

# VERACITY

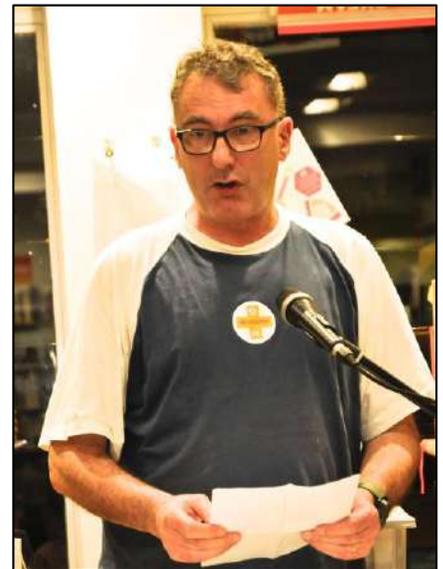
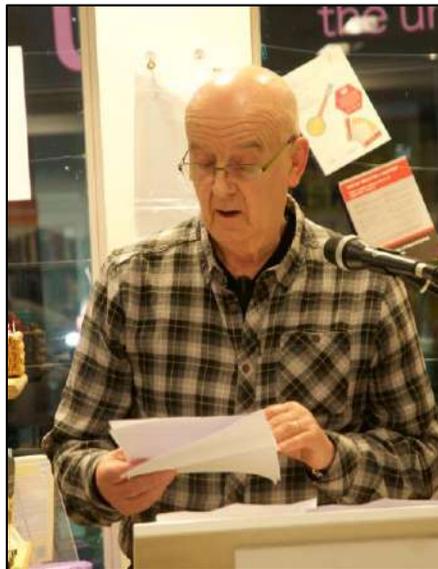
The Magazine from Verulam Writers



Edition 41

Summer 2019

## 65 YEARS CELEBRATED AT LOCAL WRITERS' SHOWCASE



Photos by Mike Shaw

This time in VERACITY...

- **Steve loses the plot**
- *Deep breaths* – Phil on why **writing is good for you**
- *I'll have a P please Rob...* Robert on **busting writer's block**
- Some familiar names tell all in **My VW**

Verulam Writers continued to celebrate its 65<sup>th</sup> season by hosting a Local Writers' Showcase Evening on April 26<sup>th</sup> at the Oxfam Bookshop, Catherine Street.

The free event gave local writers from St Albans and across Hertfordshire the opportunity to read their work. The line-up included VW members and non-members, published authors, and those just beginning their writing career.

Oxfam were amazing for letting us host our event in their great bookshop (*continued on page 3*)

## From the Editor...

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

This edition continues the celebrations of **Verulam Writers turning 65**. The cover story by Phillip Mitchell and Gerwin De Boer with photos by Mike Shaw, is about our hugely successful **Local Writers' Showcase Evening** in April that saw Hertfordshire writers come out in force to read and listen to the work of others.

I'm delighted that more members of VW, past and present, have written in with stories about how much the group has meant to them. Look out for the **My VW** articles. As well as these we have many articles on the craft of writing by our members. Lesley, whose second novel *The Brighton Guest House Girls* is out now, writes about how to improve your writing, Robert has created a fantastic mind-map to help you get over that great enemy – writer's block, and Wendy has written an article... on writing articles!

Finally, as the 2018/19 season has ended we are looking ahead to our **66<sup>th</sup> season**. Meetings at St Michael's are set to resume again in September, so do keep a close eye on our Facebook page and website for details of our meetings for the year ahead.

Wishing you all a great summer, and we look forward to seeing you next season.

Sam Ellis, Editor

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(continued from page 1) where you can pick up a preloved bestseller for couple of pounds, and support good causes while you're at it. Their volunteers helped publicise the event and stayed late to help on the night.



After an introduction from Verulam Writers, the shop manager, Hilary, demonstrated a water filter capable of filtering a year's worth of safe water for a family. The audience generously donated Oxfam £160 on the night – enough to buy seven filters.

Then it was time for the main event: over the course of two hours, eleven writers volunteered to read short pieces of their original work, from crime to comedy, to an appreciative audience.

Oscar Windsor-Smith, a long-time member of



Verulam Writers, started the night with his story *Trumpet Volunteer*.

Next was a great, though-provoking story about love, the lies we tell others, and those we tell ourselves by Lisa Sinnott, who's only been writing a year.

Artist, poet, and short story writer, Mary, read a piece that demonstrated her gift for deep, sarcastic and funny writing with great characters, drama, and comedy.



Candy Denman was up next reading the first chapter of her new book *#youtoo*. Candy has written for television programmes such as *The Bill* and *Heartbeat* and having enjoyed writing both crime and medical stories, she decided to combine the two in her crime series set in Hastings featuring Dr Jocasta Hughes, a GP and forensic physician. Her piece described a gruesome crime scene and promised a gripping novel.

After a short break, where the audience talked to the writers, browsed the bookshop, and topped

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up their free glasses of wine, we welcomed Karen Skinner from Hertford Writers Circle. She read a story from her collection of 'shorts'. The audience will never think about chocolate eggs the same way again.

Tim Brown, who normally writes literary dark comedy, read something wonderfully different: a beautiful, poetic piece he'd originally written for his wedding, which took place only the previous Saturday.

Verulam Writers member Robert Patterson read next. His great story started with a curry and ended with a man determined to find his own path in life.

Tina Shaw, a member of Verulam Writers for about 10 years, read a story about a lady who had a stroke and wants to return home to retrieve letters from a man she used to know, so she can read them one last time. She's not able to return home but the occupational therapist is able to get them for her.

The writer of the novel, *A Column of Smoke*, about love and deceit in a science lab, and *Is that Fish in Your Tomato?*, a popular science



book, Rebecca Nesbit, read one of her few pieces of writing which isn't about science and told us a funny story of what happens when a person is obsessed by the London Underground.

Suzanne Stanton's story was a hilarious tale about the struggles endured in a marriage when a husband brings home a new love: a chicken.



Suzanne said she enjoyed writing it and the audience loved hearing it.

Finally, Dave Weaver, another long-time member of Verulam Writers and writer of a large number of short stories and novels, read a story of a woman refusing to vote as she's told, and the huge consequences of her small act of resistance.

The quality of the writing on the night was amazing and we thank all the writers and everyone who helped in the organisation of the event. The evening was a great success and we are keen to organise more local events – keep an eye on the Verulam Writers programme.

*By Phillip Mitchell and Gerwin De Boer  
Photos by Mike Shaw*



## The Howard Linskey Competition



The 10<sup>th</sup> of July saw the adjudication of the Howard Linskey competition for crime writing.

In what was dubbed 'A Killer Tendency' the night was not quite as expected because Howard had ripped his achilles tendon and couldn't attend. Despite his absence, winners were announced. In third place was *The Old Man and the*

*Raven* by Phil Mitchell, second was *Time of Death* by Rebecca Nesbit, and first was *The Merciless Sea* by Gerwin de Boer.

Well done to Gerwin, and wishing Howard a speedy recovery!



## The Success Book

We're delighted to share some of our member's successes from our success book, circulated at every meeting at St Michael's.



Month	Writer	Type	Title	Publication	Words
May	Wendy Turner	Article	Ringing True	People's Friend	600
June	Michael Richards	Book	Chi Gung Ancient Art for Modern Times	Lulu Press	1,200
June	Lesley Eames	Short Story	My Turn	Woman's Weekly	2,000
Sept	Wendy Turner	Article	Remembering the Brave	This England	1,000
Sept	Wendy Turner	Article	Rushmore Country Park	Evergreen	1,000
Sept	Tina Shaw	Letter	N/A	The Guardian	N/A
Oct	Wendy Turner	Article	Jackie's Story	People's Friend	N/A
Feb	Tina Shaw	Article	Seen – Heard	NCPC School Service	N/A
Feb	Barbara Billington	Short Story	Night Drive	Mojave Heart Review	3,000
May	Lesley Eames	Short Story	Visihug Time	Woman's Weekly	2,000
May	Phil Mitchell	Short Story	The Escaped Jaguar	Popshot Magazine	1,300
May	Lesley Eames	Short Story	Seesaws	Woman's Weekly	1,000
May	Anne Ellis	Mob Game License	Muscling Through	Kunlun	N/A
May	Jonny Rowland	Article	Through My Eyes	World Medical News (website)	1,500
June	Wendy Turner	Article	Keeping the Peace	People's Friend	1,000
June	Lesley Eames	Novel	Brighton Guesthouse Girls	Aria (Head of Zeus)	100,000

## Verulam Writers 2018/2019 Competition Winners

First	Second	Third	Gnome
<b>David Gibson Cup</b> <b>Topic:</b> An Object that Changes Lives <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 3 <sup>rd</sup> October 2018			
Claire Morgan	N/A	N/A	Michael (aka Sue Pine)
<b>Lisbeth Phillips Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> Solving Traffic Problems <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 28 <sup>th</sup> November 2018			
Dave Weaver	Phillip Mitchell	N/A	Phillip Mitchell (aka Trey Flick-Light)
<b>President's Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> A Ghost Story <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 6 <sup>th</sup> March 2019			
Oscar Windsor-Smith	Sam Ellis	Phillip Mitchell	Tina Shaw (aka Sue Tibble)
<b>Crystal Decanter Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> Print the Legend <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 15 <sup>th</sup> May 2019			
Gerwin de Boer	Phillip Mitchell	Oscar Windsor-Smith	Tina Shaw (aka Cat E. Gorey)
<b>Howard Linskey Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> Crime <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> July 2019			
Gerwin de Boer	Rebecca Nesbit	Phil Mitchell	N/A

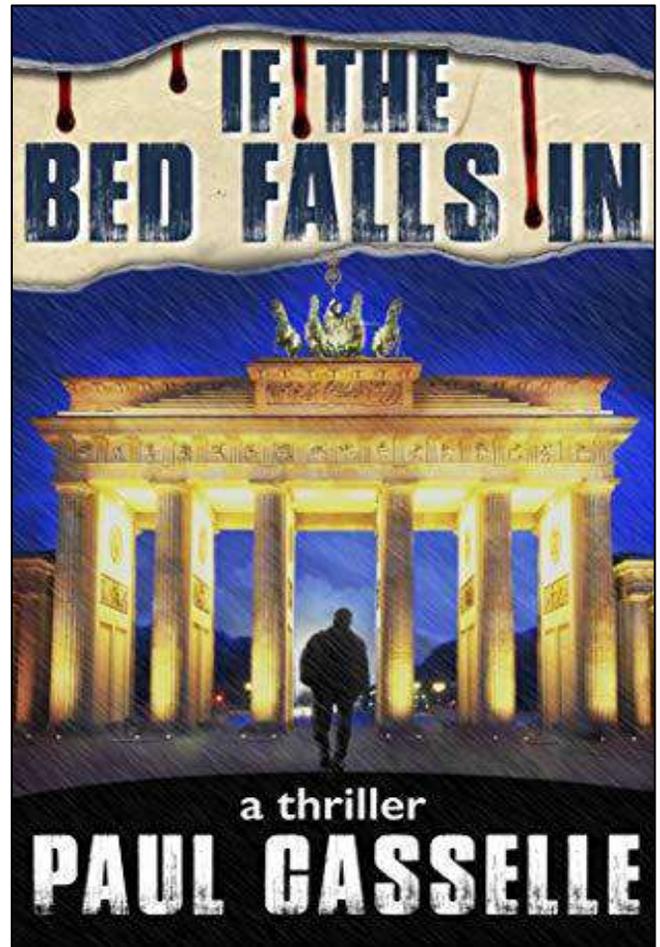
## My VW – Paul Casselle

Paul Casselle *reflects on why he joined the Verulam Writers.*

**Why do we do anything? No, really. Why do you go to work, brush your teeth or even get out of bed in the morning?**

I am a great believer in the notion that our emotions and our minds, although intricately linked, are two separate tools which must be employed correctly if we don't want to find ourselves bashing home a delicate screw with a lump hammer. For me, it is our minds that are the practical enablers; the clever hard-working dispassionate experts that dream our dreams and then find practical ways to achieve them. On the other hand, our emotions are terrible planners and even worse decision makers. It is our intellects that are the do-ers. But it is our emotions that make the whole confusing, painful, awesome, miraculous journey worthwhile simply by enjoying the ride.

So, how does the mind work? Well, I'm using mine right now writing this piece. I can feel ideas churning away inside my head. But they aren't random, they are focused. The mind is a precision tool used to find a tidy, efficient path from A to B or to get a particular job done. My current task is to write something about life, the art of writing and in particular Verulam Writers who have been instrumental in helping me develop from a writer who *wants* to write to one that actually *does*. But although it is my mind that is pecking away at the keyboard, employing thousands of years of evolved syntax and grammar and actually coming up with the ideas I am trying to convey, none of this would happen if something deep inside me didn't *feel* it worthwhile.



Every idea I have ever had has come from my mind. Ideas are practical, tangible and logical. An impractical or illogical idea is not a lot of use to anyone. Emotions, on the other hand, are not necessarily the opposite, but they *are* pure joy or pain or simply a self-sustaining feeling of wellbeing.

Every time we do something there is a motivation behind it; a force as real as the physical forces that beat at the heart of Newtonian mechanics. That motivation is driven by either something we want to do or

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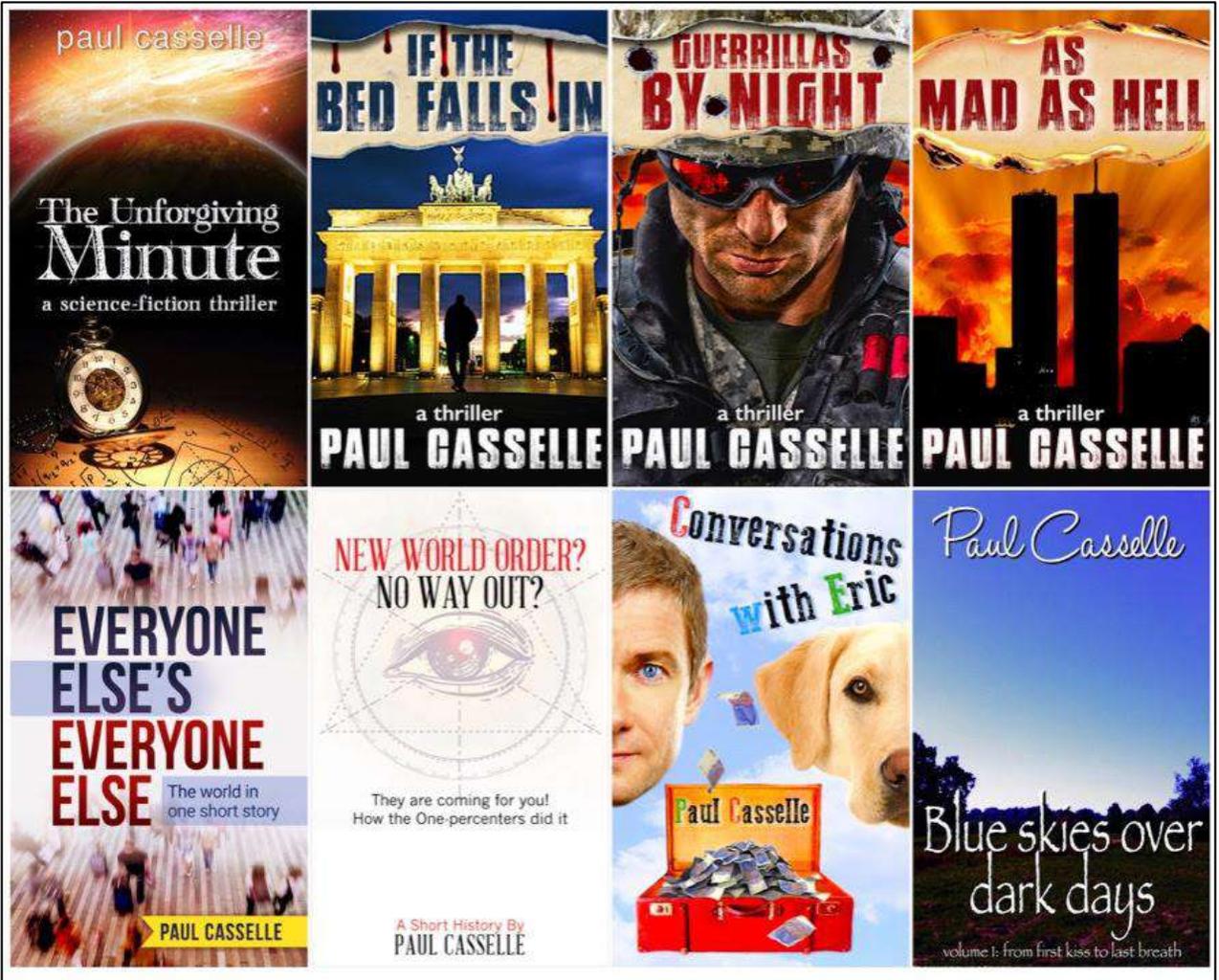
something we feel we should do. Either way, we do things because we get a tangible reward; a rush of emotion, feel-good feedback that has evolved to keep us moving forwards. It is the force that has brought us from bland single-cells to what Shakespeare called, “the paragon of animals”.

I once heard it said that, “We read to know we are not alone.” We are islands of ideas in seas of emotion. Our words, whether written or spoken, are the frail boats that connect us and it is the pure joy of sailing that makes us all such purposeful mariners. Without the sometimes stormy, sometimes mirror smooth seas we would be ideas without a purpose.

I joined the Verulam Writers’ Circle (as Verulam Writers was known then) to be with other

people who felt, like me, that they had a precious cargo of ideas and knew that those musings would have no purpose unless we could find a way to share them with others. For most of us, fame and fortune would not be the reward, and even for the fortunate few who would succeed in making a living from writing, the real reward is always facing your fears and diving into that capricious sea of emotion that links each of us to all of us.

Why do I get out of bed in the morning? Because I have weird and wonderful thoughts, and I love sharing them with the other extraordinary islanders around me. And when I have the courage to do so, it is my emotions that make me smile and cry and want to keep going.





on



## @verulamwriters

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

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

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

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



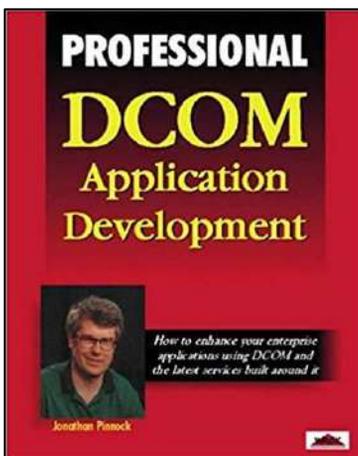
## My VW – A Game of Two Halves

Jonathan Pinnock, one of Verulam Writers most prolific writers, gives his take on his time in the group.

I first joined the Verulam Writers' Circle back in 1992, at a time when I'd just been made redundant and was wondering if I should try to make a career out of writing (Narrator: He didn't).

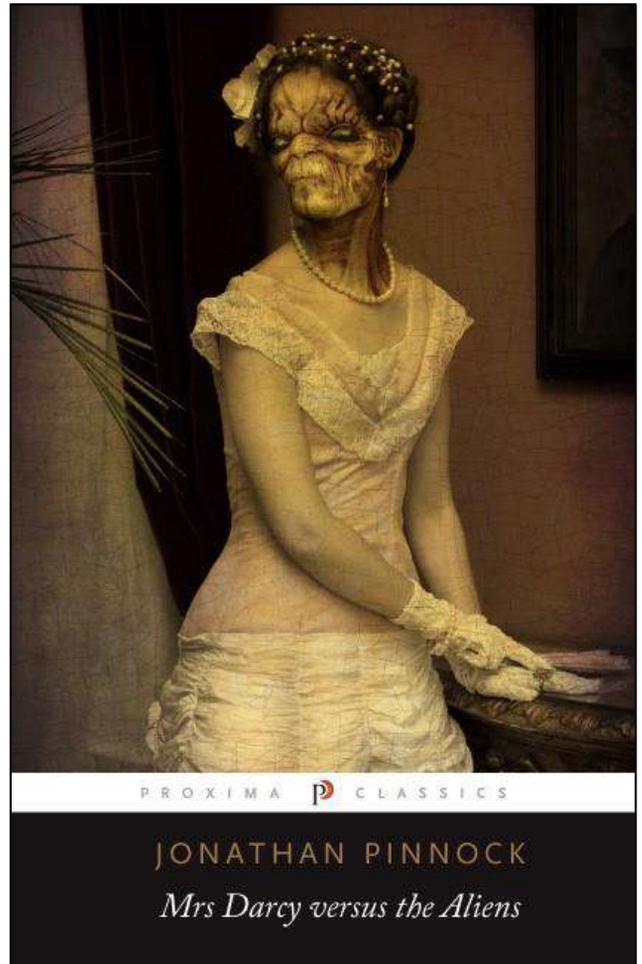
My impression was of a very welcoming place, but one that was very much dominated by non-fiction writers – most especially its President, Gillian Thornton. Members certainly did write fiction and some of it was published (even if an awful lot went to *Freelance Informer*, as Nick Cook reminded us in the last edition of *Veracity*). However, the idea of getting a novel published was regarded as somewhat fanciful.

As things turned out, I did get a publishing deal in 1997 – for a non-fiction book on software –



and the effort that this, and the other similar books that I got involved in, demanded of me meant that my own attempts at fiction got sidelined. My membership of VW also lapsed.

When I returned in 2004, I noticed that things had changed somewhat. There was a different buzz about the place. One of the newer members, Kate Allan, was about to have her second novel published. Ian Cundell and Kevin Bennett had set up a lively online forum (even if getting into it proved something of a challenge for some of the membership). Toby Frost was a



rising star who was still searching for the right vehicle, before accidentally stumbling on Space Captain Smith. Later on, Jenny Barden, *who already had an agent* and was thus an object of some awe, joined too, followed a few years later by Julie Mayhew, who passed through like some kind of comet, leaving us dazzled in her wake (note to self: check simile before submitting).

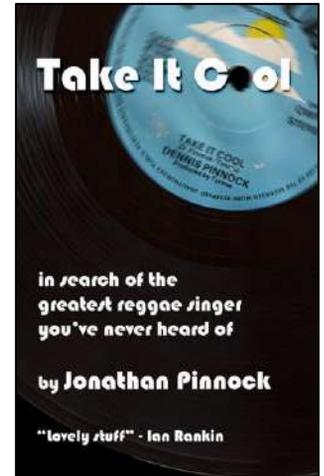
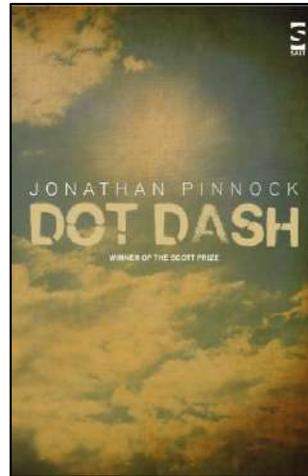
It was also an exciting time to be a short story writer. Competition for the various internal competitions was fierce, especially after Oscar Windsor-Smith joined. Then in 2007, Dave

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Weaver and myself got ourselves onto the shortlist for the University of Hertfordshire Writing Award, and I think that was probably the precise moment when I realised that anything really was possible.

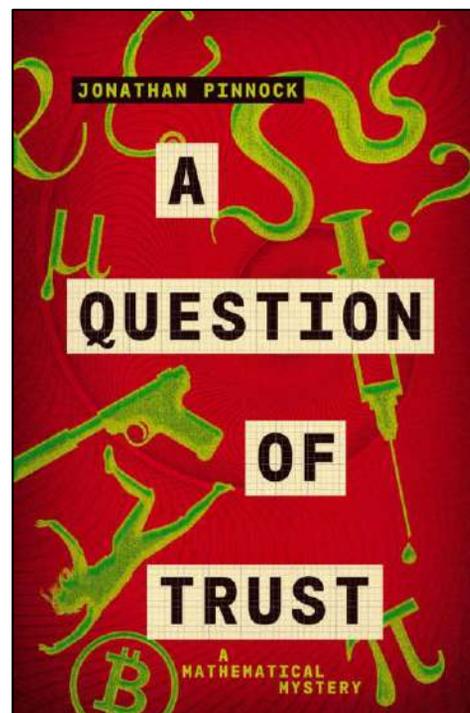
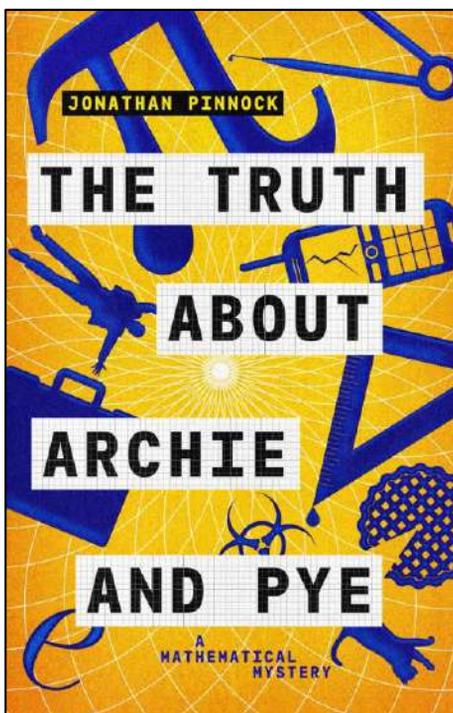
Shortly after this, I had the idea for *Mrs. Darcy Versus the Aliens* during a post-meeting pub conversation with Toby, and I owe everything to the members who encouraged me to carry on writing the thing, even when, owing to a classic example of morphic resonance, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* somehow showed up six months after I'd started work on it. If it hadn't been for their support, it would never have been published at all.

A year after *Mrs. Darcy* came out, my first short story collection *Dot Dash* was published by Salt, although by then I'd left Hertfordshire for the delights of the South West. A couple of years after that, *Take it Cool*, my reggae memoir, another book that literally would not have existed without the encouragement and critique of the members of VW, was published by Two Ravens Press.



The quality of life in Somerset is, I have to say, generally *much* better than it was in Hertfordshire, apart from one thing. There isn't anything to compare with VW. After *Take it Cool* came out, I got so desperate for the kind of support and critique I used to get that I ended up shelling out for a Creative Writing MA at Bath Spa University. That did eventually set my writing career back on track, but it would have probably been cheaper to commute to St Albans and back every Wednesday instead. VW really is unique.

Miss you.



## What I've Learned from Article Writing

Wendy Turner *draws on her extensive experience writing articles.*

**If there's one thing I've learned about writing, it's that you never stop learning about writing!**

Article-writing is becoming more interesting and perhaps it's a little more challenging to produce what editors want. Have a look at your target magazine and note the topics and layout of their articles. Is yours a block of text on one subject e.g.: a country park? Or would it be more interesting and attractive if written in separate blocks of text relating to different aspects of the park, e.g.: trees,

wildlife, walks and trails, conservation, activities? You could vary the word-count in each block depending on the amount of information you have. Articles are sometimes set out in this way with headings and sub-headings. Perhaps people enjoy reading in smaller chunks these days.

If your article is a block of text on one subject, you could add a box-out at the end with additional information, e.g. some little-known or fun things about the park. 'Top tips' or a fact-file in bullet-point style would add further interest. Look through a few articles and note the ratio of text to photos. Where does your style fit? The editor could email you a couple of templates so that you



can fashion your article to fit a particular style. Approximately 450-550 words would fill one page. 700-1,100 words would be a two-page spread depending on the layout.

Museums, churches, cathedrals, local councils and societies are your friends! They will help with your queries and email you a photo, picture or painting if you need one. They will also double-check your text if need be and make some suggestions or additions. If you think it enhances your article, write it



up in your own style and send them the final version to OK. Remember to credit them at the end of your article. Drop them an email to let them know when the article will appear and thank them again for their help. Leave the door open for future contact!

Potential articles are all around us. A day trip out somewhere? You could pick up some leaflets, take some photos and write it up. What's on next weekend? It could

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be anything from a wildlife or tree-planting event to a model railway, Morris Dancers or a historical anniversary. Why not go along and make a few contacts? Maybe a road or building has been named after someone. Find out who they were and why they are honoured in that way. You might be able to pick up a used copy of a book on the subject from Amazon at very low cost.



Why not rise to the challenge of modern article-writing? Have a look at what's out there. Hopefully it will spark some interesting writing ideas!

- Humour makes the world go around. Give your reader a smile!
- Let some things go. You can't be successful all the time. Sad but true.
- Be confident in your own style. It's unique! Do it your way but be honest and be prepared to read, learn, alter and delete.

## My VW - Those Were the Days

Tina Shaw on her Verulam Writers.

**1980ish I decided it was time to reignite my literary ambitions and searched around for local possibilities to kindle my inspiration. No internet of course, so it must have been the library where I came across the fact that there was a nearby writers' circle at St Michael's Church Hall.**

Attending a new group for the first time is never easy. All sorts of fantasies go through your mind about what will be expected of you. Would I be asked to write something previously hardly counted on the spot? Would I be expected to read some masterpiece I had written? Would everyone be published authors? My short story and even shorter article in a women's magazine published several years

I arrived early as usual to find the room full of rows of chairs all facing forwards (writer's CIRCLE it was not). Several people (I can only remember women of a certain age and above) were milling about. I slunk into a back-row seat and sat listening for the whole of the evening. We probably had coffee but, like the content of the talk, I have absolutely no memory of it.

I made one more attempt and attended the subsequent meeting but it did nothing to spark my desire to start scribbling (I had not even brought my first word processor then), so unsurprisingly I gave up.

I hope we do better now in making newcomers welcome. I think we do and of course the website provides people with a greater source of information. Apologies to anyone who was part of that early group at VWC. It clearly hasn't scarred me for life.

## Have You Completely Lost the Plot?

*Lost in your writing? Steve Barley on how to find your way back.*

When it comes to plotting, I think we can all agree that Guy Fawkes really struggled. His execution wasn't much better, because he broke his neck leaping off the ladder leading to the gallows. Writers can struggle too as they try to turn their perfect plots into practical prose on paper. When doubts creep in unbidden: *Have I used too much alliteration? How do I pack everything in? or Where should my story lead next?* We all lose the plot on occasion, so here are some suggestions on how you might find your way again.



***I have so much information to relay, how do I fit it all in?*** – Introducing your characters and setting in any story is hard, but when that setting is not of this time or place, and characters' pasts influence their present, there can be an awful lot to tell – as fantasy writers know only too well. Tolkien did it using longwinded descriptions and historical references that were truly majestic in their scope but were often right royally distracting from his primary plotline. But does it all need to be told at once? *Game of Thrones* is in that realm too, yet its author, George R. R. Martin, swaps info dumps for a gradual unveiling of his seven kingdoms and beyond. He uses foreshadowing to hint at things yet to be revealed, not only intriguing the reader, but at the same time telling them it's okay not to fully understand everything yet. He also uses dialogue to provide back history and context, often delivered with emotion to prevent it sounding monotone and unnatural.



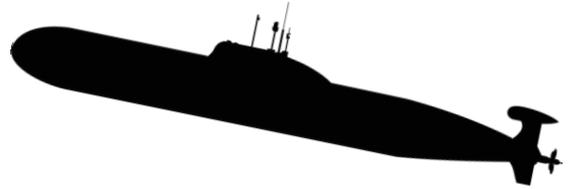
***I don't know how to get from A to B*** – Thankfully there is no plot satnav to direct writers when penning their story otherwise we'd all end up writing the same book. But what can we do when we get stuck? First off, try backtracking. If your previous chapter closed things off nicely, rip it apart, re-write it and end on a cliff-hanger instead. Adding a sub-plot by introducing a new character, dilemma or conflict means it's harder to become bored or stuck, and it gives you an easy lead into your next

chapter – that goes for the reader as well as the writer. Another option is to go straight from A to B and write the bits you *are* inspired by and go back to connect them later. Carpenters prepare first and glue last, so why can't writers? After all, those story printouts are just wood in another form.

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***This scene/character doesn't seem to work*** – If it feels wrong to you then it will certainly feel wrong to your reader. It's time to get editing. Scenes can be tightened or even chopped entirely. Focus your prose on the parts that reveal essential information, character motivation, show conflict or introduce tension and mystery. Eliminate unnecessary detail and dialogue that doesn't progress your story. If it's a character that feels wrong, and is key to your story, then perhaps you haven't solidified them sufficiently in your mind. Make a separate list of their physical and psychological strengths and weaknesses, flesh out their background, what motivates them, what their ambitions and pet hates are. Learning how they look, speak, act and react in your mind first, makes writing about them much easier later and turns them into believable, well-rounded characters.

Keen to get back to your plots and sub-plots? Provided they're not about gunpowder or U-Boats, my work is done.



*Not necessarily this kind of sub-plot...*

## My VW

Yvonne Moxley on the curse of her Verulam Writers.

**I have been pondering on the question of what Verulam Writers' means to me and thought I'd better write something down before I fall asleep – not that the subject is boring, of course. Although there hangs the curse of VW.**

My attendance amounts to years – decades probably, and I still haven't managed to overcome the curse. Workshop meetings are a nightmare. They set my mind whirling and spinning from 8pm to 10pm, which in no way is conducive to sleeping when I get home. So I watch the TV (which usually has the effect of making me nod-off), drink a large mug of Horlicks, soak in the bath till I'm wrinkly (OK, *more* wrinkly), warm the bed if the weather's cold, but all to no available.

Manuscript nights are no better. All those chapters read out loud, all those things I could have said to encourage but didn't, all those tense, edge-of-the-seat endings before the next chapter the following fortnight. You can see how I suffer, can't you?

Sometimes we have quizzes or guest speakers or competitions. They don't make it any easier. And the people! Oh dear, the people. All that interesting and enlightening talk, enthusiasm and creativity may be good for the soul but not for my beauty sleep.

So that's my dilemma. To stop going is out of the question – where would I get my ideas from? My inspiration? My motivation? No, it looks as though I've got to suffer in silence. So please don't ask me what those bags are doing under my eyes. They've got VW written all over them.

## Writing is Good for You

Phillip Mitchell *on the downs, ups and euphoria of writing.*



Early morning, I'm often found in cafés, hunched over a coffee and notebook, pen in hand, scribbling whatever thoughts appear. Free Writing, just writing whatever comes into your head, can be exhilarating. If you haven't tried Free Writing, you must. I do it in short bursts. Even if I sit, pen poised, with no idea what to write for the first minute, some spark will eventually set me off, and then I'm in the zone, and it feels amazing. Words and ideas flow out of me. I'm creating. I'm writing out my worries, frustrations, and all those things trapped inside my head that are itching to escape into some kind of story.

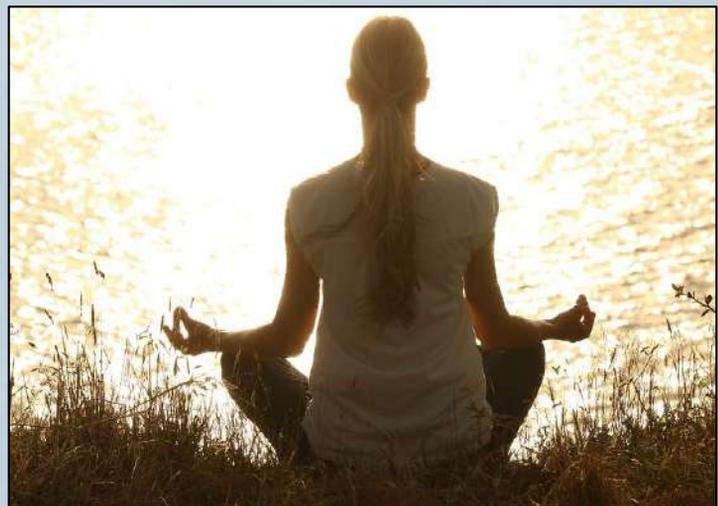
Of course, quite often, more often than I care to admit, I review what I've scribbled and see that it's total rubbish. When writing, there are good days and bad days. On the bad days you have to remember how good it feels when you write something good.

I'm a firm believer that writing is good for you. Everyone needs some form of creative outlet – a way of expressing yourself. It feels good to create things, to stand back and say I made that and only I could have made that. It's great to have something you've written sliding out of the printer and put it in someone's hands to read.

"I've always associated the moment of writing with a moment of lift, of joy, of unexpected reward."

- Seamus Heaney

And, for me, writing is like therapy. When writing characters I've had to explore my own character – I've become more self-aware. I confront and reflect on past experiences – good and bad. And getting



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all of that out on to a page feels great. I'm happier as a result.

Scientists have studied whether writing is good for you. One study found that people who wrote about their traumatic experiences reduced their stress levels, improved their mood, had fewer stress-

related trips to the doctor, and generally improved their health. And I'm not sure if my partner will agree, but studies have also found that because writers communicate better, they have better relationships.



you cannot write or type fast enough, you're experiencing a sudden rush of genius. It's like you were born to write this story. And it feels good.

Endorphins are flooding your brain. That's why we write – for those moments. Writing is sometimes hard work, but that challenge, is good for you. Writing is good for you.

"I can shake off everything as I write; my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn."

- Anne Frank

Writing is also good for the body. Studies have shown writing can reduce blood pressure, create a healthier immune system, improve lung function, and boost athletic performance.

Yes, writing can be frustrating, exhausting, sometimes it's like a puzzle you cannot solve, you mope, you think about deleting it all or ripping it up, starting on the next thing, but then, suddenly, you work it out, you know what your story needs, and

"Writing isn't about making money, getting famous, getting dates, getting laid, or making friends. In the end, it's about enriching the lives who will read your work, and enriching your own life, as well. It's about getting up, getting well, and getting over. Getting happy, okay? Getting happy."

- Stephen King

## Block Busting! How I Get Over An Author's Greatest Setback

Robert Paterson gives his insight on the dreaded topic...



*Stuck!*

Sitting down with a pen and paper one evening, Garfield's face lights up.

"That's it!" he cries out joyfully. "I just thought of the perfect cure for writer's cramp! Writer's block."

And with a sigh, the chubby, cynical feline abandons his attempt to write a novel.

As authors, we can all sympathise with Garfield's problem, because we all recognise it. You sit down and try to think of an idea and nothing comes no matter what you try. The wheels of your head grind like badly oiled cogs but the story

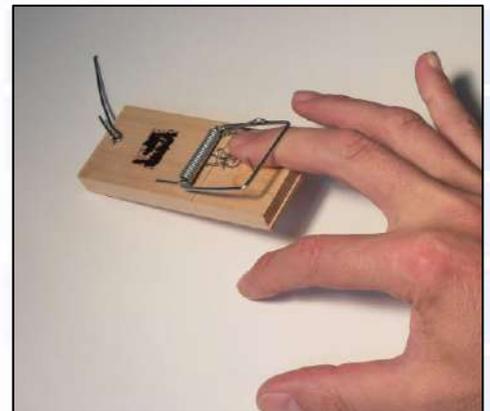
simply fails to materialise. Writer's block has thwarted you again.

For me, writer's block comes on especially hard when writing a story to a set theme. Some of them simply don't lead to an idea forming in my head. Even if I have an idea that I can build upon, I'm still not always sure how to construct a palace from the bricks that lay before me.



*Trapped!*

So what do I do? Well, everyone's different, but here are some ideas that work for me. Why not take up from where I've started, and add some of your own to the diagram...?



*Caught!*

# VERACITY

## ASK ANOTHER PERSON

An author can't always easily see what he writes from another's perspective and friends, relatives, lovers, etc. can see paths and visions he sometimes can't.

## WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

This advice may seem obvious, but it still holds true. Consider what you know and this will give you direction and clarity in your writing.

## DRAW UP A PLAN

Create a bulleted list or synopsis to help you review the story and plan what comes next. If you already have a plan, add details to the necessary section.

## BUILD A MIND MAP!

This simple tool helps you visualise, build and add ideas with ease, as I've done here. Use bright colours and amusing images to make it seem more like fun than work.

## WHAT WOULD KIPLING DO?

Consider what your favourite author would do with the story at the point you've reached, especially if they write in the same genre.

## PUT YOURSELF IN THE CHARACTER'S HEAD

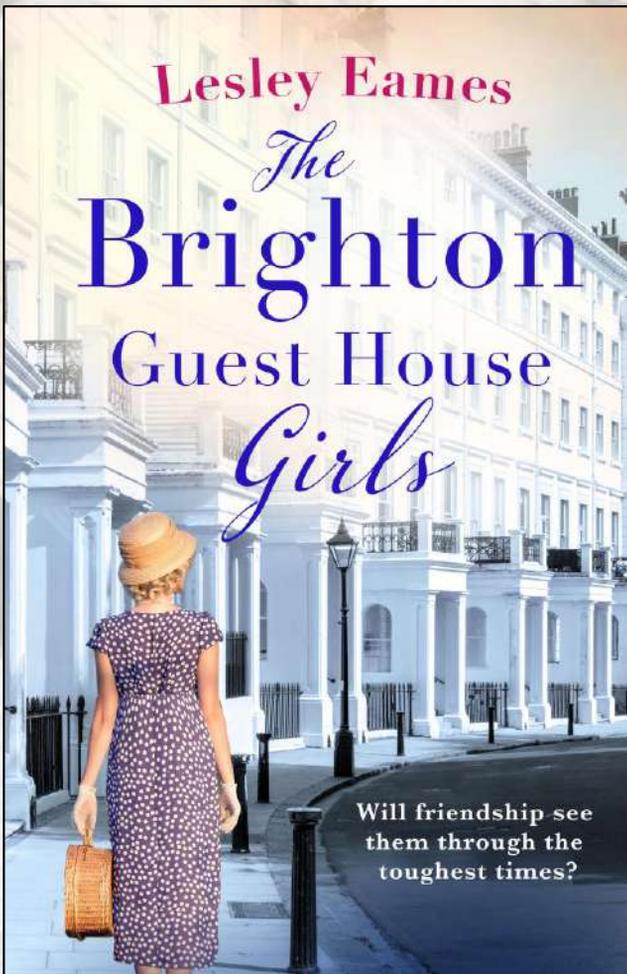
Think carefully about the nature of the character(s) involved in the story. How would he/she/it act in context?

## CONSIDER PAST COMPETITION WINNERS

If you're a long-standing member of VW, consider carefully what competition-winning stories had that yours lacks and how you might add it. If not, try the same for prize-winning novels.

## How to Improve Your Writing

Lesley Eames, *creative writing tutor, mentor and editor*, has just released her second novel. *The Brighton Guest House Girls* is out now.



**The day we don't want to improve our writing is probably the day we should give up because it means we've grown complacent.**

In considering how we can improve we might want to consider:

1. Addressing specific weaknesses in our writing
2. General improvements

Having written two novels now, I've been privileged to work with two fabulous editors and I'm a great believer in the usefulness of having another (informed) person's eyes on my work. This isn't possible for everyone, however.

Professional feedback is still available through writing courses or critiquing/mentoring services but these options have costs attached. Options which don't have costs attached include:

1. Peer review through manuscript evenings at writers' groups, buddying schemes or informal arrangements between fellow writers for critiquing each other's work.

2. Reading work out loud. Reading work out loud can be an extremely useful for identifying a range of problems including clunky sentence construction, repetition, awkward dialogue and poor punctuation.
3. Assessing our writing against a checklist of elements including:
  - a. Scene setting. Have we brought the setting to life using all the tools in our writers' toolkit including associations, the senses and, where appropriate, nostalgia?
  - b. Mood/atmosphere building. Is what we've written dreamy, hard-edged, terrifying... What do we need it to be?

# VERACITY

- c. Plot. Is our plot interesting, original, credible, surprising...?
- d. Characterisation and character arcs. Will readers engage with our characters? What will our lead characters learn and/or develop as people as a result of what happens in the plot so as to leave the reader with a sense of satisfaction?



Structure

- e. Structure. Have we started in the best place to hook the reader's interest? Have we 'information dumped' the back story so that it slows the pace or have we drip-fed it actively along with the action? Have we ensured that there are always questions outstanding so the reader is incentivised to continue reading in order to find answers? Do the chapter endings make the reader want to keep turning the pages? Have we built to a climax ending? Have we wrapped things up quickly after the climax or allowed the reader to grow bored?

- f. Style. Have we written smoothly and clearly so the reader isn't confused? Have we used clichés or tired imagery? Could we introduce 'wow' imagery instead? Could we *show* the reader what is happening instead of *telling* it in a pedestrian way? *Show not tell* is the difference between watching a TV programme for ourselves and someone reporting to us on what they've seen.

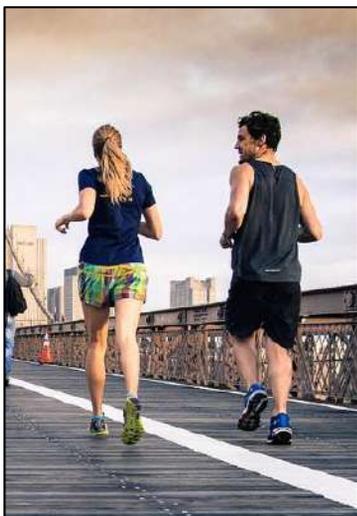
- g. Dialogue. Is it lively? Natural? *In character*? Is it always clear which character is speaking or do we need more dialogue tags such as *Fred said*? On the other hand, have we overdone the dialogue tags and used them when they're not actually needed?



Dialogue

- h. Pace. Have we 'information dumped'? Is the story getting booooring? Have we ensured that there's always at least one outstanding question to which the reader needs an answer?

- 4. Analysing the work of other writers. What works – or doesn't work – in terms of scene setting, plot themes and development, characterisation and character arcs, style etc? As writers we need to develop our own writing voices but it doesn't hurt to learn techniques from others.



Pace

Reviewing what we've written is essential but it doesn't hurt simply to practice the craft of writing whenever we have a free moment. With this in mind we can set ourselves challenges. A character study in 100 words... An atmosphere or mood-build in 50 words... An original angle on a well-used theme... A conversation between three characters... Showing not telling a scene and/or action...

One of the joys of writing is that the capacity for improvement never ends. Good luck!

## Time's A-Wastin'

Anne Ellis *on time that slips by...*

We've all been there — at least, I hope it's not just me! You've carved out some time in your schedule to write, and you sit down at your laptop. The TV is off; the cat is fed; there's a cup of coffee by your keyboard, and you've got a solid couple of hours of to really get cracking on the WIP. Another thousand words or two? Should be easy, right...

Except, when you get up at the end of those two hours, you've barely scratched the surface, and are nowhere near your goal. Why is this so common—and more importantly, what can we do to stop it happening?

### 1. Don't obsess over perfection first time through.

If you can't find the brilliantly new and unique phrasing you're sure must be on the tip of your tongue — or your typing fingers — don't let it destroy your momentum. It's perfectly acceptable to put in a placeholder and come back to it later. Similarly, you don't have to fact-check everything as you write. Leave yourself some kind of marker (bold text, say, or square brackets) and edit the questionable bits at a later date.

### 2. Don't get distracted.

A lot of us write at home. This has its advantages (zero commute; ability to work in pyjamas and bed hair) and its disadvantages. It's easy to get distracted when at home—



by household tasks; by household appliances; by other household members. If your family and/or other cohabitees are the understanding sort, you may be able to impress on them that when you're writing, an interruption could send that perfectly crafted sentence flying out of your brain and totally derail your train of thought. If they're not, it may be time to look into alternative offices, e.g. the library, should your town still seem to have one, or any café your friends don't go to (for obvious reasons).



# VERACITY

## 3. Don't get distracted

Yes, this is the same as point 2. I'm glad you were paying attention. But now I want to talk about that great blessing and bane of the writer's life, the internet. How many of us have paused our writing for 30 seconds to look up a minor point of fact, only to emerge blinking and dehydrated three days later from an obscure corner of Wikipedia? If you know you're prone to falling down the rabbit hole, it may be advisable to have a firm rule about no research whilst writing, or in extreme cases, to switch off your Wi-Fi. Yes, it is possible to do this. (At least, so I'm told...)

## 4. Stick with it.

As Thomas Mann said, a writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people. In other words, don't expect it to be easy all the time. It's wonderful when it is—it's what we live for, those moments of flow when the words seem to write themselves and our typing speed is woefully inadequate—but sometimes you really do have to sit down, grit your teeth, and bang out some words, even if they're not *good* words. You can't edit what you haven't written—and you may find that once you're over that initial stumbling block, things get much easier.



## 5. Reward yourself!

Particularly if you're writing a novel or other lengthy work, the payoff for all these hours of work can seem a long time off. So make sure you reward yourself for hitting your daily goals, even if it's just something little — allow yourself an extra ten minutes in the bath, say, or looking at funny cat memes, or make a start on another steampunk fascinator (that may be just me). It'll motivate you for the following day, and the day after that.

## 6. Don't beat yourself up

Everyone has days when they don't make their goals. It's important to forgive yourself when this happens. If you're feeling down about your writing, it'll make the job that much harder.

So to sum up: be kind to yourself! Give yourself a distraction-free environment, remove all temptations (get thee behind me, social media) and celebrate the positive! And hopefully those words will start flowing. And if they don't? Tomorrow is another day.



# VERACITY

Anne Ellis writes gay romance and mysteries under the pen name JL Merrow. She has had around 25 novels and novellas published, plus over 60 short stories. Anne's most recent publications, available on ebook, include...

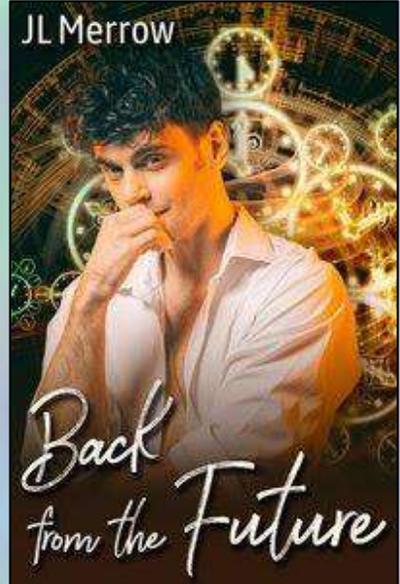
## Back From the Future (short story)

Ever since his one-night stand with big, butch, bisexual Bill, Marty's been in the hopeless grip of a passionate, yet seemingly unrequited love. House-sitting for the object of his affection, all he can do is cry on the scaly shoulders of Bill's exotic fish—until he meets the tipsy time-traveller who lives upstairs.

Arthur Prefect (not his real name) is a refugee from a dystopian time, and he's pining too, for the man he left back in the future. Over the course of a drunken evening, Marty dreams up a plan to reconnect the lonely young man with his lost love — but he'll need to do more than dream to fix up his own future with Bill.

Note: this short story also appears in the UK Meet anthology *Lashings of Sauce* under the title "Et Tu, Fishies?"

Available in ebook – [JMS Books \(www.jms-books.com\)](http://www.jms-books.com) | [Amazon](#)



## Hot Summer Nights

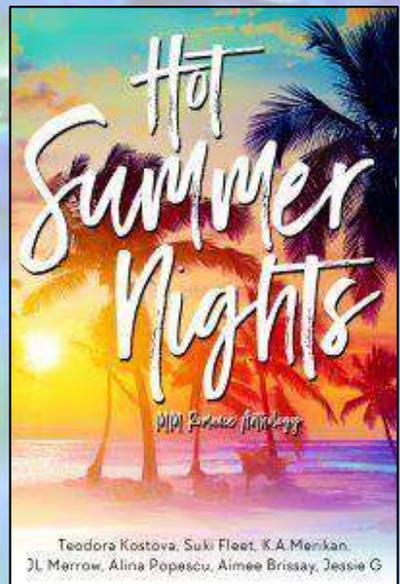
Over 500 pages of hot, summer fun! Seven sizzling LGBT romances to fan the summer heat.

Grab a cold drink and dive into these steamy stories covering a wide range of MM romance subgenres and tropes – from friends to lovers, second chances, and sexy ménages, to May-December pairings, werewolves, and even dragons.

There's bound to be a story to catch your eye and make your hot, summer nights even hotter. You'll also be helping us raise money for The Trevor Project, a suicide prevention charity for LGBTQ+ youth. Stories by [Teodora Kostova](#), [Suki Fleet](#), [Alina Popescu](#), [JL Merrow](#), [Aimee Brissay](#), [Jessie Gin](#) and [K. A. Merikan](#).

Includes a novella by JL Merrow, *Alpaca My Bags*.

Silver fox Scott Riley is holidaying on the Isle of Wight with his newborn granddaughter and her parents following the breakup of his relationship. A bit of fun in the sun with rugged alpaca farmer, Ryan, could be just what the doctor ordered. But when both men realise this holiday fling could be the start of something more, they'll need to work hard to counter Scott's family's misgivings—not to mention their own.



Available in ebook: [Amazon](#)

## My VW - Verulam Writers Is...

Robert Paterson *on his VW.*

It's been 10 years since I first tried out Verulam Writers and I've been an active member for 8 years. It felt quite forbidding at first. I had always thought myself to be a good writer; at least my friends and family thought so. Therefore, the weight of criticism I faced in my early days felt disheartening, even hurtful.



But people sometimes forget what extraordinary things come out of a struggle. Hot forges and powerful hammer blows may fashion the finest weapons. Through the criticism my fellow VW members gave me, my writing has become stronger and more polished. While I've not enjoyed the success some of my fellow members have, I'll never again be afraid to follow my lifelong dream of writing and publishing a great novel.

For me, Verulam Writers is...

- **AN IDEAL PLATFORM FOR MY WORK.** Safer than the Internet and right in my own home town!
- **A ROUTE TO PUBLICATION.** I have attempted to submit my work to publishers and agents several times over the past 10 years. No success yet, but I'll never quit!
- **MINGLING WITH LIKE-MINDED COMPANIONS.** Writers are rare among my circle of regular friends and it is deeply pleasurable to share my passion for writing with others who feel the same.
- **GAINING TRANSFERABLE SKILLS.** Taking the minutes and joining the circle committee has allowed me to acquire skills that I've never got the opportunity to obtain in work.
- **HAVING MY INTELLIGENCE RESPECTED.** Participating in our annual non-fiction writing competition and chairing our annual quiz night both allow me to make use of my considerable intellect.

And most of all, for me, Verulam Writers is...

- **WINNING FIRST PRIZE!** Securing first prize in the 2016 Lisbeth Philips Competition was a realisation of a dream after many years of frustration and has compelled me to put an entry into as many of our competitions as possible, so that I may repeat this success. Wish me luck in future!



## Teach your Talent!

Nick Cook *on teaching as a way to improve your writing.*

**You join a writing circle. You discover that writing is not as easy as it looks but eventually you get the hang of it. Like most writers your ultimate goal is the novel. But then you realise that your writing skills can open other doors as well.**

One of these is teaching. If you teach creative writing one immediate benefit is that you will cement your own understanding. Nothing makes sure you know a subject more than having to teach it.



But where to teach? One great area is the adult education classes run by local colleges of further education such as Oaklands College in St Albans. In many ways this is an ideal way to get into teaching not least because it can involve as little as two hours a week teaching time (plus homework marking) and therefore will not cut too much into your writing time.

Having got your class how do you actually go about the teaching? You don't. At least not for most of the time. As you know from your own experience the best way to learn to write is simply to.... write.

Your most important job is to constantly remember that you are not the star of the show. That role is reserved for your students. Yours is to motivate their writing and get them to read it out in front of the class. Let them criticise each other's work. This allows them to develop the all-important skill of criticising their own work. As Hemingway said "every writer needs a built in crap detector."

But you do need to facilitate. You need to ensure that their criticism of each other's work is valid and constructive. You also need to make sure it stays focussed. For example discussion on a piece about childhood holidays can all too easily result in the entire class debating the merits of Skegness verses Bognor Regis.

But of course you will also have to do some actual teaching.

One of the most valuable ways you can do this is by giving feedback. For example when you mark

their homework you are giving the most valuable feedback of all because it will be based on your own knowledge and experience. This form of feedback not only gives your students one to one tuition but helps you check whether they have mastered the points covered in your lectures.

And yes. Teaching will include lectures. But these should never be the most important or time-consuming part of each lesson. Topics covered in your lectures should of course include the old chestnuts:

- Show not tell
- Character
- Plotting and Structure
- Editing

Make sure you break up your lectures by breaking the class up into groups to discuss points that you raise. This helps the class to get to know each other and gives those students nervous about speaking in front of the whole class the opportunity to get their point of view across.

And be generous. Give them as much as possible in the way of handouts. Far better for them to be listening and thinking about what you say than desperately trying to copy every down every word.

Finally: where do they go after your class? You do not want them to lose momentum once they leave your structured environment and the weekly homework deadline. You might do worse than recommend a good writers' circle.

Such as VWC!

## About Us

Verulam Writers meet fortnightly on Wednesday evenings at 8pm in St Michael's Church Hall, St Albans, AL3 4SL. Informal gatherings are held every other week in a local pub. To find out more and for a full list of events, visit the VW website at: [www.verulamwriterscircle.org.uk](http://www.verulamwriterscircle.org.uk)

## 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 Sam Ellis 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)

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

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Wishing all Verulam Writers and VERACITY readers a great summer. See you next season!