' latest book, *Masterclasses in Creative Writing*, is published by Constable & Robinson at £9.99



Writers' FORUM EXERCISE

The overall effect

A Take the book or magazine story you are currently reading or select one you know well. Decide its tone in just one word: *dreary, joyous, poignant, twee, humorous, reflective...* are just a few suggestions

Notes

Completed / /

B Select one of the following subjects and write the first two paragraphs of a short story on that theme, having first decided on the tone you need to create. Have a possible market in mind, because that will decide length, style etc of the story. Will you use first or third person viewpoint?

■ An overweight, somewhat scatty woman is persuaded to go to exercise classes by her daughter. She is divorced and not really bothered about losing weight; she is more interested in finding a man. Her antics seem certain to end in disaster...

■ A compulsive gambler has been banned from his home and family by his wife. He is desperate to get back and thinks of a way he can at least see his children. But his scheming sister has other ideas...

■ An elderly lady is lonely. Years ago, she was in show business. She is befriended by a young girl who persuades her to do talks about her stage experiences and her rather shady past. But her family intervene, saying it will be too much hassle for her. (Actually, they're worried she'll show them up).

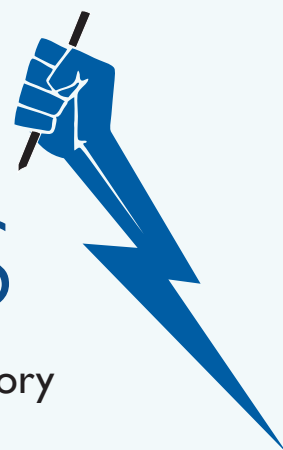
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Writers' FORUM

FLASH COMP RESULTS



Last month's task was to create the gripping first half of a short story

This was an exercise that should have encouraged you to think about pacing. I asked you to write the gripping first half of a story that hooks the reader in and leaves them wanting more. You had around 400 words, which means the final story, the end of which you'll work on this month, has to be just 800 words. That's not a lot of space. So how much story to set up was a big factor in this comp. Not enough, and the final story wouldn't be interesting enough. Too much, and the story can't be satisfactorily resolved within 800 words.

The first common problem was using all of those 400 words to set up a single hook at the end. Remember, at the 400-word mark you were supposed to be halfway through the story – that's far too late to start trying to intrigue your readers. The first hook needs to happen in the first line, or in the first paragraph, at least. These entries read more like the beginnings of novels, where there is space to describe settings and characters in more detail. And, in fact, even in a novel you probably shouldn't leave it so late to start hooking your reader in.

I suspected that, a lot of the time, the writer was thinking more about setting up a mystery for the next month's entrants than about the requirements of an 800-word story. A lot of entries ended with people opening mysterious boxes, or gasping as they read a letter, or finally about to explain what was going on.

But I didn't ask for a cliffhanger. I asked for the gripping first half of a story, not the first of a two-part serial. I didn't mark entries down for ending this way – it doesn't make a story less enjoyable to have moments like this halfway through, and neither was there anything wrong with providing plenty of scope for the imagination for the second half – but I did reject these entries if they relied only on this cliffhanger to provide excitement.

A related problem was that many entries weren't at all gripping. What 'gripping' means is open to interpretation, of course, but I struggled to apply it to openings about accountancy, inclement weather, petty office politics, gardening, bell-ringing teams, cycling, fishing, dry stone walls and so on. It's a common fault among beginner writers to not put enough plot into a story, relying on just the one idea to carry it. They also think that readers/judges/editors will have the patience to wait for this idea to be revealed, and will then forgive the slow pacing and lack of action to that point. They won't.

A technique that often works better is to start your story with the strong idea and then keep working at it, piling on the plot points. A common alternative is to reveal the strong idea later (or at the end if it's a twist story) but begin with a strong hook that relates to it and throw in plenty of plot points on the way to the big reveal.

Finally, all too often entrants didn't explain anything that was going on – no names or places, no reasons why the characters were in that situation. Some opened with characters hiding in fear from an unknown threat and left them that way. This sort of writing isn't mysterious or intriguing, it's actually rather irritating. The reader is left floundering.

You always need to ground the story in some way so that readers can understand what is happening and who is involved, so that they can empathise with the character and appreciate the threat or hurdles they face, and understand their motivation. Think about *who*, *what*, *where* and *when*. There can be a mystery, of course, and you might not want to reveal *why* things are happening yet, but enough detail has to be filled in to create a scene in the reader's eye.

£100 winner

The Rest Will Follow by Jennifer Riddalls

Sally picks at the small wound in her wipe-clean armchair, stealing a nervous glance at her visitor as he sits down. He told the staff he's her nephew but she doesn't have one. At least she's pretty sure she doesn't. She can't think here. Two TVs and a radio vie for her attention and there's a cloying medicinal smell mixed with a tang of urine that sears her nostrils like spilled vinegar. Sally realises he's started talking and tries to focus.

'...about your missing son. About Stephen,' he finishes.

She stops picking and meets his gaze properly. This must be a journalist, after all this time, though this one's a bit old and dishevelled.

'Who are you?'

He raises a shaking hand to his mouth and chokes back a sob. Sally leans forward with wide eyes. She's dreamed of this moment many times, though she thought she would know him immediately. His eyes are green, but not as deep as the velvety moss colour she remembers. The memories turn to water.

'Stephen?' It comes out as a whisper.

'Oh God. No... shouldn't have come. Sorry,' he mutters then abruptly stands and walks away. She sits for a minute, hands shaking and automatically picking the wound again – hurting herself with memories, opening old wounds in her head. She ran out of tears a long time ago, somewhere in the 48 years of not knowing, but the grief is infinite. The new pain fuels her anger, gets her up out of the chair and after him.

Sally ignores the patronising wittering of the receptionist and the hot throbbing in her right hip as she moves to the exit. She spots him right away, head in hands in his car. He doesn't notice Sally until she's at the passenger door, opening it. He jumps when she nearly falls into the seat. Half-in, half-out he helps her to sit straight. The receptionist is now outside, bristling with irritation. 'You'll have to sign her out,' she shouts, but waddles back inside without waiting.

'You can tell me who you are.' Sally is surprised by the calm and authority in her voice.

'I-I knew Stephen. We were just boys. I should have come to you years ago –'

She cuts him off. 'Spit it out.'

A few seconds of silence threaten to smother them both. He nods slowly. 'I'm so sorry he's – I know where the body is. I can take you there.'

• Jennifer, from Crondall, Surrey, writes: 'I had an abandoned 5000-word story, already titled *The Rest Will Follow*, and completely rewrote it as flash fiction for this competition. It wasn't working at all in its long form and the title seemed serendipitously in line with this particular brief.'

Editor's comments

Jennifer's entry begins strongly with Sally being visited in her care home by a strange man claiming to be her nephew. We learn that her son

Stephen went missing almost 50 years ago, and at first Sally thinks this man is him. But the man apologises and leaves. Sally finds the strength to follow him to his car and the man confesses that he knows what happened, and where the body is...

The tone of this piece was emotional, but at the same time the pace was brisk and the action quickly moved us from the care home to the car, ready to set off in search of answers. The character of Sally is well drawn and we want her to find some sort of resolution.

Thoughts on the ending

There's an obvious conclusion to be drawn here – that Stephen died and the childhood friend witnessed it and covered up the accident or crime. That may be the version that suits the story you want to tell. But there's enough ambiguity that I'm sure entrants will think up many different possibilities. The temptation is to try to be clever – and you can be – but more importantly you must keep the tone and style of Jennifer's beginning so that the finished story reads like a single piece.

It's going to be tricky to make it work with just another 400 words to play with. For instance, the opening has only two characters (plus Stephen). If you need an extra cast member or two, you need to bring them in quickly or it will seem too contrived. And does Sally need to go anywhere? Can the story come to a satisfying conclusion more succinctly if the pair remain in the car?

Remember to think about pace and the needs of the story as a whole, not just your part.

Highly commended

Harry & Sheila by Kim Kneel, from Ramsey, Isle of Man
Bed-bound Harry and his frail wife Sheila are visited by their son, Adam, who they last saw when he stole from them 23 years earlier. It ends with Harry catching Adam looking in a drawer in his bedroom... What set this domestic story apart was Harry's ears, which he imagines flying like birds around the house, listening in to whispered conversations... With its unusual use of sound, Kim's story came a very close second.

All Eyes on Me by Eleanor Kilmister, from Stoney Stanton, Leics
The unnamed narrator is walking along the street when he (or she) notices that everyone around is stood staring at him and another woman. She panics and runs away, with all the starers giving chase... This was a gripping beginning, and the scene is well described, but I felt the lack of description or background of the narrator was a problem.

Where To? by Ben Howels, from Exeter
Kate is being abducted by masked figures in a van. She is taken to a dark cell. Eventually we learn that she is some sort of detective or agent who's in this position on purpose. The lights are switched on to reveal a glass wall with a familiar figure behind it... The thriller setting was used by several entrants but I liked the way that Ben added a twist when he reveals that Kate isn't just a kidnap victim. Again, though, I felt this set-up was rather hard to resolve satisfactorily in just 800 words because we know very little about what is going on by the halfway point.

Fitting In by Sharon Boyle, from East Lothian
An unnamed child watches from the stairs as her parents host a dinner party in their new neighbourhood. An older sister, Fiona, is nervous about having to take part in some sort of ceremony... Shades of *The Stepford Wives* or *Rosemary's Baby*. The naivety of the narrator left room for different interpretations of events, but the character felt a little uneven.

Fog and Fire on the Solent by Michael Bloor, from Dunblane
A cargo ship's crew tackle a fire... Mick's entry was a ripping yarn using his career in shipping research for authentic detail – but this would have made the second part rather difficult for non-experts!

Writers' FORUM FLASH COMP

Enter our monthly quick writing contest with a £100 first prize

Our monthly competition for short short writing has a £100 prize for one winner and a number of runners-up may also be published, depending upon the nature of the contest and available space.

The flash competition is **FREE FOR SUBSCRIBERS** (single entry only). For non-subscribers (or extra subscriber entries) the entry fee is £5, which you can purchase by following the link on the *Writers' Forum* website (www.writers-forum.com).

Entry is strictly by email only.

Writers' Forum wants to encourage you to write, so:

- We will have a theme/task each time so that new writing has to be produced.
- There will be a tight deadline so that results can be published quickly and entrants can't dither!

The judge's decision is final and no correspondence over results will be entered into. By entering, entrants agree to these rules and for their entries to be published in *Writers' Forum*.

COMP 189: ENDING

**Deadline: 12 noon
GMT on 26 June 2017**

Editor's assignment:

You have Jennifer's opening, the challenge is to write a satisfactory conclusion to this story in another 400 words (± 10). Make sure you read my 'Thoughts on the ending' opposite. Think about pace.

How to enter

- 1 Paste your ending straight into the body of a new email (NOT as an attachment) followed by the wordcount and your name and address. Give your purchase order number or state if you're a subscriber to check against our database. Add a line or two about what inspired you.
- 2 In the email's subject line box, write **Flash Comp 189:** followed by YOUR suggestion for the overall story title.
- 3 Send your email to flashcomp@writers-forum.com by the deadline above.

The results will be published next issue. Good luck!



MAKING THE LEAP

Anne Goodwin explores how to use our own lives as a springboard for fiction

A first novel is often produced from autobiographical material. Jeanette Winterson poured her experience of growing up gay in the Pentecostal church into her debut *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, while the poet Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar*, closely parallels her own descent into mental illness. But even writers not blessed – or cursed – with such interesting biographies can use our own experience as a springboard for our first large-scale fiction project.

One of my favourite debuts of recent years features a Mormon family facing the sudden death of a child. Published in 2014, *A Song for Issy Bradley* was serialised on BBC Radio Four's *Book at Bedtime*, shortlisted for several prizes and won the Authors' Club Best First Novel Award.

Author Carys Bray grew up in the Mormon church. She explained: 'My second child was born with a life-limiting condition and she died when she was a baby. Issy Bradley dies in very different circumstances, but I do think that my experience of losing a child made me interested in grief and the different ways it affects people.'

'I'm also interested in faith and doubt and the mechanics of miracles, so it seemed like a good idea to set the novel in a religious family. Of course, I could

have researched a different religion ... I decided to make use of the religion in which I grew up.'

Carys writes from personal experience without being constrained by it. But she's far from unusual in this: many other debuts also tell a personal story in a different form. They stay loyal to the emotional truth, build on the author's interests and passions, and are set in a known place or culture.

What if it had happened this way...?

Losing a child is, fortunately, a relatively uncommon experience, but writers who continually ask themselves 'What if?' can find a wealth of possibilities in the dramas, large or small, of their own lives.

For example, the mother of a daughter with autism might create a mother of an autistic boy making different parenting choices to those she made herself, as Catherine Simpson did in *Truestory*.

Others, like Mary Costello, author of *Academy Street*, have adapted the biographies of close relatives.

'When [my mother] was three her mother died suddenly ... My mother never emigrated but one of her sisters worked as a nurse in New York for four years in the '60s before returning to Ireland. So although Tess shares some biography and

geography with my mother and aunt, she is an entirely fictional character and her inner life, as both a child and an adult, is entirely her own.'

Emma Healey's Costa First Novel Award winning *Elizabeth is Missing* emerged from a conversation with her grandmother in the early stages of dementia.

Healey said: 'She told me she didn't know where one of her friends was – she'd tried calling but got no answer. Luckily they had a mutual friend who knew that the "missing" woman was staying with her daughter. That was the end of the mystery in real life, but it got me thinking about how that might translate to fiction.'

Even quite mundane events can be reimagined as attention-grabbing fiction: one of my own prize stories was sparked by the memory of hitching a lift from a man who didn't take the route I expected.

Same emotion, different situation

Emotions that are painful in real life can at least serve some purpose to the novelist. *A Song for Issy Bradley* might not have been such an engaging read if its author hadn't known grief from the inside. But these emotions need to be properly processed before we can make effective use of them.

Many years had passed since my own painful adolescence when I began writing my debut, *Sugar and Snails*, about a



Carys Bray

Colin McPherson



Emma Healey

Martin Figura



Gavin Weston



middle-aged woman who hasn't managed to move on from a life-changing decision she made at fifteen.

My character Diana's situation is very different to my own but, by re-engaging with the emotions of my traumatic teens, I was able to get under her skin in a way that convinced readers who have faced such circumstances.

Personal passions

While a preachy novel would deter readers, a strong belief in the subject and themes can help maintain the writer's motivation through the arduous journey from first word to published book.

A sense of outrage lies behind Gavin Weston's 2013 debut *Harmattan*, about a girl growing up in rural West Africa. His family had sponsored a girl from Niger until learning, just before her twelfth birthday, that she had been married off and would no longer be part of the programme.

Weston said: 'My children just couldn't get their heads around it. This little girl's framed portrait had sat nestled amongst other friends and family for six years and now she was married! I felt angry about the situation, and that I hadn't seen it coming: I knew that child marriage was prevalent right across the Sahel, but I had, incorrectly, assumed 'sponsored' children were protected against the practice. It

struck me that what was needed was for the world at large to hear a first-person account from a child bride.'

A similar rage at injustice, this time historical, lies behind Johanna Lane's debut novel, *Black Lake*. She said: 'It was a story I really needed to tell. My mother's ancestral home was sold when I was a teenager. It had been in my family since the 1700s and the loss was devastating.

'The inside of Dulough [the Irish house in the novel] is based on that house. The outside of Dulough is based on an estate called Glenveagh in Co Donegal. It was built in the mid-1800s by an awful Scottish man who turned many of his tenants out of their homes at the bleakest, most poverty-stricken moment of Irish history.'

'I used to visit Glenveagh as a child and would get so upset and indignant; how dare this man come to our country and do such an awful thing? Then, when I grew older, I had to confront the fact that the blood in my veins is a much closer match to his than that of his tenants. I wanted to come to terms with that and think about what it means to be Irish.'

Familiarity with situation and setting

Prejudice and discrimination inspired Emma Claire Sweeney, author of *Owl Song at Dawn*. After growing up alongside a

disabled sister, she wanted to tell a more positive story about people with cerebral palsy to counteract the more dominant pessimistic narrative. But Emma didn't make things easy for herself when she decided to set her debut in Morecambe, on the Lancashire coast.

She said: 'My story began to emerge when I could hear the voices of my main characters: twin sisters born in 1933. But they both spoke with Morecambe dialects. This posed a problem because I had never set foot in the town.' So part of Sweeney's research entailed familiarising herself with the place her characters had chosen.

Others know their setting before they start to write. Although the West African setting of *Harmattan* would be unfamiliar to most readers, Gavin Weston says he wouldn't even have contemplated writing his book had he not lived in Niger.

The Man Booker shortlisted debut *The Lighthouse* sends the central character on a long-distance walk in Germany, following the route author Alison Moore had followed on a holiday the previous summer. Claire King wrote *The Night Rainbow*, set in France, while living there.

'The setting itself is fictional,' she said, 'but I made it up of several places that I know well, some more intimately than others, as well as imaginary elements.'

A foreign setting isn't essential; in fact, readers enjoy finding a familiar place reflected on the page. When I set my own debut in the city I'd lived in for two decades, and the house I'd occupied for one, it was to make my story easier to write. Once published, however, I relished discussing the locals' reactions.

These are some of the ways in which, without writing a fully autobiographical novel, we can draw on our experience both to bring our story more vividly to life and to make a complex task a tiny bit easier. Will these examples provide the springboard for your own story?

• Anne Goodwin's second novel *Underneath* was published in May. Anne is also a book blogger and author of over 70 published short stories. Catch up on her website annegoodwin.weebly.com or on Twitter @Annecdottist



Johanna Lane



Emma Claire Sweeney

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RIDING THE FATE TRAIN

by Bette Guy

"The whole bloody world is a bit difficult. Yet it can be unbelievably brilliant."



One detail, one event, one meeting, can affect a whole life. How much is simply being in the right place at the right time? Riding The Fate Train questions whether Fate is the New God. In this excitedly different Collection of short stories the human condition is revealed with candour and humour, by evoking the hopes and the dreams, the joys and the sorrows, the loves and the fears of the characters who tell their story. What emerges is a pattern of how happenstance can, in a flash, completely change a life forever.

Riding The Fate Train written by Bette Guy and published by Longbottom Press. Stories from Britain and Australia.

Available as a paperback and ebook from Amazon.com



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Technophobia



Keir Thomas looks at sites and apps that can help ensure you put in the writing work

CRACKING THE WHIP



Getting paid for writing this column is useful in more ways than one. Aside from ensuring my cats get new shoes, it compels me to actually sit down and write. I also have the luxury of an editor who will complain if I miss deadlines (which never happens, heh heh).

These two things give me all the incentive I need. By way of contrast, I have yet to be commissioned as a novelist, so the only factors driving me to reach for the keyboard are whatever I can find within myself. As I'm only human, often this simply isn't enough.

However, there are websites that can help people like me keep churning out the words no matter what, and this month's Technophobia will explore them.

Counting words

The basic rule of these websites is that you must type a fixed number of words every day. The original site to introduce the concept, 750 Words (<http://750words.com>) came about because the site's creator read in a writing manual that three handwritten pages per day is considered steady progress when writing a novel. He measured how many words this equated to. You've got it – 750.

Visiting the site (once you've created an account) you'll see

nothing more than an ultra-basic word processor where you can begin typing, just as you do with an online word processor like Google Docs. Indeed, everything is kept deliberately fuss-free. Your work is saved automatically online as you type (you can download it to your hard disk at any time) and your progress is shown by a wordcount at the bottom of the screen.

Once you reach 750 words, you're rewarded by a cross in the box for that day, although you don't have to stop writing at that point, of course.

There are boxes for the entire month running across the top of the screen and they're visible at all times. Once you've completed a few days of writing, a curious thing happens in that you simply don't want to break the streak of completed days. This is 750 Words' fundamental trick and it's curiously powerful. The longer the streak becomes, the stronger this feeling grows.

Novel length

If you do the sums you'll see that you've only got to keep up the streak of unbroken days for four months and you'll have created a decent-length novel.

There's no way of cheating the system – 750 Words won't let you adjust the daily word

tally if one day you're just not feeling up to it, although you can schedule holiday periods so that your streak doesn't appear to be broken.

Rival website BlankPage (www.blankpage.io) clones the 750 Words method, but allows you to set your own daily word count target, with a suggestion that you start with a perhaps more manageable 250 words and adjust upwards as time goes on. (To make the change, click the settings icon at the top right, then click the Settings entry on the menu.)

Analyse that

To encourage you even further, 750 Words (and to a lesser extent, BlankPage) let you view analysis of your writing – everything from the number of words per minute you type, to the tone of each day's work, or the words you use most frequently.

If you miss a day and break your streak, you'll get sent motivational email reminders, and indeed you'll be sent these anyway to keep your spirits up, with reward emails when you achieve longer streaks.

Both sites work hard to encourage you to write any way they can. 750words.com lets you compete against other users of the service by earning points as you write,

BlankPage allows you to set your own daily word count target

and by signing up for monthly challenges – breaking a streak adds your name on a Wall of Shame page. To join the challenge, just click the entry under the This Month menu heading.

750 Words is free for your first 30 days, before a \$5 per month membership fee is required. BlankPage is free but you must pay for Premium membership (\$10 per month) once you exceed 4000 words in total. As you might have realised, paying for the service is itself a way of ensuring you keep writing.

Hard core

Taking a breather to edit while writing is possible with both 750 Words and BlankPage, even though the goal is primarily to hammer out words. There's

Continued overleaf ►

Continued from previous page

also no requirement to write your daily quota all at once – knocking out 250 words in the morning then 500 in the evening will still get you the cross in that day's box. Additionally, with 750 Words you get a partial reward if you write something one day but not the full amount – the checkbox for that day gets a slash but not a full cross.

The Write or Die website (<http://writeordie.com>) again clones the 750 Words concept but cares not for such charity. If you activate its Consequence mode, even lifting your fingers from the keyboard for more than a few seconds will cause the screen to turn red, a horrible sound will start playing (a car horn is the default), and nasty pictures will start appearing, such as snapshots of spiders.

In contrast, Write or Die's Reward mode plays nice sounds, such as kittens purring, and shows lovely pictures every time you type a certain number of words.

The final mode is called Stimulus and is similar to Reward except that you get the sound effects and images all the time – unless you stop typing, in which case they go away and the screen again turns red.

Write or Die sounds like a joke, and it is certainly rooted in a humorous approach, but it does actually offer the features it claims. If your writing inertia is such that you just can't get



Lift your fingers from the keyboard for more than a few seconds and the screen turns red

the words down on the page, then it might be worth a try. Allegedly, even some big-name writers have turned to it out of frustration.

Although Write or Die has a demo mode, to get the full features of the site you will need to make a one-off \$20

payment. Dedicated apps for iPhone and iPad cost £9.99 each, while apps are available for Windows, Mac and Linux at \$20 each (around £15).

Turning off Facebook

All the solutions listed so far might sound drastic if your problem is simply spending too much time on social media. If so, then Freedom could help (<https://freedom.to>).

Once installed on your Windows PC, Mac or iPhone/iPad, this small app blocks all social media for as long as you want while you write. In other words, while the session is running you won't be able to access Facebook, or Twitter, or Snapchat, or the rest. You can create your own block lists too so you can add any additional sites you just can't resist.

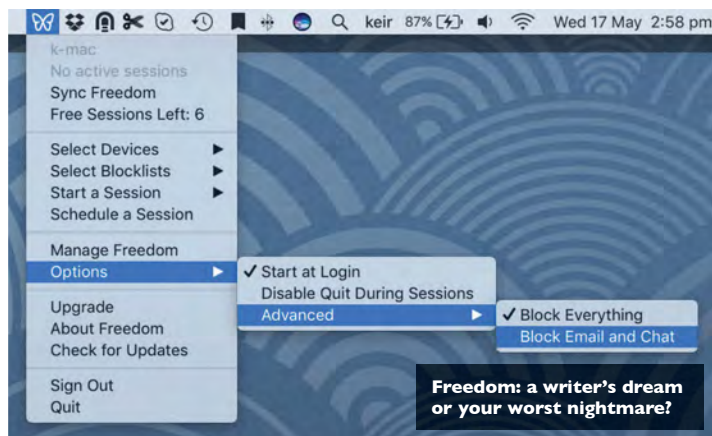
If you use the internet to research while writing, don't worry – you can still access all other websites while the Freedom blocking session is running. However, if you wish, Freedom will also turn off access to all websites, and optionally turn off email and chat clients as well. Just select the options from the menu.

If you're a determined procrastinator you can still

overcome Freedom's blocking capabilities by simply quitting it. However, there's yet another configuration option to block even this!

Sure, if you're technically savvy you might be able to find a way around it (I didn't even try, so don't ask me!) but for most users this final configuration choice will be enough to turn the PC into a virtual garret, from which there will be no escape until the session expires. So you might as well get on with that writing.

Freedom is a subscription service costing \$6.99 per month, or \$29 per year. There are other apps that do similar tasks, including some that are free, but none seemed as comprehensive or useful as Freedom, so I reckon it's well worth paying for.



• Keir Thomas has been writing about computers for more than two decades. He also offers personal technical support and upgrade services for Apple products in the Manchester, Stockport and north Cheshire/Derbyshire areas. See www.mancmacsupport.com

In his first two novels Thomas breathes life into Charles Dickens' beloved characters from *A Christmas Carol*, and his original characters by creating back and future stories.

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"...give or take a moment." is still being written, but will move the characters to 1892. It is scheduled to be published at Christmas 2017.

Both titles are available online: Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Google Play



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Thu 6		
Fri 7		
Sat 8		
Sun 9		
Mon 10		
Tue 11		
Wed 12		
Thu 13		Writers' Forum #190 on sale
Fri 14		
Sat 15		Fiction and poetry comps (rolling deadline)
Sun 16		
Mon 17		
Tue 18		
Wed 19		
Thu 20		
Fri 21		
Sat 22		
Sun 23		
Mon 24		
Tue 25		
Wed 26		
Thu 27		
Fri 28		
Sat 29		
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Mon 31		Flash comp #190

Writers' FORUM

Achievement Chart

July 2017

Pin up this calendar and then every morning add a note about what you are going to write that day – it really works!

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Congratulations to this month's winners, Lucy Kellett, Kieran Costello and Mandy Huggins.

Do you have a short story that could impress our head judge Lorraine Mace?

Any subject, any style is welcome. Turn to the rules and entry form on page 39.

FIRST PRIZE £300

It's Different This Time

Lucy Kellett

It smells of bins in here as me and blue rabbit burrow deeper into the sleeping bag. The metal walls shake with music from outside. I can tell they're made out of metal cos when I make me hand into a ball and hit them, they sound the same as me truck toy, and that's metal cos Mam told me. There, see. I did it again. Rat a tat tat. I can do it in time to the music. I stop after a while, but the beat carries on. It's like a builder going bang with a hammer, except for the nail never goes in; the builder just keeps banging. I kinda wish that beat would shut up. It's OK, though. When this rocket lands I'll be on the moon.

It's not really a rocket, by the way. I were just pretending. This is Vitor's van. Vitor lived with us for a bit. He was Mam's boyfriend but now they're friends. Friends means you share pencils and play at breaktime. Never called Vitor dad, though. Greg's me dad these days. I cross me fingers inside the pocket of me hoodie. If I cross them tight enough, and for long enough, I reckon it might make him stay. But I don't know if this'll work. They all go in the end. It's a rule. Like when you add two and one, it always equals three. It don't matter if you do it on Thursday, or Saturday, or Sports Day, it always equals three. So no matter if it's this year, or when I were four, or when I'm a big lad, me dads always go. It's the rule.

There's a knock.

'Dylan, it's just Mam.'

The door opens and the music barges in.

'Just wanted to check you're OK in there.' She sits on the floor of the van and pulls a coat with a furry collar tighter around her body. At parties she looks like Princess Leia with them ribbons plaited in her hair. Her feet swing to and fro, and the perfumey smoke from her special cigarette makes pictures in front of a rusty wall made out of waves.

I kind of wish I could make her hang around the van with me.

Mam's been different since Greg's been around. She used to cry when she opened letters, them oblong ones with windows in. But she don't do that no more, and I'm glad. Stuff's been cool since he moved in; we play football in the park, and he gives me and Mam lifts to the market in his dusty old Skoda. He does that so Mam



don't have to be a tortoise carrying her stuff there on her back.

A kiss arrives on me forehead, delivered by Mam, and she disappears back to the party. I lock the van and bunch the sleeping bag around me. It's dead private in here; I'll give it that. Moses and Ed from me Year 2 class would've had their bath by now, but I get to stay dirty tonight. That means I'm the winner.

I dream of dinosaurs. A big t-rex is chasing a triceratops. The triceratops is nearly getting away.

Voices wake me. It's proper dark in here, so it's obvious morning hasn't shown up yet. The talking comes from the driver's bit. It's Vitor – I can tell it's him cos of his funny accent. He says stuff like Landan, and he calls everyone mate.

'I know old Parsons; he's the sort of copper that'll go easy on ya if ya grass someone up,' Vitor says.

Grassing up sounds like a right laugh. Maybe Greg'll play it with me in the garden. If I chase him round, I bet I could catch him and chuck some grass under his T-shirt.

Continued overleaf ►

► *It's Different This Time continued*

'But who would I grass on?'

'Intit it obvious?' says Vitor. 'The nursery at Greg's place is full of weed.'

Me nursery ain't full of weeds. I'm too old for a nursery anyway; I'm nearly seven for Christ sakes. It's me bedroom.

I wanna set them straight, shout that me room's tidy. But me eyelids are like blinds being pulled down. Mam says I'm one of them kids that'll sleep through anything. It don't matter if I'm on a sofa with people milling round me, or lounging in the shade under Ma's jewellery stall at a festival, taking a break from helping her serve customers, as long as there's voices and a bit of music, I'll go out like a lamp. I could sleep if a herd of elephants were charging through me bedroom door. If they trod on me I'd probably wake up, though.

'He'll get 10 years,' says the voice. But I only half hear, and the conversation gets mixed into me dream. I'm gonna sleep for ten years. I'm sure that's it.

'So?' says Vitor. 'Lemme grab my jacket. Come on, mate, let's go back to the party.'

The next time me eyes open, it's definitely morning. I open the van and squint into the sunshine. An old sign says Uptown Mill Leisure Centre. I figure it ain't a leisure centre no more as the windows have got big planks of wood nailed onto them. People queue to pay a man then pass through a brick corridor. The beat growls from inside.

Mam and Greg won't be ready to leave yet, so I stroll to a grassy area where groups sit on the ground. I can't see no other children. Two men in gloves with the fingers cut off, and hair that only grows in the middle, huddle and roll cigarettes. One of them holds a dog on a piece of rope. I stroke the dog's ears.

A knot scrunches up in me tummy. This place is quite big, and I've got no idea where Mam and Greg are. And with this music blasting into me brain, I don't remember where the van is neither. Man up, ain't that what people say. I need to man up.

Exploring inside, I'm an adventurer in the passageways and hidden rooms, and I feel better. I climb the staircase two by two, me jumper tied round me head like a ninja warrior. People sit on

The music sounds like a savage creature, with claws to lash me and everything

the stairs all the way up, talking and leaning on one another. Two ladies dab sherbet from a tiny plastic bag, but it don't look like they have enough to share. They take it in turns to sniff the sherbet up their noses. Grown-ups are weird.

Music roars from behind two doors. It's dark inside apart from some blue lights whizzing on the ceiling. I don't wanna go in, but thinking about Mam being through them doors gives me super-powers. I swing open the doors and move through a forest of arms and legs. The music sounds like a savage creature, with claws to lash me and everything. It's boiling in here. Bodies bump me. A man next to me looks like he's being electrocuted by the music. I pretend he's a cartoon, all sparks blazing off him as he gets a massive electric shock. It's nice when I finally spot Mam dancing with her eyes closed. It helps her concentrate on the music, that does; she told me once. Greg and Vitor are there too.

Greg gives me a soft punch on the arm, and I grin. Then he puts his arm round Mam and looks at Vitor out the corner of his eye.

Mam grabs me hands and whirls me round. Whoosh. This is a right laugh. Then she talks to someone, and I go play in the hallway. I make a mountain from the fur I've picked out the carpet. After a while there's a bald patch.

When it's time to leave, Vitor ain't ready to go, so we head to the tube station. Mam uses me children's pass to let us both through the ticket barriers.

'Vitor wants you back,' Greg says to Mam. 'He still has feelings for you.'

'What feelings?' I butt in.

'Never you mind,' says Mam.

Then I remember last night in the van. 'Vitor said there's weeds in me nursery. It ain't a nursery, though. Can you tell him, Mam. He thinks I'm three years old or something. And there's no weeds in there. I keep me room proper tidy, don't I.'

Greg's hand strokes me hair. I'm growing it long, by the way, like his.

'I'm sure he don't mean nothing by it, buster,' he says, 'What else did Vitor say?'

'Nowt important. Just some stuff about the garden,' I say. Greg makes circles on the back of me head and I pretend not to notice, but secretly I hope it don't stop.

'What stuff?' he says.

'Something about copper? And a game called grass me up?'

Greg sits upright. He runs the sleeve of his jumper over his stubble. For the rest of the journey his eyes dart from one advertising poster to the next, and he stops doing circles on the back of me head.

When we get home, I build a starship out of Lego, and Greg cooks lunch. Mam comes in and Greg mutters, 'I'm gonna have to move the plants. It's gotta be tonight.'

Greg disappears into the shed. He don't come in for tea. As I eat me fish fingers, me eyes follow him in the garden – he walks in a figure of eight, then a circle, then a triangle, all the while talking on his phone. Then he heads out.

At bedtime, I gaze at the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling that have been there since infinity. Something creaks in the garden. I go to the window. In the darkness, Greg carries boxes from the shed to his Skoda. Then the car swooshes off, and I don't remember falling asleep.

Thudding on the front door wakes me. It's louder than them elephants I were talking about.

'Police, open up!'

I burst open me bedroom door and run to Mam's room. But she's gone and so's Greg. This must be a bad dream. I dash to the top of the stairs.

Men in helmets tip the hallway table over. Their clothes say police but they look nowt like ones I've seen before; they're like soldiers. They must be pretending to be police cos they're destroying the house.

They've got guns! They must have taken Mam and Greg, and now they're coming for me. I run to me room, I climb into the cupboard, I hug me knees, I hold me breath. If I move a muscle I swear they'll hear me.

Footsteps thunder upstairs. Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom. That's me heart. It's so loud, I know they can hear it, and they're coming.

Brightness fills the cupboard. A man with a helmet is next to me. I scream.

'There's a kid in here!' he says.

Stuff clatters across me bedroom floor – pencils and pens and schoolbooks and me Alton Towers ruler. It's like it's happening in slow-mo. Me robot radio gets trodden on by a booted foot, and its arm crunches off. I clamp me lips shut real hard so me jaw stays still. A tear escapes and I taste it on me lip.

'Go downstairs to your mum,' the man says.
The men move through the house like them aliens in Moses's iPhone game, destroying everything that gets in their way. I run to the door, wait till the coast's clear, then cling to the bannister as I come down.

Mam stands in the hall in her nightie.

'What's happening?' I say.

'It's just a silly game, petal,' Mam says softly. 'It's called Find the Mouse. There's a tiny little mouse hiding, and they're looking for it. The dogs are hunting for it too.'

Her face is lit up by streetlight from outside. She's kind of shaking.

She wraps her arm round me and steers me to the sofa in the living room. We sit, and she moves me head to rest on her chest. From the window, I watch as dogs sniff along the grass. One of the men opens the shed. Maybe the mouse is in there.

Me eyes peel open. I spring up and look around. Everything's upside down, all the furniture and that. Then I remember the game about the mouse. I must have fallen asleep.

Mam and Greg are shouting in the kitchen. I tiptoe to the door, minding the creaky floor board.

'You're worrying too much,' Greg says. 'I moved the plants, and they didn't find nothing. They can't get me.'

And I realise something about last night; there weren't no game about a mouse.

'For now!' Mam's voice is screechy. 'In't this enough to make you wanna stop? For us.'

Mam always wants me dads to stop doing things. Why don't she just let them be?

'And how do you suppose we get by without the plants? You've been happy with the money they've made us, haven't you?' Greg says. 'We need them plants.'

'That's bullshit. I have a son! Can you imagine what it were like for him last night? You have to decide, Greg. It's us or the plants.'

The house is quiet. That quietness that's as load as a lion roaring, and I wonder if Greg's hugging her. But then I decide he's probably not because after a minute or two Mam shouts, 'I didn't think so.'

Then there's a hush, and I think I already know what's coming. I cross me fingers. I cross them real hard. If I cross them tight enough, and for long enough, maybe it could work. But I don't really believe it. I'm too old to believe in magic or miracles. Me fingers go dark red with white blobs on them, and I can't feel them no more.

'Get out!' Mam screams. 'You can collect your goddamn stuff when I've sorted out this mess of a house.'

Ever so quietly, the front door clicks shut. So quietly that I hope I heard it wrong. That Greg didn't go, and that he'll be in the kitchen making me breakfast and saying, 'Let's go play football, buster.'

I go into the hallway. The plant pot's smashed, and earth and bits of pot and loose sheets of paper cover the floor. Our phone cord's wrapped round the table legs like a worm.

Smashed plates on the kitchen floor remind me of the rockery in Gran's garden. Mam sits at the table with her hands over her face. I thought this time it might be different. And I shouldn't have hoped for it, because this time were like all the others. Except it weren't. It were worse. Because this time I found out what it were like to have a proper dad.

I burst into the kitchen. 'No wonder all me dads wanna leave us when you keep bossing them around,' I say. 'It's your fault. All of this.' I kick the smashed plates across the floor.

Through the glass doors I see me football on the grass, and I don't wanna think about playing it on me own.

Continued overleaf ►

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► *It's Different This Time continued*

'I know,' Mam says quietly. 'I know.' She stares out the window. She don't make a sound. Her cheeks get wet and I know it's from tears. 'Greg's bad news, petal,' she says.

'He's not, Mam,' I scream. 'He's different.'

Everything's moved from its proper place. But the photo of me and Mam and Greg at Legoland is still Blu Tacked to the fridge. I sit on the floor and turn myself into a ball. I beat at the ground with me fists.

I sneak a look at Mam. She cups her hand over her mouth; she looks like she's trying to eat her hand as she squeezes her eyes shut and shakes.

And I wanna make her OK again. Maybe this time is different, because this time I need to be different. This time I mustn't make her cry. Or make things worse. This time I'm gonna man up.

Slowly, I get up. I take a piece of smashed plate and put it in the bin. Then another. I pull the pots and pans off the floor and put them back in the cupboards. I make a pile of things that belong in cupboards I can't reach.

'I'm sorry, Mam.' I say.

Then, out the corner of me eye, I see movement outside. Greg stands at the glass doors. Mam's head turns to him. Then she looks away.

I can just about hear Greg's muffled voice through the glass. 'I'm gonna stay out here till you let me in.'

I run to the door. 'Daddy!'

'Dylan, don't!' says Mam. But I've already let him in.

Greg stays just inside the door, all awkward like a kid standing in front of class for show and tell.

'I've got rid of the plants.' He huffs and puffs like he's just run here. 'If it's you or the plants – or you or anything else in the world – I'd choose you every time. You and Dylan. I want us to be a proper family. I'm not going anywhere.'

He steps forward, and stays still for a second. Then he moves over to Mam and puts his arms round her. She don't stop him.

And I don't know why Mam's so bothered about Greg's gardening, but I don't care. Because none of me other dads said that, about not going anywhere. And I believe him. I do.

After a while, he pulls away. He picks up scraps of paper and packets of food from the floor and puts them back in the cupboards. Mam gets up and joins him. I begin sweeping. And without saying nothing, we go through the rooms. Piece by piece we put our house back together.



About the author Lucy, from London, works as a freelance copywriter and also ghostwrites for top film directors. Previous successes include a short story, *A Mother of my Own*, being chosen as Editor's Pick in *Litro* magazine.

SECOND PRIZE £150

I'm Afraid of Wolves

Kieran Joseph Shay Costello

Grandad says the wolves are gone. They're gone and they're not coming back, so there's no reason to be scared. I don't believe him. I tell the kids at school and they laugh.

'Says who?' they jeer.

I tell them what Uncle Ben said – that the river keeps out the pack but one or two still cross, that they stalk the streets, sniff the air, push their flanks against unlocked doors. I don't tell them that I've seen the wolf – that I see it most nights. Stories are easy to ridicule.

But this wasn't a story, not for me. It rises from the shadow of the hallway light, like smoke, until it stands on hind legs, gnarled claws and jagged jaw ready to fall upon flesh. Scratching and hissing, breathing bloodthirsty plumes. The wolf doesn't pounce; not at first. It stands, inhaling the fear, savouring the dread.

I wake with bruises and the doctor says I've been having night terrors. The priest says the same thing, but he uses different words. We live opposite the church; its bells echo about our lounge and in summer its shadow almost reaches our door. The priest doesn't talk about evil spirits like they do in movies. He watches Mom cry and talks about prayer.

I sit up at night and wait and listen. Grandad comes over and tells me the wolves were killed. Even in the Dales, where the mist sits conspicuously on the hills, swallowing cottages and hedges, there are no wolves. There could be trolls, he jokes, but no wolves. He has a big smile that turns his wrinkles upside down. I don't tell him what I think.

The priest doesn't want to say anything; he bows his head and lets thoughts pass over him. Mom waits and plays with frayed



cardigan sleeves.

Grandad and I climb to the bell tower and he pats me on the back. 'God can watch you sleep from here,' he says, because you can literally see my bedroom window.

I ask him if God can see the wolf. He frowns and says wolves are afraid of God, so they wouldn't come near the church. He forgets to deny their existence.

'All this wolf business isn't helping your mother,' Gran says when we get home.

I know what she means. Mom's different. She walks from room to room cleaning things already clean and muttering, like a ghost in search of purpose. She's always in her pyjamas, the ones with the pink teddy bears. I hear Mom's friend talk in the kitchen. She says I'm acting out, that I miss my father, that he's a lousy something. But Dad isn't responsible for the wolves – though I don't think he'd

believe me either.

Uncle Ben has stopped telling me stories. When he comes for dinner or to drop off Asda bags, I try to ask questions. Information is important when you're dealing with the unknown. He frowns in his big eyebrow-furrowed Uncle Ben way and pats the seat next to him.

'It's only a story,' he says. He doesn't break; he has a statue face, like the teachers at school. 'Make-believe. Fiction. Not real. I was just kidding.'

'But I've seen them,' I tell him.

'Where?'

'In my room.'

His frown deepens; he's no longer a statue. It looks like his features want to leave.

'Enough of that,' he says. 'What if I stay on the weekend? Then I can prove there's no wolf.'

I nod and think him brave.

This night I wake to the sound of creaking floorboards. There's no hallway light. I watch the TV's standby glare disappear. Is the wolf holding something? Can wolves do that? I move my blanket lower, inch by inch, until I see the red dot has moved.

No, there's two of them. No, it hasn't moved; they're eyes, blood red eyes trying to lock on to mine.

I learnt from a documentary that you mustn't break eye contact with bears. You can move backwards, but you can't break eye contact because the eyes matter so much. We don't all have claws or furry hides, but we all have eyes. I use my forearms to push myself up. The wolf is swaying. I keep staring into those red pits. I forget to breathe. I sob into the edge of my blanket and ignore the documentary man's advice. I shut my eyes tightly and wish the wolf away.

I've been missing school a lot.

'She's very upset,' Grandad says after Mom has left to speak to the teachers.

He's brought a jigsaw of the Dales and we spend an hour searching for the corner pieces, the bright blues and vibrant greens. There are no rain clouds. I reach across the table and he grabs my wrist. I flinch under the pain. He rolls up my sleeve and starts to prod at the bruises. Tears swell in his eyes and he looks desperate.

'What?' he mutters.

'Wolf,' I say.

Henry comes over after school. I can tell somebody has said something because he's being weird. He doesn't want to play PlayStation. He says we should go outside. He says we should go to the river and I panic. It's too near the woods, but I don't tell him this. There's two of us anyway; and maybe if Henry sees the wolf as well, Mom won't cry, the priest will have answers and the doctor will stop looking up conditions with long names.

Dashing waters collapse over rock. We try to cross but slip on preened stone. Henry falls and laughs and it's not weird anymore. We set our feet akimbo and climb the brook into the field. I watch the tree line for red eyes. The dark blue horizon is dressed in shredded pink, like a ripped dress, like something savaged. Henry says we should go into the woods. There's excitement in his voice. He wants to see what I see. I tell him again what Uncle Ben said, and that the river and church stop them from storming our village in the dead of night. He laughs and rolls his eyes. Maybe it's the first time he's ever rolled his eyes.

We walk. The sun is gone; there's a dome of night over the forest and shadows over the field, and the leafless trees look like jagged teeth, swallowing what's left.

'What's a matter with you?' he says.

I'm shaking on the river bed. I would've ran for the bridge, but

there was no time.

'There's nothing there,' Henry says, disgusted and disappointed.

His mom takes us home. She studies me like something that's gone wrong, like I'm a lesson. The village talks. Mom tells me off for reading Dad's books. The teachers think I have an imaginative mind, which is to say I lie. Uncle Ben stays over. He sets up Dad's old sleeping bag on the sofa.

'I have a yellow belt in karate,' he jokes, chopping at an imaginary foe.

He drags a dining chair next to my bed and waits for me to sleep. He's still there in the morning, head lolled and dribbling.

'See,' he says, rubbing his neck and grimacing, but smiling.

Mom begs him to stay over again. He says he will, but downstairs. It'll save his neck; and he has ninja hearing, he says, winking at me.

The priest says it's because Dad's gone. I need a father figure. He comes over and sips tea from tiny floral cups. He suggests Mom goes to confession and Uncle Ben takes me to church. The priest isn't like the priests in the movies or on TV. He looks through me, nods and smiles, as though I'm part of a world he has no real interest in.

Grandad suggests I stay with them for a while. They live far from the forest – outside the village – and I can still go to school. Mom gets angry. She thinks they still speak to Dad. She thinks they're trying to take me away.

Uncle Ben can't stay tonight. He's met a girl. Just for a night.

'I'm only down the road,' he tells Mom.

He says he's set up cameras in my room – full security lockdown – nothing in or out without his knowing. I have no idea whether he's telling the truth, but I like the idea.

I wasn't always afraid of the dark. Dad used to take me camping,

His frown deepens; he's no longer a statue. It looks like his features want to leave

high into the hills where stars are everywhere, where there's more silver than black. He told stories, too, but not like Uncle Ben's. Dad liked stories about dragons and dwarfs, ogres and maleficent trolls, brash wizards and charismatic rogues. He liked to elicit long pauses and stare into the sky, or wave his hands about to mimic the fall of great beasts. He didn't get scared, but he was sometimes sad.

'A dragon is a drake before it becomes a dragon,' he'd say.

Mom goes to confession and the priest stops visiting. He comes to school instead and asks questions, asks if I'm OK, asks if the bruises are getting better. I have a shadow around my eye and I tell him it hurts. He asks about Uncle Ben, asks if I like him staying over. He looks at me differently, like he can see more than the edges, like the puzzle is almost complete.

Maybe the doctor's right – maybe I roll and tumble and kick at empty spaces, contorted and flailed, gabbling with my limbs, escaping figments. Maybe it's the video games.

The night before I go to Grandad's, the wolf is different. I can hear it outside my door, mewling and whimpering, crawling about as though desperate to enter, as though everything is inside and the hallway is just dark nothingness. I sweat and shake and say a prayer to God, who I think must also fear the wolf. I squeeze my

Continued overleaf 

► *I'm Afraid of Wolves* continued

face and think of Dad, think of the dragons and baby drakes.

Grandad's kept our puzzle. It's spread over the dining room table, half-complete, with the remaining pieces set to the side, organised by colour and impression. They don't mention the wolf.

I hear Grandad crying at night. I tiptoe to their bedroom, through the hallway light, sure that the wolves won't stray so far from the forest.

'What did I miss?' he says, and I think Gran tells him that it's OK.

A man and a woman come over. They ask questions about home. Questions about the wolf. They want to know if people are kind. Gran helps me take off my T-shirt and glides her hand over my body.

'See?' she says to the unhappy visitors, almost pleading.

It takes three days to complete the jigsaw puzzle. But there's a piece missing. It's at the side, where a thorn bush should be, beneath the evergreen. Grandad says sorry. I tell him I don't mind; I tell him it's enough.

I sit with a man with long silver hair. He's an obvious wizard. He

has dusty tomes for books, pendulums and wooden amulets doubtless hewn from mystical trees. He says I should relax, nothing can touch me, and that Grandad is waiting outside. I feel a spell taking hold; my eyelids dip and the colours dim; the world tumbles until I feel hot and sweaty, until I see the wolf. It unfurls from the hallway light, draped in shadow, snarling and seething, then whimpering and still. Its red eyes bleed red tears. I can feel myself speaking, but the words are far away, like they're falling from the stars.

The wolf bends closer, taking it all in, sad that I've gone. It doesn't howl; it never howls. Only whimpers. The shadow falls upon me. I feel the fur. I smell the blood. I merge into it, a wrangled mess of limbs pushed up against the sky. I scream and wake. I don't know what I've said. But I tell him; I tell him about the wolf, dressed in pink teddy-bear pyjamas.



About the author Kieran, from Stafford, is a freelance copywriter, compulsive wanderer and lover of stories. He travels and writes, and is partial to a bit of escapism. His website is at www.kjscostello.com

THIRD PRIZE £100

Sardine Herding

Mandy Huggins

It was almost the end of the English lesson. Mr Richards had asked us all to come up with a sentence that contained a simile. I thought of a story I'd seen on the news: commuters being pushed on to the subway trains in Tokyo by white-gloved station attendants. Herded like cattle, then packed like sardines. Which to use? For some reason I pictured a glittering school of sardines weaving through seaweed, herded by the looming shadow of a hungry shark.

I scribbled down my sentence: *The commuters were herded like sardines into the carriages.*

When I looked up, Mr Richards was at my desk holding out his hand for my paper.

Sandy was in love with Mr Richards, but I couldn't really see the attraction. He was so old, for one thing – at least twenty-six at a guess. He had translucent skin and bony fingers, and wore a battered leather jacket that reeked of stale smoke and fried onions. He smoked roll-ups which he kept in a dented silver tobacco tin. Sometimes our essays would come back with a smear of ash rubbed into the paper.

The bell sounded as I passed him my work, and I raced after Sandy down the corridor.

'Are we going to Derek's tonight?'

Every Wednesday we were allowed to meet up for a couple of hours after we'd done our homework. Our O levels were still a year off, but our parents were really strict about school and stuff. Anyone would've thought it was the 1950s rather than the 1970s, because neither of us was allowed out during the week apart from this. To be honest I'd have rather stayed in on Wednesdays and watched *Survivors*, but beggars can't be choosers. So we both told our mothers that we were going round to each other's houses, when really we always ran down town to Derek's Cafe.

Mr Richards lived opposite the cafe, in the flat above the antique



shop. He never closed his curtains, and in winter we could see into his living room. Often he'd sit at his desk in the bay window, marking papers with a cigarette dangling from his lip, occasionally gazing out across the street. Sandy would nudge me and giggle when he looked up, but I don't think she was really sure what she wanted, or what she hoped would happen.

There was the time we never spoke about, when he'd walked into the room completely naked. We stared, wide-eyed, at his smooth pale chest, his taut buttocks, the line of dark hair that led down from his stomach. We caught each other's eye and blushed, but when we looked up again the room was in darkness. On the way home that night neither of us mentioned what we'd seen, but we'd spotted the glitter and shine in each other's eyes: the new knowing. And as we took the shortcut through the park, the moonlight caught the bare branches of the trees, and I felt something bright and pure race through me – one of those singular moments of teenage clarity when you can imagine the future and know for certain it will be good, and worth the wait.

But for now we were stuck at school, and that future was still a

far-off dream. The present was Derek's on a Wednesday evening; a dimly lit cafe where conversations were accompanied by the constant ding-ding of the pinball machine and a lingering smell of damp leather and two-stroke oil. That evening there was only one other customer, a biker called Joe. I had a massive crush on him, but I hadn't told Sandy how I felt. He was only a couple of years older than us – maybe seventeen, or eighteen tops – but I sensed he thought of me as just a kid.

I watched him lean over the jukebox, his faded red T-shirt stretched taught across his shoulders. He took his time choosing, and the first song was half over before he came back to the table. Derek looked up from his *Racing Post*.

'Not that Springsteen guy again,' he muttered.

Joe smiled, catching my eye. I blushed, I know I did. He sat back down and took out his cigarettes and his brass Zippo lighter. I loved that lighter. I loved the heavy clunking sound it made as it closed, and the way Joe's hair fell across his eyes when he lit a cigarette.

He often came in the cafe after he'd finished a late shift at work, and unless his friends were there he would always sit at the end of our booth. He didn't talk much, but sometimes his leg would brush against mine. I looked at his strong hands and felt a stab of something sweet inside, a strange warmth that melted and slipped away. His eyes were dove grey and they crinkled up when he laughed. I knew that his nose was too big for him to be considered handsome, but I didn't care.

Sandy passed her tobacco tin along the table to him, but he pushed it across to me.

'Roll one for me, will you?'

I looked up and met his gaze. Even though no one else was watching, my hand shook as I took a liquorice paper from the packet and a finger of tobacco from the tin. He held the finished cigarette up and examined it with a grin. 'Not bad.'

He smoked it as though it was a special cigar, holding it out and examining it between drags. But as he stubbed it out in the ashtray he turned to Sandy.

'Do you fancy going for a quick spin round the seafront?'

He stood up, as though she'd already agreed, shrugging on his leather jacket. Sandy hesitated for a second and then pushed back her chair.

'Oh yes please! I've never been on a motorbike! Do you mind, Marnie? We won't be long will we, Joe?'

He shook his head and smiled at me as they headed to the door. Sandy zipped up her jacket, fumbling with the spare helmet that Derek had dug up from behind the counter.

I felt dizzy. I clenched my fists as the tears welled up, and turned away from the window, waiting until I heard Joe's bike pull away before I snatched my coat from the back of my seat. 'Your tea!' shouted Derek as the door swung shut behind me.

I stood on the pavement a moment, and looked up at Mr Richards' flat. The light was on in his living room but he wasn't sat in the window. I crossed the road and pressed the bell. The intercom crackled. 'Yes?'

'It's Marnie Bridge, Mr Richards. I wondered if I could talk to you a moment?'

There was a pause, then static and throat clearing.

'It's about my homework – the TS Eliot essay,' I added.

The latch buzzer sounded and a light came on inside. I pushed the door into a cold beige hall. As I started to climb the stairs I saw his pale face looming over the banisters.

The room was warm, heated by a gas fire, and there were piles of books and marking on the floor and table. He cleared a space for me on the settee and stood with his back to the fire.

Continued overleaf ►

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► Sardine Herding continued

'How can I help you, Marnie?'
I cleared my throat. I'd no idea what I expected to happen here, I just knew that I had to have *something*, because Sandy had taken what I really wanted.
'We saw you naked,' I said.
'You did?' He seemed amused.
'It was a couple of months ago. We were in the cafe opposite... that is, Sandy Makefield and I were. We just looked up and saw you.'
He stepped across the room and stood directly in front of me. 'Did you like what you saw?'
He was so close that I could see the green flecks in his eyes, and the rough patch of skin on his left cheek. He took a step back and grinned.
'Sit down, Marnie, relax. Have a cigarette?'
I tried to take one from the tin, my fingers clawing clumsily at the neat rows of roll-ups. I told him they were packed like cattle. He laughed and took one out for me, leaning in with his lighter.

The next day I arrived late for English, sliding into the desk next to Sandy's just as Mr Richards called us to attention. I couldn't bear to look at him.

'Where did you go last night?' Sandy whispered. 'We came back after ten minutes but you weren't there? I've something to tell you!' I didn't answer, and pretended to write in my rough book. Sandy scribbled something on a Post-it and pushed it inside the cover of my English book. Mr Richards clapped his hands again, and began to discuss the sentences we'd written the day before. His voice jangled in my head and the answers from the other students washed over me. I could still feel his warm breath on my face, and then his lips on mine, soft and greedy. And I could picture Sandy with her arms wrapped round Joe's waist as they sped along the foreshore.

I was suddenly aware that the whole class had fallen silent. When I looked up they were staring at me. A few of the girls started sniggering. I realised Mr Richards must have been calling my name, and I noticed he'd written 'HERDED LIKE SARDINES' on the whiteboard. They obviously didn't understand I'd written it intentionally, because they were laughing as though they thought I was stupid.

Mr Richards caught my eye and winked. I ignored them all and unfolded the Post-it note. I knew it would be about her and Joe, and I also knew I wouldn't be able to tell her what had happened last night.

Joe wants to go out with you but he's too shy to ask! He wanted to check with me first to see if you liked him! I SAID YES! x

'Have you got another example sentence there for us, Marnie?' asked Mr Richards. 'Read it out please.'

I pretended to read from the Post-it.

'When the girl thought about what happened last night she felt as sick as a dog.'

My heart was thudding, and I didn't look up. I just flipped the note over and started to write my reply to Sandy.



About the author Mandy lives in Yorkshire and works in engineering. Comp successes include Bare Fiction, Retreat West, Ink Tears and Cinnamon Press. She abandoned her first novel when she realised it was a short story.

From the very first paragraph I believed in the voice of the narrator of Lucy Kellett's winning story, *It's Different This Time*. It is easy to picture the child locked in a van, clinging to blue rabbit and pretending to be inside a rocket on its way to the moon. We know there is music blaring outside because the metal walls are shaking to the beat.

I like the way the relationship between child and mother is shown as a caring one, even though my initial thought was that she couldn't be a good parent to leave her son in this way while she goes off and enjoys herself. We learn later that the venue is a party, where it is clear that drugs are freely available. This is shown from Dylan's perspective, which means he sees things from a child's innocent point of view.

People sit on the stairs all the way up, talking and leaning on one another. Two ladies dab sherbet from a tiny plastic bag, but it doesn't look like they have enough to share.

The dialogue, too, is well thought out. Dylan gets to hear some crucial information, which he passes on in a mangled fashion to his mother and her boyfriend, Greg. The way this is portrayed felt right for the child that he is. He was able to warn them of a potential threat without even realising that one was on the horizon.

Dylan liked Greg more than his mother's other boyfriends and hoped he'd stay – that it would be different this time – but we are made to think this relationship, too, is doomed to fail. What made the situation real for me when reading the story was the heartbreak faced by the narrator.

Smashed plates on the kitchen floor remind me of the rockery in Gran's garden. Mam sits at the table with her hands over her face. I thought this time might be

different. And I shouldn't have hoped for it, because this time were like all the others. Except it weren't. It were worse. Because this time I found out what it were like to have a proper Dad.

The story ends with the return of Greg after he realises that he wants to be with Dylan and his mother and is prepared to make sacrifices in order to stay. The final line sums up the story perfectly.

Piece by piece we put our house back together.

This is not the tale of a perfect family. It is a well-crafted and honest story showing that love holds people together even in imperfect relationships.

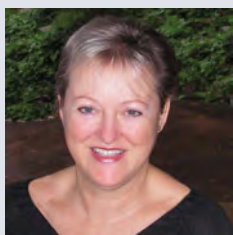
I'm Afraid of Wolves by Kieran Joseph Shay Costello shows a different side of motherhood. This is a much darker story than it first appears, particularly as, on the surface, it gives the impression of a mother who wants to be both loving and supportive for her child after her husband leaves, but isn't able to work out how to achieve this.

The narrator is clearly living in fear of a nightly visitor and this is cleverly presented to give the misleading impression of a sexual predator.

The wolf doesn't pounce; not at first. It stands, inhaling the fear, savouring the dread.

The narrator isn't believed by any of those who should be watching out for him. His gran tells him his actions are not helping his mother, and the mother's friend says he is acting up. Even his grandad doubts the child's fears are valid.

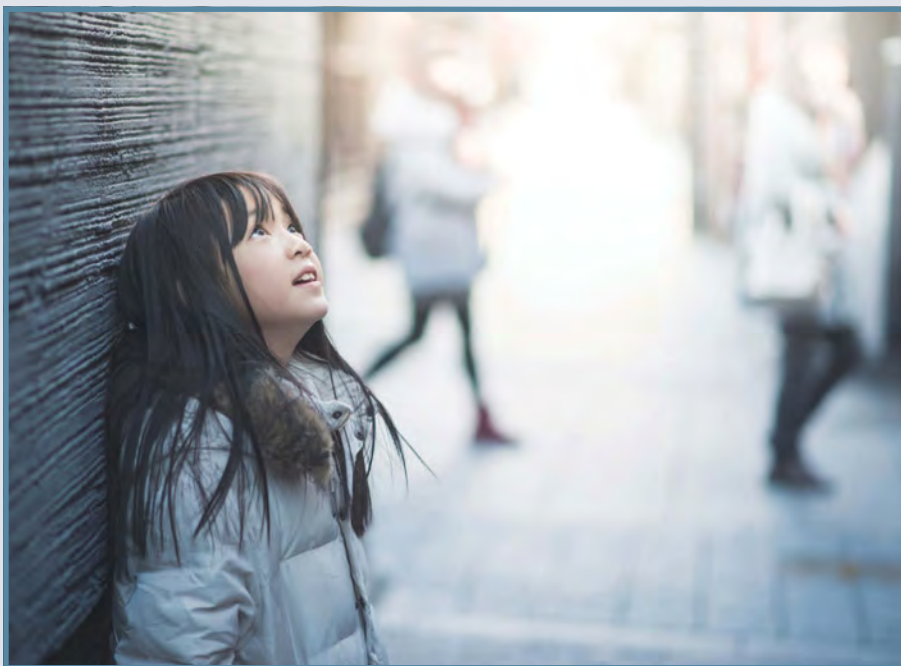
I've been missing school a lot. 'She's very upset,' Grandad says after Mom has left to speak to the teachers.



Competition round-up

Out of the mouths of babes

Lorraine Mace explains why she chose this month's winners



Using a young narrator

This month we happen to have three first person narrators in differing stages of childhood: two fairly young children and a teenager. In all three cases the voices work because they give access to the way the child thinks and feels. Writing in this way is more difficult than it sounds – it is all too easy to put adult interpretations on events. To maintain the integrity of the voice the author has to inhabit completely the mind of the child. This means putting aside how to think as an adult and taking on the naivety and innocence of the narrator.

By using a naive narrator the reader can see the world through the child's eyes, while simultaneously feeling adult emotions, such as fear and grief over situations the child may not see as threatening or distressing. A child's perspective can bring complex issues down to the basics.

The author introduces a possible suspect in the form of an uncle.

Mom goes to confession and the priest stops visiting. He comes to school instead and asks questions; asks if I'm okay; asks if the bruises are getting better. I have a shadow around my eye and I tell him it hurts. He asks about Uncle Ben; asks if I like him staying over. He looks at me differently, like he can see more than the edges, like a puzzle is almost complete.

The truth about his mother is so well concealed throughout

the story that the revelation is all the more shocking. Not an easy story to read, but one that stayed with me long after I'd read it.

Mandy Huggins chose a great title for the third-placed story, *Sardine Herding*. It is eye-catching but also gives a hint at the mindset of the narrator. This is another story that hits hard, putting the reader into the mind of a vulnerable teenage girl. Mandy has the narrator's voice spot on. I was able to believe in her from

the first paragraph.

There is a point in the story when we share a moment of joy with the narrator, which makes the ending all the more poignant because of what is lost by her one misguided action and the teacher's lack of morals.

And, as we took the shortcut through the park, the moonlight caught the bare branches of the trees, and I felt something bright and pure race through me – one of those singular moments of teenage clarity when you can imagine the future and know for certain it will be good, and worth the wait.

I was impressed with the way Mandy kept in the narrator's head as events unfolded. I felt her anger – and anguish – when it appeared the boy she wanted was interested in her friend. I remained in her head when she made the ill-fated decision to call on her teacher, but was also detached

enough to want to scream at her not to ring the bell. To elicit such reader reaction is a sign of good writing.

I felt Marnie's confusion, and wanted even more to push her back from the obvious danger she was courting.

I cleared my throat. I'd no idea what I expected to happen here. I just knew that I had to have something, because Sandy had taken what I really wanted.

As distressing as the events had been, the ending left me feeling Marnie would be fine. She seemed strong enough to deal with what had happened and was clearly ready to move on with her life.

Highly commended

There were seven shortlisted stories this month:

The Partisan by Patrick Tuck
Remanent Fears by Lucy Gluyas
The Eocene by Petra McQueen
Missing a Beat by Shane Hulgraine
Waterfall by Jane Dotchin
Sins of the Fathers by Louise Johnson
Flying by Jim Edmiston

Lorraine is co-author of *The Writer's ABC Checklist* (Accent Press) and author of children's novel *Vlad the Inhaler* (LRP)



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Our head judge uses reader entries to show how to improve your writing

THE LETTER PLOT

Sometimes a plot requires information to be delivered by a character who is no longer on the scene – perhaps someone who has passed away, moved to another country, or is in prison. One way to do this is via a letter.

There has to be a *valid reason why* this is the chosen form of communication, though. It cannot be simply because the author needs it to happen. The letter has to be seen as the only credible way (within the constraints of the story) that the recipient can find out whatever it is that will have a profound effect on the plot.

This brings me to my second point. Whatever is contained in the letter has to affect one of the characters, or change the course of the story. Unless the letter introduces something that cannot be brought to light in some other way, it will stand out as a plot device and so not be credible.

He Shot Us Down, Then Saved Our Lives! by Paul Brannon uses a letter to introduce information that couldn't be given in any other way (it is a letter from father to son delivered after the father's death) so fulfils the first of my points. However, although framed briefly at the beginning and end by the son's point of view, the real story is contained within the letter. It doesn't affect one of the characters, nor does it change the course of the story. It is the story.

The problem with this is that, by its very nature, the entire piece is narrative. There is no dialogue, no interaction,

which means there is also no emotional connection with the reader.

The title of the story outlines the plot. A German fighter plane shoots down a British aircraft. The two British airmen find themselves in freezing water and are about to die from hypothermia when the German pilot (who also had to bail out) saves their lives by picking them out of the sea and taking them to a special buoy constructed by the Germans to house beds, heating and basic cooking facilities. These buoys were placed in strategic positions in the English Channel to enable their pilots to survive long enough to be picked up by a rescue boat or a passing neutral ship.

The German pilot revives and feeds the two British airmen and sets them adrift in their own life raft once they are fully recovered from their ordeal. They head off to waters known to be patrolled by British rescue boats, leaving Ulli, the German pilot, to be picked up by his own side.

The storyline is excellent and should be full of excitement, tension and high drama, but because it is told in narrative it lacks these elements.

Contradicting themes

The opening to the story gives the impression it will be about the wartime exploits of the father.

I knew he'd been a pilot and there was a connection with the navy, but he would only ever go into detail about what he didn't do whenever we asked questions



about his experiences. At the reading of the will, though, of all the things he left me, this letter was to become the most precious and set me on a journey of discovery about all the things he did actually do.

This set-up implies that the story that follows will be about the father, but it is actually about the German airman who saved him, as the father's part in it is passive. The prime mover in the story is the rescuer, not the rescued.

I would suggest either rewording the opening to reflect this or (and this is my preferred solution) rewriting the story so that it is told entirely from the father's point of view. In this particular case the story would be far stronger if shown as it happened, rather than telling it in distant narration, decades after the event.

Not always golden

There is a section in the story where the narrator (the father)

recounts the moments before he and his co-pilot have to decide what action to take. After being hit by enemy fire the aircraft was losing fuel and would not be able to make it back to Britain.

This gave us two chances: one, to jump out while we still had sufficient height or, two, to ditch the plane into the sea. Neither option gave us much comfort, but we'd have to choose one or the other. If we jumped, we'd at least escape without having to crash land, but the thoughts of the freezing, ice-cold sea brought home to us the dangers of that option. If we ditched into the sea, it would get us that much closer to land and, if we got it right, we'd be able to get the dinghy in the water, and get straight in it without the freezing immersion the jump into the sea would cause us.

I feel the above passage would carry much more impact if the two men had a terse discussion about the two options. It is flat and lacking

any emotional depth, but it has all the elements of a high drama scene. Dialogue and action are needed to bring the characters to life and make the situation real for the reader.

Non-dramatic drama

When something happens that adds to the danger, the reader needs to feel the tension level escalate.

The decision was then dramatically taken out of our hands and we were forced to take immediate action. The damaged engine burst into flames and it found more fuel to feed it and raced towards the fuselage. We didn't have the luxury of time with us any more and would have to bail out. NOW!

There is not enough drama in this. It is told a little too prosaically. However, if the earlier scene had shown the two men frantically discussing their options, imagine how much more tension would be added when one of them spots the flames and yells: 'We need to bail out. Now!'

Because the story is being told years after the event in the form of a letter, it isn't possible to inject the level of tension needed to make the scenes exciting. However, if the author had the narrator father telling his son the story face to

face, he could then move into flashback at crucial points and use dialogue to ramp up the tension.

The rescue

The two men are in the sea, knowing they have a tiny margin of time in which to reach the life raft before they black out from the extreme cold. It is only a few feet away from their position.

We both set out to reach it, but it soon became impossible to push out my arms as they became leaden along with my legs. It couldn't have taken long at all before I blacked out. The next conscious memory I have is looking up at the sky with my back on something firmer. I could feel Jim next to me, also lying on his back. A face loomed over me, propping my head up and pouring a liquid down my throat. They liquid exploded a warmth through me and revived me to some extent.

We need to be in the water with the narrator. What does it feel like to be so cold? How did it feel to know the life raft was so close but not near enough? What emotional trauma was he experiencing?

Even more important, how did he feel when he came to? What did he think when he found a stranger looming over him? Did he fight against the

liquid, which could have been some form of poison?

We noticed a light getting nearer and nearer and my hopes surged thinking this could present salvation. When we got to it though, I was disappointed to discover it was merely a buoy. My assumption was we'd be tethered to this buoy in the hopes of being seen by a rescue boat patrolling the channel.

When the rower reached this buoy, he climbed on to it, tethered his dingy and opened the top! We'd never seen anything like this before but he looked back at us with a huge smile on his face pointing down inside the buoy which had a light pouring out from its interior. Although we'd heard rumours of such a thing, we hadn't dreamed they would actually exist, but what we had here turned out to be a strategically placed rescue buoy, known to the Luftwaffe as a Rettungsboje, or lobster pot, to which they bore a resemblance.

The narrator recounts this amazing event without any emotion whatsoever. Readers need to be inside his head as he sees the buoy. We have to feel his emotion when he believes his life raft is going to be tethered to it. Does he believe rescue will come? Is he scared he will die from cold and hunger before that happens? What does he feel when the lid is lifted and light shines out? Does he fear he's going to be held as a prisoner of war?

The rescue could be (and should be) a moment of high tension, but it falls flat because we cannot get close enough to the narrator to know how he thinks and feels.

Living happily ever after

The letter ends with a short passage about how the three men parted.

The next morning Jim and I of the Fleet Air Arm bid a genuine heartfelt goodbye to our Luftwaffe enemy. After much discussion, it was decided that we two much revived and now dried out Brits would get into our life raft and

head ENE to lanes we knew would be patrolled by our rescue craft and not be picked up by Ulli's boats. Ulli was going to wait until one of his rescue boats or a neutral ship came by and would be returned that way. And we found this out well after the end of the war through an alliance of the RAF and the Luftwaffe, set up to keep crew members of both sides in touch.

I would have liked to see this farewell happen. What form did the discussion take? How good was Ulli's English? We end the story without getting to know Ulli as a person, but he is the central character – starting out as the antagonist and ending it as the protagonist. We should see him as a living, breathing character whose actions endangered and then saved the lives of the narrator and his friend.

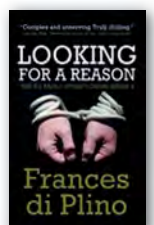
Conclusions

The story is excellent – it has all the elements of a great drama: conflict, danger, near-death experiences, a saviour when least expected, rescue, camaraderie, friendship and gratitude.

In my opinion, using the letter to tell the story prevents it from working as well as it should. My advice would be to reconsider the structure. Remove the letter entirely and either have the father recount the story to his son or forget the father/son relationship altogether and show the events as they affect the narrator.

Either way, readers need to be on the plane when it's shot and subsequently bursts into flame, they need to be dropped into a freezing sea, come close to dying, and ultimately be rescued by the enemy who turns out to be more saint than sinner.

Writing as Frances di Plino, Lorraine Mace is author of the DI Paolo Storey crime series. Her latest book is *Looking for a Reason*



Letters checklist

Before introducing information via a letter, consider the points below. You might find a better way of introducing the facts you want to impart – or decide they don't need to be given at all.

- ☐ Does the reader need to know this particular thing? This may sound ridiculous, but there are times when an author spoils a plot by bringing in facts that simply aren't relevant.
- ☐ Does the information affect the plot in a necessary way? Introducing a thread that has no bearing on the plot often irritates readers because they follow the clues down a blind alley for no reason whatsoever.
- ☐ Do the contents of the letter change the life of the recipient or another major character?
- ☐ Most important of all – is this the only way to bring in the facts? If you have a choice between a note from beyond the grave (or sea/space/planet) and having the information given via dialogue, nine times out of ten dialogue will be the stronger method.

ADDING WORDS

Glynis Scrivens explains how learning the essential writing skill of adding words can lead to multiple sales of the same story

Every fiction writer needs to learn how to add words in a way that enhances a story. Why? This might be the only way you can sell it.

Sometimes an editor will comment: *'This story felt rushed.'* That's not necessarily a no. It's your cue to add depth and round things off better before resubmitting.

Sometimes your story falls short of a magazine's fiction slot. Maybe you've written a 1000-word twist but it's been rejected. If you can bring it up to 1200 words, that will open up other markets to try. Once you've mastered this skill, your 1000-word stories can be transformed into 1500 words as well. Why limit the number of sales a story can achieve?

Remember this: if a story is good enough to sell once, it can sell twice.

And why stop there? Just ensure you know exactly what rights you're selling each time.

Here's an example. My story

Hello, Stranger started out at 1160 words. In 2006, I brought it up to 1400 words and it was accepted by *My Weekly*. Two years later I added more words, bringing it to 2430 words. It sold to *Hjemmet* magazine in Denmark.

It has subsequently sold at 1490 words to *You* magazine in South Africa, *Allas* magazine in Sweden and *Fast Fiction* in Australia.

All of these sales were achieved because I learned the essential skill of adding words. You should too.

Had I left the story at its original length of 1160 words, it may not have sold at all.

So, if you've written a story you believe is a good one, then it's definitely worth spending the time figuring out how to extend it. Stories can't simply be padded out; those extra words must bring something to the story.

Here are five ways to add words – and more meaning – to your stories.

Go deeper

Explore the impact of events and interactions on your characters, delving more deeply into their response. You can do this by adding action, dialogue and emotion to develop character.

In my 1160 word original version of *Hello, Stranger*, I wrote:

The stranger's a newcomer. She's a bit intimidating, to tell the truth. More sophisticated. Very independent. And she wears lots of perfume and make-up. Her lovely face doesn't need foundation, blush, mascara and eye shadow. But I won't be saying anything. Had my head snapped off last time.

(48 words)

Using the technique of going deeper into the mother's viewpoint, I rewrote this paragraph as:

The stranger's a newcomer. She's a bit intimidating, to tell the truth. More sophisticated. Very independent. Even speaks differently, especially when she's on the phone to her friends. And she wears lots of perfume and make-up. Her lovely face doesn't need foundation, blush, mascara and eye shadow.

It's hard to recognise you under the layers of make-up. And your light blonde hair is a dark shade of brown now. You spend hours straightening it. I've burnt myself on that appliance more times than I'd care to remember. Do you ever remember to turn it off?

When you've gone out, I walk around the house turning off lights, the CD player, the hair straightener, the computer, and

sometimes the TV as well. Such a pointless waste of electricity.

But I won't be saying anything. I had my head snapped off last time I said something about this.

'What were you doing in my room?' you said, when I'd shown you the blister on my hand from holding the hair straightener. It'd been on the wooden floorboards, turned on, red-hot. You refused to listen to me when I explained we could've had a fire. And you refused to look at my burnt hand. Somehow you felt that I was the one who'd done something wrong. That injustice hurt me more than the burn on my hand.

(225 words)

This version is nearly five times longer without waffling. New aspects of the situation are explored and we learn more about the relationship between the mother and her daughter. The incident with the hair straightener adds an extra dimension. 'Show not tell' is important when including extra scenes like this one.

2 Add backstory

Readers need to care for your characters. The longer your story, the more they want to know. So when lengthening a story, you need to bear this in mind.

I learnt this when I submitted my story *Somebody Else's Lover* to Kari Bjørnstad, then editor of Norway's *Hjemmet*. The story was 2250 words. Here's her response:

I have read the short story, rather nice, but I find it maybe a bit uncompleted/unfinished, elements hanging in the air.

I would like to know more about both her and his past, about their



International short story writer Glynis Scrivens

Hello, STRANGER

It's all the things that no longer happen that hurt – and there are constant reminders of them. Like an empty space next to me on the bed where you used to be every morning, still in your pyjamas, sleepily telling me your dreams.

Or the hand you no longer hold to cross the road. Or the kite that gathers dust. Shaped like a dragon, it sits undisturbed in your room.

Then there are the dolls going midweek in the bathroom cupboard since your last clean out. Next stop for them is the charity bin.

It's sneaked up on me this time, Karen, which it shouldn't have done. You're my youngest. I've been through this twice. I still haven't learnt to cope, though, if this emptiness is anything to go by.

In front of your mirror, applying make-up, you're totally absorbed in choosing a lip gloss. You haven't noticed me enter the room.

How could you hear anything over the CD player anyway? At

Suddenly, one day, there's a child you barely recognise living in the house *By Glynis Scrivens*

top volume, it blares out songs of love and anger all day.

I have to knock now. There's an invisible sign on your door that says, *Keep Out. Do Not Enter Unless Invited.*

Am I invited? Sometimes. You switch between being my girl and being a stranger. I never know who I'll find.

You switch between being my girl and being a stranger

I can relate to my girl. She talks to me, confides in me, needs me. The stranger's a newcomer. She's a bit intimidating, to tell the truth.

Sophisticated. Very independent.

And she wears lots of perfume and make-up. Her lovely face doesn't need foundation, blush and mascara. It's hard to recognise you under the layers of make-up. And your deep-brown hair is now a light shade of blonde, and you spend hours straightening it. I've burnt myself on that thing more times than I'd care to say. Do you ever remember to turn it off?

But I won't be saying anything to you. I had my head snapped off last time.

Sometimes the stranger will be here, and something happens that brings my girl back. Maybe

I slip out of your room. I've can't remember what I was going to say to you.

He and I look at each other. He misses you too.

I get him his dinner and while he waits it down, I find his head. It's still light enough to take him on a walk. Freshen up both our moods. I've noticed he's been looking a bit down. His life's got empty spaces in it too, where you used to be.

By the time we get back, you've finished your make-up. You're on the phone. It seems to have become magnetised to your ear lately.

I fix dinner. It's Saturday so I make your favourite – chicken curry with basmati rice. The kitchen fills with the delicious spicy smells and I leave it simmering while I watch the news on TV.

I'm ready to dish up, when you finally hang up the phone. 'Dinner's ready,' I say merrily. 'I've already eaten.'

Except you haven't. You've been at work from 11 until three. And since you got home, you've been in your room.

Without looking at me, you tell me you're going Latin dancing with Anna tonight.

I haven't got time to eat.

I pretend I haven't heard you contradicting. 'Anna's dad

amount of blue eye shadow and mascara can conceal it.

'Can you give me and Anna a lift home at 10 o'clock?'

'Why didn't you ask me earlier?' I say. 'I didn't even know you were going out.'

'I'm asking you now, you say with a too-bright smile as you take my hand. 'Please, Mum.'

Knowing a smile and contact will get you a 'yes'. Knowing instinctively it's what I need.

Outside a car horn toots. As you close the door, I realise with a pang that you haven't kissed me goodbye.

I touch my cheek – another empty space.

I eat my curry and watch *Midsomer Murders* on the television. Then I make coffee. I'm not the night owl I once was, and if I don't have coffee I might doze off.

Ten o'clock sees me at the Latin-dancing studio. You've got me well trained – and I'm looking forward to hearing about your evening. Hundreds of people pour from the studio. It takes you a while to spot me.

'Anna wants to sleep over, you say, as you both sit in the back of the car. Now I feel like a chauffeur, not a mum. And the seat beside me is empty, too.'

The hand you no longer hold to cross the road. The kite that gathers dust. Shaped like a fire-breathing dragon, it sits undisturbed against the wall in your bedroom. It hasn't scared a butterfly for years.

Then there are the dolls going midweek in the bathroom cupboard since your last clean-out.



HELLO, STRANGER

What was she like as a teenager, she wondered. Did she treat her mom the way her kids treated her?

By GLYNIS SCRIVENS Illustration: MINDI FLEMING

It's all the things that no longer happen that hurt – and there are constant reminders of them. The empty space beside me on the bed where you used to lie, sleepily telling me your dreams every morning, still in your pyjamas.

The hand you no longer hold to cross the road. The kite that gathers dust. Shaped like a fire-breathing dragon, it sits undisturbed against the wall in your bedroom. It hasn't scared a butterfly for years.

Then there are the dolls going midweek in the bathroom cupboard since your last clean-out.

Next stop for them is the charity bin at our local supermarket.

It's sneaked up on me this time, Karen, which it shouldn't have done. You're my youngest. I've already been through this twice. I haven't learnt much about coping, though, if this emptiness inside is anything to go by.

You're in front of your mirror, applying make-up. Totally absorbed in choosing a lip-gloss, you haven't noticed me enter the room. How could you hear anything above the CD player anyway? It blares out messages of love and anger all day, at top volume. I have to knock these days. There's an

invisible sign on your door that says *Keep Out. Do Not Enter Unless Invited.*

Am I invited? Sometimes. You seem to vacillate between being my girl and being a stranger. I never know who I'll find.

I can relate to my girl. She talks to me, confides in me, needs me. The stranger is a newcomer. She's a bit intimidating, to tell the truth. More sophisticated. Very independent. Even speaks differently, especially when she's on the phone. And she wears lots of perfume and make-up. Her lovely face doesn't need foundation, blush, mascara and eyeshadow.

It's hard to recognise you under the layers

former partners.

If you could make the story a bit longer and more complete, I think it will be good.

Adding an extra 700 words secured the sale, and I received guidance how to do this.

Developing your characters by giving them a past adds something to your story.

3 Create images It pays to remember that someone will be illustrating your story. Adding words gives you scope to create images for them to work with.

I've learnt that most fiction editors are conscious of the task of finding illustrations. Make their job easier.

My original version of *Hello, Stranger* has one sentence of 17 words where my heroine pours a bath and adds 'Relax' bubble bath. To expand on this, I added an image that could be used by the illustrator:

So I pour myself a bath – a big hot one – and I add 'Relax' bubble bath. While the bath is filling, I lay a towel on the bathroom floor and do my yoga exercises. There's a full moon tonight, shining through the window onto the rippling water. I turn off the light and enjoy the simple pleasure of watching the reflections bounce as the water continues to pour. A nice steamy aroma is rising from the bath and

I begin to relax. My jaw muscles slacken and I slowly undress.

Seventeen words become ninety-two.

4 What would your character do next? Generally I retain

existing plot elements rather than seeking to add a sub-plot or additional action. But there are times when a story suits an additional scene at the end, showing what happens next. Don't be afraid to let your plot evolve further.

5 Add five senses With one-page stories in particular, there isn't much scope for description. But when you need to add words, it's helpful to remember all five senses – sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste.

Don't just have your hero eating a hamburger. Have him smelling the onions fry,

PRO TIP

When you're increasing the length of a story, do it in stages. This way you'll have a series of useful lengths for later use. For example, a 650-word story being developed to 1500 words (yes, it can be done) should be saved when you get to 800, 1000, 1200 and 1400 words.

listening to the traffic going past, seeing someone he recognises, getting sticky fingers from the sauce and then experiencing all the sensations of taking that first bite.

Don't make it obvious, of course, or it will look more like a writing exercise. Weave in those extra elements subtly throughout the text.

Adding weather can also be useful. For example, the smell of rain on mown grass could bring back childhood memories. There could be rain trickling down someone's neck from an umbrella. Rain that limits visibility. Rain that hammers on a corrugated iron roof, keeping someone awake. Rain that brings a chilly breeze so your character has to borrow a coat...

Final word

Techniques such as these enabled South African writer

Ginny Swart to get four sales from a single story, although she admits it was hard work.

'I've always found adding words to a story to be really difficult, once I've written it to my satisfaction,' she says. 'The craziest editing I've done was for a Halloween story that was accepted by an Australian magazine at 800 words.'

'The next year I rewrote it at 2000 words and an English mag used it. Then I resuscitated it for a South African magazine at the required 1500 words. Finally the following year I got carried away and padded it out to 3600 words for a magazine that likes long, detailed stuff.'

• *Edit is a Four-Letter Word* by Glynis Scrivens is available from Compass Books



Searching for answers

I always buy her a new book of poems for her birthday. I creep into her room when she is out and leave the book on her table, without any inscription or dedication. Sometimes we happen to sit together in the dining hall. I avoid her glance, so as not to have to face her mocking sadness. On hot days, when faces are covered in sweat, the acne on her cheeks reddens and she seems to have no hope. When the cool of autumn comes, I sometimes find her pretty and attractive from a distance. On such days Geula likes to walk to the orchards in the early evening. She goes alone and she comes back alone. Some of the youngsters come and ask me what she is looking for there, and they have a malicious snicker on their faces. I tell them I don't know. And I really don't.

From the short story Where the Jackals Howl, by Amos Oz (translated by Nicholas de Lange and Philip Simpson)

Poets need enough time and enough courage to enter all kinds of places alone, not just orchards. They need to thoroughly explore these places and when they return, maybe they have found the word, phrase, title or format for which they were searching.

Or maybe what they were searching for eluded them. As well as time and courage, poets need hope – that, if they remain dedicated to their craft, all their searching will bring rewards.

In fact, being a poet involves a lot of searching...

Search for the right word

At the risk of stating the downright obvious, when writing a poem it is essential to search for the right words; however long that might take. It is all too easy to fall back on clichés.

One of the ways to avoid clichés is to make a list of all the clichés you can think of. For example, if you are planning to write about spring, summer, autumn or winter, start by making a list of all the overused images you associate with that season. For example:

■ Spring: trees that are green or daffodils that are yellow; white lambs gambolling and high-flown phrases about new life bursting forth



- Summer: think carefully about how you describe the heat, the parched earth or the blue, cloudless sky
- Autumn: dying leaves, squirrels storing nuts, a chill in damp air
- Winter: long descriptions of sunlight glistening on new snow or shards of ice, people who shiver and wear thick jumpers, numb hands and feet

How many more can you think of about seasons? Spend some time making your own list of clichés.

If the seasons fail to inspire you, try doing the same with one of the topics below (or with a subject you feel inspired to write about):

- Love and loss of love
- Death
- Cats
- War – especially the two world wars

Then start to write your poem with the sincere intention to avoid anything on your list.

Remember, even when you are writing about a very personal subject, such as the death of a loved one, clichés need to be avoided. This may be the first time *you* have suffered the death of a child, parent or spouse but the reader will have read numerous poems on the same subject.

Search for the right format

For a true writer, each book should be a new beginning where he tries again for something that is beyond attainment. He should always try for something that has never been done or that others have tried and failed. Then sometimes, with great luck, he will succeed.

Ernest Hemingway

Hemingway was talking about books, but the same could – and maybe should – apply to poems.

If the task of doing 'something that has never been done or that others have tried and failed' sounds too daunting, start with doing something that *you* have never done before.

Take time to read other poets and see how they used various formats. Then take some time to think how you might use this knowledge to choose formats that are right for your unique style, and tone.

Have the courage to play with format. For example, write your poem in couplets. Then combine the couplets to make four-line or six-line stanzas. Combine these stanzas to make one continuous narrative. Then create a totally new format.

Search for the format that works best for your subject matter and the perspective from which your poem is written.



with poetry editor
Sue Butler

Search for the right perspective

And talking of perspective, no time is ever wasted searching for the right point of view from which to deliver your poem.

If you are dealing with a subject you find hard to express, perhaps it is worth beginning at a distance. Start by saying 'he' or 'she' and let your characters take on the responsibility of expressing challenging or controversial emotions.

Once the characters have taken on a life of their own and you have observed them from a distance, try replacing 'he' or 'she' with 'I'.

Don't make the reader search

You need to search hard so your reader doesn't have to. At the end of the poem, don't leave the reader shrugging their shoulders and searching for answers to questions such as:

- What is the message, lesson, moral or point of the poem?
- What is this image trying to convey?
- Who is speaking?
- Why does the tense or perspective change at a certain point in the poem?

Embrace whatever your searching reveals

There is no rule on how to write.

Sometimes it comes easily and perfectly; sometimes it's like drilling rock and then blasting it out with charges.

Ernest Hemingway (again)

Remember that as long as you are searching, you are moving in the right direction as a poet. Have faith that searching leads to discovery. And if what you find is not what you were expecting, then embrace the opportunity and allow it to lead you into new ways of writing and sharing ideas with your reader.

Poetry feedback service

If you'd like detailed and targeted feedback from Sue, you can purchase an extended critique of three poems for £35. Email her at poetry@writers-forum.com for details.

EXPERIMENT

Poetic relations

I've been reading Amos Oz recently and if you don't know this Israeli author's work I thoroughly recommend it. For me, he is a poet who just happens to write in prose. Poetry is allegedly something that gets lost in translation, but this is not so for me when I read Oz's work rendered into English from the original Hebrew. In the novel, *Touch the Water, Touch the Wind* (translated by Nicholas de Lange), Elisha Pomeranz survives World War Two and leaves Poland to begin a new life in Tiberias, Israel, where

the work of mending watches and clocks brought about a cool feeling of enjoyment, a gradual rallying of the forces of order.

While Elisha is in Tiberias:

Time passed, and Pomeranz, still squinting, still dreamy, began to resume his old researches, which he had neglected for more than ten years now, somewhere in the twilight zone between pure mathematics and theoretical physics.

Another thing the reader learns about this period of Elisha's life is:

There were, naturally, superficial relations with four or five people. The grocer who at six o'clock would listen to two different radio broadcasts simultaneously on two radio sets, in French and Arabic, who was surrounded by piles of newspapers and magazines, and was daily expecting a major disaster. Pomeranz would exchange a few sentences with him, bloodcurdling political speculations, apocalyptic forecasts, international conspiracies and manoeuvres. Then there were the meter readers, the neighbours, their dogs, their children, regular and occasional customers. They all crossed his path without impinging on him, because he did not want to encroach or make friends, but only to sit quietly and calculate, sit silently and listen.

Write about Elisha Pomeranz from the point of view of one of the people who cross his path but do not impinge on him. What does the grocer think of Elisha? How would the grocer describe the few sentences they exchange? What kind of man do the meter readers see? How would Elisha's customers and neighbours or the dogs and the children describe the relationship they have with him?

As you write, remember to explore the different effects created by letting the people (or the dogs) speak using 'I', 'we' and 'us', or in having a narrator speak using 'he', 'she' and 'they'.

POETRY WORKOUT

Where do stepping stones lead? Do you ever feel like Sisyphus? What colour is a touchstone? Fill a poem with hard places...

1
2
3
4

Walk a mile with a stone in your shoe. Now remove the stone.

Walk another mile. Describe the difference.

Sow something on stony ground. Describe how this affects your relationship with a person or place.

Is a heart of stone a myth or do such hearts actually exist?

Which stones are precious and which are not? Consider diamonds, gallstones, stones thrown in glasshouses, gravestones, rolling stones, millstones and stony stares.

Poetry competition

£100 winner

Mother's Nature

Thomas Harrison, Sandbach, Cheshire

bed sheets make a tent
from an elbow bent, up to a shoulder curved,
and under them
in the nook and the cave of a mother's body,
lies a son or a daughter –
curled, shell-like, patient, a chest rising in rhythmic dreams...
The ceiling hangs above them as a cocoon.
White and open, gentle and fresh.

But as night loses its chill and dark fades to sun,
something is changing...
something happens to the mother's sheets.

They become green and mossy and damp with dew,
they stand atop rock and soil and magma and clay
where the elbow and shoulder once lay;
now they cover and encircle – as mother did to baby –
tunnels and roots, crustaceans wet and hooves dry from
silt or sand, leaf or dust.

That same ceiling hovers above them as a promise.
Still and open, white and blue, twisting and drifting,

both ours and theirs.

The winning poem this month begins with no capital letter and no preamble. This technique means the reader enters the poem midway through the action: the mother has already made the bedsheets into a tent and the reader has no idea how long mother and child have been in their current positions. This is a good way of engaging the reader right from the start.

Having gained our attention, the narrator of this poem sets the scene further with a six-line sentence; one that ends with an ellipsis... This simple piece of punctuation encourages the reader to pause and consider the tableau that the narrator has described in detail and also (or especially) what it is the son or daughter may be dreaming about.

It is always worth remembering that a good poem needs to give the reader all the information they need to follow the narrative and feel a connection of some kind with the characters; but there also needs to be places in the poem where the reader can pause and take stock before reading further. The narrator does not reveal the exact age of



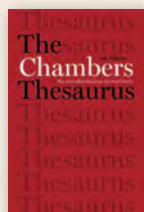
the child or its sex, and so the reader is able to imagine the child in a way that works best for them.

The poem begins by talking about the mother and child as 'they' and this continues through the poem until the very last line. Here the narrator speaks for him or herself and the reader. The narrator claims that the 'ceiling' and the 'promise' belong to the characters in the poem and to 'us'. It is always very brave for narrators to speak for anyone other than themselves, but in this case I suspect most readers will not feel the comment is out of place.

Poems that might have been

Each month we give you three suggestions or questions about the winning poem. Use them to explore the different directions the poem might have taken. Think about format, style of language and narrative development. Use the questions to inspire your own poem or poems.

■ Rewrite this poem keeping the same format (ie lines in each stanza and the same sentence structure) but from the point of view of the child or the mother. How does the poem's potential relationship with



Each month our winning poet wins £100 and a copy of the new edition of Chambers Thesaurus, worth £40.

the reader change if the narrator says 'I', and is recounting their own experience?

■ Does the poem change in anyway if the person making the tent is the child's father rather than the child's mother? Rewrite the poem so it shows a father's relationship with his son or daughter. Does the gender of the child change the poem in any way?

■ Write a poem about 'rhythmic dreams' of the child. Might the dreams shed some light on the age and sex of the child without actually mentioning either directly? What might the dreams reveal about the child's life outside this tent made of bed sheets?

Highly Commended

Mountain side by Diane Earl, Mochdre, Conwy

Diane Earl's poem explores the relationship between parents, children and a mountain. In the final stanza the narrator says:

Unspoilt still, unknown,
The place reminds of earlier times,
When children then, but now full grown,
They bring their own to see the fern,
Still growing tall round slate-grey stone.

Patchwork by Joyce Walker, Borehamwood, Herts

In this poem the narrator starts to knit and remembers 'The garments made when you were small'. The poem continues:

As you grew up, the colours changed,
The patterns changed and you changed too,
You didn't want my cosy knits;
Those ones made lovingly for you.

Back in the present, the narrator reveals 'now I take my scraps of wool... I knit each square with love... I knit our lives into a spread I bind them together...'

The French Polisher by Sylvia Greenland, Exeter

Also highly commended this month, this poem does not contain a single mention of a parent or a child but it does portray a very tender relationship between a piano and the person who polishes it. The poem opens 'I am a piano, not just a box... a beautiful instrument... The music I make took sixty years work' and the whole poem is narrated by the piano. This is a love poem that explores the relationship between the 'he' who polished the poem and the piano.

If you have time this month, try writing a poem about the love between a person (or an animal) and an inanimate object (or a landscape feature). Let the inanimate object narrate the poem. Or if you prefer, replace love with hate, envy or jealousy.

Writers' FORUM

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Deadline: 15th of each month. Late entries go into the next contest.

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Literary diary

FESTIVALS

Ways with Words, Devon 7-17 July

This 10-day festival is a vibrant and joyful event – a chance for those who read books to meet those who write them. Anna Pasternak, Wendy Holden, AC Grayling and Simon Armitage are among the well-known names this year.
www.wayswithwords.co.uk

Port Eliot Festival, Cornwall 27-30 July

The festival is a celebration of words, music, imagination, ideas, nature, food, fashion, flowers, laughter, exploration and fun. This year Hollie McNish, Louis de Bernières, Robert Newman and Matt Haig are among those taking part.
www.porteliotfestival.com

Festival at the Edge, Shropshire 28-30 July

A weekend of storytelling, tall tales, terrific tellers, music and more, surrounded by views of the Shropshire countryside. There are practical workshops, story rounds and informal music sessions to join in with. There will also be stories and performances for children.
www.festivalattheedge.org

Abbey900 Festival of Books, Gloucestershire 7-11 August

This year is the 900th anniversary of the founding of the Augustinian abbey of St Mary in Cirencester. As part of the festivities, Octavia's Bookshop is hosting a five-day book festival, with activities and author events at 11.30 am and 2.30 pm each day. An entry fee of £1 on the door will be donated to Abbey900.
www.octaviashop.co.uk

Edinburgh Book Festival 12-28 August

Set in a specially created tented village in Charlotte Square Gardens, this festival offers something for just about every age and interest, bringing readers and writers together for inspiration, entertainment and discussion. More than 800 authors are taking part in 700 events.
www.edbookfest.co.uk

Beyond Borders International Literature Festival, Scotland 26-27 August

A weekend of panel discussions and debates exploring world cultures and new ideas in the tranquil setting of Traquair House, near Peebles. There will be meet-the-author events, guided walks and cycle rides and more.
www.beyondbordersscotland.com



NAWG Annual Festival of Writing, Warwick 1-3 September

This festival is open to all writers who want to hone their writing skills and meet new friends. Agents Hattie Grunewald and Kate Nash will be taking part, along with many other authors and publishing professionals.
www.nawg.co.uk

AUTHOR & BOOK EVENTS

Adrian Selby, Anna Smith-Spark and Adrian Tchaikovsky, Sheffield 1 July, 7pm

The authors are at Waterstones to discuss how they go about creating their characters and worlds, signing copies of their latest works and answering questions. Tickets cost £3 and are redeemable against any purchase on the night.
For more details call 01142 728971.

Billy Bragg, Liverpool 3 July, 7.30pm

Bragg will be at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall's Music Room discussing his book *Roots, Radicals and Rockers: How Skiffle Changed the World*.
For more details call 0151 709 9820.

Jane Corry, Manchester 4 July, 6.30pm

The author will be at Waterstones Arndale to discuss her new novel *Blood Sisters* before taking questions and signing copies.
For more details call 0161 832 8563.

Isabel Ashdown, Newport 5 July, 6pm

The author will be at Waterstones with her new thriller *Little Sister*, set on the Isle of Wight. Tickets £3, redeemable against book purchase.
For more details call 01983 527927.

Kate Medhurst brings you the pick of next month's writing and book events

Tony Robinson, Ely 5 July, 7.30pm

The popular actor and presenter will be at Topping and Company Bookshop talking about his autobiography, *No Cunning Plan*. Tickets £8.
For more details call 01353 645005.

Matt Haig, London 6 July, 7pm

The author will be in conversation at Foyles in Charing Cross Road talking about his work, his life and his process of writing, including his new novel *How to Stop Time*. Tickets £8.
For more details call 020 7434 1574.

Michael Connelly, London 11 July, 7pm

The crime author will be at Waterstones Piccadilly with his thriller *The Late Show*, the first in a new series about a female LAPD detective. Tickets are £8, including a glass of wine/soft drink and £3 off the price of the book on the evening.
For more details call 020 785 12400.

Louise Welsh, Glasgow 12 July, 7pm

Waterstones hosts the launch of *No Dominion*, the final instalment of Welsh's *Plague Times* trilogy.
For more details call 0141 332 9105.

Rowan Coleman, Harpenden 13 July, 7pm

The bestselling author of is at Harpenden Books to celebrate the release of her new novel, *The Summer of Impossible Things*.
For more details call 01582 471375.

Peter Robinson, Ely 15 July, 3pm

The writer will be at St Peter's Church in Ely, talking about his latest novel, *Sleeping in the Ground*. Tickets cost £6.
For more details call 01353 645005.

Natasha Pulley, Bath 18 July, 8pm

The author will be at Topping and Company Bookshop talking about her new historical novel *The Bedlam Stacks*, set in the shadowy forests of South America. Tickets cost £7.
For more details call 01225 428111.

Arthur C Clarke Awards, London 27 July, 7pm

Foyles in Charing Cross Road hosts a special evening as everyone raises a glass to the winner of the 2017 Arthur C Clarke Award. Tickets cost £13 including drinks and nibbles.
For more details call 020 7434 1574.

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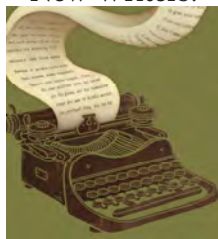
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New courses



Start a poem at Lumb Bank

RESIDENTIAL COURSE

Starting to Write Poetry, West Yorkshire 10-15 July

This Arvon residential course is aimed at less experienced poets and those just beginning to write. Working from classic and contemporary poems in a supportive atmosphere, you will start poems and take several of them to a finished state. Tutorials and tailored reading and writing tasks will further the learning experience. It takes place at Lumb Bank (above), an 18th-century millowner's house that once belonged to the poet Ted Hughes, and costs £760 (single room) or £710 (shared room). www.arvon.org

ONE-DAY COURSE

How to Get Your Novel Published, London 8 July

This is an unmissable masterclass for fiction writers by literary agent Ed Wilson and

publisher Suzie Dooré. You'll learn the ins and out of the publishing process, the roles of publisher and literary agent and what Ed and Suzie look for in submissions – and more besides. It costs £189 for the morning's course and an individual feedback session. It will be held at the *Guardian* newspaper's media and conference centre in Farringdon and runs from 10am until 1pm, with feedback from 2pm. www.theguardian.com/guardian-masterclasses

PART-TIME COURSES

John Retallack Playwriting Course, Oxford 11 September – 4 June

This is a brand new professional playwriting course from award-winning playwright and director John Retallack (*Wild Girl*, *Truant*, *Hannah and Hanna*). It covers every aspect of writing a play over 30 weekly sessions and three day-long workshops. There are individual tutorials at the end of each term. Sessions take place every Monday and there will be a maximum of eight writers per group. Admission

HELPFUL NEW BOOKS

Writers' & Artists' Yearbook 2018

(Bloomsbury, £25) is the bestselling guide to all areas of publishing and is updated every year. The book is packed with advice, inspiration and practical guidance on who to contact and how to get published, with over 4000 listings entries. New articles this year include 'Writing popular history'

by Tom Holland, 'Editing and writing' by Diana Athill, 'How to make a living' by Alison Branagan and many more. Published 27 July.

How To Write Poems (Bloomsbury Activity Books) by Joseph Coelho and Matt Robertson

(Bloomsbury, £9.99) is full of exciting activities to encourage children to get their pens flowing! The book will make them chuckle and think, and inspire them to write their own poems. Popular poet Joseph Coelho explores a mind-boggling selection of poetry, from laughable limericks to poetic puns. Published 21 September.

is via interview plus a submission of written work. The course costs £2500. www.oxfordplaywriting.co.uk

Novel Writing, London 14 September – 8 March

Taking place in the Curtis Brown Central London offices, this popular face-to-face creative writing course for 15 writers features visits from the Curtis Brown literary agents. It takes place over six months and is led by Simon Wroe. The cost is £2990. www.curtisbrowncreative.co.uk

ONLINE COURSE

Writing for Children From 23 October

Designed for beginners who would like to write successfully for children, this course will explain how children's fiction works, and will provide you with essential tools that will help you produce compelling stories for a young audience. It costs £365 and lasts six weeks. www.writersworkshop.co.uk



Emily Cunningham of The Write Factor publishing agency helps you find the way forward with your writing

THE MENTOR

My writing seems boring

Whilst I admire the rollercoaster ride of events in others' writing, I find that my own work is much less eventful, some could even say dull. I worry that there isn't enough action to keep my readers' interest, but when I do try to liven it up, I find myself falling back into my usual, gentle style. Is this a problem?

Julian, Crawley

It's only a problem if you want it to be, Julian. You're right that, traditionally, the exciting twists and turns of plot development and narrative arc are what create a page-turner, but it is possible to produce an absorbing read without these usual devices.

An example of this is Nicholson Baker's first book *Mezzanine*. He uses lengthy footnotes on almost every page to take the reader on fascinating diversions. For example, he discusses at length the most effective way to fill an ice cube tray – should the tap be aimed at each section in turn or just one, allowing the water to overflow into the others? The minutiae of life can be fascinating.

I think his success is based on the fact that he makes observations about everyday activities that we normally do without thinking. In sociology, these are described as 'seen but unnoticed'. By drawing our

attention to them, he manages to bring them into sharp focus as a subject for consideration, in much the same way that stand-up comedians will start their jokes with: 'Have you ever noticed...?' They get laughs by pointing out familiar behaviour that we all recognise but have never stopped to think about.

So it's definitely an acceptable and appealing style of writing and, as a bonus, it's also all the rage. Lorna Howarth, my colleague at The Write Factor, says: 'I've noticed that books that lack the usual narrative arc, and that are really just an exquisite meditation on life, are trending at the moment. These books and stories "acclaim the mundane" – the narrative arc is not the key driver of the book – although some do have a traditional beginning, middle and end with a denouement.'

So your writing doesn't need to be action-packed to still be riveting. It's a

good example of when 'style over content' needn't be a criticism.

Lorna continues: 'With the trend in mundanity – which is not meant in any way to be a derogatory term but rather to give a flavour of "everydayness" – what raises a book to exception (although sometimes authors do miss the mark) is the acute attention to detail, where observation, descriptive prowess and lyrical turns of phrase are enough to carry it.'

A recent bestseller that ticks all these boxes is *My Name is Lucy Barton* by Elizabeth Strout. In essence, not much happens in the book, but what makes it a superb read is how the author has the protagonist, the eponymous Lucy, piece together the details of her deprived childhood while her mother lies in hospital, dying. They speak for the first time about all that has been swept under





You're allowing your readers to pause for a moment to experience something authentic and honest

the carpet. It is set over a period of five days and the listlessness of being in a hospital, the incompleteness of memory, the frustration at her taciturn mother all combine to create a novel that is rather marvellous in its mundanity.

Perhaps the lesson to be taken from this is that other people's lives – the everydayness of them, the mundanity – are endlessly fascinating to other people. What we possibly think of as boring and

in need of fictionalising can in fact be revelatory to another.

Take Facebook. I have often thought that an excellent salve against all the boasting and 'look at me' egotism would be to post about ordinary days, nothing-to-write-home-about views and bog-standard meals. Instead of another spectacular view from someone's holiday balcony, I'd relish a dull picture of a garden wall. Jacket potato and beans, not a seafood platter.

There's something so refreshing about celebrating the normal, and grounding too. It's an excellent weapon in the constant battle against feeling inadequate. No need to measure yourself against thriller writers, your own contribution is just as engaging.

There's also more than just a tinge of mindfulness about this perspective. Instead of rushing from one murder/abduction/sex scene to the next, you can stop and smell the roses (and look at

their shape, texture, etc). You're allowing your readers to pause for a moment to experience something authentic and honest, instead of a quick thrill.

There's even scientific research to support this. A study by Harvard Business School in 2014 discovered that, whilst our phones are full of photos recording red-letter days, it's the humdrum, normal pictures that strike a special chord. We underestimate the pleasure that these often overlooked snaps give us. In the same way, your quiet approach may not have the same razzmatazz but instead bring a wonderful contentment and peace.

When Strout's Lucy Barton is struggling to find her writer's voice, her creative writing teacher tells her: 'You will have only one story... You'll write your one story many ways. Don't ever worry about story. You will have only one.'

By which she means, your one story, which may result in a dozen books, can only be one story ultimately, and that's *your* story. It's an inspiring way to unleash your imagination because nobody else in the entire world can tell your story.

Never underestimate what you have to offer, Julian. I for one would love to read your work.

Celebrating the everyday: tips to try

■ To fine-tune your descriptive skills, write about the view from your window but make sure it's a dull one. You could even take it up a notch in the humdrum stakes and turn your attention to the window itself instead of the view from it. PVC? Tell me more!

■ For an example of style over content taken to the nth degree, try reading *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau, in which he rewrites just one event – an argument on a bus – 99 different ways.

■ Try the mindfulness meditation practice of eating a raisin. You can't just pop it in though, take your time over it. The whole thing must take several minutes. First you must examine it closely, then smell it, savour it in your mouth, before finally chewing it. Immerse yourself in the full experience of 'raisinness' and then write about it.



The Write Factor offers all sorts of services to support your writing process, from mentoring and writing courses to editorial feedback and assessment. Find out more at www.thewritefactor.co.uk

Research secrets



Crime writer Vera Morris tells Anita Loughrey how her research helps her to catch the flavour of the area and era of her novels

I've always enjoyed reading crime novels, from Agatha Christie to Henning Mankell and Peter James, and I enjoyed writing too, but as a head teacher, governors' reports were the closest I got to being creative. When I retired, I tried to write a crime novel, but the female protagonist was so terrifying I decided I couldn't spend a year in her company.

I turned to other genres but, whatever I wrote, there was always murder, rape or violence. I returned to crime because I thought I had a feel for what would interest other avid crime readers.

I set *Some Particular Evil* in a school in 1970, the year I was appointed senior mistress of an 11–16 mixed comprehensive. The 1970s were a time of political upheaval, public unrest and increasing guerrilla warfare. Sounds familiar? I knew how a 1970s school was organised, the facilities available and what it was like to teach then. All I needed to do was trawl my memory.

In 1970 the headmaster had to keep a logbook of important happenings. Such a book is important in *Some Particular Evil*. The telephone system in the school I worked at only had direct lines from the headmaster's, deputy's and secretary's offices. If a staff member wanted to make a call, the number was noted and a bill presented monthly. Pupils had to ask permission to use a public phone in the dining room. In my novel these restrictions add an extra frisson during emergencies.

Part of my childhood was spent in Suffolk and I still



Fishermen's huts in Aldeburgh

visit as often as I can. I love the stretch of coast between Aldeburgh and Dunwich and this is where the two novels are set.

My degree in zoology means I have knowledge of anatomy, genetics, blood grouping and other matters which are useful when writing murder and post-mortem scenes, or assessing medical evidence. I do love the grisly bits!

Finding the right title

Justice was the main theme of *Some Particular Evil*, so for a title I searched for a quote from *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase, Saying and Quotation*, and *5000 Gems of Wit and Wisdom*. When nothing grabbed me, I changed tack and tried a secondary theme: evil. I hit on a quotation from *Pride and Prejudice* – not a likely source, I admit. Darcy is speaking to Elizabeth:

'There is, I believe, in every disposition, a tendency to some particular evil. A natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome.'

He didn't think there were any murderers in his family!

That was the one – the title fitted the book. I used the same method for the second book in the series (published in November). The theme was temptation and I found a quote I loved by Henry Ward Beecher:

'No man knows what he will do till the right temptation comes.'

The Right Temptation? Oh, yes! Then – oh, no! Don't get too attached to your title. Accent Press, my publisher, have just decided a better title would be *The Temptation*. I understand the reasoning behind the change and the quote will still be in the book. The reason for the change is... Sorry, that would be a spoiler!

Names

Names are important. I love a name that fits the character. Dickens was a master at this. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Gaffer Hexam pulls bodies from the Thames, the Veneerings are an upwardly mobile couple and Mr Twemlow is a feeble soul.

Before I started, I found family names by trawling the obituary columns of daily newspapers. I made a note of the first names as well, as I didn't want to make the mistake of using someone's real name. *The Penguin Dictionary of First Names* came in there.

The two main characters in my crime novels are Laurel Bowman and Francis Xavier Diamond. Laurel is athletic, brave and compelled to seek justice; Frank is resilient, sharp and perceptive.

Sometimes I find a name I have to use. Elderkin became Detective Sergeant Stuart Elderkin and I thought Miss Dorothy Piff was perfect for the school secretary.

Collecting material

I roam secondhand bookshops, museums and charity shops to buy old maps and books. Local bookshops stock many locally written books. In Aldeburgh I found the *Aldeburgh Diary* by JP Bristow, which contains a map, photographs and all sorts of interesting facts. A visit to RSPB Minsmere, near Dunwich, gave a list of all the different birds, mammal, reptiles, amphibians and insects seen each month.

I read books on real crime such as Val McDermid's *Forensics – The Anatomy of Crime, Forty Years of Murder* by Professor Keith Simpson,



Cause of Death by Dr Geoffrey Garrett and *Trials of Passion* by Lisa Appignanesi. These educate me about murder techniques and forensic details – but do check the dates various forensic techniques were introduced.

I also collect books on fashion and find John Peacock's *Fashion Sourcebooks* very useful. Each book covers an era, with details of day, sports and evening wear.

Talking to people can give you precious nuggets of information. Being lucky enough to be able to ask questions to both serving and retired members of the police is a godsend. Reading a chapter of *The Temptation* to a group that included a retired chief inspector, I learnt that fingerprints couldn't be lifted from paper in the 1970s.

In Aldeburgh, fishermen's huts line the promenade. One fisherman is Mr Fryer. In *The Temptation*, Laurel Bowman questions a fisherman about Aldeburgh residents. I wanted to use Mr Fryer's name, so apposite for his occupation, and asked his permission. He was flattered, said yes, but didn't think there were any murderers in his family!

I use the internet a lot. I download a calendar for the year the novel is set in from www.timeanddate.com. This gives you the months, phases of the moon and holidays and observances. In both novels the action takes place over a few weeks and I can mark off the days on the calendar.

I consult newspapers of the period, mainly *The Times*, for interesting facts that will help pin the period, also any

unusual happenings. I also like to know what the weather was like and sunrise and sunset times, sport results and what was on the radio and TV.

In *Some Particular Evil*, Miss Piff says to Laurel: 'Those poor passengers hijacked by Palestinian guerrillas. Four aircraft at once.' It's a snippet of conversation, not pertinent to the main plot, but it adds authenticity and also adds to the uneasy atmosphere.

I read *The Times* online through Reading Library. Belonging to a library gives you access to so much research material both online and on the shelves. Reading a novel, or watching a DVD of the period you are writing about, can be inspiring as well as informative and it's all free. Librarians like putting their skills to good use, so do ask for their help.

I also use the internet to find information on such diverse things as car models, how to pack a pipe, or the differences between manual and ligature strangulation. I print out all this material and keep a file for each novel – a very large file!

Time to stop

There comes a time when I'm itching to write. I won't have every fact at my fingertips, and I will have to do more research as new things crop up. Who knows what will appear on the page? I learn so much doing research – often it sparks fresh ideas, and it's fun, especially talking to people. But don't be hidebound by facts. Henning Mankell said: 'In the world of fiction it is possible to take many liberties.'

• www.veramorris.co.uk

WRITING OUTLETS

with Janet Cameron

Cross-genre submissions

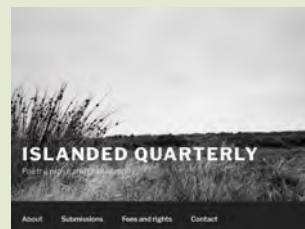
Islanded Quarterly

islanded.org

Islanded Quarterly is to publish its first issue this summer, so you can jump in at the start! This will be an online literary magazine of poetry and prose with a thoughtful, spiritual focus, and most genres will be considered. For successful submissions, they will pay £15 for the first 1500 words of prose, then a penny per word to a maximum of £45, or £15 per poem.

Tip: The editors seek material that focuses on feeling and mood rather than theme and setting.

Submissions: Short stories of 1500–5000 words. Poems can be any length. Email only to submissions@islanded.org. Do not include a cover letter or author bio at this stage.



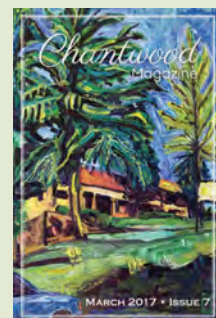
Chantwood Magazine

chantwoodmagazine.com

This bi-monthly online magazine is prepared to look at all genres of fiction, for example sci-fi, fantasy, speculative, romance and historical. Poetry can be traditional or free verse. There's a free PDF download of the magazine, and they also produce an annual anthology.

Tip: The editors are keen on good spelling and grammar and ask you to avoid very long paragraphs.

Submissions: Send fiction of 100–7500 words or poetry of one to two pages. Instead of your name, please use your email address on your manuscript. Times New Roman is preferred, check out their guidelines. Send as a single attachment to submissions@chantwoodmagazine.com



Figroot Press

figrootpress.com

Figroot Press produce two issues per year of short prose and poetry. Figroot wants to get down to the nitty-gritty of life, as they say they "seek to understand the grease of the human condition". Poetry submissions can be in any style.

Tip: Powerful imagery and surprise are key, but to impress the editors, the surprise must linger.

Submissions: Five pieces of fiction up to 1000 words, three to six poems in a single document, one poem per page, or three to five prose poems of a maximum of 60 lines per poem. Email to submissions@figrootpress.com and include a brief bio as a separate document.



• Janet's ebook *Fifteen Women Philosophers*, published by decodedscience.com, is available from Amazon

Competitive Edge

Judging has helped me write

Julie Phillips reads competition entries for BBC Radio. She tells Helen how the experience has helped her hone her own stories

Julie Phillips has taken on the fascinating job of judging short stories by children for the annual BBC Radio 2 competition. This month she joins us to tell us how she got involved in that, and also what she looks out for when judging adult competitions.

'I heard through the BBC Radio website that they were looking for more judges for their 500 word children's writing competition,' Julie tells me. 'They said they wanted to hear from teachers or librarians, neither of which I was. But I was a published writer, I worked in a primary school as a teaching assistant, I'd judged adult writing competitions before and at that time I ran the after-school creative writing club, so I thought it was worth a try. I emailed them and they said yes!'

'It's an annual competition and they have an army of hundreds of judges who filter out the top stories, giving each one a score out of 50. There are five categories we score on, including originality and characterisation. Our top-scoring stories go through and are then judged by the main judges who pick the winning stories. I've done it for about three years now and thoroughly enjoy it.'

Julie also judges short story competitions for adults, and has some specific things she looks out for.

'I like something original that isn't like anything I've read before,' she says. 'Sometimes a competition has a set theme and it's so tempting for writers to go with what pops into their head immediately. Well, that idea is probably the first thing that occurs to other writers entering that competition too and the judges end up reading stories that are derivative. I like a fresh, confident voice, someone who knows how to tell a story not an anecdote. Who can punctuate and spell, too. Someone who is writing for the reader and not themselves.'

'I have to confess that I'm not a fan of profanity – it does put me off. But I try and ignore it if I can see that the swearing is in context and not excessive and not just there

for the sake of it. It has to be authentic.

'A satisfying, natural ending is also a must. If it's a twist, I like it to be plausible and believable – not too obscure but not something I can guess, either. I've had a fair few twist short stories published in women's magazines so I can spot bad ones a mile off as well as appreciate well-written ones.'

Julie also points out what would lead to a story losing marks and not being placed.

'For that I depend on the competition's rules,' she says. 'If the writer has gone over the word limit they are automatically disqualified, in fairness to the other writers who have taken the time and effort to keep within the word limit.'

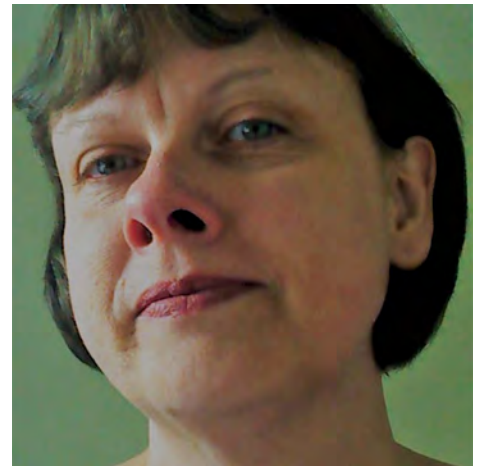
'If it's just an anecdote and not a story, it will lose marks, as it will for being predictable. One of the fiction magazines' favourite reasons for rejection is that a story "contains no surprises". I like to be surprised. If a story can make me both laugh and cry at various points, it certainly helps. I like to be made to feel something when I'm reading it.'

'If I had to choose between two stories that were equally well written, it would come down to personal taste, I think. I would look at the originality of both stories. Whose voice do I find most convincing? Which story drew the most emotion out of me or made me really think and stayed on my mind?'

'Judging has had a huge impact on my ability to write short stories, especially the process of discussing what makes a good story with fellow judges. By reading hundreds of short story entries, I can see what works and what doesn't. One of the most important things that comes up every year is how many sad story entries we get. It's so refreshing to get an upbeat story after all that sadness. That's what will stick with the judges. In my opinion, humour will always trump melancholy.'

Finally, Julie advises: 'Be fearless and dare to give the judges something new and unexpected. Don't be run-of-the-mill.'

Thanks to Julie for her valuable insights.



Helen's Hint

This month I'd like to urge you to step away from your computer for a bit and think about what makes you a better writer – other than actually writing.

Here are some suggestions:

- It's summer – who knows, we might even have some nice weather! Take the opportunity to get out and about and see different places. This will inspire your writing.
- Talk to people – ideally people you wouldn't normally have a chance to talk to – and really listen to what they have to say.
- Take the time to relax, and make sure you get enough sleep. You'll feel better for it and feeling better will help you write better.
- Read! Especially things you wouldn't usually read. This will open up your horizons.

And when you've done all that, get back to the computer feeling refreshed, with a positive attitude and ready to win.

Competition of the Month

If you fancy having a go at a humorous story, have a look at the 'To Hull & Back' competition (see opposite). Not only is this a good chance to try out your upbeat writing skills, but there are also some very quirky prizes on offer, including having your photo on the cover of the anthology – with the picture to be taken while being ridden to Hull and back on a Harley-Davidson! Find out more at www.christopherfielden.com.

We're always keen to receive your recommendations for Comp of the Month. Get in touch at the email address above.



with short story writer
Helen M Walters

COMPS NOW OPEN

Troubadour Poetry Prize Closes 16 October 2017

Poem: 45 lines. **Fee:** £6 for first entry, then £4 each. **Prizes:** £2000; £1000; £500. **Details:** see www.coffeehousepoetry.org

Flash 500 Novel Competition Closes 31 October 2017

Novel: 3000-word opening chapter and one-page synopsis. **Fee:** £10. **Prizes:** £500; £200. **Details:** see www.flash500.com

Cannon Poets Sonnet or Not Poetry Competition Closes 31 October 2017

Poem: 14 lines. **Fee:** £5 for first entry, then £2.50 each. **Prizes:** £500; £250; £125. **Judge:** Liz Berry. **Details:** see www.cannon-poets.org.uk

COMPS CLOSING SOON

27 JUL

Biographers' Club Tony Lothian Prize

Biography: proposal of 20 pages. **Fee:** £15. **Prize:** £2000. **Details:** see www.biographers.club

31 JUL

Cinnamon Press Debut Novel/Novella Competition

Novel/novella: first 10,000 words. **Fee:** £12. **Prizes:** a year's mentoring, publishing contract and 100 copies of book. **Judge:** Ian Gregson. **Details:** www.cinnamonpress.com or write to Cinnamon Press Writing Prizes, Meirion House, Glan yrafon, Tanygrisiau, Blaenau Ffestiniog LL41 3SU.

HISSAC Short Story and Flash Fiction Competitions

Story: 2000 words. **Flash:** 500 words. **Fee:** story £5 or £12 for three, £18 for five; flash £5 or £12 for three, £18 for five, £25 for



Part of the To
Hull & Back prize

seven. **Prizes:** £250; £50; £25. **Details:** see www.hissac.co.uk or write to HISSAC, 20 Lochsln Place, Balintore, Highland IV20 1UP.

To Hull & Back Humorous Short Story Competition

Story: 3000 words. **Fee:** £7 early bird, then £9. **Prizes:** £1000; £200; £100; 3 x £50; 14 x £25, plus extras – check out the website! **Details:** see www.christopherfielden.com/short-story-competition

1 AUG

Ilkley Literature Festival Competitions

Story: 3000 words. **Poem:** 30 lines. **Fee:** £5. **Prizes:** story £200; poem £200; £100; £75. **Details:** see www.ilkleyliteraturefestival.org.uk or write to Ilkley Literature Festival, 9 The Grove, Ilkley LS29 9LV.

30 AUG

Earlyworks Press Flash Fiction Competition

Flash: 100 words. **Fee:** £3.50, or £15 for up to six entries. **Prize:** £100. **Details:** see www.early-workspress.co.uk or write to Earlyworks Press, Creative Media Centre, 45 Robertson Street, Hastings, East Sussex TN34 1HL.

31 AUG

Park Publications Article Competition

Article: 1000-1500 words. **Theme:** 'My writing day'. **Fee:** £3. **Prizes:**

Continued overleaf ►

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ANNOUNCING THE 2017 MELITA HUME POETRY PRIZE



EYEWEAR PUBLISHING LTD IS PROUD TO ANNOUNCE
THE 6TH ANNUAL MELITA HUME £1,500 POETRY PRIZE

JUDGED BY
VAHNI CAPILDEO



THE MELITA HUME POETRY PRIZE

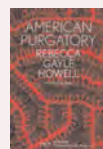
is an annual poetry publication award for an original, first full-length collection by a poet aged thirty-five or under, resident in the UK or Ireland, or of British or Irish citizenship, writing in the English language.

The winner will receive publication by Eyewear Publishing Ltd in 2018 and a prize of £1,500.

Previous winners of the Melita Hume Poetry Prize include Caleb Klaces for *Bottled Air*, Marion McCready for *Tree Language*, A.K. Blakemore for *Humbert Summer*, Maria Apichella for *Psalmody*, Tony Chan for *Four Points Fourteen Lines*, and Jenna Clarke for *Fortune Cookie*.

SUBMISSIONS ARE NOW OPEN
UNTIL 31 AUGUST. (£20 ENTRY FEE)

Full guidelines are available at
<https://store.eyewearpublishing.com/pages/melita-hume-prize>



OUT NOW!

ABOUT THE JUDGE

Vahni Capildeo is a British-Trinidadian writer. Her critically-acclaimed books are *No Traveller Returns* (2003), *Person Animal Figure* (2005), *Undraining Sea* (2009) (shortlisted for the Guyana Prize for Literature Caribbean Award), *All Your Houses* (2010) (a limited-edition artist's book with photography by Andre Bagoo), *Dark & Unaccustomed Words* (2012) (longlisted for the 2013 OCM Bocas Poetry Prize), *Utter* (2013), *Simple Complex Shapes* (2015), and *Measures of Expatriation* (2016) (winner of the Forward Best Collection Prize). She read English at Christ Church, Oxford and subsequently became a Rhodes Scholar there, completing a DPhil in Old Norse and translation theory, which overlapped with her Research Fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge. She was the first poet on tour for the Out of Bounds poetry project, is a contributing editor for the *Caribbean Review of Books*, and a contributing advisor to Blackbox Manifesto. Her performance and installation work, begun during her Judith E. Wilson Poetry Fellowship (2014), includes responses to Euripides' *Bacchae*, 'Radical Shakespeare', and the revolutionary Guyanese writer Martin Carter.

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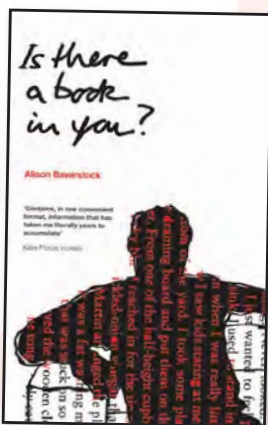
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Rebecca Swift,
The Literary Consultancy



Continued from page 63

£50; £25; £15. **Details:** see www.parkpublications.co.uk or write to 14 The Park, Stow on the Wold, Cheltenham GL54 1DX.

Aesthetica

Creative Writing Award

Poetry: 40 lines. **Fiction:** 2000 words. **Fee:** poem £12; story £18. **Prize:** £1000. **Details:** see www.aestheticamagazine.com

Hysteria Writing Competition

Poem: 20 lines; **Short story:** 2000 words. **Flash:** 250 words. **Fees:** poem £3; story £5; flash £3. **Prizes:** poem £75; story £150; flash £75. **Rules:** open to women only. **Details:** www.hysteriauk.co.uk

18 SEP

Mslexia Women's Novel Competition

Novel: first 5000 words. **Fee:** £25. **Prizes:** £5000; finalists receive manuscript feedback, introduction to agents/editors. **Rules:** open to women only. **Details:** see mslexia.co.uk or write to Women's Novel Competition, Freepost Plus RTKZ-LGXC-EBAH, Mslexia Publications Ltd, PO Box 656, Newcastle upon Tyne NE99 1PZ.

21 SEP

Erewash Writers' Open Short Story Competition

Story: 2500 words. **Fee:** £3 for one or £2.50 each for two or more. **Prizes:** £100; £60; £25; £15; two free entries to 2018 comp. **Judge:** Anne Rainbow. **Rules:** New Writer and Open categories: see website for details. **Details:** see erewash-writerscompetition.weebly.com or write to EWG Competition, Parklands Connexion, Stanhope Street, Long Eaton, Derbys NG10 4QN.

29 SEP

Manchester Writing Competition

Poem: three to five poems, max 120 lines total. **Story:** 2500 words. **Fee:** £17.50. **Prize:** £10,000. **Details:** see www.manchester-writingcompetition.co.uk or write to Manchester Poetry/Fiction Prize

2017, MMU Finance Service Centre, Manchester Metropolitan University, Righton Building, Cavendish Street, Manchester M15 6BG.

30 SEP

Bedford International Writing Competition

Story: up to 3000 words. **Poem:** up to 40 lines. **Fees:** £6 or three for £12. **Prizes:** £300; £150; £100; special prizes for story £100 and poem £100. **Judges:** Ruth Hogan, Lesley Saunders, Steve Lowe. **Details:** see www.bedford-writingcompetition.co.uk or email bedfordwritingcomp@aol.co.uk.

Tom Howard/Margaret Reid Poetry Contest

Poem: 250 lines maximum. **Rules:** either open style/genre or rhyming/traditional. **Fee:** \$12. **Prizes:** \$1500 in each category. **Details:** see winningwriters.com

Books and the City Heatseeker Competition

Story: 2500. **Fee:** FREE. **Prize:** mentoring session with Paige Toon and ebook publication of story by Simon & Schuster with royalties. **Details:** see booksandthecity.co.uk

The Henshaw Competition

Story: 2000 words. **Fee:** £5. Optional critiques additional £10. **Prizes:** £100; £50; £25. **Details:** see henshawpress.co.uk or write to The Henshaw Competition, 24 Rowlandson Close, Northampton NN3 3PB.

UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED...

Theme and genre are open. Entries should be original and unpublished. Postal entries should be printed on white A4 in a clear plain font. Include a separate cover sheet with the title, word count, your name, address and postcode, phone and email. Stories should be double-spaced with good margins. Where necessary include a large enough sae with sufficient postage. Always contact the organiser or check their website to confirm details. Writers' Forum does not accept responsibility for errors in or changes to the information listed.





Where I write

Phil Barrington visits Peter Laws in his 'third place'

I'm one of those coffee-shop writers. A walking cliché. I hog a table while annoying folks with constant finger taps. Heck, I even slip my shoes off and sit cross-legged on the chair. Someone online said writers like me have *'The aura of smug: Here I am working! I'm a writer!'* But believe me, it's not as showy as it sounds. Writing in these spaces just works for me.

It helps that a coffee shop isn't home. I want to feel like I'm going to work. Some mornings I catch myself in the chemist window with my laptop case, and I look like a normal person with a normal job. That's nice. But I can leave a coffee shop whenever I want, and that's even nicer.

Sociologists call this middle ground between home and office a 'third place', and their popularity is growing. Years back I got kicked out of an Ikea cafe for not having an electrician-tested plug. Now they set up whole banks of power points to draw in so-called 'coffice' workers.

Noise-cancelling headphones stop me getting distracted. I specialise in horror

and crime fiction and it's amazing how music can suck you into creepy worlds. My new novel, *Purged* (Allison & Busby), sees an atheist ex-vicar helping the police catch a Christian serial killer. That gets pretty dark in places, yet whenever I feel like it, I can pop out the headphones and – boom – I'm back in the room. I can buy a drink and stand in a queue, chatting. That's the beauty of it. If you want company you can have it, but it's all on your terms.

It's great for inspiration too. Need to write a nerdy twenty-something character, or a frazzled grandma? Just look up from your screen and you'll find them right in front of you, parading their mannerisms. And my favourite part? When the rain's hammering at the windows, and the strings of Bernard Herrmann are filling my ears; when I'm in the world of Matt Hunter, my main character, and I'm sitting in a coffee shop in *his* town, in *his* life.

I like this way of writing so much that I sometimes book into conference hotels. I'll sit in their communal area and write

from 9am until 9pm, then take a whisky up to my room to watch re-runs of *Bullseye*. I've written in monasteries too, with breaks to drink ale with the monks. I'd written four novels in such spaces, but was rejected so many times I was about to give up, until I got a two-book deal last year.

Funnily enough, I broke my pattern recently and started working at home (in an office filled with drive-in movie posters and B-movie props). It's because I'm writing a non-fiction book for Icon, on why humans are drawn to the macabre. The research has involved some truly grotty videos, which I wasn't going to look at in Costa. I'm an ordained church minister too, so when I'm writing sermons I tend to do that at home. I like to practise delivering them out loud, and if I did that in a coffee shop I'd freak everybody out.

But for novels, you'll find me in the third places. Some might despise this method, or think writers who use them are posey fops. Well, I suppose some of us are, but it also happens to be an amazingly productive space. Oh, and they have muffins.

• See www.peterlaws.co.uk or @revpeterlaws

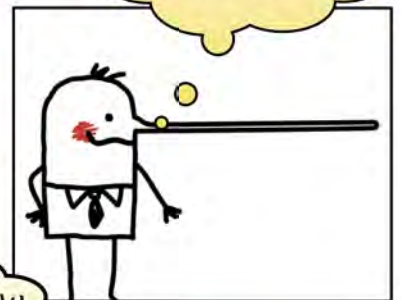
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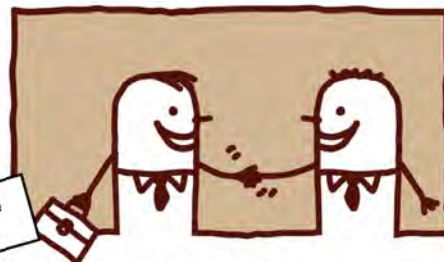
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Walter Dinjos



"I won the 2015 Flirty Fiction Prima Magazine and Mills and Boon competition. The prize was **£500**, a three page feature in the magazine and the chance to work with Mills and Boon on my book. Also I have three stories in three anthologies with other authors – **we've raised almost £2,000 for cancer charities**"

Rachel Dove



"I have been published in different papers and magazines and am now producing around **250 articles a year**. It's going a bit too well at times! Seriously, it's very satisfying, stimulating and great fun – and thanks again to the WB for launching me on a **second career**. I meet so many interesting people and count myself mighty lucky."

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"If you listen to the tutors and take time to read the material you can be a working writer, it really is an excellent course. I've found part-time work as a freelance writer for Academic Knowledge. I've earned just under **£2000** in the past year."

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"I am delighted to tell everyone that the **course is everything it says on the tin, excellent!** I have wanted to write for years, and this course took me by the hand and helped me turn my scribbles into something much more professional. I am delighted that **my writing is being published and I am actually being paid**. All thanks to the Comprehensive Creative Writing course."

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