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Writers

FORUM

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Writers' FORUM

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

As many people make a New Year resolution to start writing, this may be your first look at *Writers' Forum*. So let me point out that reading this magazine is not going to make you a better writer, just as joining a gym won't make you fitter. We can give you advice, like a gym instructor can, but it's the hard work you do yourself that makes the difference.

What we do is act as a regular reminder that you want to be a writer, just like that monthly gym membership, and offer encouragement from people who have been making a success of it – authors who know the training never stops if you want to stay sharp. It's a swift kick that leaves you time to practise the tasks and competitions we set and get on with your own projects. If you want to make 2018 the year you start taking writing seriously, your commitment starts here.

Write soon, Carl



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news FRONT

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

Screenwriter fights off ex-partner's claim on share of profits

A note of caution for authors who ask for help from partners. Scriptwriter Nicholas Martin, who wrote the screenplay for the 2016 comedy-drama *Florence Foster-Jenkins*, the true story of a New York heiress who became an opera singer despite her painful lack of ability, has won a High Court case brought by his former partner.

Opera singer Julia Kogan claimed that she had written the screenplay jointly with Martin when they were living together and was therefore entitled to a share of income earned. The judge rejected her claim for joint authorship after Kogan's own emails and diary entries were clear proof that Martin had written the script alone.

After the trial, Mr Martin said: 'This is a very fair ruling and an important one for writers. I have always acknowledged that Julia was a great support ... and contributed helpful input on the

Cressida Cowell recognised for literacy campaign work

How to Train Your Dragon author Cressida Cowell has won the Ruth Rendell Award. The prize was launched last year by the National Literacy Trust and Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society to celebrate the author who has done the most to champion literacy throughout the UK over the past year. Andy McNab, whose books appeal to reluctant reader boys, was the first recipient.

In the last 12 months Cowell has delivered writing workshops and reading events for 15,000 schoolchildren, as well as judging various writing contests for children and acting as an ambassador for literacy campaigns on behalf of the National Literacy Trust, BookTrust, the Reading Agency and World Book Day. Cowell said boosting literacy is 'still very badly needed' with one in three children leaving primary school lacking the ability to read well. She said her most important role as a children's book writer was 'to get as many children as possible reading for pleasure, in the same way that I read for the joy of it when I was a child.'



world of opera, but she did not write this script with me.'

Mr Martin's lawyer added: 'Any other result would have created huge uncertainty for any writer who might discuss their work

with their partner or any other collaborator.'

Helen Yendall

Debut poet wins prize with personal account

Cumbrian poet Kim Moore has won the Geoffrey Faber memorial prize with her debut poetry collection, *The Art of Falling*, part of which is a personal take on domestic violence.

The 36-year-old former trumpet teacher follows writers like Seamus Heaney and JM Coetzee in winning the £1500 prize, which is awarded in alternating years to a book of verse or a book of prose 'of the greatest artistic merit'.

Moore said of the poems: 'The first time I wrote them they came out really raw, like therapy. But I rewrote them again and again.' She added: 'I'm not telling the story of it. It's more metaphors for violence... The poems feel almost like little shields I can hold in front of me at a reading.'

John Peacock

Hargreaves invents new 'role model' Little Miss

A 'feminist' new 'Little Miss' – Little Miss Inventor – is due to join the Mr Men & Little Miss series of children's books next year. Author and illustrator Adam Hargreaves, whose father Roger created the brand, starting with Mr Tickle in 1971, says the female scientist character was created as a 'positive role model for girls' and to challenge stereotypes [apart from the 'boffins wear glasses' one presumably – Ed]. Fittingly, the *Little Miss Inventor* book will be launched on 8 March 2018, to coincide with both International Women's Day and British Science Week.

LITTLE MISS INVENTOR



Helen Yendall

Christmas appeal to help get children reading

Citing research that reveals that one in eight disadvantaged children does not own a book, the National Literacy Trust's Christmas Stories campaign asks for money to help change the life stories of young people. A donation of £5 will give a child their very first book, while £50 can help the Trust improve the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of a family in one of the UK's most deprived communities.

For more information, see <https://literacytrust.org.uk/support-us/fundraising/change-childs-life-story-christmas>

MPs vote for book on how to stop Brexit

Former MP Nick Clegg's book *How to Stop Brexit (and Make Britain Great Again)* has been voted parliamentary book of the year by politicians in the Houses of Commons and Lords from a list drawn up by bookshops. It was a list dominated by titles addressing populist discontent and protest.

The former deputy prime minister's book won by a narrow margin according to Alan Staton, head of marketing at the Booksellers Association, which runs the annual prize with the Publishers Association. Staton said: 'This is what happens when you have a secret ballot.'

Richard Adams was big fan of Jane Austen

The library of Richard Adams, famed author of *Watership Down*, which includes a complete set of Jane Austen first editions valued between £60,000 and £80,000, is to be sold at auction.

Adams, who died in December last year, once recalled that his favourite Austen classic, *Emma*, was a comfort whilst he served in WW2. He said: 'I was glued to it... when my posting came... It didn't much matter to me where

Still time to take part in our survey to find out 'What makes a writer?'

What helps a writer to create ideas? How are they motivated to keep writing? What are the main barriers they face? Are writers likely to have been keen readers in their childhood? What satisfactions come from writing? *Writers' Forum* is collaborating with Kingston University, University College London and other writing organisations to research these and other questions in a project called 'What makes a writer?'

The team believe that the findings from this research will be of significant interest to all writers, to the publishing industry, to the wider creative economy and also to the education and health sectors. The findings will be available to everyone, and the organisers plan to share key insights via this magazine – and there will also be an associated conference for writers.

The key building block of this research is a survey of writers and we would be very grateful if you would participate in this by visiting <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/what-makes-a-writer>

As you will discover, the questionnaire is long (44 questions which on average take 22 minutes to complete), but you should find it interesting and thought-provoking. There are no right or wrong answers; the researchers are interested in your attitudes. If you feel a question does not apply to you, please just miss it out and move on. We would also like you to know that the survey is entirely voluntary, it is anonymous and all results are confidential, and you can drop out at any time.

The deadline for completing the survey has been extended to 14 January 2018. If you have questions please contact Associate Professor Alison Baverstock (pictured) at a.baverstock@kingston.ac.uk



I was posted, as long as I could go on reading *Emma*.'

The collection also includes a Shakespeare Second Folio, a bible that once belonged to Charles II, and first editions of *The Wind in the Willows* and the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books. Juliet Johnson, Adams' daughter, said that her father would read to her and her sister, leading to a shared love of novels.

Suzanne Nolan

Billiard metaphor pockets Bad Sex award

American author Christopher Bollen has won the *Literary Review's* annual Bad Sex in Fiction award. In *The Destroyers*, a literary thriller, the hero Ian rekindles his relationship with an old flame, which Bollen describes thus: 'Her face and vagina are competing for my attention, so I glance down at

the billiard rack of my penis and testicles.'

The *Literary Review* explained: 'The judges felt that there are parts in the book where Bollen goes overboard in his attempts to describe the familiar in new terms, leading occasionally to confusion. In the line quoted... they were left unsure as to how many testicles the character in question has.'

ODD SPOT BY HUGH SCOTT



Derek's familiarity with Science Fiction had led him to believe that flying saucers were very big and far away.

Send us your news and the best item each month wins a year's subscription

We want short news items for these pages, either researched directly by you or sourced from press releases or publications and rewritten for us. In return you'll get a byline and the best item each month wins a free subscription. This month's winner is John Peacock.

Items should be **under 200 words** – the snappier the better. You can attach a good quality photo and please make sure stories about events are submitted in time. Importantly, you must be able to prove your story is true and where you found it. *Writers' Forum* may edit any items submitted and if a story is covered by more than one writer we'll choose the best version.

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!



PEOPLE POWER

Douglas McPherson talks to author-turned-publisher Dan Kieran about his crowd-funded publishing house, Unbound

Traditional or self-publishing. It used to be a binary choice, but for the past six years there has been a third option that blends the expertise and support of the former with the artistic freedom of the latter.

Unbound uses crowd-funding to let readers choose the books they would like to read, regardless of whether a mainstream publisher would find them too niche or expensive to produce. If enough readers pledge money to pay for a book's production, Unbound then does everything that a traditional publisher would do, including editing, printing and distribution into bookshops via a partnership with Penguin Random House.

The company has attracted big name writers such as *Snowman* author Raymond Briggs, who published a collection of his *Oldie* columns. It has produced a *Sunday Times* bestseller in the form of Simon Usher's *Letters of Note* and found acclaim with Paul Kingsnorth's first novel *The Wake*, which was long-listed for the Booker.

Unlike traditional publishers, instead of paying royalties, Unbound splits the profits from sales 50/50 with its authors. It also accepts manuscripts submitted through its website without the need for an agent.

Unbound was the brainchild of Dan Kieran, a former deputy editor of *The Idler* magazine. Kieran became a bestselling author in the early 2000s with *Idler* spin-off *Crap Towns – The 50 Worst Places to Live in the UK* and went on to write a mixture of humour and travel books.

After nearly a decade of success, however, declining sales and the financial crash of 2008 meant that publishers were no longer offering him the big advances he'd once commanded. In fact, the author of *Crap Jobs* found himself reduced to a crap job of his own – clearing out a rat-infested basement in Bognor.

'I was back doing the same minimum-wage jobs I was doing when I set out to become a writer,' he reflects. 'It was pretty soul-destroying.'

It was in that moment of despair that he had his epiphany.

'I was on my lunch break, looking idly out to sea, and I realised that I'd

sold roughly 350,000-400,000 copies of my books around the world and didn't have the name and address of a single person who had bought one. If I'd had that information, I wouldn't have needed a traditional publisher because I would have been able to talk to my audience myself.

'It was the "1000 true fans" model, dreamed up by Kevin Kelly, where if I had the name and address of a thousand people who loved my work and I could persuade them to each pay me £100 a year for my writing, then I would have a really amazing salary.

'I thought, someone has to build a platform that brings authors and readers together. I felt like readers were the most under-used resource, because no one ever asked them what they wanted, and I thought it would be really interesting to get them involved in choosing which books were published.'

Kieran teamed up with two friends, the former *QI* producers John Mitchinson and Justin Pollard, and the three entrepreneurs struck lucky when Monty Python's Terry Jones, an old friend of Pollard's, suggested they include his children's book, *Evil Machines*, among their first offerings.

'Terry was a big part of our confidence when we were raising money to build the platform,' says Kieran. 'When your first book is by a member of Monty Python you have a good feeling this is going to happen!'

How it works

Unbound is not an open platform. Submissions are screened by a team of editors, who decide which books will be put forward for funding.

'Because people trust us, we'll do anything we think is brilliant and only things that we think are brilliant,' says Kieran. 'So of the 20-30 submissions we receive each week, we'll do between two and five. But with the ones we reject, it's not, "It's never going to be there," it's just, "You need to keep working."'

Of the 15 to 20 books that Unbound gauges to launch in 2018, about 60 per cent are expected to secure enough funding. A typical book needs funding of £8000 to

£12,000. However, as with crowd-funding sites such as Kickstarter and GoFundMe, supporters tend to pledge more than the price of a book, which reduces the number of backers required.

Each book's campaign offers a series of reward packages at a wide range of prices, where the pledger will receive a copy of the book plus anything from postcards to dinner with the author.

'One of our fastest-funded books ever was Dr Sue Black's *Saving Bletchley Park*, and one of her rewards was socks, because she knitted socks,' says Kieran, who stresses, 'It's important that the rewards are true to you.

'They can be artwork or guided tours of places connected to the book. We've had huge success with launch parties and lunches where people get to meet the author, because it's about dismantling the gap between reader and author. People love getting more access.'

The average pledge is £35, which means most authors need to attract around 350 backers. Kieran admits that's easier for established writers who have an existing fan base they can call on.

YouTube star Stuart Ashen, for instance, has a million subscribers to his channel. He secured 455 per cent funding for his book *Terrible Old Games You've Probably Never Heard Of* and has made more money from pledges than from bookshop sales.

However, Unbound has also had success with first-time novelists and, with them in mind, has introduced a lower funding level of £4000 to £6000. With this option, books are not distributed to bookshops (although they can still be ordered in them) but the author only has to find around 150 to 200 backers.

One book that took this route was former nurse Natalie Fergie's novel *The Sewing Machine*.

'It achieved 114 per cent funding and went on to sell really well,' says Kieran. 'Another one doing well is *The Almanac* by Lia Leendertz. It reached 130 per cent funding and has sold 10,000 ebooks.'

Unbound has so far funded a total of 300 books with £4.7 million worth of pledges and is currently taking between



It's about dismantling the gap between reader and author

£7000 and £10,000 in pledges every day.

'Our biggest success has been with left-field projects,' says Kieran. Crowd-funding takes the risk out of investing. *The Wake*, for instance, is set in 1066 and written in its own hybrid of modern and old English.

'It was not considered financially viable for the traditional route,' says Kieran, 'but we were able to fund it because people

read bits of it and thought it was genius. *The Good Immigrant*, edited by Nikesh Shukla, was turned down by every publisher in London, but we were able to make it happen because of the hard work of the authors to spread the word.

'One of my co-founders describes traditional publishing as a bit like agri-business,' Kieran expands. 'It has just a few crops that it farms – TV tie-in, genre fiction, celebrity memoir, humour... and they do it brilliantly. But if you're outside of that main-crop approach to publishing, then we're a great place to come.'

Fundraising

When it comes to approaching people to pledge money, Kieran likens it to the

promotional work that any author will do to sell their book – it's just that Unbound authors do it before the book comes out. Authors can ask family and friends, and are encouraged to build a community of supporters through social media and blogs. They are also asked to make a video pitch for their book on the Unbound website.

'Every book on Unbound has a story that's not in the pages of the book itself, and that's the story of why the book needs to exist,' Kieran explains. 'We always say to authors, you've got to be clear about why your book needs to happen... and that is what you have to communicate.'

As a rule, some 60 per cent of funding is generated by the author's own activities and the rest comes from the website's 140,000 regular users.

'The thing that decides whether it's going to work or not is the energy of the author, every time,' says Kieran. 'The books that get funded are the ones where the author's got a look in their eye that says they're going to make it happen.'

His story

Kieran has wanted to write since his mother took him to a Roald Dahl book signing when he was a child. After dropping out of university for the second time ('It's a long story,' he admits with a smile), he found himself living next door to the offices of *The Idler* and applied to do work experience with them.

After six months, they gave him a full-time position and he went on to develop their website, which is where the content of *Crap Towns* first appeared.

The irony of Unbound's success is that Kieran conceived the idea as a way of publishing his own books, but it ended up stopping him from writing because he was too busy running the business.

He has finally returned to his keyboard to pen *The Surfboard*, a memoir about a point during the formation of the company when he felt as if he'd reached the limits of his ability, but then ultimately found a way forward after taking time out to learn how to build a surfboard.

Naturally, he'll be publishing through Unbound – if enough readers pledge their support for the project.

'It's certainly not guaranteed that my book will be funded,' he says, 'but as CEO I'm very excited about experiencing the business the way the writer does. I'm going to learn exactly what it's like to use Unbound.'

• To submit a manuscript to Unbound visit www.unbound.com

Writers' CIRCLE

Your news and views, writing tips and funny stories

RE TREAT

I spent last weekend at a new writing retreat called Solus Or on the Black Isle peninsula near Inverness. For various reasons my writing mojo had been somewhat absent of late. Well, the retreat I was invited to join certainly helped that!

Was it the fabulous views? Being waited on and enjoying marvellous, home-cooked food? A lack of distractions? Yes, all of those – but not to be underestimated was the connection with fellow writing friends.

We brainstormed, we planned, inspired each other, sometimes challenged each other, shared market news and then we got on and wrote. I'm not sure I produced a masterpiece but I did draft two short stories, send one off and edit another. I also had a complete lightbulb moment.

If your mojo is elusive and you have the opportunity to experience time away from the routine with people of a like mind, I really can't recommend a retreat more.

Fran Tracey, via email

INSPIRED VISION

PRIZE LETTER My favourite section of the magazine each month is usually the fiction competition, and once again I was not disappointed when I picked up my #194 December copy.

Each month, the authors who gain recognition in this contest take us on a journey that is off the beaten track; a much-appreciated diversion from the well-trodden short story market.

This month, *Black and White Vision* by Sarah Hills was the story

STORY COMP

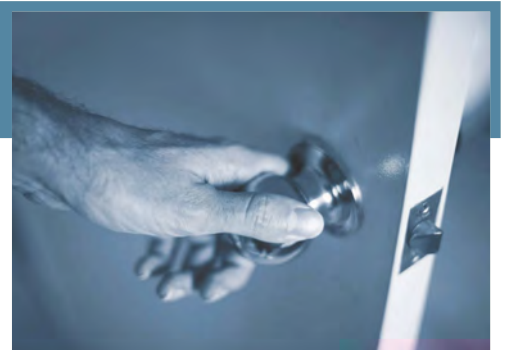
THIRD PRIZE £100 *Black and White Vision* Sarah Hills

Alan's house sits in darkness. A tiny box-like house; blinds always down and closed, even in summer. He uses the under-cupboard lights in the kitchen and one anglepoise lamp, bent towards the wall, in the living room. He prefers to watch TV in the dark. He tells himself he likes the sensation of being cocooned from the world after the bright busy-ness of the health centre, the constant flow of people and needs. An old Apple Mac sits on a desk in the corner, but he never touches it.

He never invites anyone back to the house. He works long hours, six days a week. The seventh day he sleeps and watches wall-to-wall box sets. Every evening he eats a takeaway in front of the TV. By 10 o'clock he is nodding and off to bed. Striding upstairs, two at a time, he shoves clothes into the laundry bin and is asleep almost before his head sinks into the pillow.

He doesn't even notice the second bedroom door any more. The white satin surface has no features, just a plain metal handle. More wall than door.

Alan always does his round of the health centre early, before most of the staff arrive, alongside the cleaners. This morning he drops final



palate of greys he can see out of the top window. The bottom is opaque, as the office used to be a treatment room, and there are bars outside to prevent burglaries, but the unpredictable sky is a touch-stone: sandbanks of cloud that roll for hours, even days, overhead; rain that passes like pixelated waves or hangs in the air as mist or fog, refusing to fall. He is aware of the great sea of light above his head. Sometimes, at high tide, it fills the sky in a great dome, pushing back the atmosphere to a high pale blue. At low ebbs, the light collapses under the weight of cloud to a thin wedge. Today is such a day. *Barely enough for everyone's eyes.* Alan thinks to himself.

that captured my attention all the way through. With precision and power, it released clues about Alan's past, and the reasons behind his long work hours and emotional drought. When we were finally given the full picture, the story drew to a heart-warming and moving end, which left me with tears in my eyes.

I could relate so well to the main character in this story because some time ago I too had put aside a passion of mine, persuading myself that I was wasting valuable time with self-indulgence.

As the story ended with Alan picking up his camera once again, I headed to my garage; my own 'dark room'. It was here that I had packed away all my attempts at becoming a writer: half-finished articles; poorly planned stories; and a lever-arch file containing random chapters of my first

attempt at a novel. Thoroughly inspired by this story, I won't be boxing them up again.

**Sue Watt,
Glenrothes, Fife**

CHRISTMAS GIFT

I started studying writing fairly recently, and have been training myself to look for anything that can help me to develop my skills. Films are a source of inspiration, and I like to watch different genres depending on my mood.

For years I have settled myself with a cup of hot chocolate in front of the Christmas 24 channel to relax during the cold, dark winter evenings. This time, however, I consciously analysed the stories and noticed that while they are all different, they have the same plot: *Man meets woman. One of them doesn't believe in love or in Christmas. But against the*

odds they end up together and live happily ever after.

This realisation was very encouraging to me because, as a beginner, I often wonder if I will ever come up with a story idea that is original enough to be attractive to publishers and readers. But these films taught me that creativity is limitless, and there are many different and interesting ways to tell a story.

**Claudia Bakeev,
Swindon, Wilts**

NaNOVICE

I've been a member of the NaNoWriMo site for seven years, but this year is the first time I've taken part in the 50,000-words-in-30-days challenge.

I've made lots of trips to Oxford to take part in the Nano Write-ins and I've had a really good time. I've met lots of lovely



A YEAR'S SUBSCRIPTION!

The writer of the prize letter each month will win a year's subscription to the magazine. Please make sure that you include your full name and address in your email. Write to letters@writers-forum.com

people from Oxford Writers' Circle who have kindly accepted me into their family despite being from Banbury.

I'm glad I joined NaNoWriMo and my only regret is not joining in during previous years. I know many people feel disheartened for getting behind on their intended wordcount, but I think it's not the winning but the taking part that counts.

**Chloe Gilholy,
Banbury, Oxon**

GUILT FREE

I love your magazine and look forward to it every month (the flash fiction comp is my favourite bit) but I was annoyed by a paragraph on your news page.

Apparently I should be feeling guilty about buying and reading books on my Kindle instead of supporting my local bookshops. There are a few reasons why this assertion made me angry.

First of all, I do not have a local bookshop; it went out of business before the internet and before discounted books. I have a newsagent chain and a supermarket.

Second, I have a small budget and I have to buy books where they are cheapest. I use my Kindle, eBay, charity shops and, of course, the library, as well as my father's extensive book collection, which I'm sure you will be pleased to note was bought in (then) local bookshops.

Third, among all the dross of Kindle's self-published books, there are some real gems that are not available to buy anywhere else.

To be completely clear, I do not feel like I'm failing anyone because I choose to read some

of my books on a Kindle. This doesn't mean that I in any way support Amazon and its tax policy (I don't) but I do what is right and enjoyable for me.

Thank you. A nearly always happy reader...

**Sarah Rolfe,
Hailsham, E Sussex**

FLASH POINT

About a year and a half ago, as an aspiring short story author, I set myself a challenge: I would enter the *Writers' Forum* flash comp every month until I either won it or had a story published elsewhere. After all, I'd paid for my subscription; why not use it? Some of the exercises didn't really suit my style, but I made myself complete them all. It was all good practice, I reasoned.

Then back in March of this year we were tasked to write an original science fiction piece. My story didn't win but it was highly commended, and the editor commented that it was 'beautifully written'. Confidence boosted, I decided to polish it up a little more and send it off for publication.

To my delight it was accepted by *Daily Science Fiction*. I'd achieved my goal! But now I had a habit, so I carried on entering most of the flash comps. My SF story, *The In Between Place*, was published on 13 November, and by a strange coincidence that was also the day my copy of *Writers' Forum* dropped on to my doormat and I discovered that my latest flash entry, *Beasties and Ghosties and a Small Green Bear*, had achieved runner-up. If I can do it, anyone can – keep writing!

**Kat Day,
Middle Barton, Oxon**

FIRST DRAFT

Oh dear, it looks like Ali Smith was having a bad writing day. Can you spot the 20 errors in this 'first draft' of *Autumn*?

The receptionist smiles a patient smile. (A smile especially for patents.)

Im afraid we need something with a current address and preferably also with a phonograph, she says.

Elisabeth shows her passport.

This passport is expired, the receptionist says.

I know, Elisabeth said. I'm in the middle of renewing it.

I'm afraid we can't accept an expired Id, the receptionist says Have you got a driving license?

Elisabeth tells the receptionist she don't drive.

What about a utility bill? the receptionist says. What on me? Elisabeth says. Right now?

The receptionist says that it a good idea always to carry a utility bill around with you in case some one needs to be able to verify your ID.

What about all the people who pay their bills online and don't get paper bills anymore? Elisabeth says.

The Receptionist looks longing at a ringing telephone on the left of her desk. Still with her eyes on the ringing phone she tells Elizabeth it's perfectly easy to print a bill out on a standard inkjet.

Elisabeth says she's staying at her mother, that it's sixty mile away, and that her mother doesn't have a printer.

The receptionist actually looks anger that Elisabeth's mother might not have a printer. She talks about catchment areas and registration of patients. Elisabeth realizes she's suggesting that now that her mother live outside the catchment area Elisabeth has no business being her in this building.

Sent in by Ginnie O'Farrell, from Hexham, Nthmb, who wins £25

Corrections
1 for patients (missing letter).
2 Im (missing apostrophe).
3 photograph (incorrect word).
4 I know, Elisabeth says (present tense).
5 expired (capital).
6 the receptionist says. (Missing full stop).
7 driving license? (spelling).
8 she doesn't drive (third person singular).
9 receptionist says. (New paragraph).
10 What, mother lives (third person singular).
11 it's a good idea (typo).
12 in case someone (one word).
13 The receptionist looks (no capital).
14 looks longingly (adverb).
15 tells Elisabeth (inconsistent spelling).
16 at her mother's (possessive).
17 sixty miles (plural).
18 actually looks angry (adjective).
19 her mother lives (third person singular).
20 no business being here (typo).

£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



Introduce yourself

Douglas McPherson shows you how to break into the world of magazines



The party season is upon us, and if you want to make the most of all those social opportunities it's no good being a wallflower and hoping that all the popular people in the room will come and find you. Look at them: they're standing there surrounded by their friends, laughing and chatting; they haven't even noticed you're there.

If you want to be part of those sparkling conversations, you'll have to put on your best smile, walk over, stick your hand out and introduce yourself.

Oh, and you'd better have something good to contribute – something that will grab

their attention and hold their interest – otherwise they'll all fall back into conversation with one another and you'll be left standing invisibly on the sidelines once again.

It's a bit like that being a freelance writer. There are plenty of wonderful editors you could be having exciting conversations with, on topics such as the cover story or opinion piece they'd like you to write, and how much they're going to pay you for it.

But you won't have those discussions if you lurk by the wall, watching enviously while they dish out the plum jobs to the usual old cronies. You have to push your way through the crowd, look 'em in the eye and

convince them that you should be their new best friend.

Fortunately, you won't have to do that in person, but you will have to do it by email.

Finding Mr(s) Right

The most important part of any pitch is sending it to the right person. A missive addressed to 'Dear Sirs' at enquiries@whatevermag.com *may* get passed on to the appropriate person, but it doesn't show much knowledge of or interest in the magazine on your part (especially if the 'sir' is a woman) so why would they think you capable of writing something that fits their needs?

Many mags have several editors responsible for different

sections and their roles may not be obvious even if their names are listed in the publication or on the website.

The correct approach is therefore to identify the part of the mag you're aiming at – such as the travel section or a themed slot like My Weekend – then ring up and ask who you should pitch your idea to. Be sure to ask for their email address.

Attention grabber

It's often said that the best ideas can be summed up in one line, and that's particularly true in the world of magazines where editors live and breathe headlines and cover lines. So come up with the sort of short snappy 'sell' that, if it were on the cover of a magazine, would make a reader want to buy the mag and thumb quickly to your piece.

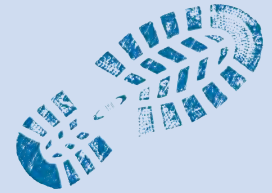
Put that in the subject box of your email.

As an example, my first pitch to *Vintage Rock* was an interview with a former promotions girl at pioneering record company Sun, who had written a memoir about her time with its legendary boss Sam Phillips.

My subject line was *Sun, Sam Phillips and Me – an interview with Barbara Barnes Sims*, and that ended up being the headline when it was printed.

Say hello

The magazine world is friendly and informal, so it's perfectly



TAKE THE STEP

Lesson 1

A freelance writer has to be proactive. You have to research the right editors to approach and pitch them a continual stream of good ideas.

Lesson 2

Editors live and breathe headlines, so build your pitch around a one-line summary that could be used on a magazine cover to tempt readers. Make it the subject line of your email to catch an editor's eye in exactly the same way.

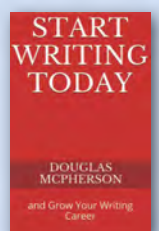
Lesson 3

Always follow up your pitch with a polite enquiry to check it was received. That second nudge can often result in a sale.

Homework

Think of an article you'd like to write, then come up with a cover line that would both catch an editor's eye and sum up exactly what they'd be buying. Take inspiration from the cover lines of your target magazine and write something in their style.

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



“Push your way through the crowd, look 'em in the eye and convince them you should be their friend”

acceptable to greet your editor by their first name:

Hi Rik,

From there, get straight to the point with a direct question:

Would you be interested in an interview with Barbara Barnes Sims who was in charge of publicity at Sun from 1957 – 1960?

My pitch was for a general feature, but if you're targeting a particular slot, mention it:

Would you be interested in a Flashback piece on Barbara Barnes Sims...

If your pitch is an obvious fit for the mag, a one-line summary like that should be all an editor needs to start thinking yes or no. If you need to supply wodes of extra explanation, maybe the idea isn't right or you need to focus

it a lot more before you pitch.

Your editor will have some questions, however, so your next paragraph should state why the article would be relevant at this particular time:

The piece would tie in with her new memoir The Next Elvis in which she recalls working with Sam Phillips, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, Johnny Cash and others, and opens a unique window on day-to-day life at Sun.

By that point the ed will know if they want the piece. Their only questions will be: who is this writer I've never heard of? And: can I trust them to deliver?

Your next par should therefore be a potted summary of your credentials:

I write regularly about 1950s rock'n'roll in titles including the Daily Telegraph and Country Music People. As an example of my work, here is a link to a piece

I wrote on Jerry Lee Lewis in the Daily Telegraph.

If you don't have any writing credits, mention any relevant experience, such as working in the health sector if you're pitching a health article. You could also start a blog and post articles on your specialist subjects that you can link to.

A clear, grammatically correct email will in itself say a lot about your ability and professionalism.

Say goodbye

Having set out your pitch, sign off with a repeat of your question and an invitation to contact you:

If you would like an interview with Barbara Barnes Sims, please let me know or give me a call on XXX XXXX to discuss the idea further.

*Regards
Douglas*

Call again

Most successful pitches are replied to within a few days. Unsuccessful ones are often simply ignored, but don't be discouraged by that. If you haven't heard anything in a week, send a polite follow-up:

*Hi Rik,
Did you get my pitch for an interview with...*

Some pitches do get overlooked or put on the 'maybe' file, and many a story has been sold with a gentle reminder.

Most of all, though, remember that an editor has a magazine to fill every week or month. They need a constant stream of ideas, so just keep pitching until you hit upon the one they want.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Douglas shares writing tips he's learned through experience

#36 Be a browser

It's easy to become blind to the wall of magazines on display in your local supermarket. You grab the same paper and mag that you always buy and hurry on your way. As a freelance, though, you need to think markets at every opportunity, so always spend time browsing for new writing opportunities. There are usually several competing mags on the same subject, so if one isn't buying your work, check out the others. Also study mags in sections that you don't normally peruse. You may be a music writer; but might a food or gardening mag have a slot for a piece on Debbie Harry's bee-keeping hobby? The weekend newspaper supplements are packed with freelance opportunities, so make a point of buying a different paper each week to dissect it thoroughly. Be sure to check the newsstands when you visit different towns, too, as different areas cater to different interests.

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

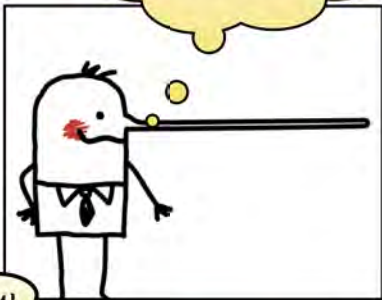
Confused about Self Publishing?



Publishing your own book can be a bit of a nightmare. There are all sorts of pitfalls for the unwary.

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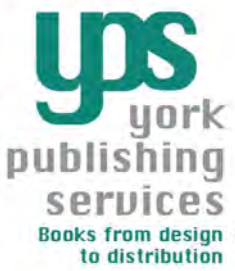
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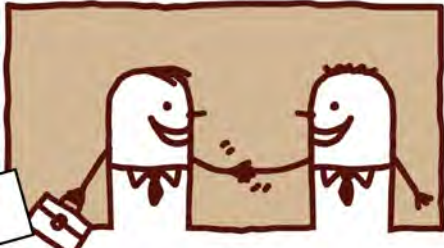
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Tales of my GURU

by Hugh Scott

This month the mystery mentor manages to sum up editing

I had escaped from Harrods where my wife was face-deep in rails of clothing, and I was resting my forehead on the rain-cold window, when someone took my arm and led me to a nearby **estaminet**. The place was ill-lit but for spots of fire that bobbed or drifted, none travelling more than an arm's length from its epicentre; then, as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, I saw that the spots of fire were the glowing ends of cigars, and their movements were constrained by each smoker's reach.

Then a match flared and approached my face; and I discovered a Hoogla cigar between my fingers. I leaned across the table, partly to accept the light and partly to see who had so kindly kidnapped me –

But it wasn't, as you possibly thought, my Guru.

You know my Guru – that shadow of shadows who looms with literary brilliance when my amateur status is trembling; and it was trembling today, because not only was Harrods like a human tsunami discombobulating me, but because my acquaintance Apricot Flan (who is not a pudding) had demanded a mantra that could encapsulate editing.

She was no good at editing.

And I was no good at encapsulating.

So who had tucked me into this smokers' heaven, and provided the Hoogla?

To find out, I cleverly said: 'Who are you?'

'It's me, you great dumpling,' said my wife. 'Who else?'

I didn't try to answer. Who else, indeed?

'All this and a Hoogla,' I said gratefully, puffing the cigar.

'It's twenty-five quid for the cigar. I bought two. One for him.' And I realised that someone else had joined us and was scratching a match, and my wife had faded behind a Harrods catalogue.

This, now, was my Guru.

'Encapsulate editing for Apricot Flan,' I requested.

'Apricot Flan,' sighed my Guru. 'Such eyelashes. And a beginner. Words are precious to a beginner. They love what they have written. But what they have written may not be good. They should regard their work with a cool glance.'

'They should understand that editing is the first process in giving their story impact. Editing trims the fat off. The fat is



excess words, that is, words that don't mean much, such as *There are* at the beginning of a sentence. So instead of *There are many people unhappy with their shape* try *Many people are unhappy with their shape*.

'This takes the reader immediately to the heart of the sentence, which is *many people*. *There are*,' he continued with a glimmer, 'many examples.'

'And many exceptions,' I said, which he kindly ignored.

'Also,' continued my Guru, 'words can be removed from the middle of a sentence while retaining the meaning, thus:

Edward's late breakfast of scrambled egg with bacon, followed by toast and marmalade, meant that he could not eat his lunch. This could be: *Edward's late breakfast meant that he could not eat his lunch.* The point of the sentence is that Edward could not eat his lunch – telling the reader what he actually ate for breakfast is not necessary.

'Repetition is often important in a story in order to keep the reader informed. But repetition sometimes appears because the writer is being too emphatic, or is trying to clarify something for herself.'

My Guru puffed his cigar, frowning. He raised a finger into the gloom, and coffee appeared. 'They know me here,' he murmured. 'Coffee?'

He continued to frown. 'I'm frowning,' he explained, 'to stop myself repeating the fact that repetition may not be necessary, and should be deleted. Though,' he sighed, releasing a billow of smoke, 'we must retain clarity of meaning. What an excellent cigar. Thank your wife when

she comes back.' My wife was still vague behind the Harrods catalogue.

'The other category of editing is deleting unnecessary events. This is difficult. The beginner writer imagines her heroine delving into the shoe shop, and trying on every pair of shoes, enjoying the smell of leather, delighting in complaining about a poor fit, rejoicing at discovering pure foot comfort! Oh, and so on...'

My Guru frowned again. I waited.

'The writer must, eventually, get to the climax of the scene, which could be, let's say, the young woman serving her looks like her long-lost daughter. But if there is no climax, then the writer has been merely indulging in writing about shoes, so the scene leads nowhere and should be deleted.'

'And,' said my Guru, raising his eyebrows enormously, 'I can't give you further examples because my cigar isn't long enough. In fact, I think it's gone out!'

And with this mysterious comment, he dissolved into the gloom, leaving me still trying to encapsulate editing for Apricot Flan. For a moment I struggled to remember the heart of my Guru's advice, then I thought: *Remove words that don't mean much. Remove events that don't mean much.*

And I repeated this all the way home, much to my wife's annoyance, because we had a six-hour train journey.

Use it or lose it

Pronounce 'estaminet' with a French accent; in other words, make it rhyme with 'say'. It is a cafe or restaurant where one is allowed to smoke. Here is how to use it:

The prime minister cries: 'We cannot allow an estaminet in any city, any town, any village or in any hamlet in England! It is disgusting that – What?' She leans towards the Minister of Food. 'Really? I thought it was...' Addressing Parliament: 'I withdraw my objection!' Sits down somewhat relieved.



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.

HELPFUL AT ANY STAGE

Pippa Roberts explains why writers' labs at local theatres are worth exploring wherever you are in your writing career

When someone decides they would like to be a writer, their mind almost invariably goes to novels and short stories. Playwriting is a strange, arcane art that a few people seem able to practise, but no one is quite sure how.

In fact, the route to writing plays can be very much clearer than the route to writing novels. Many theatres have writers' labs where members' scripts are read by professional actors and the author is given feedback by the actors, the other writers and the director – normally very supportive and constructive criticism.

While being a writer can be a solitary occupation, attending these labs can also provide a sense of community.

It should be possible to find a writers' lab (or sometimes two) attached to a local theatre, even if you are not in a big city. Some smaller towns and cities provide excellent training for playwrights and they also boast a number of groups for different levels of development.

Salisbury Playhouse

Salisbury Playhouse is a great example of an organisation with a strong focus on the needs of disadvantaged writers, particularly women. Although women make up the majority of drama students, research carried out by Tonic Theatre in conjunction with the Royal Central School



Martin Lytton's play *Twenty-One Pounds* was commissioned by Cheltenham Everyman

of Speech and Drama found that women made up only eight per cent of the writers of new plays produced in London's West End and the 20 top subsidised National Portfolio Organisations (those receiving Arts Council funding). Many women are trapped in writing for schools, museums and universities, while writing by men is more commonly found in the big theatres.

Angela Street started the writing group Juno to address this need. Women were able to attend monthly open workshops free of charge, and a showcase of their work was performed in Salisbury Fringe.

Writing courses developed at Salisbury Playhouse and the town's Arts Centre run very regularly – and most welcome men as well. At present Angela

leads a Friday group for more experienced writers who want script development, and a Saturday morning group for all levels of experience.

She says: 'Of course I'm also aware that some women prefer a mixed group, which is why my other groups are open to all. But I'm conscious of multiple barriers to having work produced, barriers such as class, race, age, disability, mental health issues, and money to attend groups, pay for childcare, travel and so on.'

She has recently started a group with Link Up Arts for artists with disabilities, their carers and supporters, and she is also experimenting with pop-ups in Wiltshire, Dorset and Hampshire, with the intention of helping writers outside major towns.

Several Salisbury writers have had successes locally and in London as a result of these sessions. Linda Morse has had many shorts selected for performance, one recently at the Blue Elephant Theatre in London, and Veronica Dewan's play *She is Not Herself* was produced by Kali Theatre in London.

Pete Talman, another Salisbury writer, has had comedy success and won Make the Cut, a competition run by Director's



Readings at the Juno writing group

Cut Theatre Company. His play was performed at St James's Theatre, London.

Salisbury Fringe continues to showcase new writing, with professional actors, at pubs, clubs and cafes around the town. If you are anywhere nearby, I can recommend it as a wonderful place to build your writing career.

■ See <https://angelastreetwriter.wordpress.com/juno-theatre> or <https://angelastreetwriter.wordpress.com/2017/09/10/new-writing-workshops-starting-soon>

Cheltenham Everyman

Cheltenham is another good place to be. At Cheltenham Everyman there are two writers' labs, one of which now contains the more experienced writers.

Director Paul Milton says: 'I'm very happy that recently we have been able to commission a number of writers to create work that has been professionally performed.'

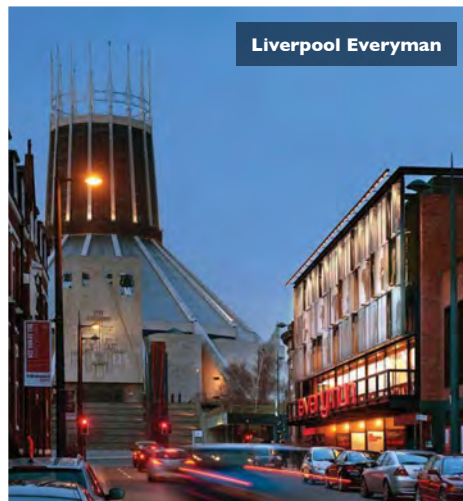
Martin Lytton's play *Twenty One Pounds* was commissioned and produced by Cheltenham Everyman. He has no doubt about how much the writers' lab has helped him.

'When I first joined Writers' Lab nearly 10 years ago I had never written for theatre. The practical lessons, the open, honest critique and the experience of putting on rehearsed readings in a studio environment have enabled me to experiment and find my own voice.'

Miranda Walker, another member of the Cheltenham Writers' Lab, has written for *The Now Show* and *The News Quiz* for BBC Radio 4, and her play *Fly Eddie Fly!*, about Olympic ski jumper Eddie the Eagle, was performed at Cheltenham Everyman.

Miranda is currently working on sketch show *Diddy TV* for CBBC and has had a TV sitcom optioned by DLT Entertainment.

She says: 'Whatever and wherever I'm



The experience of putting on rehearsed readings has enabled me to find my own voice

writing, Cheltenham Everyman is my script-writing home. I love to be there and still get a huge amount from attending the Lab to hear my work-in-progress read by actors, and to receive feedback from fellow playwrights.'

She strongly recommends other writers to find writers' labs to develop their skills.

Other Lab members have gone on to write for university projects, museums and schools, and have also written non-fiction books and short stories. Learning to write good dialogue gives a writer a transferable skill. Good dialogue is essential to all types of writing.

■ See <https://www.everymantheatre.org.uk/participate/professional-training/writers-lab> or contact paul.milton@everymantheatre.org.uk

Soho Theatre, London

Other theatres with a strong focus on developing new writers include Soho Theatre, which has a writers' lab that meets once a month from October to June.

There are groups for different ages – one for 16–26 year olds, and one for ages 27 plus. Writers are given masterclasses by guest artists and are invited to shows at discounted rates. The theatre also has an extensive script library for writers to use.

Other resources at Soho Theatre include regular script-writing competitions offering cash prizes and development

of the winning plays. This is a fabulous theatre, and well worth seeking out.

■ See www.sohotheatre.com/writers/writers-lab-16-26s or <http://www.sohotheatre.com/writers/resources>

Royal Court Theatre, London

The Royal Court describes itself as the 'leading force in world theatre for energetically cultivating writers – undiscovered, emerging and established'.

If you live within reach, they have an ongoing programme of writers' attachments, readings, workshops and playwriting groups.

Applications to the next Introduction to Playwriting groups will open in spring 2018. Sessions will provide guidance while a writer works on a full-length script. Like all theatre courses and labs, these groups do book up well in advance, so it is sensible to put your name down as soon as possible.

■ See <https://royalcourttheatre.com/playwriting/writers-groups/introductory-groups> or contact info@royalcourttheatre.com

Liverpool Everyman

Further north, the Liverpool Everyman often runs courses for writers, although they do sometimes require you to have previous experience of writing for stage.

■ See <https://www.everymanplayhouse.com/making-theatre/the-writers-room>

It is impossible to mention all the theatre writing initiatives that exist across the country. Some theatres may not have a writers' lab, but who knows? – if you push them enough they may start one.

Following the theatre route has certainly proved to be a great starting point for many writers.

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Dear Della



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



Where can I find a writing retreat?

Q **PRIZE LETTER** I've read a lot about the benefits of a writing retreat, but have no idea how to go about researching which would be best for me. I'm not sure if there are 'themed' retreats (sci-fi, drama, romance), or what kind of preparation I might need to do beforehand. Could you shed light on how to set about finding one?

Suzanne Nolan, Colchester, Essex

A A lot depends on what you want to achieve. Do you just want to be away from the stresses and distractions of home so you can finish your novel, or would you like to be inspired and guided by an experienced tutor? Or perhaps it's something in between.

There are many types of retreats. With some you hire the location and catering, others just the location. Some of them are led by an experienced writer who will help you. The cost will depend on the level of involvement of other people – leaders, tutors etc. Many are advertised in the pages of *Writers' Forum*. Check them out. Also get recommendations if you can from writers' groups and forums.

Although I've never been on one myself, the Arvon Foundation's courses and retreats come highly recommended. See www.arvon.org [See also this month's Letters page for a reader's recommendation – Ed.]

The best retreat I ever went on was one I organised with a group of writer friends. There were six of us, including one couple. We booked a five-bedroom house for the weekend and split the cost. One person volunteered to do the cooking and the rest of us did the washing up. We agreed we'd write during the mornings (plus Friday evening) and planned a social afternoon on Saturday. We also agreed that each of us would lead one of our writing sessions. Here are my top tips for making this work:

- Go out of season – October through till February/March. It's much cheaper.

- If you're only going for the weekend, pick somewhere close to all of you. Travelling eats into your time.
- Go with people you really like.
- Agree in advance who will do what on the domestic front.
- Take some prepared workshops.
- Have fun!

Q I am retired and write mainly non-fiction. I spent my working life in a difficult field and many of the practical methods and skills I learned are relevant to everyday life and could be useful to people seeking help. So could I write a how-to book? I qualified years ago, but would I need recognised current qualifications for credibility?

Edwina Culshaw, Ramsbottom

A In my opinion you need two things to write a how-to book. The first is credibility, which can come from either qualifications or personal success (eg, I lost 10 stone by doing X). You don't necessarily need current qualifications but I would say that your knowledge and experience in your field needs to be current.

You also need to be able to write. If you can't write, employ a ghost writer.

Q Many of the articles in *Writers' Forum* feature opportunities abroad, especially in the USA. I duly sent off a feature and was delighted when it was accepted, but the accompanying contract and tax notification form gave me cold feet as I don't feel sufficiently aware of foreign law or tax implications. Sadly, I declined the offer. Where I can find help with such matters?

Angela Hindle, N Yorks

A Congratulations on your acceptance and what a shame you felt you had to turn it down. These forms aren't usually that complicated, although I know they look daunting. They usually just want you

to give your National Insurance number and tax status in the UK, including income etc. The Inland Revenue would be able to give you some guidance.

From the moment I began to write professionally – even when I still had a full-time day job – I employed an accountant. Their fees are tax deductible so it seemed to make sense and took all of the worry out of these situations.

If you work full time and already use up your tax allowance, then any money you earn as a writer is subject to tax – either in this country or abroad. Unless you are au fait with filling in tax returns and calculating tax yourself, you will need an accountant to do this for you. I think they are worth their weight in gold.

Q I have had four books published by Lion Hudson, as well as a number of articles in various magazines, but I have never received any formal training as a writer. I wonder if I am entitled, legally, to run writing classes and charge a fee.

Stephen Poxon, St Albans, Herts

A You don't need any qualifications to set up a class and charge money. What you will need is credibility, which it sounds as though you have. It may be handy to have some kind of teaching experience, but it's not a legal requirement.

One thing to be aware of, though – if you are inviting people into your home and charging them, it's a good idea to get public liability insurance, and you will also need to advise your insurance company. You may also need PLI to teach in a hired room. Check with the hiring organisation.

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.



WRITING4CHILDREN

MAKING MORE OF ME Author Kathryn Evans tells Anita Loughrey how a good agent supports you through the ups and downs

My agent, Sophie Hicks, signed me up when she was still with Ed Victor Ltd – I think it was around 10 or 12 years ago. When she set up her own agency she asked if I'd go with her and I didn't hesitate.

She's been amazing, picking me up when I'm down, always fighting my corner. I got quite low about three years in when we still didn't have a deal, but she absolutely believed in me, and if she did, how could I not?

I originally sent her a picture book, which she turned down. So I tried again with a YA novel called *Skin*. She rang to have a chat about it, and when she offered to represent me, I was stunned. I tried to be professional, asking about terms and so on, but inside I was so excited. I thought I'd made it.

That book just didn't sell – who knows why, sometimes things just aren't quite right for the market or the moment. I wrote a couple of other things – one of them Sophie wasn't keen on and the other I panicked about and asked her to withdraw. I'd lost my nerve.

A few years passed and I began to think it was all pointless – our family farm was struggling and I needed to put more time into that so I stopped writing. I went to see Sophie about it and she was brilliant. She said she honestly believed we'd get there, she backed me 100 per cent. But I had really lost hope.

That time of not writing made me utterly miserable and in the end my family said, please, just go and write something. I decided I'd rather write and never be published



Kathryn Evans and (inset) her agent Sophie Hicks



with
children's author
Anita Loughrey

than never write again so I set to work with an idea I'd had. That idea was the beginnings of *More of Me*.

I wrote the first draft quite fast, it flowed out of me. It's about a girl, Teva, who replicates herself once a year and the version that is left behind is stuck at that age forever. She has to hand over her life to the new Teva – best friend, boyfriend and all her plans for the future. It makes for some interesting dynamics at home! I had a scruffy first draft within eight months of coming up with the idea.

Writing process

When I write, I want to have a good plan but truthfully, I usually have just an idea, a character, a beginning and end. So because I know I'm going to have a lot of juggling and rewriting to do, I use Scrivener. This allows me to see what's in each chapter and where it comes, at a glance. I have a header line and a brief synopsis for each chapter so I know what comes where – it makes it so easy to physically switch scenes around.

Also you can flag up issues by making notes as you go: '*More of x here,*' or, '*Go back and change x to fit with this.*'

Scrivener allows you to set project targets – an overall manuscript length and daily wordcounts. Depending on how busy I am, or how much pressure I'm under, I'll set a target of between 500 and 2000 words a day. I have to achieve that, every day – it keeps the script fresh in my mind and keeps things moving forward. The 500 target works well because if I go over I re-set

and start heading for the next target. It gives a really great sense of achievement.

I try and get a first draft down as uncritically as I can and then I edit. I'll probably do four or five full edits before I send the script to Sophie.

One pass is for structure – is the pace right, is the tension right, has each chapter got a hook, is every scene driving the action forward? There's also a pass to check character and another for relationships, and finally, one to see if I'm really dealing with the heart of my story. In *More of Me*, it was ultimately about identity.

Nagging doubts

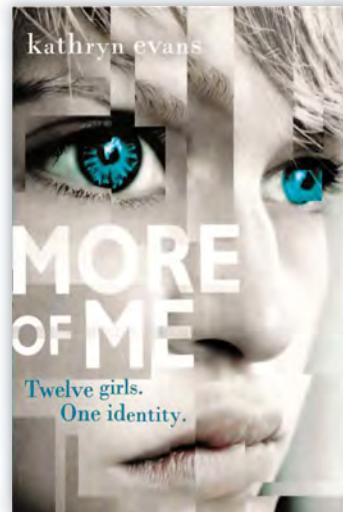
While Sophie submitted *More of Me*, I got on with a new book! It's the only way – and thank goodness I did. When your first book sells you're suddenly thinking about how to build a career.

More of Me sold really quickly. It had taken so long to get to that point – years and years – and I could hardly believe it. I ran out to find my husband and cried all over him. He probably thought the dog had died. It was an amazing mix of joy and relief and validation.

It still took around 18 months before the book was on the shelves. We needed that time, though – there were three more full edits, then copy edits and a proof check.

My main editor at Usborne, Sarah Stewart, was brilliant. She really got what I was trying to do and has a real talent for metaphorically lifting the flaps so I can see where the story could work better.

I loved it too, seriously. Editing with her was a dream.



Hard work, but a dream.

I'm also a member of SCBWI (the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators) so I have a great crowd of writing friends. In particular, I was a member of the very first SCBWI online critique group. It morphed into a YA critique group and now we're just a group of friends who give each other whatever support we need. I'm also part of the face-to-face group, CHI SCBWI. They are hugely supportive.

All this helps, but mostly, Sophie helped me to overcome the doubts. Having an agent who has faith in you really helped overcome everything.

Who doesn't have doubts? What matters is if you let them cripple you and stop you from doing what you want to do. Use the doubt to fire the engines of development – the need to learn, to read, to improve. Doubt will help you be a better writer. Just don't let it stop you taking risks.

Have faith

My new book looks at how we deal with grief. When you're

trying to write a pacy story, with an element of intrigue and modern relationships, it's easy to lose sight of your reason for writing the story.

There will always be edits, of course. My agent will see things I've missed and then, with any luck, I get to work with another great editor. I love working with an editor, crafting your work, making it better. It's a long-winded process but it seems to work for me.

My advice to readers of *Writers' Forum* who have been taken on by an agent but are still waiting to be discovered is to be professional. Trust your agent to get on with their job – selling your work – while you get on with yours, which is writing the very best books you can.

I learnt to have a bit more faith that I can write, but not so much to think I've got everything right.

My writing really came together when I let myself be me. When you start out, you're trying lots of styles, it's hard to find your own voice. I realised my own voice was exactly that – my own. The sum total of all I'd read and all I wanted to write about. I wrote it out as an equation for a blog post:

$$(Hardy^5 + Bronte^3) \times (Asimov^2 + Wyndham^2) \times Orwell^5 + (King^2/Rennison^6) = Evans$$

And that's me, my style: contemporary thrillers with strong relationships, a sci-fi twist and a spoonful of horror.

• Find out more about Kathryn at www.kathrynevans.ink

THE MAGAZINE SCENE

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

Business innovation stories wanted at BQ

If the new year has you thinking about a career change, consider exploring your entrepreneurial side with *Business Quarter* (BQ).

- The target readership is the business community rather than consumers – anything from a small start-up to a well-established old firm. Articles should celebrate and inspire, so look for businesses in your area that have had success and interview key people about how this was achieved.
- There is a lot of potential for interviewing managing directors/chief executives of businesses if you are able to get some time with them. Don't formulate your own questions but rather check the website for a template of things to ask.
- If you are an expert on a particular business topic, anything from marketing, sales or pricing strategy to multimedia content production or motivating a team, then it's worth getting in touch with the editorial desk so you can be on file for a soundbite when required. It may just lead to you being invited to contribute something meatier, perhaps for the How Do I... column.
- Other sections with scope for you to contribute include Around the World in 80 Trades, which hooks up a company with the countries that they export to, and Workplace of the Week, which gives the chance for a business to highlight something quirky about their workplace such as an office pet, a nap room or a special place to encourage creativity.

Visit: www.bqlive.co.uk

Field your ideas to *The Cricketer*

Cricket is a year-round business and is well served by magazine *The Cricketer*. Here's how to bowl some ideas in its direction...

- The mag has recently expanded its page count to include more county cricket reports. So if you attend local matches, this could be your chance. Managing editor Huw Turbervill says recreational cricket is 'now covered in greater detail than ever. We are continuing to invest in a lovely looking magazine with great reads and top journalism.'
- The website aims to make cricket more accessible to casual fans with shorter news items and match summaries. Huw says the site tries to 'provide up-to-date reports on world cricket, stats-based articles and a mix of features with a focus on imagery and video.'
- Other general interest stories could involve the girls'/women's side of the sport or schools that nurture the stars of the future. As a fan you may have an investigative angle to explore. And if you have access to big names in the sport today, it's definitely worth getting in touch.

Recent coverlines: *County cricket in 100 objects; Money, money, money – why recreational cricketers receive outrageous sums; Cost of county cricket – how many thousands you need to follow your team*

Visit: www.thecricketer.com



MARKET NEWS

■ A new website is helping to showcase video reporters who highlight positive stories in their community. Winkball offers publishers access to a range of freelance videos of local events, anything from a village fete to a theatre production. An extra facility sets out to create a network between reporters, video makers and publishers. For example, a reporter could suggest an event which a video producer is interested in filming. They would then find a sponsor who will pay them for their time. The finished film will be accessible by any publisher on Winkball. The website aims to 'change attitudes to the way we produce and consume media in the UK' and will also offer the chance for publishers to commission freelancers through the 'Winkball Wire', as well as featuring training resources to help young people get into video reporting.

■ Print magazines often seek to extend their brand through sponsorship and related products, but lifestyle title *Monocle* is perhaps the first to lend its name to a range of properties. There are already Monocle shops and cafes and even a radio station, and the latest idea is to work with property developers and designers to offer luxury flats. The move was spawned by a series of articles on creating the perfect apartment. Founder Tyler Brülé told the *Guardian*: 'We know where our readers are and where they travel, and we know what they like.' The first property is planned for Bangkok and, if successful, others will be commissioned.

INSIDE VIEW

National Geographic Food

If proof was needed that food and travel do indeed mix, then look no further than a new title that has just been launched by National Geographic called, quite simply, *National Geographic Food*. Here's a look at the sort of ideas the team might be looking to put on the menu...



Back story

This isn't just another food magazine full of recipes and tempting photographs to go with them. Instead there is more of a focus on getting 'behind the scenes' with all types and aspects of food. If you have access to people who are in the know about the production of a trending food and who can provide an interesting angle on, say, avocados, then it is worth forming into a pitch. Editor Maria Pieri says: 'We'll aim to debunk the myths, speaking to producers, suppliers, farmers, chefs, restaurateurs, nutritionists... and family cooks, too.'

Keep it real

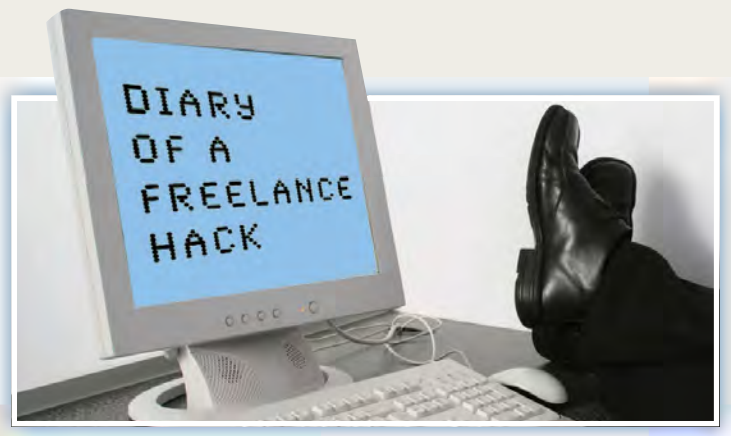
Stories about our relationship with food are welcome. There could be a focus on a type of food that has been used in a particular family or culture for generations. Suggestions don't have to be wholly positive – for instance, it could be a food that nutritionists and other experts always frown on yet we couldn't live without. Maria Pieri is keen to 'explore real food, real people and real recipes, the ones you actually make at home'.

Personal taste

Ideas don't have to be populist. They could involve a food that not many people have heard of but someone somewhere in the world loves. Remember, as Pieri says, 'each and every one of us has their own unique tastes.' Your pitch could be about something you yourself eat, providing you can place enough interesting and relevant context around it. Sustainability is a good buzzword that the title will champion.

Recent coverlines: *Chocolate: wild bean to artisan bar – how it stacks up; Wild mushrooms and cloudberry sorbet – the fruits of the Swedish forest; Chinese, Indian or Dutch – a taste of New World whisky*

Visit: www.natgeofood.co.uk



TALKING POINTS

The thing with interviews is that you never know what's going to happen until the day. You have to prepare as thoroughly as possible so you're ready for anything. This month, for example, I found myself writing about two sons of late rock stars for separate articles. On the face of it, the interviews would be very similar, but they went very differently.

For No1 Son, I was promised just 20 minutes on the phone, which isn't a lot of time to fill 3000 words. I prepared doubly thoroughly so I could get some good questions into my brief allocation, and also so that if I didn't get many quotes I'd have enough background info to pad the piece out.

It's always worth bearing in mind, however, that although limited durations are sometimes specified because the person is doing a row of back-to-back interviews, a short cut-off time can also be to give them a get-out if they're not enjoying the chat. If they're into it, you may get longer, so it's always worth having some extra questions ready.

As it turned out, the moment No1 Son started speaking it was clear he wasn't going to stop – he was on the blower for an hour and a half! Thankfully, the transatlantic call was incoming or my expenses claim would have dealt my editor a death blow.

Chatterbox interviewees can be almost as frustrating as taciturn ones, though, as it's easy to waffle for half an hour without saying much. I had my work cut out trying to steer him onto the topics I wanted to cover. Transcribing the tape and editing it down into readable quotes, meanwhile, took an age.

No2 Son was much shyer. As his wife was expecting a baby 'any day', he would only commit to an email questionnaire. Still reeling from No1 Son's verbosity, that suited me as I wouldn't have to transcribe it. His wife must have gone into labour, however, because the evening before my deadline he answered only the first eight of my 20 questions.

It was at that point that my prep came to my rescue. During my research, I'd culled some quotes from previous articles online and jotted down some good lines from YouTube interviews. My intention was to revisit the topics in my interview, but now I simply shoved them into the gaps in my story with tags like 'he said at the time' or 'he said at his book launch', which were truthful but successfully blurred the join between the archive quotes and my brand new ones.

With my intro and some other anecdotes pre-written, I sent the piece in right on time.

INSIDE STORY

Douglas McPherson reveals the story behind a ghostly Christmas romance

Few things are as disorientating as writing Christmas stories in the summer. I wrote four in the last week of August. From nine to five, my head was so full of snow, crackers and tree lights that I almost began signing my emails 'Merry Christmas.' Then I'd leave my keyboard and find it was a sunny, summer evening.

That's the time of year when the women's mags are calling for yuletide tales, however. In fact, although magazine fiction is mostly written on spec, one of my Xmas shorts was a commission. For the *My Weekly Christmas Special*, fiction editor Karen Byrom asked a dozen writers to each come up with an 800-word story based on a line from the *Twelve Days of Christmas*. Mine was *10 Lords A-Leaping*.

The brief said: 'While the story should pick up on the theme of the line you've been assigned, it does not have to be addressed too literally.' In my case, Karen added: 'I'm imagining an American visiting a stately home for the all-British Christmas experience, maybe some ghostly leaping lords... but don't feel constrained by this.'

Initial ideas

My first thought was a different scenario entirely: 10 lords appearing on a *Britain's Got Talent*-type show. At the end they come on in their ermine gowns and wigs, which they discard to reveal buff bodies in skimpy trunks for a break-dancing routine.

As I've never seen *BGT*, however, and don't even possess a telly, I quickly

I reached the final scene with no idea what had brought them together in the starlight

decided it would be safer to give Karen what she wanted.

An early thought was a haunted house where people go to stay. In fact, the owners and staff secretly dress up as ghosts to maintain the illusion. The twist would be that the house really is haunted by the requisite leaping lords.

Another idea was a seance in a stately home with the twist that one of the attendees is a ghost. Perhaps it could be part of a *Most Haunted*-type programme.

Bare bones

None of that felt quite right, but it all led me to the concept of a Christmas Eve party in a castle, where the entertainment would be actors dressed up as spooks. More specifically, I began to form the idea of an upstairs-downstairs romance.

I pictured an opening scene where an actor and actress are getting ready for their performance. Maybe he's new to the company and has drawn the short straw of wearing a suit of armour that will come to life and start clanking around during the show.

The suggestion would be planted that the two thespians are going to have a romance.

Later, during the party, we'd meet the visiting American – a brash loudmouth – who is trying to chat up the hostess, an aristocrat who owns the

castle. She greets his advances coldly, however.

The twist would be that she ends up with the bloke in the armour, and maybe the American with the actress.

I could see the final scene in which the actor in shining armour, who I decided to call Ed, is on the terrace in the moonlight with the aristocrat, who became Lady Dorothy – a reference to Dorothy and the tin man in *The Wizard of Oz*.

But wait – where would the leaping lords come in?

How about the American tries to impress the hostess with his knowledge that the castle really is haunted by a leaping lord... who only appears when there's romance in the air. When Dorothy rebuffs his advances, he mutters: 'Well, it doesn't look like there will be any lords leaping about tonight.'

At the end of the story, though, as Dorothy and the tin man embrace on the terrace, we, the readers, would take a peek through the French doors behind them and see the ghostly lords taking to the dance floor.

Skeleton

I reckoned I could fit all that into 800 words with a tight five-scene structure:

Scene 1: Ed and actress getting ready.

Scene 2: Dorothy and the American at party.

Scene 3: Ed in his armour watching the party before the show begins.

Scene 4: American gets together with actress.

Scene 5: Ed and Dorothy on terrace.

Final image: Going back to my *BGT* idea, I decided that the ghostly lords are so excited by Ed and Dorothy's romance that they're not just leaping but break-dancing (although that was ultimately edited out).

Research

Having worked out all the above in my head, I wasn't sure how I was actually going to bring the characters into alignment, but decided to start writing the first scene, where the actress is helping Ed into his armour, and see where it led me.

I didn't know how you get into armour – do you bolt it on with spanners or what? So I went online and found a YouTube clip of a knight being dressed by an assistant. It turns out that you strap and buckle the various plates over chainmail, and the suit is much lighter and more flexible than I'd imagined. Those were facts I could use to make my scene realistic, as was a bit of terminology:

'Let's get your bevor on then.'
'My what?'

'Neck guard. Stops 'em cutting your 'ead off!'

I decided the actress was a talkative Cockney called Molly*. Cockney, because these hired entertainers were the

Ed may indeed be a knight in shining armour, but can he charm his fair lady?

By Julia Douglas

Is this real armour?" Ed asked as Janie strapped his shoulder plate over his chain mail shirt. "The real McCoy!" the blonde cockney confirmed as she moved to his other shoulder. "Five hundred years old! Italian. Probably made by Armani or the equivalent back then. Look at this gold trim! I bet the bloke who wore this won the hearts of a few fair ladies."

Ed gazed at his reflection in his burnished forearm. He tried to arrange his slightly haphazard eyebrows and moustache into a lady-winning expression.

"Let's get your bevor on, then, darlin'."

"My what?"

"Neck guard. Stops 'em cutting your 'ead off! Although that would probably be an improvement, wouldn't it? Not that there's anything wrong with your 'ead – don't get me wrong!" She giggled as she stood chest to breastplate with him to put the throat armour in place.

His cheeks heated at the unexpectedly close proximity of her cute little face as she reached around his neck to buckle the strap. He'd never had much luck with the ladies.

"I mean, a headless horseman would fit right in, wouldn't he?" Janie picked up his plumed helmet. "Not that her ladyship would want an 'orse galloping around in here. There – all done. Want to clank up and down for practice?"

"Makes a change from a Father Christmas suit." He flexed his arms. "It's not as heavy as it looks."

"Standing still will be the tough part. You'll be like one of those guards outside Buckingham Palace."

"So what will you be doing until the haunting?"

"Before I become the ghostly White Lady?" Janie gave a twirl in her frilly little maid dress. "I'll be serving the drinks, won't I?"

They say this castle really is haunted!" Randy Winkleman's brash New York twang cut through the noise of the party. "Not that I need to tell you, eh, Lady Dorothy?"

Dorothy smiled politely as he nudged her. She wished she could leave the Christmas Eve entertainment to the Crazy Ghost Company, but as the castle's owner her presence was expected.

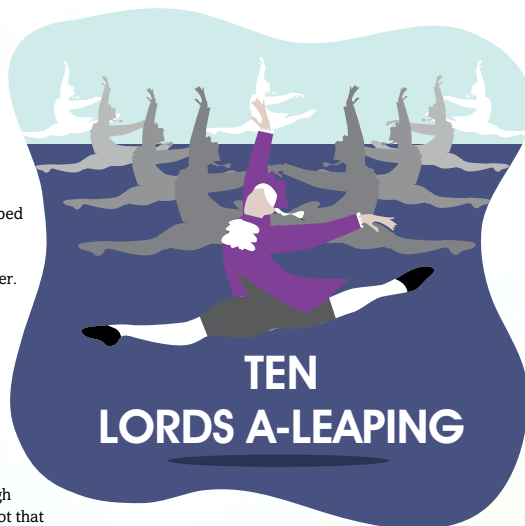
"I was reading up on it on the flight over," Winkleman went on. "The original Lord Lightfoot loved the ballet. Some say he still takes to the floor in the small hours... but only if there's romance in the air!" He gave her a wink.

"So I believe," said Dorothy. "Well, I'd better mingle before the show begins."

As the elegant aristocrat departed, the spurned Winkleman muttered, "Well, it don't look like Lord Lightfoot will be leaping around the floor tonight."

Standing unnoticed, like just another suit of armour on display, Ed watched through his narrow eye slit as Janie skipped around with her tray, chatting and laughing. He wished he had her confidence.

34 My Weekly FESTIVE SPECIAL



Well – tonight, for once in his life, he'd have to be bold. As the clock edged towards ten, Janie swept by and gave him a wink before she left the ballroom. Ed hoped he wasn't about to make a fool of himself.

Wow, that show was a zinger!" Randy Winkleman declared. "When the suits of armour came to life, I just about died! As for your entrance on the zip wire – that scream you let out was a heart-stopper!"

"That scream was for real, believe me!" grinned Janie, still wearing her crinoline, Elizabethan wig and ghostly face paint.

"So what do you do when you're not haunting castles?"

"Oh, a bit of acting, bit of dancing, bit of circus – I'll try anything, me!"

"You know, I'm producing a show on Broadway in the New Year and we need some all-rounders."

"Really? Oh, I'd love to work in New York..."

The starlight twinkled on Ed's armour as he stood on the castle terrace in the small hours of Christmas morning, his helmet under his arm, a glass of mulled wine in his free hand.

"I still can't believe it's you," said Dorothy, her breath forming on the cool air. "When you opened your visor I thought I would faint!"

"Do you remember that I once told you," he said, "that this poor boy from the village would go away to make his fortune and one day return to be your knight in shining armour?"

"You never needed a fortune to impress me."

"Well, acting never made me rich... but at least I do finally have the armour."

"Oh, Ed," Dorothy sobbed. "I thought you'd forgotten me and I'd never see you again."

With a clank, Ed sank to one knee.

"Dorothy, my fair lady, do you think –"

Through the French doors behind them, a transparent figure in wig and tights leapt onto the silent, darkened dance floor with nine of his ghostly chums. ❄️

characters find an instant rapport – maybe flirtatious, maybe just professional; we could leave it open-ended.

As for Ed and Dorothy, I reached the final scene with no idea what could have brought them together in the starlight on the terrace. My original thought was that they'd simply hit it off at the party, but that didn't seem likely for such reserved characters.

It was only then that the symbolism of the armour struck me and I decided that he'd planned a surprise reunion all along:

'Do you remember that I once told you that this poor boy from the village would go away to make his fortune and one day return to be your knight in shining armour? Well, acting never made me rich... but I finally have the armour.'

I thought the romance across the class divide was a touching twist, and having worked out Ed's plan went back to Scene 1 to foreshadow it in a way that would hopefully make the story consistent without giving the game away:

'I bet the bloke who wore this won the hearts of a few fair ladies!' said Molly.

Ed gazed at his reflection in his burnished forearm. He tried to arrange his slightly haphazard eyebrows and moustache into a lady-winning expression.

The idea was that we'd think he was considering his chances with Molly, but if we re-read it, knowing the end, we'd know he was nervous about his surprise for Dorothy.

Luckily his plan worked: he got the Lady... and my story is in the shops now!

* Molly was later changed to Janie to avoid clashing with the character in *Five Gold Rings*.

'below stairs' characters, the equivalent of servants to the wealthy party guests.

Her chattiness would suggest she was flirting with Ed, whereas in fact it's just her outgoing personality. Her confidence would also make her a good match for the brash American.

Ed, meanwhile, was a shy, slightly apprehensive man to fit Dorothy's cool reserve.

Name game

I was pleased with my opening scene which felt realistic and

would provide a believable foundation for the later, more fantastical elements.

I was aware that I'd eaten 300 of my 800 words, though, and knew that my next scene with Dorothy and the American would have to be short and tight.

For economy I had to bring him on stage with a name that instantly conveyed his character. And as he was quite amorous...

'They say this castle really is haunted!' Randy Winkleman's

brash New York twang cut through the noise of the party. 'Not that I need to tell you, eh, Lady Dorothy?'

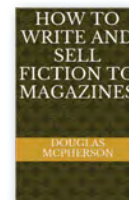
Dorothy smiled politely as he nudged her.

Wrapping up

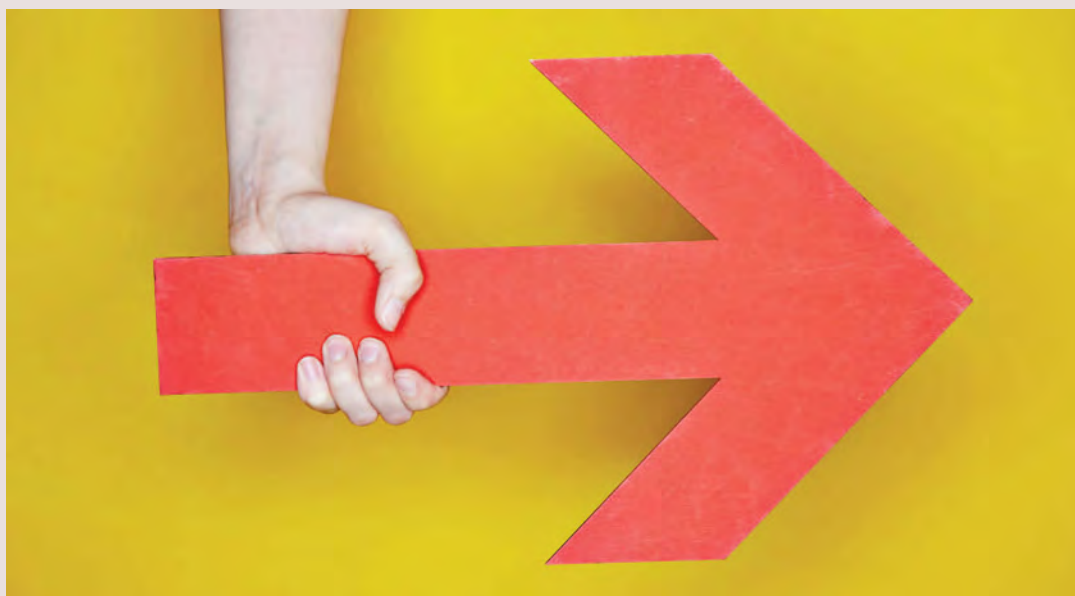
I decided the union of Molly and Winkleman needn't be overtly romantic. He could be congratulating her on her performance in the show when he reveals that he's a Broadway producer looking for people like her for his new musical.

So the two brash, chatty

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



THE CASE FOR TELLING



Barbara Dynes explains why there isn't always a need – or the space – for showing scenes, and sets an exercise

As fiction writers, one of the first things we learn is 'show, don't tell'. So, what is the difference? 'Showing' is like watching an action scene in a film. The characters come to life – they act, react and speak; the scene unfolds in front of your eyes.

An example of showing:

'How many times have you been to see Mum?' Jane spat. Although she knew other people in the pub were staring, Jane was past caring. 'I'm doing it all!'

'You have no idea what's going on in my life,' Pam hissed back. 'I just haven't been able to fit anything else in.'

If your scene is a 'big' one – that is, one that is vital to the

plot – writing it in a 'showing' style, as above, is preferable to merely 'telling' it. But when you are writing about less important events there is a good case for telling.

Telling

Telling is when you merely explain what is happening or describe a scene, setting or character, and then move on.

An example of telling, using that earlier situation:

In the pub, Jane began to argue with her sister, saying that Pam never saw their mother and that she, Jane, was doing it all.

Compare that with the first example, where we actually see and hear the pair arguing and are shown the action in

a far more interesting, lively way. When a writer needs to get across an important scene – one that is vital to the plot and involves the reader emotionally – that event needs to be shown. This is especially so today, in a commercial short story or novel. Ask yourself: how important is my scene?

Action scenes

When there is a necessary, yet routine happening, it needs to be accelerated – told quickly – so we can move on to the more exciting stuff. And this is where it is better to tell.

Supposing that your plot involves Paul getting sacked from his job, followed by a scene at home where he tells his wife. You will want to 'show' the reader the two main

events – Paul's confrontation with his boss, and the reaction of his wife to the news. But getting Paul from A to B in between these scenes can be done in a 'telling' way, because the journey is not important. 'Telling' compresses the action, moving the story on quicker.

Example:

Paul drove home as though in a trance. How to tell Rachel? When he got back she was in the kitchen.

That way, you have jumped the boring bit (his drive home) by telling it, moving on quickly to show the more interesting scene with the wife, which you can open up with emotion, direct dialogue, etc.

Indirect dialogue

When you use direct dialogue, you are showing the scene and revealing character at the same time.

Example:

'Hi, sis, I didn't expect to see you in this neck of the woods!'

But if seeing his sister is not that important, you could use indirect dialogue:

He told his sister that he was surprised to see her there.

It is an economic way of dealing with dialogue and can be an asset in a short story. But it is also dull!

He told her he was leaving her and taking the dog with him

Indirect dialogue like that

wouldn't do at all for what appears to be a major event! Always use direct dialogue for dramatic scenes. We want to hear how he tells her, the words he uses and what she says in return. The writer needs to make the most of it!

Characters

The four ways of showing a character's traits are through:

- Speech
- Appearance
- Action
- Thoughts

Writing *Sue had a bossy attitude* is telling. Why not let her speak instead? What a person says and how they say it can reveal a tremendous amount, saving you having to spell it out. In this case *'I want those papers on my desk in the next hour!'* would show Sue's character.

But sometimes you have to use telling – for instance, when you want to reveal someone's appearance and it cannot be shown through character action or reaction.

This, from *The Great Gatsby* by F Scott Fitzgerald, says it all about Tom:

Now he was a sturdy straw-haired man of thirty, with a rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner. Two shining arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face...

Remember, telling about just the one aspect of a character – his walk, bushy eyebrows or loud laugh – can be more effective than trying to reveal too much about them in one go. And showing how they look from another character's viewpoint will add another dimension for the reader.

Setting, background and description

Readers need to be able to place your story somewhere. It is too easy, especially for short story writers restricted on

words, to neglect background, which creates vital atmosphere.

If it is not possible to get this across through someone's observations or speech, tell it. In a more leisurely age, writers began their novels with wonderful telling description, but today's readers demand a quicker pace. If you do tell at the beginning, be sure to move on swiftly to the more important story.

Flashback

Flashback reads far more interestingly if you approach it as though it is happening now. That sounds contradictory, but showing that scene from the past, rather than telling it as a passive piece, makes for more interesting reading.

However, a lot of flashback works adequately when merely told. Only show it if the scene is important to the story.

An example of showing, using direct dialogue:

Jenny remembered the last time she'd been to visit her grandparents out in the sticks.

'If you'd got up a bit earlier, my girl, you could have fed the chickens,' Grandma grumbled.'

But, if Grandma and her grumbling is unimportant to the story and you simply want to get over a few facts, it's fine to just tell the flashback:

Jenny remembered the last time she had been to visit her grandparents out in the sticks and her grandma had grumbled about her staying in bed late.

'Show, don't tell', though good advice, is not always possible or, indeed, correct. There is often a very good case for straightforward telling.

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



Writers' FORUM EXERCISE

Show what's important

A The following passage is written in 'telling' mode. Rewrite it, 'showing' the important scenes and using a telling style for the others. Put in some background – weather, trees, etc. Bring the piece to life!

John ended up walking his mother's dog, but only after an argument. As soon as he got to Mum's she was moaning at him, saying her legs were bad and she'd have to let Toby out in the garden but he could do with a good walk. John was annoyed and felt used because he'd never liked the dog – actually, he couldn't stand animals in general – but ended up slamming out of the door, with Toby, a big hairy mongrel, raring to go.

In the park, John let the dog off the lead and began chatting to an old lady with a tiny Pekinese. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Toby charge straight towards a black poodle whose owner was an attractive woman about his own age. Ah, maybe this dog-walking lark might turn out to be more profitable than he thought! But the woman started shrieking, trying to grab her poodle, and John abandoned the old lady, who was in the middle of telling him about her late husband, and tore across the grass.

The woman was yelling furiously at Toby, then when she saw John, she shouted even louder at him. John managed to put the dog on the lead but the hysterical woman still went on about irresponsible dog owners, that they shouldn't have dogs and that she would report him. John tried laughing it off, but she wasn't having that and, to his dismay, two other dog walkers came up and joined in the fracas.

Notes

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My scene rating /

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BECOMING A WRITER

Kath Kilburn explores how to cope with the ultimate criticism – reader reviews

We may be getting ahead of ourselves here but, following on from last month's idea of welcoming criticism, I want to talk about reviews. That's because, to some extent, reviews can be described as 'critiques writ large'. And not only large, but in full view of your family, friends, your boss, that teacher who said you'd never amount to anything... (Or maybe that was just me?)

Let's assume you've published an ebook – a pathway open to anyone with a computer and the patience to work their way through the reasonably straightforward process. By self-publishing, you have skipped the painful stage of hearing your manuscript thud demoralisingly back on to the doormat time after time and the criticisms of agents and publishers. However your book is published, now it's time for feedback from the people who really matter: your readers.

Make no mistake, going public with your work is frightening. Publishing a book is inviting a response, and obviously not all responses will be encouraging. As a writer, you'll probably feel like you're sending your first-born out into the world to face the slings and arrows of outrageous readers, unprotected and undefended.

Tenterhooks

The big difference between a 'crit' from writing group members and reader reviews is that mostly the reviewers aren't writers; the hours of work, the blood, sweat and emotional input mean nothing to them. Furthermore, the point of a review isn't to help you improve your writing; it's to help others decide whether



they should buy your book.

Science fiction author David M Kelly told me: 'It's quite honestly one of the scariest things I've ever done. There's so much of you in that mass of paper and now you're letting people see it. You're on tenterhooks until you get the first responses.'

Reviews on your writing feed into today's more general review culture. Everyone has an opinion and wants it to be heard, whether on TripAdvisor, Trustpilot, Amazon or Goodreads. Readers can be scathing; the old adage that if you have nothing nice to say you should say nothing at all, doesn't hold sway.

And why? Maybe, it's a genuine desire to help people choose a better book. Or maybe it's just someone in a bad mood with a need to lash out.

Sadly, some reviewers also can't distinguish between a book that just isn't to their taste and one that's badly written with lots of plot holes.

Bear in mind that people are more likely to complain when they don't like something than shout it from the rooftops when they find something

they like. I don't know why, as Harry Worth used to say, but there it is.

Perspective

If you pick up a low star review or two, first remind yourself that even the most popular writers face criticism, and live to not only tell the tale but also top the bestseller lists. Check out Hilary Mantel, Jodi Picoult, Marian Keyes as examples.

(Slightly off-topic, actress Diana Rigg managed to edit a whole book of bad stage reviews in *No Turn Unstoned*. This has itself accrued a single bad review: 'One of those books that when you put it down, you can't pick it up again.' Ouch.)

Next, decide how much of your energy you should spend thinking about bad reviews. It's human nature that disappointing ones stay in your mind long after the brilliant ones have faded from memory. Try charting, long term, the number of high star versus low star results to keep things in perspective.

Author Alex Foster has written an ebook called simply *Kindle Reviews* (currently available free), which includes

advice on negative ones, and an explanation that 'not all negative reviews have a negative effect on sales'. Alex explains how some negative reviews can actually have a positive effect on sales, because readers trust the overall picture more and understand that reviews are subjective – they will judge the reviewer. How cheering is that?

While you're waiting for success to arrive: don't respond. People who respond to bad book reviews tend to sound, or even act, unhinged. Don't, for example, track your reviewer down and smash a bottle of wine over her head, as one aggrieved writer did.)

And, really, what can you say? It's not like a faulty iron; you can't send them a replacement. Do act on anything helpful. If someone points out that a character changes name halfway through, you could fix that and re-upload your book, but otherwise don't stress over it.

You can use it as motivation to do an even better job next time – not only better in terms of research, plotting and writing, but also the nitty-gritty of publishing an ebook: choosing your category information, setting a price and describing your book to match with reader expectations.

See your first reviews as a rite of passage. If you can sufficiently adjust your attitude, you'll be able to laugh about them with friends in a charmingly self-deprecating way for years to come.

As David M Kelly concluded ruefully: 'Now you've been through all that, it's not enough, because to succeed you have to do it again and again. So you just push all that to one side and knuckle down to finishing the next one.'

Writers' FORUM FLASH COMP RESULTS



Last month's task was to write a work romance with a blind narrator

Did you know you shouldn't pet someone's guide dog because it's working? Of course you did. Most people do, apart from small children and those with no common sense. That's probably why most entrants put it in their flash stories this month. It's not just phrases that become clichés, it's also easy to lapse into using well-worn trivia and scenes, too. Good writing can be summed up neatly, if incompletely, as telling your readers something they don't already know. That might be information that's not previously been widely shared, such as expert tips in a how-to article, or a way of describing or connecting familiar things and feelings that makes your reader understand them in a new way. So be careful to quality check your writing for freshness. Think: has this come too easily to mind?

The most common problem this month was people focusing too much on their narrator's blindness. It was spelt out that the purpose was to get you to use other senses than sight. A lot of you also found it difficult to create a convincing romance in so few words.

What was most notable, however, was how passive almost all your narrators were, when publishers/editors usually demand that the main character plays an active part in their narrative journey. Notable exceptions included Karen Moody's *Out of Sight*, whose narrator is thinking about an affair, and stories from Sarah Rolfe, Karen Rodgers and Susannah Northfield, whose narrators ask out the love interest. Would there have been a way to make your character more active?

It's a little more common to have passive heroes/heroines in romances, and so our finalists got away with it...

£100 winner

Spice Girl by Ros Woolner, Wolverhampton

Can I put you down for a song for the Christmas talent show, Paul? It's the new HR assistant, with her Black Country diphthongs.

'Sorry, Melissa. I don't sing these days,' I say, trying to keep the strain out of my voice. She's not to know that I stopped going to the office Christmas party the year the CEO stole my fiancée.

'Are you shew-er? It's an office party, not the *X Factor*.' Her voice is warm and comfortable. It makes me think of gingerbread and mulled wine, although that could be because the office always smells faintly of cinnamon when she's around.

I find myself hesitating.

'How about a duet?' she asks.

'With you?'

'Yes. It'll be fun.'

It could be fun, I realise. After all, there's no risk of bumping into my ex. She and Ted only lasted a few weeks. That's his style – steal, discard and move on to the next trophy. Before I can answer, though, Ted himself barges in.

'There you are, Melissa. Can I borrow you a moment? You don't mind, do you, Paul?'

The last question isn't actually addressed to me – I can hear he's already turned away – but for once I don't mind.

That evening I dig out my old Christmas CDs for the first time in three years. I go to bed humming a tenor harmony to *I'll Be Home for Christmas*, imagining a delightful diphthong on the word 'home'.

The next day I've got the phone in my hand, ready to ask Melissa if she'd like to discuss our joint performance over lunch, when an email arrives from Ted. I always set my screen reader to a female voice for Ted's emails and turn the speed up as far as it will go. It makes me feel as if I've clawed back a tiny bit of power. However, this time I end up slowing it back down again to make sure I heard properly. I did: Ted is encouraging as many people as possible to take part in the Christmas talent show and, to get the ball rolling, he plans to perform a duet with Mel, our lovely new HR assistant.

Yes, he did say 'lovely'. I put the phone down.

When the day of the party arrives, I claim I've got a splitting headache and leave in the middle of the afternoon. That way I won't have to explain my absence later on.

I'm waiting at the pedestrian crossing when I hear my name and a hand touches my arm.

'Melissa?'

'Yes,' she laughs. 'Have I caught you in the act of escaping?'

'I've got a headache,' I say carefully, remembering that she works in HR.

'A real headache? Or is it like my sore throat? The one that's sadly preventing me spending the evening with Ted the Predator?'

I laugh from pure relief.

'I suddenly feel much better,' I admit.

'Great. Do you fancy going for a drink? I know a good karaoke bar.'

'And I know a song.'

There's a wonderful smell of cinnamon in the air.

Editor's comments

The narrator's blindness is barely hinted at, and isn't part of the plot, but it provides a fun scene where Paul speeds up his boss's voice on the reading software. This felt fresh but authentic. We empathise with this petty revenge, but the email puts an obstacle in love's way. Ros draws attention to the qualities in Melissa's voice and how she smells; the title, *Spice Girl*, is a nod to both her cinnamon perfume and the singing that will bring them together. The Christmas theme is good timing, too. Apparently effortless writing like this takes hard work.

Runner-up

Night Walk Home by Dominic Bell, Hull

laughter and conversation. I strum gently.

A smell of cigarettes and wet dog. Paul.

'All right, John? Busy tonight.'

His voice is rough and hard. Thirty years in the Army, then he came home to his old village and bought the local. I came here when my aunt offered me a home after my patrol tripped the bomb. He heard, came round and found me playing. Hence the job. He's soft at heart.

I grunt agreement, then smell that perfume, that washing powder.

'Hi, Tess.'

'Jane, actually.' An affected accent. Tess can do a lot of accents. She was on the stage, but things went wrong with a man and she retreated home to her dad.

'Yeah, right. And what is your look tonight?'

'Red frizzy hair and an orange jump suit. Flared, naturally.'

'And she looks lovely in it,' says Paul. 'A bit porky, though. What are you now, size 20?'

'22. Big and beautiful.'

'You told me you were petite yesterday.' I say. 'Water retention?'

'Afraid so. Ankles like footballs.'

They do this every time. I wish I knew what she looks like, how she is dressed.

Tess sings, her voice lifting me as I play. People join in, applaud us and I feel their buzz, feel happy and part of everything. Nice words and goodbyes as people leave.

Dog and cigarettes again.

'Tess says Jim called to say he's short of drivers – can you wait a bit?'

'Or I can walk you home?' Tess says, suddenly near.

'Are you sure?' I say. 'It's a bit of a step.'

'I could do with some fresh air.'

I put the guitar in its case and sling it on to my back. Tess guides me out through the door into a warm breeze, full of summer scents.

'Hold my hand,' she orders.

It is soft, her arm bare against mine, electrifying me with sensation.

Cars howl past. I drag behind, worried about them.

'Trust me,' she says.

I feel us leaving the road's hardness, smell grass and soil, the tang of exhaust fading.

'Just short-cutting over the fields,' she says.

She leads me through the darkness. I wish she would do this for ever.

'The moon is out,' she says. 'It's all beautiful and silvery.'

'I can imagine that,' I say. 'But not you.'

She lets go of my hand. I am anxious I have messed up, but then I feel lips touch my cheek. I reach for her, but she is not there. She laughs.

'Dance with me,' she says, and she is in my arms, humming gently. A soft T-shirt, rough jeans; her body and slim firmness. I tentatively stroke her hair. Long, straight.

'Brown hair, brown eyes,' she says. 'Hope you're not mad about me cancelling your taxi.'

She pulls my face to hers and the world is her breathing and my heartbeat and a bubble of expanding happiness.

Editor's comments

Dominic's was a good story but like most other entries there was a bit too much about the narrator's blindness for it to win, but I liked the way the plot concentrated on the romance and the natural way it developed, with humour as well as emotion. Sight is mentioned, but it's felt as an absence, and the other senses are nicely used.

Highly commended

The Audit by Sarah Morris, Montgomery – a gay office worker is thrilled when a colleague mentions he's now available. This used all the senses except sight to create an intense story in just one scene. Almost nothing is said out loud or actually happens but everything suddenly becomes possible for the narrator.

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.

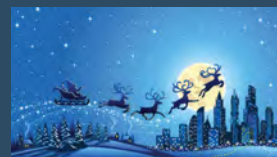
Writers' Forum wants to encourage you to write, so:

- 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 195: 'T WAS THE NIGHT...

Deadline: 12 noon GMT on 2 January 2018



Editor's assignment: Write a parody version of *A Visit from St Nicholas* by Clement Clarke Moore to reflect modern life. The original is 540 words so that's your maximum. Follow the same rhythm and rhyme scheme, each verse a pair of rhyming couplets.

How to enter

- 1 Paste your entry 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 195:** followed by your interesting and relevant story title.
- 3 Send your email to flashcomp@writers-forum.com by the deadline above.

The results will be published next issue. Good luck!

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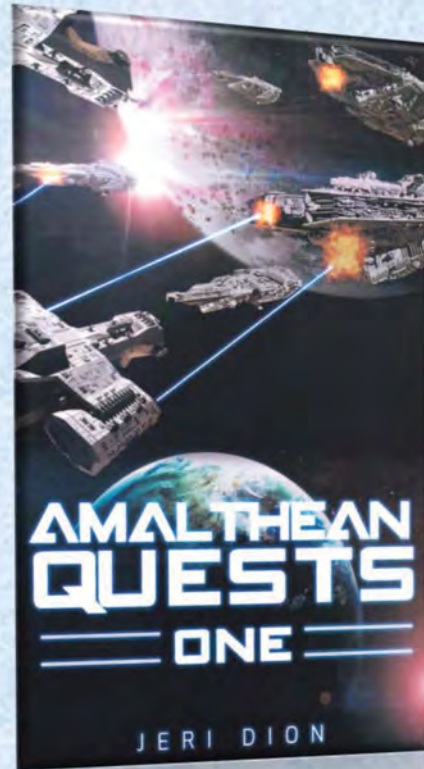
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This year's event is sponsored by *Writing Magazine*, Nielsen Book, Writers&Artists, Matador, The Book Guild, TJ International Printers and others. The keynote speaker is publishing consultant James Spackman, with sessions on topics as wide-ranging as illustration, marketing to retailers and media, typesetting design, Ingram Spark, poetry preparation... and much more. A full programme and registration details are available on the conference website.

Registration is £65 per person; this includes a delegate's pack, morning coffee, buffet lunch, afternoon tea, a drinks reception and a choice from more than fourteen sessions on different aspects of self-publishing.

www.selfpublishingconference.org.uk

"I cannot think of very much wrong with the event and can recommend it to aspiring writers and indie/self publishers. Richard Denning
I just wanted to thank you for the excellent Conference I attended on Sunday. It was well organised, well presented, full of helpful, friendly people and a joy to attend. **Sandra Smith**

That was an absolutely first rate conference - from the speakers to the catering and the venue. A great overall atmosphere and so many nuggets of info and ideas they wouldn't all fit onto the notepads you kindly provided! **Tony Boulelemier"**

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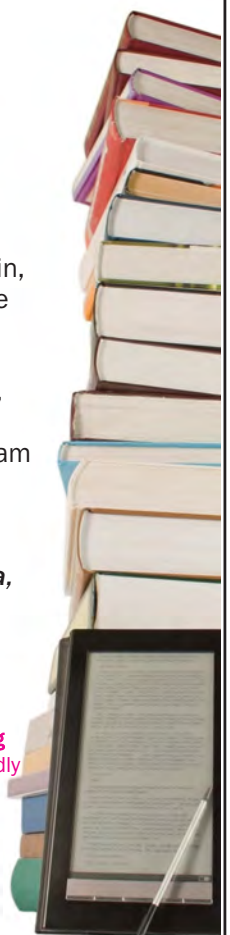
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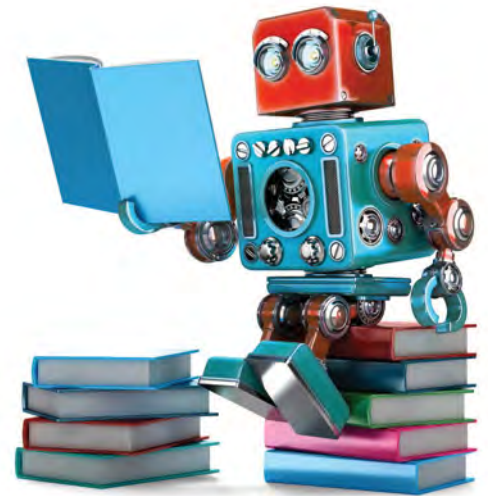
 THE BOOK GUILD
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Technophobia



Keir Thomas takes a look at the aggressively marketed Grammarly app to see if it's worth the subscription



THE ROBOT PROOFREADER

Any writer who's been online recently won't fail to have noticed Grammarly, which is aggressively targeting writers with adverts. It claims to be indispensable but can it really help the creative writer? Let's find out.

The basics

As its name suggests, Grammarly is a grammar and style checker. In other words, it's meant to be like having your very own sub-editor stringently checking your copy. This might be checking live as you write, or you can have it check over work before you submit it. Grammarly is referred to as a proofing tool and I examined the efficacy of these back in issue #184, so you might start there to get a little background.

Grammarly is a cloud application, which means it's accessed through a web browser just like Google Docs. Indeed, Grammarly is built around a basic word-processor interface into which you can write or paste text for checking. However, it is also accessible as a plugin for Microsoft Word if your computer runs Windows. (Sorry, Mac and Linux users!)

It's also possible to install Grammarly as an application on your computer – this time

for both Mac and Windows – but although what you see appears to be a real application, this is a clever illusion. You're actually just seeing the Grammarly website once again. In other words, the website and the application look and function almost identically.

Grammarly is also available as browser and Microsoft Outlook plugins, largely for checking emails, but we'll stick here to examining the app in more traditional writing contexts.

Initial use

If you're using the integrated Word plugin, checking an existing document is as simple as opening it and then selecting the new Grammarly ribbon. Once you click the Open Grammarly button at the left, the errors Grammarly reckons it's found appear in a sidebar at the right of the window.

If using the browser or standalone application, you have a choice of either copying and pasting into Grammarly, or dragging and dropping a word-processor file on top of the window. However, here you hit a bizarre limitation because Grammarly can't check documents that are more than 60 pages, or 100,000 characters (not words!), or larger than 4MB in size. Rather strangely,

this limitation doesn't apply to using Grammarly within Word, so it therefore makes sense to use Grammarly within Word at all times if you can.

Grammarly took around half a minute to finishing checking an 80,000-word novel, and typically it churned for a few seconds when a new sentence was written to a document before reporting back. In other words, it was by no means slow but it also wasn't instant.

Notably, Grammarly is free to use but you'll only get a subset of the total number of grammar and style checks. For the full thing, you'll need to pay for a monthly subscription – of which more later.

Checking types

Grammarly checks six broad areas relating to grammar and style:

- Contextual spelling
- Grammar
- Punctuation
- Sentence structure
- Style
- Vocabulary enhancement.

Each of these can be turned on or off from the toolbar (or ribbon if you are using the Word integration). Grammarly also includes a plagiarism detector, although this is a

tool clearly aimed at the world of academia.

With both the browser and standalone versions of Grammarly you can also hire a real-life proofreader, at a rate ranging from US\$0.03 per word (that is, \$30 per 1000 words) if you can wait 24 hours for the returned document, rising to \$0.24 per word for less than an hour's turnaround (a whopping \$240 per 1000 words). All you need do is open the file for checking, click the button, pay up and then wait.

Regardless of whether you are using the browser, standalone or Word-integrated version of Grammarly, the results appear as call-outs at the right of the document. As you scroll through the document, Grammarly's list of corrections scrolls too. This proves to be a neat and very user-friendly way of working.

If Grammarly suggests a fix it will be coloured green in the call-out, and you can click this to accept the automatic correction. Alternatively, you can click the small down arrow to view a brief explanation of the error, and then optionally click the More button for a full technical explanation of the nature of the error described.

Grammarly lets you choose from many different styles

Continued overleaf ▶

Continued from previous page

of writing, ranging from a more relaxed Creative category (and, yes, novels are included as a sub-option) all the way through to Technical, Academic, Business and even Medical styles. Each alters the type of checks made. We stuck with the General (Default) style in our testing.

Results

Perhaps the simplest way of explaining Grammarly's efficacy is to share some of the 'errors' it spotted in a novel I'd written.

Grammarly highlighted several words as misspelt. They weren't, of course; they were just in British English, and Grammarly is a US product. I

I'd suggest it was at least correct (although not always useful) 75 per cent of the time

don't think US programmers realise just how annoying it is to be told words like 'analyse' are incorrect.

The good news is that it's possible to switch Grammarly to British English in your Profile settings. The bad news is that you can't switch on a document-by-document basis. If you write for different global markets, you're going to have to alter your Profile settings for each document. And sorry, Australian, Canadian and other English speakers – you're out in the cold!

Here are some other issues Grammarly highlighted.

Overused words: Grammarly spotted I overused the word 'obvious'. It suggested 'apparent' as a synonym. Notably, my

use of the word wasn't in neighbouring sentences, which many grammar checkers will flag up, but within the piece in general. Grammarly also picked up on instances of words it said are 'often overused', like 'largely' or 'basic', even if I hadn't used them very often.

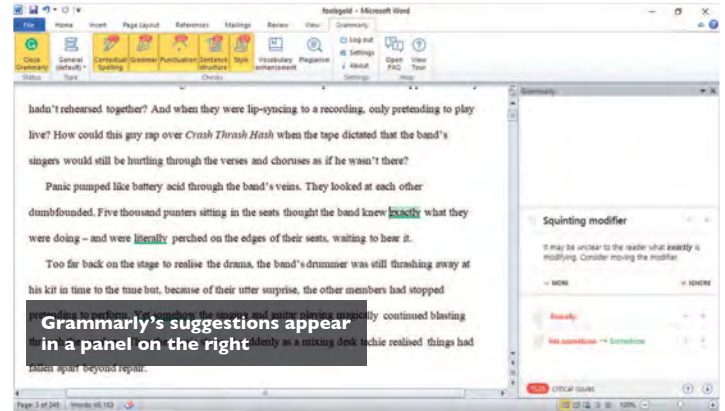
Missing article: Grammarly suggested I change the phrase 'before it had chance to begin,' to 'before it had *a* chance to begin' – a slight refinement.

Missing comma in compound sentence: Grammarly seemed a little obsessed by this one, even insisting sentence clauses joined by 'and' needed a comma in between. Personally, I try to avoid commas as a stylistic rule but some styles of writing might benefit.

Empty phrases: Another obsession Grammarly appeared to have, at least when checking my work, was that it disliked words such as 'definitely' and 'actually' because they apparently add nothing to their sentences (for example, within the sentence 'He was definitely the only golfer wearing a leather jacket.').

Disability-biased language: Grammarly suggested I replaced 'able-bodied' with 'non-disabled', suggesting the former was biased or non-inclusive. As somebody with an interest in disability, such issues are certainly on my radar, but I've never heard 'able-bodied' mentioned as potentially offensive.

Passive voice: An obsession with all grammar checkers, and sure enough Grammarly flagged many sentences as being in the passive voice. For example: 'He swung again, and again, until contact was made with the ball'. Rephrased non-passively this read: 'He swung again, and again, until the ball made contact.' To rewrite it



properly, it's clearly the club that has to make contact.

Unclear antecedent: Starting sentences with 'This' often lead Grammarly to claim it wasn't clear what the sentence was referring to. In most cases it was blindingly obvious, however.

Right or wrong

In my testing, I'd suggest that Grammarly was at least correct (although not always useful) around 75 per cent of the time. This is say around 25 per cent of the time it got it wrong.

For example, I used the word 'warzone' euphemistically to describe a chaotic scene, yet Grammarly considered it incorrect based on the context (presumably because I hadn't also mentioned guns, soldiers or tanks). Elsewhere it simply misread a sentence, stating the subject had no verb, when in fact everything made complete sense logically and grammatically.

Nonetheless I found most of Grammarly's suggestions at least insightful, and there's little doubt it delivers on what it claims to. For this reason I consider tools like Grammarly to be useful in providing a new perspective on work, especially as an extra check before sending something off. It really is like having another pair of eyes giving your manuscript the once-over.

However, there's an obvious danger if you find yourself relying on Grammarly to correct lazy or slapdash writing,

or if you simply accept all of its suggestions without understanding the nature of the error.

Price

Although Grammarly claims to be aimed at all kinds of writers, in reality its primary target is academic writers. Perhaps this explains the cost, which is frankly eye-watering: US\$29.95 (about £23) each and every month. If you stop paying then Grammarly stops working!

However, you can bring this price down to an effective \$11.66 (£9) per month if you pay \$139.95 in one lump sum for a 12-month subscription. Notably, there's no way of buying Grammarly as a one-off lifetime purchase.

To be frank, it's impossible to justify such a high price. To give a comparison of other monthly subscription fees for software, subscribing to Microsoft Office itself costs just £10 or so per month. Adobe Creative Cloud costs £10 for Photoshop and Lightroom. A cost of perhaps £2–£3 per month seems much more realistic for the functionality you're getting. At that price, I might recommend it.

• Keir Thomas has been writing professionally about computers for two decades. He has edited magazines, written textbooks, and blogged professionally. His website is <http://keirthomas.com> and his Apple tips blog is <http://mackungfu.org>

THE WRITERS' IDEA STORE

Last month I featured writers who drew on their day jobs as inspiration. It's a brilliant way to use your knowledge to introduce readers to a world that may be different from their own.

One such writer is Elizabeth Ducie (www.elizabethducie.co.uk) who writes thrillers set in what she describes as the 'somewhat murky

Paula Williams explains how a crime story took 32 years to find its wings

world' of international pharmaceuticals.

'For 33 years I worked in this controversial industry,' she says. 'I travelled to more than 50 countries; usually ones where the industry was poorly developed. I helped governments write the rules for making safe drugs and helped companies interpret those rules.'

'When I started writing fiction, it was inevitable I would call on my travel and industry experiences. Many of my short stories are set abroad; my first novel, a quest/historical/romance mixture, was based in Russia. And then I started writing thrillers.'

'*Counterfeit!* was triggered by two things: I wanted to pay tribute to the work of Nigerian regulator Dr Dora Akunyili, who has waged war on counterfeiters since her sister's tragic death from fake insulin. And I wanted to explore the views of a health minister who told me he couldn't afford to worry about

the quality of the drugs being supplied to his people; it was more important to satisfy the growing demand with quantities. At the time I was outraged, but on reflection, I realised life is not always as simple as we see it from our relatively secure viewpoint.'

Counterfeit!, the first in the Suzanne Jones series of thrillers, was published in 2016. The second in the series, *Deception!*, is out now.

Elizabeth Ducie didn't say how long the gap was between getting that first glimmer of an idea for her novel and finally getting to write 'The End'. But I wonder if she can beat my record?

Back in 1985 (that's 32 years ago, if you're into maths) I took a creative writing course at an adult education centre – it was probably known as night school back then! One of the exercises we were given was to write a story

based on a nursery rhyme. Now, I'm hopeless at those sort of classroom situations. Give me a whiteboard, or a pad of paper (and, of course, a Fiction Square) and the ideas will usually flow. Put me in a roomful of people, all scribbling furiously, and the flow turns to a sludgy trickle before silting up completely.

So, all I managed to write down, that long

ago November night, was *Who killed Jock Dobbin?* It was, I thought, a catchy title for an intriguing murder mystery and a play on the rhyme *Who Killed Cock Robin?*

But that was as far as I got. That blank piece of paper with the catchy title remained buried at the bottom of my 'non-starters' folder for the next 32 years.

Until I was approached by a magazine editor asking if I'd be interested in writing a crime serial for them. Now I'd love you to think this sort of thing happens to me every week and that everything I write is commissioned. But, sadly, that's not the case.

So I sat down at my laptop and opened a new file entitled 'Crime Serial'. My mind went as blank as the screen I was staring at. What was I going to write about? Usually, I get an idea for a story and then approach an editor. This was the first time it had happened the other way round.

I began leafing through my notebooks and finally, in desperation, dug out the old handwritten scraps at the bottom of the filing cabinet. I found the page with just the words *Who killed Jock Dobbin?* across the top.

I started thinking of the rhyme *Who killed Cock Robin?* that had inspired it and suddenly I had the title of my serial. *All the Birds of the Air.*

Then, I began to see a series of anonymous notes that pop up all over the place. And the first of these notes says: *Who killed Jock Dobbin?* Followed soon after by *Who saw him die?* Etc. A different note for each chapter of the serial and the outline began to take shape. Bird by bird. Note by note.

I had the best fun writing that serial! The words (and the notes) just flowed and I kept the bird theme going all the way through. I even called one of the characters Paloma (check out the meaning of the name).







In fact, I enjoyed writing *Birds* so much and got so attached to the characters that I've started writing the second in the series. I've never written a series before and am loving the challenge. And as I started this on 1 November, I joined NaNoWriMo (www.nanowrimo.org) – another first for me.

I'm finding the recording of my daily wordcount really motivating. In fact, you could say I am flying!

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 Weather	6th roll Location	7th roll Object
	1 Editor	7 Girly	13 Snow storm	19 Village green	25 Fake medicine
	2 Birdwatcher	8 Lanky	15 Winter sun	20 Bank	26 Bird
	3 Teenager	9 Wise	15 Cloudy	21 Caravan	27 Bow and arrow
	4 Salesman	10 Introvert	16 Drizzle	22 Night club	28 Dish
	5 Old soldier	11 Proud	17 Windy	23 Hair salon	29 Book
	6 Music teacher	12 Sullen	18 Misty	24 Volcano	30 Trowel

Writers' FORUM

Achievement Chart

January 2018



"Many a trip continues long after movement in time and space have ceased." John Steinbeck

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

Image: Tithi Luadthong

What am I writing?

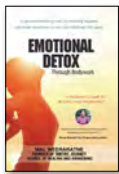
Enter brief notes about what you want to achieve TODAY
(or plan your work for TOMORROW if you prefer)

Notes

Upcoming anniversaries
and deadlines

Mon 1		New Year's Day
Tue 2		Bank Holiday (Scotland) Flash comp #195
Wed 3		
Thu 4		
Fri 5		
Sat 6		
Sun 7		
Mon 8		
Tue 9		
Wed 10		
Thu 11		
Fri 12		
Sat 13		
Sun 14		
Mon 15		Fiction and poetry comps (rolling deadline)
Tue 16		
Wed 17		
Thu 18		Writers' Forum #196 on sale
Fri 19		
Sat 20		
Sun 21		
Mon 22		
Tue 23		
Wed 24		
Thu 25		Burns Night
Fri 26		
Sat 27		
Sun 28		
Mon 29		Flash comp #196
Tue 30		
Wed 31		

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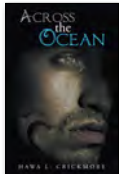
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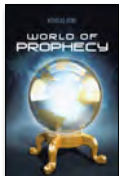
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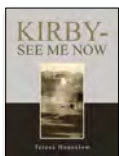
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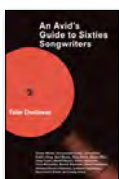
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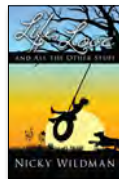
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Writers' FORUM

fiction competition

Congratulations to this month's winners, Catherine Hokin, Sharon Boyle and Carl Hughes.

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 41.

FIRST PRIZE £300

Practically Perfect

Catherine Hokin

An east wind rustles. Leaves slip from shivering branches. Flowers curl back into beds. Wintery fingers flex and stretch. Nobody notices. Well, somebody does but then she notices everything; she's made that her business.

Apple Tree Road bustles with purpose. Commuters charging into action, briefcases swinging, laptops and iPads switched on at first light. Spreadsheets and timetables to hold back the chaos, little hands occupied neatly out of sight. The head-patting parents who perch in this street aren't wicked or cruel, who could suggest such a thing? They're busy and time-poor and slaves to the mortgage and, well, you know the drill.

'Tomorrow.' Jane cleared a space for her crisply bound folder among the table's tottering piles. 'You asked when I could start. Tomorrow, or...' she looked round a kitchen whose shabby chic pretensions had tumbled to parody. 'Perhaps, if you prefer: today.'

Jane opened the binder invitingly as hope fluttered like a firefly across Clarissa's stricken face. The house was all at sea. PE kits spilled from discarded, over-ripe bags; a messy mix of colour-coordinated activities, uniform lists and homework schedules collapsed across the fridge. The tangled jumble of children's lives that refused to harmonise with deadlines and dinners and demanding clients. A world in need of order and far more besides, but one thing at a time.

'Today? Well that would be perfect!' Clarissa's laugh as brittle as barley-sugar. Jane's neatly-typed pages sat between them unread. She pushed them forward with an encouraging pat.

'You might like to check these?' Barely a glance. 'My references?'

Jane had, of course, been trained by the best and the best had resolutely refused to trade in such nonsense, but the world had moved on since Mary's day. A lot had moved on since Mary's day, but the parents were still as blind, for all their teddy-cams and mobile-monitoring. Still, the offer was there.

'Between you and me, I'm really rather desperate.' Clarissa trembled a hand at the flotsam and jetsam waiting to devour her. 'Such a parade of hopeless girls, far more interested in their own lives than mine. I gave the Agency quite a piece of my mind when I called them



this morning.' Jane smoothed down her sensibly-cut skirt as Clarissa continued. 'One hates to complain, of course, but if it finally got me the help I deserve...'

A tricky one this, best left to you. A strong dose will be needed, I think.


Dear Mary, as needle-sharp as ever she was but better suited to the offices now. Jane smiled her best smile and plucked a coffee-splattered list from the fridge. 'The twins' after-school schedule I believe.' She dropped it into her pocket and helped herself to the car keys dangling from the fruit bowl. 'Why don't I press on, let you get back to work?'

Clarissa stared at her like a dieter drooling at a sponge cake.

'Activities, homework, nursery tea: it will be bedtime before you know it and everything managed.' Jane waited. She always waited just at this point, opening up enough space to check the paperwork, to suggest a breathing space or an introduction before children were handed over to a complete stranger. Always offered, always ignored. A head shake, the folder flicked closed. 'Well, that's settled then.'

Clarissa had already moved on: the lure of deadlines finally met and pre-dinner drinks actually drunk far more enticing. Jane wished it was different, but what could she do? Still, this was just the first day, the first little test. Nothing was decided, not yet.

The playground stood empty, stragglers whipped into cars and healthy snacks, a melee of fun-to-learn maths and strictly timed music beckoning. Cooper and Paige stood in the yawning space,

Continued overleaf 

► **Practically Perfect continued**

anchored either side of a pursed-lipped teacher, small frames bent under the weight of book bags, sports kits and lumpy instrument cases. They regarded Jane's appearance with solemn faces but little surprise.

'Your new nanny, Miss Banks.' Jane shook the twins' hands, leaving them gaping, and turned to the teacher whose list of complaints was clearly well-practised. Jane let her grumble; she never interrupted, and the wrong-footed woman ran gently out of steam.

'You are very kind to wait, it won't be needed again.' She gestured to the deserted gate. 'Paige, Cooper, promptly please: your violin lesson awaits.' The children trotted obediently away, smothering a grin at their teacher's confusion.

Seat belts fastened, carrot sticks dispensed, the rest of the world caught up with, Jane regarded the children through the rear-view mirror. Serious round faces, serious round eyes, but the trace of a dimple, the promise of smiles.

'Shall we settle on Jane? Miss Banks is a mouthful and nanny really belongs to a goat.' The children nodded, eyes becoming saucers, heads moving closer. 'No whispering now, it's terribly rude, unless of course you are addressing a pigeon: they have dreadfully sensitive hearing, poor things.'

A nudge and then Cooper, his voice high and anxious. 'Are you going to stay long?'

'Long enough.' A frown at her answer. 'That's an unusual first question. How long do your nannies normally stay?'

A pause, Cooper's frown deepened. 'Not very long. Mummy sends them packing, especially if Daddy talks to them too much. No one stays very long. Not even if we really like them.'

A sniff from the child just out of view. Jane reached out a hand and clicked open her bag. 'Pass this to your sister. One big blow, young lady, and then reading books out, both of you. Spit spot.'

She turned her attention to the road; a gasp from the back seat and a sudden tussle. Jane coughed, just once, and hands flew back to knees. 'And please do not return that. Some items are simply not for sharing.' Jane watched through the mirror as Paige leaned into Cooper, pointing open-mouthed at the name embroidered on the lacy little square. *She's magic*. Whispers wandering from back seat to front and hastily hushed. Jane winked at a robin perched on a traffic light and pretended not to hear. Dimples and smiles, coming soon enough.

'What do you keep in this?' Paige stroked the soft leather and traced a finger across the tortoise-shell clasp. 'Mummy's bags are tiny and too delicate for touching.' Jane smiled, momentarily lost to butterfly purses covered in pearls and evenings filled with moonlight not nursery teas.

'Open it if you want to. It's been closed long enough.'

Paige's lips formed a perfect O as she twisted the catch. The bag fell open, cherries and strawberries filling the air. Jane raised an eyebrow, Paige clamped her mouth closed. 'Can I fetch Cooper?'

'As you know where he is, you certainly can and, if you go upstairs and fetch him rather than screeching like a banshee, you certainly may.' Mary's voice, an echo of faraway days. Jane nodded, a laugh twitching as Paige ran without running, feet dancing the same scrambling step she once used to fetch Michael. She blinked as the kitchen shivered: not a memory for picking at now. Four months of careful organisation and the house was finally calm and ordered. All Mary's rules carefully applied: strictly set bedtimes, schoolwork before playtime and no nonsense from anyone, Daddy most of all. Parents restored to adult lives, children tidied away. A little too tidied away. Mary's ways followed just as she promised, not time for her own; not yet. With luck not at all. Jane smiled the lights back on

as Cooper clattered into the kitchen.

'Mummy, we're going to look in Jane's bag!' His face lighting and falling as his mother's perfumed cloud swept by.

'How nice dear. Nanny, I'm going out, a business thing, I'll be late.'

'Will you read us a story before you go?' Paige at her brother's side. Two little birds waiting for crumbs.

'Goodness, you have Nanny for that; you don't need me.' A wave, a careless pat, a door firmly shut. A sigh settled on the kitchen, lips threatening to tremble, eyes to fill. Another opportunity to redress the swinging balance tossed casually away. Jane clapped her hands and the shadows ran. 'Quickly now, children: my bag is waiting.' Eyes brightened, hands pounced. Cooper the first to plunge in, face screwed up tight enough to crinkle away eyes. 'Lollipops!' He gaped at the table as their globes bounced out rainbow bright.

'Choose one.'

The children stared at Jane, Dickensian orphans at the Curiosity Shop's window. Paige looked longingly at the scattered treasure. 'But they're full of sugar...'

'And a spoonful now and again will do you no harm.' Jane tapped the table and the lollipops swam across its surface like a swarm of fat fish. 'Choose one, tell me what you taste.'

Cooper wiggled his fingers and caught the nearest treat, licking cautiously at its ocean-deep blue. 'Lemonade... ice-cream...' he began to giggle. 'Fish and chips, the seaside!'

'Now you.' Jane nodded to Paige who plucked an emerald from the glistening heap.

'Ice-cream too and lemonade but this one's different...' She closed her eyes, licking through the layers. 'Sausage rolls, jam tarts; a picnic!' A moment full of sugar as Jane popped a silver lolly into her pocket, a sweet promise of moonlight and kisses still to come. She tapped on the table again as the children slurped.

'Dig deeper, there's more. Paige, you first this time.' Green globe glued to sticky lips, Paige stretched deep into the bag and pulled out two elegantly bound books. Creamy pages peeped from leather covers tooled in gold and red. The lollipop fell as Paige stared at the loops and whirls settling lazily into words.

'They've got our names on them.' She handed Cooper his and opened hers, laughing as she turned the pages. 'It's Narnia and the witch and the wardrobe. But it's not Lucy in the snow, it's me. Look at the picture: it's me, standing by the lamppost!'

'Mine's *Peter Pan*.' Cooper squared his shoulders and grinned, his voice already taking on a swaggering edge. 'I'm a pirate, look: I'm practising swords with Smee!' Silence wrapped around the children and dimmed the kitchen lights. Jane gathered up the lollipops as they traced themselves through the pages. Eventually heads began to nod, stories drifting into dreams.

'One more thing to find.' Jane kept her voice low: gentle spells Mary had taught her were like pie-crusts and promises, easy to break. She stretched the leather mouth wider and guided the yawning children through its depths. The bag gave a tiny shrug and two dolls wriggled into outstretched hands. Lucy in her furry coat and a pirate complete with eye-patch and parrot. Paige hugged her doll hard, staring wide-eyed at the little body curled snugly in her arms. 'It's a wishing bag. You can make wishes come true.'

If only. But Jane said nothing. Paige dropped a kiss on the doll's button nose as Cooper made his pirate walk the plank off the edge of the table. The dolls worked their magic: absent parents forgotten, sleepy children ready for bedtime's call. Teeth brushed, nests made and a story about a girl who wanders through a wardrobe into a sailing ship pressed down tired eyes. Cooper fell asleep first, clutching his pirate as fiercely as any treasure chest.

'I still have a wish.'

Jane pushed Paige's hair back from her flannel-warmed face. 'What do you need?'

'To be cuddled, like this. I wish we could be cuddled as tight as this.' The little girl wrapped her arms round her doll's yielding body. 'Safe and warm for always.' Another echo, this time from a boy just as desperate as this sleepy girl, holding too tightly to a kitten who ran out of a door because no one was watching. Not a mother or a father slipped back to themselves or a nanny who sailed away thinking the world all come right in a promise of kites and sunnier days. No one was watching when the kitten kept running and the boy raced after, not even the sister tired of playing mother and fallen asleep on her own lonely bed. You can make wishes come true. If only. Some mistakes could not be made right, some childhoods would never be perfect but practically perfect, that she could do. Jane felt a tear fall towards Paige's sleepy face and turned it into a kiss.

'They will, I promise. They will. No one will ever forget you again.'

A west wind whispers through the waking streets. Leaves unfurl and creep back across welcoming branches. Flowers uncurl sleepy petals to peep at the sun. Spring sends kisses to soften winter's touch. Jane notices.

The residents of 71 Apple Tree Road are such busy people. Deals done lead to bigger deals; columns become features, a regular slot. Parents are blooming and, if the children have become quieter, more shadow than substance, that's to be admired not questioned. Nanny knows best after all, even if Nanny would rather she didn't. Jane's made our lives so simple, as easy to manage as if you two weren't here. She really does make wishes come true. Said with a laugh and a pat on the head but even so. Is there anything as careless as a complacent parent?

'There's something new in my bag, why don't you look?' A familiar game now: eyes screwed-up, hands wide, treats waiting. 'Both of you together. Open it up as wide as you can and reach down inside.'

Jane smiled at the children, all washed and combed and dressed in their Sunday best, tipped so deep they were almost falling. 'And hold tight to your dolls as you go: cuddles at all times, never forget.'

Jane closed the door with a firm snap and set off down the road, heels clicking on the sun-splashed pavement. She nodded to the whispering wind and smiled at a bobbing sparrow. A new day all decked out and beckoning, a dress made for dancing waiting to claim her; kisses to be collected before a new family in need of some magic called. The air honeysuckle-sweet and spring-day-fresh, no scent of rain to spoil it. Jane popped her umbrella into her bag's waiting pocket, careful not to disturb the package stowed deep inside. Soft brown paper cocooned the contents, string knotted just tight enough. Jane patted its contours very gently: not a stir, just as it should be. Mary's ways were all well and good and waltzing with penguins was a wonderful thing but there was deeper magic for those who cared to look, a lion had taught her that. Jane smiled at the butterflies flitting through the roses. Nothing to fear: a deep and dreamless sleep and then snuggling arms and kisses for as long as there were children who believed in hugs. As perfect as perfect could ever hope to be.

The post office was quiet, the morning rush gone. Jane removed the parcel from her bag and pushed it gently across the counter. 'For the Children's Hospital.' She smiled her pretty smile and made the young clerk blush. 'A packet of dolls all ready for cuddles. Handle them with care.'



About the author Catherine lives in Glasgow with her husband and likes loud music and whisky. Luckily, Glasgow excels at both. She's had a number of stories and one novel published and fervently hopes she's a better parent than this story suggests.

SECOND PRIZE £150

Bad Seed

Sharon Boyle

It wasn't the boys lipping fags and jangling pockets of miscounted change who slithered filthy fingers over my hair that spooked me. Not, too, the carts jolting and jarring over connections, or the grisly artefacts turning animated at sudden points. No, the part I hated most, the part that gave me the shits-factor, was Dead Al himself, a leather-faced mannequin that performed shock duty near the end of the ride. He was propped up in a corner where the carts slowed down so he could take his gay old time leering at on-comers and stealing their shrieks.

My friend Delores adored the ride, especially when the train broke down, which was often. One time our cart stuttered and stopped in front of Dead Al himself and I found myself drawn to the mummified face with its glass-marble eyes, strangely high forehead and tan-coloured lips that stretched over two rows of perfect teeth.

Delores stood up to poke Dead Al, her eager face glowing in the flickering light.

'D'you know, Debs, that Dead Al looked like Elvis Presley when he was alive? The younger version, not the fat mess current version.'

'What do you mean, when he was alive?'

She squinted. 'Thought everyone knew. Fizz-face Caruthers went




round last year claiming Dead Al used to be a proper person.'

'He can't be. When you die you get buried. Caruthers is lou-lou.'

'Caruthers is indeed lou-lou,' Delores nodded before shoogling her chubby arse back into the cart. 'But it's true. Apparently, Dead Al died of fright on this very ghost train and the owners just kept him.'

I gazed at Dead Al as Delores went on to tell me his membrane was not synthetic, oh no, but bona fide skin over bona fide bones.

It took the boys a half hour to get the carts shifting again, by which time I was shaking more than the cloth ghosts that fluttered outside advertising the ride. I refused to go on the ghost train after that and the next time the fair visited I was busy studying for

Continued overleaf 

► **Bad Seed continued**

secretarial school and attending the family extravaganza that was Cousin Gordon's nuptials.

The wedding took place on the hottest day of the year and during the buffet I mooched around the community hall trying to shake off my underarm heat-sweats and looking at old wedding photos tacked on the wall: my parents', my aunt's and even Granny Fleming's. Granny Fleming's old black and whites showcased the family in a time when fashion was the result of penury and a wayward imagination. I clocked my great-granny, a blousy woman with expansive facial features she'd successfully passed on to Granny Fleming, Granny Fleming's sister and...

'Dead Al?' I whispered.

There, tucked at the back of a large group of Flemings stood the number one star of the ghost train, and although it seemed po-faces must have been a la mode when the photo was taken, Alive Al wore a genuine smile that displayed those perfect teeth. I whistled out some breath, and rattled round memories for any mention of him in family lore. I shook my head. There had been none.

I ambushed my parents the next evening, the blandness of televised canned laughter providing background to my outburst of, 'How do you know Dead Al?'

'Who?' Mum swivelled round. 'Dead... who?'

'Dead Al. From the fair. The mummified guy. I saw him in one of the wedding photos.'

Her hesitation pointed to high guilt.

'How on earth did you recognise him?' she said eventually. 'He looks nothing like... that thing.'

'When you've sat for a scary half-hour underneath those teeth and that generous forehead that's been shared around the family, it's easy to make the connection.'

'God, I hope nobody else noticed. Your Granny bullied us into secrecy.' Mum reached for her pack of Embassy. 'He was your great-uncle.'

It took a moment to process that I was related to Dead Al; that Dead Al had indeed been a plugged-in member of the human race as Delores claimed.

I sniffed. 'And what is he doing on the ghost train?'

Mum's hand shook so much she stopped trying to light her cigarette and started to cry. I had resurrected a dire ancestral secret and ruined her silver-lining outlook of the world.

Dad pacified her with, 'Debbie had to find out sometime.'

'No, she didn't! This secret should be dead and buried – just like that thing should be.'

'His presence helped save the fairground,' Dad told me, with both eyes on the telly. 'He was known as the face that launched a thousand screams.'

'Everyone thought he was a wonky dummy,' added Mum. 'Publicity shot up, how did the *Courier* put it? *Like a Strongman clanger hitting the bell of scary success.*'

'How did he get there?' I asked.

Teasing out the story was like reeling in a thrashing shark with nylon thread. Apparently Dead Al, formerly Alistair Fleming, had left to find his fortune, but instead flambéed the family coffers and cooked up a scandal on the side. He had been the bobby-dazzler of the chemistry department at school, and, said Mum, an insufferable boaster who thought himself too good for the job, so he'd left, threatening to return when famous and rich on the back of his Grand Idea.

'And that's all I know of the matter. Don't bother me any more.'

This was no more than a silhouette of an explanation so I approached Miss Caruthers.

When the council had relieved Miss Caruthers of her job as school librarian she'd whined so much they let her keep it on a part-time,

joke-pay basis. Delores told me Miss Caruthers took home books borrowed by students from the council houses and baked them in her oven, 'to burn off any germs caught from their clarty houses. And because she's lou-lou.'

'Where's your book?' Miss Caruthers leant over the counter looking as if she was up for the most clapped-in face award. First prize, I reckoned.

'No book, I'm here to ask a question.'

'About which book?'

'No book. Alistair Fleming? He used to be a teacher here years ago.'

'Who?'

'Alistair Fleming. Dead Al?' I whispered the nickname.

Miss Caruthers did not indulge in whispering and yelled: 'Dead Al? From the fair? Yes, I worked here when he strutted about the place like some pseudo Elvis. What about him?'

I leant in to signify the delicacy of the matter. 'Do you know how he came to be an exhibit?'

'He was a bad seed through and through,' she boomed. Her eyes narrowed. 'You remind me of him.'

I glared at her.

She glared back and said: 'The body was dumped outside the family home. I saw it before the old mother spirited it away.'

Background gasps and titters let me know we had an audience.

'Dumped? Who by?' I asked quietly.

'By whom. How should I know?' Her indignation yanked up the volume. 'Should imagine he got in with some more bad seeds. Other men that liked what he liked. This town is full of bad seeds.'

'He died of fright.'

'Great-Uncle Al? I asked.

'Course not,' frowned Granny Fleming, all facial creases leading to her pointed nose that quivered in outrage. 'And don't call him that. Gil Gilchrist, the owner of the fair. He died of fright.'

'Was it him who exhibited Great... Dead Al?'

'It certainly was not. One of his lackeys scooped up the body when Mother took his body to the council dump hoping the authorities would do the decent thing. We didn't recognise the body at first, it had some kind of ointment painted on – shiny, grotesque, an abomination. No, Gil Gilchrist rode on the ghost train one day to ensure everything was up to scratch and spluttered himself into a heart attack on seeing you-know-what gawping at him.'

'Why didn't your mother want her son's body?'

'Because he mired us in debt and shame. My father was black affronted. He died of mortification.'

'Were you glad Al died?'

It seemed nobody in this town could die of a straightforward disease like cancer or pneumonia.

'Delighted.' She pointed a finger. 'He didn't deserve a funeral, even an orange-box affair with a pimped-out minister. His actions ensured there was no money left for me. If I had a toy he'd steal it; if I had a treat he'd steal it. He stole everything from me. He was a user and an abuser. Over my dead body does he worm his way back into this family. On that I will not turn.'

'Formalin, acid, glycerine and the secret ingredient that made it all work, zinc salts. That's what Uncle Al was embalmed in,' said Mum, counting off her fingers. 'That's why his body never decomposed. He concocted the stuff with his business partner, a struck-off doctor who'd murdered a patient.' She swirled her iced gin. 'A quality duo they were.'

'Embalming?' I kept a diplomatic silence about her suddenly knowing more on the matter.

'Preserving folks,' Mum muttered. 'Basically fleecing rich people

who couldn't bear to be parted from loved ones. Something about positioning bodies into everyday activities, dressed and displayed in glass mausoleums. His Grand Idea. Can you imagine?

'He coated himself in his own embalming ointment?'

'Jesus Christ, no.'

As she gave details I saw curtains pulling back in my mind's eye to Great-Uncle Al, who was neither great nor an uncle at the time of the story, taking a fancy to the doctor's daughter, sweet Amy Wilson of the coy looks and worshipping ways.

'I'm going to be famous one day,' he winked at Amy. 'And rich.'

Amy gave a small smile and dropped her eyes. 'I know you will be, Al, and I'm going to be by your handsome side when that happens.'

'That's right, you and me together.' Al puffed out his chest. 'And one day we'll get married.'

'What about my father? He doesn't want us to... you know, liaise.' Amy's eyes lifted.

'He's not here, is he? Why don't we do a spot of liaising right now?' Al whispered in her ear.

Amy giggled and slipped her arms around him. 'Married? Really?'

'And then,' said Mum, 'the doctor walked in. Alistair had been so... raucous, apparently, that the doctor heard, investigated and went berserk. Amy Wilson told us about it afterwards.'

Rewind a couple of minutes to when Amy and Al were being raucous, Al perhaps going at Amy as if on top a mechanical bull, buckaroo style, and therefore unaware of the door opening behind him or of the feet striding to the bed or the hand slipping a knife (or perhaps a scalpel) from a pocket, which was thrust through his back and most likely twisted. He would certainly be unaware that this same hand would go on to slather the preserving concoction over his body and abandon him outside the family home as a token of a spoiled partnership.

The cart trundled over familiar connections and I stared ahead, heedless of Delores' wittering about the heat wrecking her hair-do, her intentions of marrying Donny Osmond (his agreement surplus to requirements), and her surprise at getting me on the ride again.

'In fact, Debs, I'm surprised at your insistence about it, but have to say I've always loved... What the hell are you doing?'

I had prepared for the slowing at the corner and was ready with small cable cutters.

'We are freeing Dead Al.'

I unsnapped the main support around Dead Al's waist, handed the cutters to Delores whose mouth hung slack, and twisted Dead Al's body around. Although filled with flimsy withered innards I couldn't uproot him from the podium.

'Mother Mary and all that is holy, will you stop?' hissed Delores.

'He's faithfully scared the bejesus out of the town's teenagers for long enough and I am taking him home for a decent burial,' I puffed. 'I think his feet are glued down.'

I gave a final wrench which knocked him off balance but before I could complete the rescue, the cart juddered on and Uncle Al was left dangling forward as if ready to pal up with the next passengers.

Delores never spoke to me again. And neither did Granny Fleming – not after Delores vomited my actions around town. The *Courier* visited but the family zipped themselves together and refused to talk, which meant the reporters plastered manure on the front pages for days. Mum thought it best I continue my secretarial course at another college, in a town twenty miles away. (She told me Granny Fleming squawked out a demon-child rant every time she called to apologise

Continued overleaf ►

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► **Bad Seed continued**

for my behaviour. I do honestly think it was humiliation that killed my grandmother and not the heart attack the doctor claimed.)

The finale to my kidnapping attempt was the double family burial. Alistair Fleming received a proper interment when his coffin was placed on top of Granny Fleming's. My attendance was hooted at by family members but although I had meddled with the past and therefore upset the present, I stood straight, knowing I had returned the ousted kin.

A deep grumbling sounded overhead and the mourners shifted, getting ready to run at the first raindrop.

Mum drew a crochet shawl around her. 'It's about time something broke up this heat.'

I watched the minister open his bible and wondered if the rumblings were perhaps Granny Fleming turning in her grave. But as the minister was about to speak, Miss Caruthers squeezed through the rows of people and in her substantial voice began to describe how awful Alistair Fleming had been in life and that it wasn't right he be buried in a Christian place and that it had 'always been fitting

he was entombed in that feculent fair, terrifying young lasses just as he terrified them at school.'

Mum grappled for Dad's hand. Dad cleared his throat and said: 'That's old news.'

'Just as he terrified poor Amy Wilson,' continued Miss Caruthers. 'Thirteen years old she was – and it took all the Fleming money to keep it quiet. The doctor went to prison but did you know poor Amy went into a Home, where she was abused further?'

Those around me fidgeted, glared or suddenly found their feet interesting but their lack of verbal response told me that this too was old news. I stared at these people who had smothered the secret at Granny's behest and then I stared down at the coffins and nodded, thinking it apt that Granny Fleming had had her mourners stolen by Dead Al. For Miss Caruthers of the sane and sensible mind was right, this town was full of bad seeds.



About the author Sharon writes short stories and flash fiction whenever she can steal time from family and work. She was winner of the 2017 Exeter Writers' short story competition and is delighted at being placed in this competition.

THIRD PRIZE £100

She's One Hell of a Man

Carl Hughes

've decided I'm going to be a man,' Sherry Dinkins says while trowelling marmalade on to her toast that Monday morning.

Ma and Pa stare as if she's jumped out of a lavatory bowl with a cockatoo's crest on her head. 'What're you on about?' Pa demands.

'I've just told you. I'm going to be a man. In future you've got to call me Alfie.'

'You're daft, you are,' Ma says.

'No I'm not. It's all the rage, is changing sex. It goes by a lot of initials what I can't remember. You just tells every bugger you wants to be the other gender, like, and Bob's your auntie. They even do it in schools where lads can wear frocks and girls trousers, and every bugger has to treat them like they was born opposite to what they is, if you gets me meaning. It's the latest fad.'

'And why the bloody hell would you wants to be a man?' Ma demands. She's slouching at the kitchen table with her usual mug of tea, head wreathed in cigarette smoke and hair in curlers.

'Cos men gets all the respect. They says women's equal but they don't treat 'em like they are, and I'm the equal of any bugger I am.'

'You're talking like a cow pat with chickenpox,' Pa says, scratching the hairs on his beer belly. His shirt's open to the navel and blubber spills over the top of his trousers like a tub of lard dredged from the bottom of a septic tank. 'You was born female and female you'll stay. I'm not having any of that bloody silly transgender palaver in this house, young lady, and that's that – my final word on t' subject.'

'You can't stop me being what I want,' Alfie says. 'I'm nineteen now, old enough to vote for a government and be an MP if I'm so minded. Alfie Dinkins MP – aye, that'd sound right good even if I says it as shouldn't.'

'You, an MP?' Ma says. 'You can't even spell your own bloody name and whoever heard of an MP what's on benefits? You have to go to university and all that sort of shit till you're qualified to have your moat cleaned on expenses.'



'Well, actually I doesn't want to be an MP – I were just giving an example. Now I'm a bloke I think I'll start me own business. Yeah, Alfie Dinkins, man of affairs.'

Pa's hair always looks like something spewed by Ken Dodd over a drum of oil and now it stands on end as if he's stepped into a mausoleum and seen an Egyptian mummy get up and dance. He jabs a finger at Alfie. 'We does well enough on benefits in this house, we does, and I won't have no member of my family talking about going into business or otherwise finding work. There isn't enough jobs in this world to go around and what few there is should be left to them as wants 'em.'

'You're only saying that cos you thinks I'm a lass and therefore something to be despised. Well, I won't have it no more. I'm Alfie Dinkins, a bloke even if I've got no goolies yet.'

'Yet! What d'you mean, yet?' Ma squawks. 'I hope you isn't talking of having thingies sewn on.'

'Not as such. I mean, it isn't necessary. These days you just says you wants to be a feller and that's all there is to it. It's the latest fad, like I said. You could do it too if you was so minded.'

Ma chokes so much on her tea that it squirts down her nose. After taking a few drags on her Woodbine to recover her composure she says: 'I'm not turning into a bloke for no bugger, ta very much. Imagine what Tilly Hopkins next door'd say if she saw me hanging out the washing in a beard and dungarees.'

'You wouldn't have to. Pa'd do that when he called hissself a woman named Sally.'

Pa's complexion turns as purple as the funeral shroud of a Roman

emperor. 'Me, a bloody woman called Sally! Are you off your rocker, our Sherry?'

'Alfie,' she corrects him. 'Or Percy. I've not decided for sure what me new name's going to be. I want summat with a bit o' class so folks'll see I've been brung up proper with a right good education.'

'All they'll see is a lass what weighs nigh on sixteen stone and what's got a complexion like a tortoise with dermatitis,' Pa says.

'There's no need to be insulting to your son,' Alfie/Percy says. 'Anyway, I've settled on Percy. Or maybe Archie. Yeah, Archie it is. Archibald Dinkins – Archie for short. And I'm not fat if that's what you're insinuating – just big-boned.'

She chomps through her toast and marmalade, which she despatches just in time to retrieve four eggs and eight rashers of bacon from the frying pan. She ships them in quick order, then, mindful of her father's jibe, she searches the fridge for a pot of yoghurt to keep her weight down.

'What're you looking for?' Ma asks.

'Yoghurt.'

'What d'you think this is, a health-food shop? You knows bloody well I doesn't buy yoghurts.'

'Well, you should. It's good for the digestion. Us blokes needs summat for us digestion after a night out wi' the lads. Anyhow and however, as I were saying before you so rudely stuck your oar in, I'm setting up in business. I can just see the sign over me shop now – Reginald Dinkins, tailor to the transgenders.'

'Oh, so it's bloody Reginald now, is it?' Pa says.

'It'll sound better when I gets me knighthood for services to them what's changed sex. Sir Reginald's classier than Sir Archie.'

'We'll be right proud of you, our Sherry – I mean Archie or Percy or whatever your bloody name is this morning,' Ma says.

'Don't encourage her,' Pa growls. 'She'll grow out of it. When I were her age I wanted to be Batman. I saw meself as the Caped Crusader driving around in me Batmobile with me mask on and taking from t' rich and giving to t' poor.'

'I thought that were Robin Hood,' Ma says.

'Aye, well, it's the thought what counts.'

'Anyhow, our Reginald, what's all this about being a tailor to the afflicted?' Ma asks. 'You don't know nowt about tailoring.'

Reginald slaps his elephantine thigh, sending up a cloud of dust like locusts on a prairie, and says: 'Hush your gob. Us transgenders isn't afflicted, we're enlightened. And there's nowt to tailoring that can't be picked up off the internet. I might branch out eventually and go into quilt-making with funny faces on. Or I could grow strawberries in our greenhouse and sell 'em to Tesco what'll have no need to import no more from Morocco and suchlike, wherever Morocco is.'

'We haven't got a bloody greenhouse,' Pa points out.

'No, but we will have when we moves to a posh place what I'll be able to buy out of the money I earns as a tailor to the transgenders and when I gets me Sirship.'

'Well, our Reginald...,' Ma begins.

'Call me Reggie.'

'Well, our Reggie, just when does you propose to become a millionaire? There's no rush, mind, but I'm a bit short of the readies for me fags this week so I could do with a bit o' help.'

'I'll go down to t' Jobcentre,' Reggie says. 'They'll tell me how to apply for grants and that sort o' stuff to open me shop. Maybe I'll take on a few of the unemployed as seamstresses or summat like that. I'll pay 'em the living wage o' course, as long as they don't go on maternity leave and expect me to keep on dishing out wages. That's the trouble wi' women, they expect to have their cake and eat it while we blokes do all the hard graft.'

'You, hard graft!' Pa nearly pees his pants and chortles like a warthog with haemorrhoids. 'You wouldn't know hard graft if it jumped up and sunk its dentures into your podgy arse.'

'That's rich coming from you,' Reggie says. 'You left school at sixteen and went on the dole next day and there you've stayed ever since.'

'It's me bad back, you know that. I mean, you can't do much when you've a bad back like what I've got, now can you?'

'It don't stop you going to the boozer three times a week and getting sloshed out o' your mind.'

'Even a bloke with a bad back's entitled to some pleasure. I doesn't ask for much, I doesn't. Just enough cash to keep me in fags and booze, plus enough to fill me belly o' course and a couple of holidays and stuff like that. I'm entitled to it, not being one o' them illegals what invades the country and sponges off the taxpayer, and anyways I've a wife and daughter to support.'

'I'm not your daughter, I'm your son from today onwards,' Reggie says. 'And I supports meself, I does – I gets benefits in me own name, not yours.'

'As long as you pays your way I don't care whose name you gets your benefits in,' Pa says. He belches, a sound reminiscent of a hippopotamus with tonsillitis.

'Right, I'm off to t' Jobcentre. When I comes back I'll be one o' them entrepreneurs what you reads about in t' papers. Like that bearded thing Richard Branson what owns trains and planes and things.'

So saying, Reggie shrugs into his combat jacket, farts as men do, and sets off into the February morning feeling that life is paving his way with gold doubloons dropped from a pirate's nether regions.

The Jobcentre is on the high street in premises previously used as a funeral parlour. Inside, there's a fuggy warmth that swirls around plywood boards containing fluorescent cards that advertise jobs ranging from leaflet deliverers to shelf stackers, all at minimum pay. A polished counter runs the width of the place, divided into cubicles where jobseekers can sit and talk without being overheard by the riff-raff. Reggie grabs one of these cubicles, sitting wide-legged in the way of all men of the world, and waits for the clerk on the other side of the counter to pay him heed. The clerk is a woman with pimples around her stick-like nose and hair the colour of strawberry jam that's gone off. She's peering into a computer screen, frowning as if it's flashing its naughty bits at her and she doesn't quite know what to make of it.

'Excuse me – can I get some service here?' Reggie says after a few seconds of being ignored.

The woman glances up. A name badge says Iryna Musker-Caldecott. Her real name's probably something like Gladys Smith, Reggie thinks.

'Can I help?' Iryna Musker-Caldecott asks.

'I want a grant to open me shop,' Reggie says.

'I beg your pardon?'

Reggie sighs. This seems to be one of those days where she has to explain herself to the moronic. 'A grant,' she enunciates. 'To open me shop.'

'We're here to find clients jobs,' Iryna says. 'Is that what you want?'

'Well, sort of if you're splitting pubic hairs. I wants to set up in business as a tailor to the transgender lobby.'


Iryna blinks and reaches for a pair of spectacles which she slips on to her nose. Peering through them, as if Reggie has turned into a turd with a lettuce for a face, she says: 'I'm not sure I understand.'

'I became a bloke this morning, like what the latest craze is, and I want to make clobber for them what's like me – summat other than they was born as, if you gets me meaning.'

'I don't think I do.'

Reggie raises his eyes. 'I doesn't know as I can make meself any clearer.'

Iryna taps her keyboard and peers into the computer screen again.

Continued overleaf 

► *She's One Hell of a Man* continued

'Let's start at the beginning,' she says with a smile that might have fallen out of one of the coffins that used to be housed in this place. 'What's your name?'

'Reginald Dinkins. Sir as will be.'

'Your real name, I mean.'

'I've just told you.'

'But you've been coming in here for years and as far as I recall your name is Sherry Dinkins.'

'That were yesterday and for the previous nineteen year. As from today I'm a man. You can change sex these days just by saying you have. If you don't believe me take a look in the *Sun*.'

'Actually I'm a *Telegraph* person and I don't hold with this business of girls becoming boys and vice versa.'

'Vice what? Oh well, never mind. I'll be right good at taking inside legs, I will, and all you need to make clobber for the transgenders is a sewing machine and some bugger to work it. I daresay you can help me in that direction.'

'Are you suggesting I should learn to use a sewing machine?'

'Not you personally, you silly dungheap with a pillow for a brain. I mean you can get some bugger off the dole and put 'em on me payroll. Not that I'll be able to pay 'em until the orders start rolling in, o' course, but they can think of it as a career investment. It'll be cheaper than going to university and taking out a big loan to pay for professors and suchlike to talk to you through their back passages. For now I just wants to know how I gets a grant to open me own shop.'

'Not from the Jobcentre, that's for sure.' Iryna Musker-Caldecott stares like somebody in a zoo watching a baboon scratch its scarlet arse. 'You'd have to apply through the town hall or some business enterprise fund but I'm sure they'd laugh you out of the place.'

Reggie drums his fingers on the counter. 'Let's get this straight. Are you bugging me off cos you won't do the job you's paid for?'

'My job is to find you work, not arrange finance for some pie-in-the-sky enterprise.'

'You're as much use as a fart in a perfume factory, that's what you are.' Reggie points accusingly. 'What's the point of having you here if you can't help entrepreneurs? I bet I knows what it is – you're a lesbian what doesn't like hunky blokes like what I am. You'd be ready to use me shit as toothpaste if I turned back into a glamour-puss like what I used to be yesterday, wouldn't you?'

Iryna Musker-Caldecott looks like she's swallowed a hedgehog and developed halitosis. 'How dare you speak to me in that manner. And I'd hardly call you a glamourpuss, young lady.'

'See, I knewed it – you're jealous. Well, if that's the way fellers get treated I'm not surprised a lot o' lads turn themselves into girls. I think I'll revert back to what I were before I did me U-turn, if you gets me meaning. I'm not Alfie or Percy or Archibald or Reginald, I'm Sherry Dinkins, that's who I am. A fair maiden with a lot o' charm and prospects to match. So put that in your blowpipe and suck it.' She stands up and as a parting shot declares, 'I hopes you die of arse rot and next time I comes in I expects a bit o' respect and more benefits, what I'm entitled to as I'm dyslexic.'

A minute later she's outside, fluttering her eyelashes at a homeless beggar who's lying in the doorway of a derelict shop with a comatose dog at his feet. She knows how to come on hot and strong to the fanciable. She's turned into one hell of a woman.



About the author Carl is a retired journalist who worked for 35 years on local and national newspapers. His fiction has been published in many magazines in the UK and abroad and has won numerous prizes. He lives in Norfolk with wife Linda.

Ever wondered what happened to the Banks children after Mary Poppins packed her bag and left the seemingly perfect family? Catherine Hokin clearly did and answered that question with her winning story, *Practically Perfect*.

I like the way that Catherine avoids the sugary sentimentality of the Disney version and looks a little more closely at the PL Travers original. The story opens as Jane Banks, now grown up and a nanny trained by Mary, sits with a mother desperate to offload the burden of childcare. Catherine shows the mother's state of mind by her negligent attitude.

'You might like to check these?' Barely a glance. 'My references?'

Jane had, of course, been trained by the best and the best had resolutely refused to trade in such nonsense, but the world had moved on since Mary's day. A lot had moved on since Mary's day, but the parents were still as blind, for all their teddy-cams and mobile-monitoring. Still, the offer was there.

As Jane waits, hoping the mother will at least check the paperwork regarding previous employers, the author drops clues that this story may not end quite as 'happily ever after' as readers might expect.

Jane wished it was different, but what could she do? Still, this was just the first day, the first little test. Nothing was decided, not yet.

Later paragraphs hint at Jane's personal tragedy which affects the way she works. We discover her brother Michael died because no one was watching him when he chased after a kitten. Mary Poppins had already left and the parents had delegated care of Michael to Jane. This is good foreshadowing of where and why she diverges from

Mary's teaching and adds a dark note to her care of the children.

Parents restored to adult lives, children tidied away. Mary's ways followed just as she promised, not time for her own; not yet. With luck, not at all.

This dark tone is reinforced when Jane decides to depart from the expected.

Mary's ways were all well and good and waltzing with penguins was a wonderful thing, but there was deeper magic for those who cared to look.

The story's conclusion is shocking as Jane turns the children into dolls and sends them off to the children's hospital to be cuddled forever, as they had wished. A grim reminder to be careful when making wishes – they might just come true!

A lovely, quirky scene opens Sharon Boyle's second-placed story, *Bad Seed*. We are on the ghost train ride with the narrator when she comes face to face with Dead Al waiting to 'steal their shrieks'. The author lets readers know when the story is set in a natural way – through dialogue.

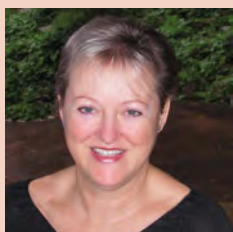
'D'you know, Debs, that Dead Al looked like Elvis Presley when he was alive? The younger version, not the fat mess current version.'

'What do you mean, when he was alive?'

She squinted. 'Thought everyone knew. Fizz-face Caruthers went round last year claiming Dead Al used to be a proper person.'

Not only does this tell us Elvis is alive but it pinpoints the stage in his career. It also introduces a great hook – was Dead Al a real body? If yes, how and why did he become part of a circus sideshow?

Having put the matter out of her mind, the narrator



Competition round-up

Not quite happily ever after

Lorraine Mace explains why she chose this month's winners



Plot or character development?

The plot frames the conflict and creates the action. Without plot there is no story – or at least not one readers will find satisfying. However, characters are the heart of any tale. No matter how good the plot, if the characters aren't real, then it will fail to engage interest. Readers follow complex plots because they want to see how the characters deal with what is thrown at them. So plot and character are equally important. They have to work seamlessly together.

is shocked to discover Dead Al was once a member of her own family. Sharon uses some lovely phrasing to show how difficult it was for the narrator to garner any information on the matter: *Teasing out the story was like reeling in a thrashing shark with nylon thread.*

We discover Dead Al was a bad seed who probably mixed with others of a similar persuasion, but are not told what that might be. However, it's clear the retired librarian knows more than she is saying.

I really enjoyed the passage where Alistair Fleming becomes Dead Al. Having been discovered on top of his partner's daughter, he is stabbed and doused with his own embalming fluid.

But this is eclipsed by the sections dealing with his rescue.

I gave a final wrench which knocked him off balance, but before I could complete the rescue, the cart juddered on and Uncle Al was left dangling forward as if ready to

pal up with the next passengers.

The ending is pure poetic justice as Granny Fleming, who knew the truth about Dead Al, was forced to share burial space and mourners with him.

An entertaining story with some great characterisation.

Carl Hughes must have had a fun time writing *She's One Hell of a Man* because the dialogue is amusing and drives the story along at a brisk pace.

From the opening paragraph, where Sherry Dinkins declares

her intention to change gender, to the final line where she berates the poor woman in the Jobcentre, every sentence added to the enjoyment.

The opening scene tells us a great deal about the family dynamics. The characterisation is broad but funny. Pa doesn't intend to take away a job from someone who wants to work, so does his bit by being on benefits. Ma is aware of what's required to be an MP and tells Sherry (now Alfie) she'd need to go to university before she could have her moat cleaned on expenses. When Sherry says

she's a bloke even without goolies yet, I laughed at Ma's response: *'I hope you isn't talking of having things sewn on.'*

The character development with Sherry/Reggie turning entrepreneur is wonderful:

'Maybe I'll take on a few of the unemployed as seamstresses or summat like that. I'll pay 'em the living wage o' course, as long as they don't go on maternity leave and expect me to keep on dishing out wages. That's the trouble wi' women, they expect to have their cake and eat it...

The ending neatly completes the story's circular thread as Sherry changes gender once again – she's turned into one hell of a woman.

Highly commended

There were nine shortlisted stories this month:

In the Dark by David Ward
Looks Hurt by Mark Snyders
Mam's Pearls by Patricia M Osborne
Canal Turn by Robert Kibble
Rumpleskin's Stilt by Pete Pitman
The Turbothrob Triple-X by Martin Strike
Fancy Fish and Bleach by Russell Day
Once More on to the Beach by Tracey Glasspool
Chicken Soup and Stuffing by Katherine Freeman

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



Fiction workshop



with tutor
Lorraine Mace

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

CLEARING THE MIST

From the very beginning of any story, it is important readers are able to identify with the central character. One of the ways this happens is by naming the person. Without a name the character is formless.

If you close your eyes and think of someone called Cyril it is fairly certain you will picture an older person who perhaps works in a safe and undemanding job. A woman going by the name of Lolita is more likely to figure in your mind as a manhunter than a small town librarian.

If you now try to visualise a man or woman without a name, and imagine what their occupation might be, I am sure you will find it harder because names are so much part of a person's identity.

In the opening paragraphs of *Red Mist* by Patricia Wall we discover that a little old lady is watching a young bully torment smaller boys. She decides he should be stopped and does this by following him and stabbing him to death.

After a period of ill health, during which she is confined to the house, she goes with her kind and loving husband to the supermarket. While there, she's insulted by someone she deems a thug. This person, too, is despatched by knife; one stolen from the butchery counter.

We next meet her after her husband's funeral when she takes her dog for a walk in the park. Once again she is subjected to abuse, this time from a female jogger. She returns home, picks up a knife from the kitchen, goes back

to the park and follows the woman to the local pub, where she stabs her.

In each case, the old lady takes a souvenir from her victims – a lock of hair, a finger from a leather glove and a toggle from a cagoule. The story ends 15 years later when a cold case team look into the murders, but by this time the old lady is long dead.

The introduction

Red Mist opens with the narrator telling the reader about the protagonist.

Nice old lady, much like any other, sits in the small corner kiosk of the new shopping centre. She runs this little bric-a-brac shop selling china and odds and ends. Each morning she sets out a table outside for the less expensive items to encourage passers-by to stop and buy.

Towards the end of the day the children from the local school start to pass. One boy in particular always catches her attention. He's bigger, red hair, ruddy complexion, overweight bully. Each day she grows to hate him more and more. As he passes her table she hears his comments.

'Who'd want to buy this rubbish,' he'd sneer.

He terrorised the other smaller boys by swinging his rucksack and hitting them over the head, thumping them on their arms and kicking at their shins.

Although there is a lot of information in this, the problem for readers is that it is difficult to visualise. I would like to offer the following rewrite to show one way of



bringing the protagonist to life as she witnesses the bully in action.

Firstly, we need to name her. I quite like the name Florence for a little old lady selling bric-a-brac. I'm going to keep to the author's opening as much as possible to illustrate how little needs to be changed to breathe life into the character.

Florence smiled over at Gloria in the coffee shop opposite as she set out the less expensive items on the table outside her bric-a-brac kiosk.

'How are you feeling today, Flo?' Gloria asked, strolling over with Florence's regular milky coffee.

'Much fitter, thanks. The arthritis is always easier when the sun shines.'

Everyone was so friendly in the

new shopping centre. Florence loved her spot where she could people-watch. Towards the end of the day the children from the local school began to pass.

Florence's earlier good humour deserted her. There was that boy again. He was easy to spot. Not just by his size and red hair, but by the way the younger children tried to avoid him.

'Stop that!' she called as he swung his rucksack and connected with one small boy's head.

The red head ignored her and turned his attention to another child, thumping his arm and kicking his shin.

'Leave him alone!' Why was the security guard never here when he was needed?

The boy grinned as he passed her table.

'You gonna make me?' He

picked up a china dog and let it drop. Florence was relieved to see it bounce without coming to any harm. 'Who'd want to buy this rubbish?' he said and laughed.

Keeping it real

We are led to believe the old lady only acts because of the red mist that descends, turning her from a kindly soul into someone capable of cold-blooded murder. For this to be the case, we have to see the rage overtake her in an instant, causing her to lash out. However, in this story, all her murders are premeditated, which goes against the red mist theory. When she follows the boy she already has the knife in her pocket. Similarly, in the supermarket, she steals a knife to stab the thug. For her final murder, she goes home to fetch a knife to do the deed.

This is easily overcome if we were able to see the old lady as someone with a Jekyll and Hyde personality – in other words, we witness her transformation as something complete and separate to her normal persona. Unfortunately, she kills without remorse while still being portrayed as a sweet little old lady.

I would suggest showing instances of rage which don't lead to murder, but are caused by the red mist coming down. She needs to 'become' someone else during these phases and, perhaps, not be fully aware of her actions when she reverts to her normal disposition. This would add credibility to her more extreme actions.

Let there be blood

Once we can accept the old lady as killer, it is then even more important that the aftermath of her crimes is believable. This is where research is essential.

When someone is stabbed there is a certain amount of blood splatter that is unavoidable. Plunging a knife into the back of another person means getting up close and personal, with no way of avoiding the blood that

would spurt from the wound.

The first murder: *She plunged the knife into his back. He goes down, never to get up again.* She then goes to the bus stop, catches the bus and returns to her kiosk to resume work. This isn't credible as she would be covered in blood and could hardly get on the bus without someone noticing and commenting on it.

The second murder (after stealing a knife from the butchery counter): *She feels the red mist rising as she takes out the knife and plunges it into his kidneys and pulls it out with a gurgling noise.* She then goes to the car and climbs in next to her husband, who is oblivious to her actions. As before, the blood splatter would surely be noticed.

For the final murder she sits in the pub waiting for her victim to go to the ladies: *She follows, takes the knife out of her pocket just in time for red cagoule as she steps out of the cubicle. The red mist rises as she plunges the knife into her chest.* She then leaves without anyone spotting blood on her clothes.

As each murder is to a lesser or greater extent premeditated, I would suggest bringing in an element of forethought so that the blood on her clothes

isn't a problem. Perhaps she could keep a plastic mac in her pocket which she dons prior to committing the deed. She could then remove it, fold it away and put it in her bag or a pocket until she is safely home and can dispose of it.

Souvenir hunting

The old lady takes a reminder of her kill from each of her victims.

From the boy: *She kneels down and pulls a lock of red hair and slips it into her mac pocket.*

From the thug: *She stoops and cuts a finger from his leather gloves.*

From the jogger: *She bends down and snips a toggle from the red cagoule.*

This is fine if she has been portrayed as a serial killer, but that isn't the case.

Or perhaps it is...

And this is where character development is so important. Is she in the category of those who kill when the red mist descends? Or does she fit the mould of someone who plans each act? If she falls into the first category, why would she feel the need to take tokens? Souvenirs are something a serial killer would gloat over after each killing. Our little old lady doesn't (yet) fit this

classification – but she could if her character were sufficiently developed in this direction.

...and no one lived to tell the tale

The end of the story is told from the narrator's perspective, showing that the old lady got away with her crimes. The narrator also lets us know she stopped at three murders.

The stupid unimaginative police enquiries come to nothing. They are baffled and never link the three murders together; after all they were such different victims. By the time fifteen years later when the cold case review team showed an interest, three knife crimes and within close proximity, the old lady and the piddling little dog were long dead.

I would suggest ending the story slightly differently. I feel we could remain in the old lady's head and be with her as she gloats over her success in ridding the world of three people who, in her opinion, didn't deserve to live.

Perhaps she could be fingering her trophies and remembering the thrill of each event when there is a knock on the door. She puts her souvenirs back in their hiding place and goes to open the door. On the step are two officers who want to ask her a few questions about a red-headed boy, an unpleasant man and a female jogger.

What happens next can be left to the readers' imagination. Does she outwit the police, or is she charged and locked away for her crimes? It doesn't really matter as either would work. What does matter is that the reader feels the story has reached a satisfying conclusion.

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



The art of naming characters

Choosing the right name for your characters is important, but don't let it cripple your thought process. Keep it fun! If you have fun writing, your readers will have fun reading.

- Don't try to be overly creative, even if writing SF or fantasy. Readers should be able to pronounce the names in their heads!
- Make the name age-appropriate. When was the character born? The popularity of certain names is cyclical so check name lists online. If something wasn't in vogue in the 1960s, when your character was born, make sure the reader knows there is a valid reason for using it.
- Think about your character's parents. They are the ones who came up with the name. John and Mary are unlikely to name their daughter Exotica. By the same token, River and Sundance wouldn't choose a 'safe' name for their child.
- Names change according to where the story is set (or where the character originates from): Peter/Pierre/Piotr/ Pieter/ Petros/Petrov/Pedro/Pedar.
- Ask yourself: does the name fit with genre, era and theme?
- Use the name to add to the characterisation – a strong name for a decisive and controlled person, a softer name for someone who is trying to find their place in the world, but often failing.

KEEP CALM & THINK POSITIVE

Douglas McPherson gets the low-down on a new short story and features market from *In The Moment* editor Kirstie Duhig

It's something a lot of women's magazines seem to have forgotten: the pleasure of taking time out from the day to lose yourself in a heart-warming short story.

But that's one of the benefits offered by recently launched mindfulness and wellbeing magazine *In The Moment* – which means a new market for fiction writers at a time when many other mags are no longer using short stories or have closed their doors to all but established writers.

'In each issue we have an eight-page, tear-out mini-magazine called Take A Moment that includes a short story, a crossword puzzle and a recipe for either a hot or cold drink,' explains editor Kirstie Duhig. 'The idea is that readers make the drink mindfully, find a cosy, comfortable spot and take a moment for themselves to do the crossword and read a thought-provoking short story.'

'It's a lovely way to present something in a different way, to give insight or challenge a reader's perspective, so that they can relate to the story and maybe consider their life in a different way,' the editor continues.

In The Moment is a quality international magazine published 13 times a year by Immediate Media whose stable includes the *Radio Times* and other BBC branded magazines including *BBC Wildlife*, as well as craft titles such as *Simply Knitting* and *Papercraft Inspirations*.

Each issue features one 2000- to 2400-word story. They are open to unsolicited submissions, for which they pay rates 'in line with other

The key is that there is an element of hope or resolution

magazines' and will consider stories previously published online or in not directly competing titles. That means they are open to stories that have appeared in mags such as *My Weekly* and *The People's Friend*, which Kirstie considers to have a different readership to *In The Moment*.

So what sort of stories are they looking for?

'The things we have been looking at are themes such as forgiveness, kindness, happiness and empathy,' says Kirstie. 'The stories can be modern and challenging, happy, funny or sad, but the key is that there is an element of hope or resolution at the end. They don't have to be tied up with a bow so that everything is hunky-dory, but there needs to be the start of some kind of resolution.'

'We want our readers to enjoy the story and come away with a feeling of calm. So thought-provoking yes, confronting no. We don't want to make the reader uncomfortable or angry.'

The best way to get a feel for what they are looking for is to read the current issue, says Kirstie, who adds: 'Our stories have a female protagonist and need to be feminist in outlook. We're trying to avoid



cliché and stereotyping.'

They are also avoiding stories linked to specific occasions because of a month's delay between the magazine's UK sale date and the date it appears in the US, and the two-month delay before it hits newsstands in Australia.

Features

A 'good proportion' of *In The Moment* is written by freelance writers, and Kirstie welcomes pitches for features in all of its four main sections: wellbeing,

creating, living and escaping.

'Our wellbeing section offers practical expert advice on topics such as natural health and beauty, confidence and optimism,' she explains. 'Our creating section encourages creativity as a means to mindfulness and features simple step-by-step projects.'

'The living section explores lifestyle choices like food and interiors. We want to embrace trends, innovations and ideas.'

'Our escaping section is not just about travel, it's about

encouraging readers to free themselves from their daily routines – to give themselves space to refresh mind and body. So we've covered things like staycations, retreats and unusual places, as well as first-person adventures or more philosophical pieces about travel.'

Not currently open to freelancers are the Good News section and back-page Life Lessons interview, which are written in-house.

Fresh ideas

'In some respects, anything goes,' Kirstie says. 'As long as the topic includes themes of well-being and positivity we'll consider it.'

The main quality she is looking for is a fresh perspective – something that's not just interesting and relevant but also exciting.

'We have lots of freelance pitches coming in every week, so when we're making our choices it's about the pieces that stand out because there's something different in them – a new angle. We're looking for features that haven't been done before.'

The magazine is also looking for depth.

'It's really important to us that our features have genuine insight and something that our readers can take away,' says Kirstie. 'Sometimes they're giving readers tools or ideas or inspirations for ways to bring more happiness, more opportunity, more optimism into their lives.'

In terms of tone, she says: 'We don't tell women how to live their lives. It's not about telling them this is what you must do to be happy or more fulfilled. What's important to us is having a conversation with our readers and offering insights and tools that allow them to make choices.'

'Another thing that is key to us is humour, where appropriate. We want content that is lively, energetic and has humour and is not heavy, dry and prescriptive.'



How to pitch

Non-fiction contributors should always email an idea rather than send a completed article, says Kirstie.

'What we like in a pitch is a really concise précis of the idea, including which section it's for, so we know the writer has read the magazine and genuinely thought about our readership and how and why the feature would be relevant to them.'

'We like to know how the piece would be structured and what research is being proposed – whether there are specific experts or books that the writer will use as sources.'

'What would put us off is if a pitch is very general and doesn't give us any specific ideas about sources or relevant experts. We need to know that a writer is able to do their research and our readers can trust everything we publish.'

'Where relevant, we'd also want details of images available. If it's a feature for our wellbeing section it may be that all the images would come

from stock, so that wouldn't be relevant to the proposal. But with a travel feature we'd want words and pictures to come as a parcel, so it's vital to know we'll have images to support the content.'

Photos can often be obtained free from press officers and tourist boards, but in the case of travel features, Kirstie states, 'We would always want to include images of the writer, because what is appealing to our readers is the first-hand nature of our features – the genuine experience that our writers had on that journey or adventure.'

'It's useful to include a link to your website or blog if you have one,' Kirstie adds, 'or links to previously published features and a list of magazines or online sites where you have been published.'

Magazine market

In The Moment has a sister title, the quarterly craft magazine *Project Calm*, and the mags are just two of several recent

launches in a busy wellbeing sector that includes *Breathe*, *Teen Breathe* and *Happiful*. So are print magazines making a comeback in the digital age?

'I think they are in certain sections of the market,' says Kirstie. 'A lot of craft magazines are selling as well as ever, because readers recognise the benefit of holding something in your hand and making something yourself.'

'In the wellbeing and mindfulness sector, picking up a magazine is very different to reading on screen. It's much more relaxing, and in our screen-led society it's a way of escaping the screen. I think that's why there have been a lot of launches and why print is still really valid today, if not more so.'

'If you want to read something before you go to bed, the last thing you want to look at is a screen, because it has such a negative effect on your ability to go to sleep, whereas sitting and reading a magazine is a really relaxing and lovely thing to do.'

Perhaps another aspect of print's resurgence has been the physical quality of some new launches, including *In The Moment* with its gift-like tear-out section, bookmarks and recipe cards, which makes them pleasing items to hold and own.

'It's very important to us that we get the look and feel of the magazine absolutely right,' Kirstie agrees, 'because that's a big part of the reader's enjoyment of the magazine as a whole. That's why we're printed on matt paper and spend more money on our paper stock.'

'Ours is a magazine that we expect our readers to keep and go back to, to read and read again. It's not disposable in the way a newspaper would be.'

Submissions

Send all submissions to Kirstie Duhig at calmmoment@immediate.co.uk and state in the subject box whether it's a short story or a feature idea.

DISCIPLINARY ACTION

'The discipline of the written word punishes both stupidity and dishonesty.'
John Steinbeck

If you want to run a marathon or be able to run a mile in four minutes, you need to run a lot of miles on a regular basis. If you want to lose weight, you need to consume fewer calories than your body uses and not just on Mondays and Thursday afternoons for a fortnight. You need to keep the ratio constant until you have reached your goal weight. And, of course, to avoid regaining your lost weight and wasting all that effort, you need to make sure you don't go back to your old, unhelpful habits.

If you want to be a poet, you need to write and read a lot of poems.

I am sure it will not come as any shock to hear that writing demands discipline. But as the author of *Don Quixote*, Miguel Cervantes, said: 'It is one thing to praise discipline, and another thing to submit to it.'

So here are some suggestions on how you might improve your discipline as a poet and so improve your skills; which hopefully will allow you to increase the impact of your poems and make them appealing to as wide a readership and as many publication formats as possible.

Commit the time

We all have busy lives so this month make a plan and stick to it. (Of course, life is unpredictable so you may need some flexibility.) Write down when you will write and be sure to be specific, eg:

- *Every Monday this month from 09:00 am to 11:30 am.*
- *Three nights a week: this is for the whole month, after the children have gone to bed, for a minimum of one hour.*
- *Every other Wednesday and Friday: for 45 minutes during my lunch break at work.*

Location, location, location

Once you have decided when you will write, be just as specific about where you will write.

Then – whether you decide to write in a cafe, at your kitchen table, on a plane or in a public library – do just that.



Something other than rhyme

'With self-discipline almost anything is possible.'

Theodore Roosevelt

Select a discipline other than rhyme and apply it to your poem. Of course, you could decide to use a certain number of syllables or stresses in every line, but if you want to get more adventurous how about trying one of the following:

- **Number of words:** Every line must use the same number of words regardless of how many syllables the words contain. What is the longest line you can create and what is the shortest?
- **Use letters:** End or begin each line with a word that uses a certain number of letters or begins with a certain letter. Is it possible to avoid words that begin with a certain letter? (Choosing Q, X or Z is cheating.)
- **Let the verbs speak:** Use one verb per couplet or one verb per stanza. Can you write a whole poem using only one verb, either repeatedly or as a one-off occurrence? Could you explore this discipline further using, say, adjectives or adverbs?

Prepositions and conjunctions

A **preposition** is a word such as *after*, *in*, *to*, *on* and *with* that shows the relationship of a noun or pronoun to the other words in a sentence. They describe, for example, the position of something, the time when something happens, or the way in which something is done. Some prepositions are made up of more than one word: *because of*; *next to*; *on top*.

A **conjunction** is a word used to connect clauses or sentences or to coordinate words in the same clause, for example *and*, *but* and *if*.

Try writing a poem that uses only one preposition (either repeatedly or as a one-off occurrence) and one conjunction (again, either repeatedly or as a one-off occurrence).

Punctuation

When he first began writing in college, EE Cummings (1894–1962) was strongly influenced by the style of Ezra Pound. However, before long Cummings created his own poetic style. He broke up or scrambled words and presented them in a new way; and, as a general rule, he did not use punctuation or capitals, including



with poetry editor
Sue Butler

the use of the lower-case 'i' in his poems. He did sometimes use capitals for special emphasis and punctuation marks to shock.

Write a poem:

- Using no punctuation at all – not a capital letter or a comma.
- Where every line ends with a full stop.
- Using only one type of punctuation mark, eg commas or question marks.

Stick to the facts

'Man must be disciplined for he is by nature raw and wild.'

Immanuel Kant

Write a poem that uses only facts. Decide on your definition of a fact and do not deviate from it. But how can you be sure? For example, is something your narrator can see, smell, hear or touch a fact? Is something you have read in *National Geographic* magazine a fact?

Stay alert

'A work of art is not a matter of thinking beautiful thoughts or experiencing tender emotions (though those are its raw materials) but of intelligence, skill, taste, proportion, knowledge, discipline and industry; especially discipline.'

Evelyn Waugh

As you write, keep your eyes and ears open and pause regularly to sniff out any rotteness. Then be honest with yourself; kind and fair but honest.

If you know you have written a cliché get rid of it. If you could describe something with more intensity do it. If you know the first or last line of your poem really is not as strong as it could be then rewrite it.

Have the discipline to be as good as you have the potential to be. After all, if you are willing to accept second-best then second-best is likely what you will end up with.

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

FAMILY SECRETS

Robert Lowell (1917–1977) was an American poet born into an old Boston family that could trace its origins back to the *Mayflower*. In the third section of his poem, *My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow*, Lowell describes Great Aunt Sarah, who in her youth had the confidence to jilt an Astor, spent hours perfecting her technique on the piano but failed – for a reason not explained – to appear at the recital. Much older now, Aunt Sarah spends her time playing on a dummy piano...

|||

Up in the air
by the lakeview window in the billiards-room,
lurid in the doldrums of the sunset hour,
my Great Aunt Sarah
was learning *Samson and Delilah*.
She thundered on the keyboard of her dummy piano
with gauze curtains like a boudoir table,
accordionlike yet soundless.
It had been bought to spare the nerves
of my Grandmother,
tone-deaf, quick as a cricket,
now needing a fourth for 'Auction',
and casting a thirsty eye
on Aunt Sarah, risen like a phoenix
from her bed of troublesome snacks and Tauchnitz classics.

Forty years earlier,
twenty, auburn headed,
grasshopper notes of genius!
Family gossip says Aunt Sarah
tilted her archaic Athenian nose
and jilted an Astor.
Each morning she practised
on the grand piano at Symphony Hall,
deathlike in the off-season summer –
its naked Greek statues draped with purple
like the saints in Holy Week...

On the recital day, she failed to appear.

Write about a piece of family gossip. Go on, tell all...

POETRY WORKOUT

Don't let your reader get lost in or between stanzas. Fill your poems with appropriate signs

1

Compose a sonnet about the signs that suggest something is approaching, ie appendicitis, lunch, night, a hurricane, aliens, disappointment, a new relationship.

2

Write in the present tense and the first-person singular about a sign the narrator notices but doesn't heed. Why is it ignored?

3

Advertise something using a billboard haiku, eg a food, a holiday destination, a charity, a loan or a political message.

4

What is a sign of the times? If you follow it where will you end up?

Poetry competition

with poetry judge Sue Butler



£100 winner
Ethel Goodall, Glasgow

SHAKING UP, WORDS,

Waiting, for the right ones
To settle

Like some figure, forever enclosed
Staring through blizzard,

With each tap on the glass, random
Patterns falling, running

Into one another, words
Melting.



About the poet Ethel Goodall is a retired librarian and is interested in literature, history and archaeology. She enjoys music, embroidery and nature, and is a member of a seniors t'ai chi class. She has had poems published in various anthologies.

The way the title of this month's winning poem, SHAKING UP, WORDS, by Ethel Goodall, from Glasgow, is also the first line shakes up the reader's expectations from the very beginning. It also warns the reader, subtly, to be on their mettle as the language is going to be condensed and the narrative may involve the unexpected.

The contrast between SHAKING in capitals as the first word in the title and *Waiting* as the first word of the second line is likely to resonate with anyone who has ever tried to write a poem.

Putting *To settle* on a line alone and then following these two simple words with a stanza break gives the reader plenty of time to let the

implications of this statement sink in, or, excuse the pun, settle.

In the next two couplets, Ethel may use sparse language but the reader is quickly left in no doubt about what is being described. This is a great example of how so much can be said (and be said very effectively) in a few well-chosen words.

Closing the poem with a single word encourages the reader to think about what melting really means.

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.

■ The action in Ethel's poem involves shaking, waiting, staring, melting, falling, running and a tap on glass. Write seven haiku-style poems where each poem focuses on one of these activities. If you can, link each of these into a cohesive narrative.

■ *Waiting, for the right ones...* Use a poem to explore a time when you were waiting for the right words. Why did you need them? Did they arrive in time or were you left with no option but to use the wrong words? Or perhaps you were left with no words?

■ Use *Enclosed* as the title of and inspiration for a poem. Who is enclosed and by what? Are they happy in this situation or do they long to escape? If they long to escape where do they want to go and why will things be better when they get there? Are they responsible for being enclosed or are money, age, religion, health or other people involved?

Highly Commended

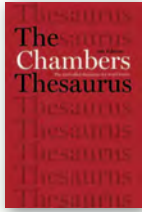
Look at me now, Doctor by Kathryn Budden, Paignton, Devon

This poem opens with a stark and thought-provoking statement – *It was not a sore part* – which immediately raises the question what part was not sore and were there perhaps other parts that were sore?

And if this was not enough for the reader to contemplate, the following line states just as starkly: *could not be controlled*.

These two lines set the scene for what follows – a brave and very personal poem about a medical misdiagnosis. This poem does not rant, rave or heap burning coals of blame on to the medical profession. The narrator chooses simply to say:

It needed some thinking out of that box
It could be determined yet
no one
joined up.



Each month our winning poet wins £100 and a copy of the new edition of Chambers Thesaurus, worth £40.

And there is wonderful honesty about the lines:

Many symptoms
two sided
- tellings on both.

An MRI lights up the wall
notes close to chest for the verdict,
never heard the word
misdiagnosis

If you have time this month, I encourage you to explore the theme of blame and make a note of the techniques you find yourself using to deal effectively with this challenging subject.

Remember our time by Gill Lewis, Groby, Leics

Another technique you might also like to explore is how to incorporate lists into your poetry. This is a technique Gill Lewis uses to good effect, asking us to remember our time...

...By the holidays we had
Skegness, Trinidad

Began with just two
Then three, then four, dog made five
Yorkshire Dales, St Ives

Self-catering tent
Luxury four star hotel
Whitby, La Rochelle...

...Short breaks and day trips
Too old to get insurance
Salisbury, Penzance

Remember those times
Happy to stay at home now
White Horse, Queen's Head, Plough

What does the list of place names bring to the poem? How do you ensure the list does not overwhelm the poem?

URBAN(E)UPDATE by Peter Stanchini, Hastings, E Sussex

And at risk of giving you too much to explore this month, Peter Stanchini's poem must surely inspire you to consider how your poems look on the page. Here it is in its entirety:

URBAN(E)UPDATE

THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH WITH US?
WORDSWORTH! THOU SHOULDST BE LIVING @THIS HOUR:
HASHTAGFUNKYINNITCITYPOETZ/[MSGs]

Notice how the first line relies on the punctuation to make the line a question. This, of course, raises the question as to whether you could be using fewer words and stronger punctuation in your own poetry.

Writers' FORUM

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Deadline: 15th of each month. Late entries go into the next contest.

Name

Address

Postcode

Phone number

Email address

Poem titles

- I declare that this poetry has not previously been published or broadcast and that it is my own work

Signed

I enclose (please tick) my poem(s) payment of £

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6-8 April at Cirencester

'Write Romantic Fiction' with Kate Walker - Retreat

'Write that Crime Story' with Stephen Wade

'The Business of Writing' with Simon Whaley - Retreat

Dates & Venues to be confirmed
With Alison Chisholm:

'Poetry for all Seasons'

'Write From The Top: The Cream Of Poetry'

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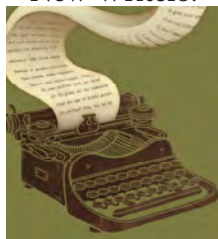
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Literary diary

FESTIVALS

Books on Tyne Book Festival, Newcastle

25 November – 3 December

The partnership between Newcastle Libraries and the Lit & Phil continues with the seventh year of this Newcastle book festival. The City Library offers some old favourites this year with John Grundy and Chris Phipps, and the Polari Literary Salon returns with one of the biggest names in crime writing, Val McDermid. www.booksontyne.co.uk

Doolin Writers' Weekend, Ireland

2-4 February

The weekend features workshops, readings, advice from publishing industry insiders, music sessions and open mic sessions. The 2018 programme will feature Patrick DeWitt, Sean O'Reilly, Sally Rooney, Ann-Marie Ni Chuireann, Doireann Ni Ghríofa, John Cummins, Sinead Gleeson, Rob Doyle, EM Reapy, June Caldwell, and many more. Weekend tickets from €99. www.doolinfestivals.ie/writers-weekend

Imagine Children's Festival, London

7-18 February

The Southbank Centre hosts 12 jam-packed days of half-term fun. Enjoy the best children's theatre, activities and inspirational authors with plenty of workshops and free activities for children up to 12. Be tickled by Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* and join radio personalities and debut authors Greg James and Chris Smith for an action-packed *Kid Normal* event. www.southbankcentre.co.uk

Portsmouth Book Fest

12 February – 4 March

Organised by Portsmouth City Library Service and the Hayling Island Bookshop this boasts a number of exciting events for all. www.portsmouthbookfest.co.uk

Cork International Poetry Festival

14-17 February

The festival celebrates its seventh anniversary with a mix of workshops, talks and readings. www.corkpoetryfest.net

Limerick Literary Festival

22-25 February

This year sees the 34th edition of the Limerick Literary Festival, which seeks to promote Limerick as a place of literary excellence and to provide a platform where readers can meet their favourite authors and other readers. www.limerickliteraryfestival.com



Liz Trenow is in Colchester

Faversham Literary Festival, Kent

23-25 February 2018

This festival offers a platform to listen to well-known authors discuss their books and the craft of writing, and provides opportunities for local writers and illustrators to showcase their work alongside published authors from further afield. There are also events for children, writing workshops and short story competitions. www.favershamliteraryfestival.org

Essex Book Festival

March

The 2018 programme includes events across Essex with writers, poets, artists, filmmakers and musicians taking part in what is the UK's only month-long, county-wide, book-inspired festival. There will be workshops, film, theatre, art, music, poetry and more. www.essexbookfestival.org.uk

AUTHOR & BOOK EVENTS

Barney Norris, Salisbury

9 January 6.30-8pm

This local playwright and author will be at Waterstones for a talk on his new book *Turning For Home*. He will be signing copies afterwards. Tickets cost £3 and can be redeemed against a purchase of the book on the night. For more details call 01722 415596.

Kimberley Chambers and Julie Shaw, Leeds

9 January 7-8.30pm

The crime author will be at Waterstones discussing her new novel *Life of Crime* with true-crime author Julie Shaw. Tickets £3. For more details call 0113 244 4588.

TS Eliot Prize Readings, London

14 January, 7-9.15pm

Marking the 25th anniversary of the TS Eliot Prize and presented by Ian McMillan, the 2017 Shortlist Readings is a major highlight of the

Kate Medhurst brings you the pick of next month's writing and book events

literary calendar. Ten shortlisted poets have been invited to take part and the atmosphere should be electric! It takes place at the Southbank Centre and tickets cost £12. For more details call 020 3879 9555.

Matt Haig, Canterbury

17 January, 6.30pm

The global bestselling author will be at Waterstones discussing his book *How to Stop Time* as it is released in paperback. There will be a Q&A and a book signing. Tickets cost £3. For more details call 01227 452354.

Peter May, Perth

17 January, 7.30pm

One of Scotland's top authors will be at Perth Theatre in conversation with BBC Radio Scotland presenter Fiona Stalker about his latest book *I'll Keep You Safe*. There will also be an audience Q&A session. Tickets cost £7. For more details call 01738 621031.

Jen Campbell and Daisy Johnson, London

22 January, 6.30pm

The monthly Short Story Salon welcomes award-winning poet and debut author Jen Campbell and Daisy Johnson, author of the highly-acclaimed *Fen*, at Waterstones in Gower Street. Tickets cost £6 and include wine. For more details call 020 7636 1577.

Lionel Shriver, London

28 January, 7.30pm

The award-winning writer will be talking to fellow author and journalist Tim Lott at St Martin's Church, Kensal Green. Lionel will answer questions and sign books. Tickets £10. For more details call 020 8960 6211.

Liz Trenow, Colchester

29 January, 7pm

The author will be at Waterstones talking about her latest novel *In Love & War*. Liz was inspired to write the story when she discovered that battlefield tours were being organised within months of the end of the war, while the devastation wrought by the fighting was still very visible. Tickets cost £2 and there will be complementary wine and nibbles on the night. For more details call 01206 561307.

Ruby Wax, Bath

31 January, 7.30pm

The comedian and mental health campaigner is at Topping and Company Bookshop to talk about her funny and compassionate new book, *How to Be Human*. Tickets cost £9.99 and are redeemable against a purchase of the book. For more details call 01225 428111.

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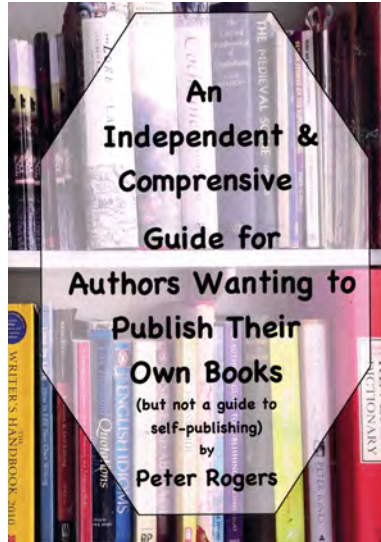
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New courses



A winter residential at Moniack Mhor

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www.moniackmhor.org.uk

SHORT COURSES

Writing Your Roots: Family History and Memoir, Birmingham From 4 January

In this five-session course, you'll be writing the past into life, whether your family's stories are local legends or tales connecting far away. You'll explore a range of writing techniques including memoir, short fiction, poetry and dialogue to capture the flavours, sounds, dreams and family dynamics of living memory and a more distant past. Sessions take place on Thursdays from 6.30pm to 8.30pm and the cost is £99.

www.writingwestmidlands.org

Writing for Children, London 11 January – 29 March

Tutor Anthony McGowan leads the lessons on this intensive, practical, skills-based writing course run by the Faber Academy. You'll benefit from everything Anthony knows about this difficult craft including plots that keep kids gripped, dialogue that convinces them and humour that gets giggles. It costs £995.

www.faberacademy.co.uk

Commercial Writing, Nottingham From 29 January

Learn how to develop your writing muscles in this fun, interactive six-week course, with exercises and advice throughout. It takes place on Mondays from 11am until 1pm with Caroline Bell Foster and explores elements that make your novel attractive for publishers and agents, from character development and settings to dialogue. It costs £120.

For more details call 0115 947 0069.

ONE-DAY COURSES

Writing Books for Young People, Swindon

13 January

Elen Caldecott leads this workshop for new or experienced children's writers. Maybe you've a great idea but aren't sure how to start writing. Or perhaps you've lost your mojo in the middle of a manuscript. This half-day workshop starts with the basics of writing a good story for children, then uses exercises to show how to keep momentum going. It costs £25 and takes place at the Richard Jefferies Museum.

www.richardjefferies.org/special-events

Introduction to Creative Writing, London

16 January

Prize-winning author Diane Chandler and her publisher, Stephanie Zia of Blackbird Books, are running a series of kitchen-table workshops for beginners. Informal and engaging, the three-hour, one-off sessions will share insights on plot, character, dialogue and more, including tips on how you might publish your work. They run from 9.45am until 1pm and cost £35.

www.dianechandlerauthor.com

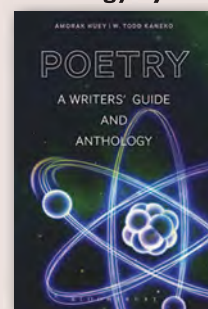
HELPFUL NEW BOOKS

The Last Draft: A Novelist's Guide to Revision by Sandra Jean Scofield



(Penguin Books, £12.68) shows writers how to turn first-draft manuscripts into the novels of their dreams. Critic, long-time teacher and award-winning novelist Sandra Scofield illustrates how to re-read a work of fiction with a view of its subject and vision, and how to take it apart and put it back together again, stronger and deeper. Published 5 December.

Poetry: A Writers' Guide and Anthology by Amarak Huey and



W Todd Kaneko (Bloomsbury Academic, £21.98) is a complete introduction to the art and craft of writing poetry. The authors map out more than 25 key elements of poetry including image, lyric, point of view, metaphor and movement, and use these as starting points for discussion questions and writing prompts. It also offers examples of contemporary poetry including poems by Billy Collins, Sherman Alexie, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Traci Brimhall, Terrance Hayes and more. Published 11 January.

ONLINE COURSES

Experimenting with Form 10 January

This 12-week course takes a playful journey through some of the most interesting forms in English poetry. Topics include the modern sonnet, tanka and haiku, the ghazal, sestina, villanelle, terza rima, visual and concrete poetry, epistolary poems, iambic pentameter and rhyme royal. This online course costs £150.

www.poetrylibrary.org.uk

Online Creative Writing 22 January

This online creative writing workshop is designed for beginners, and those looking to refresh their writing skills. Over 10 weeks, students will work through a structured series of specially designed online writing exercises exploring different forms of prose and poetry, all from the comfort of their own homes, receiving regular tutor and peer feedback along the way. It is run by the University of York Centre of Lifelong Learning and costs £110.

www.york.ac.uk/lifelonglearning



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

THE MENTOR

What's the best way to improve?

Your advice to a writer worrying about whether she was getting anywhere (issue #193) got me thinking. I stopped submitting to comps earlier this year when I realised how much my stories needed to improve. My characters were too thin, my plots rushed, my viewpoint inconsistent and I wasn't always getting a good balance between showing and telling.

I'm working to improve but what is the best approach? Can a writer fix so many faults all at once or should I tackle one area at a time? And are there exercises I should practise, like a musician?

Helen, Oxford

Thank you, Helen, for the opportunity to create *Am I getting anywhere? – The Sequel*. The ticklish subject of whether it's possible to improve is such a massive topic that there's certainly potential to expand on what I advised previously. In that article I touched on lazy writing and the habits we fall into. I also looked at different ways to push your writing to another level.

One thing I find encouraging about your letter is that you are aware of what

needs improvement. That is the first step in any journey towards literary perfection. Too often the major stumbling block is blissful ignorance; writers who are simply oblivious to the fact that their writing is not as polished as it could be.

You ask whether problems should be tackled one by one or all at once, and I would say the answer is both. By this I mean systematically go through a piece of work looking at all the areas that need improvement. Attack a print-out of that



draft with different coloured pens – green for character development, red for plot, blue for show/tell and so on. Imagine yourself as a fresh new reader each time, targeting these particular subjects.

Don't worry about how to become 'a better writer'. A good writer is simply someone who spots the problems in their work and fixes them. Sort out specific problems as you spot them and you'll naturally get quicker at it over time.

What is your approach when you recognise an area of weakness? Instead of just thinking, 'That character is thin,' and letting your shoulders slump, challenge yourself to make him or her more robust. What would make them truly memorable?

Glen David Gold, author of *Carter Beats the Devil*, said: 'When my students ask me about making strong characters, I always point them towards Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, as there are 15 major players whose personalities are vivid and distinct – and they're all rabbits. It has been 32 years since I first read the epic



cliffhanger to end a chapter.

So try revisiting a piece of writing that has pacing difficulties and crowbarring in extra details and scenes.

On the subject of balancing show and tell, I find that the 'showing' element can just emerge by itself. When I reread a section, I suddenly realise I've 'shown' rather than 'told'. For example, instead of saying, 'Mark felt scared,' I wrote, 'Jane could feel Mark's palm leave an imprint of sweat against hers.' I didn't consciously think I must show not tell, it happened organically because I was living the scene. I bet you'll discover examples in your own work.

That's the thing about being your own critic: you never focus on what you have achieved – where your writing sparkles and your characters come alive - just what you haven't. We're our own worst enemies.

It saddens me to think that you've given up hope of winning writing competitions, Helen. Dig out the last entry you submitted and read it with fresh eyes. Get out those coloured pens. Think what you could change to really tickle those jaded judges, what will make them fall off their chairs with amazement. Surprise them and you may surprise yourself with what you're capable of writing.

TIPS TO TAKE AWAY

I love the idea of practising writing like practising a musical instrument. Here are some ideas to try.

■ For the tedious exercise of playing scales, you could substitute thinking up 20 different ways to describe the sensation of falling asleep.

■ For repeating a particular bar of music until you can play it perfectly, rewrite a sentence in a variety of tenses, points of view and character. For example, rewrite: 'Helen doubted herself but she persisted,' several different ways.

■ As every music teacher will tell you, sitting down and practising every day is the best way to improve, so no matter how you feel, make writing a daily habit. *The Writer's Way* by Jack Rawlins and Stephen Metzger is an inspiring read about this.

“ A good writer is one who spots the problems in their work and fixes them ”

and do your best to eradicate it.

As for suspecting that your plots are rushed – I think that this can be rectified (again) with a return visit to your work. What is causing you to hurry through the action? Is it impatience? Or perhaps boredom?

I can remember as a child always being tempted to abruptly end a story with: 'And then I woke up and realised it was all a dream.' The ultimate limp ending when you can't be bothered to think of anything more convincing.

As adults, the ability to sustain the tension in a novel can seem superhuman, but it doesn't have to be achieved in one go, you can tweak again and again to increase the drama.

If, for example, you're writing a scene where someone discovers a dead body, you can prolong the suspense by inserting a separate scene in the middle, making the reader wait for the juicy details. This is similar to the technique where you include red herrings to throw the reader off the scent – especially effective as a

battle between General Woundwort and the awesome Bigwig, and I don't think I've ever again been so thrilled by a piece of literature.'

So if in doubt, write about rabbits!

Lorna Howarth, my colleague at The Write Factor, recently observed that the main character in a book I am ghostwriting (yes, I practise as well as preach) was unconvincing. She was right and I added some extra background to boost her profile. It didn't bring joy to my heart but it made sense, so I didn't let her observation floor me, I used it to enhance my work.

We all have room for improvement. Just take that second step after noticing a flaw

THE WRITE FACTOR

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



International bestselling author Joseph Kanon talks to Anita Loughrey about how he ensures his thrillers are historically accurate

I write novels of intrigue set in the immediate aftermath of World War II or during the Cold War, so research is a crucial part of the writing process for me. My sources are almost exclusively books, hunting from one bibliography to the next, along with pictures and, importantly, maps.

Place is almost a character in itself in my work, so I usually have a map by my side as I write. Or rather a series of maps, since place names change. In Berlin, several times.

Talk the talk

I have never interviewed anyone for my books. In part, this is because of my own language inadequacies – I can manage restaurant or autobahn German but not the fluent German that would be needed for an interview, nor do I possess the ear for nuance that such an encounter requires.

Even when the potential interviewee is English-speaking I'd rather work from written testimony. Memories are faulty, and even those people who were actually on the spot usually see things through a haze of time. What they remember has an indisputable authenticity – after all, they were there – but it's not always accurate. If you attend a dinner party and three weeks later ask all the guests to describe it, you're likely to get an astonishing variety of takes on what happened. Far more reliable, I've found, are written accounts, especially if they're written at the time – diaries, letters, journalism.

Autobiographies by key figures written later tend to be self-serving and usually



dull, but a letter or magazine piece can be as revealing for what it leaves out as what it contains: what assumptions are being made, what both writer and reader accept as normal shared experience. I look for what is happening in daily life that they feel worth noting – shortages, rationing, etc.

Of course, this is not to say histories and biographies have no place on the research shelf. They make up the building blocks of any research project, the baseline of what you need to know. But personal writings are gold for novelists – they can offer the kind of detail, the sensory impression that can make a scene come alive.

When I was researching *The*

early days of the Russian occupation, but what made it so valuable to me is that the author gives you a real feel for what the city was like, not just the mounds of rubble we've all seen in pictures, but how the city sounded and how it smelled.

In one memorable scene she walks across what had been the busy centre of Berlin, not hearing a sound. I added a solitary bicycle whose clacking wheels would make the stillness even eerier.

Years later, I was able to repay a little of my debt to this book when it was re-issued and I was asked to review it for *The New York Times*, a rare instance of a literary debt coming full circle.

The subjects of my novel *Defectors* by their nature tended to keep a low profile while Stalin was alive. Their presence in the Soviet Union wasn't even acknowledged and I worried there would be very little written material to consult. But happily two of Kim Philby's four wives (the two he had in Moscow) wrote memoirs, as did George Blake and various foreign correspondents, and all of them supplied the details of city life I was looking for.

Walk the walk

My books usually take a year's reading as research. No matter how much you read about a place, however, there is no substitute for actually being there, on the ground. I think you have to walk a city to know it: the distances, the feel of neighbourhoods. Where will your characters live? Do they walk to work or take a tram? What restaurants do they

Place is almost a character in itself in my work

Good German, a novel about Berlin in the summer of 1945, I came across a then out-of-print memoir called *A Woman in Berlin* by Anonymous. The author describes numerous rapes and didn't want her family embarrassed.

It's a remarkable book in every way, perhaps the best first-hand account we have of



like? What do they see as they walk down the street?

You don't have to tell the reader everything they see, one or two details will do, but I have to see everything in my mind's eye so that it's real to me. None of this is easy – you're bound to make a mistake somewhere and someone's bound to send you an email to point it out. In *Defectors* I had a Marine guarding the US Embassy in Moscow (as they do in other places) but was quickly corrected – the Soviets would have used their own guards.

The problems of getting things right are compounded when your story is set in the past. It's one thing to stroll down Istanbul's Rue de la Pera (now the Istiklal Caddesi); it's another to stroll down it in 1945. Aside from anything else, it's now pedestrianised.

Pictures help and, again, accounts written at the time, but at a certain point imagination has to come into play. You take what concrete details you have and let them suggest what a place must have been like, or what you would have noticed were you to go magically back in time.

The first thing any tourist in Moscow today would notice, for instance, is the roar of traffic, thundering down the wide Stalinist ring roads and giving the city an almost tangible energy. But if you were to arrive in 1961, as the protagonist of *Defectors* does, the first thing you would notice is the absence of cars. Only Politburo members had cars in those days, and in contemporary photos even trucks are pretty thin on the

ground. The wide boulevards would have been empty. The quiet city – at night even more so – would be a complete contrast to the New York you'd just left.

Defectors presented some special problems because Moscow has changed so much since 1961. What seems vibrant, even vulgar now would have been dreary and puritanical then. I wanted my defectors to have living situations that mirrored as closely as possible those of actual western defectors in 1961.

In a top-down controlled society like the Soviet Union, your housing assignment, for instance, would speak volumes about your status and value to the Party. So I tracked down Kim Philby's apartment building and put my defector just around the corner. Guy Burgess's apartment building also makes an appearance as it was conveniently across the street from a murder site.

I went to restaurants and hotel bars the real defectors had frequented (most still there), rode the same Metro and went to the same Bolshoi until the two research strands came together: the print materials leading the location scouting on the ground.

After a while I began to see Moscow as the defectors might have seen it, through a scrim of history that turned today's colourful city into the grey Moscow of the Cold War.

Then I'd have a drink in the hotel's rooftop bar overlooking a Disney-like floodlit Kremlin – inconceivable in 1961 and certainly not usable in my story. But even research should have its occasional rewards.

WRITING OUTLETS

with Janet Cameron

Great short stuff online

Flash Fiction Magazine

flashfictionmagazine.com

Flash Fiction Magazine publishes one brilliant story online every day, and you have a good chance of acceptance as they use 10 to 15 per cent of the material submitted. There is no payment for online publication, but if your work is chosen for one of their regular anthologies, you will receive \$40 payment. Send traditional stories only please, no poetry or memoirs.

Tip: Your story must have a discernible plot involving conflict and resolution.

Submissions: Use the online submissions manager and send between 300 and 1000 words. Only one submission per month. Full guidelines available online.



Ariel Chart

arielchart.blogspot.co.uk

Ariel Chart is a very professional blog run by a single editor. Although brevity is key here, all genres are considered. Traditional and contemporary poetry of no more than 50 lines is acceptable, and any genre of short story, including experimental, up to 1500 words maximum.

Tip: If your work has been published before, you can still send it to Ariel Chart, providing you retain the rights.

Submissions: By email only and the editor insists you use your real name, not a pen name. Current email addresses for submissions are on the website.



100 Word Story

www.100wordstory.org

This site is tremendous fun for a quick read and for writers who don't have much spare time. You can subscribe online. There is also a monthly photo prompt to encourage you.

Tip: The editors say the 100-word format forces the writer to question each word in a way that even most flash fiction doesn't. Make each word count.

Submissions: Your story needs to be exactly 100 words, no more, no less, and remember to include a 25-word author bio. Submit via their online Submishmash manager. There is, however, a \$2 submission fee.



• Janet's ebook *Fifteen Women Philosophers*, published by decodedscience.com, is available from Amazon

Competitive Edge

AS ONE DOOR OPENS...

Being traditionally published has closed certain doors, one author finds...

Published in the US and UK, mostly under the pen names of Gil McDonald and Amos Carr, novelist and short story author Jill McDonald-Constable is no stranger to writing comps... with mixed results.

'I consider myself to be a really lucky person, on the writing front at least. With nine works now 'out there' from two publishers (one in the USA) and three of my titles available in libraries across the UK, I thought I was doing quite well in my own small way. I may never earn huge amounts of money, but the satisfaction of holding a shiny new book with my name on the cover is a thrill I will never grow tired of.

'But I do still like to enter writing competitions. I've always believed they are a way to hone your work, discard unnecessary words, and discover more about the kind of writing which most appeals to you.

'I usually write romance, medieval, westerns, time-slip and animal tales... not all in one story, of course. Mind you, why not? Through entering comps, I have recently discovered that I also quite like writing supernatural tales and stories set in the 1920s.

'I used to enter quite a few contests and have had a few successes over the years, enough to keep me interested. However, since being traditionally published, the amount of competitions open to me has been reduced



Jill McDonald-Constable

dramatically. As an unpublished author, I was free to enter almost every comp out there. But now there are a lot of very interesting competitions that are off-limits. Some won't even take self-published writers.

'Many of those that are still open to me seem to have a much higher entry fee, as if having anything published means I must be earning a lot of money. I wish! There is little to be earned from winning most of these competitions.

'I shall carry on competing in those that are open to me, but there seems to be a slight smack of discrimination. I do sometimes wonder if there could be two categories: one for unpublished and one for published authors.'

• Find out more about Jill's books at www.amazon.co.uk/Gil-McDonald/le/B00JNRSLWU

Morgen's Motivation

If you find your writing is a little stale, try a different genre or era out of your comfort zone. Jill found herself writing about the supernatural and the Jazz Age, and realised she was good at it.

With nine published novels and many short stories under her belt, she's done the million words that W Somerset Maugham and Ray Bradbury (among others) are quoted as saying is the benchmark of being a great writer. Although I don't believe it has to be as much as that, writing is a craft and we need to hone our skill.

Even if you don't end up getting your new story published, it's still practice.

If it's not fun though, it will show in your writing. If you're struggling – or worse, bored! – put it away and move on to the next piece.

Comp of the Month

The Fantastic Books 'SciFan Fire and Ice' competition is looking for 'your darkest, most twisted dystopian' stories (in the science fiction and/or fantasy genre) up to 2000 words. Their theme, as the title suggests, is fire and ice. Although this competition is specific in its requirements, those two elements are a natural conflict and that's what every story needs.

With a deadline of 31 December, you don't have long to enter, but even if you don't have a story ready for that competition, there's nothing stopping you submitting it elsewhere, whether it's for another competition or a magazine. There are plenty of those who like authors with a dark side!

Find more details on this competition opposite and on their website: <https://www.fantasticbooksstore.com/competitions/current-competitions>

Reader feedback

■ Veronica Whittaker: 'I've been writing for about six years now. I joined a writing group which, slowly, led me to try a few competitions, with a bit of success – a poem published in *Writers' Forum* and a win in the BookTrust 50-word comp. I am currently doing an Open University degree course and have just completed the writing side of it. I'm hoping to do a Masters in Creative Writing at the end of it all.'

Morgen adds: 'Veronica went on to come third in my 100-word comp recently!'



with writer, editor and competition judge Morgen Bailey

COMPS NOW OPEN

Words for the Wounded / Georgina Hawtrey-Woore Independent Author Award Deadline 6 March

Book: picture books, self-published adult or YA fiction or non-fiction. **Fee:** £12.50. **Prizes:** A review and A Day in the Life feature in *Frost* magazine for top two winners in each category. **Judge:** Gillian Holmes. **Details:** see www.wordsforthewounded.co.uk

Bath Novel Award Deadline 30 April

Novel: first 5000 words and synopsis. **Fee:** £25. **Prizes:** £2000 plus Minerva trophy; £500 voucher for Cornerstones Literary Consultancy. **Details:** see bathnovelaward.co.uk or write to The Bath Novel Award, PO Box 5223, Bath BA1 0UR.

Yeovil Literary Prizes Deadline 31 May

Novel: synopsis and opening chapters max 15,000 words. **Fee:** £12. **Prizes:** £1000; £250; £100. **Poem:** max 40 lines. **Fee:** £7; £10 for two; £12 for three. **Prizes:** £500; £200; £100. **Short story:** max 2000 words. **Fee:** £7. **Prizes:** £500; £200; £100. **'Writing Without Restrictions' prize:** Any format, eg a letter; recipe; science piece; advert; label; essay; biography or a mini saga. **Fee:** £5. **Prizes:** £200; £100; £50. **Details:** www.yeovilprize.co.uk or write to YCAA, The Octagon Theatre, Yeovil BA20 1UX.

Erewash Writers Competitions Deadline 21 June

Poetry: max 40 lines. **Prize:** £10. **Flash fiction:** 500-600 words. **Prize:** £10. **Short story:** 1500-2500 words. **Prize:** £25. **Theme:** 'Summer Garden' (but not as title). **Fee:** FREE (optional critique: £3 poetry or flash fiction; £5 short stories). **Rules:** max two entries per author. **Details:** see

Yeovil's Octagon Theatre is home to lots of prizes



<https://erewashwriterscompetition.weebly.com/2018-free-entry-themed-writing-competition.html>

COMPS CLOSING SOON

31 DEC

Ballymaloe International Poetry Prize

Poem: no line limit. **Fee:** €12. **Prizes:** €10,000; 3 x €1000. **Details:** www.themothmagazine.com or write to The Ballymaloe International Poetry Prize, c/o The Moth, Ardan Grange, Milltown, Belturbet, Co Cavan, Ireland.

Fantastic Books 'SciFan Fire and Ice' Competition

Story: Dark twisted dystopian sci-fi and/or fantasy, max 2000 words. **Theme:** 'Fire & Ice'. **Fee:** £5 each for first four, then £3.50. **Prizes:** £100; £50; £25. **Details:** www.fantasticbooksstore.com/competitions/current-competitions

Flash 500

Flash: max 500 words. **Fee:** £5 or £8 for two. **Prizes:** £300 plus publication; £200; £100. **Details:** see www.flash500.com

1 JAN

Exeter Novel Prize

Novel: 10,000 words (opening of novel and a synopsis.) **Fee:** £18. **Prizes:** £500 plus trophy; 5 x £75 and trophy. **Judge:** Broo Doherty.

Continued overleaf ►

Short Memoir Prize

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- Closes: 31 Jan '18
- Entry fee: €16 (€10 subsequent)

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Details:

www.fishpublishing.com

Essential Books for Writers

By Alison Baverstock

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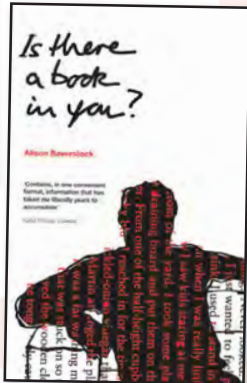


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Continued from page 63

Details: see www.creativewritingmatters.co.uk/2017-exeter-novel-prize.html

29 JAN

Bath Novella-in-Flash Award

Novella: 6000 to 18,000 words with flashes (chapters) of no more than 1000 words. **Fee:** £16. **Prizes:** £300; 2 x £100; plus publication. **Details:** see www.bath-flashfictionaward.com

31 JAN

BeaconFlash Monthly 500-word Competition

Story: max 500 words. **Theme:** the month, ie 'January'. **Fee:** £2 (optional critique £5). **Prizes:** three shortlisted go through to the following July's BeaconLit Festival final where 10 prizes announced, worth £325. **Details:** see <https://beaconlitblog.wordpress.com/500-word-competition>

11 FEB

Bath Flash Fiction Award

Flash fiction: max 300 words. **Fee:** £9. **Prizes:** £1000; £300; £100. **Details:** see www.bathflashfictionaward.com

22 FEB

BBC Radio 2 500-word Short Story Competition

Flash fiction: max 500 words. **Rules:** ages 5-13. **Details:** www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00rfvk1

28 FEB

Crime Writers' Association Margery Allingham Short Story Competition

Story: 3500 words. **Fee:** £12. **Prize:** £500; CrimeFest 2019 tickets; Margery Allingham-related books. **Details:** see thecwa.co.uk/debuts/short-story-competition

Fish Flash Fiction Prize

Flash: max 300 words **Fee:** online €14 for one, then €8 each; postal €16, then €10 each. **Prizes:** €1000; online writing course. **Judge:** Sherrie Flick **Details:** see



www.fishpublishing.com/flash-fiction-contest or write to Fish Flash Fiction Prize, Durrus, Bantry, Co Cork, Ireland.

Kelpies Prize

Novel for children: please see website for suggested manuscript lengths for different age categories. **Theme:** set wholly or mainly in Scotland. **Fee:** FREE. **Prize:** £2000 and publication. **Details:** www.florisbooks.co.uk or write to Kelpies Prize 2018, Floris Books, 2a Robertson Ave, Edinburgh EH11 1PZ.

1 MAR

The Rialto Nature and Place Poetry Competition

Poem: 40 lines, up to six poems in each batch of entries. **Theme:** any aspect of nature/place. **Fee:** £6 for first, then £3.50 each. **Prizes:** £1000; £500; Ty Newydd Writing Centre course; wildlife tours. **Judge:** Michael Longley **Details:** please see www.therialto.co.uk/pages/nature-poetry-competition-2018 or write to Nature and Place Comp, RSPB, Stalham House, 65 Thorpe Road, Norwich NR1 1UD.

UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED...

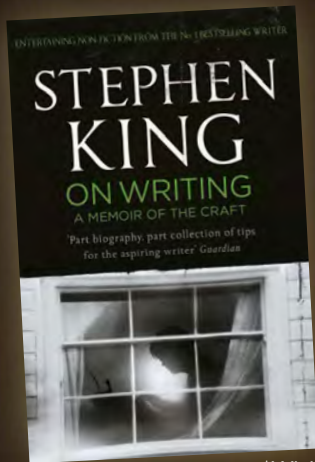
Theme and genre are open. Entries should be original and unpublished. Postal entries should be printed on white A4 in a clear plain font. Include a separate cover sheet with the title, word count, your name, address and postcode, phone and email. Stories should be double-spaced with good margins. Where 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.

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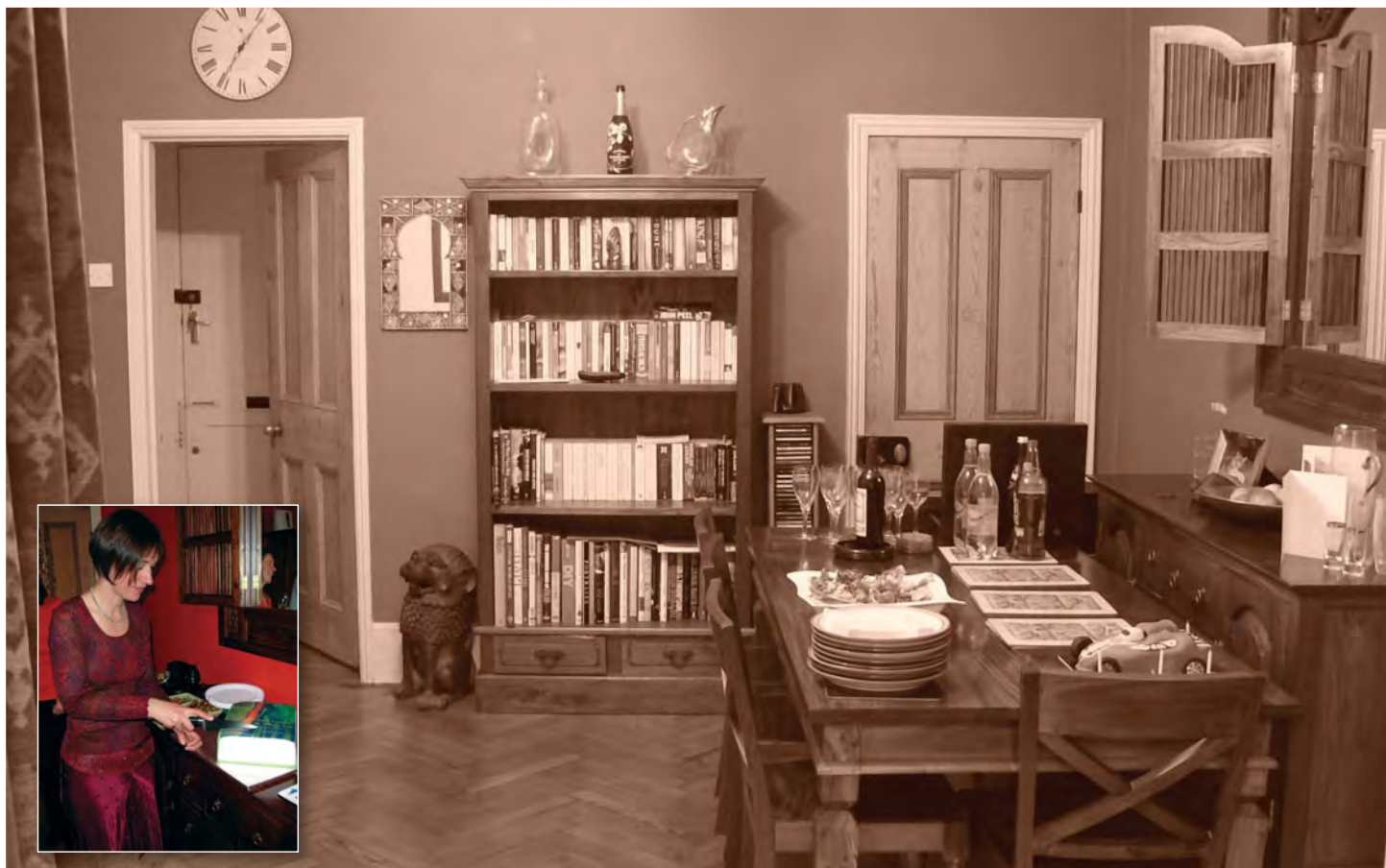
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Where I write

Phil Barrington visits award-winning author Jane Davis at her unusual home in Carshalton, London

I need complete silence. I've a tendency to glare at anyone who disturbs my train of thought, even if they come bearing coffee and biscuits. This glare is known in our house as the Davis Death Stare.

We don't have a spare bedroom, so the obvious place to locate my laptop was the dining room, the only room with a table. After my debut novel, when I gave up work to write full time, I bought myself a writing bureau. On my first attempt I warped the hinges of the fold-down desktop. In retrospect there would never have been enough space for all of my research folders, calculator, notebooks, diary, camera, thesaurus, dictionary, etc. Now it is just a general depository for stuff.

On the wall is a small portrait of a young girl gifted to me by an elderly neighbour who was my adopted granny when I was growing up. On a shelf to my right is the antique camera that has a cameo role in *My Counterfeit Self*. Above the fireplace is

the silver Buddha's head that features in *An Unknown Woman*. Looking around, I can see many objects that have crept into my storylines but there are no whiteboards or Post-it notes. No chapter breakdowns. I don't outline at all. My novels grow organically. Often the final draft bears very little resemblance to the first.

Now my writing room is under threat. I promised to keep to normal office hours (ie not 7am until 9pm during the week and 7am until 1pm at the weekends) and to keep to my 'corner' of the table (half, in practice). But I was getting away with it. Then, last year, my partner began working from home part time. Disaster! From my perspective, he is invading my writing space two additional days a week, while, according to him, I am denying him access to the kitchen and bathroom – the dining room serves as the corridor to both. Effectively, he is trapped in the living room. It was decided for me. I would have

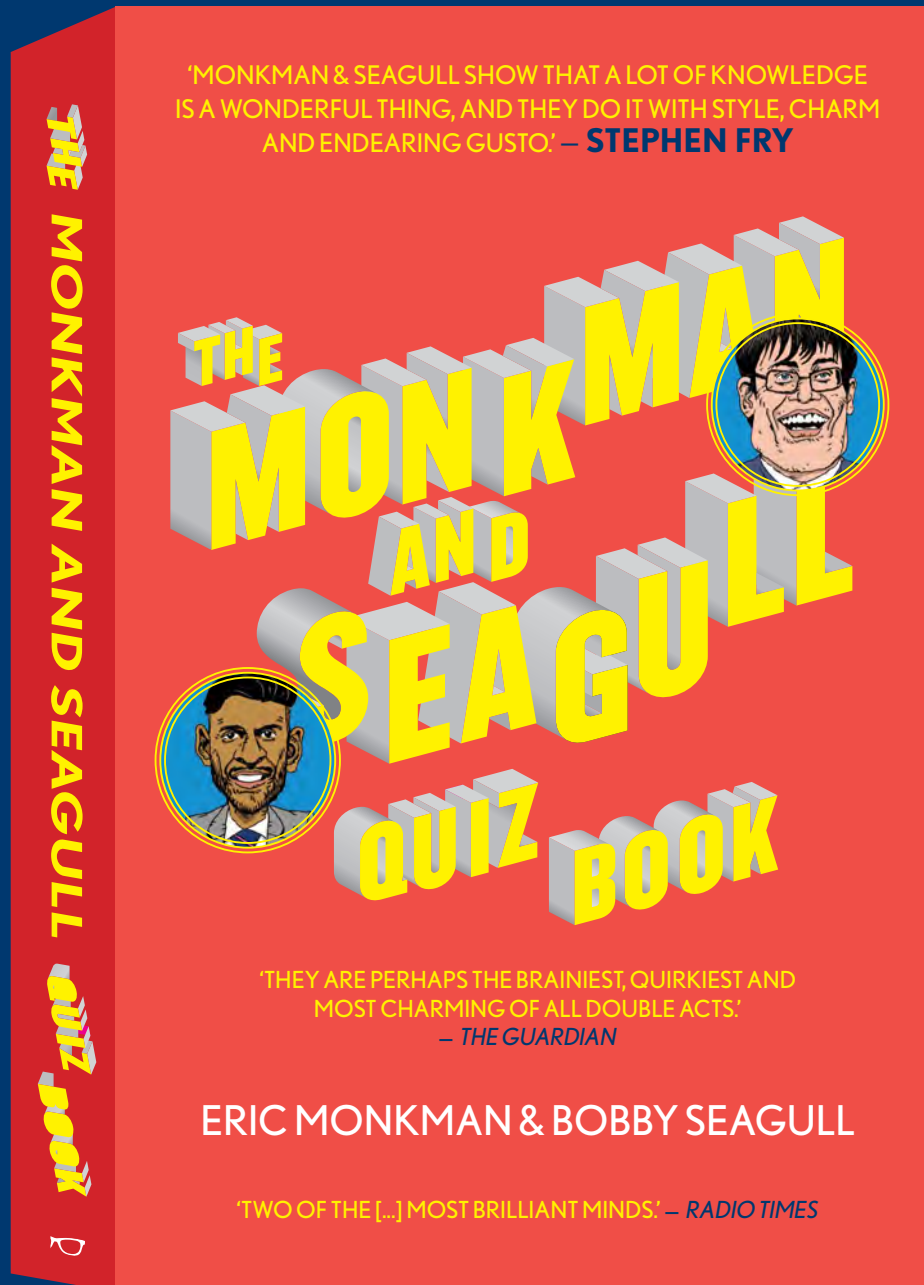
to retreat to some kind of writer's shed.

Two obstacles stalled this project. One was the railway at the bottom of the garden. Noise and vibrations aside, the changing of signals used to delete files from my computer, I kid you not. Before I used to back up my work, I lost the first five chapters of the novel that became *Half-Truths and White Lies* and had to recreate them from memory.

Then, by the time we laid the hardcore, 'next door' managed to produce two more children and build them a playhouse right next to the intended site of the writing shed. The children have proven to be far noisier than the trains.

Earlier this year we found a company who were prepared to add a small extension to our very peculiar house. It's an old ticket office for what was once pleasure gardens. It was never intended to be lived in and has very low overhanging eaves. My eviction has been delayed as we now have a building dispute on our hands. Said builders totally underestimated the time the job would take. I may even get to finish my current work-in-progress before matters are resolved...

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What our students say:



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Sarah Plater



"I enrolled in The Writers Bureau's Creative Writing course in the hope of **building my confidence as a writer** and ending my cycle of publishing failures. **I currently work as a content writer** with a writing agency and have even won a writing competition."

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."

Martin Read



"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."

Steph Thompson



"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 scribblings 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."

George Stewart

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