

VERACITY

The Magazine from Verulam Writers



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VW CHAIR PUBLISHES DEBUT NOVEL



The Chair of Verulam Writers, Phillip Mitchell, is releasing his debut novel *Under the Moss*.

In an interview with *Veracity* (page 6) Phil describes *Under the Moss* as ‘a contemporary novel following the relationship between enigmatic Sophie and troubled Ben.’ Ben finds solace with Sophie, but Sophie has a disturbing secret that develops into an obsession with moss.

Phil says ‘Hopefully, readers find it a little dark, a little funny, and a little bit weird, but very readable. When writing it, my hope was that people would describe it as, “that strange little book about a girl obsessed with moss.”’

This time in VERACITY...

- Steve writes a **blank page**...
- Yvonne does her **research**...
- Something smells strange in **Anne’s story**...
- Judith on the **Verulam Writers’ Block**...

Available on 10th May as a paperback and eBook, *Under the Moss* is published under pen name Steven Mitchell by SRL Publishing, the world’s first climate-positive publisher where for every copy sold a tree is planted or a contribution is made to planting or forest preservation. Copies will be available to buy at upcoming Verulam Writers meetings, and are also available here: <https://srlpublishing.co.uk/product/under-the-moss-steven-mitchell>

From the Editor...

Hello and welcome to another edition of VERACITY – the newsletter by Verulam Writers about all things writing.

Spring is a great time of year – personally I've used this time to clean the house, tidy the garden, dust off the summer wardrobe in anticipation, and generally press the reset button on life (slightly hampered by a fortnight of COVID). I also think it's a great time to press the rest button on writing too, and I hope that this edition of *Veracity* will give you ample inspiration to do so.

In this edition you'll find some fabulous articles including Phil's on confidence, Robert's reporting on our visit by astronomer Stuart Clark, and Steve Barley on how to fill the blank page. Also please find further details of our upcoming anthology, *Bloody St Albans*, in this edition.

Finally, huge congratulations to our Chair, Phil, who's debut novel is publishing very soon. *Under the Moss* is a brilliant read, so get your copy now.

Sam Ellis, Editor

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From the Chair...

Chairman of Verulam Writers Phillip Mitchell.

We've done some exciting things at Verulam Writers recently.

To help our meetings become more accessible to all, we've moved to the upstairs room of the hall, which has step-free access. And we've invested in a projector and document camera so those who find it a little harder to hear can read along with the writer speaking. These are big changes to the way we've done things for a while and it's great how members have supported the changes. There are always ways we can improve further, so please let the committee know if there's anything else we should consider to make our group more inclusive.

A few weeks ago, we put out a call out to members for stories for our planned anthology, *Bloody St Albans*, crime stories from dark and deadly Hertfordshire. I encourage all members to submit something for consideration. Excitingly, we've enticed some big-name crime writers from the local area to include some of their stories in the collection. We'll reveal more details of these writers at a later date. We plan to publish as an eBook and printed book to sell in local stockists with money split between Verulam Writers and a local charity. Further details on the writing requirements for submissions can be found further on in Veracity.

One of my highlights of the year so far was our talk from astronomer and writer, Stuart Clark. He gave great writing advice, illustrated with some fascinating examples of his work. He finished the talk with a piece describing a time he stood in the Atacama Desert and gazed at the countless stars, more than he'd ever seen. It really stuck in my mind. Recently, we had a power cut in St Albans, and similarly I found myself in my dark garden staring at the night sky. Despite the moon being bright that night, I'd never seen so many stars above St Albans. It was beautiful. And then the electricity came back on, and I was glad I could make a cup of tea. But my reason for mentioning this is one of our members recommended Stuart as a speaker. So, if there's a speaker you'd like us to approach to come and talk to us, just let us know and we'll see what we can do. Likewise, if there are any topics for workshops you want us to arrange, perhaps there's a particular aspect of writing you're struggling with or something you want to dive deeper into, just let us know.

Take care and see you at a meeting soon.

Phil

Chair of Verulam Writers

VW - Cheap at the Price?

Tina Shaw looks back on her time at VW so far.

Why become a member of Verulam Writers? What does it offer? What has it done for me in the 10+ years I have been a member?

It is always hard to analyse one's motives for joining a group. Most actions are motivated on more than one level. Deep down, perhaps I hoped that some of other people's successes would rub off on me and that novel would finally be published. I would be inspired into new creativity and soak up new ideas and techniques. The range of speakers who have addressed the group over the years have certainly been a potential source of inspiration. In reality, their biggest contribution to my work has been to remind me of 'the lucky break', combined with persistence in not being put off by rejection after rejection. Some of the speakers have also offered some useful technical advice on subjects such as self-publishing and blogging about which I have very limited knowledge. Whilst most things can be found on the internet, it is easier to absorb from a human being.



A recent VW meeting.

Listening to other people's work and to the critique of their work, is always interesting. Hearing different styles and different twists to short stories can only enhance my own work. Some of the genres do not appeal to me and sometimes I disagree with the comments made by fellow members, which is to be expected. I am not a fan of sci-fi or fantasy but it is probably educational for me to be exposed to these genres occasionally. Understanding my dislike of certain genres and styles has helped me to realise my writing strengths.

The biggest gain for me from belonging to VW has been the competitions. When, as at present, my motivation to write is at a low ebb, entering a competition has continued to be irresistible. The occasional success obviously helps but the possibility of winning remains sufficient spur to my taking part. When, as most often I don't win, I console myself with wondering why the judges chose one or other of the winners, which would not have been top of my list.

Membership of VW offers the opportunity to make the acquaintance of likeminded people with an interest in creative writing. I could join a U3a group but the fact that VW is quite diverse in terms of age range and gender creates a broader perspective. We would, however, all benefit from a wider ethnic membership which could offer different views of the world. Now at least we are able to accommodate people with mobility issues, which will give us another potential perspective.

We have been fortunate in attracting several new members to the group this year. It has been refreshing to hear their work read out. Long may it continue.

BLOODY ST ALBANS



CRIME STORIES FROM DARK AND DEADLY HERTFORDSHIRE

What is Bloody St Albans?

Verulam Writers is putting together an anthology of short crime stories to be released as a paperback and eBook. The collection will showcase the work of VW members, and we'll aim to sell it in local stockists and online. Profits will go into VW funds for future activities and possibly a local charity (TBC).

We'll launch the book by the end of October 2022, ready for St Albans residents to buy as the perfect Christmas gift. We'll also have a boozy launch party.

What are we looking for?

Fictional short stories 4000 words maximum.

The stories should feature St Albans or the surrounding areas. For example, your characters could live in St Albans or be visitors. You could use local landmarks as your setting or use local historical figures as characters.

Crime is a wide genre, so your story can be funny, creepy, thrilling or anything in between—we want a varied range of stories. The only stipulation is that a crime must feature in the story. And, despite the title of the anthology, your crime doesn't have to be bloody.

Please keep the language relatively clean (the book is designed for adults, but gratuitous swearing should be avoided) and try to not make any criminal acts too graphic.

When's the deadline?

30th June 2022.

What do I do when I've finished my story?

Please email a double-spaced Times New Roman size 12 font Word document to phillipmitchell1@hotmail.com

If accepted, the editors will correct any glaring errors and may come back to you with suggestions to make the story as good as it can be.

The BIG Interview

Phil Mitchell on his debut novel *Under the Moss*.

Your debut novel, *Under the Moss*, is being published soon. How does it feel to have your first novel published?

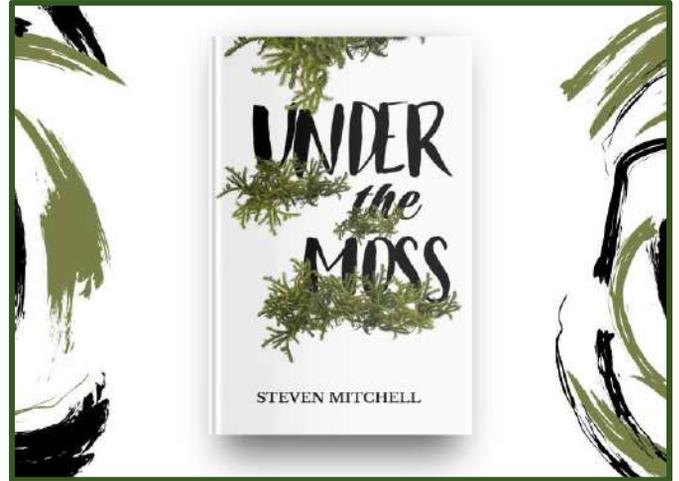
It feels a bit weird, to be honest. When you put so much work into something so intimate, where you've put all those odd, little thoughts in your head down on a page, it's strange to then have it printed in a book for anyone to read. When I got my proof copy, I just kept turning it over in my hands thinking, "It's real. It's real!" It's exciting, and I'm lucky to have found a small press who believes in the book, wants to invest in it, and put it out there. I'm excited for people to read it.

***Under the Moss* - what's it about?**

It's a contemporary novel following the relationship between enigmatic Sophie and troubled Ben. They begin a whirlwind romance, but Ben soon discovers Sophie is hiding something. She won't talk about her past, and secretly visits a man's grave. But Ben has a secret of his own. He's embarrassed about a psychotic episode he experienced while at university, and fearing further mental illness, he struggles to form any sort of relationship with people. Sophie is the first person he's connected with.

One day, Sophie brings home moss she's collected from the grave and soon begins an obsession with moss. Her behaviour becomes erratic, damaging her relationship with Ben, and she eventually becomes ill. Ben tries to help, but when Sophie reveals the secret behind her moss obsession, it breaks their life apart.

Hopefully, readers find it a little dark, a little funny, and a little bit weird, but very readable. When writing it, my hope was that people would describe it as, 'that strange little book about a girl obsessed with moss.'



Is it fair to say that *Under the Moss* is a love story?

On the face of it, it's a pretty one-sided love story. Sophie's actions suggest she's in love, but she never says it to Ben. And the reader might struggle to see why she would love him. She's enigmatic and beautiful, and Ben just isn't. He's very ordinary, perhaps dull in comparison. Ben just wants someone to love, someone to be with, to not be so lonely. He'll forgive Sophie almost anything to be with her. We learn late in the book what lies beneath Sophie's moss obsession and why she's really with Ben, and it breaks his heart. But she's coming from a place of love. It's definitely not a romance novel. There's no happily ever after, although there's hope at the end.

Where did you draw your inspiration from?

The spark of the idea came from when my partner's mum was choosing her name for a new puppy. She said, "I really like Moss." It set my brain whirring. I couldn't shake thoughts of what would happen if someone really, really liked moss. I started seeing moss everywhere. And soon after wrote a short story about a woman who loves moss so much, she starts eating it. It's

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not my best story, but the ideas in it wouldn't let go of me, and when I decided to write a novel, something inside me insisted it be about a moss obsession. The story grew as I explored reasons someone would be obsessed by moss.

I drew a lot of the novel from my own experience. Many first novels include a lot of autobiographical stuff. All my previous relationships have provided inspiration, and I shouldn't admit it, but there's probably more of me in Sophie's character than Ben's. Also, I knew some troubled people when I was younger. All of that experience went in the mixing bowl and came out as *Under the Moss*.



***Under the Moss's* subject matter is thought-provoking in that it looks very closely at obsession. Did you find it hard to write on a subject that can be disturbing?**

I took the easy way out to some extent in that I wrote the book from the point of view of someone living with the person who's obsessed rather than in the head of the one obsessing. The other way round would be a very different book, and one I might write one day. I think we all get a little obsessed by things occasionally, so it was a matter of finding those feelings and amplifying them. Everyone knows someone who has taken on a hobby which has escalated quickly. They start off with a cheap set of golf clubs and in a month, they're spending thousands on a putter and the exact same shoes worn by Tiger Woods. The things Sophie does in the novel are pretty

wild and escalate so they're damaging to both her and Ben. She gets completely lost in moss because there's a vacuum in her she needs to fill. But I hope readers see some humour in Sophie's actions, although she's actually someone really struggling with grief.

Did you have many difficulties with the writing process?

I didn't write moss linearly. I jotted scenes in my notebook as they came to me. They might be a page long or a chapter length, and once I'd typed them up, I spent ages piecing everything together like a jigsaw and filling in gaps in the story line to glue everything together. Sometimes I got a bit stuck on how things fitted together, but then an idea would suddenly come to me out of nowhere. There are loads of sections that got edited out. There was a character I really liked who I had to cut—he was funny but wasn't needed for the story. I don't think I'll ever feel the novel is finished—I think there'd always be things I'd change, but I have to let it go and move onto the next thing. When I started on *Under the Moss*, I was still learning to write, and it helped me get better. I'm still learning now. All writers continually learn and improve the more they write. It never stops.



What was the most joyous part of the process for you?

I remember having pieced the novel together and deciding to type The End. It was a great

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feeling, like a massive weight lifting off my shoulders—a real achievement. But then I did probably eight or nine more drafts. When I found a publisher who really got the book and got me, that was a great feeling too.

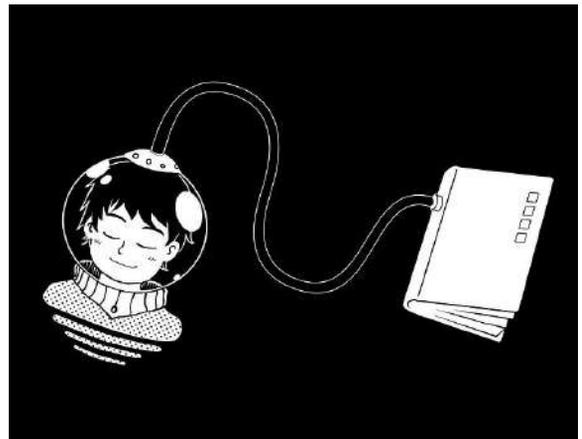
What was your writing journey to get you to this point?

I always enjoyed writing at school and really wanted to do English at A-levels, but my teacher convinced me to do all science A-levels by saying, “You can write about science and be a science journalist.” Needless to say, I’m not a science journalist. But Science has been good to me. I’ve got a great career and it takes me all around the world. When I moved to St Albans in 2015, I began writing seriously. I had lost my creative outlet of playing in a band, which had been a big part of my life. I’d always said I’d like to write, but I just needed a push. My partner convinced me to join a beginner’s creative writing class at Oakland College and I loved it. Former VW chair, Nick Cook, led it. After that, I did his intermediate class. And if there had been an advanced one, I would have taken that too. But I



did join Verulam Writers with some of my course mates, and although it was very scary that first time walking into a room of experienced writers, it gave me a community and licence to call myself a writer. I entered some competitions and started winning prizes. That really pushed me to write more. Feeling I’d come to writing later in life than I should have, I

wanted to get better at writing and better quickly, so very quietly, not telling many people at all, I started an MA in Creative Writing with the Open University and graduated with a distinction. I wrote a lot of *Under the Moss* as part of my MA and I got useful feedback from tutors and course mates to improve the novel. Now I’ve got my first novel out of the way, I want to crack on with the next. I might self-publish some of my short stories too if I ever get round to it.



How has being both a member and Chair of VW helped you along on the journey?

Being a member of VW has been enormously helpful. It’s provided a community of like-minded people. I’m always nervous about telling people I write because it feels pretentious to call myself a writer. Growing up, no one I knew was a writer—amateur or professional. No one read seriously and talked about books. Being a writer was on par with being an astronaut. It was so unachievable. But being with VW makes me feel like a writer and proud to be a writer. It’s an enormous honour to be Chair of the group. I still keep it relatively quiet that I write—I don’t broadcast it to everyone, but I need to shout about it more if I want my novel to sell to as many people as possible.

VW has also helped my writing journey because forces me to write. The competitions I’ve entered and the *Veracity* articles I’ve written

have given me deadlines. The competition prizes give me something to aim for. And my writing has improved because I get to hear other people's writing and think about what I like about it, or what I don't like, and that makes me think about how I can improve my own work.

What's coming next from your pen?

The bones of novel I'm currently working on was written in 30 days during National Novel Writing Month. I've since been expanding and editing it, but preparing for the launch of *Under the Moss*, and life in general, has slowed the pace of revising it. The new novel is quite different in subject matter to *Under the Moss*, but my style comes through. It's about a family who move to an island nature reserve after a family disaster and become its sole occupants. Set in the late 1980s, it's narrated by the 12-year-old son, so I need to get the voice right. It's much darker than *Under the Moss*. There are elements of folk horror, but some humour too. Ultimately, it's about a family collapsing and a boy's struggle with his role in that breakdown. And there's a big cat stalking them too.



Your pen name is Steven Mitchell. What was the reason behind this name change?

Phil Mitchell is best known as a TV character on BBC's *EastEnders*, and only my partner when I've annoyed her, and my mum call me Phillip, so I

went with my middle name, which also happens to be my dad's first name, so he's telling everyone he's written a novel. Steven's a bit boring, I guess, but I might change it to something like Kurtis Blood when I begin writing gruesome crime thrillers.

Under the Moss - how/when/where can we read it?

It's published as a paperback and eBook via SRL Publishing on 10th May and is available from all good online and physical bookshops. If you buy it directly from the publisher, they'll plant a tree for every copy sold. Even if you buy it elsewhere, the publisher works out how many trees have been sacrificed and contributes to tree planting or forest preservation schemes. They're the world's first climate positive publisher and their sustainability approach helped them to win a 2022 British Book Award for the best small press in the East and South-East of England. If you come to a Verulam Writers meeting, I'll sell you a copy of *Under the Moss* at mate's rates.

Link to SRL Publishing Website:

<https://srlpublishing.co.uk/product/under-the-moss-steven-mitchell>



Researching for Writing



Yvonne Moxley *on researching for writing.*

If I had to choose between research and writing I would find it impossible. I love both in equal measures. I have now done an inordinate amount of research for three non-fiction books and one novel and with hindsight this has been a great learning curve.

My novel has been in progress for years and as it's based on a true story I've had to entertain a certain amount of research, not simply for dates and timelines but also for social aspects of early Victorian life like street food, the treatment of the poor, results of the cholera epidemics, and the life of penny-liners to name a few. The challenge is that when I'm writing my umpteenth draft I have difficulty remembering which ones are the researched facts and which elements are my own creative thoughts. Note to self: type actual facts in red next time so that I can tell the difference a year or so down the line.

Of course, this problem doesn't occur in non-fiction books. Everything is true. Honest. Well... when I say true there are so many different versions of 'true' that it can be difficult to decide which of them is accurate. The internet is obviously the go-to place for research and whilst information on Wikipedia needs to be double-checked there is a plethora of good facts and figures to be found on www.british-history.ac.uk, and www.Britannica.com which features videos as well as articles on myriad subjects. It's surprising what you can learn in only a few minutes on these websites – you never know what you might find.

The best source of information, again to be double-checked depending on the person, is to speak to a specialist on the subject. Admittedly I'm not very good at

approaching strangers but they can be a wonderful source of insider knowledge. Another note to self: take a notebook. No, I really won't remember everything I'm told.

My best source of research, or at the very least my inspiration and motivation, is to take photos. This is my favourite part of the A-Z books I write and as each book requires one hundred of them, I'm in my element. One final note to self: find out which day is bin-collecting day before visiting a town. There is nothing worse than a quaint pebbled street with a row of unsightly wheelies in the way.

I take photos of everything – lots of them. I was once waiting for the scaffolding to be dismantled on the oldest pub in Eton but as this was during lockdown I had a long time to wait. I was writing a chapter on ghosts (yes, a factual one!) and the pub was said to be haunted. I took a photo of the scaffolding – no, I don't know why either. When I downloaded the image I thought I could see a half-hidden ghostly face on the right-hand side of the window. As I said, you never know what you might find.



Stuart Clark Visits Verulam Writers

Robert Paterson reports on a visit by Stuart Clark.

On 19th January, Verulam Writers enjoyed a special talk by a man who I consider to be one of the best visitors we've had. Stuart Clark is an astronomer who was once a lecturer at the University of Hertfordshire. He is also an author of both science fiction and science fact, in the form of novels, articles, screenplays and more. Stuart has been writing since he was in primary school and has found it is a natural progression to go from that to coaching people's writing.

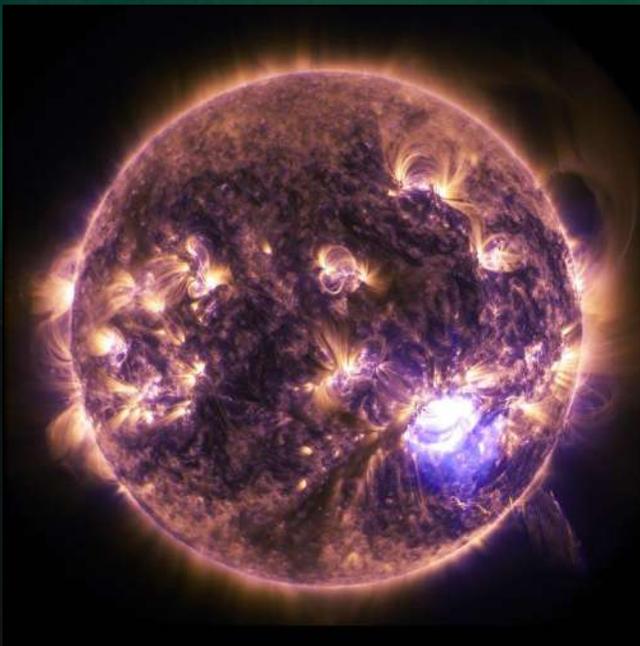
Throughout the evening, Stuart filled us to the brim with advice about how to write satisfying narratives. His mantra is 'All Killer, No Filler', i.e. no superfluous material. When considering work that may be published, go with the flow of the time. Tastes can alter quickly, as Dava Sobel's *Latitude* demonstrated. Her narrative non-fiction was so compelling it dramatically changed the fortunes of authors who could write popular factual narratives.

Great writing should always be compelling to read and Stuart says this can be achieved in two ways. First, locate what it is about perennially popular narratives like folk tales that makes them compelling. How do they begin and end, and how do such things as plot development and the characters make them extraordinary?

Secondly, and most importantly, is that you must consider how to *humanise* your story. How can you make it strongly relatable to people, whoever they may be? He himself has thought about applying this technique to popular science books about light and fungus, neither of which are very human!

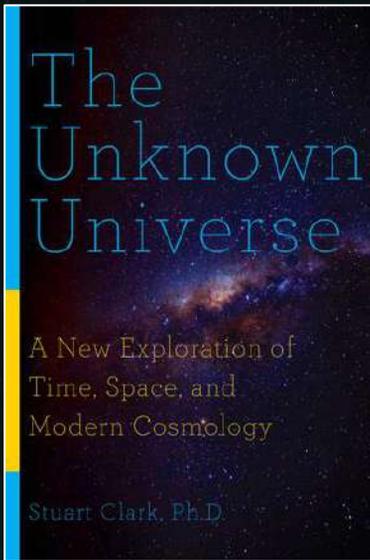


All Killer, No Filler

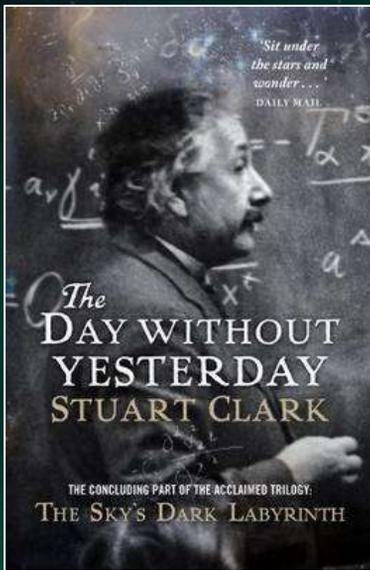


To illustrate his point, Stuart made some readings from his books, such as *The Sun Kings*. This book looks deeply into astronomers who have studied our Sun, including the amateur 19th century Englishman Richard Harrington. He was lucky enough to take photographic images of the Sun during a freak event when the Aurora Borealis and Australis reached right over the Earth. The telegraph network was rendered inoperable by this phenomenon, which Harrington discovered went hand in hand with sun spot activity that defied his imagination. What might a man of his era think of a blazing white eruption of light travelling across the face of the Sun at a colossal 40,000 miles per hour? We can only guess.

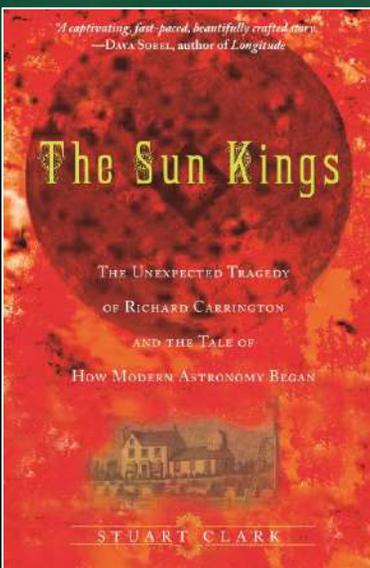
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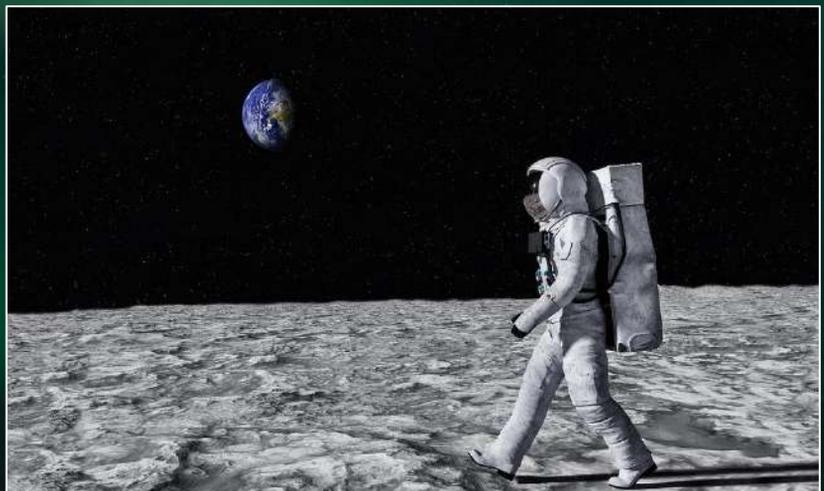
Even more touching was the story of James Irwin and David Scott in *The Unknown Universe*. These men were the astronauts who landed on the Moon with Apollo 15. Their lunar module was equipped with a moon buggy that could travel well away from the lander to search for rocks that were unsullied by the geological processes of Earth. Anorthosites was their name, and Irwin and Scott found just the one they were looking for on the rim of a crater. Beautiful as the pure white rock was, the men took much greater satisfaction from the fact they possessed a rock that could tell scientists how the Solar System may have formed in a way no Earth rock could. James Irwin was so proud of the anorthosite, he carried a replica in his briefcase on lecture tours for many years afterwards.



The most bittersweet reading of all came from *The Day Without Yesterday*, a novel which is primarily fictional, but strongly factual too. It tells the story of Georges Le Metre; a Belgian astronomer and close friend of Albert Einstein. He's relatively unknown, so the book has to be fictional to fill in the gaps of our knowledge about him. Just like astronomers of old like Newton and Galileo, Le Metre saw his devotion to science as a mirror of faith rather than something anathema to it. While calculating trajectories for shells in a First World War artillery regiment, Le Metre had an epiphany. He would dedicate his life to finding order and purpose in life in both the old way and the new. As a result, when the War was over, Le Metre continued to work as a physicist while entering a seminary to train as a Catholic priest. He managed to be a success at both, without sowing conflict in others or within himself. How is this man not world famous?



After a few tips on research and a final brief reading, Stuart bid us farewell. Let us hope he can descend upon us once more in the future, when the stars are in our favour.



The Blank Page (and How to Fill It)

Steve Barley on filling the dreaded blank page.

All writers, no matter how good, bad or cuddly they are, have one thing in common. Can you guess what that is?



No, owning a writing-themed coffee mug isn't the answer, nor is self-doubt. Although, come to think of it, I'm not so sure about that last one. The answer is much simpler, and more upfront.

Every writer's story begins with a blank page.

Our more pedantic friends will no doubt argue, 'Actually, it begins with a lot of blank pages!' and they'd be right – if not our friends for much longer. Yet it is that first blank page that can often cause the greatest grief for writers as their left and right brain lobes fundamentally disagree on the approach needed to fill it.



You see, the creative part of our brain, with its limitless childlike enthusiasm, is the reason we're

facing that empty page in the first place, as it tells us it absolutely must have somewhere to deposit all of its brilliant ideas before it bursts, or worse, forgets them altogether!

However, the fun-sponge, more logical side of our brain keeps yanking on those child restraints as it raises the serious grey matter of, 'What should we use for our killer opening line?' As well as, 'Should we write in past or present tense? In first or third person? Do we reveal things chronologically, or Dr Who-style?' Closely followed in a mental monotone by, 'Should we start in the thick of the action, or provide some sort of context first?'

Before we know it, that blank page is mirroring the look on our faces, and the only thing our brain lobes can agree on is a trip to refill that writer's coffee mug we don't all have. So what can we do to kick-start the writing process such that our friendly word counter doesn't resign in disgust at the end of day one? In no particular order, here are a few tips that might just help you get to page two.



- Try listing the sequence of events in your story in simple bullet points without worrying about detail or writing style. It's surprising how many pages that alone can fill. This skeleton outline can then be fleshed out into your full story one event or scene at a time.

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- We usually have a firm idea of our main character even if the story we're telling about them is more fluid, so why not begin by describing your protagonist's character traits – their look, speech, tastes, motivation, background etc.? What you've written should easily fill a page and can always be weaved into (or edited out of) your story later.

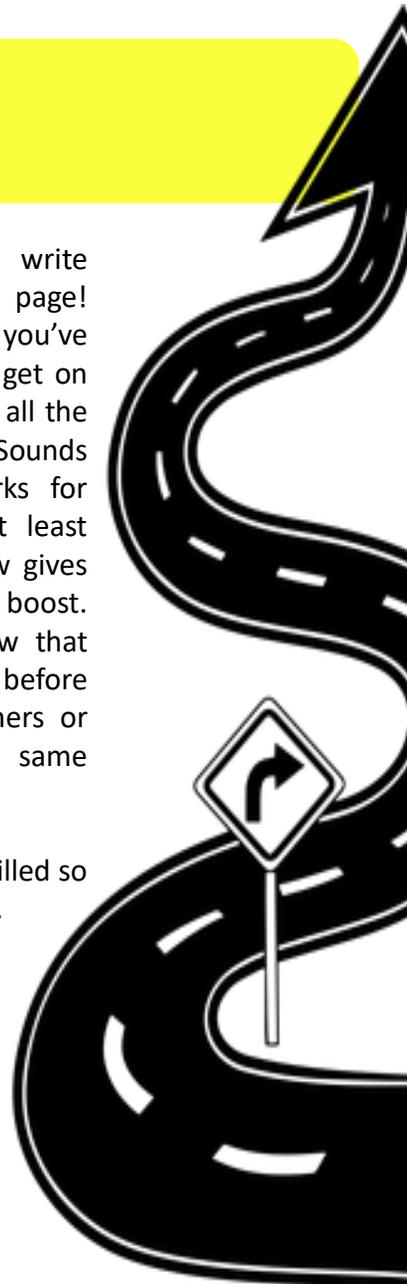
- There's no rule that says you have to start your writing journey at the beginning of your story. Write what you feel most comfortable about first as you can always add your opening scenes later.

- Another reason for approaching your work mid-story is that it is likely to save you wasted time and effort. Why deliberate at length on the perfect opening line or paragraph when the odds are you will replace it anyway? It's natural that the direction and structure of your story alters as you progress through the writing and editing process.

- Every story involves some sort of research e.g. on places, fashions, use of language, scientific techniques, time periods, social attitudes etc.. Pick something relevant to your story and write out key information you unearth that might be useful in your writing. Your resultant scribblings may look a little random, but they are sure to fill a page. An extra bonus is that your research will give you confidence writing about those things you don't necessarily have first-hand experience of.

- Still stuck? Then write gibberish for one page! There, it's filled, you've started and can now get on with page two where all the good stuff happens. Sounds bonkers, but it works for some people and at least your word count now gives you a psychological boost. Don't forget to throw that gibberish in the bin before submitting to publishers or they might do the same with your manuscript.

Well, that's my page filled so my work here is done. Good luck with your blank page!



Public Speaking

Nick Cook on the hot topic of public speaking and why we should all consider it.

Why on earth should I do that?

Sharing your interests, experience and passions with other people is fulfilling, fun and sociable. It can also be another and profitable outlet for your writing skills.

But I haven't a clue how to prepare a talk!

If you are a writer you already have a head-start because you are a storyteller. And whether your talk is about nuclear fusion or newest fashions the key to making it entertaining is storytelling. For example a business talk on how George Eastman founded the once great Eastman Kodak company can be made more human by recounting how he was driven by his fear of poverty to leave school to earn six dollars a week to help support his recently widowed mother. Fear of poverty was to drive his ambition throughout his life.

But I am a rubbish public speaker

No you are not. Everyone has the potential to be a great speaker. There was nothing about Demosthenes to suggest he would become the greatest orator of ancient Greece. A weedy body, poor health and a speech impediment suggested that he was lucky to have enough wealth to make working for a living unnecessary. But then his parents died. The executors stole all his wealth and suddenly he had to become a public speaker to present his case in court. Public speaking under the highest possible pressure.

Necessity had become the mother eloquence. He practised day and night to achieve that eloquence. He practised his speech running up hills to improve his breathing. He practised his speech with a pebble in his mouth to overcome his speech impediment (please don't do this at home. Or if you do use sherbet lemons).

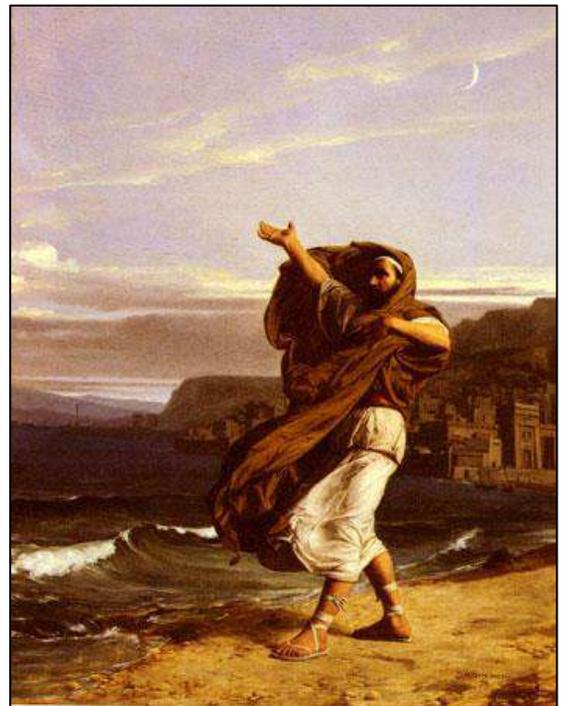
He won his case.

If you want to learn more about preparing and giving talks I recommend *Art of Public Speaking; Lessons from the Greatest Speeches* by John Hale available as DVD or download (<https://www.thegreatcourses.com/>).

But I haven't got anything to talk about!

Actually you have. We spend our lives swimming through a sea of interesting and entertaining things to talk about. You just have to capture them and turn them into spoken words.

One speaker I know collects police constables' helmets (presumably not while they are still wearing them). His audience pass the helmets round as he talks about their history and evolution.



Demosthenes practising his oratory (hopefully not having just swallowed the pebble...).

Another speaker draws on his thirty year police career to give a series of talks on crime from Ruth Ellis to the Bovingdon poisoner.

And yet another gives a highly entertaining and intriguing talk entitled *Cheese is milk's way of achieving immortality* (complete with samples).

As a writer you have a head start when it comes to turning these ideas into entertaining stories.

But what about nerves?

Embrace them. Nerves are your friends. They galvanise you. They give you energy. And once you start speaking they will stick with you, keeping you on your toes and helping your brain stay crystal clear.

Of course like all good friends nerves can sometimes be a little unruly. One of the best ways to keep them in order is good preparation. This gives confidence. And going through the opening remarks in your head before you step up to the podium will help you ignore them.

Should I memorise or read my talk?

Probably neither. Some speakers feel that memorising a talk can lead to wooden delivery, but on the other hand just reading the talk seems to lack spontaneity. So most speakers do something in between.

And to help them do this they use PowerPoint. The slides act as an aide memoire. However, avoid putting actual words on the screen as much as you can. Use pictures instead. Pictures, as the cliché goes, are worth a thousand words. And as well as prompting your memory they will enhance the experience of your audience.

A good tip is to display the slides on a laptop facing you so you do not have to turn your back on the audience to look at the screen behind you. Another tip is to have a written copy of your talk to hand as a safety net even if you don't use it.

So how do I get gigs?

Your best bet is to put details of your talks on a public speakers' web-site. This is usually the first port of call for a speaker secretary looking for speakers to book.

Public Speakers' Corner (<https://www.publicspeakerscorner.co.uk/>) is a good example. For £20/annum you can feature up to five of your talks. Optional contracts are available to give you more prominence.



This is the one I use and find it very good. But there are others. It is well worth having a look at some of them to just to see how different speakers feature their talks.

You mentioned profitable?

I was wondering when you were going to get round to that!

Typically you can make around £50 for a talk lasting about an hour (including ten to fifteen minutes for any questions). On top of this you can charge travel. If you

advertise talks on a speakers' site you need to be very clear about your charges. Speaker secretaries pay great attention to them!

Of course some speakers do charge more than £50 and some less. You need judge for yourself the balance between the money you get for each talk and the number of bookings you are likely to get.

What else do I get out of public speaking?

Clearly you are unlikely to be giving up the day job unless you happen to be a celebrity or a famous and preferably controversial politician.

But you will get something far richer. The world has never been more interesting than it is now. Public speaking will inspire you to study and engage with your interests, passions and causes and best of all you get to share them with a live audience.

Other Points to Consider:

Equipment

Increasingly, venues provide their own equipment. But take your own anyway – just in case.

- **Laptop** – make sure to get the right connectors to attach to your projector.
- **Projector** – go for the brightest you can afford as some venues will be brightly lit and it may not be possible to turn down the lights. Anything over 3000 lumen will be bright enough for most venues.
- **Screen** – get the biggest you can. For an audience of 50-140 people a screen with a diagonal around 120 inches should suffice.
- **Extension Cable** - with at least a couple of sockets.
- **Cable Cover** – essential. For protecting the cable from damage and people from tripping over.
- **Speakers** – if you intend to incorporate sound into your presentation.

PAT Testing

Some venues may ask for your equipment to be PAT (Portable Appliance Tested) for safety reasons. This can be done fairly cheaply by a local electrician.

Insurance

There are two main types of insurance you need:

- **Public liability** to protect yourself in case you should accidentally cause injury to someone e.g. they trip over an uncovered extension lead.
- **Equipment Insurance.** The best option here is to extend your household contents insurance to cover the use of your equipment while giving talks. It may be difficult to find an insurer to insure relatively low cost equipment.

Further advice on insurance advice can be found on the Public Speakers' Corner website at:

<https://www.publicspeakerscorner.co.uk/helpful-for-public-speakers/>

Learning to Speak Effectively

1. *Art of Public Speaking; Lessons from the Greatest Speeches* by John Hale available as DVD or download (<https://www.thegreatcourses.com/>).
2. *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* by Chris Anderson. This book tells the story of TED (Technology Education Design), a platform featuring speakers it considers the best. The book is an inspirational guide to becoming a public speaker. You can also watch and learn from the talks at <https://www.ted.com/talks>

The Toff and the Tinkerer

JL Merrow's (aka. Anne Ellis) story.

Master tinkerer Hodgkins (Son) has seen it all—except the problem presented by the toff who's just walked into his shop. Can Hodgkins fix an issue that might threaten his whole industry, all while keeping the customer happy? More importantly, can he make a bob or two whilst doing so?



The toff doesn't stroll into the shop so much as sidle, like he don't want no one to know where he's going. Or maybe he's just ashamed to show his face.

"Begging your pardon, sir," I says, "but did you mistake us for the brothel next door?"

He blinks at me so hard I'm half worried his nose is going to fall clean off, plop! onto the counter. "There's a brothel?—never mind that. It's you I'm here for. You are Hodgkins and Son, Makers of Mechanical Marvels and Tinkerers of Distinction, are you not?"

"I'm one of 'em, right enough. What can I do for you today, sir?" I asks, not that I need to, it being as plain as the nose on his face. Which is very plain indeed, being a cheap papier-mâché one held on with a leather strap what don't go at all well with his expensive tailoring.

He looks down it at me and glares some, then he gives a little sigh. "Before we begin, I want it understood that my, ah, facial infelicity is *not* due to syphilis. A duelling accident, when I was young and foolish."

"You ain't so old now, neither," I says chirpily, for it's true enough, and he ain't bad looking, if you can overlook the middle of his face, which I grant ain't an easy task. I don't make so bold as to offer my opinion on his foolishness, as in my experience it's rarely wanted. "But if it's noses you're after—for whatever reason, we don't judge none—you'd be better off going to the Pantheon Bazaar. Nashorn's the name—"

"I've *been* to Nashorn's. They told me they couldn't find any fault with the wretched thing!" Out of his pocket comes a little box what's been ruining the lines of his greatcoat, three inches square and two deep, with a golden rhinoceros embossed on the top. (Gaudy, that Nashorn lot; always have been.) He opens it up and plop! There's his nose on the counter after all.

It's a beauty, this one, with Nashorn's patented india-rubber suction fittings, the finest lambskin outer and the real boar bristle hairs, neatly trimmed. (They use softer hog hairs for the ladies, or there's the option to have none, which they don't recommend on account of them right squand'ring pea-souper fogs we've been getting of late.) "I'll need to see it on, sir," I tells him, and he sighs again.

"Excuse me," he says, and turns aside to swap noses.

When he turns back to me, well, you'd never know it weren't his own hooter staring me in the eye. That's why Hodgkins and Son don't do noses no more; Nashorn's cornered the market with them new-fangled German designs: their slogan: The Nose That Nobody Knows. Still, we make a pretty penny out of automata, clockwork contrivances, and prosthetic organs, so I ain't one to grumble, and neither's me old dad.

"Breathe deep," I tells the gent.

VERACITY

He does so, and the nostrils flare then relax again with a noiseless in-and-out.

I root around in the drawer until I find the smelling salts, and I shove 'em under his nose. It scrunches up proper like.

“Now the real test,” I says, and I passes him the pepper-pot.

With a pained expression, he sniffs deep and then sneezes fit to wake the dead.

That nose don't shift a hair's-breadth.

“Well,” I says brightly, “Seems all right to me.”

The gent glares at me some more, but as they say, familiarity breeds content. I ain't worried. Reckon he can tell that, too, cos all at once he sorta deflates, like a dirigible when they lets out the gas. “It's an intermittent fault. That's why Nashorn's couldn't help me.”

“If they couldn't help you, what designed and built it—”

“Please, you're my last hope.”

I narrow my eyes at the gent. True, Nashorn noses don't come cheap, but neither do gold pocket-watches nor Harrods suits and greatcoats, not to mention a top hat so tall it's a danger to doorways and low-flying birds. “Couldn't you just buy another? Reckon they ought to give you a discount, as a goodwill gesture.”

“I could, but... This one has sentimental value. It was the last thing my darling Fanny bought for me, before she...” He blushes. What's more, the nose blushes with him.

What I wouldn't give to have a tinker with one of them... “I'll help you,” I says, “but you got to tell me everything about it.”

“Well, you see, it's like this...” the toff begins with a theatrical air. “I was perambulating the streets, my dear fiancée upon my arm, when I became aware of the most irresistible aroma. I felt the strangest compulsion to follow my nose down the street. I ran, blind and deaf to everything, dragging my poor Fanny with me; only the aroma was to be attended to. And then I came to my senses, standing inside a tannery and breathing in what I objectively know to be the most repulsive of odours, and all the while smiling and laughing as though I were in heaven being fed the finest ambrosia.” He sighs. “It's no wonder Fanny called off the engagement the very next day.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Seems as how her love can't have been all that deep, if you don't mind me saying, sir.”

“Perhaps not. But unfortunately the vat of... well, you know... into which she fainted *was*.”

I wince on the poor lady's behalf. “Leave it with me,” I says. “I'll see what I can do.”

I have that nose in pieces before you can say knife. Careful like, mind; I was taught by my dad, what's the best in the business. I've practised on top-of-the-range automata, like my ma when she wants something tightened and she don't want Dad to know.

It's an education, this nose, and no mistake. Some of the engineering... Course, the design's had more patents slapped on it than Her Majesty's steam-powered bath chair, God bless her, but a few tweaks here and there and Bob's the relative of your choosing.

But I can't find nothing wrong with it.

So I comb my hair, I put on my cockiest hat, and I head off down the Pantheon Bazaar. Being a personable young man about town, if I say so myself, I manage to get talking to one of the young ladies what works at Nashorn's, a pert little redhead with steel-rimmed spectacles and a grease stain on her nose. I take her for pie and mash, and several pennies-worth of gin, and we carry on talking late into the night. (Maybe we do more than talk, but that's neither here nor there, and she's ready and willing once I pull out my Hodgkins' Patented Prophylactics, Proof Against All Ills And Unpropitious Potentialities.)

Turns out, it ain't lambskin what Nashorn covers their noses with. It's human skin. The insides of the things, too. And those ain't boar bristles, neither.

Now, this is just me making, as it were, a conjecture; but I reckon I ain't too far off the mark. Suppose the nose what this skin came from belonged to, say, a tanner? Stands to reason, a tanner wouldn't find the odours of his profession so vile as the next man. Might even breathe them in with pleasure, after a lengthy absence, such as might be occasioned by dying, being sealed in a coffin and being buried with nothing to wait for but the resurrection men. And if it's true of the man as a whole, why not of the nose? Or might not, indeed, a part of the soul inhabit the revived organ, it being that portion of the person what's not gone to its eternal rest?

Trouble is, how's our toff going to take it when I tell him his nose is haunted? Not well, I'll be bound. Like as not to call for an exorcist, which is a terrible thing to do to a poor, innocent ghost.

What's worse, if word of this sort of thing gets bruited about in the streets, there'll be riots. It's a respectable profession, being a tinkerer, but one whiff of body-snatching could ruin all that. My old dad spent years building up this business, and I ain't going to be the cause of our windows being smashed and our livelihood destroyed.

It's a crying shame folk can't be more practical about these matters. Was that tanner using his nose, lying underground contributing comestibles for the worms? No, he was not. Why shouldn't another fellow make use of it?

So when our gent comes back in, a muffler round his mug though there ain't a hint of fog in the air, I know what to tell him.

"It ain't a fault," I says. "Think of it as a feature. Of all the noses sold by Nashorn, there ain't none but yours what has an appreciation for the fine aroma of the tanner's art."

He gives me a shifty eye. "Are you taking commission from Nashorn's?"

"Upon my honour as a tinkerer, I am not," I tells him grandly. (Although you may be sure I'll be looking into it toot sweet, as Madame Mouchoir likes to say.)

"So you're saying I simply have to learn to live with it?"

"To *appreciate* it, sir. It ain't everyone what's got a nose that gives them an insight into a whole new industry, is it?"

VERACITY

"I suppose not..."

"This ain't your mass-produced nose. This is a hand-crafted original. Quirks and individualities is only to be expected. It is, as you might say, a proboscis with personality."

"Are you *sure* you aren't in Nashorn's pay?"

"Cross my heart and hope the cogs seize. However," I add significantly, "I am in *your* pay, sir." I name my fee, based strictly upon hours worked and expenses expended. Never let it be said a Hodgkins overcharges. (Or undercharges, neither; all that gin didn't come for kisses.)

He grumbles, but hands it over. "And my nose?"

I place the box on the counter and open it up. "Good as new, and freshly tuned up. All features and quirks fully operational. Just as when your lovely young lady bought it for you."

A sentimental gleam comes into his eye when I mention his Fanny, and he grabs the nose, turns his back and drops the muffler.

It's a good thing no customers come in the door right then, is all I have time to think before he's turning back to me once more, prosthetic proboscis perfectly in place. "Thank you, I suppose. Good day."

"And the same to you, sir. Why don't you and your nose take the opportunity to reacquaint yourselves in the relaxed atmosphere of Madame Mouchoir's next door?" (We have a mutual arrangement to recommend each other's services, on top of which I keep her in prophylactics and she keeps me in such services as she might be best placed to supply.) "Course, I couldn't suggest that in all conscience if I thought that nose of yours was down to syphilis—"

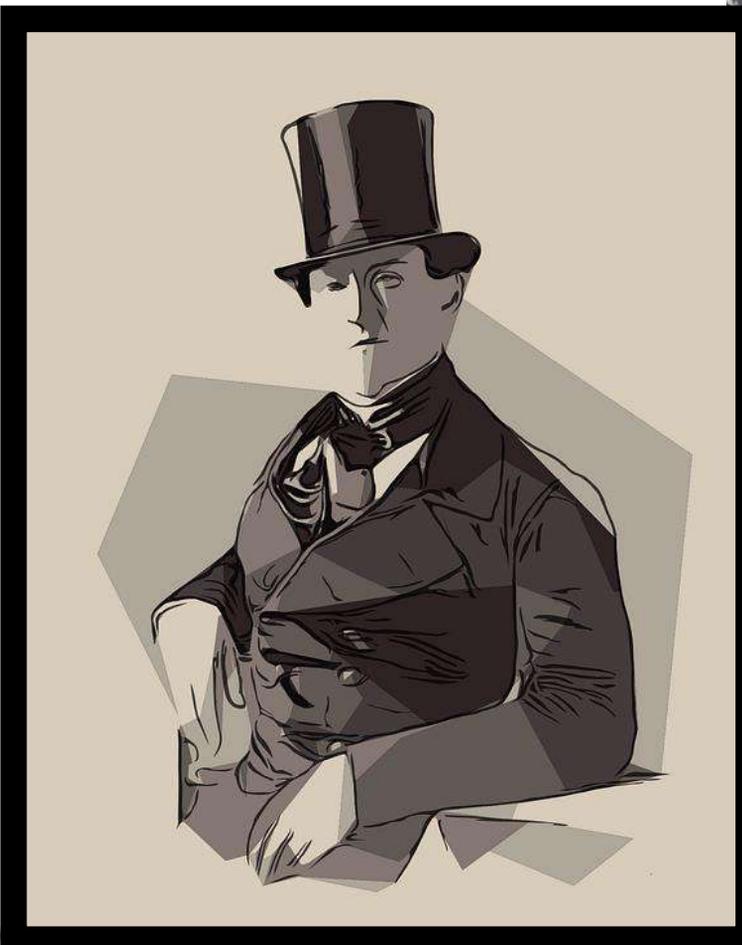
"It's a duelling injury!"

"Course it is, sir," I tell him, secure in the knowledge I delivered another box of prophylactics next door only this morning. "Course it is."

After all, the customer is always right.

The Toff and the Tinker originally published on TENTACLE Tales:

<https://tentaclesteampunklondon.wordpress.com/issue-zero-dark-steam/the-toff-and-the-tinkerer-j-l-merrow/>



QUIZ NIGHT

Sam Ellis on *The VW quiz night*.

Wednesday 16th March saw the annual **VW quiz night**, conducted by our own quizmaster Robert Paterson.

Entitled 'Robert Paterson's House of Games', the evening lived up to its usual high expectations, with a range of questions, from the straightforward to the cryptic.

Some of the more challenging questions were also humorous, with one round asking teams to figure out book titles from a description - but with a twist. For example the description of '...Katniss Everdeen unexpectedly becomes a participant in a televised death battle in which 12 boys and 12 girls must fight each other using only the contents of a wardrobe', was not 'The Hunger Games' but rather 'The *Hangar Games*'. We love a pun at VW (as the Gnome de Plume can confirm) so these types of questions seemed very fitting.

The winning team won puzzle books and glory. Thanks to Robert for another great quiz!



The Great World Building Workshop

Robert Paterson *reports.*

Following the success of my Writing Voices workshop in 2021, I put myself forward to present another workshop this year. Since I have an interest in fantasy novels and was planning two such sagas, the committee was decided the theme ought to be building fictional worlds. While a lot of time, research and preparation went into this, it was widely agreed the finished result was informative, compelling and even better than my last effort.

My “Great World Building Workshop” took place on the evening of Wednesday 2nd February. Since the committee had not yet set up a projector, I had to do without PowerPoint slides and gave out handouts instead. Feedback from last year’s talk

prompted me to include a greater number of exercises, which offset the knowledge I imparted and kept things stimulating.

The talk had a hierarchical structure and covered the art of creating 3 increasingly complex types of fictional worlds...

1. FAMILIAR WORLDS

Everything is as we know it in our world, with no alterations to society or history.

2. UNUSUAL WORLDS

Here there are distinct yet limited differences to our world. Cartoon worlds and alternative history stories are examples of this.

3. EXTRAORDINARY WORLDS

Astoundingly different realms, where time might work backwards, life might live at the Earth’s core or humans might have evolved into their subsequent species. The possibilities are as limited as your imagination isn’t.

I started with standard advice that could apply to creating Familiar worlds as much as Extraordinary ones, such as writing what you know and researching what you don’t. I stressed the importance of working out the details of any fictional world, even if you have a strong idea of what form it will take. This fed into an exercise in which I asked visitors to briefly describe how they would do one of 4 everyday tasks. As the workshop progressed, I asked them to describe how this activity would be accomplished in a science fiction and fantasy setting, stressing how it would be different.



This in turn fed into my emphasis of the importance of the most vital word relating to world building...

VERISIMILITUDE

This is the quality of a fictional world that keeps it familiar to the reader and thus more believable. Many fantastical worlds will adapt familiar concepts in a way that feels fresh to readers, like steampunk sagas, which make bygone technology look futuristic.

Easily the most amusing part of the evening was when I asked visitors to write down a change that might happen to our Familiar world to make it into an Unusual one. That person then passed it on to their neighbour to add a consequence of that change. The best change and consequence was a world where all people dying out except red-heads, so mankind would have to be revived by cloning Prince Harry's hair!

I could not teach participants too much about the complex subject of building Extraordinary worlds in a single evening. Therefore, I imparted just a few precious pearls of wisdom...

1. ESTABLISH RULES FOR YOUR WORLD

If magic exists, work out its limitations and stick to them.

2. AVOID CONVENIENCES

No "Macguffins" that solve all problems or Mary Sues who are experts from the start.

3. AVOID INFORMATION DUMPS

A reading from Ben Elton's novel *Blind Faith* showed how short segments of information can be inserted into the narrative to keep the flow.

4. USE THE JOURNEY CONCEPT

Have the heroes' quest or voyage take in a large part of the fantasy world.

5. USE CHARACTERS WELL

Carefully consider what kind of person is discovering this world; their background, demographic, personality, etc.

Contrary to expectations, the workshop concluded 10 minutes before 10pm, so I suggested participants share what they had written for the exercises before we went home. I had hoped to give out a handout with further exercises on it, but I had not had time to produce that, so I brought it to the meeting a fortnight later instead.

I was very pleased with how the workshop turned out and I had a strong feeling that most attendees enjoyed themselves. The handout even gave me my first chance to bring one of my own creations to life; a god-like band of noble warrior beasts named the Fortetani! Meeting *them* would certainly be worth writing about, and I hope I apply my own rules correctly when I come to create their world.

Comic Sans

A comic poem by Sam Ellis.

I object to Comic Sans

When used on posters, cars or vans,
In essays or in a reader's letter
Sent to highlight some spelling error,
Or to advertise some company.
Its casual script is villainy.

It does not do justice to letters and words,
Punctuation, nouns and verbs,
Elocution, dialect, pronunciation,
Inflection from conjugation
Found in language and its rules,
Taught in all the country's schools.

When thinking up this poor typeface
What laws of lettering did the creator embrace?
Did he see some awful scrawl
Spread across a lavatory wall
By a graffiti artist of such great skill,
Or was he simply feeling ill?

Just think of the loss of majesty
If used in documents through history;
No grandeur in historical charter,
The Rosetta Stone, the Magna Carter,
All soiled by such bad design –
The handwriting of Frankenstein.

Oh dear Microsoft, why did it survive
Beyond your Windows ninety-five?
Because, you see, all I want
Is for you to delete this awful font.
So please do take it as an omen
That this is written in Times New Roman.

I can be bold...



I know you're
font of me
really...



But I'm the
best type...



Writing With Confidence

Phil Mitchell *on the elusive quality of confidence...*

We've all been there. That point when you stare down at what you've been writing, what you've been agonising over for hours/days/weeks and think, "this is complete rubbish," and maybe, "why do I bother?"

Perhaps you hate the words you've used, or the rhythm of the sentences. Maybe you feel what you've written is silly, it doesn't make sense, or it's potentially offensive. These thoughts are often accompanied by a sickening feeling in the stomach and an urge to eat biscuits or ice cream. All writers suffer a crisis of confidence at some point. It happens to all artists. But there are ways to improve your confidence.

Ignore the inner critic (sometimes)

It's not helpful for me to tell you to ignore your inner critic. It's hard to write well, and sometimes the inner critic is useful. It recognises when you can do better. Hemingway said, "The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shockproof, s*** detector. This is the writer's radar and all great writers have had it." But sometimes you need to silence the inner critic. The first draft of anything is terrible. Always. Try to write to the end of what you're writing without your inner critic pausing you along the way to edit. It's easy to fall into the trap of refining as you go, but that bogs you down, and constantly criticising yourself for your poor writing kills your confidence. There's nothing like a pile of unfinished manuscripts to make you feel terrible, so get to the end of something, and you'll feel great. Then polish, polish, polish until your writing gleams.



Take some time out

If you're really stuck and have no idea how to progress with the thing you're writing, don't rip it up. Come back to it later. Go for a walk. Do the washing up. Binge watch 7-seasons of a Netflix series your friend said was "OK". Trust that your amazing brain will be silently working on your writing in the background and solve your problems before you know it. Sometimes, you just need to give yourself time, and be confident you'll figure it out, eventually.

Write a lot/Read a lot

When your writing isn't going well, it's easy to think you've wasted your time. But remember, writing is never a waste of time. Like any skill, the more you do it, the better and more confident writer you'll become. Likewise, reading is never a waste of time. Read as widely as you can, and you'll learn what good and bad writing is. And, occasionally, you'll read something well-known, and you'll think, "I could do better," and that will give you an enormous confidence boost.

Set Goals

Set Goals

Set yourself goals and achieve them to build your confidence. Perhaps your goal is to write for a certain amount of time each week or target a certain number of words. Or maybe set yourself a deadline to finish something. The important thing is to make your goals achievable so you're not crushed when you don't meet them. Don't compare yourself to successful authors or envy them their success. Don't become frustrated that you're not churning out four novels a year and feature in the book charts. Those writers do what they do. You do what you do, and you do it better than anyone else. To be a celebrated writer requires hard work, talent and an incredible amount of luck. You've got the first two—try and put yourself in the right place for the luck to find you.

Continue to learn the craft

Keep studying the craft of writing and your confidence will improve as your skills do. Read books, magazines, and blogs, or take courses. There are countless paid and free options out there. Develop your dialogue skills or learn how to write more convincing characters. If some of the learning content is familiar to you, then celebrate that you're already writing well in that regard.

Listen to other writers

Go to author's talks, or find them online, and listen to what they say about their writing process. You'll realise that they've faced the same struggles and crisis of confidence that you have and that it's completely normal. And you'll pick up some writing tips too.

Set your writing free

Get your writing out there. Send it out into the world. Share it with other people. Receiving great feedback at manuscript nights can boost confidence. Although everybody secretly wants to hear that their writing is exceptional, and more critical feedback can leave you reeling, you can come away buzzing with ideas on how you can improve your writing. Just remember, everyone wants your work to be as good as it can be. The fact you've been brave enough to show your writing to other people should alone boost your confidence. There are plenty of want-to-be writers whose work remains unread in a drawer.



Get published

Getting published and competition wins are a great confidence boost. There are countless printed and online publishers and competitions to enter. But winning competitions and getting published is tough. There are a lot of writers out there attempting the same as you. But keep trying. Publishing is an industry that follows fashions, so perhaps it's a matter of waiting for the right moment. And people have different tastes. Not everyone likes the books that often win the big literary prizes. Not everyone likes the huge best-selling thrillers. Someone out there has the same taste as you or is drunk or crazy or foolish enough to publish your work or place you first in a competition. You just have to keep trying.



Celebrate all your accomplishments

Getting published or winning a competition is amazing but celebrate all your writing accomplishments: everything you start, everything you finish, every time you find time to write and hit a word count, every time you submit to a competition or publisher, every time you show a piece to someone else, every nice comment you get. We all remember the negatives. Embrace the positives. And don't belittle your work. You're not trying to write a novel. You *are* writing a novel. You haven't entered a little writing competition, you've written and polished and finished a short story, something entirely from your imagination using a huge amount of skill and creativity. If you put in the time and energy, you are a writer. Never feel like an imposter.

You probably write because you enjoy the process, because it fills a deep need to create, to tell stories, to entertain. Don't forget that. It gives you permission to write what you want, when you want, and how you want. Be confident and write, write, write



Verulam Writers: A Guide to Critiquing



This guide is intended to help members get the most out of sharing their work with the group.

Tips for giving criticism:

- **Arrive with the right mindset:** We're all here to help other writers (and ourselves) improve our writing. Remember you can learn a lot by listening to critique on other writers' work as well as your own.
- **Know what your feedback can offer:** You're able to provide the writer with something they can't get themselves: reaction to the piece by someone who *isn't* immersed in their story. You provide invaluable insight into a general reader's reaction, and that of a writer distanced from the work.
- **We all have different tastes:** You don't have to like a piece of writing to give it a fair critique.
- **Go beyond a "wow, great story!" type of response:** You don't need to know detailed writing techniques to comment on things like character, dialogue, setting and plot. Do the characters feel real to you? Can you imagine people saying those things? Can you picture the setting? Does the plot make sense? Can you spot clichés? Are there opportunities for the writer to show and not tell? What do you think about the level of tension, pacing, conflict, tone, voice, and theme? Are there bits that jarred and took you out of the story?
- **Be nice & show respect:** Even if you hate a piece of writing, the writer has invested time and effort on the manuscript. Phrase criticism in a way that wouldn't offend you if it were your writing. For example, use polite phrasing: your critique is more likely to be well received if you say something like, "I found this part slowed the pace a little," and then explain why, rather than say, "It was boring."
- **Use "I" statements:** It's your subjective opinion you're offering, so say, "I found this part slowed the pace," not, "This part slowed the pace."
- **Sandwich your feedback:** Try not to just give negative feedback. It's important for the writer to know what *does* work, as well as what doesn't. Start with something you liked, then provide constructive criticism, and end with something you liked.
- **Be specific:** If you liked the writing, why did you like it? If you didn't like it, explain why.
- **Offer suggestions:** If you didn't like something, offer ways to make it more appealing to you.
- **But, don't rewrite in your own voice:** Suggesting word choices or rephrasing sections can be helpful, but don't rewrite entire paragraphs or pages in your own style—how you would write it isn't the point.

- **Never criticise the writer:** Discuss the manuscript, not the writer. If you found a part boring, don't tell the writer, "you write boring manuscripts."
- **Remember your biases:** We all have biases and must critique around them and stay focused on the craft. Avoid criticising the writer's choice of subject or things like the race, gender, religion, or sexuality of their characters. You can of course point out inaccuracies and highlight where the work may cause offense.
- **Don't take ownership:** The writer makes the ultimate decision on whether to accept or reject any criticism. Even if you feel a certain change is required, do not push the writer.
- **Don't fixate on spelling or grammar mistakes:** It's fine to point out the odd spelling error or misplaced comma, but don't feel you have to correct every mistake. The writing brought for critique is often raw and the writer will fix these at a later stage.

Tips for receiving criticism:

- **Don't take it personally:** Criticism of your work is not criticism of you. Try to maintain a separation between you and your writing.
- **No draft is perfect:** You may feel strongly about your work, but there is almost always room for improvement. Don't stress if the other members have a lot of suggestions.
- **Don't get defensive:** You don't need to defend your writing – nobody is attacking it. If you don't agree with someone's critique, let it go.
- **Everyone has an opinion:** You might think it's perfect, others think it's too long, and others think it's too short. Learn the voices offering criticism and decide which you value most.
- **Don't be dismissive:** The ultimate decision of what goes into your manuscript is yours, but don't dismiss harsh or difficult to implement criticism. Following the hardest advice can be the most worth it.
- **Don't just hear – listen:** Be open-minded and challenge your assumptions. Try others' ideas out. The more you listen, rewrite, and see improvements in your work, the easier it will become to accept criticism in the future.
- **Take notes:** Write down everything people are telling you, not just the nice stuff.
- **Wait:** After hearing criticism, let it sit for a while before revising or thinking about changes.
- **Remember, you own your writing:** As Neil Gaiman said: "When people tell you there's something wrong with a story, they're almost always right. When they tell what it is that's wrong and how it can be fixed, they're almost always wrong." Listen to people's critique, and then decide yourself how you want to fix it.

References:

<https://www.thewritersloft.org/critique>

<http://www.fmwriters.com/Visionback/Issue%205/butidon.htm>

<https://hollylisle.com/sp-member-handbook/>

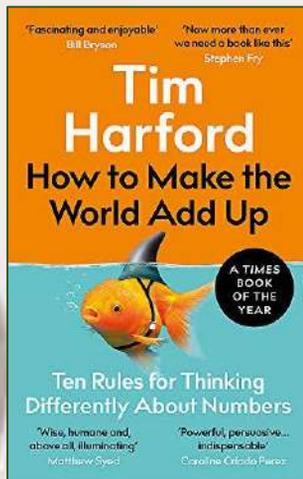
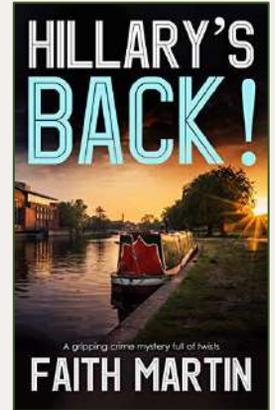
<https://www.writersdigest.com/be-inspired/guide-to-critique-group-etiquette-9-embarrassing-mistakes-to-avoid>

<https://thewritelife.com/tips-for-writing-critique/>

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

Steve Barley is reading... **Hillary's Back** by Faith Martin

It's the eighteenth book in her DI Hillary Greene murder mystery series set in Oxfordshire. I might just have read the previous seventeen recently too! Easy to read and well written but the bodies do tend to pile up.

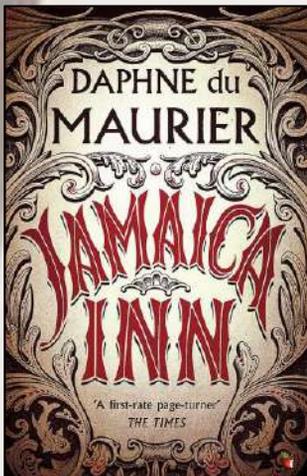


Robert Paterson is reading... **How To Make the World Add Up** by Tim Harford.

It's all about how statistics can be unreliable, how we can gather them better and how they can become more trustworthy. It's written in an engaging and amusing manner, in relatable, layman's terms that Stuart Clark would approve of.

Robert Paterson is also reading... **Jamaica Inn** by Daphne Du Maurier.

Set just over 200 years ago in Cornwall, the central character is Mary Yellan, who is left orphaned and homeless on her mother's death. Her only recourse is to join her Aunt Patience a few miles away at Jamaica Inn. But her Uncle Joss is a wicked brute. Mary must escape, but not before Aunt Patience is safe.

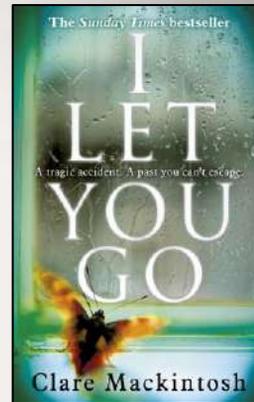


It's my first time reading a Daphne Du Maurier and I have mixed feelings about it. At first, the book was gripping, reading more like a horror novel than a thriller or a history saga. Yet while I'm compelled to read on, the lightness of the narrative is inconsistent and I often find myself skimming over parts of it. I'm not put off reading other Du Maurier books, but I do hope they improve on this one's faults.

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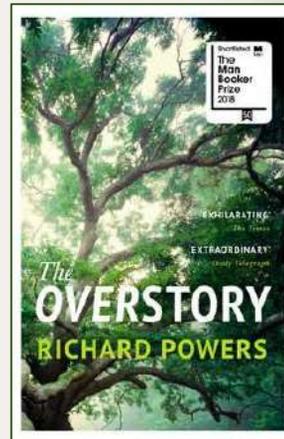
Yvonne Moxley is reading... **I Let You Go** by Clare Mackintosh

This book was recommended to me by VW members. I couldn't put it down. It is compelling, tragic, and punctuated with unsuspecting twists. It was voted a Sunday Times and a Richard and Judy bestseller, and now I can't wait to read her new book entitled *Hostage*.



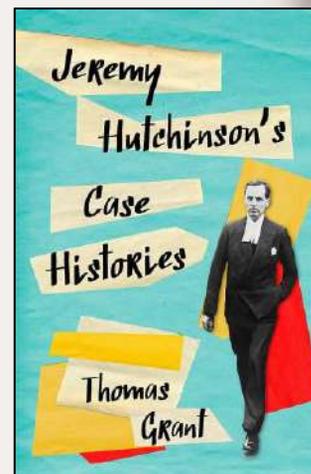
Phil Mitchell is reading... **The Overstory** by Richard Powers

I will never think about trees in the same way again. This brilliant Pulitzer Prize-winning novel makes me sad for the forests and despairing of humans. It's a complex book following the lives of nine strangers brought together in a last stand to save the natural world from catastrophe. But despite the number of main characters, it's the trees that are the actual stars of the book, and I now feel enlightened with copious amounts of tree knowledge. Highly recommended.



Sam Ellis is reading... **Jeremy Hutchinson's Case Histories** by Thomas Grant.

The whole truth under oath is that this is a re-read because I love it so much. A brilliant biography framed by some of the most famous cases Jeremy Hutchinson QC took on, including the defence of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Christine Keeler and great train robber Charlie Wilson. Aside from his astonishing career his personal life was colourful too – born to parents in the Bloomsbury Group, his first wife was actress Peggy Ashcroft and he died only a few years ago, aged 102.



The VW Website

Take a look at our website www.verulamwriters.org



Here you can find all the latest on our upcoming meetings, find out about new competitions, download Veracity, and more.

There are two features in particular that we want to draw your attention to;

First, there is the section **Writing by our Members**. Here we showcase one piece of writing per members. So if you have a particular piece of work that you are proud, whether is available for purchase or maybe downloadable on your own website, we can feature it in this section. Just send an email to verulamwritersevents@outlook.com. There are already a few items on this section. If there is a particular style you prefer or image, you'd like us to use, please let us know in the email.

Secondly, we have a new **Members Forum**. Here we can have discussions on writing, share work for feedback and make suggestions about the Writing Group. You can register by signing up for an account. All you need is an email address and come up with a password. Then we'll need to check your membership and validate your account. That should only take us a day or two tops!

We hope you all enjoy the new website. Feel free to share feedback on the forum!

Verulam Writers 2021/2022 Competition Winners

FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	GNOME
David Gibson Cup Topic: A Wedding (set by Sam Ellis) Adjudication Date: 6 th October 2021			
Anne Ellis	Austin Best	None	Phil Mitchell (aka Marion Haste)
Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition Topic: A True Story (set by Ben Bergonzi) Adjudication Date: 1 st December 2021			
Wendy Turner	Jane Fookes	Carol Jacobi	Jane Fookes (aka Annette Curtain)
President's Competition Topic: Orange (set by Phil Mitchell) Adjudication Date: 2 nd March 2022			
Cecile Keen	Ben Bergonzi	Samantha Rostom	Molly Barr (aka E.C. Peeler)
Crystal Decanter Competition Topic: Royalty (set by Sam Ellis) Adjudication Date: 18 th May 2022			
Howard Linskey Competition Topic: Crime Adjudication Date: TBC			



on



@verulamwriters

Do you have some news to share about writing such as an event or publication of an article or book?

- **Visited a website that could be a good resource for other writers?**
- **Seen a good quote?**
- **Like to find out more about the VW?**

Then head to @verulamwriters on **facebook!**

We'd like to encourage all members to visit and use our Facebook page. It's full of news from the VW and a great way to stay connected! As long as posts are writing-related and appropriate, we'd love you to post too!





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Do you have some news to share about writing such as an event or publication of an article or book?

- **Visited a website that could be a good resource for other writers?**
- **Seen a good quote?**
- **Like to find out more about the VW?**

Then head to @verulam_writers on

twitter !

We'd like to encourage all members to visit and use our twitter page. It's full of news from the VW and a great way to stay connected! As long as posts are writing-related and appropriate, we'd love you to post too!



The Verulam Writers' Block *The Verulam Writers Showcase*

Judith Foster has been a member of Verulam Writers for many years and has a love of poetry. She says:

By education a linguist, I was a builder in my working life, and in my first retirement a fine art painter and printer. Now, in my second retirement, I do what I have always previously put off, which is to write something other than reports and family letters. I thought it would be short fictions, but it has turned out to be mostly poetry.

Paris – Poet and Lover

Though eldest son, I did not please my father, no.
 My gifts are of no value to his Trojan state.
 He wanted soldiers, fighters, on whom he'd bestow
 Gifts, slaves and honours, begging details of the fate
 Of those whose mighty world was shattered in the east,
 And later, those whose little worlds were spread out wide
 Across the blue-dark, black-dark, purple, heaving sea, creased
 With the slight furrows of their jaunty ships that ride
 So lightly on the wave. He had a favoured son,
 Hector, still young, while I spun out my middle years
 In idleness, half envious. I never pleased my father.

My gifts? They lie within my mind. For other ears
 I tease my thoughts, and put them into words. Rather
 The paper and the reed, the ink and midnight oil
 Than burnished bronze and gleaming sweat under the sun.
 I dreamed my youth in words. It was not toil
 Whose poetry could gratify the mind of one
 Who thought that only war was fit for men, and war
 The only way of winning. There was no renown
 In what I chose. With difficulty he forbore
 To cast me off. Instead, as shepherd sent me down
 Through the country with his silly, sleepy sheep flocks.
 As for me, I felt released, unbound from prison,
 Following the sheep, teasing my thoughts. No one mocks
 A shepherd, careful of his charge; that's benison.

The spear's no good against the wolf. I learnt the bow.
 Among my thoughts, among my poems, among my sheep
 I sharpened my arrows, watched for the weak and slow,
 Watched for the wolves who hunt at midday, watched them creep,
 And pause and crouch, and roughly rush against a teg.
 I sprang behind my bush, fitted the point, and aimed;
 Deep pierced his shaggy shoulder, and the next his leg.
 He dropped, he rolled, he growled, complaining he was maimed.
 The rest of them, discouraged now, melted away,
 Assyrian shades. I touched his pelt, red with his blood,

And slit his throat to spare his mauling as the prey
Of his grey brothers. Nothing had he understood.

The seasons, bright, harsh, passed. I came to understand
The meaning of my teasing thoughts, of my desires.
My father wanted me to be a lord, to stand,
Deliver judgement, take first place, light the fires
That wafted to the gods. That choice was not for me.
To spare his pride, I'd say I had rejected Hera,
Her offer of worldly lordship. Grave Athene
Too, gave way; he knew that life to me was dearer
Than the grime and heat of battle. That left one choice:
Fair Aphrodite took my golden apple,
Offered me love. It was to her I'd give my voice.
Three goddesses, conjured in my mind. I'd grapple
With my father's will and seek that love throughout the world.
He did concede how strong divine compulsion,
And sent me out ambassador, Troy's sails unfurled
To preach our trade and peace, promote our nation.

I travelled through our world, wherever trade was good;
I played the bright-eyed diplomat. Youthful beauty
Brought me youthful beauties. But soon I understood
That that was not enough. I came, as was my duty,
To Sparta. Austere Menelaus was the king.
He feasted me, he honoured me. I saw his wife.
And in the instant, poems within my mind took wing,
And straight I knew that I would sing them all my life.

Her face was like the moon, her hair was like the sun.
Sun-blest by her golden hair, love smote me moon-blest,
Artemis and Apollo, two subsumed in one,
Love-blest, god-blest, a flowering, rich, ripe harvest.
She was a girl. Menelaus spoke horses, power
In middle years. My poems just came welling
Out of me like wine from jars, a gorgeous shower:
Helen's eyes, Helen's hair, Helen's breasts, all Helen.
Of course she fell. The plans we made were born in her.
She threw her difference at Menelaus' nose.
I glowed with joy. She would her love on me confer.

I thought that I had won the world when Phoebus rose,
And lit us slipping out of harbour. She had twined
Herself into my heart, filled the veins and marrow
Of my whole existence, herself no more confined
In chilly Sparta, rectilinear, narrow.
We fell into each others' arms at night. Each dawn
I watched the sun come up, illuminate her beauty.

On Troy's wide beach come messengers. My heart is torn.
Briefly, they communicate my father's fury.
"Don't give me that love, love, love, love, love, all that stuff.
Your return home is trouble, on this littoral.
Only a useless poet would be fool enough
To steal a king's wife, not expect reprisal.
One day there'll be a thousand ships to fetch your whore,
Destroy the towers of Troy for your impertinence.
Perhaps ten years, perhaps a little less or more.
The Greeks will club together. What's your defence?
Your piddling words that dribble from your mouth like spit,
You rhymes, your assonances, where's the gain in that?
Whom do you strike? Who dies beneath your words? Not fit
To call you man. Dismiss, go, skive off with the brat."

She had exchanged garments of wool from Spartan sheep
For tunics wove of rustling silk, deep dyed colour;
She had exchanged the air of Sparta, mountains steep
Against the sandy marsh, malarial pallor;
She had exchanged the bright regalia of a queen
Against contempt and scorn from Priam's retinue;
She had exchanged the disciplined, high Spartan scene
And so fell victim to poetic words. I too.
The goddess gave me love, love to be in love with.
I was first poet, lover next, and husband last.
I poured my love into the words, fashioned the myth
Of lovely Helen. Her tongue lashed me with the past.

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

About Us

Verulam Writers meet fortnightly on Wednesday evenings at 8pm. To find out more and for a full list of events, visit the VW website at:

www.verulamwriters.org

Get Involved

If you would like to write for VERACITY (we'd love to have you!) or have any comments or feedback please email the editor at:

VWVeracityEditor@gmail.com

Publicity

If you have anything you'd like to publicise (a new publication, an event etc.) then we'd love to hear about it at:

VWPublicity@gmail.com

Events

Events are always in the works, even online, so if you'd like to volunteer please email Phil and Gerwin at:

verulamwritersevents@hotmail.co.uk

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

We would like to wish you all a great spring!