

VERACITY

The Magazine from Verulam Writers



Edition 54

www.verulamwriters.org

Winter 2025

CHILLS, BUT THRILLS AS WELL!



This time, in VERACITY...

- Two amazing **author visits!**
- The saga of a **doomed home!**
- Scandi noir goes to **Greenland!**
- Part one of a chilling new tale **we wrote collectively!**

Oh, to have Christmas back! Frost, dampness and long nights are with us still and there's no gifts and feasting to look forward to. Thankfully, however, those long nights have been quite special for Verulam Writers over the winter.

We're now about half way through the 2024/25 VW year, which means we've had two competitions and are in the process of writing entries for a third; the President's Competition.

Sorry; tell a lie! There was also our Christmas poetry competition, which was judged on the same night as our annual festive party on 18th December. We also provided people with new and interesting reading material thanks to our Christmas book swap.

We've had two well-received workshops since the last edition of Veracity and two authors have visited us. Other visiting authors are being slated for before the summer break, but the committee will let you know the details when the arrangements have been made. Keep checking the Verulam Writers' website (www.verulamwriters.org) for this and other upcoming events.

I hope you all continue to enjoy the events in the calendar and keep reminding all keen writers you know who are 18 or over to give us a go. Remember, non-members can take part in a meeting for £3 or workshops and talks for £5.

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From the Editor...

Hello, members and friends of Verulam Writers. So many good articles have been coming my way that I've not been sure how to fit them all into this edition. Indeed, I haven't! Some items I hoped would go in have had to be put on the summer waiting list. But don't worry if you wrote something you don't see in the following pages. I never fail to publish anything I receive.

There's only one competition story to read this month, but that doesn't matter because there's a

shared story on these pages; one which you yourselves have collectively contributed to and will be running as a serial throughout the year!

Otherwise, have fun reading up on everything that's happened in the group since October. If you were there, your memories will be refreshed and grow fonder. If you weren't, you can be satisfied you've caught up on what you missed. See you again in June. Roll on summer!

Robert Paterson, Editor

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From the Chair...

By Co-chairperson of Verulam Writers, Mandy Carter.



Well, hello there, and welcome to our first Veracity of 2025. If I'm honest, stepping into the co-chairperson role was not on my 2024/25 bingo card, but life throws up some strange and wonderful curveballs and as I'm constantly discovering, sometimes you just have to roll with it and enjoy the process. So as much I've struggled to find time to write this short piece (honestly, 2025 already feels like a million months long - and my damn day job just doesn't seem to respect my need to take time to spew words across a page at regular intervals), I'm pleased to greet you for this edition of Veracity. I'm constantly inspired by the incredible talent and creativity within our group, and I'm sure that this edition will be as equally fabulous and insightful as previous editions.

Having written about writers' block, procrastination and distraction techniques previously, I'm adding "winter" to the things that are stopping me from picking up a pen at the moment. Writing during these cold winter months can be quite the challenge, can't it? The short days and chilly weather often make it tempting to hibernate rather than put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard). But I know for many, there's also something incredibly cozy about bundling up with a warm drink and letting the wintry landscape fuel the imagination. If I'm honest, I do actually have several half-written ideas and themes for articles ambling about in my head - so it seems that whether you're working on the next great novel or jotting down a few lines of poetry, winter offers its own special kind of inspiration for some.

Of course, inspiration for writers can come from all sorts of places. A walk in nature can offer a sensory feast of sights, sounds, and smells that can get your creative juices flowing. People-watching, apart from being an enjoyable activity to while away an hour or so in a busy cafe or park, can lead to intriguing character development or unusual storylines (which reminds me, I really must weave into a story, the time I was in a Budapest bar, watching a rather angry man have a showdown with what I can only assume was his wife's lover!). Curling up with a well-written book will always inspire - but what about getting uncomfortable and reading something that is not your go-to genre or style - you never know what new perspectives and techniques you may stumble across. Even mundane activities, like cooking or doing chores, can provide a mental break and allow your subconscious to work on plot twists or dialogue. Engaging in conversations with friends, family, or fellow writers can bring fresh insights and ideas (something I know we can all relate to, being part of this group!) And sometimes just trying something new - like attending a lecture, visiting a museum, or even taking a different route home - can open up a world of inspiration waiting to be woven into your writing.

Continued overleaf

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From the Chair, page 2

So far this term, we've had our usual opportunities to be inspired by the works in progress that you all bring to the manuscript nights; the Presidents Cup theme of "Print the Legend" (which I'm sure will elicit some fabulous stories from our members), the co-writing session led by Robert that really got our creative minds going and our fascinating evening with Peter Waine - a writer with an infectious passion for his subject matter (as well as an impressively extensive network and address book).

And we still have more to come – I'm especially looking forward to Judith's workshop on "Speaking in Public", as I know it'll be a great opportunity for us to learn and practice the art of selling our writing through the practice of reading our work aloud to a group. With the annual Quiz Night, we'll be knocking on the door of summer before you know it - and getting inspiration from long, sunny days (I'm staying positive on the "sunny" element guys), holidays and sipping ice cold drinks as we watch sunsets over golden beaches (cliche heavy, I know). But for now, where do you all seek your inspiration from? Anything unusual that you could share with the group, which may in turn inspire others to head out and try something new? After all, we're all here to grow as writers in a supportive and dynamic community where we can all thrive.

Mandy



The Lisbeth Philips Competition

By Judith Foster

Editor's note: This year's theme was "A Family House" and the adjudication was on Wednesday 4th December. Congratulations also to Ben Burgonzi, who won the Gnome De Plume for his pseudonym, May B. Troo.

A Few General Observations Which Arose from the Readings

1. Check your punctuation. Good punctuation makes sense on the page, and helps reading aloud.
2. Check your spelling.
3. Check the meaning of any unusual words.
4. Don't use inverted commas to pretend to explain vague words.
5. Don't mix your pronouns, for instance, 'he' and 'I' referring to same person in the same paragraph.
6. Think carefully before using a cliché. It can as easily add pudding to your writing as zest. What is a cliché? A word or phrase that other people use a lot.
7. Read your work aloud to yourself, and listen carefully. This also helps with punctuation. You can always recognise from the writing who is a reader of good English.



The Lisbeth Philips Competition, Page 2

Brief Comments on the Entries

This is a really good batch of scripts, and a privilege to read, each one different from any other.

The competition requires them to be based on fact, even though the connection may be distant.

Individual pieces ranged from completely factual to meditative, and each was generally well-balanced, varying in tone, intensity and view-point. Those pieces written largely about people, sometimes highly emotional, showed well developed expressive ability, while those descriptive or presenting an argument were clear and to the point.

A La Ronde by Wendy Turner

A description of a charming 18th century house in Devon built by two enterprising ladies, energetic beyond the expectations of their times.

A Family House Divided by Dave Weaver

An exploration of Edgar Allen Poe's strange story 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. Poe's story asks more questions than it answers about relationships and the house itself. The writer has speculated widely and knowledgeably on some of those questions.

The Unmade Bed by Cécile Keen

A deeply personal review of the unhappy relationship between daughter- and mother-in-law as the older woman approaches her death. Through her resentment and guilt the younger woman regains her humanity and some pity.

Now you see us by Harriet Bagnall

This tells the story of two unhappy women through their conversation as they try to console each other by associating their unhappiness and attempts to escape their woes with the art in the exhibition they are visiting, concerning the invisibility of women.

A Family Home; A Lifetime of Care by Tina Shaw

An Edwardian house recounts its pains and pleasures through building operations and a succession of occupiers of declining fortunes, up to the day of its destruction.

The Lisbeth Philips Competition, Page 3

Bag End: The There, The Back Again, and The Thereafter by Jake Pirrie

A meditation on the meaning of 'home' in JRR Tolkien's work, and how it fits into and can be understood and interpreted through literary theory.

A Family House (The editor sincerely apologises we were not able to identify the author.)

A lively account of a small boy's joys and miseries through his mischief and dreams of escape. It is set appropriately within the tensions and pleasures of the other members of the family.

Summing Up

I have read each of these stories four times, in the order in which they were handed to me. On my first reading I set out a provisional table of preferences which never changed. But finally, all the pieces were so good that I regretted having to choose only three. And to place these only hesitantly, each of them worthy of first place. It happens that all three chosen make a heavy emotional impact, irrespective of the style of writing. The story counts.

It was difficult enough choosing the first three. Deciding among them was even more difficult. I might as well have used a pin. This was my choice.

Prize Winners!

Third Prize:

First World, Second World by Ben Bergonzi

This story features all the requirements of the brief, house, families, fact, all so truly expressed that tears came to my eyes as I read the last paragraph. It is beautifully shaped into the alternating trips into the houses in which the discoveries are matched experience by experience and person by person. The writing is clean and unpretentious, with few metaphors or adjectives. A strong but not painful contrast is made between the houses and the space available to the two families. Each dwelling, including the most recent one, has been given a clear period atmosphere. A pleasure throughout.

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The Lisbeth Philips Competition, Page 4

Second Prize: *A Family House by Nargis Lal*

An intense, emotional monologue, expressed, as one's unspoken thoughts always are, in snatches of significant meaning. It covers a great deal in addition to the family: racial fear (if the Brummies felt afraid, how much worse for the Tyagis?), politics, employment, religious faith, the caution concerning western culture. The writer is in constant communion with her ghosts, who are so real that I too felt their presence. It describes such density of life as I cannot imagine.

And I love the threatening fox in the hall.

First Prize: **See overleaf!**

This story describes an extraordinary series of interlocking events, recognised by the only person who can relate them to each other, a masterly way of telling a contemporary story.

This is a piece of simple, understated writing, covering the requirements of fact, family and house. It is written in short chapters: the Ukrainian refugee Marina in Germany, the video of the Russian stooge Fima, the release of the tortured Ukrainian soldier Alexei and the discovery of their single location in the one house belonging to Marina, brought together with the directness of a report. But from the unemotional script the impact of cruel events strikes even more heavily.

Judith

Marina's House

Mike Spurgeon's first place entry for the 2024 Lisbeth Philips Competition

The autumn sun shone weakly, as gusts of wind tore leaves from the trees. Marina stood on a bridge trying to make sense of everything. She welcomed the drop in temperature although it would never be as cold as Ukraine. The chill cut into her tiredness.

Nataliya had really put up a fight that morning. She was either very strong for a six-year-old or her mother was more frail. At least her son seemed OK although very quiet. Marina's husband kept saying "we must be strong for the children", but he would never know the full story of their lives in Germany. She would never know all that he did at the front.

When the sound of a passing car broke into her thoughts, Marina immediately searched for her phone, the epicentre of her new life. She wondered about looking at her Instagram, to check pictures of the bridge they had had built over the swimming pool at 17 Sadova Street in Vuhledar. The gentle arc reminded her of the one she was standing on now.

Memories of how they had bought a shell of a house and transformed it into their family home came flooding back. The smell of newly plastered walls and then fresh paint, the constant noise of power tools, the arguments over money, sleeping out in the garden while the builder put in joists and replaced floors; everything planned with passion, sitting around the table and trying to imagine what it would be like to have stairs on the left side or the right, building in an alcove over the fireplace, going through colour charts with the children for their bedrooms, deciding that they could have a sauna in the basement and most of all the mural on their bedroom wall of two doves in a cherry tree. Love and wellbeing, that's what Marina titled the photo on "Insta".

Another cold gust made her stop. It could all be ignored now. There was only rubble.

Marina checked the time, remembering what the agency had said "You mustn't be late, remember the Germans are always punctual." So onwards on another journey. This time to beg for the position of warehouse assistant, hopefully with child friendly hours.

Over 2000 miles east in Russia, a bemused "Fima" of the 155th Naval Brigade was being introduced to a class of 5 to 6-year-olds. Still limping from a bullet to his left leg, he was in good spirits, enjoying the attention from the children. He was beginning to get the measure of his audience. The Ministry communications team had shown the class a shortened version of his Telegram video of the fighting at 17 Sadova Street and told him the main thing was the medal. Let the children handle it and talk about the ceremony where Putin himself awarded Fima the "Military Valour" medal.

Fima felt mildly uncomfortable answering "I don't know" to the question about what happened to the children whose toys were in the video. He was more pleased with his answer to "had he spoken to any Ukrainians?" ("they are Nazis so I shoot at them, not talk to them"). This reply got him an approving nod from his handler. He made a mental note to himself to ask if he qualified for a bonus later.

Marina's House, Page 2

The longer version of Fima's video had spread across the internet to many outside Russia. Marina saw it and recognised the wrought iron stairs of her home, the pictures on the walls, and the table where the family celebrated birthdays. Worst was seeing "Fima" pick up photo albums of her children, flick through them and then drop them next to empty shell cases, broken glass and drops of blood on the floor.

BBC journalists saw the video and compared hundreds of social media images of members of Fima's unit. By comparing his hairline and a mole on his neck, they were able to identify Fima as Andrei Efemekin. The BBC also contacted Marina to get more background on her story. They were going to ask Fima about his time in Marina's home.

Initially the call went well and Fima willingly volunteered information; but when they asked if he ever thought about the people who lived there, the people in the photo albums, he quickly ended the call.

A video of a rescue by the Ukrainian army had another tale to tell. Alexi, an IT specialist who volunteered soon after the invasion was captured by the Russians after being shot in the back and leg, then held captive in the basement. He remained there for 46 days with no medical aid, often being refused food and water. During that time, some of the Russians beat him and nearly choked him. They told him that they were from prison and didn't care at all.

When the Ukrainian army counter-attacked into the suburbs of Vuhledar, they found Alexi just in time. He weighed just 42kg. The Russians had withdrawn, and Alexi had managed to find one of Marina's carpets to wrap around himself for warmth but was otherwise too weak to move. If he had not been found he would likely have died within a few days.

Marina saw Alexi being found and stretchered out of her house on social media. She was shocked that people had died in and around her home. When asked to comment Marina said, "I can't believe this is happening to us, that it's not a dream".

Today drone footage shows that there is almost nothing left of Marina's home. It can only be recognised in the moonscape of rubble by a blue rectangle where a swimming pool used to be.

Oleksandr, the father of Alexi is happy to see his son back alive but shocked at how starvation has changed his son's appearance. When the BBC interviewed him about Marina's house, after taking a deep breath and with tears in his eyes, he said:

"We must stay human to each other, regardless of everything."

Mike

Author's Visit Number 1 – Becky Alexander

Becky Alexander herself has very kindly submitted this account of her visit to Verulam Writers on 20th November.

It was a real pleasure to spend the evening with the Verulam Writers. It can be quite daunting walking into a room to talk about your own writing, to a group who already know what they are doing, but everyone made me feel very welcome.

I felt strongly that it should be a chance to share ideas and experience among fellow writers, rather than me 'lecture', and I was so pleased with the questions from Mandy and other members, and the discussion that followed.

If you weren't able to be in the room that evening, here is a brief summary!

- I read from *Someone Like You* and *The Other Mrs Eden*, which came out this year. They are psych thrillers, set in the acting world. My publisher is Storm, a fairly new company started by Oliver Rhodes, who also started Bookouture.
- I come from a traditional publishing background. I have worked as a Managing Editor and Acquisitions Editor for Bloomsbury, PenguinRandomHouse and HarperCollins, so I was able to share why I chose the newer digital-first model (higher royalties, new company, motivated to sell!).
- We discussed the pros and cons of working with agents. I have a good one – Charlie Campbell at Greyhound Literary. The group shared experiences of poor experiences, of agents wanting to change a book beyond what the author wants.
- We had an interesting chat about cover design, which prompted insights about colour, images, font, and how involved (or not) the author is.
- We discussed the editing process. I love it – I'm an editor so I am inclined to trust that editors have your best interests at heart. It's also really hard to see your own book clearly after a while, so I found my editors at Storm very helpful.



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Becky Alexander's Visit, page 2

- We talked about the discipline of writing and I explained that book 1 took almost two years to write and edit. Book 2 took 6 weeks, because I had a contract and a deadline! That got gasps from the room, which made me smile – it does seem fast looking back on it! I'd had advice from another local author, M.J. Arlidge, that you need to treat it like a job, and sit down every day. And you know what, it works. Writing at pace, every day, is ideal for thrillers, as you keep the pace up (and remember what you wrote). I know not every writer has time for this, but it's worth bearing in mind. Tasks can expand to fill the time available!

I was delighted to be given a copy of *Bloody St Albans*, and to be made to feel so welcome. I hope to come along some time next year, and I hope to see many of you at one of the local Noir at the Bar events soon.

Spending time with fellow writers makes it all real, holds us accountable, and pushes us on, so stay involved with your local writing community and good luck with your own writing adventures.

Becky



The Dialogue Workshop

By Tina Shaw

Despite the aim of the workshop being to explore the use of speech in writing, this proved to be one of the quietest VW evenings of the year! Lots of silent moments whilst people were busy heads down scribbling away.

Research of the internet produced two main themes about dialogue writing. Firstly, the issue of formatting, from which I drew the conclusion that, although there are rules, it is best to write using the format that works for you.

If you are lucky enough to get a publisher, they may well want to alter your format to fit in with their house style. The second main theme was to consider the purposes of dialogue. These mainly related to advancing the plot, setting up conflict situations, changing the course of events, or revealing information about the characters. As with much writing, the maxim 'less is more' holds true. A few well-chosen words can convey as much as a long descriptive paragraph, and can invite the reader's curiosity about the plot, or the characters, and stimulate the desire to continue reading the book.

The other piece of good advice is to read the dialogue you have written out loud, either to yourself, or a willing helper, and to earwig on as many conversations as you can. I always found the top level of a London bus when school had just tipped out its pupils, a rich source of authentic dialogue, but there are many occasions when some surreptitious quiet listening can reap rich rewards.

So, to the main part of the evening's workshop. After some brief examples of dialogue by such authors as Aldous Huxley, Charles Dickens and Bernadine Everisto, VW members were asked to spend five minutes writing dialogue about a variety of situations, and with a variety of voices. I am particularly interested in the techniques of writing the dialogue of characters of different age groups and a different gender to my own. People whose first language is not English, or who come from a different strata of society present a challenge when speaking as part of the story. Conflict situations between characters were also included in the exercises, as well as trying to indicate something about the plot.

Finally, after each five minutes members were invited to share their efforts which, as usual, produced a wide variety of different ideas.

Despite a modicum of anxiety about how the workshop would be received, I enjoyed the preparation and felt members valued the opportunity to attempt something different.

Tina

The Isle of Wight Book Awards

By Wendy Turner

The Book Awards took place at the Island Sailing Club on 1st October 2024, for which I had entered my *A-Z of the Isle of Wight, Places, People and History*, published by Amberley Publishing in 2023. There were three categories, fiction, non-fiction and children's books. The brief was that they could be conventionally or self-published and e-books were also acceptable but they had to have been published in 2023 and be about or connected to the Isle of Wight. I was delighted that the judge for the non-fiction section was gardening journalist and broadcaster Alan Titchmarsh. The event was hosted by singer-songwriter Paul Armfield who ran the Island's main bookshop for many years and has recently released an album on Tennyson's poetry set to music.

My party of three duly arrived at the sailing club, which was a super venue. It was plush and comfortable with ships, boats and yachts passing by right outside. Tables accommodated six or seven people, and we enjoyed a pleasant lunch of crispy chilli beef and crispy noodles, seabass and stir fry vegetables and *crème brûlée* and berries. There was a talk from Search and Rescue, the charity chosen to benefit from any funds raised, including book sales and a raffle. There was time for a good look at the entries – there were nearly forty books – and I could see that they were of a high standard. The covers were attractive and, from a brief look-through, they were interesting and engaging.



The Isle of Wight Book Awards, Page 2

Then came the big moment when the awards were announced. The fiction winner was *The Garnett Girls* by Georgina Moore, who once ran the Press Office at Headline. Georgina also won overall best book so a super author. I watched with bated breath as Alan Titchmarsh – who was on screen as he couldn't attend in person – gave us the non-fiction result from his garden. The winner was *Rose, Castle and Crown*, a book about Hampshire and the Isle of Wight's Citizen Soldiers, written by military historian Colonel Patrick Crowley, who has published several historical volumes. So, I was up against something of a heavy-weight but at least my little A-Z appeared on the table amid an ocean of lovely books. There was a joint first in the Children's category with *The Darker Side of Wight* by Peter J Murray, and *Trouble* by Michael E Wills.

I did win something though; a couple of jars of relish and crackers in the raffle, so all was not lost! It was a great event, and I consoled myself that at least my book was read by Alan Titchmarsh. I wonder if he'll remember it when he next pops down to the Isle of Wight?

Wendy



Author's Visit Number 2 - Peter Waine

By Wendy Turner

We were delighted to welcome Peter Waine as our guest speaker on 30th January. Peter has written widely on the English countryside and, as a former Chair of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and of the Tree Council, his love of it is evident. His wide-ranging posts include being a former trustee of the Royal Opera House and a member of the governing body of world cricket (ICC). He has also written books on *The Square Mile* and the history of livery companies. Peter launched into writing when he aspired to write a business novel. An agent suggested a writing partner, which he found through a contact at the BBC.

Peter spoke about his book *22 Ideas That Saved the English Countryside* which outlines the CPRE's vision and their historic partners, The National Trust, the RSPB and the Ramblers' Association. The book celebrates what has been saved and protected but also outlines what has been lost. He spoke about 'the countryside on your doorstep' – it's still there and worth fighting for. Good Town and Country Planning is essential, producing the National Parks and Green Belts that protect much of our countryside. Peter reminded us that less than 10% of land in the UK is considered built upon. He defines his book *As I Go Wandering* as a love letter to the English countryside.

Peter, Chair of the Housman Society, described A E Housman as 'the greatest classicist we have ever produced and our greatest poet.' Although Housman failed his Finals and turned down a Laureat, he became a tenured professor at University College London and Trinity College Cambridge and Professor of Latin at both. Peter read an extract from *A Shropshire Lad*, familiar to many of us:

*Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide*

Peter commented that poetry is not the words but the way of saying them. He spoke of the poet Edward Thomas (1878-1917) who, although a pacifist, enlisted during the First World War. When asked why, he scooped up a handful of soil and said – 'for this.' He was killed in action aged 39.

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Peter Waine's Visit, Page 2

Peter's top tips:

Seize opportunities – one thing leads to another.

Get the dialogue going and don't keep going back over it, as it disturbs the flow.

Really get into it. Do your homework.

Many fictional characters are based on real people

Your book should have wide appeal

Lastly, Peter mentioned some books that he has enjoyed and considers beautifully written: T E Lawrence *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, John Galsworthy *The Forsyte Saga*, Maurice Druon *The Poisoned Crown*, Oswald Wynd *The Ginger Tree* and Peter Swanson *The Christmas Guest* which he recommends as very clever and as good as any Agatha Christie. Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is loved for its insight into human nature, and we ended with a discussion on the wisdom of Winnie the Pooh (which he also loved!)

Peter Waine took us on a literary magic carpet ride around the world in an hour or two, on a dark January night. Our thanks to him.

Wendy



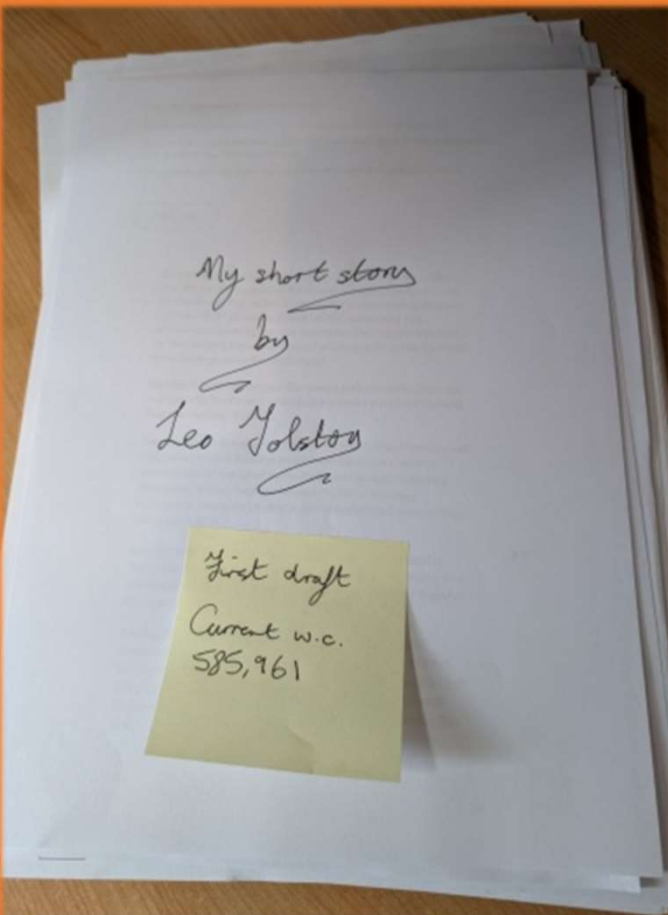
Six of the Best Short Story Competitions

By Steve Barley

Steve has given us a list of the best places to send your stories when VW don't have a competition on!

Have you got more creativity on tap than Fred Astaire? Do you like working to deadlines as immovable as your parents' opinions on...well everything? Want to know if your writing ability is finely crafted like a good ale or still at the student homebrew stage? Then why not enter a short story competition to find out?

The benefits of these literary talent shows are multifarious and go way beyond the bragging rights of being skilled and lucky enough to be long/shortlisted, placed or even the overall winner.



Firstly, it allows me to use the word *multifarious* which sounds pretty cool in anyone's dictionary. Secondly, writing short stories, especially to a brief, encourages you to write something outside your usual genre, which can be hugely rewarding as well as great fun. Thirdly, they force you to tighten your descriptive prose and plot progression in order to limbo your way under that strict maximum word count. Fourthly, they're relatively quick to write and can get the creative juices flowing again should you be suffering from writers' block on page 1300 of your first novel – I'm convinced it helped Tolstoy.

For those of you tempted to have a go, your first port of call has to be one of the many and varied short story competitions set throughout the year right here at Verulam Writers. Examples include the David Gibson Cup, the President's Competition aptly named after its key judge, the Crystal Decanter, and Howard Linskey's ever-popular crime writing competition. The pool of writers may be limited to our membership, however the standard is always high, so placing or winning is a true achievement, and doing that in front of your friends and writing colleagues makes it even more fulfilling.

Six of the Best Short Story Competitions, page 2

If you want broader acclaim, or are prize-money motivated, look no further afield than the UK as we have more short story competitions than repeated letters in Missisi...Misissipp...Missisip... Tennessee! If you have a short (story) attention span, I've found six of the best which, in my opinion, are well worth your literary consideration. Two may have closed already, but as they're highly prestigious you need to plan ahead for when they roll around next year. Here is the full list:

Six of the Best Annual Short Story Competitions

Title	Deadline	Description
1 Bristol Short Story Prize bssp.blogs.bristol.ac.uk	January	4000 words, any theme, £12 entry (some free entries with T&Cs), £1000 top prize, run by the University of Bristol
2 Writers & Artists' Short Story Competition www.writersandartists.co.uk/competitions	February	2000 words, themed, free entry, top prize is an Arvon residential week-long retreat worth £850
3 Bridport Prize - Short Story www.bridportprize.org.uk/the-competition/short-story	May	5000 words, any theme, £14 entry, £5000 top prize, £3500 in other prizes, they have flash fiction and poetry competitions too
4 The Aurora Prize For Writing writingeastmidlands.co.uk/for-writers/aurora-prize-for-writing	August	2000 words, any theme, £9 entry, £500 top prize with Literary Agency review on work of your choice, run in partnership with The Society of Authors
5 Hammond House Literary Prize Short Story Category www.hammondhouse.org.uk	September	3000 words, themed, £10 entry, £3000 in cash prizes and televised awards ceremony
6 The Bedford Competition bedfordwritingcompetition.co.uk	October	3000 words, any subject, £8.50 entry, £1500 for 1st place, extra prize for Bedford residents

All I can say now is plan ahead, pick one that is suitable and have a go, or apply to more than one. You've got nothing to lose, apart from the occasional entry fee, but if you win...

And remember, no one is judging you if you don't enter.

Steve



The Multi-Disciplinary Writing Workshop

And the story that resulted from it

By Robert Paterson

On the night of Wednesday 4th February, I took charge of a rather special workshop. Instead of developing any one skill in our members, like Tina's workshop, it allowed them to practice multiple writing talents in the course of an evening while group writing a brand-new ghost story with some thrilling twists.

Visiting members were split into 3 groups, each sat at their own table. The order of challenges presented to them was determined by a di throw. An **EASY** challenge simply involved filling in the blanks as your team saw fit. A **MEDIUM** challenge involved editing or writing short phrases or sentences. A **DIFFICULT** challenge required teams to do freeform writing; as much as they had time for.

The 3 sets of challenges ran as follows.

DESCRIBE A CHARACTER'S APPEARANCE

ADD DIALOGUE

ADD VERBS

ADD ADJECTIVES

CREATE A MONSTER

ADD SIMILE AND METAPHOR

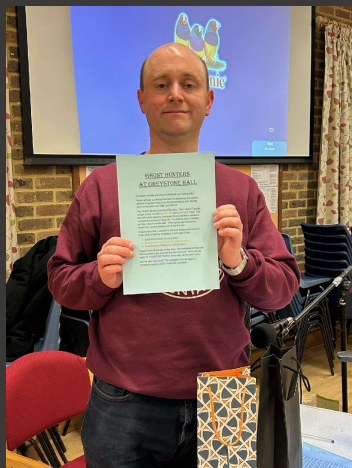
CREATE A FLASHBACK SCENE

REDUCE THE NARRATIVE

ADD EMOTIVE WORDS

And finally, attending members got to vote on 5 possible choices of how to end the shared story! Exactly what will happen shall be revealed in a future edition.

Although members were unsure at first, the 7.5- or 10-minute time limit no doubt adding to the tension, I was delighted how admirably they rose to the challenge. Their dedication was palpable. At the start of the evening, we had a haunted house story full of blanks. By the end of the evening, we had a virtually completed story. We even laughed more than you would have expected given the subject of the story! And that story will be printed in Veracity throughout 2025.



Turn the page and you can read part 1. But I recommend keeping the light on as you do so...

Robert

VERACITY

GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL PART 1: THE ARRIVAL OF THE FOUR

*On the eve of my passing, by full moon's light,
My bane's kin shall come in the dead of night.
For this cursed descendant a path shall appear,
One of murderous peril and darkest fear.
At its end, through the kinsman with moon's name gifted,
My soul shall be calmed and the curse ever lifted.*

These cryptic words were what had drawn Simone Greystone back to her ancestral home; the crumbling, lonely clifftop ruin that was Greystone Hall.

Simone felt her stomach tighten as she looked up at the house, from shame as well as fear. The haunting of this house was her own ancestor's doing.

"Are you quite sure you want to do this?" Felicity Merriwether, asked Simone.

It had been Felicity, an experienced medium and old family friend, who had found the cryptic poem while sorting out some old family memoirs. She had presented it to Simone, who thus proposed tonight's quest.

"I have to," Simone sighed. "Tonight is both a full moon and the anniversary of Lady Cynthia's death. It could be decades before the chance presents itself again."

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL PART 1, PAGE 2

"Ugh, I can-not get a decent signal here!" Simone's cousin Diana snorted. "My followers would so love a livestream of a trip through a real haunted house!"

"Remind me why we're bringing her?" Felicity hissed to Simone.

"Felicity, she's the key to the whole affair!" Simone protested. "The goddess Diana represents the moon. None of my other living relatives have a name that fit the words of the poem. I might equally well ask what use he might be."

She looked over at Felicity's gangly nephew Gus, who was rocking back and forth on his heels, wheezing nervously with a bizarre false smile on his face.

"Conan the Barbarian he's not," Felicity rumbled, "But Gus has a mind like a computer. He can solve puzzles in a blink which would take other people hours. What's more, he's loyal, and that's hardly a trait many Greystones can be proud of!"

Simone looked back at Felicity with blazing eyes, but released her pent-up breath wearily. It was pointless to start a fight.

"Let's see if I'm the exception. Gus, Diana, brace yourselves. We're going in."

With hearts pounding madly, they made their way over the yellow clumps of moorland sedge towards the ominous black door of Greystone Hall.

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL PART 1, PAGE 3

It took some effort to open the door, but once inside Simone and her companions found themselves in a once grand entrance hall, its wide marble staircase festooned with dust-choked cobwebs.

"Aw, look at that," Gus crooned in his strange croaky voice.

Simone swung her torch around to follow his gaze. Above the top of the staircase hung a large oil painting.

It was a full-length portrait of a woman in eighteenth century clothing seated next to a table on which lay fading yellow roses. The Greystone coat of arms was vaguely visible in the background behind her. Looking closer, Simone could just make out boots under her skirts, scuffed in places that matched marks on the table.

The woman's loose blond hair was streaked with grey. Pretty as she was, the woman's bony features recalled a consumptive death mask behind her countenance. She looked mournfully down at a deer which had placed its head in her lap, stroking it with her left hand while her mellow eyes reflected the deer's own soft expression. Her right hand clutched her purse, which seemed thin and empty, as if all the money within was spent. The overall effect was sweet, but melancholy.

"That's the lady who started it all," Simone said heavily, "Cynthia Lovejoy. More than 200 years ago, my ancestor Lord Edwin Greystone led her on and proposed to her before falling for a marquis's daughter instead. Devastated, Cynthia fled into the family vault under Greystone Manor and had swallowed poison, cursing the house with her dying breaths. My ancestors abandoned Greystone Hall and anyone who's returned since has run homeward in blind terror."

Simone reached into her backpack for a large, rolled up sheet of paper. The rustling of it hid what she muttered under her breath.

"If they returned at all."

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL PART 1, PAGE 4

Simone's sheet of paper was a map of Greystone Hall that she had copied off historical documents her Uncle Neville had kept in his attic.

"The best route to the family vault is to the left, through the library," she told her companions. "Follow me."

They heaved open the door to the left and there, sure enough, was the library. This too was dusty and cobwebbed, and silvery moonlight shone through the holes in the patchy curtains. The crumbling shelves held only a handful of books now, along with a few ornaments like globes and candlesticks.

"Is this safe?" Felicity asked Simone nervously.

"You tell me," snapped Simone, as she shone her torch around. "You're the one who sees ghosts."

"Oh cool. These are organised in triple reverse Dewey Decimal," enthused Gus, as he examined the shelves.

"God, you're *such* a nerd," sighed Diana flippantly.

Thankfully, she didn't get the chance to say any more. A sharp gasp from Simone had drawn everyone's attention.

"The map!" Simone shrieked. "It's changing! But how? Why?"

Sure enough, the map of Greystone Hall was moving before their eyes. Lines demarking walls were fading away, while fresh ones emerged into the paper and others fluttered back and forth like twigs caught in a strong wind.

"The wall!" howled Gus.

To the party's horror, the outside wall of the library was now creeping towards them, shrinking the room inch by inch!

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL PART 1, PAGE 5

With speed and courage none of them would have guessed of him, Gus lurched forward and seized the handle of the door they had come in from. He pushed and shoved with all his strength, but it was futile. The same supernatural force that was shrinking the room had now sealed the door as well.

"Gus, it's too late!" Felicity cried shrilly. "Come away!"

Just as the wall reached the hinges of the door and closed it completely, Gus fell back into the arms of his aunt. As he did so, the window and curtain merged into the wall around them, almost like paints blending. There was now no light except for Simone's torch. And the wall was still advancing!

"Oh my god! We're going to be crushed!" screamed Felicity.

"Balls! This one's jammed too!" Diana snarled, as she tugged at the door on the opposing wall. "Hey, what the..."

Before her surprised eyes, the door handle melted away in front of her. Instead of the one large black door, four smaller ones now morphed into being. Each had a large brass letter adorned on it; A, D, F and S.

"Look at the map!" To the others' surprise, Simone was smiling as she called this out. "There are now corridors leading into the house behind each door."

"And those are our initials," said Gus.

"I think we each have to take a door," breathed Simone.

NEXT TIME: CORRIDORS OF FEAR!

Mischievous Christmas Elf

Joan Crooks and Steve Seaton's winning entry for the Christmas poetry competition

The grownups, loud with party banter do not hear the noise, as Santa
Nearby in his sack he delves for gifts to be sorted by his elves.

One naughty elf soon strokes his chin and with eyes lit up and a cheeky grin
Starts switching presents on the table, magic'ly swapping every label!

It's present time on Christmas Day. The family's in disarray!

Each gift arrives for the wrong person...as if some witch has put a curse on!
Mum sees the mess and cries "Let's swap." But Grandad starts to have a strop;
"Oi! Hands off my building bricks"; while Ben yells "Wicked! - walking
sticks";

Worse, amidst the hullabaloo Gran snaps "I'll keep this make-up, too!
I'll be young again - it'll make me pretty!"; Aunt sniffs: "You're worse than
Walter Mitty;"

Dad, as wise as Aristotle tries to grab young Sammy's bottle
too late - already plastered! Mum claps her brow: "That little rascal."

Santa heard what had transpired, so sacked the elf: "Ho Ho - you're fired!"
The moral then of what's here told: *the aged want youth, the young to be old.*

**You'll also be able to read some of Joan and Steve's tips on co-writing
in the summer edition!**

Miss Smilla's Feeling For Snow

By Peter Høeg; Translated from the Danish by F. David

A review by Judith Foster

Published in Denmark 1992, published in Great Britain 1993

This story told by a Greenlander, alienated from her culture and irrecoverably angry in her mainland exile, is a detective story, thriller and adventure on snowfield and sea. It is also a plea for cultural respect by its heroine, who lives on the knife-edge between intensely detailed reality and her fear and depression. She is intelligent and knowledgeable, cynical and lonely.

One day, shocked and puzzled by the death of a child who was fond of her, she decides to look for what lies behind his death. Within the large cast of characters, she has a unique point of view and purpose. Anyone she meets may become an enemy. She moves among them, certain only of her intelligence, detailing her endless lists of books and snow-gear, knowledge of medicine, chemistry and biology. Above all, she knows about snow and ice, the culture and climate of Greenland and the northern seas. Her physical, almost magnetic relationship with the land derives from her Greenland childhood. The reader shares with her both interior and exterior space as she measures stride by stride the ship carrying her back there.

It is a story of torture and violence. Perpetrator and victim of both, she is constantly under threat. There is also physical love, and a love story folded deep inside the darkness. The writing is hard as basalt and as full of fear as a pomegranate of seeds. There are fantastical dreams and myths, and pleasurable memories of childhood, in the uniquely adapted culture of Greenland. Smilla is witty, making wry jokes about being friends with your toaster, but never funny. The book commands the reader's total concentration.

Smilla herself? She walks the line between friends and enemies, any one of whom, at any moment, might cross that line to the other side. She is always intensely emotional within her self-control, fear and loneliness. A fastidious, pernickety and nasty woman, inside whom there is a better person crying to get out. You are always on her side. With her huge resourcefulness, in the end, she wins because she knows more than anyone else.

Her destructive cynicism about Denmark, Europe and politics in general comes across as the author's own prejudices. I have read other works by him. None of them were as good as this book.

What We're Reading (and What We Think!)

Tina Shaw is reading... **Shakespeare, The Man Who Pays the Rent** by Dame Judi Dench

This is not my usual genre but was in the parcel I picked up at the Xmas Book Swap. It is Judi Dench's take on various characters in different plays, as well as reports of amusing anecdotes that have taken place during her career. Knowledge of the plays makes it more meaningful, so I am having to make an effort to finish it, but I think it will be worth the effort.

Steve Barley is reading... **Shogun** by James Clavell

The first TV series based on this novel came out in 1980 and inspired me to buy the book, I loved it. A new TV series in 2024 triggered the same response. Over forty years ago, its story opened my eyes, and those of millions of other readers, to exotic far-eastern settings and the cultural and religious chasm between feudal Japan and the colonialistic European powers during the 1700s. It gave us samurai and ninjas, honour and bloodshed. It's as powerful a read today as it was for me back then.

Anne Ellis is reading... **The Victorian Murder Mysteries** by Gyles Brandreth

I'm currently reading book #1, having read book #2 on a 99p deal, and I'm quite enjoying it. Which is odd, as I normally hate books with real people inserted into fictional narratives - I find it impossible to suspend disbelief - and these centre on a whole bunch of real people. The main character is Oscar Wilde, acting as a very Sherlockian detective, and the narrator his real-life friend and biographer Robert Sherard. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, E.W. Hornung and the Marquess of Queensberry also feature, among many others. I'm not sure why I'm giving these books a pass. Maybe it's because the author appears to know his subjects rather well? Or maybe it's because Oscar Wilde was such a larger-than-life character the reader could readily believe six impossible things about him before breakfast.

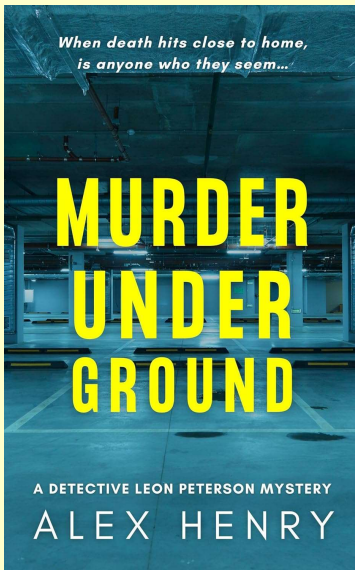
Sam Ellis is reading... **Eighteen** by Alice Loxton

Each of the 18 chapters focusses on a person from history during their eighteenth year. At least, that's the idea. The reality is that their eighteenth year is a bit of a passing mention in order to talk about their life as a whole. What I particularly like is that it's not just your Elizabeth I's, your Nelson's and your Brunel's (though they are included), but also lesser-known figures get a look in too, like Jacques Francis (a salvage diver on the Mary Rose) and Jeffrey Hudson (a favourite in the court of James I who was captured and enslaved in Africa for 25 years), as well as modern figures including Vivienne Westwood and Richard Burton. Really interesting stuff.

All-in-all, don't expect any deep analysis, but it's a fun concept that's well-executed. If you know someone in their teens who's interested in history, then definitely buy this book.

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Publicity



Verulam Writers treasurer Anne Ellis has a new co-written book out!

The **DI Leon Peterson Mysteries** are a joint venture between JL Merrow (Anne), Sue Brown and Ripley Hayes, and we're very excited to announce that the second book, *Murder Under Ground*, is now out in paperback and on Kindle!

When death hits close to home, is anyone who they seem?

DI Leon Peterson's Christmas at home is interrupted by the discovery of a body practically on the police station doorstep—but who would brutally stab Paul Easton, a popular youth worker, in the station's underground car park, and why would suspicion fall on DS Jasmine Todd?

As they work over Christmas and New Year, Leon is forced to bring in other detectives, not all of them welcome additions. They soon realise there's more to Paul Easton and his life than meets the eye. Conflicts within the team extend both on a personal level and how they view the suspects. No one appears to be who they seem.

For Leon, this case hits home in more ways than one. Yet again he revisits his past as they hunt for Paul Easton's killer.

Meanwhile, he has his own decisions to make regarding his future in the force.

Buy link:

<https://books2read.com/murderunderground>

Current Competition

President's Competition 2025

Theme: Print the Legend.

Tell a story based on a legend from somewhere in the world. Legends are presented as fact, so don't just give the reader style and originality. Try and convince them it's real!

Word limit: 1500

Entry fee: £3

Deadline: Wednesday 26th February

Address if you can't attend the meeting: Ben Burgonzi, 53 Beechwood Close, Little Chalfont, HP6 6QU

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Verulam Writers 2024 Competition Winners

FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	GNOME
David Gibson Cup Topic: Something in the Water (set by Suzanne Stanton) Adjudication Date: 2 nd October 2024			
David Weaver	Only one winner, I'm afraid!		Alex Craig (aka Kirsten Swore)
Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition Topic: A Historic Moment (set by Judith Foster) Adjudication Date: 4 th December 2024			
Mike Spurgeon	Nargis Walker	Ben Burgonzi	Ben Burgonzi (aka May B. Troo)
President's Competition Topic: Impersonation (last year's theme; set by Judith Foster) Adjudication Date: 20 th March 2024			
Ben Bergonzi	Tina Shaw	Mike Spurgeon	Cecile Keen (aka Noah Lott)
Crystal Decanter Competition Topic: Star (set by Barbara Billington) Adjudication Date: 1 st May 2024			
Philip Mitchell	Dave Weaver	Tina Shaw	Philip Mitchell (aka Ian Ter-Stella)
Howard Linskey Competition Topic: Crime Adjudication Date: 19 th June 2024			
Cecile Keen	Anne Ellis	Steve Seaton and Joan Crooks	Steve and Joan again (aka Penny Forum)

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Information Resources and Contact



The VW Website www.verulamwriters.org

Contains information about our upcoming meetings, competitions, events, etc.

This newsletter may be found there too!

verulamwritersevents@hotmail.co.uk Here you can register your interest for **volunteering at events** and submit a piece to our website's **Writing by our Members** section. We will post it for you. One piece per member.

VWPublicity@gmail.com For any **events you know of** and would like publicised.

VWVeracityEditor@gmail.com For **articles for this newsletter** and any **feedback** for the editor. Send them anytime; no need for me to request them.

Members' Forum This section of the website is for members' **discussions on writing, sharing work** for feedback and **making suggestions** about the Writing Group. Any member with an e-mail address and paid-up membership can join. We'll need to check your membership and validate your account afterwards, but that's a mere technicality and should take us two days maximum!

Venue Address St Stephen's Church Hall, 1 Watling Street, St Albans, Herts., AL1 2PT. We meet at 8PM on the first, third and, if possible, fifth Wednesday of every month except August. Check the website just in case, because the church sometimes has to allocate us different evenings.

The editor would like to thank all of the contributors to this edition,
and all editions of VERACITY.

Our next meeting will be on
Wednesday 26th February at **St
Stephen's Church Hall.**

For more details please visit
<https://www.verulamwriters.org/>

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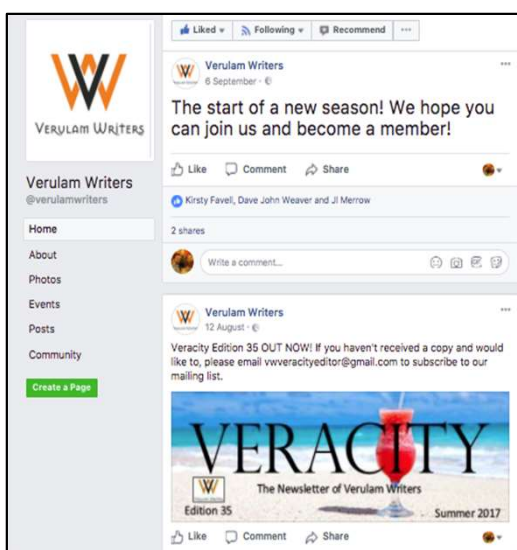
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Feel free to visit either of Verulam Writers' social media pages, where you can do any of the following.

- **Share writing-related news, such as an event or publication of an interesting article or book.**
- **Share links to websites that could be a good resource for other writers.**
- **Share a great quote.**
- **Find out more about the Verulam Writers.**



Please do use these pages as VW members. Just keep the posts writing-related and don't feed the trolls!