

# VERACITY

The Magazine from Verulam Writers

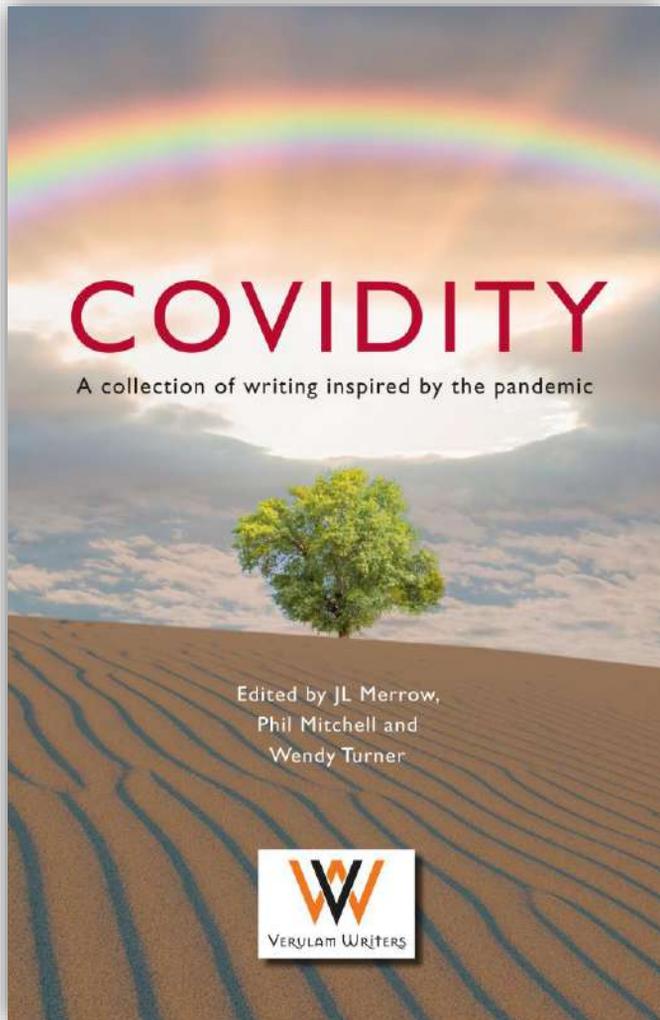


Edition 45

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[www.verulamwriters.org](http://www.verulamwriters.org)

## VW RELEASES COVID-INSPIRED ANTHOLOGY



Verulam Writers has released a COVID-inspired anthology, *Covidity*.

*Covidity* is a collection of writing inspired by the pandemic and has been published as a free eBook on multiple platforms including Amazon, Apple, Kobo, and Barnes & Noble, as well as appearing on the new Verulam Writers website.

Featuring pieces from 18 Verulam Writers members, the collection includes fiction, poetry, plays, and essays, from the factual and funny to the fantastic and fiendish. It has also been highly commended in the National Association of Writing Groups Anthology competition.

This time in VERACITY...

- Anne talks about **SEX**...
- Tough talk on **tough reviews**, by Lesley...
- Yvonne **dusts down an old project**...
- The **Writer's Block**, dedicated to Richard.

## From the Editor...

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

It was a busy season at VW, with manuscript nights a'plenty, as well as the adjudication of many competitions, and Robert's Writing Voices workshop – to name just a few highlights.

One major change has been the launch of our new website, [www.verulamwriters.org](http://www.verulamwriters.org). Do please take a moment to visit, and we would like to encourage all members to join the forum.

Finally, I know we were all very saddened to hear of the death of one of our long-standing members, Richard Bruckdorfer. What a true gentleman he was. His manners were unflinching, even in his dry response of 'I know it's complicated' when I made the unforgivable editor error of misspelling his surname in an early edition (sorry Richard!). He was an exceptional writer, a well-respected member of our group, and a warm voice at VW. I will miss him, as will we all.

Sam Ellis, Editor  
[VWVeracityEditor@gmail.com](mailto:VWVeracityEditor@gmail.com)

## Contents

### 1 Covidity

News on our COVID-themed anthology.

### 3 From the Chair...

Chairman of VW Philip Mitchell gives his view.

### 4 The Wartime Singers

Lesley Eames on her latest book.

### 5 The Ones that Got Away

Nick Cook on Sci-Fi titles worthy of note.

### 8 VW Launches New Website

News on our brand new website launch.

### 9 Let's Talk About Sex

Anne on the sticky subject...

### 12 From Bombers to Bands...

How a chance comment led to an article.

### 13 Show Me the Funny

Steve Barley jokes around.

### 15 The 2021 President's Competition

A report on this year's competition.

### 16 The Piddu

Phil Mitchell's winning entry.

### 19 You've a Voice

Robert's Writing Voices workshop review.

### 22 What We're Reading

What we're reading at the moment.

### 24 Difficult Topics

Tina on tackling difficult subjects.

### 25 The 'New' Dusted-Down Project

Yvonne Moxley on working on her novel.

### 26 Brace Yourself

Lesley Eames on tough reviews.

### 28 A Guide to Critiquing

The VW guide on how to critique.

### 30 The Howard Linskey Competition 2021

A report on our yearly crime competition.

### 31 My Brother, the Arsonist

Phil Mitchell's winning entry.

### 35 Competition Winners

The full list of winners from this season.

### 38 Getting it Down to One

Robert on choosing a competition theme.

### 40 Stop Cock

A 'plug' for Anne Ellis' latest book.

### 41 The Verulam Writers' Block

Dedicated to Richard Bruckdorfer.

## From the Chair...

*Chairman of Verulam Writers Philip Mitchell.*

We writers are an unusual bunch. Fiction writers, for example, make up weird stories, have internet search histories that would worry the Police, and carry a reputation for being bad at socialising. When we've spent hours writing about serial killers, dastardly wizards, and heroic crime-fighting protagonists, who can blame us if normal, everyday people seem a little boring. But despite that, Verulam Writers is a friendly and welcoming community. We're a group of like-minded people—people who understand what it is to be a writer. We've all felt the terror of the blank page and experienced those miserable days when the words just won't flow. We know the frustration of hitting the delete key and abandoning writing that's taken all your time and energy but is too terrible to be saved. And yet, we still write, because we love it, and because we need to do it. Verulam Writers' members include poets, scriptwriters, novelists, short story and non-fiction writers working in disparate genres including crime, sci-fi, romance, historical and fantasy, and what binds us together is we all feel that calling to write.

With that in mind, I'm pleased to say we've launched a new website and I encourage members to sign up and use the member's forum. The forum is there for our community to connect outside of our formal meetings. Share your work for feedback and tell us about your favourite books. Let everyone know about forthcoming competitions, literary events and useful writing courses. Tell us all about your successes or ask for advice on things you're struggling with. Or, maybe, share a picture of your cat walking across your keyboard as you wrgdkfhwfghdwdjqw. As I write, we're easing out of the latest coronavirus lockdown,

hopefully for the last time, but it's unlikely we'll hold physical meetings for a while yet, so the forum is there to connect us and support us all in becoming the best writers we can be.

It's been great to see some new and returning faces at our recent Zoom meetings, and we always want to see more people involved. Please encourage your writer friends to come along. In our present online environment, writers can join us from anywhere in the world. If you're a Veracity reader who's hesitant about joining a meeting, then our online meetings are a good way to try us out, and they remain free for this season. There's no pressure to read your work or contribute to the discussion, just listen in and see if we're for you. All we ask is that anyone new briefly introduces themselves. Contact us using the form on our website for the meeting links.

I'll finish with the sad news that we recently said farewell to our talented member Richard Bruckdorfer, who passed away after battling a brain tumour. Following my announcement of his death to Verulam Writers' members, I received many lovely messages expressing sympathy for Richard, and we spent time at a meeting fondly remembering him and his writing. Richard will be greatly missed, and the strength of feeling demonstrated by our members proved to me what a caring, supportive and sociable community of writers we are.

Rest in peace, Richard, and stay safe everyone.

Phil

## The Wartime Singers

Lesley Eames on her latest book.

**July 8<sup>th</sup> 2021 was a Red Letter Day in my diary as my fourth book was published. In common with my previous three books, *The Wartime Singers* is a historical saga/romance.**

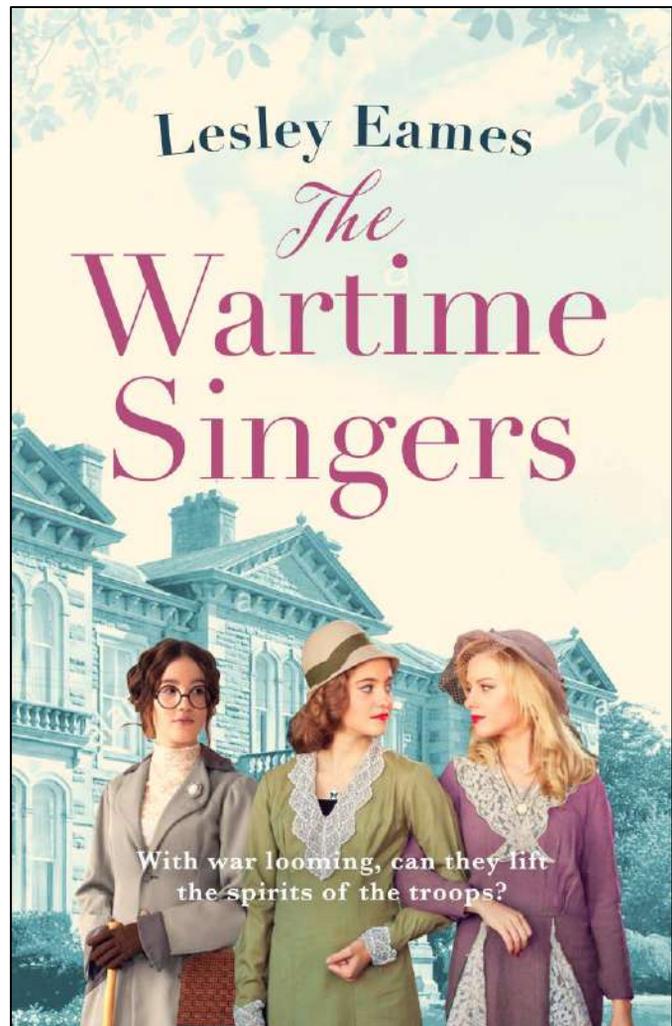
All of my books have been set in the period from 1908 to 1923. This is a time in our history that interests me greatly because it brought so much political and sociological change. Opportunities for ordinary people – for women in particular – and the impact of war are common themes in my novels. So are family, friendship and romance.

This is not to suggest that the books are all the same. Far from it. Each book introduces new characters with new stories to share.

*The Wartime Singers* begins in 1908 when narrator Lizzie is twelve. It follows her through the war years to 1918. This timeframe enabled me to chart her journey into adulthood and explore the influences, challenges and characters she meets along the way.

I love creating characters and Lizzie was no exception. It was great fun to build a cast of supporting characters around her too, each with their own personalities, motivations and journeys. One of my favourite creations in this book is Margaret Penrose. Not the easiest of women. Downright scary, in fact, but... interesting (I hope).

As ever, writing a book took me through peaks and troughs of emotion. I laughed at times, felt joy at times and cried at times as the characters tugged at my heart. Then there were the frustrating days when life made other demands



on my time and wouldn't allow me to write, and, paradoxically, other days when I sat down to write but the words just wouldn't flow. It was tempting to take an axe to my laptop on the days when it all went horribly wrong.

One of the new challenges this fourth novel threw at me was music. A book called *The Wartime Singers* naturally requires songs for the characters to sing but, aside from caterwauling around the house along with the radio, I'm not musical. I can't read a word of the stuff.

# VERACITY

Why write a book about singers, then? That's part of the bigger question: *where do ideas come from?* My stories involve real life to the extent that events, movements and settings play a part – war, the fight for women's suffrage and London, for example. However, my characters tend to float down from the sky fully formed (almost literally as I stare at the sky and open my mind to ideas). These characters just wanted to sing.

Singing requires songs, of course, and some of the songs that feature in the story are old established folk songs and actual songs from the war years. Others were created specifically for

the book – a ballad, a rousing song and a ditty about a lazy donkey named Maisie. Oddly, perhaps, for a person with zero musical education, I found that I needed to make up tunes when I was writing the lyrics, even though only the lyrics appear in the book. Probably, this is just as well, but as I caterwaul around the house I now have new songs to sing. *There once was a donkey named Maisie...*

*The Wartime Singers* is available at [amzn.to/2P37d5D](https://amzn.to/2P37d5D) on ebook, and will be available in paperback in October. Additional suppliers include Kobo and Apple Books.

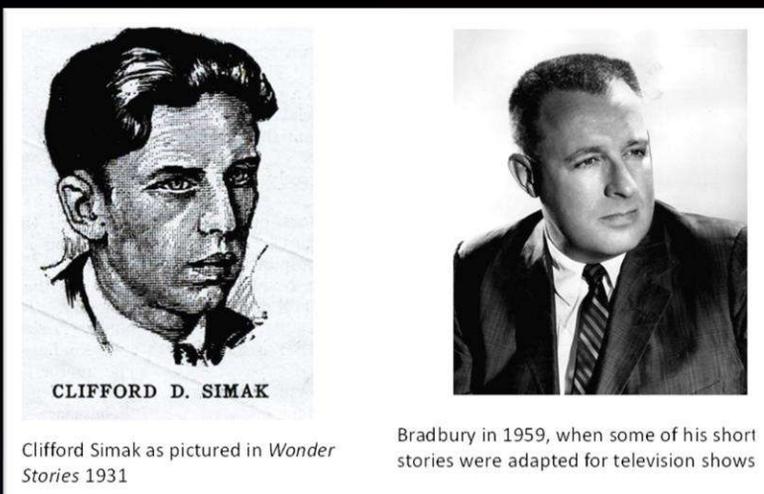
## The Ones That Got Away

Nick Cook on *Sci-Fi stories that deserve some time to shine.*

**First of all, thanks for all the comments during and after the recent Verulam Writers' Sci-Fi session. Think I learned more from you than you did from me!**

I had to leave out so many great writers, so many great stories. Not enough time! So here are some of the ones that got away.

Starting with Clifford D Simak. Famous in the mid twentieth century along with Asimov, Clarke and Heinlein, Simak today is badly, sadly, neglected.



He is special because his voice is unique. It is the voice of humanity, friendship, landscape and loneliness. His aliens are more likely to make friends with Earthmen than ray gun them. His landscapes are never alien. They usually reflect the ravines and valleys between the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers and the nearby small town of Millville where, in 1904, Clifford Donald Simak was born.

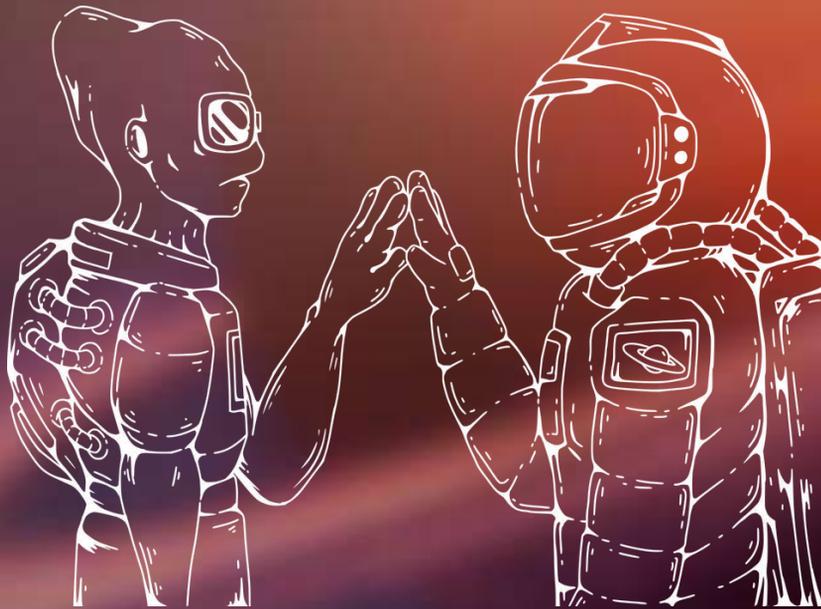
# VERACITY

*Only the treetops caught the last rays of the sun. A coolness came stealing up the ravine from the valley far below and there was a damp lush smell that came out of the ground. From some hidden hollow a whippoorwill called out mournfully. (Way Station, 1963)*

When he writes about what this landscape means to Enoch Wallace, the hero of *Way Station*, you know that Simak is also writing about what it means to himself:

*He needed the sun and the soil and the wind to remain a man.*

But all too often loneliness accompanies Simak's landscapes. Wallace runs a transit station for aliens. The secrecy involved isolates him from the rest of the human race. To alleviate his loneliness Wallace uses science learned from aliens to make his own group of "friends". But the friends made by Wallace are mere figments. They can converse but if you try to touch them your hand goes right through. To maintain the illusion they have a strict rule: look but don't touch. But over the years the shades tire of this half life. One by one they abandon Wallace. The last to leave is Mary. She is in love with him and, belatedly, he realises his feelings for her.



But one day she returns. By some miracle she is no longer a ghost. At last they can touch each other like normal people. But sadly their love can never be normal. Can never, in fact, *be*.

*"You can't love a doll you made," she tells him, "or I the toymaker."*

This time she leaves forever.

Loneliness is just one strand running through a novel with many. But it is the most moving.

Enoch and Mary's love is an updating of Ovid's Pygmalion. But in Ovid, when Aphrodite breathes life into the statue Pygmalion has carved of his ideal woman, the couple become a family. A much happier ending than Simak's. But you can't help feeling that Simak's is more realistic.

# VERACITY

Ray Bradbury also celebrated rural and small-town America. But *Fahrenheit 451* is anything but small town.

Montag is a fireman of the future. He burns books. These have been banned by a government that has declared reading a subversive activity. However, Montag gradually realises that a world without books is a desert. Eventually he rebels and joins a group of refugees living wild in the forests. Each has memorised a book. They pass it on by word of mouth, one to the next, keeping literature alive until publishing returns. These human books echo the poets and bards that kept myths alive in pre-literate Greece.

So much for the novels. Short stories that “got away” include:

- *The Brick Moon* by Edward Everett Hale (1867). Not as daft as it sounds! A group of friends build a moon made of bricks and catapult it into a geostationary orbit around Earth. The intention is that it will act as a navigation aid for shipping!
- *Surface Tension* by James Blish (1952). Tiny aqueous humans living in a puddle on a somewhat wet planet build a “space ship” to take a crew up and across to the next puddle. The major hurdle they face when trying to leave their puddle is the surface tension.
- *Another Rib* by Marion Zimmer Bradley and Juanita Ruth Wellons (1963) was a very daring story for its time. The survival of the human race depends on the handful of male survivors overcoming a huge taboo – homosexuality.

Yet again: so many stars left out! But I hope the few included show how lucky we are to be living at a time when such great science fiction has been and no doubt is being, and will be, written.

## If you like science fiction...

... You might just love Greek mythology.  
For copy of *Wine Dark Sea and Sacred Shrine* a newsletter dedicated to ancient mythology please contact  
[mr.nickcook@googlemail.com](mailto:mr.nickcook@googlemail.com)



## VW Launches New Website

We have launched our new website, [www.verulamwriters.org](http://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](mailto: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!

## Let's Talk About



*Anne Ellis has some explaining to do...*

**Well. Ahem. You see, when two or more fictional characters love each other very, very much...**

Talking (or more relevantly, writing) about sex: it's not always easy, is it? There's the issue of how explicit to be and the vexed question of language, not to mention keeping track of all those limbs and other parts...

### **The Naming of Parts is a Serious Matter** (With apologies to TS Eliot!)

One thing you have to decide, when writing an explicit sex scene, is what you are going to call the relevant portions of anatomy. Some writers have a curious tendency to be coy, blushingly referring to "his/her sex". My personal opinion is that any author finding themselves tempted to do this might want to reconsider whether they really want to be writing an explicit scene at all.

# VERACITY

For me, it comes down to character voice: if your POV character were speaking, rather than thinking, the words, what would they actually say? They're probably not going to use medical terminology—although if they do, that'll certainly say something about them as a character. If they use a euphemism for their partner's bits, which one they choose can also be telling. Vulgar? Childish? Funny? It may well depend on the mood of the scene, and on who their partner is. How they refer to their *own* anatomy will also be revealing—particularly if it's in a different way to how they think of their partner's.

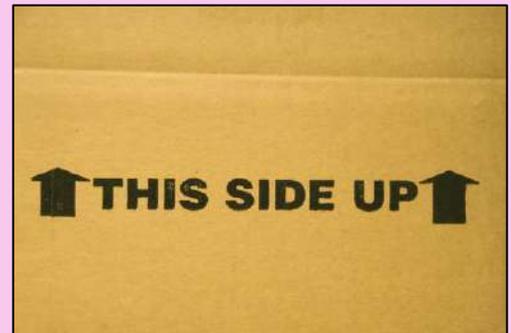


## Whose \*\*\*\* is it Anyway?

It's important to keep track of exactly whose body parts are where, and ensure that your reader can too. (This is less of a problem for those writing about two opposite-sex partners, or in first person, where pronouns can be your friend.) It is also recommended to make sure numbers of limbs do not vary (unless you are writing science fiction and/or horror) and that both parties are not simultaneously on top, or otherwise exceeding the bounds of physical possibility. This can be harder than you may think, and is the reason why editors/beta readers are also your friend.

## How Hot is Too Hot?

There is a broad spectrum of ways to write a sex scene, from a detailed IKEA instruction manual of exactly what goes where (members of the RNA often refer to this as “full docking manoeuvres”), to flights of emotion in which nothing is made explicit save the feelings engendered. And all stations in between. Which you choose will probably depend on genre. Erotica readers will anticipate pages that sizzle with lush description of actions and sensations, while historical fiction fans generally prefer a more subtle, emotional approach. Romance runs the gamut, and books in the genre will often have a heat rating so readers know in advance what they'll be getting.



And of course, there is always the option not to write the scene at all. Particularly in genres such as cosy mysteries, the closed bedroom door has a long and respected history. Which leads into...

## Know Why You're Writing a Sex Scene

A sex scene should conform to the rules you would apply to any other scene: that it must either move the plot along, or illustrate character. If you could delete this scene without altering the story in any material way, it probably shouldn't be there (and will likely have your readers flipping the pages to get back to the story).

# VERACITY

A sex scene can portray the depth of a reconciliation which would seem trite when restricted to dialogue. It has the power to convey feelings which your characters may be too emotionally inarticulate to utter in words. Or it might illustrate the misery of an impending breakup. It can show how right two or more people are for each other—or how wrong.

It might also be there to titillate the reader—but that doesn't let it off the hook as far as the story is concerned. Ideally, it should also elicit an *emotional* response. Your readers should care about your characters, and feel with and for them. Even if they're fanning themselves by the end of it.

And the sex—or at the very least, what happens immediately afterwards, or the following morning—should have consequences. By the end of the scene, the relationship between the partners should have developed in some way. Otherwise, why are you writing it?



## Engage the Reader

All the usual rules apply when writing sex scenes—possibly even more so. Show, don't tell. Use all the senses. Imaginative use of setting can make a huge difference. And, while it's important to keep it real, consider your audience carefully before making it *too* real. All the embarrassing little consequences of having human bodies can be used to great effect if you're aiming for comedy—but if you want your reader to be carried away by flights of fantasy, glossing over certain realities may be a good idea.

## And Finally...What Not to Do

I can think of no better cautionary tale than to look at previous winners of the Bad Sex Awards—see <https://literaryreview.co.uk/bad-sex-in-fiction-award> for details I can't quite bring myself to quote.

But if worst comes (sorry) to worst, hey, it's still an award, right?

## From Bombers to Bands...

Wendy Turner on how article inspiration can come from anywhere – even a chance conversation.

**‘Do you like jazz?’ the historian suddenly asked. We were deep into our telephone conversation about First World War aircraft. ‘Um...some,’ I stammered. I’m not that keen but I guessed he had a reason for asking.**

‘You probably don’t know my name,’ he continued. ‘but I’m John Bennett, one of Kenny Ball’s Jazzmen. The trombonist.’ Now there was a name that whizzed me back to my teens, dancing to *Sukiyaki* and *I love you, Samantha* in the church youth club. We spent the next half hour reminiscing on the band’s music and songs and eventually met up over a cup of coffee in Potters Bar where he and his wife lived.

John spoke of the thrill of sauntering along Broadway, New York and hearing *Midnight in Moscow* blare out from a jazz club. Appropriately, the band played *Midnight in Moscow* again during a trip to Moscow. They happily wore their new T-shirts emblazoned with the band’s name in Russian which unfortunately read ‘Kenny Ball and her Jazzmen!’

John’s love of music began in his early years when an uncle turned up with a pile of old 78 records. A piano followed, donated by an elderly aunt and soon his own version of *Boogie-Woogie* music erupted from the old piano to ‘harmonise’ with the 78s.

John was keen to join the school orchestra and got hold of an old trombone. He ‘cleaned’ it using a mixture of oil, soap, black lead and vaseline which clogged up the works nicely and rendered it virtually unplayable! He learnt musical basics with the help of the *George Formby Banjo Tutor*, 1/6 from Woolworths and found himself a treasured ‘new’ old trombone. He eyed up the school’s piano and before long *Honky Tonk Train Blues* rang out at unscheduled lunchtime gatherings. The teacher disapproved and locked up the piano but the boys always found ways to unlock it. Years later, John’s friend became a Headmaster and set up a jazz section in his own school orchestra in memory of those cherished unofficial sessions.

The young John joined forces with Terry Lightfoot and the two of them first heard Kenny Ball play at a gig in Essex. They were amazed at the cascade of notes issuing from Kenny’s trumpet. They formed a friendship that led to the founding of *Kenny Ball’s Jazzmen* and a happy partnership lasting over fifty-five years.

One of John’s fondest memories took place just before a recording session. They had neglected to bring along their ‘mutes’ which, held over the mouth of brass instruments, produce a unique hollow sound. After utilizing everything in sight, from mugs to ashtrays, Kenny raided the high street and came back with two babies’ potties which did the job nicely! A high point was playing at the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana, probably minus the potties.

After Kenny’s death in 2013, Kenny Jnr took over the band and John continued as trombonist. He sadly died in 2017 and is remembered as not only a superb musician, but a true gentleman.

It just goes to show that you never know where a chance remark might lead – *All That Jazz* became a suitable magazine article for *People’s Friend* magazine in 2015.



## Show Me the Funny

Steve Barley *brings the funny to Veracity.*

I've discovered the quickest way to achieve full writer's block is to be asked to write something funny\*... or worse, to pen something about how other people can be humorous in *their* writing. When our illustrious editor proposed I did exactly that, I have to say I was as stumped as our national cricket team in India recently. After all, how do you define comedy let alone weave it into your writing, and where exactly would you put it?\*

As the best way to overcome a blank page is to simply start writing and have faith in your final edit, I'm going to launch into my top five tips on how to add humour to your prose. Five is an arbitrary number – one could almost say odd – as I can only think of four at this stage, but I've filled my pen with optimism and so five it is.

### 1 – *'There's nowt so queer as folk'*

This well-known idiom usually ends a conversation that starts with the words, 'You wouldn't believe what this person I met today said/wore/was doing...' We've all come across people in our everyday life that I would describe as caricatures of the human race. My personal observations include: the

young woman quite happily queuing at the meat counter in Sainsburys wearing a cow onesie; the man who walked into A&E with a carrier bag who raised his thumb, waggled it and said it was hurting. When the triage nurse told him it would be three hours until he'd be seen, he said, 'I can't wait that long, my takeaway will get cold!' before storming off; not to mention the unexpected response I got from the innocent-looking old lady sitting next to me in a waiting room. When I told her I was about to go on holiday with my wife and several other couples, she said, very loudly, 'You're not swingers are you?'

These people really do exist, so if they make us laugh in real life then why not base a character on them in your writing? Extract the essence of what made them memorable and funny to you and apply that to your own character for comedic effect. If you limit yourself to just one main trait, such as their unconscious rudeness, or their propensity for stupid acts, or their unfiltered candour in conversation, then there's less danger of them appearing unbelievable.

### 2 – *Anticipation*

What do I mean by anticipation? I'll tell you later...

... no, that's just delaying things. Some of the funniest moments in stories, plays and on screen are when we, the audience, knows something that some of the protagonists don't and we can anticipate



# VERACITY

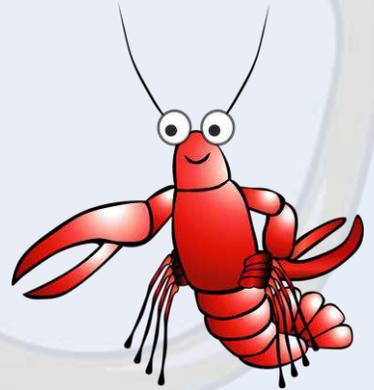
the joke or the chaos that is about to ensue. Classic examples include watching Basil think he can hide a body in a laundry basket in *Fawlty Towers*; waiting for the next item after 'four candles' that Ronnie Barker is going to ask for in the hardware store; or the clever use of mistaken identity in Billy Wilder's *Some Like it Hot*, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and Michael Frayn's bestselling novel *Skios*. Why not have a go at using miscommunication and mistaken identity in your own story?

## 3 – Wordplay

To absolutely adore good puns and wordplay is quite common, even if we do split our infinitives laughing at times. Bad puns can be fun too – after all, a groan is just a laugh in training. But we have other word weaponry in our comedic arsenal that we can use to generate a laugh such as double entendres, spoonerisms, malapropisms, oxymorons and many more. Perhaps, like Mrs Slocombe in *Are You Being Served*, you could weave your pussy into your writing or, if you prefer DIY, talk about inferior decorating or even, like Reverend Dr. Archibald Spooner, have your characters 'lop their swetters' occasionally in their dialogue. The world is your lobster.

## 4 – Go to the pub

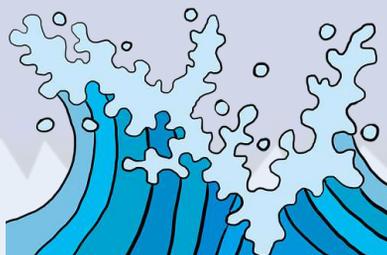
Apart from the obvious lubrication alcohol does to your word count – just make sure your spellchecker is on – listening to your friends, or eavesdropping on that table which seems to be having more fun than you, can provide you with a wealth of funny material on which to base a tale or two. Put simply, if a story or observation voiced over a drink makes everyone laugh out loud then, in the hands of a good writer, it has a shot at doing the same on paper. We all have a library of stories or life experiences which we've told time and again to different groups of people because we know they make people laugh, so why not stick some of them down in writing? You can adapt them to fit your fiction or leave them as is and call it your autobiography. The only problem is whether you will remember those stories the next morning!



## 5 – Don't Be Overly Optimistic

Nope, can't think of a fifth, so four it is. Good luck with your humorous writing folks.

**SEAS THE DAY**



\* In the 'keep the sheep out of your Capability Brown garden' sense – that's a ha-ha to you and me.

\*\*Not in a footnote that's for sure.

## The 2021 President's Competition

Sam Ellis reports on this year's President's Competition.

I chose the broad theme of Fairytale this year as I was keen to see where Verulam Writers writers would take it. VW's president John and I expected great things, and we weren't disappointed. We were taken to enchanted forests, the jungle and into a wardrobe, and we met witches, fairies and a mermaid!



John and I received eleven entries, and while the settings and characters were broad it was interesting that the stories generally (*very generally*) could be put into three categories:

1. those that did a twist on an established fairy story
2. those that created an original fairy story
3. those that wrote stories about fairies

all of which were totally acceptable.

John and I read them and met virtually to discuss our thoughts. Our lists were a little different as to which stories we thought we were going to place where, which is a real testament to the quality of the work. I know it's said every time, but it was *very hard* to judge! While we're really happy with the final outcome, there is a tinge of regret that we weren't able to give places to all the other stories that made me smile, laugh out loud and think. All were very worthy, but we did agree on a final decision.

In third place was **The Debt**, by Anne Ellis, about a debt owed by a man to a witch for the safety of his wife. This was a very strong story with a very clear message of debts having to be paid to witches because they will get you in the end, one way or another! I also liked the moral ambiguity of it all. Did the protagonist deserve to be punished? He wanted to save his wife, which is enough for anyone to make a pact with the devil, yet he did also commit murder. Both of these tell us something about his character, and gave me, as a reader, food for thought.

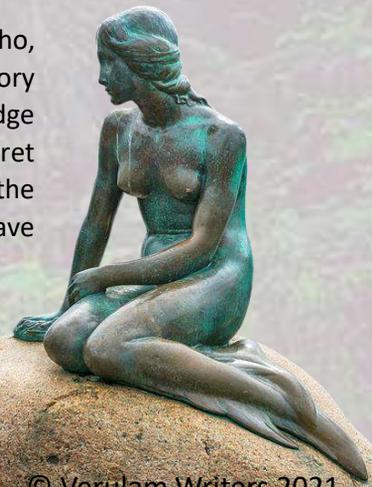


Second place was **Belle and the Big Bad Wolf** by Robert Paterson. This is a really fun take on a big bad wolf character, Rudi, and his teaming up with another, Belle. There was an awful lot of fun to be had in this story, with some brilliantly crafted characters. I imagined Rudi as a 1950s Fonzie-like character, with lines like "Relax, Doll" giving so much in terms of character, with just two words. I also absolutely loved Belle's full name - Miss Principal Respectable Cloverbell St. John Halifax. Brilliantly over the top!

Our winning entry was **The Pidú** by Philip Mitchell. This is the story of someone who, as a result of having a terrible secret, turns into a goat-like creature - a Pidú. The story is full of fantasy, wonder and questions, but perhaps what pushed it over the edge was the strong moral element that was interwoven with the plot – a dark secret caused the protagonist to transform, and only revealing the secret will 'break the spell.' It was almost a like a fable from Aesop. Of course I would have liked to have known what the secret was, but I can live with the not knowing!

Congratulations to Phil and to all of the entrants. We hope you enjoyed writing the stories as much as we enjoyed reading them.

The winning entry, *The Pidú*, is reprinted overleaf.



## The Pidú

*Phil Mitchell's winning entry to The President's Competition*

For seven nights, the young man dreamt of lying in a moonlit field surrounded by wooded hills. Thousands of stars lit the sky and the trees glowed red.

Each night the field grew smaller, the coloured trees and steep hills nearing, until on the seventh night he found himself deep in the wood, choking on falling pine needles—sharp and hot. And when the brightest star lowered from the sky and shone painfully into his terrified eyes, he woke in his bed as a Pidú.

White hair, itchy and hot, grew from his head to his feet, and he rubbed his sore head where two curved horns had sprouted. His face had grown long, and he gazed along his snout to a black nose. When he cried, realising what he had become, he bleated.

Rising from bed, he trotted downstairs. His housemate screamed, spilt his coffee, and fled from the house. The Pidú chased after him into the street, shouting for his friend's help, but the housemate didn't look back.

Neighbours peered out from behind their curtains and came out onto the street, gawping. A child, holding his toy sword tight, sang to the Pidú.

'You have a terrible secret. Your insides are rotten and black. Tell your loved ones the secret, or you'll die today and never turn back.'

Everyone nodded, knowing very well the old stories of the Pidú.

A secret? The Pidú thought.

He did have a secret.

A secret that no matter how hard he tried to hide and forget, was always there, making him tired and heavy.

The little boy was joined by his friends, and they surrounded the Pidú. A girl gently poked the Pidú in his side with a stick, and when he flinched, another girl poked him harder. And as the Pidú turned from the group, trotting down the street, they followed him, prodding. When he broke into a run, feet clattering on the cobbles, they chased him, squealing with delight.

He reached his mother's house, and without knocking, burst through the door, and locked it behind him.



# VERACITY



His mother was at the stove boiling jam, and when she saw the Pidú, she dropped her wooden spoon into the pan of bubbling berries and screamed.

‘It’s me!’ he cried. ‘Your son.’

When she looked closely, she knew it was true. Her son had turned into a Pidú.

She recovered herself, walked over to him, and slapped his long face.

‘What secret are you keeping?’ she snapped. ‘Only the worst secrets turn you into a beast.’

‘I’ll tell you, if you let me,’ he said, and leant to whisper in her ear. But as he tried to say the secret, to turn him back into a man, he found he couldn’t. He remembered how terribly she’d beat him as a child for his secrets and fibs, so when he spoke, he found he could only tell half the secret, not all, but enough that he hoped the white hair would fall from his body and he’d return to being a man.

When his mother heard his half-secret, she backed away, picked up a sharp knife covered with the red juice of berries and pointed it at him, chasing him out of the house. For although he’d only told half of the secret, what he’d said was so terrible his mother would never forgive him.

The children were waiting for him on the street, and they chased after him, whipping his back with their sticks, and calling him beastly names, until exhausted and bruised, he reached the house of his sister.

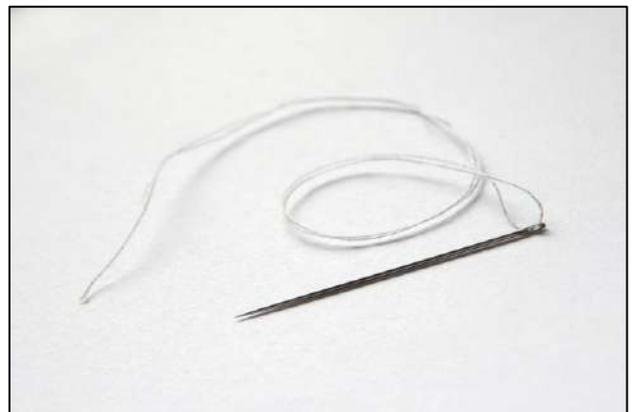
Again, he entered the house without knocking, frightening his sister whilst she was mending a dress, dropping her needle and thread.

‘It’s me,’ he cried. ‘Your brother.’

When she looked closely, she knew it was true. Her brother had turned into a Pidú.

‘What evil thing have you kept secret?’ she asked.

He trotted over to whisper in her ear, but as he went to say the secret, he realised he couldn’t. He remembered how as children his sister would betray his secrets to their mother, so when he spoke, he only told three-quarters of the secret, not all, but enough that he hoped the horns would fall from his head and he’d return to being a man.



# VERACITY

When his sister heard his three-quarters-secret, she backed away, picked up her gleaming dressmaker's scissors and chased him out of the house with them. For although he'd only told part of the secret, it was so terrible his sister would never forgive him.

The children outside chased him down the street, throwing stones at his head, until, bleeding and sore, he reached the house of his sweetheart.

Without knocking, he burst through the door, and frightened her as she stacked firewood by the hearth, dropping a log onto her foot.

Terrified by his appearance, she turned white with shock. She grabbed an axe lying by the firewood and swung it at him.

'It's me!' he cried, jumping back. 'Your sweetheart.'

When she looked closely, she knew it was true. Her sweetheart had turned into a Pidú.

She lowered the axe and came near him, soothing his white hair and stroking his soft snout.

'You have a terrible secret,' she said.

The Pidú nodded.

'You can tell me if you want to.'



As he went to whisper the secret in her beautiful ear, he realised he couldn't, for telling his sweetheart was the hardest of all. He'd rather die that day as a Pidú than hurt her and lose her for eternity. But as he turned away, she kissed him on the cheek, and suddenly the whole, true secret tumbled out of his mouth.

He stood back, lowering his head in shame. But she told him to look her in the eyes.

'Everyone makes mistakes,' she said. And the white hair shed from his body, the horns fell from his head, and his trotters dropped from his feet, and he hugged her tight and promised never to keep a secret again.

## You've a Voice; Write and Understand This



Robert Paterson *reviews his Writing Voices Workshop*

### PLAN OF ACTION

Being elected to the role of Vice-Chairman in September 2020 emboldened me to try out new challenges within Verulam Writers. When the committee suggested conducting writing workshops to add variety to the 2021 schedule, I agreed to do one about Writing Voices on the evening of Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> February; the first such event I have ever been responsible for within the circle.

I planned the event with care and the committee reviewed and approved it, but as we shall see, while well-laid plans help, they don't always work out...

### WORDS SAY SO MUCH

So, what is a "Writing Voice"?

It's the style and tone in which a particular author writes. It lies in the type of verbs and adjectives they use, how they characterise certain people, or whether their narrative focuses on emotions, appearances or concepts. Some, like Jilly Cooper and Sophie Kinsella, are light and informal. Others, like Dennis Wheatley, are wordier, even if in Wheatley's case, he still manages to thrill his readers.

Having the correct voice in your writing is very important if you wish to appeal to a specific demographic, or fit into a certain genre. Horror novels, for example, tend to have a very sinister tone, with even the more virtuous characters having a dark side. Adventure novels emphasise the conflicts caused by perils and villains, while romance novels focus on the barriers that love must overcome to make the final union more satisfying. Children's books must be light and free of complex words, and make the kids look smarter than the adults!

### CHATS AND CHALLENGES

The concepts mentioned above were all in the discussion I began the workshop with, where I set the scene before allowing members to make their own contribution. Yet I knew the evening wouldn't be interesting if it was all lectures and chatter. It was time for the circle to discover different writing voices for themselves!

Conducting the meeting on Zoom allowed me to share a document with the circle on screen. It contained the (fictional) accounts of four very different people watching the launch of a new merchant's ship called the *Saint Nicholas*, in what was probably the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I put it to the circle members to describe exactly what sort of people these were.

# VERACITY

The discussion was fruitful and even threw in some curve balls. The first person describing the launch was enraptured and clearly deeply religious, yet while I had imagined the character to be male, some considered him to be a woman given how he used “a baby’s first cry” as a metaphor. The second character I imagined to be a worried sailor’s wife waving her husband off, but some thought it was a man given that the lady observed “wenches” on the quayside. The third character was more obviously a male aristocrat interested in the trade the ship would bring, but members disagreed how much he truly cared for the common man. The fourth and final writer was a cynic who had nearly become a victim of pressganging, but nobody could agree how old he was. Overall, it was a richly varied and interesting exercise for everyone involved (try it for yourself on the next page!).



I concluded the first half of the evening with a 10-minute discussion about first person narratives. This covered why certain characters are chosen to be the narrator, why third person narratives aren’t always used and what the voice of the narrator contributes to the tone of the story. But there had been enough talk for the evening. It was time to apply what we had discussed.

## **ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER**

Once everyone returned from their tea break, I shared a PowerPoint slideshow with the members. On each slide, I revealed 2 different images, which I asked the members to describe in various ways.

To ease them into the exercise, I began by sharing images of a space shuttle launch and a cruise ship in a Norwegian fjord, which I had them describe in their *own* writing voice. There were a further 3 slides after that, containing a total of 6 images. Among the challenges that I set the members were describing rush hour in New York’s Grand Central Station both emotionally and practically, or describing an old car production line (circa 1920) from the viewpoint of an observer and a participant.

Members’ contributions were enthusiastic and always surprising, yet their impartiality became compromised when I asked them to describe a crowd of beauty pageant contestants from a personal and aesthetic viewpoint. The common modern disdain for such events made it hard for some people not to describe the scene in a negative light, but others rose to the challenge admirably.

## **IF ONLY I’D HAD MORE TIME...**

Although the exercises in the second half were very interesting and got everyone thinking, they took up more time than I’d anticipated and soon it was time to go. I had planned a subsequent 3-part exercise in which members would write a passage about a certain scenario from the viewpoint of different kinds of people. But who knows; perhaps that exercise will come around at the next party.

See you then and there!



## First Person Narratives Exercise: The Launch of the Saint Nicholas

Robert Paterson's *Writing Voices Workshop exercise*.

These narratives all describe the same scene in different ways. What kind of person do you think is writing about the scene? What emotions are they feeling? What is their background and characteristics? What might they look like if you met them?

### ONE

The sight of the *Saint Nicholas* was as wondrous as a tale from the gospels. The sun climbed in the sky behind her, silhouetting her three masts as they stood in defiance of the heavens. Her paint was as fresh as a baby's first cry and shimmered in the late dawn light. Cannons hid just out of sight behind the gun ports, like sleeping dragons ready to let loose their fire. Never had our fair city seen such a vessel and small wonder that as she cast off, the crowds cheered as they might have on the first Palm Sunday.

### TWO

Although my first duty was to see Jonah off, it was impossible not to get caught up in the occasion. Not only was the *Saint Nicholas* a grand ship to behold, but the joyous cacophony of the crowd was infectious as we heard the sails stretch and draw her out to sea. Merchants, tradesmen, stevedores, fishwives, wenches and gentry; all both high and low joined with me in waving and cheering, letting glory and wonder conquer our fears for the future.

### THREE

My father's motto was that a nation's pride depends upon its mastery of the sea, and the *Saint Nicholas* was proof of that. As I waved my hat out of the window of my carriage, I thought fondly of finely blended tea on the lawn in the summer and mulled wine in the winter. And just as my wife would get new silks for her gowns, so would the baker get silks to sift his flour. The innkeeper would get brandy and rum to serve, his patrons would get tobacco for their pipes and all would prosper and be happy. God speed, *Saint Nicholas*, and may you bring the world back to our shores for the good of all.

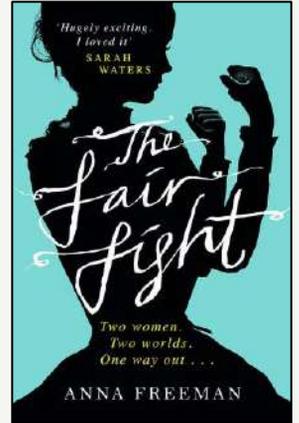
### FOUR

I waved as the *Saint Nicholas* cast off, but could not cheer. The grandness of her lines and the necessity of her cause was not defence enough against the images of pitching decks, stinking slop buckets, iron-hard biscuits and lashes from the cat that assailed my mind. How close I came to enduring those evils! Had I not been lucky enough to hear the clink of that shilling at the bottom of my ale jug, the press gang would have had me, and I'd be on my way to India in stripes whether I liked it or not. How rarely the world lets us face our demons, rather than smile through and forget about them.

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

Yvonne Moxley is reading... **The Fair Fight** by Anna Freeman.

An exciting eighteenth-century debut novel about two women from opposite ends of society learning to box, bare-knuckle style. Ruth, born in a brothel, fights to earn a living; Lady Charlotte learns to fight her way out of her wealthy, insufferable life. Anna Freeman, creative writing lecturer at Bath Spa University, also gives feedback at Curtis Brown where, on a recent course, I felt obliged to read her book. I'm so glad I did. I can highly recommend it, even for those, like me, who dislike boxing!

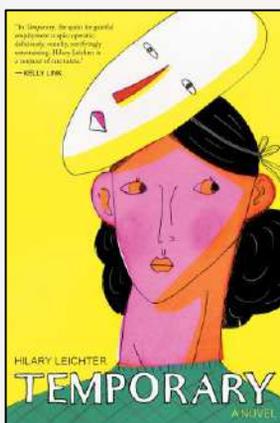
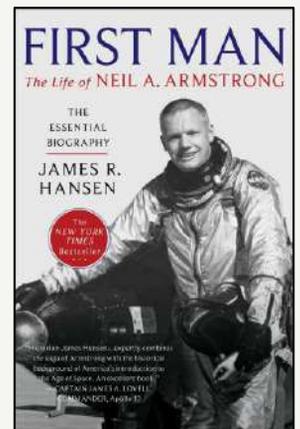
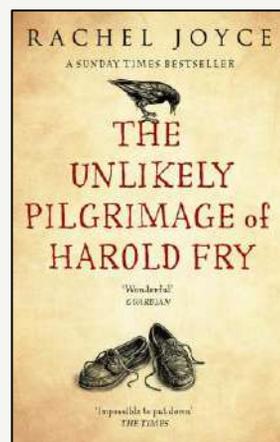


John Spencer is reading... **First Man** by James Hansen.

This is a comprehensive book reviewing the life of the first man to walk on the moon, Neil Armstrong. It is important to read because good as the film is that was based on it, this book has a thousand times more detail. His accomplishments are well known, but the book brings out the effect of the death of his young daughter, the effects of the astronaut's life on their families, and the inner challenges that he fought. If you understand the politics of the space programme, this book shows why we were so lucky to have him as the First Man.

Steve Barley is reading... **The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry** by Rachel Joyce.

An unusual journey both physically and emotionally for an elderly gentleman who starts walking and doesn't stop. Initially I thought it odd, but it soon became quite compelling and ultimately endearing. Bear with it.



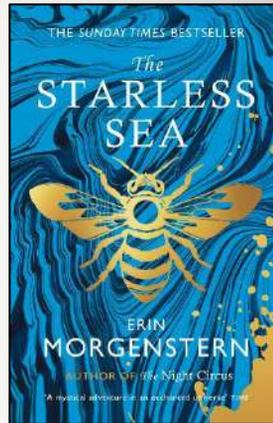
Tina Shaw is reading... **Temporary** by Hilary Leichter.

A modern novel about the temporary nature of work and relationships. It started off fairly positively, describing different working environments but the middle section descended into fantasy and I struggled to finish it. Not recommended.

# VERACITY

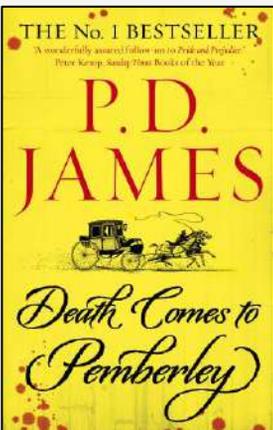
Sam Ellis is reading... **The Starless Sea** by Erin Morgenstern.

A dreamlike fantasy novel that takes you into multiple magical worlds. While I didn't feel it was as strong as the author's previous work *The Night Circus*, it's still an imaginative feast of mind-bending escapism.



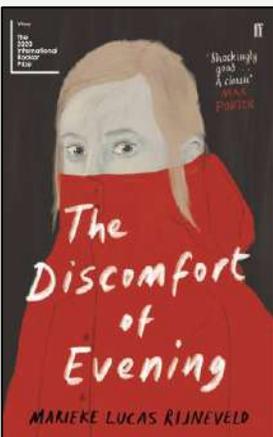
Robert Paterson is reading... **Death Comes to Pemberley** by P.D. James.

1803; Six years after the events of a certain romance classic, Elizabeth Bennet Darcy is preparing Pemberley estate for a great ball. Suddenly, her estranged sister Lydia bursts in unexpectedly and a man is found dead in the grounds. While roguish George Wickham is the chief suspect, his old friend Fitzwilliam Darcy doubts his guilt. Yet will a jury be convinced too? Baroness James's last major work is a warren of twists and turns that's faithful to Jane Austen without reading like fan fiction. It's dense in places, but with strong dialogue, historical accuracy and no loose ends.



Phil Mitchell is reading... **The Discomfort of Evening** by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld.

From the first page, where a mother smothers her children's faces with greasy udder ointment as protection from the cold, to the sad and shocking conclusion, this International Booker Prize-winning novel which centres around a tragic family accident, is both beautiful and disturbing at the same time. Truly unforgettable. The best thing I've read in ages.



Anne Ellis is reading... **Gideon the Ninth** by Tamsyn Muir.

A darkly gothic, original, funny, complex and tragic, it gives you two vivid, antagonistic female leads for the price of one. A summary? As Charles Stross put it: Lesbian necromancers...in space. Will be reading the sequel, Harrow the Ninth, when I've recovered from this one.



## Difficult Topics – How Do You Approach Them?

Tina Shaw *does some tough talking...*

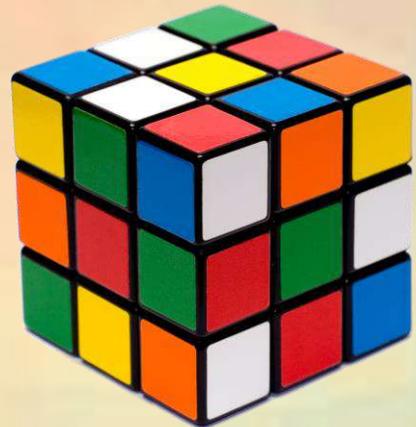
**As usual the editor has sent me an interesting suggestion. ‘Difficult Topics. How do you approach them? Head on? With subtlety? What is the best way to deal with them?’**

After my initial blank response I came to the conclusion that difficult topics are not the same for every writer. There are certain topics which others might find challenging - sexual abuse, illness, death, religion - which I feel I can write about without difficulty. However, I find descriptions of actual sexual practices much harder. Maybe it is a result of personal hang-ups, but I dislike books which choose to go into intimate details, and when I write about sex, for me, less is more. I prefer to leave the reader to fill in the blanks for themselves. A few short sentences can usually convey what is happening whilst it is the emotion surrounding the acts that hold more interest for me to write about.

Other difficult topics will be the ones where I have not fully processed my own emotions. This could also apply to the topics above mentioned, which I can normally write about freely. For example, if I have had a recent experience of these issues, such as a bereavement, or serious illness, and have not had time to process my feelings related to them, then they will come into the category of difficult topics. These subjects I would probably choose to tackle by writing more extensively about the issues, either in the form of a short story, or by inclusion in a novel. Writing about a really traumatic experience can be cathartic. Many years ago I removed a newborn baby from its parents and transported her to foster care. The images remain with me even now. Within days I had written an anonymous article for a professional journal describing the event. In this instance spilling my emotions onto paper provided me with a means

of coping with my feelings and may have been helpful to others involved in similar tasks.

Authors today are facing difficulties with cultural appropriation. If I, as a white British woman, decide to include characters who don't fit my personal profile, I may risk criticism for my lack of understanding of how a person from a different background may view the world. Of course, books



would be dull and unrealistic if the characters were only a one-dimensional reflection of their authors. The real world is full of diversity and much the richer for it, as any writing should be. However, I would be wary of writing in the first person from the point of view of a character from a very different background to my own. The Writers' Association PEN has declared the authors right to imagination, allowing them to describe the world from the point of view of characters from different cultural backgrounds.

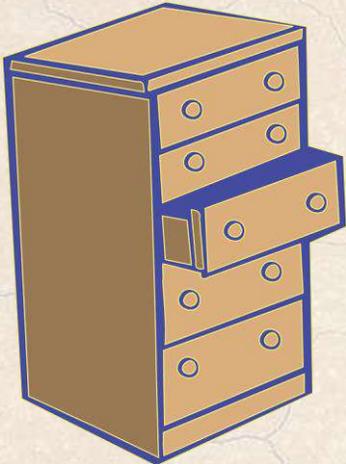
There probably is no 'best way' to deal with difficult topics. It is for the writer to decide both what they want to write about and how to approach the subjects. It will be different for all of us and may also be vary for each of us at different times in our lives.

## The 'New' Dusted-Down Project

Yvonne Moxley on the progress of her novel.

**'No way!' I hear you say, when I tell you that I'm writing a novel, which, if I didn't know you any better, I would think you were being a tad sarcastic. OK, I'm actually re-writing my novel. No, re-re-writing it. I won't say when I first put fingers to keyboard as it would be too embarrassing, but let's just say that quills had finally been abandoned.**

I have tried writing this tome in first person, third person, present tense and past tense. So I did what any professional and motivated writer does - I stuck it in a drawer.



A few years ago I took it out. I perfected it. Really perfected it. It was the best anyone had ever written. Lesley Eames (VW former chair) kindly read it for me. She was full of praise. She thought it was good, except...

I noted everything she said. Her critique was superb and I agreed with it all. Her suggestions really made me think. In fact I thought so much that I felt obliged to put it back in the drawer. That had nothing to do with Lesley, obviously. But it meant writing, I mean re-re-re-writing the book all over again. All 100,000 words – or enormous chunks of it, anyway.

Also back in the drawer went my motivation. Again, totally my fault because Lesley was greatly encouraging, it's just that I knew that to write the best book I could, and to follow Lesley's suggestions (not that I was obliged to, of course) meant so much work.

So I started writing non-fiction and took Wendy Turner's (VW committee member's) advice (what would I do without Verulam Writers?) and submitted a proposal to Amberley Publishers, who Wendy already writes for. They liked my proposal, but (where have I heard this before?) it wasn't quite right for them. However, they suggested that I may be interested in their A-Z series, so that's what I have been doing and I'm now three books in. Well, almost three. The pandemic meant I couldn't leave the house to take the 100 images required, so I opened that drawer again. Yes, *that* drawer.

I signed up for a Curtis Brown Creative on-line course entitled Writing Historical Fiction, and I'm now enthusiastic once again. Much of the course reiterated the recommendations that Lesley had made and although the CBC courses aren't cheap, and I'm being given similar suggestions to that of Lesley's, my motivation has now returned. I am trying to write, re-write, or re-hash 3,000 words a week. I'm aware that this isn't a mega amount of work but I do have lots of other things to write, and doing 3,000 a week means I should have completed it by the end of October. I aim to send it out to agents/publishers before Christmas, or at least before the seasonal rush. Having just re-read this last paragraph I feel I ought to stress, even if it's just for my own benefit, that I *am* talking about 2021!

## Brace Yourself

*Lesley Eames on tough reviews.*

**You're having a book published? Yay! Now you can sit back and simply bask in the glory of that accomplishment...**

**...or can you?**

Maybe you can, if:

1) you make your book unavailable for reviews and ratings by not actually selling it or selling it only to your nearest and dearest (particularly your mum)

or

2) you have the hide of a rhinoceros.



For those of us who wish to sell to a wider market but have softer skins, publication means bracing ourselves for bumpy rides. Yes, reviews and ratings can be joyful things. But not always.

Of course, one way of coping with negative reviews is simply not to read them, but that means closing our minds to the possibility of learning something from them. As well as being a writer, I teach and mentor other writers, and I also edit. I consider it to be part of my job to keep a finger on the pulse of what readers are saying, not just about my books, but also about the books of other writers too. For example, one criticism I've seen time and again goes along the lines of: *I just didn't engage with/care about the characters*. This is useful to remember. Clearly, characters don't need to be saints (perfect people tend to be boring) but they do need something that will make them sympathetic or at least fascinating to readers.

It's unrealistic to expect all readers to enjoy all of our books (Marmite, anyone?), so some polite criticism has to be taken on the chin. Not all criticism is polite, however. Sometimes it's vicious, illogical, ridiculous...

Here, for your edification, are some review 'types' I've come across.



**Shooting the messenger** – *This book wouldn't download properly – 1\**. Not the writer's fault, but hey ho...

**Product confusion** – *These socks were lovely – 5\**. Well, 5\* is 5\* so who's complaining?

**Plot spoilers** – *The story ended with X, Y and Z*. Great. Why would anyone want to read the book now they know how it ends?

**Misunderstanding the rating system** – *This book was wonderful so I'm giving it 1\**. Er, that's the lowest rating, not the highest.

# VERACITY

**Misunderstanding when to write a review.** Seeing a 3\* review of one of my books, I assumed the reader hadn't enjoyed it – until I saw what they'd written: *Haven't read this yet. Looks good.*

**Not reading the sales copy.** *Too many voices* was the verdict of a reader on a book of mine, despite the sales copy making it crystal clear that the story was told by three characters.

**Low expectations.** *I thought this was going to be one of those depressing workhouse stories*, a reviewer wrote about one of my books. The reader then expressed herself to be pleasantly surprised by the book and left a lovely review, but I did wonder why she'd read a book that she expected to depress her. Reviews that begin, *I don't usually read this sort of book* are surprisingly common. Often the reader isn't pleasantly surprised.

**Other expectations.** *Nothing happened* was said about one of my books. Nothing apart from a mugging, a shipwreck, horseracing, a rescue, fraud, an attempted shooting...

**Eh?** I had a terrific 5\* review from one happy reader but that reader regretted that I barely mentioned the war. Three characters went off to the war, letters passed thick and fast to and from the front, there were several updates about the progress of the war, and numerous mentions of the impact of the war on the home front – food shortages, high prices, blackouts, bombings...



**Agendas.** A reviewer rated one of my novels at only 3\* because she was disappointed it didn't feature a *non-heterosexual relationship*. It didn't feature a lot of other themes either – race, alien invasion, the history of ploughing, premier league football...

**Keep taking the tablets, dear.** I've come to expect that spite will motivate some reviews. I'm already anticipating that at least one kind soul is going to go straight in and give my new book a 1\* rating (without a review) as I'm one of several saga writers this happens to. Another writer I know receives reviews from a 'reader' who tears each novel to shreds and vows never to read another book by said author – until the next book gets exactly the same treatment from the same reviewer. I suspect there are some yet-to-be-successful writers out there who let their frustration get the better of them and try to bring down other writers. I also suspect that some reviewers just carry poison inside them. One reader left a scathing 1\* review of one of my books, denouncing it as predictable and unbelievable, and quipping that reading it meant she'd lost several hours of her life which she'd never get back. Oh, chortle, chortle. I can't help wondering why she read the book to the end if it was so excruciating and what she got out of expressing herself so unpleasantly.

It's always disappointing to receive poor reviews but it comes with the territory of publication and it's important to balance the bad ones with the good ones. *So boring*, a reader declared about one of my books, but other readers wrote, *Never a dull moment* and, *Gripped me right to the end*.

The book of mine which received the 1\* review mentioned above has in fact received more than 1,600 5\* ratings. So there we go. Yah boo sucks to you, Mrs 1\*.



## 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.

# VERACITY

- **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.

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## Verulam Writers on Fire for the Howard Linskey Crime Competition 2021

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, celebrated crime novelist, Howard Linskey, returned to Verulam Writers by Zoom to judge our annual crime short story competition. There were eleven entries, and Howard said that once again, the quality of the stories was outstanding. From drug dealers to art fraud, and serial killers to space-cows, the variety of stories and the ingenious ways they were told showed the immense talent of all the entrants.

Howard provided feedback on each story, followed by the writers reading their entries to the group. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to hear all the stories, but Howard provided comments on all the entries before delivering his verdict.

Claire Evans was highly commended for *Trapped*, the story of a safe cracker trying to go straight. Pressured into a job by the gang that got him busted last time, he's forced to take out insurance to stop history repeating.

Also highly commended was Ben Bergonzi for *Honest Admission*, in which Winston, a dustman, gets revenge on a colleague who's confessed to drunk-driving the same night Winston's lover was killed on the road.

Then it was time to announce the formal prize-winners. Third place went to Anne Ellis for *Childsplay*, the story of an ex-con becoming a surrogate parent to her new partner's baby. When the jailbird's old boss kidnaps the baby, a rescue ensues! The story had a great last line that had members groaning with laughter.

Second place went to Dave Weaver for *At the Sound of My Voice*. In this story, Mickey and Krasinski are two career criminals with a cunning plan to use hypnosis to persuade a bank teller to assist them in robbery. But it turns out the teller has nefarious ideas of his own!

And the winner of the 2021 Howard Linskey Competition, claiming a competition prize for the second time this year was Phil Mitchell for *My Brother, The Arsonist*. His story featured Gethin, a young tearaway with a disturbing fascination with fire. Little by little, his brother notices more buildings burning down near Gethin. But it turns out someone else may be responsible.

The winner of the Gnome de Plume with the pseudonym, Stan Doubt, was Tina Shaw.

Well done to everyone that took part.

## My Brother, the Arsonist

*Phil Mitchell's winning entry to the Howard Linskey Crime Competition.*

My brother loved fighting. Beneath his mop of red hair, Gethin's freckled face was bruised like banana skin. He'd start fights for the slightest of reasons: a classmate whispering behind his back, eyeing him strangely, or laughing as he passed. But Gethin's gangly limbs and weak muscles meant he wasn't built for fighting. Every boy in his school year had defeated him. And after a fight, he'd simply pick himself up and sulk over to a quiet corner of the playground. I was in the first year and Gethin was in his fifth. At school, I pretended not to know him.

Outside of school, Gethin and I spent time in the woods climbing trees and building dens. One weekend, he took a can of our dead mum's hairspray and a green plastic lighter from his backpack. He scraped back the lighter wheel and grinned as a bright flame sparked and swayed in the breeze.

'Stand back,' he said, raising the spray can to the flame. He squeezed the nozzle. The can hissed. And the lighter ignited a cloud of fire.

'My turn!' I begged.

'You're too young,' he said.

I tried snatching the can, and he shoved me hard on the chest, sending me tumbling onto my back, twigs snapping beneath me.

'I'll tell D—.'

I'd almost said, 'Dad.' But he was dead too.

Gethin used his flamethrower to scorch the bark of a tree black, then tossed the empty can into the undergrowth. The flames never left his eyes after that.

A sweaty, red-faced kid in the sixth form sold Gethin single cigarettes from packets he stole from his mum's handbag. Gethin smoked them in the woods on our way home from school, staring cross-eyed at their glowing tips. And after he'd blown the last ribbon of smoke from the corner of his mouth, he'd flick his lighter on and off, gazing deep into the dancing flame until ready to leave.

Before arriving home, he'd chew half a pack of mints, so our grandparents, who we now lived with, didn't notice his cigarette breath. And as soon as he was through the front door, he'd rush up to the bathroom to wash his face and hands of the smoke, returning downstairs changed from his uniform and stinking of deodorant so strong I could taste it.

While we ate dinner, Grandad asked Gethin about his bruises, and he'd describe his fights blow-by-blow—leaving out the fact he'd lost.

'Well done, Lad. Don't take any nonsense,' Grandad said. 'Always stick up for yourself, and your old grandad's here if you need any help.'

# VERACITY

Grandad had a boxer's flat nose and roughly inked tattoos from his hands to his shoulders. He was still tough, despite his stiffening limbs and wrinkles.

Gethin reminded Grandad of Dad, and he'd sometimes call Gethin by Dad's name, Hugh. Grandad was often confused like that. 'Having a moment,' we called it.

When Gethin received a black eye and bloody nose from his sweaty cigarette seller, he began buying whole packets of cigarettes from the corner shop. He must have been stealing the money for them. And when our grandparents were out, I caught him returning Grandad's money tin to the cupboard, placing it in the exact position he found it.

'Grandad won't notice it's gone,' he said, closing the cupboard door. 'Say anything and I'll kill you.'

Soon after, Gethin bought a refillable lighter, a skull & crossbones embossed on the metal case. He'd hover his palm over its flame, wincing with pain, until it was too much, and he spat on his hand to cool it.

One evening, the rugby club near our house burned down.

Gethin and I watched among a crowd as four fire engines extinguished the flames, black smoke billowing over the town. There was a rare smile on his lips.

'Bastards!' shouted Gethin's former-cigarette seller's father to those in the crowd who'd listen. Pacing around in his blazer and rugby club tie, he was as sweaty and red-faced as his son. 'If I catch them, I'll kill them.'

The next morning, Gethin and I went to see the ruin. The building's blackened beams had collapsed into the still smoking ash.

'Who do you think did it?' I asked Gethin.

'How should I know?' he snapped, turning and walking towards the woods.

'You were out last night before it happened. You might have seen someone.'

He paused and faced me.

'I saw nothing, right? Leave it.'

He continued towards the woods, and I went home.

Grandma was in the kitchen peeling potatoes for Sunday lunch, and Grandad was rummaging through the shed.

'I've misplaced my petrol can,' he said. 'My memory must be going.'

Two nights later, I watched from my bedroom window as something burned a few streets away, tall flames licking the orange sky.

The front door closed softly, and Gethin tiptoed up the stairs into the bathroom.

I waited on the landing until he'd finished sloshing water over his face and came out.

# VERACITY

'There's another fire,' I said, blocking his way.

'It's the corner shop.'

He barged past me, and on the back of his neck was a black patch of soot.

'You've missed a bit,' I said, pointing to the back of my own neck.

He rubbed at it and looked at his blackened fingers.

'He'd stopped selling me cigarettes, anyway,' he said, returning to the bathroom.

At school, everyone was talking about the fires. And rumours spread that someone had stuffed burning rags through the letter boxes of two of the boys from Gethin's year. Their fathers had doused them with water. The Police were investigating.

Gethin had been in fights with those boys.

Later, the school secretary led Gethin through the playground towards the headmistress's office.

I didn't see him return to class.

But after school, I found Gethin smoking cigarettes in the woods, a small fire of twigs and dried leaves at his feet.

'What did the headmistress want?' I asked.

He prodded the fire with his shoe.

'She was asking about the fires,' he said.

'Was it you?'

He threw his cigarette into the fire and stamped out the flames. Then Gethin lurched at me, punching me hard in the stomach.

'No,' he said, walking away as I gasped for air. 'It wasn't me.'

\*

After dinner, I secretly followed Gethin as he headed back towards school. He snuck through a gap in the fence and crossed the playing field to the Science block.

As I waited by the fence, worrying the caretaker might catch him, Gethin slid open a window and climbed in.

Minutes later, black smoke poured from the building.

Two figures burst from the Science block door, bent over, coughing. One was Gethin, and it took a moment for me to recognise the other was Grandad.

I backed away to hide behind a bush as Gethin supported Grandad by the waist and helped him run towards the hole in the fence.

# VERACITY

Once they were through the hole, Grandad grabbed Gethin firmly by the shoulders and faced him.

‘What were you thinking, Hugh?!’ he shouted, pointing at the burning school.

Gethin trembled.

Suddenly, Grandad looked around, confusion in his eyes.

‘Where am I?’ he asked. ‘Why am I here?’

Gethin took Grandad by the arm and led him away.

I stayed and watched the blazing Science block until the Fire Brigade doused the flames, stopping them from spreading to the rest of the school.

We received a telephone call from the school on Monday morning telling us to stay home, but we were back in the next day.

The entire school gathered in the playground as the bleary-eyed headmistress told us someone was terrorising the neighbourhood—they would be caught, and they would be punished. Staring at the floor and hands in pockets, Gethin’s shoulders shook as if he was silently laughing.

Later that day, Gethin was led again to the headmistress’s office. This time there was a Police car waiting in the car park.

Grandma collected me from school early. Walking home, she told me Grandad had gone to see Gethin at the Police Station.

‘Do you know anything?’ she asked me. ‘About the fires?’

I shook my head.

Grandma and I waited for news. And then Grandad returned alone—Gethin would be held in the cells—a danger to the public.

The house was cold and quiet. Grandad lit a fire in the fireplace, and as he lay extra logs in the flames, the phone rang.

I answered.

It was Gethin.

‘Look after Grandad,’ he pleaded.

Grandad was staring into the fire, eyes glowing orange.

‘He doesn’t know what he’s doing,’ said Gethin.

Grandad placed a log directly into the fire, both hands in the burning flames. And I noticed his fists in the firelight—one tattooed FURY and one tattooed FIRE.

‘I’ll try,’ I said to Gethin. ‘I’ll try.’

## Verulam Writers 2020/2021 Competition Winners

FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	GNOME
<b>David Gibson Cup</b> <b>Topic:</b> Sunrise and Sunset (set by Wendy Turner) <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 21 <sup>st</sup> October 2020			
Sam Ellis	Phil Mitchell	Anne Ellis	Anne Ellis (aka May Dittup)
<b>Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> Great Lives (set by Tina Shaw) <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 2 <sup>nd</sup> December 2020			
Ben Bergonzi	Robert Paterson	Judith Foster	Wendy Turner (aka Holly N Ivy)
<b>President's Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> Fairytale (set by Sam Ellis) <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 3 <sup>rd</sup> March 2021			
Phil Mitchell	Robert Paterson	Anne Ellis	Phil Mitchell (aka Grimm N Bearit)
<b>Crystal Decanter Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> Fantastic Voyage (set by Robert Paterson) <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 5 <sup>th</sup> May 2021			
Sam Ellis	Dave Weaver	John Spencer	Sally Hewitt (aka Sue Perfreak)
<b>Howard Linskey Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> Crime <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 30 <sup>th</sup> June 2021			
Phil Mitchell	Dave Weaver	Anne Ellis	Tina Shaw (aka Stan Doubt)



on



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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 @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!





on



## @verulam\_writers

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?**
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Then head to @verulam\_writers on

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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!



## Getting It Down To One

Robert Paterson's *guide to choosing a theme for a competition.*

When I won first prize in 2020's Crystal Decanter Competition, I was over the moon. This was the first fiction writing competition I'd won with the Verulam Writers. Besides, I hadn't considered my story a sure-fire winner and my success was a delightful surprise in a year that hardly ranked as a good one by anyone's standards.



But winning the competition left me with a significant challenge. I had to judge next year's competition *and* choose a theme for it. What could that theme be?

Now for some of you, choosing a theme might be a struggle. Your mind might go blank when you thought inspiration would arise unbidden. Well, my problem was the complete opposite. I couldn't *stop* thinking of possible themes! For weeks, a new idea popped into my head in every idle moment. I had to keep a scrap of paper and a pen by my side to write them all down.

Since there could only be one theme, I *had* to find a way to narrow the choices down. This article will describe the system I devised so that you, or anyone you know, may use it too if inspiration strikes a little too often! And it doesn't have to apply to competition themes alone.

### **STEP 1: THINK UP YOUR THEMES**

If you're like me, then this is the easiest part. All you need is your imagination and writing materials. Inspiration doesn't have a schedule, so keep a pen and paper handy to write down spontaneous ideas. There's no real limits, but I suggest you should have at least 10 ideas to have some sense of contrast. I certainly recommend stopping if you have 40 or so!

Each theme should have a brief title and a fuller description of what the entrants should write, so that you can put both on a flier.

### **STEP 2: MAXIMISE ALL THE THINGS YOU *MOST* WANT IN YOUR STORY**

As the judge of the competition, you have been given the privilege to inject your own passions into the theme. Therefore, the first part of Step 2 (which is also fairly easy) is to write out your top personal and literary interests. Perhaps you like adventure, romance or spooky stories. You might like stories featuring cars, dinosaurs, trains, cute animals or the sea. Once you have a handful of qualities written down, score your themes on how likely each theme is to feature them. This could be on an ascending numerical scale of 0 to 10, or with words ranging from NEVER, through MAYBE, up to CERTAINLY. Highlight the top-scoring themes overall.

*Note: I performed Steps 2 to 6 with the aid of tables I constructed on MS Excel, but you can carry out the process in whatever way you prefer. Remember, this is a responsibility that you can make fun for yourself!*

## **STEP 3: RATE THE THEMES ACCORDING TO THEIR OBJECTIVE QUALITIES**

Story themes that make *you* squeal with glee may not be ideal for a competition that requires brief entries from writers of many ages, interests and levels of experience. Therefore, think carefully about what qualities the theme should have relative to these considerations. For example, could you easily write a story of 1500 words or less based on the theme? Could it be set in just about any location or period in history? Is it a theme just about anyone can relate to?

As with Step 2, score each theme against each quality with an ascending scale of numbers or phrases, then highlight the top-scoring themes.

## **STEP 4: MINIMISE ALL THE THINGS YOU LEAST WANT IN YOUR STORY**

This step is the reverse of Step 2. First, list all the genres and features of a story that you least like; gangland stories, bawdy comedy, bullying, sharks, Ewoks, etc. Yet this time, rate and evaluate your themes according to how *unlikely* they are to feature these things. If you're rating them numerically, then use a *descending* scale, with 10 representing a theme that could never feature your bugbears, and 0 representing a theme that is sure to feature them.

## **STEP 5: GIVE THE THEMES YOUR OWN PERSONAL SCORE**

Your instinctive preference is, I feel, the best evaluator there is. Therefore, go back through all the themes and score them based on whether you feel it strikes you as brilliant, or blasé. This should be done on a *double ascending* scale, e.g. score your theme 0,2,4,6... 20 rather than 0,1,2,3... 10.

## **STEP 6: REVIEW THE SCORES AND SELECT THE HIGHEST SCORING THEMES**

Now you can choose a winning theme more clearly!

If you scored the themes numerically, you could choose the themes that scored highest overall, or appeared in the top 5 or top 10 most often at each stage. If you used words to rate them, it should be the themes that got the most superlatives at each stage.

*Note: If some of the qualities or detriments you've rated don't produce a wide range of scores, leave them out. In the end, this process is a tool and gut feeling might be the answer.*

## **STEP 7: PRESENT THE THEMES TO THE VW COMMITTEE**

These days, the VW Committee reviews themes for competitions so that we're confident they'll generate interest. Once you've chosen your top 4-8 themes, e-mail them to a committee member and we shall mutually agree on the best one.

Myself, I presented 6 ideas to the committee. Who knows? One of those might be a future competition theme if I win again!

But above all, don't forget...

## **YOU DON'T HAVE TO CHOOSE A THEME THIS WAY.**

If you can't spare the time for this process, you could just ask a friend, spouse, colleague, etc. to choose one. You could draw a theme from a hat, roll a di, or simply choose the first theme you think of when you wake up one morning. The only limit is your imagination, so use it well, and good luck.

## Stop Cock – A New Plumber’s Mate Mystery by VW’s JL Merrow

A match made in heaven – but the honeymoon from hell.

Plumber Tom Paretski and his newly-wedded husband, PI Phil Morrison, plan to enjoy their honeymoon in Italy to the full. It should be the start of a wonderful future together. But when Wayne – Phil’s ex best mate and Tom’s former bully – turns up unexpectedly at their hotel, issues from their schooldays threaten to derail the fun. Tom may not bear a grudge against Phil for past injuries any longer, but Wayne’s another matter – or is he?

Wayne now seems determined to make friends, but Tom’s struggling to forgive and forget. To add to his confusion, cryptic messages from home spark the question: Are he and Phil really as in tune as he thought? Tom’s not the first man Phil ever made a commitment to, and that marriage turned sour sooner rather than later.

It shouldn’t surprise them when death explodes onto the scene in shocking fashion, and their honeymoon turns into a murder investigation. When the group of locals Wayne had been meeting with turn their attention to Tom’s psychic abilities, he and Phil will need to pull together to figure out what’s going on—or risk this trip being the last they’ll ever take.

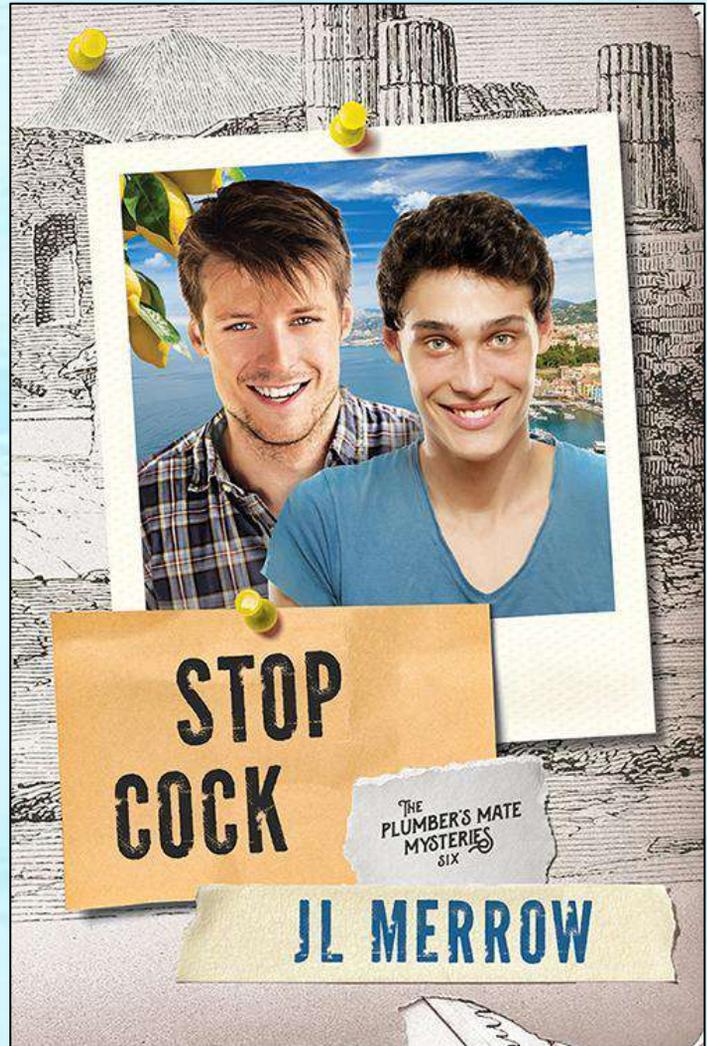
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## The Verulam Writers' Block *The Verulam Writers Showcase*

This edition of the Verulam Writers Block is dedicated to our fellow VW member and friend Richard Bruckdorfer, who passed away earlier this year. We are grateful that his daughters, Anna and Helen, have given permission to reprint Richard's winning entry to the 2017 Crystal Decanter competition, **The Dismissal**, which featured on the Writers Block in edition 35, and have provided the following introduction:

*Dad received an enormous amount of satisfaction from his writing, and we know just how influential Verulam Writers was in stimulating and honing his development as a writer. **The Dismissal** seems like a perfect example of his talent and he was so very, very pleased with the success it brought him. It never ceases to amaze us how much he could convey in 1,000 words. We can see his years as the chair of a school governors and AUT rep threaded in to this story. He loved to laugh and we can imagine him smirking and chuckling to himself as he wrote this. We are beyond sad that he will write no more; he had so many more stories to tell. Some from his imagination and some from his real life, all of which were riveting! In his last months his mind detached from reality but his creative talents were very much alive. Conversation with him was never dull! We miss him so much, but are so grateful he left behind his stories to allow us to sense him again.*

### The Dismissal

I'm Bill Merry, Chair of Trustees of the Freedom and Enterprise Academy, and I know when it's time to speak up.

'The Trustees expect even better examination results this summer, Crispin. We still need to improve our position in the league tables.'

What I had not anticipated was that our Principal would become front page news in that scurrilous underground magazine certain student dissidents have been circulating on line. I acted decisively and called a meeting of the disciplinary committee.

'I believe Mr Lightfoot will bring a representative from his union. We must adhere rigidly to the procedures.'

Mrs Gutteridge (aka Lady Blue Rinse) doesn't approve of unions and seems unable to stop grinding her teeth. The third member of our committee, Len Allcock, the short-fused CEO of our sponsoring company Sanitary Cleaning Solutions plc, is looking at his watch.

'Come in Crispin. Please sit down. You know everyone here.'

'I'm Clive Slaughter from the National Association of Head Teachers,' says the grey-suited man hovering behind his client.

I feel a frisson of excitement. This could be my opportunity to shine.

# VERACITY

'I'll begin by presenting the view of the trustees, Crispin. In a nutshell, pictures have been circulating of you and a student, Amanda Comely, in poses that could only be described as improper for someone *in loco parentis*, so to speak. You clearly had an arm round the girl's waist; fortunately, the other was out of sight. We fear that the reputation of the Academy could be irreparably damaged unless we are seen to take strong action.'

Allcock is quick to make his entry.

'And a stain on the name of Sanitary Cleaning Solutions plc'

'You haven't heard the case yet, and you have already found him guilty,' protests Slaughter, who drops a stack of documents on the table. 'We have prepared our statement.'

But Crispin tosses his copy to one side.

'It's all a terrible misunderstanding. I put my hand on her shoulder to get her attention, and nothing more. I've been in post for two years without complaint.'

I say nothing, but I'm sure that isn't strictly true.

'We have strong evidence that the picture has been manipulated by Photoshop, or something similar,' says Slaughter. 'The image is under investigation by our technical team. What we are dealing here with is a student prank.'

I can see Blue Rinse's nose wrinkling and snorts of rage blowing from her nostrils.

'So why can I see pictures of you with other girls on Instagram?' she cries. 'Have you looked at Twitter? It's crawling with filthy stories about you. The whole thing's gone viral and we're the laughing stock of the world. Sack him now! Drain the swamp!'

Slaughter looks as if he wants to kill her, and I can't blame him.

'It's all fake news to intimidate my member.'

Allcock's ears prick up. I know he could say something that might cost the Academy dear.

'I don't give a damn about your member - the dirty bugger.'

I think I should call a comfort break.

\*

Crispin is very private sort, but he's young and talented - a high flier one might say. After all, it was I who head hunted him. But I'd better watch out; Blue Rinse is after my position.

'Crispin needs to talk to you one to one,' Slaughter whispers in my ear. 'It's against my advice, but he

won't return to the hearing unless you do. He's in the broom cupboard next to the toilet.'

The Principal is trembling like a man before a scaffold.

'What is it, Crispin? I shouldn't be speaking to you outside the hearing, and there's not much room in here.'

'I have to tell you something, Bill. Something I've never told a soul.'

I prepare for a momentous revelation.

'Is it connected with the hearing?'

'Sort of'

'So what is it?'

'The truth is - I could never have done what they claim. I don't even like girls, if you know what I mean. I've always keep my private life - well - private.'

I feel as relieved as he is terrified.

'Is that all, Crispin? Being gay is the new normal.'

Now he's crying.

'I would never lay a finger on the boys.'

'Do you mean you want to?'

'Of course not - I prefer mature men.'

'Could you repeat all this to the hearing? It might help your case.'

Crispin looks like a victim bracing himself for the torture chamber.

'In front of those dinosaurs? Not a chance.'

I fear the result of the hearing will not be to the Principal's liking.

\*

I'm out of the closet and the lady from HR takes me to one side.

'A student representative has asked to address the committee.'

Emily Brightside is one of those sensible young people I meet in the course of my duties. Even Blue Rinse and Allcock will listen to her.

‘Will Mister Lightfoot be dismissed? I’ve been off sick and only just heard what’s going on. It’s all so unfair.’

We are looking puzzled.

‘Don’t you know why they did it? Mr Lightfoot was going to stop us using mobile phones on the premises. He said it was disrupting our studies and he was worried about this summer’s exam results.’

‘Stupid,’ yells Allcock. ‘It would never work.’

‘Students can’t function without phones,’ says Emily. ‘But they shouldn’t have done such a terrible thing to the Principal. Everybody’s shocked.’

Blue Rinse breathes fire through her nose.

‘Did he ask your permission, Bill?’

Now it’s all flooding back. I have a vague memory that I told Lightfoot how President Macron intends to ban mobile phones from French schools to improve performance. Emmanuel Macron is such an impressive man. Regrettably, I may have failed to mention that the ban is for kids under fifteen.

Blue Rinse is licking her lips. Do I really have to resign?

## About Us

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

[www.verulamwriters.org](http://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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto:verulamwritersevents@hotmail.co.uk)

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

Our next meeting will be on Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> September.

For more details please visit

<https://www.verulamwriters.org/>

**We would like to wish you all a great summer!**

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