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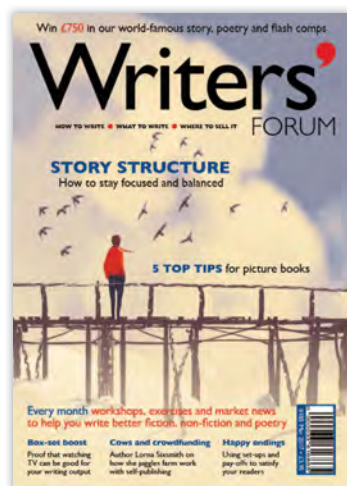
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Writers' FORUM

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

Ghost writing (*see p10*) might seem like an occupation reserved for experienced writers with a record of being published but that isn't the case. My own background is in true life magazines and like many of my colleagues I found it much easier to write up someone else's true story than create fiction. All of the other skills of storytelling – voice, pace, structure and so on – are needed but the real life events provide a useful set of constraints in which to work. As I've said before, such limits help rather than hinder your creativity because you have something to work with and are not daunted by a blank page. If you find that people often tell you things that would make a good story, think about offering to turn it into a news item, magazine feature or even a book. It's a well established way into writing.

Write soon, Carl



Don't miss issue #186 on sale from 16 March

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newsFRONT

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

Troubled romance

Allromance.com, a major romance ebook distributor in the US and the UK, has closed after falling victim to the downturn in the digital reading market.

The distributor's 5000 authors and publishers, which include major players such as Mills & Boon, were given three days' notice of the closure and were also informed that royalties would be reduced.

Apart from distributing ebooks, Allromance.com had a publishing arm that provided content to iTunes and Amazon, which has also been affected.

Authors reacted angrily about the short notice they were given to accept the deal. Writer Isobel Starling described the offer as a 'joke' and said: 'Readers had three days to download what would be millions of ebooks. The site crashed constantly under the strain and money spent on gift cards and store credit cards has been lost.'

In the UK, ebook sales fell by just under 2 per cent between 2014 and 2015, while sales of physical books rose by 0.4 per cent. Traders have blamed 'digital fatigue'.

Nicky Cassar White

Amazon book pirates pursued by publishers

Amazon has been subpoenaed to reveal the names and financial details of 100 Amazon Marketplace sellers who sell pirated books.

Education publishers Pearson Education, McGraw Hill and Cengage Learning are taking legal action against the third-party sellers on Amazon's websites for copyright infringement. Whilst Amazon is not named as a defendant in the case, the publishers say that the ability of the sellers to sell counterfeit copies of the publishers' books via the online giant causes great damage to their businesses. An Amazon spokesperson told the *Financial Times*: 'Amazon has zero tolerance for the sale of counterfeit items on our site. We are taking legal action and aggressively pursuing bad actors.'



Tricia Lowther

CSI Swanwick

Kate Bendelow, a serving crime scene investigator and writer, is running a forensics course at this year's Swanwick Summer School.

As well as describing what it feels, looks and smells like to discover and handle a dead body, she'll advise on who has access and control of a crime scene, what clues are looked for to ascertain whether death is suspicious, evidence types and methods of recovery. For the brave there'll also be the

opportunity to take a whiff of perfume samples made to replicate decaying flesh! What better way to get authenticity into your crime writing.

The summer school runs from 12 to 18 August. See www.swanwickwritersschool.org.uk

Storyteller award

Amazon have announced the UK Kindle Storyteller Award with a huge prize. The winning author will receive £20,000, a marketing campaign to promote the book on Amazon UK, the opportunity to have their work translated for sale in different territories and he or she will also be invited to an awards ceremony in London.

The competition is open to all authors who publish their book through Kindle Direct Publishing on Amazon.co.uk between 20 February and 19 May 2017. The book must be made available in print as well as for Kindle.

Entries can be in any genre, across both fiction and non-fiction, but must be at least 5000 words in length and for sale

exclusively on Amazon for the whole judging period (ie enrolled in the KDP Select programme). The shortlist will be drawn up using a number of indicators that measure customer interest in each book, such as sales, borrows and customer feedback, which indicates that the competition demands marketing skills as well as writing ability. The winner will be selected by a judging panel of 'Amazon experts and literary authorities'. See www.amazon.co.uk/storyteller

Sally Jenkins

Second win for Barry

The Costa Book of the Year was won by Irish writer Sebastian Barry with his novel *Days Without End*. Barry is the first novelist to win the prize twice – two poets, Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, have previously managed the feat.

Barry was born in Dublin in 1955 and now lives in Wicklow. Awarding the prize, worth £30,000, the judges described his novel set in the American Civil War as 'a miracle of a book'.

The Costa Short Story Award, worth £3000, was won by Jess Kidd for her story *Dirty Little Fishes*. Kidd grew up in London but recently moved to County Mayo, Ireland.



Nicky Cassar White

Golden jubilee for NZ writing group

Tauranga Writers, the longest running self-help group for writers in New Zealand, is celebrating 50 years of writers and writing with literary events throughout the year.

Each week a different member of the group will be writing on the blog and the first public event was planned for 17 February, with local artists and writers on hand to offer advice and

encouragement to anyone with a writing project in mind.

For more details, see www.taurangawriters.org.nz

Purbeck winner

This year's Purbeck Literary Festival contest has been won by Frances Ainslie, from Dunblane, Perthshire, with her story *Silver*. She wins £100, publication in *Writers' Forum* later in the year and an invite to receive her prize during the festival, which runs from 16 to 23 February 2017. For more information see www.purbeckliteraryfestival.info

New diversity award

Writing school Golden Egg Academy has launched an award to find new voices in children's writing. The Quarto Translation Diversity Awards are open to 'diverse' writers, a very broad term that includes race and heritage, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, socio-economic status, religion and culture. The awards will also support those wishing to become editors, and those writing about diverse characters.

The awards will be run annually

Book world condemns Trump's travel ban

Prominent figures from the book world have condemned the US travel ban which halted all refugee admissions and barred people from seven Muslim-majority countries. Former children's laureate Malorie Blackman vowed not to return to the US while the ban remained in place, author Phillip Pullman said he was 'fully in sympathy with Malorie's decision', while *Reasons to Stay Alive* author Matt Haig said he had cancelled a family holiday to the US.

Manchester-based publisher Comma Press announced that throughout 2017 it will only publish books by authors from the seven countries affected by the ban. CEO Ra Page said: 'If the only narrative America wants to export right now is the narrative of hate, then we need to look elsewhere. We need to consciously turn our backs on the circus that America is descending into.'

Tricia Lowther



four winners a prize fund totalling £40,000 – and entrants need not have any previous experience. Katherine Soper, a winner from the 2015 award, now has her play *Wishlist* being staged at London's Royal Court Theatre.

The competition is open to anyone over the age of 16 in the British Isles. All submissions are anonymous and read by a team of skilled readers. The final 10 will be judged by a panel of experts including playwright Lucy Prebble, actor Don Warrington, broadcaster Kirsty Lang and TV scriptwriter Russell T Davies.

Submissions close on 5 June and are accepted through the website www.writeaplay.co.uk

Alice Charles

and take the form of financial grants. Submissions will be open from April until July. Keep an eye on www.goldeneggacademy.co.uk

Spare beds needed

The Spare Room Project is an initiative to help people outside London take up publishing work experience in the capital. It's supported by the Publishers Association and matches people aspiring to work in publishing with people who have spare rooms in the capital

and would be able to provide accommodation for a week. One of the challenges for new entrants into publishing is the cost of accommodation while taking unpaid work experience. See www.publishers.org.uk/policy-and-news/news-releases/2016/spare-room-project

Susie Kearley

Better late than never

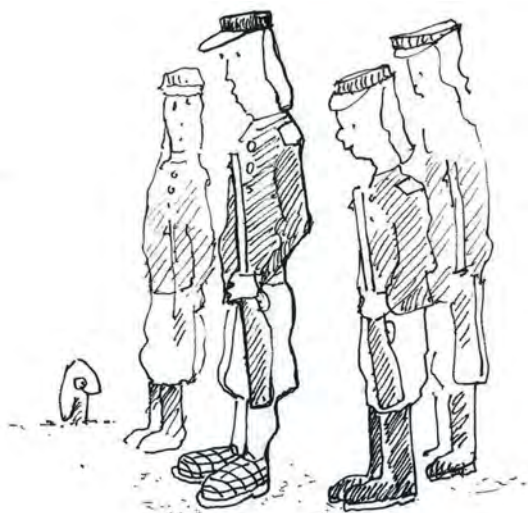
A short-story collection has been returned to San Francisco Public Library after a century by the borrower's great-grandson. The book, ironically titled *40 Minutes Late*, was borrowed in 1917 by Phoebe Webb from a branch library that no longer exists. Luckily, her descendant, Webb Johnson, avoided a potential \$3650 (£2900) fine thanks to an amnesty for overdue books launched in January.

Nicky Cassar White

Play for high stakes

Europe's largest playwriting prize is open for submissions. The biennial Bruntwood Prize offers

ODD SPOT BY HUGH SCOTT



Having joined the Legion to escape the traumas of creative writing, Derek was embarrassed to discover he was still wearing his slippers.

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 Tricia Lowther.

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!



I'LL GIVE YOU THE KEY

Setting deadlines and being organised has been the key to success for self-publishing farmer Lorna Sixsmith. She tells Kate Chapman how she did it

Lorna Sixsmith runs a beef and dairy farm with her husband Brian in Count Laois, Ireland, and fits her writing around her farm duties and looking after their son and daughter.

Her trilogy – *Would you Marry a Farmer?*, *How to Be a Perfect Farm Wife* and *Ideal Farm Husband* – takes a tongue-in-cheek look at country courtship, along with social history and some practical tips and advice for modern-day farmers and their spouses.

Lorna, who taught English and history before taking over her family's farm in 2002, had always thought about writing a book but only considered the idea more seriously after she began blogging.

She initially wrote about interior design to tie in with another business she was running, but switched her focus to farm life and her rural surroundings once she realised how much she enjoyed writing.

Would You Marry a Farmer? was the result of a blog post which went viral.

'I'd been helping Brian sort calves one day,' she recalls. 'He kept asking me to grab the white one. Bearing in mind they're all black and white, obviously I didn't know which one he meant, so we started shouting at each other.'

'Shortly afterwards I wrote "Ten pieces of advice to everyone considering marrying a farmer" – it became my most popular post and I started forming the idea of turning it into a book.'

But rather than finish a manuscript and then try to find an agent or publisher, Lorna took a far less traditional approach.

'I went to a meeting that talked about crowdfunding,' she explains. 'It gave me the idea to see if there was any support out there for what I wanted to write. I'd read a lot of farm memoirs and I found one book from Australia on advice for farmers' wives but other than that there wasn't really anything similar to what

I was planning. My books have since been compared to the old 1950s marriage manuals, but for modern times and with lots of humour and a pinch of salt.'

The idea was to seek sponsors who would make a €15 donation in return for a finished hardback copy of her book, using the funds to help cover her self-publishing costs. She put an appeal on the Irish website Fund:it.

'Crowdfunding let me test the water – even if I only got 10 backers I knew I would have to write it – so I decided to go for it. If I'd gone the traditional route I'm not sure I'd have ever finished it and the book might have been very different to the one I actually produced.'

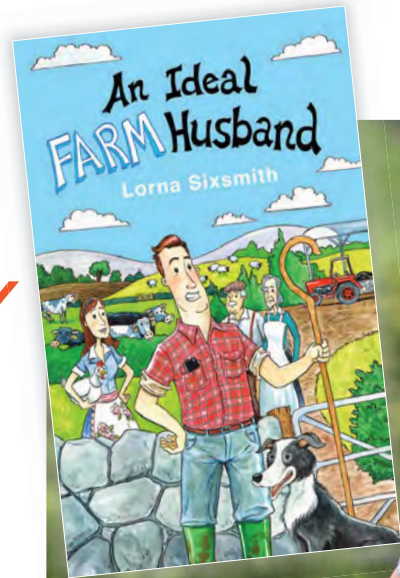
'Looking back I must have been mad. It was hard asking people for money, especially as all I had written was a blog post. I didn't have a book or a front cover.'

Lorna raised around €6000 (just over £5000) but says in reality producing 1000 books cost her in the region of €9000 (around £7600), along with a new website and illustrations. Choosing hardback made each book more expensive, taking them from €3 to €5 each to produce.

Another drawback was that she ended up spending a lot of the time she had set aside for writing managing her crowdfunding campaign.

'It was a full-time job,' she recalls, 'and this was while the kids were on school holidays. I was just constantly trying to promote it. I had a couple of articles in the local press and I wrote about it on the blog, how it was going and what was working. Twitter was by far the best form of promotion as people just had to click on the link which was right there.'

Lorna ran her fundraising drive through July and August 2013 and pledged to complete her book by the end of November that year, reassuring her backers they



Lorna and her husband Brian. Above: her latest book. Opposite: illustrations add to the humorous writing

would have their copies by Christmas, as many were planning to give it as a gift.

She wrote 52,000 words in three months.

'I just had to make myself sit down and write. Having a deadline definitely made me more focused. I've come to recognise I'm the sort of person who needs to have that. I write my best stuff under pressure.'

'For that first book I already had a lot of the contents in my head, so it was about getting it down on paper. I worked better at night and could easily sit up until 1am writing, but now I'm older and getting up earlier I like to wind down after 9pm and have the evening to myself to read. When it comes to the crunch I can still stay up late and do it but I try not to.'

Her husband Brian is her first reader.

'He'd come home from work at 10pm and I'd give him a print-out to read. He's a good first reader – he used to be a scientist and is not the type to say, "Oh that's brilliant," but will tell me which bits aren't so good and how I might improve them and really help me to stand back from it.'

'I had an editor too, somebody I knew, but I did what a lot of self-publishers do



I'm the sort who needs a deadline. I write my best stuff under pressure

and made changes after she had edited it, and that's when a couple of typos crept in.

'In hindsight having an immovable deadline probably isn't such a good idea when it's your first book!' she admits.

Lorna produced three print runs of her first book, each of 1000 copies. Sales online and in farm shops went well, which she puts down to people buying it as a Christmas gift or being prompted by radio interviews she gave.

Although she never set out to write a trilogy, the first book's success spurred her on to write the next two. Instead of crowdfunding, she used money from the sales of each book to fund its successor.

'I cringe a little regarding the formatting of my first book,' she says, 'whereas my

second one was good enough to win the Irish CAP indie book awards. Not all of that was down to the formatting, of course, but I'm sure it helped that the book looked more professional.'

In order to combine her writing with her farm work Lorna splits her year into three. She writes during autumn when the farm is quiet. 'I use Ireland's biggest agricultural event, the National Ploughing Championships, as my deadline each year – I would never finish anything if I didn't!'

February to April is her busy calving season and September to January is spent marketing and selling her books.

'My advice would be to ask other self-published authors questions – they're a very supportive lot and happy to share their experiences with others.'

'There are so many free online resources for self-publishers out there too, which I didn't know about at the start. There's the Alliance of Independent Authors, which you can pay to join for the year, and there are Facebook groups if you want tips for things like formatting.'

Lorna also advises writers to make sure



their books are readily available – she landed herself an interview on Ireland's biggest radio show but had not contacted wholesalers about stocking it and missed out on a few sales as a result.

'People talk now about authors having to build a brand and although most of us far prefer staying in our writing caves, I do think it is becoming increasingly necessary,' she adds.

'Having said that, I wouldn't change myself to do it. I know I've lost interviews because I don't fit the *city girl moves to country, high heels to wellies* image and neither am I going to aim to be a perfect farm wife and bring out a cookbook. It has to be authentic – partly so you don't trip yourself up with white lies.'

'I think having a good social media presence is crucial to building that brand and you can also share information that your audience is interested in. Just don't get too taken up with writing blog posts and forget about the book!'

• To find out more about Lorna and her writing, visit www.lornasixsmith.com

Writers' CIRCLE

Your news and views, writing tips and funny stories

RESTRUNG BOW

PRIZE LETTER Although I have had a few articles published, I am struggling to get anywhere with 'the big one'. There is so much differing advice out there and I perhaps made the mistake of listening too much to it all, to the extent that I sank into a malaise of indecision and anxiety about doing the wrong thing.

The result was that for months I didn't actually do anything writing-related but went off on any sort of time-wasting exercise I could devise, culminating in my research into booties to keep my cats' feet dry!

However, having recently attended a *Guardian* Masterclass in London on 'How to get your novel published', I feel my zest for writing is staging a welcome comeback. I am going to leave the novel alone for a while and investigate articles, short stories and flash fiction to build up my confidence and my profile.

A new string to a slightly battered bow is always useful and the novel is safely awaiting my triumphant return.

**Jan Brown,
Orpington, Kent**

JOINT PROJECT

Some authors reduce the loneliness of writing by joining a group. We took it further and wrote a book together – *From Story Idea to Reader*, an accessible guide to writing fiction.

Co-writing meant halving our workload. It also doubled our experience and skills and we found that our different approaches came together well. Knowing the other was tapping



Meeting up: Patsy and Rosemary

away at their keyboard made it harder not to do the same, and it's great knowing someone likes what you've written enough to want to put their name to it. Even though we live 300 miles apart it often felt as though we were sharing an office.

There are potential downsides. An obvious one is getting half the money – but if the book is twice as good, sales are better. Several of our five-star reviews praise the chatty style, saying it feels more like listening to a conversation than reading a text book.

There's a risk of falling out, too, but we agreed a contract at the start – not just who would write what, but timescales, how the money will be divided, everything – and we are still good friends.

Sharing the project was fun. It's a shame books don't have outtakes as we'd have had good ones! Now we're back to our own writing projects and missing the team approach.

**Patsy Collins, Lee-on-Solent, Hants and
Rosemary J Kind,
Tholthorpe, N Yorks**

TWIN ROOM

Watching an old episode of the US series *Law & Order*, I was struck by the similarity of the storyline to Emma Donoghue's 2010 bestselling book *Room* – even down to the contents of the space where the main character is imprisoned.

As a scriptwriter, I have long been aware of Hollywood's appetite for hoovering up existing material, everything from newspaper articles, books and plays to blogs and podcasts, but I've noticed more and more writers turning to movies and TV for inspiration, especially when it comes to commercial fiction.

'Talent imitates, genius steals,' TS Eliot famously said. I guess that's why there's nothing new under the sun!

**Alice Charles,
Ilford, Essex**

Ed: Donoghue has cited various fictional and real-life influences, and there are bound to be similarities in depictions of such cases, but the way she wrote the book made it her own.

DREAM SPACE

I always love the 'Where I write' column at the back of the magazine, particularly Patsy Collins' camper van in the last issue – it sounded like a lovely lifestyle. I'm really nosy and love seeing other people's writing rooms. Having the right environment to work in can make all the difference.

In our old house, I had a desk in the spare bedroom, but the room wasn't very well insulated so for half the year I ended up by the log burner in the lounge.

Now we've moved, I have my dream writing space, which I've decorated in a loosely African theme filled with a mixture of things from my travels – batik from Botswana, rugs from Turkey and Egypt, an Arab bridle from Jordan – and a few other eclectic bits and pieces found in charity shops or on eBay!

I'd say the room is probably a bit 'Marmite' in that you'll either love it or hate it, but I've attached a picture (*below*) so you can decide for yourself.

In a weird coincidence, the red curtains, which I bought through eBay, came from



Jenny's African-inspired study



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

another writer, Suzanne Baker (suzannebakerauthor.com). I only realised this when she added a flyer about her books when she sent the curtains!

Jenny Roman,
via email

FIRST DATES

I thoroughly enjoyed Douglas McPherson's article on winning the editor's heart in the February issue. The idea of making a joke about Trump – and then finding yourself demoted by a right-wing editor – really tickled my fancy!

I generally avoid politics and stick to the topic in hand, which seems to work for me. The only time I've really annoyed an editor was when I was persistent in chasing late payment. Oh well, you live and learn.

Susie Kearley,
Princes Risborough,
Bucks

AIR SUPPORT

Like Julie Norris (Letters, #183 December issue), I came late to writing for pleasure some 26 years ago. I was working full time in the construction business, and had partially completed a writing correspondence course.

The changing point for me was a job offer in Hong Kong. This involved return trips, flying business class, and my haven for writing became a wide seat on the upper deck of a British Airways jumbo jet. For 12 hours during each trip, those uninterrupted cocooned periods marked the start of my literary ambitions...

These days my haven is a tranquil study at home in peaceful Cornwall. I'm now trying to get placed in your fiction competition

and the arrival of the magazine each month is treated as a deadline for me to have a new submission ready. The critiques received back from Lorraine Mace are invaluable. My top tip from her: Always read back out loud everything you write!

Robert C Allgrove,
Egloskerry, Cornwall

THANKS, PAULA

My seven-year-old daughter came home with her English homework last week – to create a plot outline for a story to be entered in the BBC's 500 Words competition. She was in a state of panic; having been given no structure or guidance as to subject matter, she had no idea where to begin.

So I pulled out the February issue of *Writers' Forum* and turned to Paula Williams' Idea Store. Within 10 minutes, we had mapped out the story of a foolish grandmother and her imaginative granddaughter (adapted from the 'mature student'), who are frightened by strange noises from upstairs during a thunderstorm while on holiday in an isolated house in the mountains. Although very scared when lightning knocks out the power, they creep upstairs to investigate... and find not an intruder, but a toy train rattling across the bedroom floor!

A very simple plot, but one that my daughter could relate to, and she was able to complete her homework with a big smile on her face.

It just goes to show that the resources featured in *Writers' Forum* can help any writer, regardless of age!

Ginnie O'Farrell,
Hexham, Nthmb

FIRST DRAFT

Oh dear, it looks like Sebastian Barry was having a bad writing day. Can you spot the 20 errors in this 'first draft' of the Costa-winning *Days Without End*?

The method of laying out a corps in Missouri sure took the proverbial cake Like decking our out poor lost troopers for marriage rather than death. All there uniforms brushed down with lamp-oil into a state never seen when they were alive. Their faces clean shaves, as if the embalmer sure didn't like no whiskers showing. No-one that knew him could have recognised Trooper Watchorn because those famous Dundrearies was gone. Anyway Death likes to make a stranger if your face. True enough their boxes weren't but cheap wood but that was not the point. You lift one of those boxes and the body makes a big sag in it. Woodcut so thin at the mill it was more a wafer than a plank. But dead boys don't mined things like that. The point was, we were glad to see them so well, turned out considering.

I am talking new about the finale of my thirst engagement in the business of war. 1851 it was most likely. since the bloom was gone of me, I had volunteered aged seventeen in Misourri. If you had all your limb they took you. If you were a one eyed boy they might take you to even so. The only pay worse then the worst pay in America was army pay. And they fed you queer stuff till your shit just stank. But you were glad to get work because if you didn't work for the few dollars in America you hungered, I had learned that lesson. Well, I was sick of hungering.

Sent in by Belinda Hope, from Swansea, who wins £25

Corrections
1 a corpse (spelling). 2 proverbial (full stop). 3 decking out our cake. (full stop). 4 their uniforms (transposed). 5 they were alive (wrong word). 6 clean shaves (word repeated). 7 No one (no hyphen) (wrong tense). 8 stranger of your face (wrong word). 9 Wood cut so thin (two words). 10 don't mind (wrong word). 11 well turned out, considering (misplaced comma). 12 talking now (wrong word). 13 my first engagement (wrong word). 14 Since the bloom (capital). 15 was gone off me (wrong word). 16 in Missouri (spelling). 17 all your limbs (plural). 18 one-eyed boy (needs hyphen). 19 take you too (spelling). 20 worse than (wrong word). NB: any other mistakes are down to the poor literacy of the character!

£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

Ghost writing

Douglas McPherson shows you how other people's stories can get you into print



The two big things a writer needs are a good story and the ability to tell it. It also helps to have a famous name. And if you don't have the latter, ghost writing can be a great route to publication.

The world is full of people with interesting life stories, and quite often a name that will make them a shoo-in for a newspaper article or book deal. You, meanwhile, may have the one thing they don't: the ability

to write. Pool your talents and not only can you help them to get their story heard, but you can use their name or experiences to get published at a level you may not attain on your own.

Articles

If you don't fancy ghosting an entire book, the techniques can provide a first step into newspapers and magazines.

Open almost any mag and you will find articles written in

the first person, in which either a celebrity or an 'ordinary' person appears to be telling their own story. At the foot of the piece, however – or sometimes in tiny print in the margin – you'll find the words *Interview by...* or *As told to...* which reveal the article was actually written by a journalist.

Such pieces are often in regular themed slots, and if back issues reveal they're ghosted by a different writer each time, they're generally the

best entry point for a freelance who wants to write for that mag. Basically, magazines get through a lot of stories and are always hungry for more.

'True-life' mags often carry adverts soliciting readers' stories for which they will pay a set fee. In many cases, the stories are written up in-house. Most such mags, however, will buy ghosted stories from freelances, with the writer getting a separate fee from the cash paid to the interviewee.

You'll also read newspaper opinion pieces that appear to be penned by prominent figures. These don't always have an *As told to...* byline to indicate they were ghosted – but many are. And comment editors are always open to freelances pitching a ghosted piece by an expert when their specialist subject is in the news.

Interview

Preparing a first person article is the same as writing a third person piece. Begin by reading similar articles in the mag. Note the points they cover and work out what you need to solicit from your interviewee to create a well-rounded piece.

The big difference is that because the whole thing will be in their words, you'll generally have to do a longer interview and press for a lot more detail than you would if you just wanted a selection of quotes.

If they're describing an experience, ask them what it looked like, smelt like, sounded

The knack lies in having confidence to take over as author, rather than piecing together verbatim quotes

like, and what emotions they felt. Those are the things that bring a first person account to life, but they often won't be forthcoming unless you dig.

Writing up

There's a knack to ghost writing and it lies in having the confidence to take over as author, rather than trying to piece together a string of verbatim quotes.

You have to say what your subject meant, but you want it to read as if they wrote it, not as they said it. We all write in a more careful way than we speak. So while it's good to use as many of their words as possible, don't be afraid to paraphrase, edit, cut and add to what they've said in order to create a flowing piece.

Books

If you enjoy writing interviews in the first person, ghosting a book could be the next step.

Publishers and agents will often team celebrity clients

with journeyman ghosts with whom they work regularly. But there are ways to break into the game. One is to approach a person who may not be so famous that publishers are beating down their door, but who is well enough known that they're likely to sell a few books. It doesn't have to be their autobiography, remember – it could be a business manual or self-help book, for example.

An ideal subject would be a person about whom you've written some first person articles. They trust you to get their ideas across, so you already have the basis of a working relationship.

If the book has commercial potential, agree in writing how you will split the proceeds – this is important! – and approach publishers with an outline and sample chapters.

Another option is to ghost the memoirs of 'ordinary' people who simply want to record their experiences for their grandchildren. These are

self-publishing projects, so you would charge them a fee to cover the work involved.

Sign off

With most articles, it's a bad idea to let interviewees read your piece before you submit it. As long as you're careful not to misrepresent them, it's unlikely you'll get any comebacks by submitting without their approval – but entirely likely that you'll get a headache if you let them start fiddling with your finely honed prose.

I'd include most first person articles in that category and would only refer back to my source to check specific facts.

With an opinion piece, however, I recommend getting the person's approval before submitting. It will be their name on it, not yours, and they who will take the flak if the piece offends readers through your poor choice of words.

The same is true of a book.

It's your subject's book not yours, so make sure they are happy with it.

Which brings us to bylines...

Credit due

With books, it's best to agree in advance whether you will be credited as co-writer on the cover or in small print on the copyright page.

Obviously, negotiating a prominent mention is good advertising for your services. Generally, though, a ghost should accept invisibility.

After I ghosted an opinion piece in *The Times*, on which my name didn't appear, the subject told me: 'I feel embarrassed taking the credit when all I did was ramble into the phone and let you articulate it for me.'

'Don't worry,' I assured him. 'You take the credit, I'll take the money.'



TAKE THE STEP

Lesson 1

Ghost writing people's stories in their own words is a good entry point to writing for magazines.

Lesson 2

You'll have to work harder in an interview to extract more detail from your subject than you would need for a third person piece.

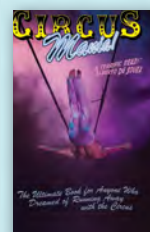
Lesson 3

The key to ghost writing lies in having the confidence to take ownership of the piece as an author and paraphrase what the subject says, rather than trying to piece together a string of verbatim quotes.

Homework

Go through some magazines looking for first person articles with an *Interview by...* credit. Check back issues to see if they're for a regular slot and whether they were ghosted by different writers. If so, then those slots are a good target for freelancers. Ask yourself who you could interview or where you could find the sort of people they feature.

• Douglas McPherson's non-fiction book *Circus Mania* is now available in an Amazon Kindle edition.



TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Douglas shares writing tips he's learned through experience

#26 Structure your interviews

When I started interviewing people, I used to draw up a list of fairly random questions, then go through the transcript and try to arrange the answers into a coherent article. Hopefully I'd find a strong quote that would make a good intro, then I'd shuffle the others around until the piece worked. This took precious time.

These days, I begin by thinking about the structure of the finished article, then work out what I need to ask to flesh out the skeleton. Structure your interviews like a finished piece and the transcript will come out in a ready-to-use order and the article almost writes itself.

You have to allow some spontaneity, as your interviewee may lead you off on interesting tangents. But if you have a plan for the finished piece, you'll know when to steer the conversation back to usable topics rather than filling your allocated time with waffle.

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

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FEEDBACK

Phil Barrington explains how to give and take criticism

You've joined a writing group or class and you're expected to say something about each other's work when it's read out. Gulp!

There are good writers and good critics. Both attributes may not apply to everyone, but you can learn to be a good critic...

Constructive criticism is positive and helpful

Destructive criticism is when you concentrate on everything that is wrong with the work

How to react to feedback/criticism...

You've read out the best piece of work you've ever written and sit back to await the praise...

Mr A doesn't like it...

The plot doesn't work. Jack wouldn't have done that!

You think...

You obviously didn't hear me say that Jack was...

You say...

(Nothing)

Mrs B loves it!

Jack was *such* a beautifully drawn character...

You think...

Thank you. At least you got it.

You say...

(Nothing)

Always...

1 Be quiet and listen. Don't try to defend your work.

2 Concentrate on what is said – good or bad.

3 Make notes.

HOW TO MAKE CRITICISM PALATABLE THE 'SANDWICH' METHOD

First, say what you liked about the work that was read. Be specific. *'Ben was a good character, I liked him because...'*

Follow up with what you didn't like – the bits that need improving. Again, be specific. *'Sarah didn't seem to add anything to the plot. Maybe you could dispose of her?'*

Finally, go over the positive comments. Say how the work could be improved if the points you criticised are taken care of.

If feedback is negative or destructive...

- 1 Don't start an argument. Some people are negative by nature and don't realise that their negativity could destroy your confidence.
- 2 In among all that negativity there may be a valid point or two. Listen politely and take notes to mull over afterwards.
- 3 As you sit there calmly, remind yourself always to give constructive criticism.

TOP TIP

★★★★★
Remember, you're never going to please everyone. But if more than one person says the same thing – listen!
★★★★★



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Tales of my GURU

by Hugh Scott

The mystery mentor says little but speaks volumes about dialogue

An acquaintance was on the other side of the road and, knowing he was rather deaf, I waved loudly, and he popped across and began talking; and I remembered that – because he was deaf – he didn't hear replies, and therefore chatted without pause.

He said: 'They've got permission to build 120 houses where the old school was. Yes, 120! They knocked the school down and they're building 120 houses. They've got permission from the council for 120 houses...'

My attention wandered as I wondered about writing such dialogue in a story.

How could I make boring, real-life chat come alive on the page? And I immediately knew that I could not. If it's boring in real life, I told myself, then it must be boring on the page. And I realised that heaps of real-life dialogue was boring; and I seemed to hear young Apricot Flan (who is not a pudding but a recent member of my writers' group) declare that dialogue should be the same as real speech.

'That can't be right,' I said, and discovered that I was alone, my erstwhile acquaintance now smiling from an accelerating bus.

I wandered into a coffee shop, collapsed at a table and ordered coffee and a sticky bun while staring at the table top.

'What,' I said 'is the difference between real speech and dialogue?'

'I don't know,' said the waitress. 'My degree's in accounting. A bun with a cherry?'

I nodded, and a shadow cast itself across the table like benevolent doom; doom, because I'd hoped to solve this problem by myself, benevolent, because the looming presence could be none other than my Guru, that brain-piercingly clever, kindly menace from beyond the universe who rushes to help me with my amateur writing whether I want it or not.

'I would like,' I enounced, 'to work this out myself.'

'I only,' my Guru enounced back, 'came in for coffee and a sticky bun. Or two.'

He placed a book on the table. 'Listen.'

'What?'

'Listen.'

I listened. I heard nothing significant.

'This book,' said my Guru, 'is packed with dialogue.'



'Yes?'

'And you don't hear it?'

'Of course not!' I chortled superiorly.

And then: 'Oh.'

'Quite.'

'It's silent.'

'It is.'

'And real chat is not silent.'

'No,' he agreed.

'That may be the main difference between speech and dialogue,' I said thoughtfully. 'It means there is no aural emphasis in dialogue, which means that dialogue must make the emphasis without using sound.'

'It means also,' I said, staring at my newly arrived coffee wobbling in the daylight and my bun looking slightly disgusting with its pink cherry on white icing, 'that the intonation must be clear; you know, which words are louder and which quieter, and whether the voice is mumbling, threatening or feeble, or if not feeble exactly, maybe weak, or vague, or...'

I thought perhaps, I was repeating myself 'You know,' I said hopefully.

'I know.'

'Also,' I looked accusingly him, as if he'd said something sarcastic, 'it means that I can miss out boring bits, of which there are many in real speech; and! And!' I yelled, and the distant waitress dropped a spoon, '– it means that I can delete anything that has nothing to do with the story!'

'Delete and delete,' I cried with delight, so that the waitress stuck her fists threateningly into her waist. 'I can delete with delight! I can cut out slurps and burps and gasps and words that dilute the meaning, and I can insert words to make a voice **languorous**; I can choose hard little words for a hard little voice! or whining, miserable words for a whining, miserable voice. Oh! I gasped and bit into my bun.

'Oh! And all that! All that!'

(I wondered if I had been infected by my repeating acquaintance, but I was *so-so* excited!)

'All that in the utter and unfathomable silence of the printed page! Aaaagh!' I screamed with joy, then covered as the waitress approached, brandishing the bill.

'Sorry!' I gasped. 'Sorry! I'll keep quiet.' And she buzzed off, leaving a dirty look.

'And,' I whispered. 'Paragraphs,' I said. 'Paragraphs in dialogue! Ho! I'm getting to grips with this! Paragraphs divide dialogue into clarifying bits which chattering voices do not have, but merely rush headlong like trains heading for disaster! Paragraphs give the reader a pause for breath; a moment to register meaning; a rest for the eyes; an easing of the back! Oh! Oh, wow!'

And I rested in my chair, munching my bun and sucking coffee.

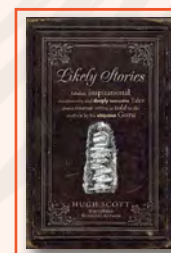
'I must explain all this to Apricot Flan,' I said, thinking pleasantly of being eye to eye with her sweeping lashes. I glanced at the bill.

'You've had six buns!' I shouted; and a second shadow loomed; and it was definitely menacing, being the waitress's larger brother; and in a moment of inspiration, mischief and a sense of vengeance because of sustained financial meanness on the part of my Guru, I cried, 'He's paying!' and I fled, noting with satisfaction the dismay on my Guru's face, and his hand not knowing which pocket his wallet was in.

Use it or lose it

Today's lazy old word is 'languorous'. It means listless or weak. Here is how to use it:

Or maybe not. 'Lassitude' 'has set in. Or perhaps 'torpor', or maybe even 'desuetude', which, I admit is different, referring to something unused But I simply can't be bothered.



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.

WRITING⁴CHILDREN

YOU NEED MOTIVATION Natascha Biebow tells Anita about how her passion for children's books inspired her to set up a literary consultancy

I have over 20 years' experience commissioning and editing picture books, novelties, young fiction and non-fiction at ABC, Dorling Kindersley and Random House Children's Books. I've had the privilege of working with award-winning authors and illustrators such as Jane Clarke, Kes Gray, Garry Parsons, Lizzie Finlay and Kate Petty.

I am the editor for the newly established Five Quills Press and long-time editor of Kes Gray's *Daisy* series. I am also the author of *Elephants Never Forget* and *Is this My Nose?*, winner of the Bookstart Best Book for Babies, and have served as the Regional Advisor (Chair) of the SCBWI British Isles since 1998.

When I had my son, I wanted to work more flexibly. I realised that I spent an inordinate amount of time in meetings and project managing and wanted to go back to what I loved best – editing. So, in 2010, I launched Blue Elephant Storyshaping, a coaching, editing and mentoring service aimed at empowering children's authors and illustrators to fine-tune their work pre-submission. I edit everything from fiction to non-fiction, up to middle grade, though I specialise in picture books.

Current market

Publishing has changed. In the current tough marketplace, publishing houses have limited in-house resources and are aiming to reduce their overheads by acquiring more finished, high-quality books that don't require as much polishing.

Agents are also increasingly pressed for time and their job is much easier when they are sent fully developed projects to place with publishers. For picture books, agents and publishers are looking for a body of work.

This is where a coach, mentor or literary consultancy can help you to create the strongest possible work for submission and get you out of the slush pile.

Authors I have worked with have gone on to get an agent and a publishing deal. Illustrators have pulled together a well crafted story dummy that their agent has



Author, editor and coach Natascha Biebow

PICTURE BOOKS STORY BOOKS EASY READERS CHAPTER BOOKS
EASY READERS CHAPTER BOOKS MIDDLE GRADE YOUNG ADULT



with
children's author
Anita Loughrey

gone on to market. I have also worked with authors and illustrators to fine-tune a contracted book for a publisher.

Picture books

Picture books are a special genre in that the words are intrinsically linked to pictures – the sum is more than the parts.

A special picture book keeps me thinking about it long after I have read it because the characters stood out, or the author presented a story with a clever twist, or because it had a unique message that spoke personally to me, or the pictures sang. I love picture books that have heart and humour.

I also believe that children need a variety of picture books, some funny, some filled with facts, some that address important issues, some whimsical and fun-filled.

The market should have room for long and short picture books, aimed at all ages from toddlers to seven-year-olds, but, generally, editors currently seem to be commissioning shorter, punchier picture book texts at around 500 words. I think there should be room for longer picture books, between 800 and 1000 words, with more intricate plots featuring multi-dimensional narratives and in which the characters can explore more complex emotional dilemmas. Longer texts can also be more lyrical and give readers more time to savour the pictures before each page-turn.

Sometimes, picture books aimed at older readers can also include more sophisticated humour or irony. However, this does not mean that longer texts are waffly – they should still be well-written and tightly edited.

Fundamentally, though, I believe picture books should be child-centred and, though they may have different levels, they should not be aimed at adults.

The essential ingredient

When you set out to write a picture book, spend some time exploring your character's motivation. Think about it like this. You see a delicious cake. You want it. But why do you really, really need it? What



will happen if you don't get cake?

If you can convince the reader about your motivation for wanting cake and the problem that comes from not getting some, they will gladly go on a story journey with you to find out how it all ends. If you aren't convincing, the reader will ask, 'So what?' and turn to the next book.

• For information about Natascha's Blue Elephant Storyshaping, visit www.blueelephantstoryshaping.com. Natascha also blogs regularly at Picture Book Den (picturebookden.blogspot.co.uk) and has a monthly Ask a Picture Book Editor column on Words & Pictures (www.wordsandpics.org)

5 COMMON PICTURE BOOK MISTAKES

- 1 Creating an episodic plot, which reads like a long list of things that happen sequentially with no tension, no clear climax, no story.
- 2 Writing rhyming books that don't have a strong story at their centre, so that the rhyme dictates the plot and not vice versa.
- 3 Sending work off too early, thinking that picture books are short and therefore 'easy' to write.
- 4 Creating picture books that have no hook or unique selling point, leaving readers saying: 'So what?'
- 5 Not exploring the characters' true motivation

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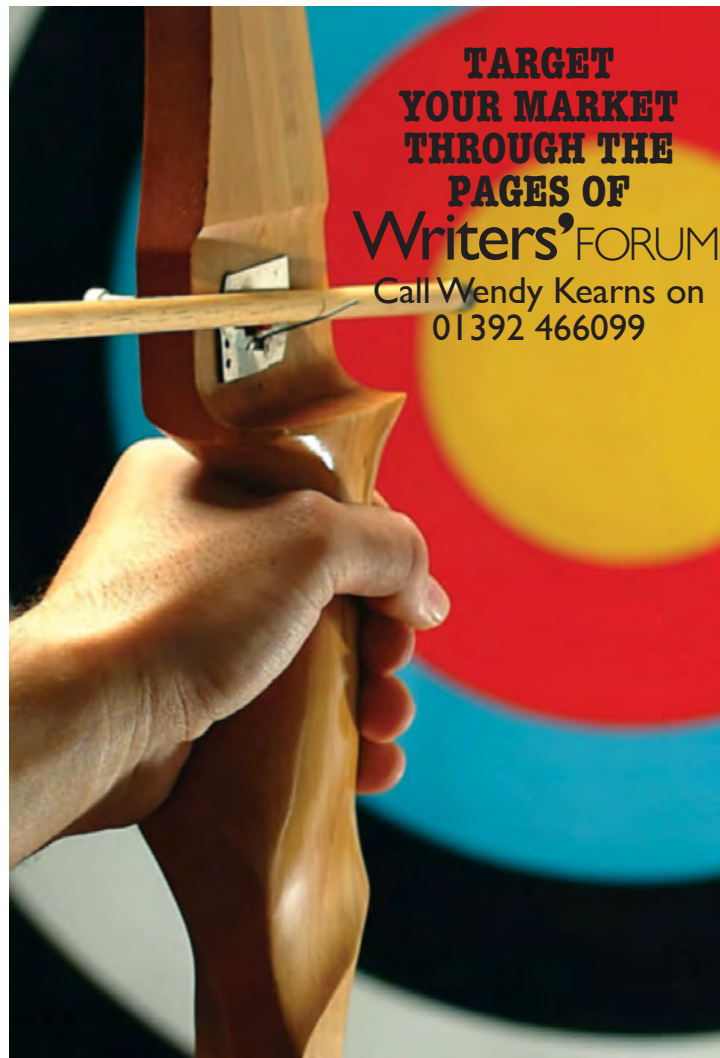
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RIDING THE FATE TRAIN

by Bette Guy

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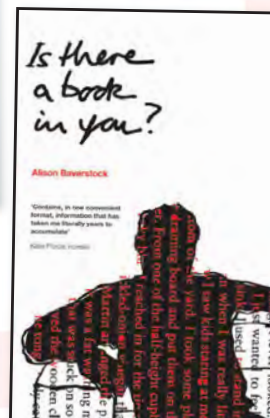
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Dear Della



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



What do I do with a serial story?

Q PRIZE LETTER In issue 181, Allis Langridge asked about potential markets for an abnormally long short story and one of your suggestions was to adapt it into a serial. A few months ago I began working on what I'd intended to be a short story. Now it's well over 10,000 words and I anticipate at least another 15,000. I've been toying with the idea of making it a serial but where do I submit? Do I need to finish every part before submitting? And could I eventually compile the serial into a novella?

Michael Malone, via email

A Novellas and serials tend to be of a similar length – 25,000 to 30,000 is a good guideline for both, although the style may be different. Serials need stronger cliffhangers, for example.

The main paid markets for serials in women's magazines (that are open to freelancers) are *Woman's Weekly* and *The People's Friend*. They'll send their current guidelines, which include length and subject, if you approach them. At time of writing *Woman's Weekly* was 3300 words a part and *People's Friend* about 5000. Both magazines use slightly longer first parts. Usually you would need to have the whole serial written before they will buy and they won't start publishing until they have the completed work.

The good news is that novellas are making a bit of a comeback. The markets you can approach will depend on the subject of your novella. As always, my advice is to check potential markets before you begin the actual writing. This is by far the easiest and quickest way of getting published in any genre. To write first and do the market research later is akin to playing darts blindfolded. You may hit the target, but it'll be pure luck if you do.

However, you have already begun, so if you think you are writing a mainstream novella, I suggest checking the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* for publishers and their

requirements and making an approach.

Two online markets that accept novellas (at time of going to print) are Failbetter.com and Straylightmag.com. Straylight is interested in publishing high quality, novella-length stories in any genre except fan fiction or erotica, for publication on their website. They will consider work between 17,500 and 45,000 words. Again, I recommend that you look at previously published work to get an idea of what style and subjects they prefer. Good luck.

Q I dare say many of us writers have, or have had, problems with formatting our manuscripts to send off for perusal by a publisher or agent, or even a competition. I find that advice differs and I'm at a loss as to the correct format. If I send a manuscript to a literary agent, I always follow their own rules of submission, but in any event, I always double space, indent by half an inch, use Times Roman 12 point and leave a one-inch margin at the top, bottom and sides. Is this the correct procedure?

I also use CreateSpace to self-publish on Amazon. I justify all of my manuscripts but have been told that it is better to left justify in order to give an even spread of type, and also to have an indent of only 0.3 of an inch.

Terry Walsh, Birmingham

A The conflicting information comes about because different publishers and agents require different things. This comes down to market again. Find out what the market wants and follow their guidelines exactly. This is particularly important with competitions, as if you break the rules your entry will be disqualified.

There is no 'one size fits all'. But Times Roman 12 point and one-inch margins are acceptable across the industry – unless a market specifies otherwise.

As far as CreateSpace goes, left justifying or not is a matter of personal

taste. Do what you think looks the most professional. It's a sensible idea to check out books published by mainstream publishers and then use these as a guide.

Q I am considering going on a writing course to improve my short story skills. However, as yet another market (*Take a Break*) closes its doors to unknown writers, preferring to choose from a select list of professional writers, I am wondering if there is any point. What are your thoughts? Should I bother training to write better short stories when there are virtually no markets left?

Annie Barton, Southend on Sea

A This depends on what you want to achieve. It's true that the women's mag markets are diminishing, and this seems to be an ongoing trend, but there are and hopefully always will be markets for short stories. There are plenty of online magazines for fiction. *Glimmer Train*, for example, pays for literary fiction. *Deep Magic* is an online magazine that publishes fantasy and science fiction short stories and novellas between 4000 and 16,000 words and pays by the word.

There are podcasts for short story writers too, some of them paid. Check out escapepod.org and podcastle.org.

So, yes, I think that it's still worth taking writing courses, which will help to improve your work. Selling short stories has always been a competitive business, and our stories need to be the best of the best to get published. A good course should help.

Win Della's book!

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



THE MAGAZINE SCENE

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

TIME FOR TRAVEL AND HEALTH

About Time is a London-focused online magazine aimed at young professional women. Since its launch in 2014, it has grown to become a leading lifestyle guide. It already has a network of bloggers focusing on different areas but there is always space for more contributors with the right idea. Here are some things to consider:

- The content is varied but united by the slogan 'It's about time you tried...' so use this as a starting point and go from there. The idea is to catalogue all that is new and on-trend and covers food, drink, travel, fitness and style. Pitches should be tailored towards a specific column, feature or section of the site.
- Move fast. The moment something is on trend or in the news, get in touch with your idea. The team usually sends out alerts to PR agencies in the morning with the aim of compiling and publishing relevant posts by lunchtime.
- Although you will see big name brands on the site, the readership is very interested in start-ups and emerging companies, an ethos that can apply to most sections – that feeling of being among the first to know about a product or place generates a huge buzz, which in turn is great for the site's web traffic.
- Editor Angelica Malin recently said that she is looking to feature more travel content and also posts on health and fitness.

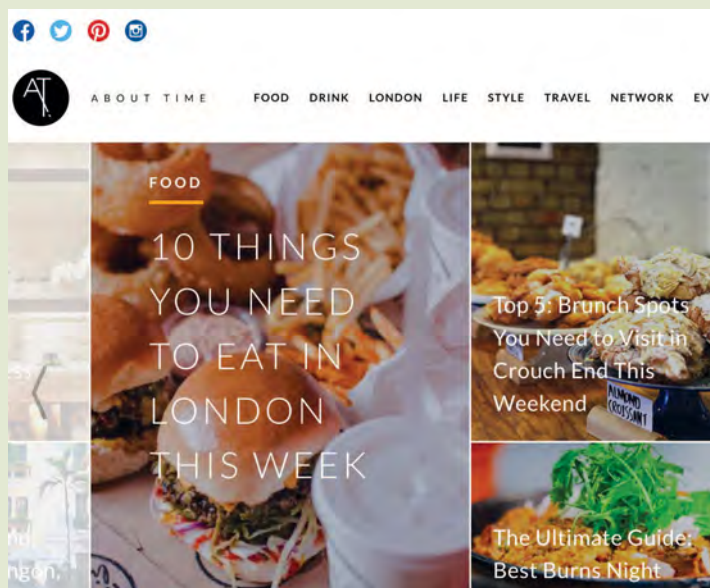
Visit: www.abouttimemagazine.co.uk

PROPOSALS WANTED AT PERFECT WEDDING

Perfect Wedding magazine is expanding and it's an area with plenty of scope for ideas. Here are some tips:

- Think through the details of a wedding you've been involved with and go from there. Michelle Royle, group editor, says: 'We cover all aspects of wedding planning from venues to fashion, decor to health, beauty to honeymoons. The industry is huge, and the readers are receptive!'
- Remember any bride or groom-to-be wants to feel good about themselves and feel certain that they will have that perfect wedding. This isn't a place for relating funny mishaps. Michelle says: 'The readers look to us for our honest, confidence-boosting tips and advice, plus beautiful ideas and inspiration.' Save the 'worst wedding' stories for true-life magazines!
- Don't just stick to flicking through back issues for what they might be looking for – check out their online presence too. Michelle says: 'Our social media has been incredible in 2016 – especially Instagram.' Indeed, in the magazine's short virtual lifetime, Instagram traffic has soared from 3000 to over 50,000 followers, attracting the interest of relevant advertisers. The brands that advertise in the mag and the pictures will give you an idea of the standards, styles and themes that tick the boxes with readers.

Visit: www.planyourperfectwedding.com



MARKET FOCUS

■ If you film something you think is newsworthy or might go 'viral', think about approaching a 'video content agency' who focus on selling clips to newspapers and magazines. Newsflare is one such agency. Chief commercial officer Bevan Thomas told *Press Gazette* how the agency evolved, saying: 'The idea was that there was a lot of this great stuff out there but a lot of contributors weren't really clear on what their rights were. They still felt that they weren't being treated particularly fairly.'

The agreement with contributors is a straight 50:50 share of any revenue generated from news publishers – and you retain full copyright. Alternatively, you could post up your video on YouTube and an agency such as Newsflare may seek you out and offer you a licensing agreement – but equally you run the risk of a national website just using your content and getting all the hits and associated revenue before you even realise you have gone viral.

■ Technology journalism shouldn't be about getting your hands on the latest gadgets but exploring and challenging what benefits to society such gadgets may bring, according to freelance journalist Bill Thompson, an expert on *Click*, the BBC World Service's technology programme. He told *journalism.co.uk*: 'I'm not that interested in shiny toys, I'm interested in why we make shiny toys, why they matter to us, and how the tools that are now available change people's lives for good or ill.' Thompson believes that technology reporters have a responsibility to help users understand the implications of their gadgets and how they can affect their life. Wise words that are probably applicable in most areas of journalism. Think before you rave about those freebies!

INSIDE VIEW

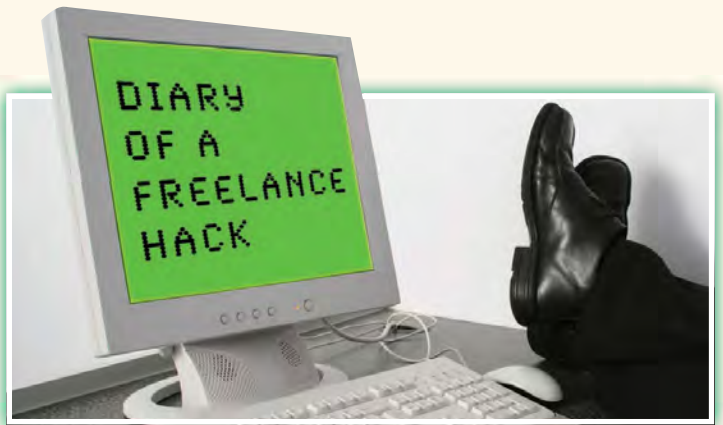
CINEASTE film magazine

Celebrating 50 years this year is American magazine *Cineaste*, a quarterly publication that focuses on the art and politics of film. The editorial covers all types of cinema, from big blockbusters to small independent films, and also welcomes writers to contribute ideas. Here are some pointers...



- You can pick virtually anything – a film or a film genre, a current production trend or a career overview, an artistic or political movement – but it's the theme that you pitch within that subject that is crucial. 'The author should examine both the sociopolitical context and artistic aspects of the topic,' explain the guidelines. 'When appropriate, provide quotes from the filmmakers about their specific intentions with the work rather than your speculations about the same.'
- Features should ideally be 3000 to 4000 words in length, so be prepared to do plenty of research. The editorial team, in the first instance, will want to read a detailed proposal of your idea rather than a full manuscript. A bibliography will be expected, and above all, have a plan from beginning to end.
- Interviews offer a great range of people for you to contact, from directors and producers to performers, writers to composers, even distributors and technicians – anyone involved in the creative process of filmmaking. They shouldn't be 'puff' pieces that fawn over the person and their work. Instead it should be an opportunity to pose provocative questions that encourage the interviewee to dissect a particular film's strengths and weaknesses. Do your research on your subject properly and the person will more than likely be impressed rather than offended at a more demanding, but informed line of enquiry.
- *Cineaste* is never under obligation to advertisers to be favourable to a movie, if criticism demands it. 'Discussing both the strengths and weaknesses of a film is more important to us than uncritically promoting it simply because the film's producers or politics are agreeable,' explain the guidelines. If you have ever felt the need to deconstruct an all-time classic with a more critical, less sympathetic eye, then this is probably the place to do it, as long as you keep within the artistic and political parameters.
- Be mindful that the readership is sophisticated. Although blockbusters are discussed and reviewed, you must bring new perspectives and arguments to the table rather than blanket praise or scorn. That said, you must be clear in your language – and don't show off your knowledge unless it is relevant. The team don't like academic jargon, film-buff trivia or showbiz references.

Recent coverlines: *The cinematic journeys of Chantal Akerman; Matt Ross explores unorthodox parenting in Captain Fantastic; Kelly Reichardt's cinema of connection and relationships*



FAKING IT

Interviews, op-eds and seeing into the future. That's what it should say on my business card. Had you sneaked a peek through my office window this month, for instance, you would have seen me cheerfully typing a glowing 1500-word review of a music festival... the day before it started.

I, the rock mag editor, was worried about the tight deadline. He was going to press immediately after the three-day bash and had allocated four pages to my piece. The event organiser, meanwhile, was anxious that I 'see as much of the festival as possible', and had booked me four nights' full-board hotel accommodation, apparently completely deaf to my protests on the phone that it really wouldn't be necessary as I planned on turning up for just the headline act and a couple of the support bands if I got there early enough.

'I'll mention all the other acts,' I assured him, 'and you can tell me on the phone later if anyone didn't turn up on the night.'

He laughed nervously, probably thinking I was joking, and said: 'Well, I'll reserve you a room for two from Friday.'

I tried to explain that since I only lived 20 miles away I didn't need even one night's accommodation, but I might as well have saved my breath.

'Tell you what,' mein host added, 'I'll book you in from Thursday, so you can come down the day before.'

The fact was, however, that while four pages sounds like in-depth coverage – and would look like a comprehensive overview, thanks to photographs supplied by the festival's official snapper – 1500 words isn't much room to write about more than 30 bands. Our usual reviews of such events are pretty anodyne. After a few lines describing the general ambience and a couple of paragraphs on the festival's history, most of the acts get little more than a mention that they were there, rather than a meaningful critique of their performance on the night.

Bearing in mind my tight deadline, I decided I could safely write the bulk of my piece in advance, turn up for a few hours on the Saturday and fill in the gaps with a few paragraphs on the main attractions.

In the end, I was feeling so creative that I wrote the whole of my review, and probably came up with a more entertaining piece than I would if I'd typed it under deadline pressure the morning after a weekend of late nights. In fact, I was so pleased with the result that it suddenly seemed a shame to have to show my face at the festival at all. So, shoot me for it, I didn't!

INSIDE STORY

In a second look at his *My Weekly* story *Journey's End*, Douglas McPherson discusses set-ups, payoffs and endings

Last month we looked at how you can combine a new setting with a tried-and-tested plot to create a completely different story, but one you know will have a good chance of success because the emotional story arc or final twist has already proven a winner.

In the case of my story *Journey's End*, I married the setting of an American gas station to the structure of a story I'd previously sold called *Circus of Ghosts*.

The latter was set in a Parisian circus building but beneath all the big top imagery was a skeleton you could apply to any setting:

- Elderly woman visits a place where she worked/lived in her youth and which is on the brink of demolition.
- As she walks through the abandoned environment the sights remind her of characters from the past, including a fiancé who died tragically.
- The woman dies and wakes up in the afterlife where the environment is restored to its prime, she is young again, reunited with her fiancé and they live happily ever after.

As we saw last time, the three ingredients you need to turn an off-the-peg plot into an original story are:

- An atmospheric setting
- Engaging characters
- Effective use of research.

When you sit down to write, however, there are other structural techniques that you can use to fully engage

As Chekhov put it, if the rifle's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging on the wall

your reader and give them a satisfying read. One of the most effective, and easiest to build into any story is a series of set-ups and payoffs.

Set 'em up

In essence, you introduce something early in the story – that's the set-up – that you return to in a different context later. That's the payoff.

The satisfaction for the reader comes from returning to something that perhaps we didn't see the full significance of the first time but do now.

As an example, an early scene establishes that the hero carries a gun. That's the set-up. The fact that we know he has a gun makes it satisfying – and believable – when he pulls it out during a climatic action scene. If he suddenly drew a gun we didn't know he had, that might be more surprising, but it could also feel like a cheat on the part of the writer, because the character would be using a resource that we didn't know he had.

Planning

Set-ups and payoffs need to be built into a story as two halves of the same mechanism. A good way to do it is to think about an effective payoff then work out a suitable set-up.

To return to the gun example, if you decide you need some gunplay at the end of your

story, write in a scene near the beginning that establishes the fact your character has a gun.

The trick is to make the set-up an interesting scene in its own right, so it doesn't look like you're simply 'planting' something for later use, and also so that the set-up doesn't make the payoff too predictable.

An example of a heavy-handed set-up, in my opinion, comes in James Patterson's book *Zoo*. The hero is trying to convince a disbelieving world that animals are about to turn on mankind. So when we see the set-up that the hero shares his apartment with a pet chimpanzee it's so obvious that the chimp will go ape that I couldn't believe the guy would risk living with such a dangerous creature in the first place!

Chekhov's gun

It must also be borne in mind that readers are so attuned to set-ups and payoffs that you should never introduce something that appears significant without providing a suitable payoff later, or you will create expectation that is subsequently disappointed.

As Chekhov put it: 'If you say in the first act that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third act it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there.'

My story

In *Journey's End*, the payoff is the heroine, Lauren, being reunited in the afterlife with the boyfriend she lost in her youth. So I obviously needed to set up earlier in the story the fact that she'd had a boyfriend who'd died.

I called him Clark because in a short story you want names instantly evocative of the time and place.

The set-up scene, with Lauren remembering Clark's death, and the payoff scene, with her meeting him in the afterlife, were part of my plot from the beginning. But in the writing of the story it was possible to introduce a whole set of smaller set-ups and payoffs that would bring both scenes to life.

First, I envisioned the afterlife Clark arriving in a big expensive car – a Cadillac, say. So, to make that payoff satisfying, I wrote a set-up where Clark says: 'One day, I'm gonna pull up at your dad's gas station in a brand new Cadillac and you and I are gonna take off, heading for the promised land!'

His reference to the 'promised land' was also a set-up for the payoff I delivered in the final line of my story:

She slid on to the leather bench seat and they hugged and kissed.

Then the Cadillac rolled out onto the highway and vanished into the heat haze, heading for the promised land.

Having a character repeat the same words in different circumstances is another technique that can be very effective. In an early flashback

journey's end

The memories are bittersweet but she has to go back

By Julia Douglas

Last gas for 100 miles. The sign was faded and rusted to lace along its lower edge.

Beside it was a long-abandoned Ford sedan with no windows and a roadmap of bullet holes along its sun-blanching side.

There'd never been much for kids to do around Clayton, New Mexico, except shoot at things and drive too fast.

Both the car and the sign were dwarfed by a shiny billboard advertising three hundred new houses and apartments *Coming Soon!*

Lauren could hardly believe how far the city was expanding. When she was growing up, Clayton had been in the desert. Soon it would be a suburb.

The road ahead swam empty in the heat haze as she swung her Toyota off the highway and onto the forecourt of a filling station that would never pump another cent's worth of gas.

She parked near the exit, where Dad used to sell second-hand cars. She

pictured them clear as day: big curvy Buicks and Studebakers lined with chrome and painted in the old two-tone colours of red over cream and sky-blue over cloud-white.

"Drive safely, indeed!" Lauren grumbled as her wizened fingers fumbled with her seatbelt.

How dare that cop pull her over back there! And for what – apart from looking old?

Sitting at the wheel, she'd fumed while the baby-faced upstart inspected her licence as if he suspected it was fake.

Secretly, she'd felt a little anxious about making such a long drive on her own. And maybe the cop had seen her weave onto the shoulder as she peered at the signs. But when she'd seen the piece on TV about the new houses going

up, she knew she had to come out and bid the old place farewell.

Lauren felt faint as she stepped from air-conditioned cool to the heat outside. She steadied herself against her car. She shouldn't have stood up so quickly.

As her breathing calmed, she gazed at the pumps that had stood dry for years. Until recently, the land hadn't been worth developing. It was the same story across the road, where the old diner stood boarded up.

On the way in, she'd passed an abandoned general store and motel. The whole place was a ghost town, fit only for the bulldozers that were already parked up, ready for work.

How different things had been before the interstate bypassed them and the whole world had come through Clayton

"Regular or Premium?" her dad would hail the driver. "Going far?"

on its way to Arizona and California.

For a second, Lauren could see her young friend Dolly, waving happily at her from a busy diner.

She saw her dad walking from the office to a Plymouth Fury parked at the pump. The creases in his cream pants and white shirt were as sharp and clean as the car's lines. A red cap and black bow-tie completed his immaculate, freshly laundered look.

"Regular or Premium?" he hailed the driver. "Going far? Like me to check the oil and water? Here, let me give that windshield a wipe."

When she hit her teens, Lauren took over the routine.

There were places she knew where the attendant would use his thumb to stop the dipstick going in all the way. Then he'd walk back to the driver's window, show him the stick and say, "Looks like you're half a quart low,"

Continued overleaf



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to Clark picking up Lauren for a ride, he greets her with a grin and jokes: 'Are you gonna keep me waitin' forever?'

At the time, the snippet of dialogue is just there to bring Clark's character to life. But it's also a set-up for an emotional payoff in the afterlife scene when Clark arrives in his Cadillac and delivers the same words: 'Are you gonna keep me waitin' forever?'

As soon as we hear that line again, we know Clark and Lauren are back in their youth, back in love and about to journey into their happy ever after. We also know he's been waiting for her in the afterlife for the past 60 years, which adds emotional weight to a line about waiting.

Without the set-up and payoff of that one repeated

line, the scene would not have packed nearly the same punch that it did.

Symmetry

The reason set-ups and payoffs work so well is that they provide a sense of symmetry that is subconsciously appealing, whether we consciously notice it or not.

That's why I had Lauren's body discovered by a motorcycle cop who had stopped her at the beginning of the story. Plot-wise, she could have been found by anyone: a demolition worker or some kids playing in the abandoned gas station.

She could even have been found by a cop who hadn't previously been in the story. The fact we had already met the cop, however, made it

believable that he would later recognise Lauren's car and look for her.

Having him present at both the beginning and end of the story also made it more symmetrical.

So the introduction of an early scene between Lauren and the cop not only served in its own right to illuminate her character, it also formed a set-up that made the cop's reappearance at the end a satisfying payoff.

False end

I sent the story to *My Weekly*, confident that it would sell on the strength of the nostalgic, mid-century Americana and the twist end, with which I had previously been successful. I was gratified when fiction editor Karen Byrom snapped it

up. Karen said, however, that she was going to swap the last two scenes.

The last three scenes as submitted were:

- Lauren falls asleep in the gas station kiosk.
- The cop finds her dead.
- Lauren wakes up in the afterlife.

That was the same order as the ending of *Circus of Ghosts*. Karen's new order was:

- Lauren falls asleep.
- She wakes up in the afterlife.
- The cop finds her dead.

'That way,' said Karen, 'the readers aren't sure whether Lauren has died or is dreaming until the very end.'

I thought the switch worked fine – although it did make it ambiguous whether Lauren had actually reached the afterlife or merely enjoyed a comforting dream before she passed away.

In my original version, by seeing her dead before we see her in the afterlife, it's explicit that she has transcended earthly existence.

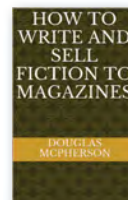
Is that a more powerful closing image? Or a cornier one? Does it depend on whether you want to believe in an afterlife?

Final twist

In the end, the point was moot, because when the story was published, Karen had switched it back to the way I'd written it!

As with many writing decisions, there's no 'right' answer. But the choice of alternative endings does illustrate the many ways that an old plot can be tweaked into something new.

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



STORY STRUCTURE

Focus and balance



Barbara Dynes explains how to structure a saleable short story – and sets some exercises

Focus is vital, particularly in the commercial short story. At the outset, your plot needs a character with what he or she regards as a major problem. Sometimes it's a practical one; more often, it's emotional. And whatever actions or additional complications you add in order to hold up the solution, you must focus on that problem all the way through, until the end.

After writing for years, I recently fell into what you might call the 'focus trap', proving it's never too late to learn. I decided to write a 2000-word short story on the theme of jealousy for a women's magazine. But after I'd worked out the plot and before I started writing, I panicked, telling myself the idea was not strong enough and needed extra content. So, stupidly, I added

an extra problem, involving a secondary character. This, I felt, would make the story more interesting.

I sent the manuscript off, despite instinct telling me it didn't quite work. I refused to face the inevitable.

Well, the inevitable happened: back it came with the comment *Not focused enough*.

Of course it wasn't! Instead of investigating one major problem I had dabbled with two weak ones. Neither of them were strong enough for the reader to identify with.

So, stressing the jealousy aspect and cutting the other problem altogether, I set about rewriting the story. By 'rewriting', I mean a *complete* rewrite, not just chopping out that second problem. I needed to alter and

add to the content, as well as to zoom in on the jealousy theme.

Anyway, cutting a wrong story short, it worked and the magazine bought the second attempt. But I'm thinking of hanging that first version on my study wall as an example of how not to do it!

Remember, if you're writing a commercial short story, you haven't the space or time to deal with too much. Concentrate on giving your protagonist one main thing to worry about – something that the reader can identify with. Even if you change viewpoint, showing two angles of a situation, it's usually better to focus on just one problem.

Structure

The traditional short story consists of a 'three-act' structure. Put simply, the three acts are the

beginning, the middle and the end of your story.

Act 1: The beginning. You establish the setting and your main character, who has a problem, either emotional or practical. This problem is something that upsets your protagonist's world and starts them on a journey to solve it.

Act 2: The middle. You add obstacles and setbacks that prevent your character from achieving that goal, crucially holding up the story. At this stage you want your reader to think: '*I must read on. How on earth will the poor guy solve this one?*'

Act 3: The end. The protagonist's fate is revealed. It's not always a happy ending, but usually his problem is resolved. This result occurs because of happenings earlier in the story, or due to his or someone else's actions. Whatever, he will have changed in some way.

Knowing that you have a solid framework and structure – that your 'house' is built on a solid foundation and won't fall down – you can then concentrate on the storyline.

The novelist David Lodge says that the structure of any narrative should remain largely invisible, like the framework of girders that holds up a modern high-rise building. You can't see it, but it determines the edifice's shape and character.

With your story or novel in mind, answer these questions:

- What is the theme? Is it central to the story at all times?

‘Instead of investigating one major problem, I had dabbled with two weak ones’

- Does the story build up, brick by brick, so to speak?
- Is the tone consistent?
- Has the novel's sub-plot stayed secondary to your main plot?

Balance

Another aspect to think about – and this ties in with structure – is balance. This is formed by the way you mould your work into its component parts: beginning, middle and end. Does the overall structure work? Is it balanced?

For a short story, you need a sharp beginning, bringing in immediate conflict, a clear middle, where you build up the tension and move the story on, and a swift but not rushed ending.

First, consider your story idea. Say you're aiming at a length of 1000 words to suit a particular magazine. Will your plot, with all its complications and obstacles, fit? Maybe it's more suited to a 2000-word story? It's difficult at first to gauge whether your plot will measure out to the required length. But after you've done a few stories, instinct will kick in.

It's relatively easy to check whether your short story is balanced by doing a rough word tally after you've finished the first draft. For instance, if it's to be around 1000 words, by the end of your first 250 you should have introduced your initial problem and made a move towards solving it. In the next 600 or so you will have added to that problem with yet more complications. (In a short story, these will be small but are necessary to create tension and hold back the ending). Then, in the last 150 or so words, you add the solution.

If you divide your story very roughly like that, you will get

an idea whether it's balanced, plot-wise. Should half the story – 500 words – be taken up with introducing characters, problem and setting, followed by just 200 involving any dramatic or emotional action, then 300 on a drawn-out ending, it is badly in need of a rewrite.

With a novel, you have more time and space, but you still need a certain amount of balance. Even if it's a thriller with lots of action and drama, the writer must slow things down now and again to allow the reader to draw breath before the next burst of action.

Also, if you keep the storyline on an unrelenting high all the way through, there will be little room for in-depth character development, description or setting. Equally, if you include too many flat episodes where nothing happens, the novel could become boring, resulting in the reader abandoning the story. Your novel's content, like the waves on the sea, needs variation: stormy, faintly rippled or, sometimes, smooth as glass.

Writers tend to get their idea and dash it down without too much thought for technical details such as focus, structure and balance. But it pays to sit back and check those three aspects before you start.

That way, you might avoid spending valuable time on complete rewrites.

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



Writers' FORUM EXERCISE

Focus on structure

A Pick a character from the column below and then give him or her a problem from the second column. Now work out a plot for a commercial story of 1000 words.

CHARACTER

Teenager
Teacher
Celebrity
Burglar
Boss of a large firm

PROBLEM

Partner has walked out
Homeless
An accident
Greed
Selfishness

Allocate how your plot will be structured and where in the story your first, second and third act will be played out. How many words will you allocate to each section? Remember that you will need to add further small hitches in the middle, in order to hold up the story, before you create the ending.

Notes

Completed / /

My rating /

B Buy a magazine and analyse one of the stories. Write notes as to where the main focus is and how the story is structured. Work out roughly where it divides into beginning, middle and end.

Notes

Completed / /

Writers' FORUM FLASH COMP RESULTS



Last month's competition was to write a funny romantic story

£100 winner

Checking Out by Dominic Bell

It had been a stressful day and I nearly went for a takeaway, but thought better of it. Instead I went into a small supermarket and picked up some beans, sausages, beer and crisps. The self-checkouts were busy so I went to a manned one – well, a womanned one, actually.

'A single man's tea,' she said, smiling.

'Afraid so,' I said. A nice smile, I thought. Big eyes, slightly messed blonde hair, and generally rather cute, despite the uniform.

'Not very healthy.' She waved a bottle over the scanner and added, disapprovingly, 'And too much alcohol.'

'I've still got student habits, I'm afraid,' I said. 'I just moved here to work.'

'Me too,' she said. 'Except I stayed a student; doing a masters.'

I held my card over the machine and got another smile as I left.

The next day I was back there, of course. I bought healthier food and no beer, but she wasn't there, and I dithered irresolutely. Then suddenly she appeared from the back somewhere and sorted some problem at one of the self-checkouts. I went back and got beer. It worked. She appeared again and, better still, recognised me.

'You again?'

'Indeed.'

She glanced at my purchases. 'More beer. I'm studying alcoholism, you know.'

Shaking her head sadly, she approved it. I was still trying to think of a comeback when one of the other staff called her away.

The next day I tried damaging a barcode before going to the self-checkouts. She emerged, picked up the offending item and started inputting the number.

'No beer today. Well done.' The smile.

I tried my luck.

'Perhaps we could have coffee sometime?' I waved my arm towards the street and knocked my milk to the floor. It burst, covering the floor at astonishing speed. She had to clean it up, of course. Not a good result.

I was walking home miserably when I saw some flowers outside a shop. Inspired, I bought some and hurried back to the supermarket. I waited outside for her to finish, not quite daring to go in.

Time slowed. It grew dark. It started raining.

'I don't think she's coming,' said a voice. It was her.

'No, no, these are for you,' I said, horrified by her interpretation. 'For spilling the milk. I mean, for cleaning up the milk.'

'Oh, thank you.' She took the flowers, smiled and turned towards the shop.

'You're going back in?'

'I am. Half an hour yet. Why?'

'I was asking if you'd like a coffee when I spilt the milk.'

'They're all shut now.'

'Oh,' I said. Uselessly.

She took pity.

'Tell you what, wait in that pub, and I'll come and study you in

a little. As homework, you know.'

I opened my mouth to defend myself, then closed it again.

'OK,' I said.

• *Dominic, from Hull, says: 'My inspiration was simply a conversation between a young man and an attractive checkout operator.'*

Runner-up

Leftovers by Mairibeth MacMillan

Saturdays at the nail salon only served to remind Gillian that she was over-the-hill, divorced and spending the evening alone while her two daughters went to visit their father and his new, younger, prettier wife.

The only thing getting her through today was the thought of the bottle of Prosecco chilling in the fridge at home. That and the box of leftover cakes the baker next door always sent through with his assistant Cassie on a Saturday, which was currently sitting unopened on the counter.

'So what'll it be today, then?' Gillian asked as she lifted Cassie's hands one by one from the bowl of warm, fragrant water and dried them.

'Just a file and polish,' Cassie said. 'I'm going for a more natural look tonight. Remember that accountant?'

'The guy you said had the most boring job ever?'

'Yes,' said Cassie beaming. 'So... I guess we're sort of seeing each other now.'

'That's nice,' Gillian said, smiling. 'So, the more natural look is because...?'

'Well,' Cassie stated. 'At some stage you have to let a guy see the real you.'

Gillian stared at Cassie, wishing she'd realised that sooner.

'I'll take that pink one,' Cassie said pointing. 'What's it called?'

'Perfect Date,' Gillian read from the bottle.

'It's a sign,' Cassie said laughing. 'So, anyone new in your life?'

'Do Ben and Jerry count?'

'They're not new,' Cassie chided.

'No, they're not,' Gillian said. 'But at the moment they are the only men in my life.'

'What about James?'

Gillian lifted her head and stared at Cassie. Maybe the fumes from the nail varnish were affecting her. 'James?'

'James. My boss. My divorced boss. The baker. The one who sends you a box of cupcakes every Saturday.'

'Only because the bakery is closed on Sunday and they'd go stale.'

'Yeah, that's why,' said Cassie, rolling her eyes. 'You do know he doesn't send any in to Mr Wilson in the post office?'

'Mr Wilson's gluten intolerant,' said Gillian.

'Right,' Cassie said. 'Just look at the cakes and then invite him to share whatever it is that you have chilling in your fridge.'

'I'll look at the cakes,' Gillian promised as Cassie paid and left, although she finished cleaning and tidying the salon ready for Monday before she finally sat down.

The light was still on in the bakery across the road, which was

unusual. James usually left when Cassie came to the salon and that had been more than an hour ago. What was he waiting for tonight?

Gillian opened the lid of the box and gasped. These weren't leftovers. The twelve cupcakes inside were each decorated like a single red rose. Gillian felt a frisson of excitement run through her at all the possibilities the beautiful gesture implied. Then she put on her coat, picked up the cakes and headed across the road.

James opened the door as she approached.

'Do you like Prosecco?' she asked, thrilled when he nodded and smiled.

• *Mairibeth, from Argyll, says: 'I kept thinking about Carrie Fisher in When Harry Met Sally, so rather than showing the couple, I decided to show the scene where the friend intervenes to get the couple together as a kind of tribute to her.'*

Editor's comments

This month it was noticeable that many stories started with too much explanation about who the main character was and their situation. It's better to start straight with the action. Even the winning story could have started at the till with the cashier scanning the items and the man noticing her attractiveness. In the second story, Gillian's situation and a little more about James could have been woven into the conversation.

However, both stories were still nicely written and contained the essential ingredients required – humour and a 'feel-good' factor. The easiest filter for judging this time was when entries didn't really add any humour to the mix. We were *told* the characters smiled and laughed but the reader wasn't *shown* a reason to join in.

With some other entries, there sometimes wasn't quite enough explanation of what was going on and I found I had to work a bit too hard to work out who was speaking or what was happening to whom.

My final suggestion is to think about paragraphs. Some entrants don't use any, which makes a story very hard to read. Unlike the number of words, they're not on ration, so start a new one whenever needed, especially when someone starts to speak.

Paragraphs help readers because they break up daunting blocks of text and give a visual cue that something is changing, and they work like punctuation by adding a pause – and therefore a chance for us to take in what's just happened.

Highly commended

Two Halves of the Coconut by Patricia Lowther – this was a close third. A girl is forced to play the coconuts by a mean music teacher but this wins her the attention of the school heartthrob. Funny language and scenes in this, but the romance aspect wasn't quite prominent enough.

Finding Harmony by Paul Dalton – a son regrets asking his parents how they met as they reminisce about a chance encounter in a record shop. Told through quickfire dialogue, the amusing characters came across well, but this raised an interesting problem. The three-way banter in the present day became the focus rather than the actions in the past and so I didn't get transported into that shop. Perhaps having one parent speaking more might have increased reader rapport.

Art Appreciation by Samantha McGinnigle – a mum meets her son's art teacher and there is a frisson between them. They skate around the fact he knows she has been doing her son's homework. Later he finds her at an art class and invites her out. He has recognised her style. Lots of potential but plot details left out, such as how he saw her artwork.

A Gift for Katie by Veronica Donaldson – a letter to reality star Katie Price from a woman who found true love. She encloses a DVD of *Titanic* and explains how she tested potential suitors by making them watch it.

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.

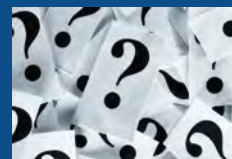
Writers' Forum wants to encourage you to write, so:

- 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 185: MYSTERY

**Deadline: 12 noon GMT on
27 February 2017**



Editor's assignment: Write a mystery story of up to **800** words. It needn't be a murder or crime, but the reader should be given a puzzle and all the clues needed to solve it within a proper story. The answer doesn't necessarily have to be spelled out, as long as the ending is satisfying and hints at the correct solution.

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 box, write **Flash Comp 185:** 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!

WRITING FOR YOU MAGAZINE

Douglas McPherson gets the low-down on writing fiction for South African magazine *You*, from fiction editor Lynn Ely and some of her regular contributors

The market for women's magazine fiction in the UK is shrinking fast. At the beginning of the year *Take a Break's Fiction Feast* decided only to accept submissions from a list of existing 'preferred writers.' This leaves *Women's Weekly*, the *Weekly News* and *People's Friend* among the handful still accepting unsolicited work.

It's also becoming harder to re-sell stories abroad, with many mags such as Australia's *That's Life!* *Fast Fiction* now demanding worldwide first rights, which precludes stories previously published in Britain.

All of which makes South African magazine *You* an attractive target for writers looking for new markets.

Established in 1987 and aimed at women in the 35-49 age range, the magazine uses one 1500-word story each week and as well as new stories is happy to accept those previously published in the UK, provided they have not been published on the internet.

'We have several contributors from the UK and elsewhere in the world,' says Lynn Ely, who took over the role of fiction

editor last summer.

The good news for writers used to a long wait for replies from UK mags is that Lynn responds quickly to email submissions, often within a week, and while she may not buy a story immediately, she will ask if she can hang on to certain stories for 'possible future use'. That way, you will at least know which tales are hitting the mark and which aren't wanted, so you can pitch elsewhere without a long delay.

Patsy Collins, who runs the *Womag Writer* blog, reports that one of her stories which was put on the 'possible' pile was subsequently bought within a few weeks.

'I try to get back to writers within three months, but I don't always succeed – it's a work in progress!' admits Lynn.

Wanted list

So what sort of stories is *You* looking for?

'We prefer women's fiction, romance and crime/mystery. We don't use thrillers, horror, science-fiction or fantasy,' says Lynn, who adds a preference for female main characters in their twenties or older.

'I don't have a preference for writing in the first or third person. I enjoy both,' she adds.

'I receive a pretty large volume of submissions a week and there aren't enough weeks in a year for us to be able to accept every story, so I base my selection on what I believe our readers will most enjoy. Generally, that's a story that's different, ie we've not published a similar storyline before; that has an ending you don't see coming a mile off; that's not



Fiction editor Lynn Ely

too twee or too despondent. I like an interesting twist to a story that's well-written with characters I can relate to, or failing that, at least ones whose motivations I can understand.'

One of Lynn's recent favourites was a Christmas story about a boy who fears his bickering parents are going to get divorced.

'I won't give away the ending as it's incredibly sweet,' says Lynn. 'But it's on our website [www.you.co.za] if you'd like to read it.'

'I also liked one about a woman whose grown-up son wasn't keen on her inviting someone whom she'd met on Facebook over to stay. I loved

the twist in that one.'

As for her pet hates...?

'When you can tell how the story will end almost from the get-go. When it's so saccharine sweet it makes your teeth hurt. Or when it leaves you feeling morose. Even a serious or thought-provoking story should leave you with a sense of hope at the end.'

Local knowledge

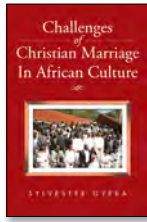
'Stories don't have to be set in South Africa,' says Lynn, 'but we prefer them to be as non-specific as possible so as not to alienate readers. We don't expect stories to have South African locations and cultural references, but a fabricated



Writer Christine Sutton

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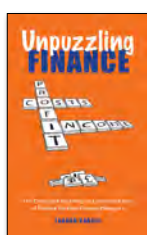


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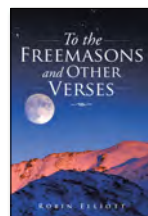
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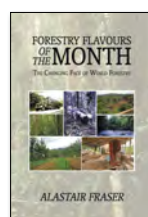


TO THE FREEMASONS AND OTHER VERSES

Robin Elliott

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FORESTRY FLAVOURS OF THE MONTH

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Alastair Fraser

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Technophobia



Keir Thomas explains how to scribble using your electronic devices, no matter where you are or what you're doing



TAKING NOTES

A close look at Microsoft OneNote

Notetaking is a vital skill for just about any writer. Journalists use it while researching; novelists can use it to sketch plot or character outlines. As you might expect the traditional approach of generating 1000 scraps of easily misplaced paper has been superseded in the digital age.

Getting started

We explored the methods that can be used when creating notes on a computer back in issue 146. In summary, there are three standard methods offered by apps:

■ **Outlining:** focuses on creating ordered headings and sub-headings in order to organise ideas and concepts before details are filled in later.

■ **Mind-mapping:** a visual family-tree style arrangement where each idea or concept has its own box within a larger arrangement, and each is linked to a “parent” or “child” to show progression.

■ **Freeform:** anything goes – from simply writing paragraphs to creating tick lists to drawing sketches.

This time around, I am digging down into a specific app, Microsoft OneNote (<http://office.microsoft.com/en-gb/onenote>), which can

be used for outlining but is essentially freeform.

OneNote is available for just about every computer device – desktop computers, smartphones, tablets and via a web browser (www.onenote.com/notebooks) – but perhaps its best feature is that it's entirely free of charge, with no limitations.

If you want to magically sync notes across all your devices via the cloud, so you can jot down ideas on your phone on the bus and then find them ready and waiting for you on your desktop PC when you arrive home, you'll also need to sign up to a free Microsoft account (<https://account.microsoft.com>). Note that you may well already have one of these if you use other Microsoft products, including its Xbox games console.

Organisation

Imagine a ring binder. You know the type – the ones that take hole-punched paper and include rings that make a satisfying clack when being opened or closed.

If you're an organised kind of person you'll also easily imagine index dividers – those coloured pieces of card with tabs that let you organise the ring binder into sections. Finally, you'll have no trouble

visualising the pages that contribute the bulk of a typical ring binder.

OneNote organises things exactly the same way, with the only difference being that the ring binders are called Notebooks. These Notebooks contain Sections – identified by tabs of various colours – and each Section contains one or more Pages.

However, because all this is digital, you'll never run out of pages, and each page can be as long as you want it to be. A single page could feasibly hold an entire novel, for example, although a better approach is to create a new page for each idea or concept. Ultimately, however, it's up to you how you organise things.

To create a new Notebook, ensure the Home ribbon is selected, and then select the New button. OneNote will default to saving the Notebook in your online OneDrive storage space, so it can be accessed via all your devices using the cloud, but if you want it to remain private then instead select This PC.

You might then be prompted to share the Notebook with others – OneNote was built for office-worker collaboration – but just choose not to if you're the only one who will use it.

Immediately you'll create a new Section, called something

like New Section 1. You can rename this by double-clicking on the coloured tab near the top of the screen and then typing.

OneNote will also have automatically created a new Page. A key feature of all pages is that they have a title that identifies them, and the title of each page is listed at the right of the window so you can switch between them easily. The title is typed at the top of the page above the date and time, which are automatically added. (Double-click the time if you wish to change either of these manually in future.)

Typing

To start typing something, just click within the page and begin hammering the keyboard as usual. You'll notice that what you type is instantly surrounded by a container box. This shrinks and expands to reflect what you type, and by clicking and dragging you can shift the box around the page using the bar at its top.

In fact, two approaches can be taken for any given page. You can keep clicking in new areas of the page to create new containers for each idea or concept. This is a bit like PostIt notes stuck to a whiteboard,

Continued overleaf ►

Continued from previous page

where you can rearrange each container to show a logical procession. Alternatively, you can simply create a single container for that page and treat the entire page as if OneNote were a word processor.

A terrific feature of OneNote is that it'll automatically organise and reformat as you type. For example, if you start typing a numbered list ("1. Idea one", "2. Idea two" etc), OneNote will neatly align the numbers and text for you. To end a numbered list just hit Enter without typing anything. The same automatic alignment will happen if you type a dash or asterisk to start typing a bulleted list.

More about word processing: you'll find that tapping Ctrl+B or Ctrl+I (or Cmd+B and Cmd+I on a Mac) will switch to bold and italics, just like a word processor, and you can use the styles dropdown list under the Home tab in the same way you would in Microsoft Word to apply instant formatting.

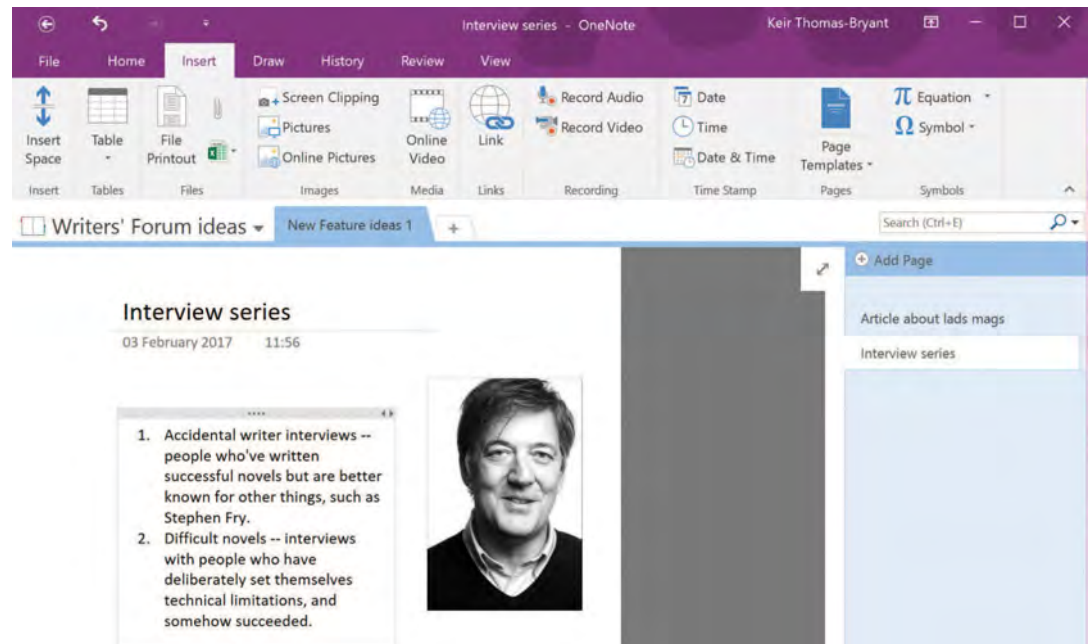
Indeed, the Home ribbon contains the majority of formatting tools found in a basic word processor, such as the ability to highlight or change the colour of text.

Advanced notation

The Tags dropdown list lets you add tickboxes (called checkboxes, as per American English) to any line or paragraph. This can be useful when creating To Do lists.

Other icons can also be inserted to help identify at a glance a particular concept or idea. For example, if creating a list of personality quirks for a character, you could use the Question tag to add any you're not quite sure about, or the Important tag to indicate those that truly define the individual. Selecting each in the Tags list inserts either a question mark or a star to the left of the line.

You can also search for tags later by clicking the Find tags



Microsoft OneNote is amongst the best 'freeform' note-taking apps and works on most computers and handheld devices

button, and then selecting individual tagged lines from the list beneath.

Again, the fact that OneNote is digital means that pages aren't limited to text. Select the Insert ribbon, for example, and you can insert word-processor-like tables, or even record audio or video clips directly into the page. You might choose to insert a recording of a phone conversation made as part of your research, for example.

However, perhaps the most useful tool for writers is the ability to insert pictures within notes, and just like text containers these can be dragged around on the page. Freelancers might want to insert pictures while researching, for example, and when dreaming up characters for novels I like to insert pictures that help me visualise that character.

You can insert pictures straight from your hard disk using the Pictures button on the Insert ribbon – just use the file browser to navigate to the picture – but selecting the Online Pictures buttons opens a web search box.

Alas, this uses Microsoft's own Bing Image Search, rather

Perhaps the most useful tool for writers is the ability to insert pictures within notes

than Google, but they're roughly equivalent in this case. In the grid of results just click any pictures that take your fancy, so they have a tick against them, and click the Insert button.

Advanced

OneNote is an application that somehow combines simplicity with a huge range of features and I'd encourage you to explore by clicking on the other toolbar ribbons.

When it comes to mobile devices, OneNote can be further boosted by several apps (see <https://www.onenote.com/apps>), which you'll find free in the usual Apple App Store and Google Play Store for Android. The mobile apps offer the

ability to add drawings if you use something like a stylus, for example.

Perhaps the most useful app is Microsoft's own Office Lens app. This gives you the James Bond-like ability to point the phone camera at documents or even objects like whiteboards and turn them into notes you can send to OneNote. This is amazingly useful if you are researching in a library, for example. Any text in the document will be recognised so that you can copy and paste it.

Using the app is simple but here are my additional hints: ensure the item you are photographing is as flat and well-lit as possible, and after you've taken the shot, check to ensure the photo isn't blurry and the text legible.

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



THE WRITERS' IDEA STORE

Being mostly a short story writer, I get through a lot of story ideas in the course of my work so am always on the look-out for new sources. And this year I discovered a magazine that offers exactly that (aside from this one, of course).

The magazine I'm talking about is a women's monthly called *Psychologies*. It's a complete

this for your own good'), the Victim ('I always get it wrong'), the Tyrant ('You're talking rubbish'), the Drama Queen ('Bad things always happen to me') and the Denier ('I don't want to hear it').

I found this really helpful and will definitely be using some of these characters in future stories. I particularly enjoyed the explanations of why people might be the way they are. The

Paula Williams takes a favourite magazine apart

treasure trove for a writer, as well as being a fascinating read. I've always loved psychology and would dearly love to find the time to study the subject 'properly' one day. In the meantime, I enjoy reading the easy to understand articles in this magazine.

An added bonus is that over the six months I've been reading the magazine it's given me loads of story ideas, three of which I've already turned into completed stories, one of which has sold, which has more than paid for the annual subscription.

Just browsing through my latest copy, the first thing that catches my attention is a little snippet entitled 'How to be happy'. Did you know that research has found that taking part in weekly adult education classes lifts your sense of wellbeing, regardless of the subject?

Apparently, the group of students followed reported improved mental and physical

health. And the subjects found to have the greatest impact? Creative writing and singing – not necessarily at the same time, I assume!

So come on, what are you waiting for? Get down to your local adult education classes, while you still can. If your local authority is anything like mine it may be threatening yet more cuts to this amazing service.

In the same magazine was a fascinating and very useful article by Martha Roberts about the psychological profiles of 'difficult' family members, why they behave the way they do and the most effective ways of dealing with them. This was timely advice as the issue came out a few weeks before Christmas!

As well as descriptions of the behaviour patterns of each character type, Roberts gives examples of what they're likely to say. The list included the Controller ('I'm only telling you

Drama Queen, for example, will do anything within her (or his!) power to make someone else responsible for their life, either by passive-aggressive sulking or creating a drama.

The wonderful thing about this list, from a story writer's viewpoint, is that Roberts not only sets out a rich source of conflict, which is, as we all know, the cornerstone of a good story, she also gives possible solutions. She writes about strategies to help each character type and to help you, and suggests ways to change the dynamic between you.

I was particularly interested in her advice on how to cope with and change the behaviour of a Drama Queen – and yes, I do have one in my family! Maybe this is the year that I come up with a more effective way of dealing with her than merely closing my eyes and wishing I was somewhere else.

If you're looking for a hero (and who isn't?) you could do worse than read the *Psychologies* profile of David Beckham. I don't usually enjoy celebrity stories but I read it with an open mind and increasing respect for the man. From a writer's perspective, the article explains what it is about Beckham's personality that makes him so 'charming', and it's an interesting list that would, I think, make a great basis for a character sketch.

For starters, he's a family man; he remembers his roots and is proud of where he comes from. He's modest and humble – which are, apparently, very 'charming' traits. He is not afraid to acknowledge his faults; he treats everyone he meets with the same courtesy, and he is driven to be the best in whatever he does. All of which makes him a bit of a paragon, doesn't it? If you were to create a fictional character with all those attributes, he would, indeed, be too good to be true and you would need to introduce some negative traits to make him believable.

There you have it. A magazine that shows you how to be happy, how to deal with the Drama Queen in your life and is so packed with potential story ideas it earns you enough money to more than cover the cost of it. Now that makes me very, very happy.

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

	1st & 2nd roll Characters	3rd & 4th roll Traits	5th roll Conflict	6th roll Location	7th roll Object
●	Footballer	Controller	Rain	School	Torn clothing
●●	Teenager	Victim	Snow	Hospital	Time capsule
●●●	Delivery driver	Tyrant	Fog	Car park	Red balloon
●●●●	Politician	Drama queen	Sunny	Ice rink	Hammer
●●●●●	Model	Denier	Heatwave	Tennis court	Old postcard
●●●●●●	Inspector	Bully	Gale	High-rise flat	Painkillers

Writers' FORUM *Achievement Chart*

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

I've always said I have nothing to say, only to add.
And it's with each addition that the writing gets done.
The first draft of anything is really just a track. Gore Vidal

March 2017

What am I writing?

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

Notes

Important dates
and deadlines

Wed	1	St David's Day
Thu	2	
Fri	3	
Sat	4	
Sun	5	
Mon	6	
Tue	7	
Wed	8	
Thu	9	
Fri	10	
Sat	11	
Sun	12	
Mon	13	
Tue	14	
Wed	15	Fiction and poetry comps (rolling deadline)
Thu	16	Writers' Forum #186 on sale
Fri	17	St Patrick's Day
Sat	18	
Sun	19	
Mon	20	
Tue	21	
Wed	22	
Thu	23	
Fri	24	
Sat	25	
Sun	26	Mother's Day British Summer Time (clocks forward 1 hr)
Mon	27	Flash comp #186
Tue	28	
Wed	29	
Thu	30	
Fri	31	



*'The course demonstrates the structures of different writing forms, then helps students use that knowledge to build their individual **creative** and critical skills.'* Peter la Trobe-Bateman



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Writers' FORUM

fiction competition

Congratulations to this month's winners, Ken Tracey, David Soloman and Richard Hooton.

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

Disappearing Overnight

Ken Tracey

The man who despised capitalism chose to meet me in the Grosvenor Hotel, Victoria. A sign that he was unlike the other defectors I had helped, and a sign that this night would be different. He was to carry out his day's business as usual, until he entered the lounge with his fiancée and joined me for a drink. Then his life would change forever.

It was dark outside and each bus that wheezed along Buckingham Palace Road displayed its top deck passengers slumped in a haze, with fags dangling from their mouths. I knew that they would achieve nothing, and never share in the wealth that they were crippling themselves to produce. Now it would get worse with petrol at fifty pence a gallon and the effects of inflation and strikes.

If only I could leave it all behind too and go with this Felix fellow tonight, to live in a fair society. Leave these pre-dinner drinkers in their double-breasted penguin suits and their maxi-skirted wives.

The waiter paused with a raised eyebrow, so I ordered another vodka. The grandfather clock and my Sekonda agreed that Felix was ten minutes late. I'd have expected more accuracy from a scientist.

Two gulps of my fresh drink had gone and I'd taken to cracking my knuckles, when a gangling young man walked in. 'I'm meeting someone,' I heard him answer the waiter's enquiry.

Immediately I discounted him as my contact. He was alone, anyway, and wore a black overcoat that almost swept the floor. His hair was shoulder-length beneath a black fedora and he squeaked along in those new training shoes. More like Mick Jagger than a scientist. But he kept coming, and next thing I was standing up and shaking his outstretched hand.

'Felix.' His mischievous grin revealed tombstone teeth.

'Alex,' I replied. He'd dispensed with the safety of code words. I told him to sit down.

He removed the coat with a flourish and draped it over a chair, where it did touch the floor. The fedora was cast on the table and he stretched back in an armchair.

'Don't get comfortable, we have to leave soon.' Already this job was different. 'Shh.'

He was about to speak and the waiter was at my shoulder. I



ordered a whiskey.

'Thanks for that,' he chuckled. 'How did you know my tippie?'

'We know everything,' I lied, in fact I'd smelt it on his breath. All I really knew was that he worked on some clever stuff that valued him highly with the Soviets, and I would deliver him and his fiancée to an address in Kensington Palace Gardens.

'Where is Sandra?'

He slid back a crumpled sleeve and studied a diver's watch. 'She should be here.'

'But she isn't. Where can she be?'

'She's coming after work, must have been delayed.'

'You should have brought her with you. Where does she work?' I was disappointed.

'It's only five minutes from here. She's a nanny in a family house.'

'OK, we'll finish our drinks and go get her.'

The lounge was filling up; sparkling glasses were being raised along with the volume of chatter. We would need to be discreet; Harold Wilson's election victory was enough for the elite to suspect reds everywhere.

'Sounds like an interesting job you have.' I knew that he'd be cautious about his work but we needed to warm up.

'We've made progress,' he smirked.

Would I learn why the Soviets wanted this oddball, or would I be left guessing? 'What's your speciality?' I tried again.

It took a wrinkled brow and several seconds for him to reduce his

Continued overleaf ►

► *Disappearing Overnight continued*

reply to my level. 'Basically, it's physics. You'll know of Einstein and Planck?'

One out of two would have to do. I nodded.

'Well, our work stems from their theories, but we've had a breakthrough with the transference of matter. That's why I must share my research for the benefit of the people.'

Admirable, but he'd lost me. He drained his glass and glanced around the room. It was clearly a full stop to further explanation.

'We are going to collect Sandra now.' I pushed my glass away. 'While we are on the street you must be alert for danger. Watch me at all times and do as I say without question.'

'OK.' But the student of Planck hadn't convinced me.

With a grip on his arm, I steered my prize through the traffic jamming Buckingham Palace Road. He directed me into Belgravia where Sandra worked and fortunately where I had parked.

'When we have Sandra we'll be travelling by car. I'm parked just past that pub on the left.' Ahead light splashed the pavement.

'The house is beyond the pub,' he answered.

We quickened our pace, if Sandra wasn't there, I would have to cajole Felix into leaving without her. The procedure was to tell them that their loved ones would join them later, and sometimes they did.

The drone of beery conversation and the tang of cigarette smoke greeted us. Felix cupped his hands to his eyes to see through the pub window. I made for the shadows and waited at the steps of a neighbouring house.

When he caught up, the shoulders of the great coat shrugged. 'She might have gone in there by mistake.' I doubted that a physicist's fiancée would confuse the Plumbers Arms with the Grosvenor, but said, 'Let's try the house first.' We were losing momentum.

We passed my car sandwiched between a Mini and a Ford Corsair. Lots of space. I could get out easily.

Suddenly, footsteps clattered ahead. I strained to see through the dark. A woman in a mini dress ran toward us.

'Felix, is this her?' I hissed.

'Can't tell yet.' We stopped a few feet apart.

'Help me,' she cried as she ran. 'She didn't pass between us but dropped sobbing into Felix's arms. 'He's killed her.'

She was too close to my prize. I grabbed her wrist and pulled her to me. The tears on her face glistened in the street light. She was about my own age, thirty, skinny with long hair and her dress was stained with blood.

'Is this your friend?' I wasn't sure whether she matched the picture I'd seen of Sandra.

'No. No, but she's bleeding, Alex. We've got to help.'

'Get away from her. Look, you've got blood on your coat now. Get in the car.'

I held her wrist with one hand and threw him the keys with the other. 'Do you want the police?' My face was close to hers.

'He's killed her,' she bleated.

'Who has?'

'My husband.'

A murder on the street would foul up my operation. 'Go to the pub. They'll call the police for you. Quick, quick.'

I shoved her away and she scurried off.

'Hold on, Alex.' It was Felix

'Get in the fucking car. Now.' He scowled and turned. 'What's the number of the house where Sandra works?'

'Forty-six,' he mumbled.

'Keep off the street until I get back.'

I took off and didn't slow down until twin columns with the house number on came into view. Lights glowed on the upper floors. At the top of the steps I beat on the door and stood back. I noticed a man on

the opposite side of the road, his face toward me. He didn't stop. I hoped that a servant would open the door. I didn't want to confront the family.

There was no answer. The woman would cause a stir at the pub and they would be quick to call the police and the response to this prodigious address would be pretty damn quick. The thought of the street sealed off and blue lights slicing the night made me beat the door with both fists.

Nothing and it was 10pm already. There was a dim light on in the basement. Back at street level, I pushed open an iron gate to the basement area, then clattered down the steps. An open door brought me to a halt. Surely this was where the staff would be. I'd give Sandra just two minutes to leave with me.

'Anyone home?' I called. Nothing. I would have to go in.

Two steps along a corridor, I called out again. 'Sandra, I need to speak to you.' The smell of coffee and the pop of a percolator greeted me. Was the open door too helpful?

I crept the rest of the way into a kitchen. I saw her feet first. Then bare legs beneath a mini skirt. A girl lay sprawled out. Her blood swam across the floor from a crater in the back of her head, her brown hair was matted. I covered my mouth with my hand and pinched my nose. Thankfully the smell of coffee was thick on the air. I knew the blood would match that on the frantic woman's dress and now on Felix too. There was a stab in my heart; the girl's face matched my picture of Sandra.

Worse still, when the police answered her call, the woman would lead them straight to this room. I turned and ran, stumbled on the steps and grazed a shin, picked myself up and scurried on to the street.

No police, but further down the street, beyond my car, there was a huddle of people outside the pub. Damn, the woman had done just as I'd told her. How come Felix was involved with these crazy people? Was I being set up for a murder?

I ran to the car. A man appeared ahead of me, much stouter than Felix. Closer, I could see that he had the boot of the Corsair open. I slowed and advanced. *Please, Felix, have the sense to stay put, with the fedora pulled well down.*

The man jerked upright on hearing me. His hair was slicked back and he had a moustache. His tie was askew and he had a wide-eyed look. Definitely some local toff.

I stubbed my fingers on the car door handle. Felix was already reaching across to unlock it.

'Where have you been?' I looked in at Felix but he shook his head. It was the toff who had spoken. No time for pleasantries, I ducked to get in. The door was torn from my grasp.

'I asked where you had been.' He stood above me.

'Just leaving, good night,' I fobbed him off.

'Where is she?' It was Felix.

'Not now,' I hissed. 'She'll follow on.'

Who were these people? They could send this job to hell; the hysterical woman, the aggressive toff and Sandra dead on the floor.

The big man held the door so it wouldn't close.

'Clear off, or we'll get rough.' I tugged the door. He grabbed my arm. To stop falling sideways, I swung my feet out and stood up fast.

'Get away.' When I shoved him his grip tightened on my wrist. Then I saw a length of pipe in his free hand. I tore at him and threw myself to the ground. It broke his grip and I rolled away. A clang told me that his blow had hit the car.

There was enough light to show a crazy grimace on his face. 'You were in my house.' He growled and advanced, still holding the pipe.

I pushed up and found my feet. Then with a shudder, I realised that I was fighting Sandra's killer. Her head had been burst open by this man. I was braced to tackle him when Felix appeared.

'Keep out of it, he's a killer,' I raged.

Felix had torn off his coat. I froze as he leapt and pulled it over the

man's head and hung on. The pipe clanged to the ground as the man struggled to get free, but Felix held on.

'Leave this to me.' A stern Felix dragged the man to the ground. I picked up the pipe and stood ready.

'Don't kill him,' I ordered. Two corpses on the same street could bring my mission to a nasty end.

He was kneeling on the man, totally in control. I glanced ahead to where the group of people muttered by the pub. Still no police. We'd been lucky but not for much longer.

When I turned back, Felix was standing on the bundle, eyes ablaze.

'You are a most privileged spy to see this,' he announced. The coat settled a little beneath him.

'What the hell's going on, Felix?'

The breath whistled from his mouth as he pressed down. The bundle had ceased to struggle. Felix kept one foot in place. He

pressed and his foot went lower, the bundle had shrunk.

The sweat ran down my back and I was panting but I couldn't take my eyes of the black shape on the ground. Felix turned to face me, his head like a statue, staring, lifeless. Then he stood tall and stepped on to his coat with both feet.

'What's happening?' I croaked.

Suddenly he stepped back, bent and seized the coat with both hands. A matador's swish brought the coat over his shoulders and I followed his gaze back to the gritty paving stones... The toff had disappeared.



About the author Ken writes short stories, memoir and features. He is thrilled with this first win and is now inspired to self-publish an anthology and his crime novel. He lives in Kent and plods and plots in the countryside.

SECOND PRIZE £150

Losing Touch

David Soloman

Hello. It's been a long time, but you haven't changed.

It's changeless here, and lonely too. I could choose to have some company at any time, but I can't face the others. Their stories. Their lives.

The judge was wrong. He said I wouldn't be here but for you. I guess it must have looked that way, but how do you explain the truth? How do you extrapolate a single moment of clarity that crystallises inexorably into murder? Is it even possible to pin down an exact moment when love dies? Over time unspoken resentments build, feelings slowly erode, until one day...

...my wife, Stella, is sitting across the table from me at our evening meal. She is talking, as she always does, about some incident at work; I have tuned out, as I always do. Out of sheer politeness I am focused on her face. I nod every now and again, watching with forced fascination as her jaw works rhythmically. A wisp of blonde hair strays, as it often does, across her mouth.

Then I hear it.

A commonplace sound. I must have heard it a million times: the sound of my wife chewing. Yet tonight it's the sound that hammers a coffin nail into my heart. It seems amplified over all else, eclipsing even the music from our sound system.

Munch... munch... munch.

Why have I never noticed how annoying that is?

Munch... munch... munch... munch... munch.

Does it seem callous that something so minor, so apparently insignificant, could change my life forever? Is it small-minded of me that only then did I realise there was nothing – absolutely nothing – left of what we once had, save the need to honour a commitment once made?

The divorce was acrimonious. I gave away far more than I needed to in settlements but willingly paid the heavy toll, hoping it would somehow assuage my guilt. Regardless, the pangs worsened each time I saw Stella – pale, tired, expressionless – going about her life, as if on autopilot. I could sense the torrent of bitterness dammed up inside her, but I couldn't take it away and I couldn't think of any way to make it hurt less.

And then, one day, I saw you.

I have kept intact my memories of our meeting across all these years. I



can play them back at will. Imagine a film running through your mind: candid-camera vignettes spliced between feelings, fleeting scents and lost tunes. It could almost be reality, but it holds no comfort at all. I am emptier with each showing. Think how a photograph can make you ache for times past, then try to imagine how it must feel if nothing new could ever happen to you again.

Sometimes I can't control the film in my head. Memories spill out and pile up around me like celluloid on a cutting room floor. Other times I cue the lights, turn up the sound and shout for action.

A hot Saturday night in September.

I push my way through the crowded dance floor, cursing the idiot friend who had dragged me to this God-forsaken, trance-ridden hell-hole, wishing instead that I had stayed home and hugged my guilt as usual. 'You'll meet someone special,' he'd said. Yeah, right.

I see her standing by the bar. She is not dressed for a nightclub, but her simple outfit – white blouse, knee-length blue satin skirt – suits her to perfection. She is slim, assured, and has long brown hair that cascades down her back in waves. Somehow I sense that she, like me, is divorced from the crazed proceedings. She, too, is alone and I am instantly drawn to her.

In for a penny: I make a somewhat hesitant approach.

'Hello.'

'Pardon?'

'I said hello!'

'I can't hear you! Did you say hello?'

'Yes!' I shout.

'Oh! Hello!'

The music thuds on. Dazed dancers careen and jerk in the smoke

Continued overleaf ►

► **Losing Touch continued**

and flashing lights. It could almost be a depiction of war.

'Would you like to dance?' I ask.

'Excuse me?'

'I'd like to dance with you... if you don't mind.'

A pause. Her eyes meet mine in a disconcerting violet gaze. Then she smiles. 'OK, but I don't really like this stuff.'

'Nor do I.'

Her mouth is close to my ear as she shouts 'I only came here because of a friend! She's out there somewhere!'

'Oh right.'

'You look sad.'

'Pardon?'

'Nothing. Shall we dance?'

She steps forward and places her arms around my neck, apparently heedless of the insistent beat of the dance music. The smoke and confusion vanish as if they were swept away by a tidal wave of sunlight. She smells of flowers and vanilla, and I am already lost in her. She just holds me, hardly moving at all, her head on my shoulder, her body moulded to mine. Doubt, guilt – all the negative emotions – they simply drain away, and my world changes in an instant. I know I will remember this moment for the rest of my life. I already wish it would never stop.

'Anne! There you are! I thought I'd lost you!'

Something nasty lurches out of the darkness. The sunlit world flees like a cat-menaced mouse. I catch a sympathetic blue glance as Anne releases me.

'Hello, Jackie,' she says. 'This is Colin. He's about to take me home. I'm not feeling so good.'

I try not to look too surprised as Jackie pierces me with a very pointed stare. 'Huh?' she grunts.

'Hello, Jackie. Nice to meet you. Anne and I are, um, old friends. Very old friends. From way, way back in the old, um...'

Anne's hand touches my arm. 'I'll get my jacket, Colin. You can tell Jackie about your American holiday some other time.'

I nod sagely as she disappears into the crowd, a tiny smile hovering at her lips. Jackie looks distinctly mutinous. Her mouth is open and I'm sure a suspicious question is on its way when, without warning, she is heaved back into the whirling masses by a large, spotty youth sporting a lurid, green Mohican haircut. I murmur a silent prayer of thanks to my strange guardian angel.

'What are you grinning about?' Anne is at my side once more.

'Oh. Hello. Nothing. Um, Jackie had to go.'

She regards me, thoughtfully. 'You look better when you smile. Shall we go?'

We make our way through the dance hall dervishes and finally reach the air-conditioned sanctuary of the brightly lit foyer. Now I can see more clearly her delicate features and the astonishing blue-violet depths of her eyes. She laughs.

'Don't stare, Colin! You look as if you've been hypnotised.'

I grin, shamefacedly.

'My name's not Colin. It's Daniel. Dan.'

'Hmm. Not sure about Dan and Anne! Hello, Daniel. It's nice to meet you.' She shakes my hand, somewhat gravely.

Suddenly I feel overwhelmingly, first-real-kiss shy.

'I don't know what to say.'

'What do you want to say?'

'Um, I don't know. Hello, I suppose.'

That is not what I want to say at all. My mind is tripping over an obstacle course of right words and perfect phrases. One by one all my ideas flutter away into the ether and I say lamely: 'So you're American then?'

Her smile is a balm. 'Yes I am, though I live here now. Will you

walk me home, please?'

'I, um, well, yes. Of course!'

She takes my arm; her touch is a benediction. For the second time in just a few minutes my doubts and fears ebb away to nothingness.

'Thank you, Danny. You've rescued me from a fate far worse than death.'

So it began.

The film in my mind is fluttering uselessly on the reel, spinning round and round. As the emptiness floods back it's as if you never existed.

I don't want it to stop there! It was almost real again. I could almost feel again. Play it, Sam! Once more, with feeling.

(No feeling. I'm losing touch.)

I saw you every day at the trial. What must you have thought? I wanted so much to reach out to you and say sorry. To let you know it was all OK. Would you have understood? Would you have believed the lie?

You always seemed to understand...

'Danny?'

'Um...'

'Do you still think about Stella?'

We are in a rumpled bed, several minutes into the aftermath of making love. Hearing my ex-wife's name jolts me out of my cosy reverie. I open a quizzical eye. Anne is propped up on one arm, her long hair tumbling over her breasts as she gazes down at me, a little frown furrowing her brow.

'Not when I'm with you...' I protest, but she silences me with a smile, placing a gentle finger to my lips.

'I didn't mean that. I know. I just meant, from time to time, do you still think about her?'

'Sometimes,' I admit. 'It's hard not to after seven years of marriage. I wonder how she is. Feel guilty sometimes. Why?'

'She came to see me the other day.'

I sit bolt upright.

'What? When was this? Where did you...?'

She laughs at my confusion. 'Don't panic! She didn't cause any trouble. She was just waiting for me outside work.'

'What did she want?'

'Not sure. She seemed really confused. I think she wanted to know if I was ever going back to the States.'

'For Christ's sake, we're divorced! It's over! It's none of her damned business!' I exclaim angrily.

'I think she just needed someone to talk to. She probably feels very lonely, you know.'

I feel the familiar twinge of guilt, buried barely skin-deep, yet today it serves only to stoke my anger.

'I'm going to see her. I don't want her bothering you again.'

She frowns again and touches my petulant face.

'I'm not sure that's such a good idea, Danny. You should let it rest. I can handle her, no problem.'

'I don't want you to have to handle her. It's not your problem to solve.'

'Don't be angry at her. Let it rest. For me.'

She takes my hand and pulls it to her breast. The sheer thrill of it makes me give in instantly.

'OK, but if she bothers you again I'm not going to stand for it.'

I'm treated to a Grade A smile.

'Thank you, Danny. You can go back to sleep now.'

I roll on top of her in mock outrage. She giggles, then I feel her lips against my ear as she whispers something that I can't quite hear.

It was just like you, Anne. Placing others before yourself. If you weren't like that I don't suppose you'd have even given me the time of day in that nightclub. What was it you saw in me, I wonder? A lost boy? A soul mate?

A mercy mission?

That night, after you'd drifted off to sleep, I lay in the darkness convincing myself that I had to talk to Stella, no matter what your reservations: I had to get her to see reason. Then, perhaps, I'd finally be able to say the words I'd been longing to use since the day I met you, but had been too guilt-ridden to broach: 'I love you, Anne, and I want to marry you. If you'll have me.'

Cause and effect. Life's dominoes tumbling relentlessly, one after the other, never knowing what, otherwise, might have been. Forever unable to take the path not travelled. What if I hadn't gone to see Stella? What if I'd simply had the courage to tell you how I felt? What if I'd never left Stella in the first place? What if? What if?

What.

If.

The very next day I picked up the phone and told Stella I needed to see her.

The flat looks the same from the outside. Perhaps not as well maintained as I remember. Lacking a man about the house, I suppose.

Sarcasm doesn't become you, Daniel.

A street light throws a dim orange glow over the doorway; I feel like a ghost in my old world.

I knock. The place is strangely silent. I knock again. I always meant to fix that bell.

A stirring from within. The door swings open with a rasping creak it did not have before.

Stella stands just inside, a tumbler full of drink in her hand, a crooked little grin on her face and that familiar wisp of blonde hair straying across the corner of her mouth. I can smell the drunken sourness on her breath. Not a good sign.

'Hello, Stella. Can I come in?'

Her face relaxes, as if some preordained plan just reached fulfilment. 'Hello, Dan. It's nice to see you. You're back then?'

Not quite sure what to make of that, I step inside. 'I, um, how have you been?'

'How have I been?' Her voice is cracked. 'OK, I suppose. You haven't brought any stuff, then?'

'I'm sorry, I don't...'

'I knew if I could see her, explain, I could make her understand.'

I don't know how to respond to this. 'Can I sit down?'

'Of course you can, Dan. It's your flat. I kept it nice for you. I cleaned it every day.' Her voice is far away, like a child close to sleep, eager to please a stern parent. 'Have I kept it nice?'

I stare at her. 'Yes, Stella. It's very nice. What's the matter?'

She is crying now as she kneels by my chair. 'It's just that I thought you weren't coming back. I thought she'd got you.'

Belated realisation nags at me: it feels like black ice seeping into my heart.

'I've cooked you a nice meal. Thai chicken, the way you like it. A homecoming meal.'

I look over her shoulder into the kitchen-diner. The table is set with wine glasses. A meal is in full preparation; kitchen implements are strewn around; candlelight flickers; I can smell jasmine rice.

'I'm sorry about what I said to you before,' she murmurs. 'Let's forget it ever happened.'

She takes my hand and a hot tear falls onto my knuckles. I hadn't expected this. I'd assumed we would end up having another row. I feel the urge to comfort her, to hold her and say everything will be fine, but...

'Stella,' I say in a very small voice.

She is sobbing now, her head in my lap, shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

'Stella!' Something in my tone forces her attention.

'I can't do this, I'm sorry, Stella. I'm confused.'

'It's OK, Dan. I still love you, even despite her.'

I am torn. I don't want to hurt her more than I already have, but I

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▶ **Losing Touch continued**

know now that Anne was right. I should never have come here.

'Stella. I didn't come back to stay. I'm sorry, but I didn't.'

Silence. She still has my hand, but her touch is suddenly tombstone cold. It's as if, deep inside her, a light has guttered, then died. She wrenches her hand away from mine. She opens her mouth. Words – vicious, ugly words – come tumbling out, vomiting from some hell-pit in her soul. Dark things, primordial emotions, screaming and tortured, fill the air.

I cannot be here any longer.

'I'm sorry, Stella. It's better if I go.'

I get up and put my hand out to her, apologetically.

She slaps it away. 'Go, you bastard! Go back to your slut!'

I make my escape into the chill night air. Almost immediately I wonder if I should go back. Surely there must be something more to say? But what?

I think of Anne. Her lips against my ear. The whisper that might have been 'I love you.'

I can never go back. Only forward.

As I stumble across the road I hear the rasping creak of a door,

then running footsteps behind me. I turn.

The knife is poised, glittering in the orange street light, and I cannot move as it arcs into my heart. Stella's face is contorted in a rictus of anger and pain.

'Dan!'

Like a dark angel, her face hovers over me in the sepia half-light... fading... fading...

'Dan! Oh God, Dan!'

Nothingness sweeps me away.

You can't see me. I wouldn't want you to. Not like this. But you always had a lot of empathy.

I stand beside your bed watching you sleep, as I always do, despite the despair.

I see you shiver as you dream. Is it my presence you sense?

Have I lost all touch?



About the author David, a management trainer, lives with his wife in Wiltshire. He won a national essay comp in 1976. Forty years and half a novel later, he does not count himself one of writing's natural finishers.

THIRD PRIZE £100 Marked Cards Richard Hooton

A haunting skeletal figure bearing a scythe stands on blackened earth with disembodied heads, hands and feet littering the ground. The Death Card. Even after all these years of dealing them out, it still causes my heart to race.

I look at the man opposite me. He's so close his breath chills my cheek. He doesn't flinch at the sight of the tarot card laid out in front of him. His blank expression remains; it's as if he expected it.

He'd asked for a double-length reading when he approached my little shop in the middle of the rickety old pier on a grey and cloudy day. How unusual. Most people, attracted by the fluorescent sign proffering *Romany Lady Michelle Reads Your Future*, just want a quick, cheap session. I know to them I'm a novelty act, a bit of fun.

I sensed instantly that he knew its seriousness. He didn't smile in the friendly or nervous way most clients do, but looked past me, thrusting £40 into my hand.

'There's something I need to know about my future,' he'd said.

It had been quiet; the gloom had kept visitors away. I'd ushered him inside.

I've been aware of my gift since the age of nine. I could sense what was about to happen. I felt a ripple from a shattered glass long before it was knocked to the floor. I glowed with pride at good essay grades before the paper had been marked. My Romany mum was a palmist and nurtured my talent. It's in my blood. But you didn't need psychic abilities to know this man was deeply troubled. He looked as if his features had been frozen, but I could feel a deep, awful pain rolling from him like the waves below us.

A hulk of a man, I was worried he'd even fit inside my reading room. Stretch your arms out and you'll touch the sides of the plain, white walls. As he'd crumpled into the plastic chair, it was like a giant in a Wendy house. In his mid-twenties, around half my age, he'd loomed over the table between us. He looked familiar.



I'd taken a deep breath before shuffling the deck of cards over my crystal ball, which was perched precariously on a small golden holder. It shimmered in a ray of light beaming through a gap in the curtains that divided us from the outside world. I'd asked him to pick ten cards, one at a time, and I'd interpret the messages they held.

So that first one. 'It's the Death Card,' I say. The very sight of it fills most clients with dread. It can just mean an abrupt change. There's no expression from him for me to read.

'I need you to turn over another card for me to realise its significance.' I'm impressed with how calm my voice sounds.

His huge hand grips another card. The table rocks as he forces it down in front of me. I try not to shake. Two figures blown out of the windows of a building on fire. The Blasted Tower. Again change. Again unpleasant. The physical or emotional structures we build are never stable or permanent.

'It's destruction and liberation,' I say. 'I see two people falling out.' Violently. My pulse quickens.

He snatches another card without prompting. Flings it on the table. A white bearded man wearing a crown sat on a throne. He's holding an Ankh, the Egyptian symbol of life, and an orb, the world over which he rules. The Emperor. Wisdom, protector, provider.

'The dominant male.' I smile. 'Bringing order from chaos.' Things are looking better for him. 'It can mean success in business.' I glance up. But warmth isn't returning to his face. For the first time he looks me in the eye as he turns over another card. A cold, blank stare. I

shiver. We look down together. A Satyr grins back at us, a man and woman bound to him in chains. A dominant male using his powers in an evil way. The Devil Card.

'Unexpected failure. Unhappiness. Self-punishment.' I can't stop myself from uttering the words. He clenches a fist so tight his knuckles crack. The bracelets around my wrist jangle. I have to calm him. And myself.

I touch the back of his other hand. It's ice cold.

'You need to tell me what's wrong.' I keep my hand on his. The vibrations from him shake my body.

'I killed her.'

He forces out the words. My muscles go rigid. I take a deep breath.

'What happened?' I speak with the gentleness of a mother.

'We were arguing.' His fist unfurls. 'She was leaving me. I lost control. Before I knew it she was on the kitchen floor. I'd stabbed her.'

'Who?'

'My girlfriend.'

His hand warms beneath mine. 'I don't know your name, love.'

He looks puzzled. 'It's Adam.' His body's movements subside.

'What's her name, Adam?'

His head jerks up, a flash of anger in his eyes. 'You're the psychic,' he sneers. 'You tell me.'

I try to control my breathing. Is he bluffing? Is this a trick designed to test me? I don't know if any actor can be that convincing. But I do know the cards never lie.

'I can help you, Adam.' My voice is faint.

'I've said too much.' He lifts a card and slams it on the table. 'Just read my future.'

A glowing yellow orb in the dark above a pool, where a wolf and a dog howl. The Moon Card. Intuition, dreams, imagination. 'It's a night-time scene,' I say. 'People don't see your problems.'

He leans towards me, his face inches from mine. 'You're the only person who knows.' His voice is quiet and cold. He's confessed to me. What if he didn't intend to and wants no one to know? I swallow hard. My brain screams run. But he's in front of the only exit.

He flips another card. 'Carry on, Sally,' he orders.

My blood runs cold. He knows my real name. It's not on any of my publicity. This faded seaside town is full of tarot readers. Why choose me? My mind is clouded by fear. I can't feel the future.

I gaze at the card. A man dangling upside down from a tree. The Hanged Man. I loosen the blue tie-dyed scarf from around my neck. Adam's gone white. He bites his lip. A trickle of blood spills from it.

'He is suspended but of his own will.' I can't control the tremor in my voice. 'It's indecision. You're stuck. You need to make a choice.' We both do.

I take a deep breath. I am trapped on a creaking wooden structure between the deep sea and a murderer. I've barely seen anyone on the pier all day. If I shout for help he'll be on me before anyone's heard. I need to be more subtle. My mobile is in my handbag in my little room next door where a kettle sits on a portable stove, next to snacks to get me through the day. If I'm quiet enough, masked by the whooshing waves and seagull squawks, I could make a call.

'Let me get you a tissue.' I speak as boldly as my dry throat will allow. 'And a drink.'

Adam nods. He'll know there's no escape route. He seems deep in thought. I walk as calmly as I can through the beads dangling in the doorway to the tiny, coffin-sized room.

Out of sight I scramble through my handbag. There are no tissues. And I can't see the damn phone. *I can't have forgotten it.* There it is, nestled between crumpled up bills and packets of mints. I jab 999. No signal. I remember how far down the pier my little shack is.

I run my hand through my hair and grip it. *Think.* I glare at myself in the little mirror I use to check my appearance between sessions. I look awful. Sweat has caused my foundation to run. My grey hair

clings to my face, which is embellished with frown lines and wrinkles. My robe, the colour of a summer sky, swamps me. Bones jut from my petite, bird-like frame. I'm an old sparrow to his hawk.

'Is tea OK?'

No answer. Has he gone?

I peer through the beads. He's still sat there. Only, there's now a large bloodied kitchen knife on my small table. Its sharp blade glitters beneath the crystal ball. I see the body, slumped on the kitchen floor, a red pool of sticky blood seeping out from beneath it. Nausea rises from my stomach.

'I'll make tea. Then we'll talk.'

I edge back inside the cubby hole, which I swear is getting smaller. I fumble for a match and light the stove. I'd already filled the kettle this morning. My mind races. I've got a phone signal here before. I'm not done yet. I rattle two mugs with one hand as I wave the mobile into every corner. One bar. It's enough. I stab the green button and thrust the phone to my ear. It's ringing. I bang the mugs down.

'Do you need help?' There's no compassion in Adam's voice.

'I'm fine, thanks. Fine.' The kettle begins to whistle.

'What emergency service do you require?'

'Police. Quickly,' I whisper, as loud as I dare.

The whistle builds to a steady whine. Another robotic voice: 'What's your emergency?'

The words spill from me: 'I'm a tarot card reader and a man in my shop has confessed to murder.'

'I'm sorry. You'll have to speak up. You're a ...'

'Tarot card reader.' I'm proud of my profession. But at this moment in time I know those words are a mistake. I blurt out the location while cursing myself.

'We'll have someone there within an hour.'

'I need someone now.' The kettle hisses, rumbling above its fire.

'I'm afraid that's the non-emergency response time.' The voice is weary. She thinks it's a hoax.

'This is an emergency. There's a murderer with me. He has a knife.' The kettle clangs as it shakes, steam pouring from its spout.

'I'll get someone to you as soon as possible.'

The kettle goes quiet. Have I convinced her or is she fobbing me off? I hang up, put the phone back in my bag, plop two teabags in the mugs and pour in the boiled water, splashing it all over the worktop. What will happen? My mind's like charcoal. I inhale. Hold my breath. Exhale. *No, I will not crumble. I must trust my spirit guide to watch over me.* I pick up the mugs and swish back through the beads. I place the mugs on the table as if nothing's wrong. I sit back down slowly. The knife lies between us. He's laid down two more cards.

'Read them.'

A cloaked female figure with a double-edged sword in one hand and scales in the other. Justice.

'Truth and law,' I say. 'Karma.'

The other shows a woman tied up and blindfolded, isolated and alone, surrounded by water, with swords shoved into the ground as an enclosure around her. Above is a grey and cloudy sky. The Eight of Swords. She is powerless. I see nothing; there's no inspiration, no guidance.

I gulp down a mouthful of scorching hot tea. 'A prison,' I splutter.

In 25 years of reading the cards it was the worst hand I'd seen. Was he damned? Did he have anything left to lose?

I steady my quivering hand. *My guide must take control.*

'You fear the future.' My voice sounds distant. 'You've trapped yourself and you're struggling to see the right path. Take off your blindfold and realise your best option.'

He faces me, one hand poised over the knife. Suddenly I recognise him. He's the son of an old friend. He was a scrawny teenager when I

Continued overleaf 

► **Marked Cards continued**

last saw him. I think of his mother. We were so alike. What he's done could destroy her.

'Why did you come to me?'

Adam looks me in the eye. 'I didn't know where to go. I don't know why but I remembered what you do. How Mum believes in it and trusts you.' He avoids eye contact and stares down. 'I thought it might help me decide what to do.' He looks as torn as a ripped card: eyes ragged, forehead crumpled. 'I always thought it was nonsense.' A bitter laugh echoes around the room. 'Until I saw those.' He glares at the cards. 'Should I accept the punishment or run?' His fingers twitch around the knife's handle.

'I've called the police,' I stutter in desperation. 'They're on their way.' I hope.

He leaps to his feet, eyes filled with fury. He grabs the crystal ball and hurls it against the wall, causing it to shatter in an explosion of mirrored glass. I cower beneath him. Adam grabs the knife. Blood drips from it, staining the cards. I'm defenceless. I close my eyes. All I can see is the Death Card. Nothing else. *She must take control.*

'You've two cards left.' The words spill from me. I open my eyes and cast the cards over. We freeze; a portrait of peril. Only our eyes move, attracted to the cards like penny coins to magnets.

A white-robed woman pats a lion under a golden sky. 'Strength.' The rawest form of power. 'A warning to control your emotions and actions before they damage you or others.' Or that love, patience and bravery can tame.

The knife hangs over me. The veins in Adam's biceps bulge. His eyes still burn. The last card lures our gaze. My last chance.

A crowned woman robed in blue sits between darkness and light. Are the cards for him or me? 'The High Priestess. Knowledge, serenity, understanding. Good judgment through strong intuition.' A female figure. Maternal. 'I remember how much your mum believes in you.' He grimaces. Dare I risk angering him more? I grit my teeth. *Trust your instincts.* 'She's proud of you.' His eyes moisten. 'The card shows your life is changing but your future's bright if you do the right thing.' My words flow fast.

A beam of light escapes the curtains and hits a shard of glass, reflecting into my face. I turn my head, dazzled. There's a gasp.

'How did you do that?' Adam looks like he's seen a ghost. 'Your face. Just then, you looked just like Mum.' He staggers back. 'It was like you became her.'

I don't know what happened but I seize my moment. 'She will stand by you. Forgive you.' He stares at me in bewilderment. I search his eyes for his soul. 'The cards tell the truth. Only truth can redeem you now.'

I bow my head. I've nothing left. I hear the crashing of waves as the sea churns.

There's a clang. Then a wail. I look up. His hands cover his face, broad shoulders heave. The knife's on the floor. Transfixed, I can't move. He pulls his hands away and tears burst from him. The Goliath is reduced to a weeping infant. I see the boy he used to be. He's still her child.

He sinks back into his chair as his sobs subside and gives a weak smile of defeat. I hear the pounding of feet outside my little enclosure. Light floods into the room and relief flows through me. Was it myself or my spirit guide who saved me? Adam holds up his hands again, this time in a gesture of surrender. He sniffs. 'I accept my fate.'



About the author Richard, a journalist from Mossley, Greater Manchester, has worked for several regional newspapers but is becoming more immersed in creative writing and recently won a comp run by Henshaw Press.

Disappearing Overnight by Ken Tracey uses three common themes to create a totally original story. Ken combines a spy tale with a touch of sci-fi and finishes with an intriguing twist on a real-life murder mystery.

From the opening line to the denouement, I enjoyed Ken's turns of phrase. I often advise writers to use imagery so that location and era can be absorbed naturally. I find being told such things, rather than being shown, takes me out of the story and reminds me there is an author behind the scenes. Ken makes excellent use of imagery to let the reader know where and when the story is taking place.

It was dark outside and each bus that wheezed along Buckingham Palace Road displayed its top deck passengers lumped in a haze, with fags dangling from their mouths. I knew that they would achieve nothing, and never share in the wealth that they were crippling themselves to produce. Now it would get worse with petrol at fifty pence a gallon and the effects of inflation and strikes.

If the people smoking on a bus didn't let readers know this was a story set some time in the past, the price of petrol would definitely do the trick. This is an unobtrusive way of showing readers roughly when the story is unfolding rather than telling them. Ken uses the same technique to show the defector is not like the person the narrator had expected to meet.

Immediately, I discounted him as my contact. He was alone anyway, and wore a black overcoat that almost swept the floor. His hair was shoulder length beneath a black fedora and he squeaked along in those new training shoes. More like Mick Jagger than a scientist. But he kept coming, and next thing I

was standing up and shaking his outstretched hand.

I also enjoyed the way Ken allowed me to work out for myself that the murder victim was Lord Lucan's nanny and that the 'local toff' was none other than that enigmatic peer – about to do an unexpected (for him and the reader) disappearing act. When he approaches, Felix (the defecting scientist) throws his coat over him and forces him to the ground.

Suddenly, he stepped back, bent and seized the coat with both hands. A matador's swish brought the coat over his shoulders and I followed his gaze back to the gritty paving stones. The toff had disappeared.

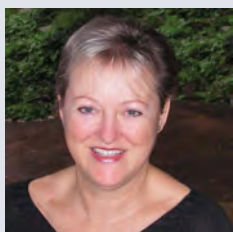
There have been plenty of stories about the disappearance of this peer, but Ken's idea is a truly original take on the theme. And it was well written.

The second-placed story also provides an original slant on a much-used theme. *Losing Touch* by David Solomon has an excellently misleading intro. We are fooled into believing the narrator is the murderer – possibly writing his missive from a prison cell.

The judge was wrong. He said I wouldn't be here but for you. I guess it must have looked that way, but how do you explain the truth?

I like the way David uses italics for what appears to be a letter to his lover and standard font for recounting what actually happened. If you're moving between present and past like this, it must be easy to follow. David ensures readers are aware this is a dual timeline story by also signalling at the start of each paragraph that he has changed to a new scene.

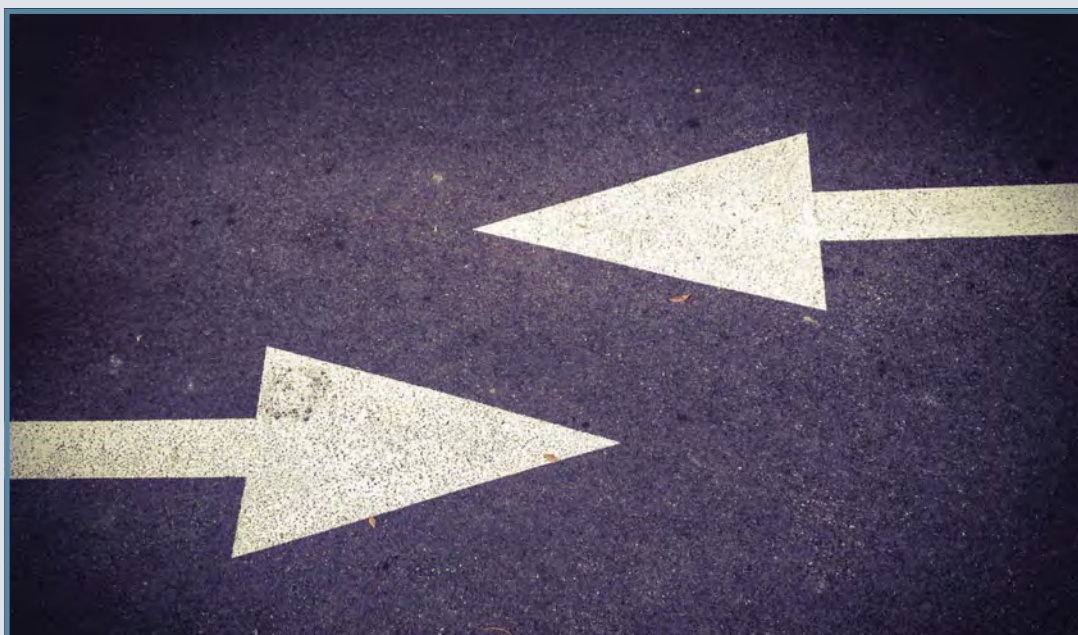
The anguish of the narrator at being unable to



Competition round-up

An original take

Lorraine Mace explains why she chose this month's winners



A fresh angle

The art of originality lies more in creating a new way of using existing story elements than in trying to come up with an idea that has never been used before. Why not combine a few ideas to produce something original (as in this month's winning story) or turn a tale on its head? Think of the plot of one of your favourite stories and try to rewrite it so that the villain becomes the hero. Always look for an original slant. Finding one can be the difference between winning and coming nowhere.

make contact with his love is credible, as is the constant replaying of events in his mind.

Sometimes I can't control the film in my head. Memories spill out and pile up around me like celluloid on a cutting room floor. Other times I cue the lights, turn up the sound and shout for action.

The dialogue is good, showing the tongue-tied gaucherie of a first meeting.

*'I don't know what to say.'
'What do you want to say?'
'Um, I don't know. Hello, I suppose.'*

That is not what I want to say at all. My mind is tripping over an obstacle course of right words and perfect phrases. One by one all my ideas flutter away into the ether and I say lamely: 'So you're American, then?'

There is another skilful piece of misdirection midway through the story which appears to reinforce the narrator's guilt

and make the reader think he killed his wife in order to be with his lover.

I saw you every day at the trial. What must you have thought? I wanted so much to reach out to you and say sorry. To let you know it was all OK. Would you have understood? Would you have believed the lie?

The ending is particularly poignant. Nicely done!

Marked Cards by Richard Hooton opens with a scene that is just sinister enough to intrigue and he successfully builds on this

tension as the story unfolds.

I look at the man opposite me. He's so close his breath chills my cheek. He doesn't flinch at the sight of the tarot card laid out in front of him. His blank expression remains; it's as if he expected it.

Richard uses the tarot images to increase the fear factor.

I glance up. But warmth isn't returning to his face. For the first time he looks me in the eye as he turns over another card. A cold, blank stare. I shiver. We look down together. A Satyr grins back at us, a man and a woman bound to him in chains. A dominant male using

his powers in an evil way. The Devil Card.

Richard puts us inside that booth and ensures we feel the fear the narrator is experiencing when she realises the sinister man knows her name. By the time the knife is placed on the table we are anxious to know if she is going to get away.

Its sharp blade glistens beneath the crystal ball. I see the body, slumped on the kitchen floor, a red pool of sticky blood seeping out from beneath it.

Richard uses the reading to fill in the backstory while simultaneously creating an atmosphere of fear. Well done.

Highly commended

There were seven shortlisted stories this month:

Proper Love by Joan El Faghloumi
Reasonable Access by Sandra Crook
Sink or Swim by Sarah Lovett
For All Eternity by Angela Bailey
All Seeing by June F Thomas
Party Girl by Maggie Davies
Shotgun and Lipstick by Charles Warren

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

WHAT'S THE STORY?

Sometimes we receive stories with a strong underlying premise that ultimately don't quite manage to deliver a convincing and satisfying read. The reasons for such stories failing to live up to the original concept vary enormously, but one flaw which appears again and again is the author forgetting to give a believable reason for a character to act as they do.

Unless there is credible motivation for the character's behaviour, bringing about a plausible outcome, even the best ideas will fail.

She Even Had a Funeral by Thomas Harrison puts forward an intriguing question: how desperate must someone be to fake their own death? The title alone was enough to make me want to read on, proving that a strong title will always attract attention.

The story's central theme deals with escape and misdirection on the part of the supposedly dead character. The narrator tells the tale of a wild time had by her and her closest friend as they backpacked around Europe. Although free and easy with sexual favours, the friend drew the line at drugs and was often left alone for long periods while the narrator went off on a bender, disappearing into a drug-induced haze and sometimes only returning a week later. During one such incident the friend panicked and called both sets of parents.

The story then jumps forward four years. The narrator tells her college roommate about

the travel companion who died, and is subsequently encouraged to visit the grave. Instead of doing so, she decides to call on the friend's mother to offer belated condolences. However, when the door opens she is faced not with the parent, but with the friend who is supposed to be dead.

Unfortunately, this is where the story ends.

It feels as if the story has been written purely for the twist, which we are aware of almost from the opening lines, leaving the reader wondering what point is being made.

Bold introduction

The story opens with a seemingly strong introductory paragraph in which the narrator questions both the past situation and her own reluctance to visit the grave.

She even had a funeral. They even gave her a goddamn funeral. As if I wouldn't one day find out? I'm not sure if that's more of a statement than a question. Did they really think I wouldn't know? Did they really believe I didn't care or wouldn't take the time to visit the grave at least? As if I wouldn't find out one day... I mean, I haven't been to the grave, but not out of any disrespect or anything, but... out of... fear? Out of... well, yes, fear of what it would make me realise about her. About myself.

However, as becomes clear later in the story, not only was the narrator not invited to the funeral, the funeral did not, in fact, take place. Which means what appears to be a



strong paragraph (and title) is weakened.

It raises too many questions that are never answered. The friend had supposedly died in a car accident, but how would the narrator know this if she hadn't been told about it? If there hadn't been a funeral, why does the narrator open by telling the reader there had been one? Not at any point is it explained how the narrator knew about the 'death' of her erstwhile friend.

Dialogue needed

There isn't any dialogue in the story until near the end when the narrator discovers the friend is still alive. Even then, only a few lines are exchanged.

I would suggest opening with dialogue between the

narrator and her current roommate, as this discussion provides the set-up for the story. At the moment, this section is told in narrative and appears midway through the story, which is confusing because the first half is all about the past where she is with her friend and we are suddenly dropped into the present day without any warning that the timeline has changed.

It seems at first as if the following passage refers to the 'dead' friend, when in fact it relates to a conversation with the new friend.

It was just a normal conversation about death. That's how it started. An old school friend of my college roommate's had died. They'd not

been close or seen each other for years but, when she found out through Twitter about it, we just started talking about dying and what would happen if someone who we really knew and really loved died. What if we died? What would we want the funeral to be like? The grave. The wake. Would there even be one for us?

She'd asked me if I had ever had someone close to me pass away, whether suddenly or expected. I paused for a moment and thought... friends, family, a lover... everyone has lost someone, some of us numerous people if we're that unlucky. Only she stuck out, though. So I talked about her.

If the above was delivered in dialogue, this would provide a smooth transition into the past for the narrator to talk about the travels and experiences the two friends had shared. It would also enable the reader to participate in these events instead of the flat narration which stops the characters from being properly established.

Character development

The two central characters sound as if they could be interesting, but they are never developed as real people. Readers are told what they are like, but the characters are never shown interacting so that they come to life on the page.

We both flirted our way into a few bars and cars and rooms without having to pay rent. God, we stayed in Budapest for... how long... at least a week without paying for a single thing. Men flocked around us. It was her 'Boho' way and it was my London accent: together we summarised the youthful, educated, attractive England that so many other tourists and country natives adored the kitsch notion of.

If Thomas were to develop the characters to show the above happening – perhaps through dialogue with the current flatmate – rather than giving the information in straight narration, the two

girls would become real to the reader. We would care about what happens to them.

More importantly, we could see how the narrator treated her friend. Without this glimpse into their relationship it is impossible to believe the friend would go to such extremes as faking her own death to get away from the destructive nature of their partnership.

It would help if we 'heard' the flatmate urging the narrator to visit the grave and were able to see the effect this suggestion has on the narrator.

Author's ability

There is no doubt that Thomas has the ability to develop his characters because later in the story he describes the reaction of someone caught out in a lie extremely well. The narrator calls at the house, but it is the supposedly dead girl who opens the door.

Her face went through that slow, animated stop-motion process of realisation that happens to anyone when they know they've been found out. Caught red-handed. The generic smile becomes momentarily larger as if to cover the lie, then flattens, then droops to a wilt; the eyes grow in size as though to take in what is really happening, then they close and narrow like window shutters; the nostrils flair but the breathing stays oddly calm like in the eye of a storm.

The above is very descriptive but it is told from a distance. The passage would be much stronger if shown from the perspective of the narrator because we would then see the friend's reaction, rather than that of a generic person.

Her face went through that slow, stop-motion animated process of realisation that she'd been found out. Caught red-handed. Her smile became momentarily larger as if to cover the lie, then flattened, before drooping to a wilt; her eyes grew in size, then closed and narrowed like window shutters; her nostrils

Hidden themes

The theme, or point, of your story can (and should) be hidden but there has to be one. Your readers don't want to be preached to, but there has to be a reason for the characters to be on the page. When readers reach the end they want to feel satisfied that their valuable time hasn't been wasted. Always check that your stories have something to say.

flared but her breathing stayed oddly calm.

The point of the story

I opened this article by pointing out that there has to be a plausible reason for characters to act as they do. Because there isn't any character development we are unable to see the relationship between the two girls. This makes it very hard to accept the need to fake a death simply to bring about an end to the friendship.

If we were able to be there in the moment as their friendship deteriorates then it would be easier to accept that this was the only way out. However, at the point in the story where the narrator comes face to face with her friend, there hasn't yet been a reason for the friend's action.

I feel that Thomas needs to show the destructive nature of their friendship – allow readers to experience the trauma, as it were. It would have to be pretty severe to make the reader feel the only way the friend can escape the narrator is by faking her death.

I'm afraid I had too many doubts to accept this premise. My doubts were reinforced when the only dialogue in the story comes into play.

'We knew you wouldn't come to it. We knew you'd be too busy gallivanting off somewhere to care if I'd died.'

If that was what she felt, where was the need to fake her

death in the first place?

Thomas needs to establish a clear pattern of the friend trying to end the relationship but the narrator refusing to let go. The friend has to feel the only way she can be free is to appear to die. Unless she feels she has no other choice, then the action isn't credible.

The final paragraphs of this type of story should sum up the point being made, but I was left wondering what that point might be.

So, she even had a funeral. They even gave her a goddamn funeral. And what does it say about me? My best friend faked her own death to get away from me.

If only my roommate's friend hadn't died.

This would be stronger if we had seen the reason why the friend had acted as she did, but, as already mentioned, there was no funeral so the above passage doesn't make sense.

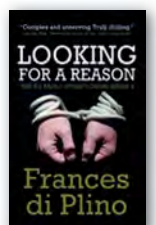
It's probably lucky that I'd never been to the grave. There wasn't one. It's a good job that I didn't try to gate-crash the funeral or wake or hang around outside to silently mourn from afar. There hadn't been any gatherings.

Advice I frequently give in my critiques comes to mind here. Before you begin (or redraft), decide on the central theme of your story.

Ask yourself what you want readers to take from the story. How do you want them to feel when they reach the end? What message do you intend to impart? What is the point of the story?

What, ultimately, is the reason for the characters being on the page?

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*



TURN IT ON

Story writer Glynis Scrivens provides indisputable proof that watching TV can be good for your writing output

Telly is a time-waster. Right? Not necessarily. It might be just what your writing needs to take it to another level.

Maybe you're sending stories to a new overseas market? Or writing in a new genre? Increase your chances of success by watching and analysing TV programmes that expand your knowledge, teach you techniques or illustrate everyday realities.

Not convinced?

As an Australian writing for Scandinavian readers, my early efforts were hit and miss. Once I started watching TV series such as *Wallander*, *Borgen*, *The Killing* and *The Bridge*, my story sales doubled, then tripled. More than a third of my sales are now to Scandinavia.

Try it yourself.

Here are eight ways you can dissect TV shows and use them in your work.

Themes and preoccupations

Scandinavian TV series focus on social and family themes, often with an underlying dark edge. Having watched Saga's character develop in *The Bridge*, I knew Swedish TV openly present flawed characters with psychological issues.

Accordingly, I've sent grittier stories to Swedish magazines on topics English editors found too dark.

The married couple in *Through a Glass Darkly* each face issues of darkness. Jean is undergoing operations for cataracts and realises how dark her world has become. Thomas suffers from depression but is

‘Once I started watching *Wallander* and *Borgen*, my sales doubled’

in denial, letting Jean take the brunt of his emotional turmoil:

He seemed to unravel when it was just the two of them, shrugging off the veneer of fake cheerfulness he assumed when he was socialising. It was unconvincing, but preferable to the blackness of his mood on those days when he'd lie in bed, curtains drawn, not speaking. Then she'd feel sucked into the despair...

Woman's Weekly rejected this story, saying: 'It's good but too downbeat.' It was published in Sweden.

My story *Heart to Heart* took seven years before finding a home in a UK anthology. It was snapped up on its first outing in Sweden. The story

focuses on the reconciliation of a mother and daughter.

The women's relationship is symbolised by a quilt. After noticing Sarah Lund's hand-knitted jumper in *The Killing*, and some patchwork cushions in *Wallander*, I realised that a quilt would ring true to readers:

She looked at the quilt, touching the line of black embroidery that stretched across the width.

'Is that an old-fashioned clothes line?' Alice asked. 'Why are there hearts on it?'

Brenda shook her head and felt her eyes moisten up. 'It's barbed wire,' she said softly. 'Our hearts were all on barbed wire. And they were hurting. That's what I wanted to show.'

... They both looked at her forearms. Over the years the crisscross scars had faded to a soft pearl. But in Brenda's memory they were still raw and angry, as the day she'd first seen them.

'My life felt like barbed wire too,' Alice said.

Watching Swedish TV dramas convinced me that I



could submit a story around the subject of self-harm.

2 Physical details

Watching *The Killing*, *Borgen* and *Unit One*, it doesn't take long to notice alpha males.

Danish actor Lars Mikkelsen is 6'3", Lars Brygmann is 6'1" and Mads Mikkelsen is 6'. Accordingly, my romantic heroes are tall when I'm writing for Scandinavian magazines.

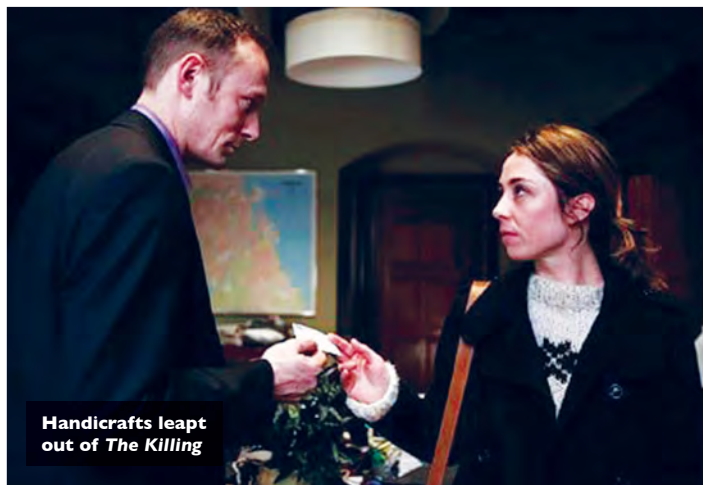
I also saw that female characters usually have their hair in a ponytail or loose bun, regardless of how sophisticated they are or how important their job. They tend to be more focused on their work and family than their looks.

As an Australian, another detail that strikes me is the landscape. Southern Sweden is flat and windy, and the sea often features. My stories for Swedish women's magazine *Allas* feature similar settings.

I realised these settings also suit Norwegian and Danish magazines after watching *The Killing* and *The Eagle*.

Last year I decided to write a story specifically for the Scandinavian market, using everything I'd learned from their TV programmes. Previously I'd adapted existing stories, adding details specific to Sweden, Norway or Denmark.

Holidaying with Harry is set in a lakeside village where Lorna decides to give her ex-husband



Handicrafts leapt out of *The Killing*



another chance. Within six weeks, it had sold in Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

3 Plot ideas

It's not just subtitled Scandi TV that can inspire you. Short story writer Fran Tracey has limited experience at dating, so she relies on watching *First Dates* to fill gaps in her own experience.

Fran says: 'It's a challenge for me to write something funny or moving about two people dating. I met my husband at school. We were friends before we were boyfriend and girlfriend, so I've never been through that "getting to know you on a date" thing, or starting again after divorce or loss.'

'My story *Chemistry* was inspired by a science teacher on *First Dates*. I liked the idea of a science teacher seeking

love – with the stereotype of geekiness, and the workload.

'I made my teachers come from opposite sides of the track – one chemistry, one an English teacher. The conflict comes from that, and from them having busy working lives, something teachers mention on *First Dates*.

'I tend to use a snippet to inspire a story. It's never my intention to fictionalise someone's true *First Dates* story – that's not for me to tell. So I changed the sex of the teachers and used the metaphor of chemistry as a thread through the story.'

Chemistry was accepted by *Woman's Weekly*.

4 Scriptwriting techniques

Fran also watches TV to learn about pacing and other scriptwriting techniques.

'When I watch something I enjoy, it gives me an extra dimension to think about in my writing – the visual dimension – not just in terms of atmosphere and setting, but also characterisation and plot. I look at the way characters move around one another, how they communicate, and how the plot is moved on through scene changes.

'I rarely write crime but I keep the techniques used by those scriptwriters and directors at the back of my mind. I like writing strong characters with their own distinct voice

in stories that are fast paced rather than reflective. This is influenced by TV watching.'

5 Structure

American writer Su Kopil watches *Castle* to study mystery structure – how the three acts work for setting up clues, false leads etc.

Su says: '*Castle* showed me the importance of humour and how characters play off each other. It was also a great lesson in story structure, specifically for mysteries: opening murder; suspects revealed; a clue that leads to a red herring; danger; and a new clue that leads to the final twist and showdown.

'Although the formula might be the same for every show, the characters' stories make it unique. I followed this structure in *Murder on Elm Street*, which appears in the anthology *Flash and Bang*.'

6 Setting

Su says: 'When I wanted to try my hand at an historical short story set in the 1930s, I was at a loss where to start. I need to be able to see the landscape of a story.

'That's when I got the idea to watch re-runs of *The Waltons*, a period drama set in the 1930s. I grew up watching the show so only needed to see a few episodes to get the feel of it again. The characters in my story *The Barter* are not Walton-esque but the backdrop is similar.

'With the setting clear in my mind, I was able to concentrate on creating a mystery around characters that would make John-Boy Walton cringe.

'I'm pleased to say *The Barter* will appear in the anthology *Malice Domestic 12: Mystery Most Historical*.'

7 Genre

Wanting a better feel for the horror genre, Su started binge-watching the first season of *Stranger Things*.

She says: 'It has kids, monsters, an evil organisation and a hero sheriff. I wanted to see how they drew out the



scary without making it silly, by taking normal, everyday stuff and turning it upside down – like Christmas lights becoming a communication device, for example.'

8 Keeping up to date

Since moving to France, novelist Jennie Bohnet relies on DVDs and documentaries to keep her in the loop about what's going on in the English-speaking world, which is her main market.

Jennie says: 'I write contemporary women's fiction for an English readership. Watching TV helps me stay up to date with all the social and cultural activities going on across the Channel.'

But Jennie has always found TV helpful.

'I watched a documentary about sailors and the Vendée Globe round-the-world race for help editing my early book *For the Love of the Sea*, where my heroine sails alone around the world.'

Finally

Don't feel guilty watching the box. Instead, choose programmes that can improve your writing.

When your story sells overseas and you're reading the complimentary copy of the magazine, don't forget to check the television guide, if it has one. Tune into what your characters – and editors – are watching on TV.



Fran Tracey

SOUND AND VISION

This month take time to explore how you might use the following three groups of words. Words that are:

- Spelled and pronounced identically, but have different meanings
- Spelled differently but sound alike and have different meanings
- Spelled identically but have different meanings when pronounced differently

Words that are spelled and pronounced identically but have different meanings

The technical term for a word that falls into this group is a *homonym*. I'm sure you can think of many homonyms but to get you started, try to write between six and ten lines about each of the following:

- Row a boat between a row of willows.
- Be *mean* to someone and *mean* every word you say.
- Stalk your *quarry* through a *quarry*.
- Turn *right* at the crossroads and find you have made the *right* decision (or perhaps be *left* wondering if you should have turned *left*).

When you have finished exploring these topics, look back through what you have written and notice the techniques you may or may not have used. For example:

- Did you find yourself either using rhyme or having to work hard to avoid rhyme?
- How did you differentiate between the different meanings of the homonym?
- How did you use line breaks or stanza breaks to avoid confusion?

Words that are spelled differently but sound alike and have different meanings

A word that falls into this group is a type of homonym called a *homophone*. Again, I'm sure you can think of many homophones but, as in the previous exercise, try to write between six and ten lines about each of the following:

- See the *sea*: for the very first time or for the last time.
- Meet someone somewhere that involves



bacon, brisket, braised neck or drumsticks.

- Check the number of zeros you write on a *cheque* to pay for a checked tablecloth... in Prague!
- Buy something from a shop in a back street or from a stranger in a pub. Walk to the ocean and stand by the lighthouse. Throw the thing you have just purchased into the *waves* and *wave* it bye bye.
- Describe how the wind *blew* as you walked somewhere in your new (or old) *blue* dress or trousers.
- Was it you, your sibling or the dog that ate the *eight* chocolate doughnuts?

Once again, when you have finished exploring these topics, look back through what you have written and notice the techniques you may or may not have used. For example:

- Did you find yourself using puns?
- Did puns creep in without you being aware?

Remember, a pun is a way of playing with words that suggests two or more meanings, by exploiting multiple meanings of words or of similar-sounding words. Puns can be a very effective technique if used deliberately but they may not be so

beneficial if they have entered your poem without you being aware.

Words that have identical spelling but different meanings when pronounced differently

Words in this category are called *heteronyms* and here are some for you to explore. Again, try to write between eight and ten lines on each one:

- *Lead*: to guide and also the metallic element with the symbol Pb.
- *Tear*: a rip and also water that falls from the eye.
- *Wound*: the past tense of wind and also something that happens on a battlefield or is treated in hospital.
- *Close*: to shut something and also to be near.

Performed or on the page

One of the purposes of this month's exercise is to encourage you to think about the difference between the visual appearance of a word (ie how it is spelled) in contrast to its sound and meaning.

This is important because poems need to work well in printed format (books,



with poetry editor
Sue Butler

magazines, online) and when performed (read live at a festival or prize giving, on the radio or in a video clip posted on social media, for example).

Look back over what you have written and make a list of how using words in the three previous groups presents problems or brings benefits to a poem when it is read on the page.

Now make a similar list for poems read aloud. Take time to consider:

- Cadence and repetition
- Possible points of confusion
- Helping or hindering narrative development

Seek feedback

You might also want to show someone you trust some of the poems you have written as part of this month's workshop and ask for honest but constructive feedback. Here are two questions you may wish to ask:

- Was it easy to understand the poems when seen written on the page?
- Was there any confusion when the poems were performed, ie when the person could hear the words but not see the way words were spelled?

How does the feedback compare with the lists you made?

And while you ponder that question I will leave you with the following quote:

A writer should write with his eyes and a painter paint with his ears.

Gertrude Stein

This suggests a writer should keep all of his or her senses engaged and strive to use skills from a range of art forms. Be a bit of a painter, a musician, a dancer, a magician, an escapologist, a singer, an actor, a film maker, a puppeteer...

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

I say, I say, I say

I am terrible at telling jokes. I only know two. The first one is a simple question and answer:

Q: *Why do communists only drink herbal tea?*

A: *Because proper tea is theft.*

The second joke I know also involves buildings. It goes like this:

A man is walking down the Malone Road in Belfast. He goes on to a building site and says politely to the gaffer: 'Good morning to you. Do you have any jobs going?'

The gaffer looks the man up and down before replying: 'Indeed I do. However, as this is the Malone Road, I only employ skilled craftspeople. This means I will need to test your knowledge before I take you on.'

The man says he fully understands and is more than ready to answer a question.

The gaffer thinks for a while, then asks the man: 'What is the difference between joist and girder?'

The man smiles and replies: 'Oh, that's easy. Joyce wrote Ulysses and Goethe wrote Faust.'

There, I warned you I was not very good at telling jokes. But don't let my ineptitude stop you from exploring the possibilities of jokes when you write.

Pick a joke that makes you laugh regardless of how many times you hear it – really laugh... laugh aloud... filling your belly and shaking your whole body until you cough and snort. Now use that joke as the basis for a piece of writing.

Then do the same with a joke you think is lame, but could be very funny indeed if you made a few changes.

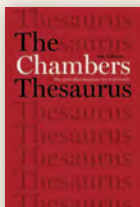
As you write, remember that because you are focusing on a joke, it doesn't mean that your piece of writing has to be purely comic. If writing about a joke leads you into serious or sombre issues, embrace them.

POETRY WORKOUT

The wheels on the bus go round and round... But what else do wheels do?

- 1 Write about being or observing a cog in a machine. How important is that cog, how reliable? Is it valued, appreciated? Take a literal or a metaphorical stance.
- 2 What happens when the wheels fall off, either expectedly or unexpectedly? Again, consider literal and metaphorical takes.
- 3 Be the man, woman or alien who invented the wheel. How and where did you get the idea? Did you end up rich?
- 4 Write about turning cartwheels either as a child or as an adult; or wishing you still could.

Poetry competition



Each month our winning poet wins £100 and a copy of the new edition of Chambers Thesaurus, worth £40.

The *Great Silence*, by Stuart Michael Royale, from Stockport, opens with the simple statement: *The radars' faces are like desert flowers*. Immediately the reader can see the huge discs and feel the heat and dust of the desert. The reader is then told the radars are like shells and is urged to hold one to their ear, so they can hear *the long game they are playing*. Within two sentences, the narrator of this poem has the reader listening with the radars – listening and waiting for the blink of other eyes / beyond New Mexico's amber darkness. The speed and dexterity with which this is achieved is something all poets should be mindful of at the beginning of their poems. It's important to engage the reader right from the start and getting the reader to join in an activity can be an effective way to do this.

Another technique this poem uses to good effect is a degree of personification. Giving the radars faces, *arms open in a massive Y* and blood (even if it is cold and cryogenic) helps the reader relate to them. The narrator in Stuart's poem speaks directly to the reader and one of the things suggested is that it would be stupid for us, the readers, to live in the same way as the radars.

The narrator in one of this month's highly commended poems, *Let Go, Mother, Let Go*, by Dr Guggari Prasad, from Sheffield, is also concerned with how to live. The narrator speaks directly to his mother, appealing for her to *Loosen that tender grip* and to *Let me walk alone*. He tells his mother *I am ready* and asks her not to be afraid because *I have learned to fly... I have learned to swim*. He then reassures his mother: *I shall return to you / Again and again, / Like the tides recede / From the shores*. He also says the reason he will return is for the warmth and affection his mother provides.

In comparison, the poem *A Survivor's Flashback*, by Phil Reay, from Newcastle, contains no warmth or affection. Using long lines in an almost prose-poem format, Phil Reay's narrator seems to be speaking to himself as he says: *The rancid, slimy, slithering monstrosity is crawling over my skin and I sense, / It's fearless searching... / A savage injection of its black venom is now my penance and marks my defeat. / In desolate shadows its deed is done...*

This poem uses a lot of similes and metaphors, as does the highly commended poem, *Thinking On*, by Edyth Ward, from Urmston, where the narrator is literally looking for a life; as if that life was a person or an object: *I approached the man on the market / who was standing in a queue. / He said that if you find one, / I think I would like one too*. Various people are consulted but none of them has the answer, until the narrator meets the woman in the bingo hall who says: *Life is like the bingo, / It's very hard to win, / But you've got to keep on trying' / and she drank deep of her gin*.

All these poems encourage the reader to think hard about the way they live or might live in the future. So next time you are wondering what to write about, look no further than yourself and your own life. Get creative with your own experiences and see where the journey leads you.



£100 winner

The Great Silence

Stuart Michael Royale, Stockport, Cheshire

The radars' faces are like desert flowers,
or smooth concave shells. Hold one to your ear
For they are listening too; in their oceans,

you hear the long game they are playing:
they're waiting for the blink of other eyes,
beyond New Mexico's amber darkness,

every girder, every fibre-optic vein,
suspended in a whisper gallery
as yet without an echo for its walls.

It is absurd that we should live as they do:
Wide is the desert underneath the stars;
their arms are open in a massive Y,

and yet the years evade them, everything
evades them, and the Great Silence persists,
as cold as their own cryogenic blood.



About the poet Stuart works for a law firm and is a former English teacher. He has written a full-length novel that is currently with agents, as well as a number of poems. He is inspired by Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney and Michael Symmons Roberts.



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.

■ Keep the title, *The Great Silence*, and write about a time when silence became the focus of all your senses. What do you smell as the silence persists? Is any part of your body in contact with another person's body, in contact with cotton or silk, wood, stone, the wind, rain, a sandwich or a mug of tea? And even though this is a poem about silence, is your environment absolutely silent... no noises at all?

■ Rewrite this poem from the perspective of the radars. Do they love or loathe the desert? Do they love or loathe the silence or do they in fact hear things which they do not admit to hearing?

■ Write about listening for a sound you are either longing to hear or dreading to hear.

Highly Commended

A Survivor's Flashback by Philip Reay, Newcastle upon Tyne
Let Go, Mother, Let Go by Dr Guggari Prasad, Sheffield
Thinking On by Edyth Ward, Urmston, Manchester

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Literary diary

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www.essexbookfestival.org.uk

StAnza; Scotland's International Poetry Festival 1-5 March

Among the 60 poets taking part in a packed programme of 80 workshops, discussions and readings are John Agard, Vahni Capildeo, Jim Carruth, Patience Agbabi and Robert Crawford.
www.stanzapoetry.org

Aldeburgh Literary Festival, Suffolk 2-5 March

Meg Rosoff, India Knight, Kenneth Clark, Ian McEwan and Artemis Cooper are just some of the names appearing at the 16th festival. There will be discussions, interviews and a book launch at the Jubilee Hall.
www.aldeburghbookshop.co.uk

Ennis Book Club Festival, Ireland 3-5 March

Expect a mix of readings, discussion, comedy and chat in one of Ireland's friendliest towns. Writers and speakers taking part this year include Paul Durcan, Caroline Busher, John Boyne, Lisa McInerney and Rose Tremain.
www.ennisbookclubfestival.com

Huddersfield Literature Festival 4-19 March

Since 2006, the festival has provided innovative and high-profile events to support established and emerging writers. Alongside workshops and masterclasses there will be author talks, comedy, performance poetry and more.
www.litfest.org.uk

Aye Write! Glasgow 9-19 March

This year, Aye Write! will be staged across three venues while Wee Write! for younger readers offers two family days and a week of events for schools. Ian Rankin, Joanna Trollope, Chris Brookmyre and Sally Magnusson are taking part.
www.ayewrite.com

King's Lynn Fiction Festival 10-12 March

See writers of international repute alongside new talent. Authors taking part this year include Louis de Bernières, Yvette Edwards, Robert



Jake Arnott
is in Bath

Cristian Barnett

Edric, Jemma Wayne, DJ Taylor, Rachel Hore, Carol Birch and Stephen Jarvis.
www.lynnlitfests.com

York Literature Festival 16-30 March

This arts festival has an emphasis on literature, spoken word and poetry and this year Joanne Harris, Claire Fuller, Michael Palin and Gervase Phinn are among the names taking part.
www.yorkliteraturefestival.co.uk

Alderney Literary Festival 24-26 March

Reflecting the tiny Channel Island's colourful past, the festival celebrates the enjoyment of historical writing in fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Writers attending this year include Elizabeth Chadwick, Ruth Downie, Andrew Lownie, Anne Sebba and Rachel Abbott.
www.alderneyliterarytrust.com

Deal Noir, Kent 25 March

This one-day crime festival features bestselling authors speaking on crime fiction in all its forms, as well as Q&A sessions.
www.dealnoir.wordpress.com

Oxford Literary Festival 25 March – 2 April

The festival offers a packed week of talks, debates and discussions with Alexander McCall Smith, Garth Nix, Hilary Mantel, Jeremy Paxman, Joanne Harris, Michael Rosen and many more.
www.oxfordliteraryfestival.org

Cardiff Children's Literature Festival 25 March – 2 April

Spread over two weekends, with events in both English and Welsh, the festival celebrates the very best in contemporary children's books. Authors and illustrators making their words and pictures come to life include Nick Sharratt, Lyn Gardner, Laura Sheldon and Robin Jarvis.
www.cardiff-events.com

Kate Medhurst brings you the pick of next month's writing and book events

AUTHOR & BOOK EVENTS

Jake Arnott, Bath 2 March, 6.30pm

The author of *The Long Firm* is giving a talk at Waterstones with new novel *House of Rumour*.
For more details call 01225 448515.

Alison Bruce, Ely 7 March, 7.30pm

Topping and Company bookshop welcomes the local author to celebrate the latest in her crime series, *Cambridge Black*. Tickets cost £7.
For more details call 01353 645005.

Samantha Shannon, Manchester 8 March, 6.30pm

The author is at Waterstones Deansgate for the release of the third novel in her *Bone Season* series, *The Song Rising*. Tickets cost £5.
For more details call 0161 837 3000.

Joanna Trollope, St Andrews 10 March, 7.45pm

The respected author will be at Topping and Company bookshop talking about her 20th book, *City of Friends*. Tickets cost £5.
For more details call 01334 585111.

SWWJ Celebration Prize Tea 15 March

The Society of Women Writers & Journalists announce the winners of their 2016 comps, followed by guest speaker Solange Hando. Members, visitors, and guests welcome.
For more details call 020 7351 6377.

David Crystal, Bath 15 March, 7.45pm

The author champions grammar with his new book *Making Sense: the Glamorous Story of English Grammar*. He will be at Topping and Company bookshop. Tickets cost £7.
For more details call 01225 428111.

Alex Gray, Newton Mearns 21 March, 7pm

The bestselling crime writer is at Waterstones to discuss her novel *Still Dark*.
For more details call 0141 616 3933.

Louise Doughty and Amanda Coe, London 28 March, 6.30pm

The author of *Apple Tree Yard*, and the screenwriter of the BBC adaptation, discuss one of 2017's most talked about TV dramas at Waterstones Gower Street. Tickets cost £6, include a glass of wine, and are redeemable against a purchase of the book on the night.
For more details call 020 7636 1577.

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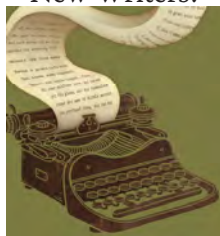
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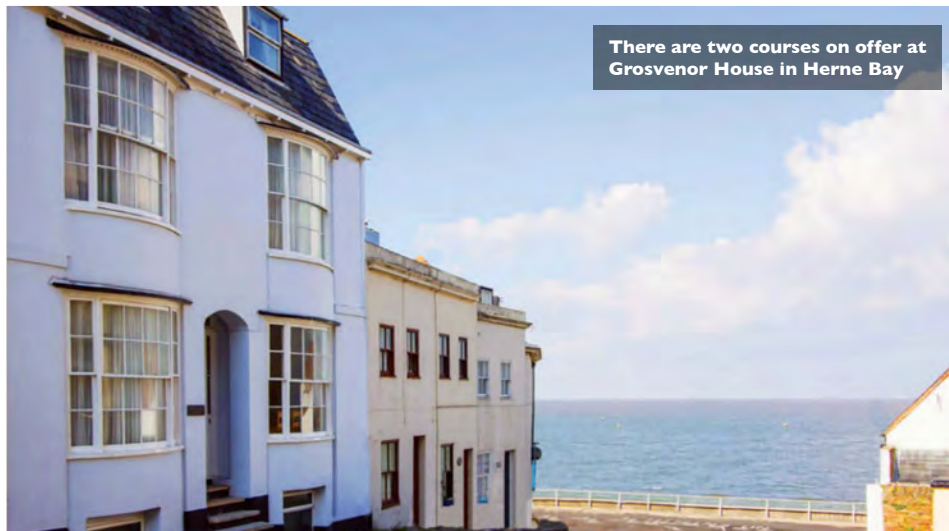
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New courses



RESIDENTIAL COURSES

Writing for Children, Kent 17-19 March

This weekend course is ideal for beginners and those wishing to develop their writing skills further. Placing an emphasis on picture books, it covers character development, plot and structure, and the 'makings' of a picture book – all in a supportive and friendly atmosphere. The course, at Grosvenor House Hotel (above) in Herne Bay, costs £295 including tuition, accommodation, all meals and refreshments, or £195 for just tuition, lunch and refreshments. www.grosvenorhouseevents.co.uk

Writing a Novel, Kent 5-7 May

This course, led by published author and BBC News correspondent Simon Hall, starts at the beginning with how to compose a striking opening line and moves on to examine the importance of a writer's unique voice, how to find your own, and how not to be afraid of it. The course costs £295 for the weekend, which includes tuition, accommodation and all meals. www.grosvenorhouseevents.co.uk

ONE-DAY COURSES

Writing for Radio, Bristol 4 March

In this Bristol University course you will cover the basics of plotting a radio play. Tutor Rachel Bentham will share useful scriptwriting techniques that help with planning and developing scenes. You'll explore character using some interactive exercises, and you'll be writing some script on the day. It takes place from 10.30am until 4pm and costs £35. www.bristol.ac.uk

One Writer, Three Voices, Cornwall 11 March

This holistic writing day offers an opportunity to experiment and play with fiction, non-fiction and poetry, based on the fact that the skills we develop in each can enrich our writing in the other two. The course is suitable for all levels of writing experience and takes place between 10.30am and 4pm at Upton Cross. It costs £35, which includes a light lunch. www.jennyalexander.co.uk

Introduction to Scriptwriting for Screen, Manchester 25 March

This intensive one-day course is designed for new writers wanting to get started with writing for the big or small screen. The day is jam-packed and covers structure, character, dialogue, formatting, clips, writing exercises and developing your own ideas. It takes place from 10am until 4pm at Central Hall in Manchester and costs £60. www.scriptwritingnorth.co.uk

ONLINE COURSE

Intermediate Creative Writing, 21 March

This online creative writing course led by tutor Eileen Casey will allow participants to explore specific writing techniques that help to build a solid bridge between the beginner and the more experienced writer. Each module will guide the participant towards producing a strong body of writing based around relevant exercises and prompts. It lasts six weeks and you'll receive weekly written feedback on the exercises. It costs €150. www.creativewriting.ie

HELPFUL NEW BOOKS

Writing Fiction by Alan Wall (Collins Need to Know?, £4.99)

is a one-stop practical guide to writing the novel that's bursting to get out. Respected novelist and creative writing teacher Alan Wall shows how to tap into your creative resources and give fiction writing a go. It includes chapters on character, plot, setting, genres, humour, narrative structures, language, conclusions, drafting, and preparing for publication.

The Complete Handbook of Novel Writing: Everything You Need to Know to Create & Sell Your Work

(Writer's Digest, £14.99) covers all the essential techniques, from generating ideas and connecting with readers emotionally to finding the inspiration to finish your work. This revised edition includes an updated marketing section and interviews with popular writers such as David Baldacci, Lee Child and Stephen King.

Start Writing Today by Douglas McPherson (Kindle Direct Publishing, £3.95)

takes writing out of the 'One day...' box and shows you how to get published within weeks and months rather than years. Whether you want to write novels, your memoirs, short stories or articles, the author provides step-by-step advice on how to start small and grow a writing career from scratch. Most of all, it will encourage you to stop procrastinating and start writing – today.

SHORT COURSE

Freelance Writing, W Sussex 3-5 March

This course at West Dean College covers the basics of how to pitch and write articles for newspapers, magazines and websites. It advises how to hone ideas, judge whether a piece is 'right' for an outlet, and provides techniques for writing for the current newspaper, magazine and online markets. The course costs £225, with single ensuite accommodation available for £202, including breakfast and dinner. www.westdean.org.uk



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

THE MENTOR

I find writing embarrassing

I enjoy writing but I find many parts of the process – ‘finding your voice’, ‘writing from the heart’, ‘stream of consciousness’ and so on – make me cringe with embarrassment. I also find talking about writing makes me sound pompous and I feel terribly self-conscious. Should I just get over myself?

Simon, Saltaire

I love your letter, Simon. You’ve really hit the nail on the head about aspects of being a writer. Even the phrase ‘I’m a writer’ conjures up an image of a salon of wordsmiths archly exchanging pithy *bon mots* like Dorothy Parker.

What is it that makes this scenario so excruciating? Is it the lack of awareness of how self-absorbed they are? Is it the assumption of superiority over mere laypeople who don’t have a choice turn of phrase to hand? Or could it be that, at heart, it touches that nerve that we all have – the fear of failure, and of opening yourself up to ridicule? Is that the reason that you feel ambivalent about writing and want to distance yourself from it?

If you said ‘I’m a doctor’ you could expect a much simpler reaction, one of admiration and respect. But say you’re

a writer and the response is much more complex. It prompts follow-on questions such as how successful you are, whether you’ve written anything they might have heard of and fundamentally, are you any good? Because writing is so personal, an intimate expression of how you feel about the world, you are opening yourself up to criticism and scrutiny in a way that you aren’t if you have a more straightforward career or hobby.

There are lots of emotions swirling around here relating to making yourself vulnerable, wanting to express yourself and experiencing self-doubt, so let’s start at the beginning and try to unpick them.

First of all, it’s a good sign that you enjoy writing. Hold on to that because it’s very precious. You don’t have to win the Booker Prize, you don’t have to ever show your

work to anyone, but if the act of putting pen to paper gives you pleasure, that’s reason enough to keep on doing it.

However, the fact that you’ve written to me suggests that your discomfort is something you’d like to come to terms with, to be able to share your work and talk about it without feeling foolish.

My colleague, Lorna Howarth, remembers how embarrassment used to dog her during her early career.

‘When my articles were published I couldn’t even look at them. I felt a flood of adrenalin run through my body as the magazines were delivered to the office. It was almost the flight-or-fight reaction, because I was ultimately responsible for my writing. Despite the fact that it had been sub-edited and passed by the editor-in-chief, I questioned my ability: *What if I got some facts wrong? What if it’s badly written? What if people disagree and we get loads of letters to the editor saying I’m useless?* None of these things came to pass, but it





‘It’s shocking to write something brutally honest... in the cold light of day, it can make your toes curl’

took me quite a while to own my writing without being embarrassed by it.’

Happily for Lorna, the embarrassment wasn’t enough to stop her writing, and neither should it stop you, Simon.

JRR Tolkien said: ‘A man that flies from his fear may find that he has only taken a short cut to meet it.’ Don’t sacrifice writing because some elements mortify you. Better to dig down to what the problem is and overcome it. Remember, the reward of other people enjoying your work is worth the risk of embarrassment.

Lorna recognised that she could tolerate having her work in print when she acknowledged that her take on the world was equally as valid as anyone else’s, and she suggests you do the same.

‘You have a right to express your views but you also have to man up because some people are bound to disagree with you or will not like what you’re saying. Any bad review is enough to make you want to hide under a stone, but ultimately, if you like your writing and you’re proud of it and can stand by it, then so be it. Everyone else is entitled to their opinions too. It’s about owning your work and accepting that nobody is infallible.’

There is an embarrassment in revealing your thoughts without hiding behind sarcasm or cynicism and it’s something you have to learn to tolerate. Just like when someone asks you how you are, and you answer truthfully and in detail, including bunions, rashes and insomnia, it’s shocking to write something brutally

honest and unflinching. When you read a passage filled with searing emotion in context, it’s amazing, but if it’s examined in the cold light of day, it can make your toes curl. It’s this juxtaposition of the realities of day-to-day life and the passion and honesty that writing requires that is difficult to juggle, but perhaps being aware of it will lessen the pain. Why not unpick the emotion of embarrassment and write about it? *Blott on the Landscape* by Tom Sharpe delights in this feeling, to great effect.

To address the second emotion – the desire to express yourself – there is no point being bland and anodyne in your writing to lessen the response it invokes, because you’ll only succeed in being boring. You must push yourself to the limit, to explore the darkest, highest and most painful emotions to write effectively.

Finally, the particular practices you mention: writing from the heart, finding your voice and writing a stream of consciousness, all require you to plunge in without scrutiny and self-criticism. If it’s the particular way these ideas are phrased that gets to you, rephrase them into something more acceptable, using a technique such as ‘free writing’ (where you write without judgment or self-censorship). Ignore the voice in your head telling you that these techniques are somehow indulgent and leave you open to ridicule – it’s the same voice that wants to squash any creativity. Dare to take risks and revel in the results.

Tips to take away

- Bear in mind what CS Lewis said: ‘Even in social life, you will never make a good impression on other people until you stop thinking about what sort of impression you’re making.’
- You find writing embarrassing? So write your most embarrassing moment and show it to someone. Feel the fear and do it anyway, to quote a certain self-help book.
- Reward yourself for conquering your embarrassment with a favourite treat. Too often we berate ourselves for our perceived failings rather than celebrating our successes.



The Write Factor offers all sorts of services to support your writing process, from mentoring and writing courses to editorial feedback and assessment. Find out more at www.thewritefactor.co.uk

Research secrets



Crime author Sarah Ward talks to Anita Loughrey about how she used her own memories as one of her research resources

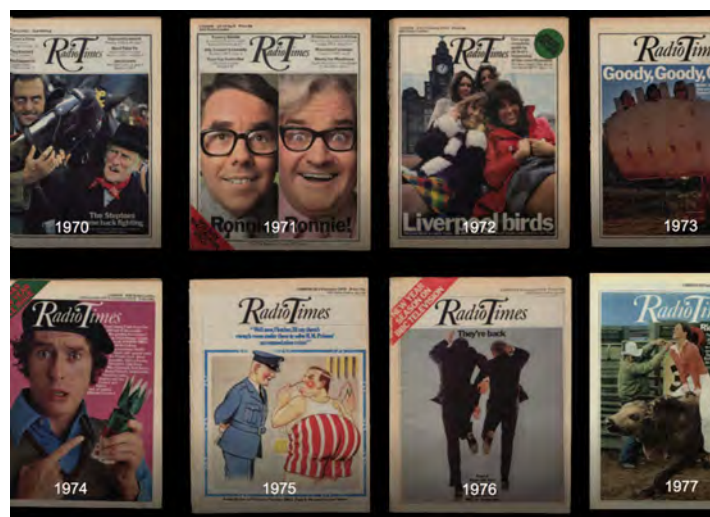
I write crime fiction. My debut novel, *In Bitter Chill*, was published in 2015. My second book, *A Deadly Thaw*, will be published in September this year, and I'm currently researching and writing my third book, *A Patient Fury*.

I enjoy researching my books but I tend to do the vast majority of the research after I have written the first draft. I usually need to do just a little to get myself going.

A Patient Fury, for example, is about a house fire and so I spoke to a fire investigator before I started. I needed to know that the premise would work in real life. Once he had told me that my scenario was realistic, I wrote the opening scene based on what I had in my mind and checked further details with the expert. Then I wrote the rest of the book, knowing that I would need to fact-check what I had written at the end.

In Bitter Chill has a main character, Rachel, who is a genealogist. Researching your family tree is an enormous undertaking and people spend years doing it. I wanted to do enough that I'd know what I was talking about when writing the novel, without becoming embroiled in the minutiae of my ancestors.

After the death of my mother I became interested in the matrilineal line and this proved easier to research. I registered with Ancestry.com and Findmypast.com and traced my mother's maternal line as far back as I could. I didn't bother with sisters, aunts or other female members. I just went straight up the family tree: mother, grandmother,



great-grandmother and so on. It allowed me to focus my research on one particular area and also to see the specific problems with looking at the female line, for example name changes.

I read a lot of family history magazines, in particular *Your Family History* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* This gave me a feel for the type of people who work as professional genealogists – their interest in people and places, for example. I also watched episodes of the TV programme *Heir Hunters*, as it gives good examples of how difficult it can be to find relatives once they decide to remove themselves from the family.

Shared memories

I made Rachel exactly the same age as me, and so a child in the 1970s. This meant I could use my own memory as research because what I remembered from my childhood, I wanted her to remember. I then used the internet to flesh out this information. I particularly like

The BBC Genome project is brilliant

the website Pinterest. It's very visual with minimal text so I can focus solely on the picture. For example, in the 1970s, little girls would have a party dress. I could remember mine. It was purple with a broderie anglaise border. I wanted to see other examples, and Pinterest provided enough information to give this background to Rachel as a little girl.

My mother used Green Shield stamp books and, although I can remember them, I wanted to refresh my memory. Again the internet was very helpful to provide the history of Green Shield stamps, which I then described in one of my first chapters. The site www.retrowow.co.uk is very good for anything vintage or

retro from the 1970s.

Using myself as an 'expert' proved very useful. I remember an editor who is younger than me asking if cars really didn't have seatbelts in the rear. I didn't need to research this! I remember my father's Ford Cortina being seatbelt-free and it wasn't until the 1980s that I started to use them.

I mention Hammer Horror films on TV in the early '80s and I wanted to check the TV schedules for the time. The BBC Genome project is absolutely brilliant (<http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk>). The site lists the *Radio Times* schedules between 1923 and 2009. It's an invaluable resource.

Another research resource readers may be interested in is vintage women's magazines, as they give a flavour of domestic preoccupations at a given time. *Women's Weekly* in the 1970s was fascinating for fashions and cookery tips and, although I didn't use specifics in my book, I felt the household come alive when I was reading them.

Conversation

I sometimes feel that research can become 'Google heavy'. When this happens my book becomes a bit detached from reality. I sometimes prefer to post an open question on Facebook. I recently asked how much it would





cost to fill the petrol tank of a Range Rover. A few comments said 'If you Google...' The point was that I wanted to speak to someone with a Range Rover because then we got into a conversation about cost, and difficulties in affording such a big tank etc. Sometimes the internet just can't replace a conversation.

I have spoken to several experts as part of my research. For *In Bitter Chill*, I spoke to a retired Derbyshire CID inspector. That was very useful but he did warn me that procedure changes quickly in the police force.

For the second book, I used my cousin, who was a chief inspector in Dyfed and Powys. He's now retired but only recently so he's a great person to use, not only to ask questions but to point towards documents and procedural information if I want to do additional research myself.

To research death by strangulation I used the internet and I did find it quite difficult to read about. You don't want your research to be 'dry' so I looked for more discursive texts where the trauma of the victims is discussed.

In the case of my character Rachel, she sometimes wakes up in the middle of the night gasping for breath, imagining what it might be like to be strangled. I think this insight gives readers an identity with the victim.

It did mean researching beyond the technicalities of strangulation and looking at post-mortem information about how the body shuts down during strangulation. This

website is well put together but it's definitely not for the squeamish: www.forensic-pathologyonline.com.

A Deadly Thaw was published in September 2016 and my research focused around two distinct areas: how abandoned buildings are entered and photographed by 'urban explorers', and the treatment of women rape victims.

In terms of urban explorers, I pored over photographs on websites, Instagram and Pinterest to see how they gain access to abandoned buildings. There's often a lot of online chat about the mechanics of getting to these buildings which sometimes aren't visible on a map. This website is a must for those interested in the area: www.ukurbex.co.uk

In terms of the treatment of sex crime victims, the period I was interested in was the 1980s and I used the British Library to look at reports into complaints made against the police by victims. These women were treated badly in two ways: first, in the interview process, and second, when decisions were made not to prosecute the perpetrators. The reports made harrowing reading.

My most unusual piece of research, so far, is for my third book, *A Patient Fury*. I visited a churchyard in Derbyshire where an empty medieval sarcophagus lies. Apparently if you get inside it, you can hear the devil.

I didn't dare climb in but I did take a photograph!

• Find out more about Sarah and her books at crimepieces.com or on Facebook at [SarahWardCrime](https://www.facebook.com/SarahWardCrime)

WRITING OUTLETS

with Janet Cameron

New literary magazines

Banshee

bansheelit.tumblr.com

Banshee is an exciting new literary journal for writing from Ireland and around the world, published twice a year, in spring and autumn. Hard copies are stocked in several bookstores in Ireland, or you can subscribe online for €20 a year. The editors seek short stories, flash fiction and poetry.

Tip: Experiment with form and style, but be accessible to a broad audience.

Submissions: Send up to two stories of 1500-5000 words, four flash fiction under 1000 words, or six poems of up to 40 lines. Submit in double spacing, one category at a time, with an author bio of up to 50 words, to bansheelit@gmail.com



LitMag

litmag.com

US-based *LitMag* is published twice a year in print and online, and they pay well – \$1000 for fiction, and \$250 for a poem or a short-short fiction story. Online, it's \$250 regardless of genre. A year's subscription for UK readers costs \$22.50 in print or \$12 online.

Tip: The editors say they are drawn to big minds, large hearts and sharp pens! I think that means passion and great sincerity.

Submissions: Up to 15,000 words for the print edition, or 4000 words online. Send one story at a time or up to six poems. Submit from 1 September to 15 August, using the Submittable button in the Submit section.



Lady.

ladyliterarymag.com

This online magazine is written by women for women. They are seeking strong, multi-layered work of complexity – and definitely no 'genre' material – from women who may not have had the opportunity to showcase their work.

Tip: Your work doesn't have to be pretty or happy or fun. It just has to be yours!

Submissions: Fiction: no more than 5000 words. Flash fiction: no more than 1000 words. Poetry: no maximum wordcount. Send to: submissions@ladyliterarymag.com



• Janet's ebook *Fifteen Women Philosophers*, published by decodedscience.com, is available from Amazon

Competitive Edge

Small steps

How one writer turned a story exercise into a win – and then an agent!

Stefanie Seddon won the 2016 Bristol Short Story Prize with her story *Kakahu*. Stefanie explains: 'It began as a character study exercise for a piece I was doing for my MA Creative Writing class at Birkbeck, University of London. I was struggling to understand an adult character, so I thought I'd try writing about a formative episode in her past. As the scene and story developed, the piece started to take on a life of its own.'

'The workshop element of my course was enormously helpful. As the author, you're incredibly close to the page, but the group discussions – although daunting at first – can help you to understand from the reader's perspective what works and what doesn't. I've just finished my MA but we still meet regularly to workshop our stories and share ideas.'

Stefanie had already had short story success the previous year.

'My short story *Eel* won the UK/Canada regional award of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize,' she says. 'This was a really timely boost to my confidence because I was still trying to pluck up the courage to show other people my work. *Eel* actually began as a piece of homework for a class on historical fiction. It helped to have the structure and discipline provided by my course.'

Kakahu is written from a child's point of view, which Stefanie enjoyed.

She says: 'Children have very heightened emotions, something I see in my own children. In many ways, childhood is when your character is forged, which makes it wonderful to write about. I think that any period where someone is caught between two worlds provides all sorts of interesting material.'

I asked Stefanie for her advice on entering short story competitions.

'My top tip would be to read as many short stories as possible! I love short stories – even more so since I've had children, when my reading time is squeezed into those precious late hours when everyone is asleep. A good



Stefanie Seddon

short story will stay with you long after you've read it, and the more you can read, the more you see what might work in your own stories. Whenever I hit a brick wall with my own writing, I pick up a book of short stories.'

The future is looking very exciting for Stefanie now.

'I'm working on my first novel, a Depression-era story set in New Zealand's southern alps, where I was born. I've also just signed with a literary agent, Rachel Conway, of Georgina Capel Associates.'

'The Bristol Short Story Prize was really pivotal in helping me find representation. Being shortlisted for comps like this gives emerging writers great exposure to people in the industry and it gives you access to a wonderfully supportive writing network. Writing can be a lonely business, so I think that's hugely important!'

Helen's Hint

Follow Stefanie's example by trying to write a story from the point of view of someone much younger or older than yourself. Stefanie chose a child but you could go for a teenager, a young parent or someone approaching their 100th birthday. Here are my top tips:

■ Consider dialogue carefully, both internal and external. People of different ages don't just have different vocabularies, they also have different rhythms of speaking. Listen to

people around you, or on TV or radio, to get this right.

■ Think about the limitations of your body. If you are a small child you won't be able to reach or see some things that an adult can. If you are elderly, you may have sight or hearing difficulties you didn't have when you were younger or stiff joints slowing you down. Either of these things could add intrigue and complication to your story.

■ Whatever age you decide to make your viewpoint character, don't make them a stereotype but do think about how you can use the attributes of their age to accentuate the plot.

Competitions of the Month

This month I want to draw your attention to a couple of inspiring themed competitions.

First, Momaya Press are asking for stories exploring either Utopia or Dystopia. Whichever you choose, this is a theme that really encourages you to take your imagination to the limits.

Alternatively, Erewash Writers' 'Pets Aplenty' competition encourages you to write a short piece about either a pet or a wild animal. So there's plenty of scope for creativity there as well.

Don't forget we're always keen to hear your recommendations for Competition of the Month. Do get in touch at our usual email address: comps@writers-forum.com



with short story writer
Helen M Walters

COMPS NOW OPEN

Cinnamon Press Debut Novel/Novella Competition Closes 31 July 2017

Novel/novella: your first 10,000 words. **Fee:** £12. **Prize:** one year's mentoring, publishing contract and 100 copies of the book. **Judge:** Ian Gregson. **Details:** please see www.cinnamonpress.com or write to Cinnamon Press Writing Prizes, Meirion House, Glan yr afon, Tanygrisiau, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Gwynedd, LL41 3SU.

Park Publications Article Competition Closes 31 August 2017

Article: 1000-1500 words. **Theme:** 'My writing day.' **Fee:** £3. **Prizes:** £50; £25; £15. **Details:** see www.parkpublications.co.uk or write to 14 The Park, Stow on the Wold, Cheltenham GL54 1DX.

Flash 500 Flash Fiction Competition Quarterly

Flash: 500 words. **Fee:** £5 for one or £8 for two stories. **Prize:** £300 plus publication in *Words With Jam*; £200; £100. **Details:** please see flash500.com

COMPS CLOSING SOON

11 MAR

Words for the Wounded Independent Author Book Award

Book: self-published fiction or non-fiction. **Fee:** £12. **Prizes:** Review, author bio and 'A Day in the Life' feature in *Frost* magazine. **Judge:** Gillian Holmes. **Details:** see www.wordsforthewounded.co.uk

24 MAR

Evesham Festival of Words Short Story Competition

Story: 2500 words. **Fee:** £5. **Prize:** £150 and trophy. **Judge:** Vanessa Gebbie. **Rules:** please see website



Evesham

for separate junior comp. **Details:** eveshamfestivalofwords.org

31 MAR

Cinnamon Press Poetry Pamphlet Prize

Poems: 15-25 poems, up to 50 lines each. **Fee:** £10. **Prizes:** 4 x 30 copies, plus publishing contract. **Judge:** Ian Gregson. **Details:** see www.cinnamonpress.com or write to Cinnamon Press Writing Prizes, Meirion House, Glan yr afon, Tanygrisiau, Blaenau Ffestiniog LL41 3SU.

Fish Publishing Poetry Contest

Poem: 300 words. **Fee:** online €14; postal €16. **Prizes:** €1000; week at Anam Cara retreat. **Judge:** Jo Shapcott. **Details:** please see www.fishpublishing.com or write to Fish Poetry Contest, Durrus, Bantry, Co Cork, Ireland.

Scottish Arts Club Short Story Competition

Story: 1500 words. **Fee:** £10. **Prizes:** £800; 2 x £100; Scottish Arts Club Members Award trophy; £500 Isobel Lodge Award for New Scottish Writing; plus signed copy of an Alexander McCall Smith novel for all finalists. **Judge:** Alexander McCall Smith. **Details:** please see www.sacctrust.org

1 APR

Wergle Flomp Humour Poetry Contest

Poem: 250 lines. **Theme:** Humour. **Fee:** FREE. **Prizes:** \$1000; \$250;

Continued overleaf ►

Swanwick

The Writers' Summer School
12 -18 August 2017

Would you like a fully inclusive week at
Swanwick Summer School for just:
£100?

If you are aged between 18 to 30, and have a passion for writing, then apply for a place on our TopWrite scheme.

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Dr Tarja Moles

email secretary@swanwickwritersschool.org.uk or call 01290 552248
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women's
**SHORT
FICTION**
competition
2017

Closing date:
20 March 2017

SHORT STORY

1st prize £2,000
plus: a week's writing retreat at Gladstone's Library, and a day with a Virago editor

FLASH FICTION

1st prize £500

JUDGE:

Kit de Waal

JUDGE:

Deborah Levy

www.mslexia.co.uk/competitions
0191 204 8860
shortstory@mslexia.co.uk
flashfiction@mslexia.co.uk

mslexia

Flash Fiction Contest

1st Prize: €1,000

- Judge: Chris Stewart
- Closes: 28 Feb '17
- Word Limit: 300
- Entry fee: €14



Poetry Contest

1st Prize: €1,000

2nd Prize: Week at Anam Cara
Writers Retreat, Ireland

- Judge: Jo Shapcott
- Closes: 31 March '17
- Word Limit: 300
- Entry fee: €14

10 best submissions will be
published in the
2017 Fish Anthology.

also online:

Writing Courses &
Critique Service

Fish

details & online entry:

www.fishpublishing.com

Fish Publishing, Durrus, Bantry, Co. Cork, Ireland.

Continued from page 63

10 x \$100. **Details:** see website winningwriters.com

20 APR

Erewash Writers Pets Aplenty Competition

Story: 500-600 words. **Theme:** Based on (but not viewpoint of) pet or wild animal. **Fee:** FREE. **Prizes:** Signed copy of Malcolm Welshman's book, publication, a chance to win free entry to open competition in 2018. **Judge:** Malcolm Welshman. **Details:** please see erewash-writerscompetition.weebly.com

24 APR

Bath Novel Award

Novel: first 5000 words and synopsis. **Fee:** £25. **Prizes:** £2000 plus Minerva trophy; £500 voucher from Cornerstones Literary Consultancy. **Details:** see bathnovel-award.co.uk or write to The Bath Novel Award, PO Box 5223, Bath BA1 0UR.

30 APR

Momaya Press Short Story Competition

Story: 3000 words. **Theme:** Dystopia/Utopia. **Fee:** £8 (US\$12). **Prizes:** \$200 (£110); \$100 (£55); \$50 (£30). **Details:** see momaya-press.com

Exeter Story Prize

Story: 10,000 words. **Fee:** £10. **Prizes:** £500 plus trophy; £150; £100; £200 Trisha Ashley Award for humorous story. **Details:** see www.creativewritingmatters.co.uk

Tom Howard/John H Reid Fiction & Essay Contest

Fiction/Essay: 6000 words. **Fee:** \$18. **Prizes:** \$1500 in each category; 10 x \$100. **Details:** winningwriters.com/our-contests/tom-howard-john-h-reid-fiction-essay-contest

Ver Poets Open Competition

Poem: 30 lines. **Fee:** £4. **Prizes:** £600; £300; £100. **Judge:** Tamar Yoseloff. **Details:** see verpoets.co.uk or write to Competitions Secretary, 181 Sandridge Road, St Albans AL1 4AH.

Bristol Short Story Prize

Story: 4000 words. **Fee:** £8. **Prizes:** £1000; £700; £400; short-listed writers £100. **Judge:** Tania Hershman (chair). **Details:** please see www.bristolprize.co.uk or write to Bristol Short Story Prize, Unit 5.16 Paintworks, Bath Road, Bristol BS4 3EH.

31 MAY

Bridport Prize

Poem: 42 lines maximum. **Short story:** 5000 words. **Flash:** 250 words. **Fee:** poem £9; story £10; flash £8. **Prizes:** poem and story £5000; £1000, £500; 10 x £100. Flash £1000; £500; £250; 3 x £100. **Judges:** Lemn Sissay; Peter Hobbs; Kit de Waal. **Details:** see www.bridportprize.org.uk or write to The Bridport Prize PO Box 6910 Bridport, Dorset DT6 9BQ.

Peggy Chapman-Andrews First Novel Award

Novel: 5000-8000 words plus synopsis. **Fee:** £20. **Prizes:** £1000, mentoring and possible representation; £500 and manuscript appraisal; £100 and partial appraisal for short-listed entries. **Rules:** see website for eligibility requirements. **Judge:** Nathan Filer. **Details:** see www.bridportprize.org.uk

Shore Scripts Short Submission

Script: 3-30 pages, all genres. **Fee:** \$32 (£25) for early entry. **Prizes:** \$1000; \$500; \$250. **Rules:** see website for later submission slots. **Details:** see www.shorescripts.com

UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED...
Theme and genre are open. Entries should be original and unpublished. Postal entries should be printed on white A4 in a clear plain font. Include a separate cover sheet with the title, word count, your name, address and postcode, phone and email. Stories should be double-spaced with good margins. Where necessary include a large enough sae with sufficient postage. Always contact the organiser or check their website to confirm details. Writers' Forum does not accept responsibility for errors in or changes to the information listed.



Where I write

Phil Barrington talks to author Stephan Collishaw, author of *The Song of the Stork*

I enjoy writing in cafés, though often that is not where I do the slog of the work.

Cafés are great places for thinking, for jotting down ideas, for pulling together plots. There's a special kind of 'alone' that you can only achieve when you are in a crowd of strangers. It can get a bit much, sitting in a room on your own, inside your own head all the time. I find cafés are good places for editing too. Perhaps that's because I feel the need for 'reward' more.

The area I go to in Nottingham is called the Creative Quarter – an area of regenerated streets that has become a hub for people sitting around staring at laptops. Occasionally someone will try to engage me in conversation, seemingly oblivious to the fact I'm trying to do some work.

I once managed to write an outline of a novel in a McDonalds. My wife worked in a school in a deprived area of our city. Often I'd wait for her to finish work and there were not many places you could

hang out for an hour, nursing a coffee. It was the kind of noisy, busy environment that particularly suited the kind of writing that I was doing. I'm sure I've read that McDonalds designed their chairs to be uncomfortable to sit in for too long. They didn't try hard enough with me.

I've been going to Lithuania since 1995, when a friend asked me to look after his apartment in Vilnius, a baroque gem of church spires and winding streets where temperatures dropped to minus 28 and it snowed for six months. There's not a huge amount to do there so it was the perfect place to write and read.

One of my favourite places is the Vero Café, where the staff are friendly and leave me alone to scribble away in my notebook. They humour me too, when I attempt to speak to them in Lithuanian. There's nothing more inspirational than staring into dark residue of a cold coffee cup, while the rain beats against the windows and

conversation around you is in a language you can easily zone out of.

My latest novel, *The Song of the Stork*, was written in a number of places. The novel is about a young Jewish girl who escapes from the Germans and seeks shelter on the farm of a Russian mute. I wrote it mainly in the utility room in my house. There are a couple of rooms that would make quite glamorous offices, but I like being squashed into the small space, with the washing machine behind me throbbing away. My dog, a black Labrador, comes and lies at my feet, meaning I can't move at all, but warming up my feet in winter, as there is no heating in the room.

On the shelf in front of me I have lots of poetry, and, if I'm stuck, I'll leaf through some Louis MacNeice or Roy Campbell. There are also some photos: one of my wife, who I met in Lithuania, taken when she was 18, pictures of my children, and a 20-year-old photo of a run-down building in a side street in Vilnius. The snow has drifted to cover the lower windows and 10ft icicles hang from the gutters. It reminds me of a magical time and a city that very much shaped who I am as a writer.



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Walter Dinjos



"I won the 2015 Flirty Fiction Prima Magazine and Mills and Boon competition. The prize was **£500**, a three page feature in the magazine and the chance to work with Mills and Boon on my book. Also I have three stories in three anthologies with other authors – **we've raised almost £2,000 for cancer charities**"

Rachel Dove



"I have been published in different papers and magazines and am now producing around **250 articles a year**. It's going a bit too well at times! Seriously, it's very satisfying, stimulating and great fun – and thanks again to the WB for launching me on a **second career**. I meet so many interesting people and count myself mighty lucky."

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



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