VERACITY

The Magazine from Verulam Writers

Edition 58

Summer 2026

www.verulamwriters.org

WE'RE ALL HEADING FOR A SUMMER HOLIDAY!



Whatever aspect of recent times has occupied Verulam Writers members' minds, whether it's oppressive heat, football madness or a reshuffle at Number 10, one thing will soon align everyone's thoughts. The close of another VW year.

The 2025/26 season has been a checkered one. We started the year with Wendy Turner stepping down from the committee and Mandy Carter leaving entirely. Our old Gnome trophy then went missing in autumn 2025. Yet a pall truly fell over the circle back in February, when one of the planes ex-member Ray Wilkinson so loved to fly crashed, taking him with it.

Regardless of this, some very fond memories have been made too. All our regular competitions have produced a large number of quality stories that have taxed our judges' discerning minds to the limits. Our Gnome has been replaced with a brand spanking new one (see left) who is already being decorated by those who win him.

We've had authors and poets visiting, some excellent talks and workshops by our members and some fresh successes; things too numerous to list here.

We only have the Howard Linskey adjudication, then the end of year party to come before the VW year ends. But don't let your creative joints rust over the summer holiday. To paraphrase a perennially popular show... KEEEEP WRITING!

This time in VERACITY…

- **Podcasts** are **solid!**
- Not all **hauntings** are **bad!**
- **Open up** the **mic!**
- **No fool** like an **old fool!**

© Verulam Writers 2026

From the Editor…

Recently, I proposed to the VW committee that I would try out some new looks for this newsletter. Revamps will come soon enough, but for now you'll be seeing some new typefaces in this edition as an experiment. Comments welcome on that.

Having covered the events of the year so well on the front page, I'll confine myself to congratulating everyone on being such personable and committed members of this circle throughout the year. The stories I've heard you write and the workshops I've seen you give or organise are top notch. We have all benefitted by being mirrors to each other, building our work up to its best possible quality.

I certainly wish you all the best for the coming summer. If the recent tropical temperatures persist, I recommend working a visit to the beach or the lido around writing something on the lawn with plenty of sunscreen on and a cool drink or an ice lolly in your hand.

Other than that, see you in September!

Robert Paterson, Editor

VWVeracityEditor@gmail.com

Contents

3 From the Chair…
Chairman Phillip Mitchell has a bit more to say than usual.
5 President's Competition
Jake Pirrie offers critique for the entries of 2026's first VW competition.
9 Home-Soul
The winning entry for the President's Competition.
13 Podcasts for Creative Writing
Paul McNamara looks into a writing aid you may not know about.
17 How to Run an Open Mic Night
What makes such an evening enjoyable and well-organised?
21 Paths to Publication
A brief report on the panel our published writers held on 18th April.
27 Crystal Decanter Competition
A report from Tina Shaw, with synopses for the prize winners.
29 Sweet Betrayal
The Crystal Decanter Competition's winning entry.
33 What We're Reading Now
Book reviews and recommendations from VW members.

© Verulam Writers 2026

From the Chair...



By Phillip Mitchell

As summer arrives, I'm looking forward to warmer weather (but not too warm), a holiday (it won't be relaxing, but the kids will love it), barbecues (as chef, I get the choice of the least burnt sausages), and a lot of ice cream.

Writing sometimes feels like holding an ice cream cone on a hot day. At first, everything looks perfect. I have exciting ideas, a blank page, and good intentions. But if I don't pay attention, the ice cream melts. Distractions appear. I play with the kids. The garden needs attention. The dreaded holiday comes around. Before I know it, that wonderful writing idea has begun oozing down the cone and dripped on my jeans.

The trick is not to stop the ice cream from melting completely. Life will always get busy, but I enjoy writing when I can. Ten minutes spent writing is better than waiting for the imaginary perfect, uninterrupted afternoon. Scribbling in a notebook in a cafe, a few paragraphs on the train, or something new to me; recording voice notes to be transcribed later.

The writing I'm doing now is a departure from my usual short stories and the novel I've parked for a bit. Instead, I'm enjoying writing songs for my band. We're going to record an album, so I'm putting together enough material for that. My band, (we're called Oh Doom! and you can find us in all the usual places you find your music; sorry for the shameless plug), play loud, sad songs. And you'd expect the gloomy winter to provide a better environment to create such melancholic tunes. But summer offers writers something special: people are out and about. Parks, beaches, high streets, festivals, and family gatherings are full of interesting characters, snippets of conversation, and unexpected moments. And summer seems to enhance emotions—from joy to anger—it's all on display.

All of my best ideas arrive when I'm paying attention to what's happening around me. I just need one idea to get me into the song, and then the writing flows like whipped ice cream swirling into a cone. So, by the end of the summer, hopefully I'll be strumming my guitar and singing some of the most miserable songs I've written yet.

And while we're talking about sad things, I'd also like to mention something about scams. There's been an enormous increase in fraudsters targeting writers. In my inbox, I regularly receive spam from those pretending to be bestselling authors, literary agents, publishers, or film producers. They contact writers by email or through social media, praise their work, and then ask if a writer wants to be featured on blogs, radio shows, book tours, writing group appearances, or offer publishing services, marketing packages, or introductions to industry contacts with the promise of boosting your literary career. The scammers have become far more sophisticated with their use of AI.

© Verulam Writers 2026

From the Chair, page 2

Gone are the obvious typos and poor phrasing. Instead, they take seconds to create a fawning, professional-sounding email about your work and they use the professional language of the publishing industry. For the ambitious writer, it's easy to get sucked in.

A good rule is simple: be cautious. I'm wise enough to know there isn't likely to be a queue of big-name publishers fighting to publish my next novel (although, that would be nice). The first thing to check is the sender's email address – if it ends gmail.com, outlook.com, etc. it's unlikely to have come from a legitimate editor at Penguin who would have a company email address. Research anyone who contacts you. Check official websites. Look for independent reviews. If an offer seems unusually flattering or creates pressure to act quickly, pause and investigate. And when in doubt, ask fellow writers for advice.

Unfortunately, the shortcuts scammers promise rarely exist in real life. Concentrate on writing amazing work, and with luck, you'll achieve your literary goals.

We're coming up to the end of this season of Verulam Writers. This means the committee is planning for the next season, so send me your ideas for guest speakers and workshop topics. And if you'd like to be more involved in the group, please consider joining the committee. It doesn't take up much time, attending just a few friendly Zoom meetings a year, and everyone's contributions are incredibly valuable. So, let me know if you're interested.

Finally, I hope you enjoy a productive and inspiring summer. Enjoy an ice cream cone, embrace the season, and happy writing.

Phil Mitchell (who writes as Steven Mitchell)
(Current) Chairperson of Verulam Writers



© Verulam Writers 2026

Judging The 2026 President's Competition

By Jake Pirrie

General Comments

I was interested that, despite it not being prescribed by the prompt 'An Old Building', all of the structures amongst the entries had, at least at one point in their histories, been homes. With that said, there was an extensive variety in stories offered from genres chosen, the histories of the buildings and the atmosphere of the pieces themselves. It had been my hope that the slightly vague prompt would have encouraged a nice diversity in stories. We* enjoyed all of the stories, which made judging quite difficult. It tended to be minor inconsistencies or small criticisms that took entrants out of the running.

Fault Lines by Phil M Upp (Joan Crookes & Steve Seaton)

There is a real contrast between this house's former owners and the protagonists of this story. We get a brief glimpse of the Granvilles' heyday before hearing of their tragic demise as the building falls to disrepair. Frances and James act completely different. They use ill-gotten gains to sell people a superficial fantasy while lying to one another. The house is restored but the façade cannot stay convincing for long. The one thing that the judges struggled slightly with is that, if Frances is secretly plotting on stealing James' ill-gotten wealth from the beginning of the story, some of her internal monologue in the first scene seems inconsistent with that later reveal.



Mike Spurgeon won the Gnome De Plume for his pseudonym, Sheik N. Stevens!

* Jake co-judged the competition with VW president John Spencer, hence the competition's name. (ed.)

© Verulam Writers 2026

Judging The 2026 President's Competition, Page 2

The Old Signal Box by Scott Sporadge (Robert Paterson)

The old building in this story is haunted by an evil reputation and the story explores how this dark history can cast a shadow over the years. This story manages to fit a significant amount of plot and swings in tone to the 1000 words. The opening to this story really draws you into this dramatic little community though there are also a lot of characters in this story and keeping track did require some backtracking. We were also not sure if Mara was aware of Fergal's positive impacts on the community and if it was just coincidental that the house blew up while Mara made her arson attempt.

An Old Building Truth Or Lies by Pete R M De La Sun (Tina Shaw)

In this tale, two brothers, playing with matches in a ruined house, get accosted by a stranger claiming to be the house's former occupant. This story has a tense atmosphere, especially near the conclusion when the narrative gives a brief description of the discordant sounds happening around the house. The older boy's behaviour and dialogue is wildly erratic which feeds into the protagonists' suspicions of criminal, supernatural or maybe even extra-terrestrial motivations. The younger pair of brothers also feel authentically written, saying and thinking things very much like children do. This story is quite dialogue-heavy and it might have benefitted from some further description of the setting and the action occurring during the story.

Falling to Bits by Clare Lehovsky

This was a very character-heavy piece following privileged housewife Ruby, with an unused degree in architecture, forced from her luxury home to deal with the shack of her recently deceased great aunt. This story's opening was very strong. Ruby's house, with its sterile, one might even say barren, comfort and utility is a good choice for exploring her particular character and interpersonal relationships. The new house contrasts nicely with the old house, positively infested and overflowing with life. What she might do with the old shack at the end is a genuinely interesting question. The one part of the story that didn't entirely work for us was the mysterious farmer Dick Lawns that meets her at the old house. The enigmatic means of his departure didn't entirely work with the slightly commonplace entrance in a German automobile.

© Verulam Writers 2026

Judging The 2026 President's Competition, Page 3

3rd Place

Priest Hole by Norman Castle

(Ben Bergonzi)

This story follows the persecution of Catholic Father John who has been trapped down a priest hole by Protestant authorities following the failure of the Gunpowder Plot. The tale was inspired by a real discovery made of a skeleton down a priest hole. Much like the real-life mystery, the ending of this story has been kept ambiguous. The reader will never discover whose skeleton lies at the bottom of the priest hole, whether it be Father John, the treacherous Matthew Franks or some person completely unrelated to this story. From the details within the narrative, research has clearly gone into Catholic oppression in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, as well as thought into the miserable experience of days stuffed down such a crevice.

2nd Place (and Gnome De Plume)

The House With The Ring by Sheik N Stephens

(Mike Spurgeon)

In an architectural dig through the homes of various epochs, two young architects discover the pasts of, not just those ancient settlements, but their own family history. With a prompt that lends itself so easily to nostalgic feelings of things lost, or the trauma of scars left behind, this story's focus instead lies with what persists. The site in question has had a succession of various homes built on top of it, housing generations of families. It is set in the near future. Furthermore, both characters are able to see attitudes and behaviours in these archaeological finds that carry through to modern times. This persistence of family trees and humanity plays in nicely with the ending's reveal that the two protagonists are long lost relatives and possibly both descended from some ancient Iron Age clan that inhabited these lands.

And the overall winner is...

© Verulam Writers 2026

Judging The 2026 President's Competition, Page 4

1st Place

Home-Soul by Bill Ding

(Dave Weaver)

In this entry, the writer uses the setting of a high-tech smart home as a twist on the classic haunted house story. However in this tale, the ghost is a friendly one and the mood is mournful rather than tense with the ghost being a young girl killed in a tragic accident and the haunted homeowners, her grieving parents. The ending to this story is very moving as all of the characters, including the small girl's ghost, handle the trauma of the bereavement. The story does a good job hinting at the tragedy early on before its eventual reveal halfway through. Despite the sad subject matter, a small and appropriate amount of humour is managed where Kevin blackmails The Vicar for a faintly silly exorcism with the leverage of a pedantic inconsistency in the procedure of the property transfer.



Our judge, along with the winners and their prizes.

© Verulam Writers 2026

Home-Soul

Winner of the 2026 President's Competition

By Dave Weaver, writing as Bill Ding

Kevin and Linda had planned the renovations long before they'd even moved into the rather dilapidated pile of Victorian bricks known locally as 'The Vicarage'. *We're making it a smart home*, they told best friends Jack and Ingrid at the intimate house-warming party.

'That should be a doddle.' Jack said, straight-faced.

'Well,' Linda told him, 'once the builders have done the damp-proofing and loft conversion, we'll rip out all the electrics and replace them with centrally-controlled sensors. It's all been explained to us by the I-House contractors.

'Whom?' Ingrid asked.

'They're called "Home-Soul".' Kevin replied. 'They install compatible devices everywhere to adjust lighting, heat, appliance controls, security, *et cetera*. It all runs off the solar panels we're putting on the roof. It'll be great, a completely autonomous system. No more power blackouts or blown fuses. All run from the Home-Soul hub in the kitchen, Wi-Fi connected to their central computer.'

'I'm jealous', Jack said, 'Sounds like the perfect home.'

'It can never be that,' Linda replied quietly, her voice wavering for a moment.

Kevin slipped a supporting arm around her shoulder. 'It'll be like an adventure. Just what we needed...'

They'd been in their fully remade new home for about a month when it began. At first Linda thought it was a car phone pick up or a slip of errant radio programming.

© Verulam Writers 2026

Home-Soul, President's Competition winner, page 2

Linda dropped the dinner plate she was clutching. It crashed to the floor and Linda followed it. She put a hand to her mouth to stifle the scream.

When Kevin got home from work that evening, he found his wife hunched up on the living room sofa, clutching a cushion.

'What's the matter, Lin?' His voice betrayed instant concern. He'd thought all this was behind them, that the therapy had worked. Was this a relapse just when things were finally going well?

She glared up at him through rheumy eyes, her pallor ghostly pale. 'Why did you do that? Was it a joke to make me feel better? How could you be so fucking insensitive?'

'Whoa, wait a second. What do you think I've done?'

'The voice on that evil machine,' she waved a hand at the kitchen, 'you replaced it with Abigail's.'

'I did *what*?' He grabbed at her hand. 'Show me!'

But the automated voice was back, informing them of off-peak water savings.

'I swear I didn't touch the bloody thing, Lin. Honest, I'd never do something so crass. Are you sure, I mean…'

'That I'm not going crazy?' She sighed. 'I don't know anymore. I just miss her so much…' She collapsed into his arms.

'It's okay.' He hugged her tightly. 'I'll push the reset button. Don't cry, Lin, please. It was just a…mistake.'

But Kevin sensed his wife's returning fragility. The death of their six-year-old daughter from drowning had haunted the couple since returning from that disastrous summer holiday in Cornwall. It had felt like living in a cemetery until this new shared project had taken their minds off Abigail. Was it time to re-start the treatment? How should he broach that to Linda?

© Verulam Writers 2026

Home-Soul, President's Competition winner, page 3

'She told me to hold onto her. She said, "Don't let go of me, Mummy". But I did let go. I killed her!'

Kevin ushered their shocked friends to the door. The trifle was still spread across the tiles when he returned.

'I want an exorcism, Kevin.'

'Don't be ridiculous. We'll get the company to replace...'

'That won't do it. And I want a proper one. Get a priest.'

The Reverend Thomas failed to hide his surprise on the phone. 'You're the couple who...'

'Bought the house from your father, yes.' Kevin affirmed.

'Well, I've conducted a few for possession. It's more about treating psychosis really. Giving mental reassurance...'

'That's what this would be.' Kevin cut in. 'I'm sure your father would have approved.'

'My father went senile in that old place, started hearing voices in his last days, spirits he said. Personally, I don't believe in such things...'

'Actually, Reverend, we've found some recent subsidence not mentioned in your surveyors' report. I don't want pressure you but...'

There was a pause then a sigh. 'I'll be round tomorrow at eight.'

The ceremony didn't take long and was faintly ridiculous. Kitchen lights dimmed, a crucifix propped up on the cooker hob and guttering candles spread out on the galley island next to a purple sash-marked Bible. A few mumbled incantations and splashing of holy water and the Reverend was done.

© Verulam Writers 2026

Home-Soul, President's Competition winner, page 4

He thought he heard Linda's voice from the kitchen on occasions, low and childlike in a one-way conversation. But he decided to ignore it. She seemed happy, at last, and what harm could it do?

One cold November evening three months later, the old house was suddenly plunged into darkness. The heating and water went off and the little light in the hub vanished. An engineer from Home-Soul made an emergency call. They watched in his powerful flashlight as he ran tests from his laptop.

Finally, he turned back to them. 'You had a bug I've never seen before in one of our modules. I think I've cleared it now. I've just reset the entire system.'

A few minutes later the hub light lit up again. Immediately there was a chattering from the printer in Kevin's work study. They went upstairs in time to see text flowing across an A4 sheet of paper. Kevin and Linda bent to read the three lines:

Thank you for letting me stay but they've come for me now and I have to go.
Goodbye mummy and daddy.
P.S. I love you

Abigail

© Verulam Writers 2026

PODCASTS FOR CREATIVE WRITING

By Paul McNamara

As a novice, I am always on the lookout for advice on the art of creative writing. Like everyone, I have shelves full of 'how to' and 'how not to' books to aid me but I have, more recently, discovered a wealth of free information available over the Internet, through the medium of podcasts.

In what follows, I sketch out the current 'landscape' of creative writing-related podcasts before diving into more detail on my current favourite for gleaning helpful advice. (Given space constraints, I will leave reviewing similar types of videocast for another time.)

Creative writing podcasters rarely confine themselves to one particular aspect of writing in their broadcasts. However, some general archetypes can be discerned. Perhaps the single most obvious divide in the current universe of such podcasts is between...

A) Those that explore creative writing by interviewing published authors on how they go about their craft, and...

B) Those that explore the various aspects of the writing process directly, to help listeners become better writers.

We will review each in turn.

Podcasts Using Author Interviews

Examples of this type of podcast include *The Writing Life* from The National Writing Centre, *Write Club* from Writers Online magazine and *First Draft: A Dialogue on Writing* with Mitzi Rapkin.

In these podcasts, authors are interviewed about the sources of their inspiration and their writing processes. Episodes typically focus on subjects like 'writing within a genre' or how interviewees approach different aspects of the writing process (such as 'grief', 'love', 'worldbuilding', etc). Sometimes, for example Sarah Rhea Werner's *Write Now* and the *Unpublished* podcast, the podcasters are themselves published authors who inform listeners of their own experiences when dealing with writing issues.

© Verulam Writers 2026

PODCASTS FOR CREATIVE WRITING, PAGE 2

A somewhat amusing variation on this theme is *The Offcuts Draw with Laura Shavin.* Here, "successful writers share their best worst ideas and talk about how and why the things they tried failed".

Further variations on this interview-based approach include *Write Now with Scrivener*. Kirk McElhearn interviews authors but sets time aside in each episode to explore how they make use of the Scrivener writing software. In the non-fiction field, the *Longform Podcast* interviews writers and journalists about the often extraordinary stories that lie behind their books.

Podcasts Offering Direct Advice

Podcasts advising listeners directly on how to become better writers, include *Fiction Writing Made Easy*, *The Creative Penn*, *DIY MFA Radio*, *Start With This* and, with a focus on grammar issues, *Grammar Girl.*

Episodes in these series can cover the widest range of creative writing topics, varying from giving practical advice on how to edit manuscripts, to writing characters and emotions, through to how best to maintain your writing process given the rigours of everyday life.

(For completeness, I should probably mention a third type of podcast that focuses on the thorny issue of getting work published. Such podcasts include (excuse the language) *The Shit No One Tells You About Writing* and *The Self-Publishing-Show.*)

Finding These Podcasts

You can find nearly all the podcasts mentioned above on major internet platforms like Spotify, Apple, YouTube, Deezer, and Audible, with many series running into hundreds of episodes. They vary enormously in style from the didactic to the conversational, the serious to the quirky, and from single to multiple presenters and single to multiple topics per broadcast. Most episodes last between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on the series.

© Verulam Writers 2026

PODCASTS FOR CREATIVE WRITING, PAGE 3

If you are interested in exploring the world of creative writing podcasts, my advice would be to sample across the series mentioned above and find those best suited to your needs and listening style. If you are anything like me, many podcasters will irritate and alienate you very quickly – but not so, Savannah Gilbo's *Fiction Writing Made Easy* which is far and away my favourite creative writing podcast discovered to date. In the belief that Gilbo's podcasts might interest fellow Verulam Writers, I devote the rest of this article to describing the sorts of topic she has covered in her almost 250 episodes to date.

Savannah Gilbo: Fiction Writing Made Easy

Savannah Gilbo is a professional 'developmental editor' and, understandably, a key objective for her in making podcasts is to build her business. She provides free resources in order to develop relationships with listeners and display her expertise. However, there is no obligation to sign up or buy anything from her, and I have generally found her broadcasts stimulating and helpful. Critics suggest her approach can be formulaic. I haven't found it so and certainly no more than many of the textbooks sitting on my bookshelf.

For this article, I reviewed the latest 50 episodes in Gilbo's series and would classify the advice she offers into four major categories, namely, 'the elements of writing', 'editing', 'getting published' and 'the writing process'. She sometimes uses guest contributors when the topic is not her core expertise, but she usually broadcasts solo. Episodes have a 'run time' of between 15 and 35 minutes.

The elements of writing she has covered recently include character creation, scene structuring, story structures, improving dialogue, building story tension, plotting and the pros and cons of using multiple PoV's.

In her specialist topic of editing, there is a natural bias towards developmental (or 'structural') editing, with four recent episodes on this topic alone. Other editing topics include line editing, working with beta readers and establishing a drafting rhythm.

© Verulam Writers 2026

PODCASTS FOR CREATIVE WRITING, PAGE 4

Her recent episodes on getting published have included how to approach publishers, market your book, use AI for promotion, self-publish and how to build an 'author platform'. Not being at this stage in my writing journey, I haven't yet listened to these episodes.

Finally, Gilbo dedicates a fair proportion of her podcasting to the writing process itself, with a particular interest in how to keep writing when the exigencies of daily life are pressing. She has also broadcast on how to build and maintain a sustainable writing practice, how to start (and finish) your novel, how to write faster and even how to use dictation.

Gilbo's style is pedagogic and direct. There is occasional repetition and she naturally promotes some of her ongoing business initiatives.

Personally, I like to listen to these podcasts on Spotify because I can follow them there with an auto-generated but reasonably accurate transcript and, since I am 'getting-on-a-bit' and don't retain information so well these days, this means I can always pause the episode to take relevant notes.

Savannah Gilbo's *Fiction Writing Made Easy* is available on her own website.

https://podcast.savannahgilbo.com/

It can also be listened to on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, PlayPodcast.net, You Tube, Podcast App and many more podcast hosting services.

(Through Mike Spurgeon, I have also placed links on the VW website to a number of the other podcasts mentioned above. These can be found under the 'Resources' tab.)

© Verulam Writers 2026

How To Run An Open Mic Night

By Robert Paterson

Those who've been with Verulam Writers long enough will know our open mic nights. (The event pictured below is an author's visit, but the overall look is similar.) At various venues around the local area, we've asked all comers, members or not, to share their written work. Enjoyment, confidence and exposure are the watchwords here, not critique.

But what goes into organizing one? Here's some instructions in case you want to make like Neil Buchanan and try it yourself.



1. FIND A VENUE

The venue for an open mic night must have space enough for the audience you intend to entertain, a sufficiently reasonable cost to hire and be accessible enough for guests to practically visit. It must have the right amount of seating for your audience and, just as importantly, the right atmosphere. A young, hip crowd would certainly not feel right reading at a retirement home!

© Verulam Writers 2026

How To Run An Open Mic Night, Page 2

2. PLAN THE PARTICULARS

Decide on the best dates for your event and check your host can accommodate you then. Don't forget to actually book the event and pay them when required!

Consider the event's start time, overall length, potential admission charge and whether or not refreshments need to be served. Depending on the venue, BYOB is potential strategy. You also need to decide on a maximum length of time for readings to keep things fair.

Organising an event like an open mic night is a multi-faceted process and there are tasks that need completing which might get forgotten. One way to prevent this happening is to create a Gantt chart, similar to the one below, which will break down and display what length of time needs to be dedicated to tasks, when they need to be completed by and what order they need to be completed in.



© Verulam Writers 2026

How To Run An Open Mic Night, page 3

3. PUBLICISE IT

Decide on the best means of publicising the event; posters, local press, websites, fliers, social media, etc. Once you've done that, prepare the materials and send them out.

The event's title, date, time and address should of course go on any and all publicity materials. Yet equally important to mention are what type of writing is being shared and the name and contact details for your group. If you include RSVP instructions of anyone who wishes to read and the maximum length of time for a reading, your evening will maintain its structure and people will know not to bring their whole unpublished novel to read!

4. DECIDE WHAT EQUIPMENT IS NEEDED

You might decide all your open mic night needs is chairs for attendees, tables for the snacks and a stage for the readers. However, audiovisual equipment can give even a small, simple event a boost. Speakers allow readers to be heard right across a large room. Projection screens that show the words can help if a speaker has an unclear voice, or deaf people are attending. Allow time before the evening starts to set this up if so, then allow time to dismantle it and pack it away afterwards.



© Verulam Writers 2026

How To Run An Open Mic Night, page 4

5. MODERATE THE EVENING

Don't set too many rules for the open mic night, other than requesting participants generally be good-natured. I've covered some of this in section 5, but on top of this, make sure people know to keep to the time limit, whether or not you set a rule that they show you their work beforehand.

Keep the tone of the evening light and if something goes wrong, encourage people to laugh it off. Make a note of what went wrong. With luck, this won't be the last open mic night you'll be organising, and you'll need to learn from your mistakes!

6. AS FOR THE PARTICIPANTS...

If you're nervous about public speaking, practice talking to an inanimate object like a wall or a tree first. Then step up to reading to people you know and trust. On the night, just read pretending the audience isn't there. (But that doesn't extend to saying rude things about them!)

Don't read anything someone else has written without acknowledgement. That could be copyright infringement. It's only fair that you also stay to listen to other people read their work and not be a heckler or a harsh critic.

Last but not least, don't forget, an open mic night is supposed to be a social event, not a stay in prison. So whether participating or organising, do your best to have fun as you do so!

Editor's Note: The VW committee is trying to organize an open mic night ourselves for the autumn; details TBC. Let's hope you yourself can come to that and that both organisers and participants follow the advice given here!

© Verulam Writers 2026

Paths to Publication

A Verulam Writers Panel Event, 18th April 2026

By Paul McNamara

Following a recent membership survey showing a strong interest in the topic, four authors, all current or past members of the Verulam Writers Committee, were invited to talk about their personal 'paths to publication'. In an evening meeting hosted by VW Chair Phil Mitchell, Lesley Eames, Dave Weaver, John Spencer and Anne Ellis answered questions on how they had achieved their publishing success.

How did you come to be published?

Phil opened the evening by asking each panellist about when they started writing and how they came to be published.

Lesley Eames has written since childhood. At a young age, she won a writing competition in a St Albans newspaper, the prize for which was membership to the Verulam Writers Circle. Following further successes in Circle writing competitions, she was encouraged to send her short stories to women's magazines and has since had 93 published. Through a chance meeting at a writers' conference, Lesley found an agent and secured a publishing contract for her first novel. A subsequent change of agent landed her a new publisher with whom she has since published a further nine novels.



© Verulam Writers 2026

Paths to Publication, page 2

How did you come to be published? (continued)

Anne Ellis began writing for enjoyment and, like Lesley, has also written extensively for magazines and anthologies, publishing over 60 short stories. She has since published 23 novels and 8 novellas under the name J.L. Merrow and, more recently, four police procedurals with two co-authors under the collective name, Alex Henry. Anne has never used an agent.

Dave Weaver has written since schooldays. Following an early interest in sci-fi, he joined a related specialist group in London, later switching his allegiance to VW to explore the writing process more generally. Dave has never used an agent. He contacted a dozen publishers directly with his first novel and one, a small family company, liked it so much they committed to promote it to a wider audience. He has since published four more novels with that same publisher, alongside a host of short stories in anthologies and elsewhere.

John Spencer writes both fiction and non-fiction. He has published over 30 non-fiction books in his professional field (chartered accountancy) and on mysterious phenomena like the paranormal and UFOs. John has sold 750,000 books worldwide.

How and where do you write?

Lesley does not maintain a set routine for writing; she writes whenever the chance arises. As such, while Lesley does the vast majority of her writing at home, she can occasionally be found sketching out new scenes while on a train or even in the dentist's waiting room.

Dave writes in “chunks” of time. If the writing is going well, he can easily lose himself in the process, sometimes up to three to four hours at a time, often writing late into the night.

John is even more of a “night-owl”. Requiring little sleep, he also writes late into the night.

© Verulam Writers 2026

Paths to Publication, page 3

Writing Versus Editing

An audience member questioned the panel about the relative time they each spend on writing and editing, and how the two processes relate to each other.

Dave lets his novels develop organically, reviewing them from time to time to ensure their structure remains logical. With short stories, he spends a long time thinking through the plot before putting pen to paper. He finds this reduces the need for editing later on.

John deliberately separates writing from editing. Like Dave, he lets his writing flow uninterrupted before returning to edit later. He spends more time on editing than writing.

By contrast, Lesley spends more time writing than editing. However, she did note that her publisher sometimes assists her in the editing process. Being involved in producing multiple books simultaneously can create pressures for Lesley. For example, with her current trilogy, she is busy proofreading Book 1 whilst also incorporating publisher-recommended edits on Book 2 and writing to a deadline on Book 3. These three processes all require different ways of thinking and responding.

Dave and Anne both noted that they start any new writing session with a light-touch review of their most recently completed work. This helps them maintain continuity and momentum in their writing.



© Verulam Writers 2026

Paths to Publication, page 4

A "Plotter" of a "Pantser"?

While panellists felt having a sense of direction for any scene or chapter was beneficial, over-plotting severely reduced the creative writing 'buzz'.

Dave described how he writes freely until his stories run out of steam or somehow become illogical. He then delves back into them to explore potential alternative routes forward. He likes how this allows his stories to 'unveil the unexpected' to both himself and his readers alike.

Anne noted how the process of writing with co-authors increased the need for coordination and plotting compared to her solo work. The three co-authors involved in the Alex Henry books meet periodically to plot the next three chapters, with each author then taking responsibility for delivering one chapter apiece.

John mentioned how writing non-fiction was very different to fiction with regard to planning. Non-fiction authors often develop a predetermined structure to match the nature of the subject under review. By contrast, researchers can write up individual sections for encyclopaedias in any order and arrange them later to best effect.

Do you have, want, or need an agent?

Lesley urged those considering hiring one to ask themselves, what might an agent offer that you can't access directly for yourself? In short, what will you get for giving up 15% of future earnings?

Agents can sometimes secure lucrative new opportunities in ways that individual authors might not be capable of accessing themselves. Examples include foreign publishing and TV rights. However, for some emerging forms of publishing, like digital, agents can prove unnecessary.

Lesley has used agents for all her novels. Indeed, her current publisher will only accept submissions through them. However, because Anne's publishers didn't require submission through agents, she has never felt the need to use one. Dave has also never used an agent. He approached a range of publishers directly. John noted that his early successes in non-fiction led agents to beat a path to his door.

© Verulam Writers 2026

Paths to Publication, page 5

Do you have, want or need an agent? (continued)

John also highlighted the general point that the better an author's track record in publishing, the easier it was to get re-published. That said, Dave and Lesley both warned against "eclecticism". Even published authors can lose their advantage if they try publishing across multiple genres.

Do you keep multiple drafts when writing?

Most panellists maintained a single working draft when writing. If they experiment with alternative versions of a chapter or scene, once they have decided which version to take forward, then that becomes their new, single, working draft.

Lesley also maintains a single working draft. If her publisher returns a new structural or line-edited version to her, that becomes her new working draft.

Anne described how she keeps multiple copies of material for security reasons. She saves draft chapters to both her laptop and the cloud. She also emails them to herself. To avoid possible confusion, she assigns distinct file names to any alternative versions of chapters she is experimenting with. She also keeps a "cut stuff" file. This allows her to reinsert any cut material if she subsequently changes her mind.

How would you describe the shape of today's publishing industry?

Panellists commented that, while the number of major publishers and the chance to publish through them has dwindled over the last 20 years, the potential for self-publication has burgeoned.

However, with smaller publishers, print on demand services, and direct self-publishing, there is now an increased onus on authors to promote their own books through online forums, blogs, book review platforms, and events like 'Stuff Your Kindle' days. Other potential marketing routes include writing newsletters and getting 'on the road' to visit book fairs, reading clubs and literary societies.

© Verulam Writers 2026

Paths to Publication, page 6

How would you describe the shape of today's publishing industry? (continued)

Panellists and various audience members noted that the increased time required to market books inevitably reduced the time available for creative writing.

What is your most important piece of advice for other writers hoping to publish?

Because "you can't edit a blank page", Anne and Lesley both urged writers to write and to keep on writing.

Lesley and John also counselled against becoming disheartened by rejection. While talent and dedication are both necessary, budding authors in today's market also need luck. Anyone's proposal or manuscript might arrive in an agent's or publisher's inbox at the exact moment they are looking for something just like it.

Dave's strong advice was for any writer to decide early on what sort of author you want to be. If you want to write professionally in a specific genre, you should respect the disciplines that go with that. However, if you want to work outside these tramlines and write material more personal to yourself, you should do so in the knowledge that far fewer readers may ever discover your work. When such authors recruit readers ("accomplices") who admire their work, they create their own niche and this is a rich reward in its own right.



© Verulam Writers 2026

Judging The 2026 Crystal Decanter Competition

Report by Tina Shaw, synopses by Robert Paterson

When the excitement of winning a VW competition starts to wear off, there comes the realisation that there is a price to pay, namely the privilege of choosing the title of the following year 's competition and judging the entries.

Having offered the committee three suggestions for titles, with their agreement that I could select any one of them, the information was sent out and I received 9 entries. Because of the way I received them (1 by e-mail, 7 on the night in different coloured envelopes and 1 by hand), I was anxious that I might remember the identity of the authors and be biased in my judging. However, once they were all free of the envelopes and collected into a random pile, I no longer knew which was which, and the style of writing and nature of the stories did not give me more than a possible clue as to the author.

I read the entries through twice and felt very clear as to which one was the winner. Second and third were much harder to decide. There were four entries which I felt had different but equal merit, so I finally came to a decision as you will by now be aware.

The parcels left on the doorstep varied including a book, a vegetable, pictures with a message, work-related items and a live animal. The recipients varied from relatively normal people, to unpleasant neighbours, to the frankly weird. The reasons for the arrival of the parcels were mostly the nub of the stories, giving rise to the selection of the winners.

Finding something constructive to say about each one was also quite challenging, but hopefully the results were acceptable. Inevitably, it is a personal choice which would have been different if someone else had been judging.

Finally, a word of advice. If the instructions say single sided, size 14 font, double-spaced, stick to the rules. It only serves to irritate and could lessen your chances of success!

© Verulam Writers 2026

Judging The 2026 Crystal Decanter Competition, Part 2

3rd Place; Mr. Arnold to You by Vi Olin (Ben Bergonzi)

An elderly couple, Derek and Maggs, come back from a walk to discover Amazon have delivered them a collection of CDs of film music composed by the late Malcolm Arnold. At first Maggs is annoyed, given that Derek already has an extensive CD collection. However, it later emerges that they were once part of a studio orchestra conducted by Malcolm Arnold himself and the music becomes an unexpected and successful treatment for Maggs' oncoming dementia.

2nd Place; Proper Parcel Panic in Packham by Miss Teri D'Sarsta (Mike Spurgeon)

Lucy and Barry are two very different people who hit upon the same idea independently; start promoting supplements. In a comedic twist, an inept Evri driver switches their packages over and the two of them accidentally begin promoting supplements for the wrong sex! However, when the mistake is discovered, they find that each of them can work with the other to their mutual advantage.

Gnome De Plume winner; Wendy Turner for D. Kath Coffee

And the overall winner is...



© Verulam Writers 2026

Sweet Betrayal

Winner of the 2026 Crystal Decanter Competition

By Steve Seaton and Joan Crooks, writing as Chris Anthemum

Katrina opened the door and looked at the parcel on the doorstep. It was the shape of a book, which puzzled her. She hadn't ordered anything recently. She felt a chill running down her back from the nape of her neck to her toes. Why did it suddenly feel that there could be a bomb underneath the brown paper... That she might not survive the unwrapping and opening of the contents?

She carefully put the parcel on the kitchen table and looked at it. If she didn't open it then she wouldn't know, and not knowing seemed very appealing at the moment. She had possibly made a series of mistakes in the last year.....or could they be called bad judgements? She feared that some people would say they were worse than that.

If she were honest, she agreed with them.

Katrina moved the parcel to a dark corner in the dining room. She made a cup of tea, thinking hard, trying to recall what had happened in the twelve months since she had retired as a psychotherapist. Deep down she knew she probably needed to go further back into her life to understand why suddenly she'd become so vulnerable to the lure of charismatic talent.

Before her professional retirement she'd promised herself that she'd start new interests, maybe spend time on creative pursuits, develop the artistic part of herself which had lain dormant for too long. And so it was that she'd met him.

Lionel Henderson, the man with the big brown bedroom eyes. The one she'd noticed immediately at the very first meeting she'd attended at her new writers' group. The man it was so hard for her to say no to. In fact, thinking about it, had she said no to him even once? About anything? She grimaced to herself, then immediately countered with: 'why would that matter anyway if it's what I want too?'

© Verulam Writers 2026

Sweet Betrayal, Crystal Decanter Competition Winner, Page 2

And so, very quickly, they'd formed a kind of jokey partnership in the writers' group, exchanging ideas, some of them silly, others interesting, all of them sparky. And they'd even collaborated successfully, winning acclaim for a couple of their more outlandish efforts.

Ignoring the parcel, she moved across to her desk to finish the long task of proofreading the final draft of her first novel, *Sweet Betrayal*. She'd decided to present her problem chapter to this evening's Manuscript Session in the writers' group. Colleagues who'd already published often had really useful suggestions at these sessions, where members shared their work and sought feedback from the others.

Later, she glanced at her watch. Tonight's meeting! Time passed so quickly when you were absorbed in writing. That wretched parcel would have to wait.

*****

She loved this friendly, civilised crowd. There was the usual lively buzz during the interval, and it was almost a relief that Lionel hadn't been able to attend this evening because of the signing session for his new book. She was both excited and terrified about finding what it contained now he'd finally agreed to allow her to read it.

Sipping her coffee, Katrina glanced thoughtfully at her old friend and colleague, Felicity, who'd introduced her to the group.

"Don't get me wrong, Katrina," Felicity was adding. "I think it's great that you're in your sixties but still up for a fling. I'm only saying that with Lionel, perhaps just be a bit careful?"

"So you don't trust him?"

Felicity made a face, shrugging. "Well, he's so full of himself. When he was writing that playscript for my drama group, he lorded it over everyone like he was Harold Pinter."

© Verulam Writers 2026

Sweet Betrayal, Crystal Decanter Competition Winner, Page 3

Katrina grinned. She'd been really stirred up by her new relationship with Lionel, who was undeniably attractive, dynamic and charismatic. But it was also true that he was very full of himself.

"Perhaps he is the new Pinter. He does seem to be doing rather well," she countered. "His first novel's coming out, and he has contact with commissioners in the BBC."

"Hmmm. A bit of a step from a community drama group to the National on the South Bank, love."

It was time for the second half of the session.

Despite Felicity's cautionary words, Katrina was feeling that she knew what she was doing in her new relationship. She was a mature woman, who had lived well, with different jobs and with different partners. On the whole, she thought she'd had an interesting time over the years and felt satisfied with how things had panned out. She was now (unbelievably, she often thought) sixty-eight years old and lived on her own in Harpenden. But although she was experienced in relationships, Lionel had brought something new and exciting into her life. It was quite a while since she'd felt so... alive. The very thought of what they'd got up to in some of their afternoon sessions in her cottage sent pleasant shivers down her spine and tingles down her thighs. Yes, being retired had definitely opened up new possibilities...

"Katrina..." drawled Felicity teasingly, nudging her shoulder. "I wonder exactly where your thoughts have just drifted off to!"

"Not telling!"

Katrina braced herself for reading out her problem chapter in which her heroine somehow had to be portrayed as still traumatised by past abusive experiences, but also now able to express anger and find assertiveness.

*****

© Verulam Writers 2026

Sweet Betrayal, Crystal Decanter Competition Winner, Page 4

Driving home afterwards, Katrina's thoughts were still contented and happy. The feedback on her chapter had been positive and she was confident she could finish the book and send it to the publisher who'd expressed interest. She gently massaged her temple, thinking about Lionel again and those passionate encounters in her small cottage. Afterwards she'd often snoozed on the sofa while he borrowed her computer to write notes and record thoughts. Making love with her gave him inspiration to write, he said, when she asked him what he was doing. She assumed he was intent on making his no-holds-barred erotic passages rakishly sexy and provoking.

But she was a little worried that he might weave some of their own wilder moments of love-making into his novel. She'd even had the paranoid thought that if one of her former clients were to read his book, he or she might be able to identify Katrina from some casual detail in the story.

Arriving home, she locked the front door, switched on the living room light, and poured herself a glass of wine from the half-empty bottle. OK, Katrina, she told herself, time to see what my demon lover's been capable of writing. I wonder if I really have inspired him?

At first, having ripped off the brown paper wrapping on the proof copy, she couldn't take it in. But, flipping through the all-too-familiar sentences, bit by ghastly bit the horrible truth dawned on her. She, a former psychotherapist, who could effortlessly understand other people's screw-ups and self-deceptions, had failed to spot what was now staring her in the face. The book had a beautifully-designed cover; and the sleeve and the spine clearly announced the author's name - Lionel Henderson.

But every single word inside the book had been written by her.

So she'd been used.

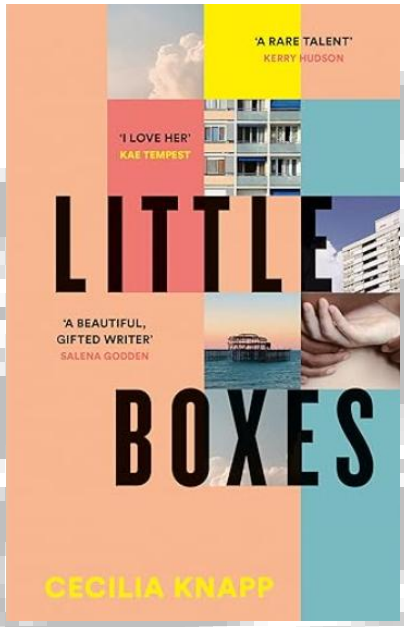
And the title emblazoned across the top of the cover was .... *Sweet Betrayal*.

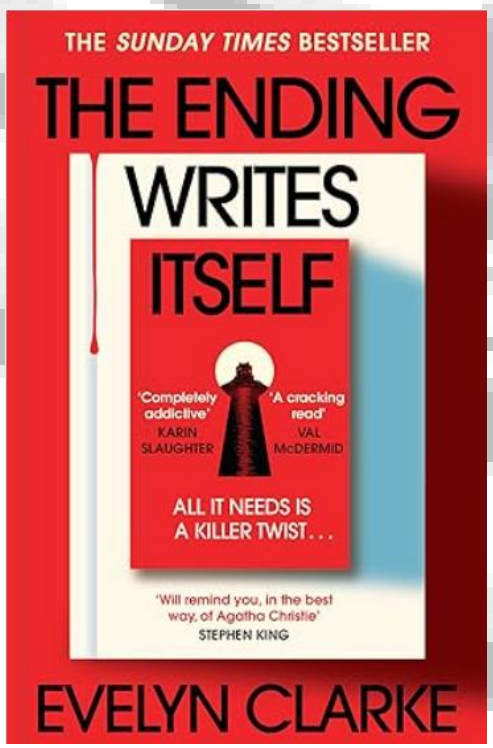
© Verulam Writers 2026

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

Tina Shaw has been reading...
Little Boxes by Celia Knapp

This is a fictional story about a group of young people who live in flats on an estate. It is well written and describes their relationships and events over a short period of time.

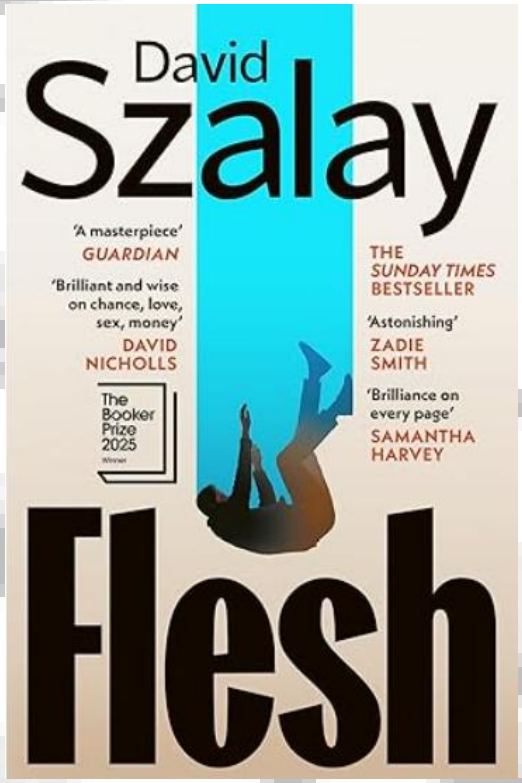




Judith Foster has been reading...
The Ending Writes Itself by Evelyn Clarke

Based on a brilliant idea, this whole book is a cliché. It is "locked room thriller," in which every aspect of the plot, every twist is a cliché, as is every character and almost every phrase – there is one four-line paragraph which contains six clichés. It is also a devastating condemnation of the publishing industry, with sideswipes at writers. But it pulls you into reading the next page, and so on and so on. Decide for yourselves whether it is a good book: don't ask me!

© Verulam Writers 2026



Phillip Mitchell has been reading...

Flesh by David Szalay

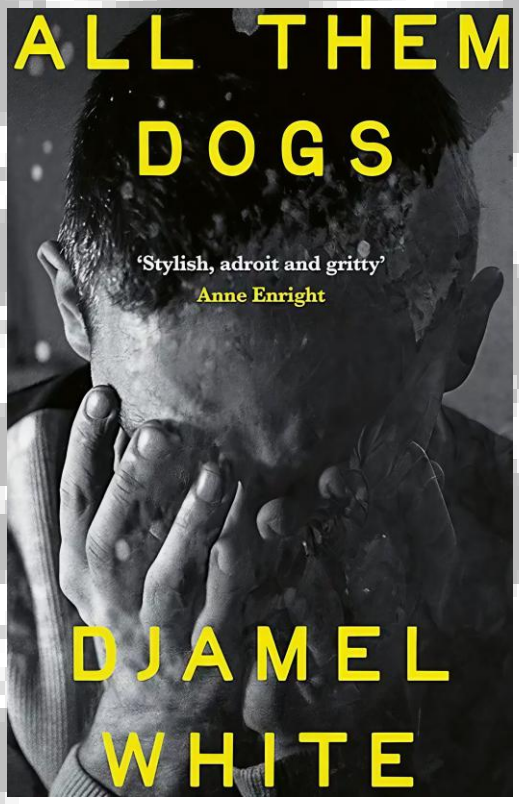
A powerful, Booker Prize-winning story of a man trying to find his place in the world. David Szalay writes in a clear, simple style that makes the book hard to put down. I was surprised how quickly I finished it. It's thoughtful, moving and honest, with characters that have remained in my head.

Paul McNamara has been reading...

All Them Dogs by Djamel White

This debut novel is a fast-paced, gritty thriller set among the notorious drug gangs of West Dublin. Under the protection of a local drugs baron, Tony Ward returns to the city five years after killing a rival in a gangland fight. Instructed by his new boss to carry out an execution, he falls in love with his fellow assassin.

Merging toxic masculinity, homoerotic charge, betrayal, and raw-boned brutality, this is a fascinating and complex page-turner. Not my usual kind of read, but I enjoyed it immensely.



© Verulam Writers 2026

Verulam Writers Current Competition Winners

David Gibson Cup

Topic: An Act of Heroism (set by David Weaver)
Adjudication Date: 15th October 2025

FIRST	SECOND	GNOME
Joan Crooks	Only one winner, I'm afraid!	Joan Crooks again (aka Ben D. Nees)

Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition

Topic: A Moment of Madness (set by Mike Spurgeon)
Adjudication Date: 3rd December 2025

FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	GNOME
Mike Spurgeon	Anne Ellis	Joan Crooks	Anne Ellis (aka Paddy De Selle)

President's Competition

Topic: An Old Building (set by Jake Pirrie)
Adjudication Date: 19th March 2025

FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	GNOME
Dave Weaver	Mike Spurgeon	Ben Bergonzi	Mike Spurgeon (alias Sheik N. Stevens)

Crystal Decanter Competition

Topic: The Parcel on the Doorstep (set by Tina Shaw)
Adjudication Date: 1st June 2026

FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	GNOME
Steve Seaton and Joan Crooks	Mike Spurgeon	Ben Bergonzi	Wendy Turner (alias D. Kath Coffee)

Howard Linskey Competition

Topic: Crime
Adjudication Date: 18th June 2025

FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	GNOME
Anne Ellis	Cecile Keen	Steve Seaton	Philip Mitchell (aka Anita Alibi)

© Verulam Writers 2026

Information Resources and Contact



The VW Website www.verulamwriters.org

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

This newsletter may be found there too!

verulamwritersevents@hotmail.co.uk Here you can register your interest for **volunteering at events** and submit a piece to our website's **Writing by our Members** section. We will post it for you. One piece per member.
VWPublicity@gmail.com For any **events you know of** and would like publicised.
VWVeracityEditor@gmail.com For **articles for this newsletter** and any **feedback** for the editor. Send them anytime; no need for him to request them.

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

The editor would like to thank all of the contributors past and present for this, and every edition of VERACITY.

Our next meeting will be on Wednesday 1st July at **St Stephen's Church Hall;** the adjudication of the Howard Linskey Competition. For more details please visit https://www.verulamwriters.org/

Follow us on:

Facebook
@verulamwriters

Twitter/X
@verulam_writers

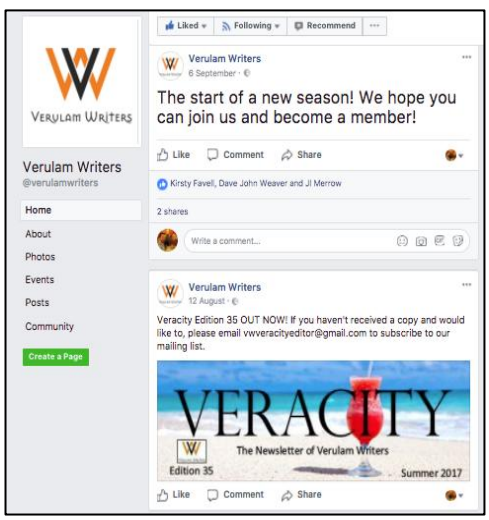
© Verulam Writers 2026

@verulamwriters

@verulam_writers

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

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





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

© Verulam Writers 2026