VERACITY

The Magazine from Verulam Writers

Edition 56

Autumn 2025

www.verulamwriters.org

A NEW SEASON AS THE YEAR GROWS OLD



This time in VERACITY…

- An **icon** has **gone missing!**
- Everyone say **Hi to A.I.!**
- **Reference guides** for the unsteady writer!
- The Fall of the **Hall of Greystone!**

Here we are again, everyone! The roses are wilting the leaves are falling and, just like our chairman and recently departed vice-chairwoman (see page 2), we're wearing our coats once more. However, the 2025/26 Verulam Writer's season is still fresh and bountiful as any harvest.

The 2024/25 season ended with the Howard Linskey Competition (see pages 7 to 9) and the summer party. Yet writing never ceased over the summer holidays, as the online meetings I dropped in on a few informal attest to. You get to appreciate that there are more writers in the circle than just the more prolific ones at such times, and that every individual's voice has value for this group.

The fact that the season is still green and new means that there's not much to write about so far. Rest assured though, by the next edition a lot will have changed. This year's David Gibson Cup came too soon for the winning entry to be included, but it will be in the spring edition along with the entry that won this year's Lisbeth Philips plate. For now, though, I hope you get a great deal out of the stimulating articles you have contributed to this venerable newsletter.

To keep up with the amazing events planned for the 2025/26 season, check the event listings on the Verulam Writers' website (www.verulamwriters.org). Keep encouraging potential new members to join or non-members to drop by. (£3 for a meeting, £5 for workshops and talks.)

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VERACITY

From the Editor…

Verulam Writers is back for another season, and so is my sixth edition of VERACITY!

The 2024/25 season ended with some bitter blows to the committee. Not only did secretary Tina Shaw and catering chief Wendy Turner step down from their roles, but vice-chairwoman Mandy Carter left the circle altogether! (Her new job's hours would clash with our meetings.) However, we've taken on some keen new members who will tell their stories later in this newsletter.

The new committee has already filled up the schedule up until Christmas and is building up the schedule bit by bit into what I hope is a year that will be full of excitement and surprises.

This edition of Veracity will contain the usual mix of articles, stories and recommendations by our members, but see if you can spot one new feature in this edition of Veracity that shows we're moving with the times.

Robert Paterson, Editor

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From the Chair…



By Philip Mitchell

I've done something terrible. Something unthinkable. And it may lead to me being kicked out of Verulam Writers. At the time of writing, I've lost the Gnome de Plume.

For those who don't know the Gnome, he's our prize for the best *nom de plume* (or pen name, if you're unfamiliar with the French term) used to enter each of our competitions. All our competitions are entered anonymously, and members vote on their favourite pen name at the end of the results evening.

I have a strange relationship with the Gnome, something I've voiced at meetings, and I fear people may think I've lost him deliberately. I've won the Gnome 3 or 4 times. When I've brought him home, I've displayed him on our mantlepiece. He's been a talking point when people come round. My wife tolerated him the first couple of times. But no more. And, to be fair, he is a bit of an assault on the eyes. His natural gnome style has been swamped in garish decoration. Over the years, winners have added items to the gnome. Things like glasses, a face mask, a necklace, and various stickers. But, despite his appearance, he is a treasured member of Verulam Writers.

I won the Gnome in our last competition, the Howard Linskey Crime Story competition. However, the previous winner, Wendy, hadn't brought him along to give to the winner on the night of the competition. That was a bit of a relief. *My wife will be pleased*, I thought. I told Wendy to keep hold of him for me until the next competition. Wendy and the Gnome are great friends. She's won him many times.

Until this week, I thought Wendy was looking after him. But following a VW meeting, when I questioned who had the gnome, Wendy reminded me by email she'd handed him over to me at our end-of-season party in July. When I read that, I went cold. I now clearly remember Wendy giving him to me in his shiny silver gift bag that he likes to travel in. I remember putting him to one side, out of the way. But I definitely didn't take him home!

Maybe some kind soul has found him and put him safely away in the hall's storage cupboard. I will have to wait until the next meeting to see. But there's a genuine possibility he might be missing, presumed dead. I imagine a stranger looking inside his silver bag, lifting him out, and thinking, what a hideous thing. I see them walking him to the nearest bin and tossing him in, laughing dramatically as they walk away.

If you have seen him, put me out of my misery and let me know; otherwise, hope he's in the cupboard at our next meeting. If he is, he'll receive a hero's welcome. And, if he has left us, I will buy a suitable replacement. Where's the best place to get a gnome nowadays?

As chairperson of Verulam Writers, I fully accept that losing the Gnome de Plume is a complete failure of responsibility. If demanded, I will tender my resignation. If I must be cast from the group entirely, I will go quietly. I will leave it to the members to decide my fate.

If I go, it'll be a shame because there's some great stuff coming up in the programme, and I quite like coming along on a Wednesday evening and being among writers. I like entering the competitions, though a win would be nice soon. And I want to hear the experience of the guests who'll visit us. But I understand the pain I will cause if the Gnome is gone, and the disgust my presence at meetings will cause.

Maybe for the last time, I wish you best of luck with your writing, and hopefully I'll see you (and the gnome) at a meeting soon.

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

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New to the Committee

In the members' own words, with a message from the editor

With the Verulam Writers committee having been rocked to its core with no less than three departures recently, those who remain have felt relieved that two new committee members have agreed to step into their places. What's an organisation without someone to run it, after all?

Given the importance of the committee and their gratitude to these guys to stepping in, I think it only fitting that they hold pole position in this term's newsletter. In fact, they form a new chapter in the committee's history, for we are taking the chance to be more flexible about the roles people play in it and wondering whether or not we can streamline it by reducing the number of responsibilities people take. Watch this space for more!

Now whether they may be succinct or loquacious, these two men will present themselves in their own words. And given what they have provided me with, I certainly look forward to hearing more of those words soon.

Paul McNamara



I was born in Middlesbrough in 1954. Having gained degrees in geography from the Universities of St Andrews and Edinburgh, I worked as a researcher and lecturer at the (then) Oxford Polytechnic. I moved to St Albans in 1987 after joining a major City-based financial institution where I headed an investment research team for over 20 years, publishing widely in my specialist field. I retired in 2012.

I've has been a songwriter and performer all his adult life and, in 2007, jointly formed folk duo, Na-Mara. With fellow musician, Rob Garcia, I've played venues across the UK and overseas. Na-Mara finished live performance in late 2024 but still write and record music.

I've joined VW having attended the Beginners and Improvers courses in Creative Writing at Oaklands College. I've recently contributed a chapter to VW's *Bloody St Albans* anthology and am currently working on a novel set in Victorian Liverpool.

I'm married with two children and have recently become a grandfather.

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New to the Committee, page 2



Jake Pirrie

Hi, my name is Jake and I'm one of the new Verulam Writers Committee members. If you've been coming to the in-person meetings at St Stephen, you might have seen me around. I'm the guy that brought in that Goblin story if it helps.

Like with many of you, I'd wager, books take up a significant part of my life. I do try to read a breadth of styles, genres and authors, but my Storygraph stats don't lie. I know I spend most of my time with fantasy and science-fiction. Looking at my all-time stats, my most read authors are Brandon Sanderson, Adrian Tchaikovsky, Miya Kazuki, Ursula Le Guin and Terry Pratchett. At the time of writing I'm currently reading Ken Liu's Dandelion Dynasty series and having a great time with its political system, inspired by Asian Feudalism meshed with steampunk airships and submarines. I am always up for book recommendations though – fantasy and science fiction are obviously welcome but anything else might help me realise my dream of reading breadth. My most significant interest outside of books is that of animation (western and anime). Although my fandom of these shows and movies often leaves me searching out manga, comic book or novel spin-offs and source material and thus always to larger piles of books I intend to read.

As with many of those whose lives are warped by bibliophilia, I started trying my hand at writing. 'How hard can it be?' a younger and more naive me might have said. Quite so, I'd soon discover. After compiling a small list of projects that fell short of what I was hoping for, I knew that it was time to start looking for some help. It is hard, especially early on, to share one's work with people. In my mind it was too big an imposition to inflict on those close to me, a favour I had no way of reciprocating. Also my writing is not (and will probably never be) a subject to bring up around the water cooler at work. You can additionally run the risk of feedback from friends and family getting tainted by sunk cost fallacy. Folk who've spent substantial effort and time into friendships, would likely give friends a half-hearted 'I liked it' or 'It was good' if handed something lacking redeeming qualities.

The reason I first turned up to that September Verulam Writers' meeting was that it was the first result if you put 'St Albans Writing Group' into your internet search engine of choice. However, I was genuinely shocked at how much I felt my writing improved in only a year of membership.

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New to the Committee, page 3

For example, I'm so much happier with the aforementioned Goblin story since bringing it to Manuscript nights. Reading out my work to the room was pretty nerve-wracking but all the polite critique that I got was so incredibly helpful. Tips from 'It should be fewer, not less' to 'Have you considered having a reason for telling this story in second person?' made that story orders of magnitude better.

There is also real value in joining a community of writers. Writing is a solitary and Sisyphean act. I'm ashamed to admit how long this paragraph alone has taken me to construct. But sometimes just having something to bring to a manuscript night feels like just a little bit of progress. Even before sharing my work, just admitting to a room of people that I wrote felt like advancement.

Later in the year, I'd started entering the competitions held by Verulam Writers. Writing a story based on prompts like 'There's something in the water', 'Legends', 'Home' and 'Heavy' forced me to come up with pieces of writing that otherwise wouldn't exist. If you haven't entered the competition before, I cannot recommend it highly enough. Even if you didn't enter, still do come to the award night. The variety of stories that these prompts seem to draw out of the group make it worth it before even mentioning the quality (which is very high, of course).

Another benefit of the competitions is that it forces you out of comfort zones. My above admittance of a sci-fi/fantasy preoccupation in my reading often bleeds through into my writing. Last year saw me writing non-fiction and I fully intend to write a poem in this year's Xmas competition. Consider yourselves duly warned.

There're plenty of added benefits too. Veracity goes without saying since you're currently reading it and then there are the writers' visits and workshops. I'm quite looking forward to a behind the scenes look at how these particular sausages get made now that I'm on the committee. I suspect blackmail.

Then each term ends with its own little Hootenanny. I'd rate the parties at the end of Winter and Summer over the last year as at least a lark. However, my own personal highlight was the quiz. As someone who likes a good quiz but knows nothing about sports and music, the literary-focused quiz from last year was a real blast.

I'm definitely looking forward to the rest of the next year as both a committee member and meeting attender. My hope is that I'm able to have a positive impact on the group in either capacity (preferably both). I would be remiss if I didn't add that if anyone reading this is interested in joining the committee, I think we're still a fair number off from turning people away at the door. Only membership, of any length, is needed.

Please feel free to talk to me if you have anything that you want me to bring up in meetings. I'm always up for listening and, while I may not be able to do anything, I've now got the email addresses of people who might.

So all that being said, thanks for everyone's help over this last year and I hope that I can reciprocate over this one. See you around fellow writers.

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Howard Linskey Competition 2025

By Robert Paterson

When talent shows are on the television, judges sometimes say that it's been tough to pick a winner. Sometimes you suspect that's hyperbole. Yet when crime novelist Howard Linskey dropped by St Stephen's Church Hall on the night of Wednesday 18th June and said he had to choose from four potential winners, I truly believe he was in earnest.

The stories members had sent in were both richly inventive and, in many cases, suitably grim. Mike Spurgeon submitted *The Moll's Revenge*, a tale of a woman who discovers the man she loves isn't all he seems and tries to escape. Ben Bergonzi put in *Soviets Bomb Buckingham Palace*, which involves a Polish pilot trying to manufacture an outrage so that Britain will attack the USSR and emancipate his people. Hardly surprising my entry, *Crashing and Burning,* didn't win a prize. Adding a dark background to a famous scene in a sitcom was never going to have as much pathos as those!

Our third-place winner was Steve Seaton. His story was *The Authors of Crime*, in which a couple use an artificial intelligence program to create a winning story entry, then get carried away with their power. Cecile Keen won second prize for a story that raised righteous indignation in members' hearts due to its graphic description of an outrageously cruel "sport"; *What's One Less Dog*? Philip Mitchell was awarded for creativity in his own way, by winning the Gnome De Plume for his pseudonym Anita Alibi. (But see page 3…)

Our overall winning entry is overleaf. But before that, allow me to replicate Howard's plug at the end of the night. Please, if you are short of something to read, check out his current novel, *A Serpent In the Garden*, in which The Bard himself, William Shakespeare, solves a mystery in the court of Queen Elizabeth I! Coming soon is its sequel, *A Muse of Fire*, which features genuine historical rebel, Robert Deveraux, 2nd Earl of Essex.

A Serpent in the Garden: A totally gripping historical crime thriller (William Shakespeare Mysteries Book 1) eBook : Linskey, Howard: Amazon.co.uk: Kindle Store



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Long and Short Division

Winner of the 2025 Howard Linskey Crime Fiction Competition

By Anne Ellis, writing as P.R. Point

The maths teacher, Mr Townsend, was the tallest man Harry had ever known. When Harry had first joined the school as an underdeveloped eleven-year-old, he'd thought Mr Townsend a fussily-dressed giant. But as Harry had grown, the man had seemed to get smaller.

Now, though, Mr Townsend was somehow a giant again. An angry giant. He loomed intimidatingly at the head of the classroom, idly thwacking a long wooden ruler against his hand.

Harry cowered at his desk. He could imagine how that ruler might feel, hitting against his soft flesh. This was one of the original classrooms in the century-old school, with wooden desks and high windows. The cane might have been outlawed decades ago, but Harry fancied he could hear the echoes of boys' pained cries reverberating from the room's austere walls. He swallowed. How old was Townsend, anyway? He was still powerfully built—far more powerfully than Harry himself—but his bushy hair was iron grey. Did he remember those days of corporal punishment?

Did he miss them?

"It's a simple problem, Harry," Mr Townsend was saying. "A weight of 60kg, with gravitational force at 9.8m/s. For a force to be generated…"

Harry's head ached, and he felt sick. Why was the man asking him this? What was the point of it all? Why were they even—

The ruler came down hard on Harry's knuckles, and he yelped in pain.

"Pay attention, Boy!"

"Why?" Harry blurted. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Mr Townsend stared at him for a long moment. Then he looked away. "The boy asks why," he murmured to the ceiling. His tweed jacket was frayed at the cuffs, Harry noticed numbly, and one elbow patch was coming unstitched.

Slow, heavy footsteps sounded as Mr Townsend paced in front of Harry's desk. "A multiplicity of reasons, Harry. Surely you can recall some of them at least? Perhaps the imaginative artwork you added to the whiteboard showing me in flagrante with the headmaster? In *permanent marker*?"

Harry's mind was hazy, too hazy, but he remembered. He'd been a weedy kid, never any good at sports and often bullied for it, but after those drawings, for the first time in his school career, he'd begun to be popular…

"Or could it be the obscene graffiti you scratched into the paintwork of my car? Or the defacement of other of my personal possessions?"

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Long and Short Division, Howard Linskey Competition winner, page 2

Those acts had made the other kids respect him even more. It'd been a lark—until the letters home and the endless detentions…

"Or perhaps it's the rumours you started, knowing full well they were entirely unfounded, about me abusing the younger boys. Those could have led to public vilification and a prison sentence and did, indeed, result in my unwilling early retirement. My poor wife never recovered from the disgrace, and I'm quite sure it contributed to her recent death."

Harry winced. By then he'd just been wanted to be rid of the man.

Mr Townsend stopped his pacing and turned to glare directly at Harry. "No, you're not here because of any of those incidents, infuriating and disrespectful though they were. I think you know what is responsible for your presence here."

"I don't! I don't! Please, Sir, I don't know why you're doing this to me!" Harry found himself sobbing. This was a nightmare; it had to be. People had them all the time, didn't they? Dreams of their school days? This couldn't be real.

He flinched back as Mr Townsend strode to the desk and towered over him. "Look at me, Boy!"

Unable to disobey, powerless to move, Harry stared up at the red face, the flared nostrils sprouting with wiry grey hairs. When he'd been a teenager, he'd seen the man as a joke, but now, a grown man in his twenties, Mr Townsend terrified him. "Please, Sir…"

"I am referring, Boy, to the day you were openly insubordinate. You refused to hand in your homework and bragged that you hadn't done it. You looked me in the eye and said…" Mr Townsend broke off, and took a deep breath, as if he needed to compose himself.

Hysteria rose in Harry's throat. *Sir* needed to compose himself?

Mr Townsend leaned in close, the reek of his tobacco-flavoured breath overpowering. "You said to me, in that arrogant, entitled voice of yours, 'When am I ever going to need maths in the real world?'"

Harry blinked. "That… That's what this is all about?" He barely remembered the day. Nobody had thought it as impressive as his more inventive, practical acts of defiance.

Mr Townsend straightened, his anger apparently conquered—for now. "And that is why you're here. To learn why maths is important in the real world." The penultimate word was dripping with contempt.

"So you will finish the calculation," Mr Townsend continued. "And I will tie the noose accordingly. The accuracy of your work will mean the difference between a swift death or, on the one hand, a painfully slow asphyxiation and on the other, decapitation, when I untie you from that chair and hang you from the window." He smiled, and Harry's stomach lurched. "So, to work. You require, for optimum results, a drop force of 1,400J. How long a rope is indicated? Chop chop." His smile broadened. "Or perhaps it'll be the short drop for you."

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A.I'M THE AUTHOR NOW

By Sam Ellis

The former newsletter editor's account of how artificial intelligence is changing writing. Sorry it took so long to put it in, Sam! (ed.)

Have you heard of Jane Friedman? Author of *The Business of Being a Writer*, Friedman's work focusses on the publishing industry, where she draws from her 25+ years of experience. She is also, however, somewhat infamous in the publishing world, as she discovered to her horror that her name was being used as the writer of AI-generated works including *How to Write and Publish an eBook Quickly and Make Money*. A small storm ensued as, according to Friedman, Amazon said that as her name wasn't trademarked they would not remove the books – a position that was quickly changed once Friedman began to create noise on social media.

The rise of the AI-generated book is not a new thing. In September 2023, Amazon introduced a limit for the number of self-published books: three per author per day. John Boyne may have written *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* in two days, but this isn't a limit to curtail speedy human writers. Amazon specifically cited 'the rapid evolution of generative AI' as the reason for this new limit.

In the broadcast world, the BBC recently updated their AI guidelines and included a 'Disclosure Formula' for use of AI, which is:

Content Format + Role of Human + Role of AI + Link for More Information

For example:

This article was written and reviewed by a journalist, using AI to assist with translation. For more information on how we use AI, follow this link:…

Essentially, the BBC has led with the idea that transparency is key. If you use AI, then say so, and how. This may be the case for the BBC, which will likely become the broadcast industry standard for the UK, but this isn't strictly the case for the publishing world. For self-publishing on Amazon the guidelines state that you should disclose if AI has generated text, images or translations, but if AI was used for editing or 'improvements' then disclosure is not necessary. Prior to September 2023 there were no such guidelines. Brett Schickler was unafraid to say he used ChatGPT to create an illustrated children's e-book using prompts, yet ChatGPT wasn't listed as an author, and nor was the program he used for the illustrations. This should, in theory, not be allowed today.

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A.I'M THE AUTHOR NOW, PAGE 2

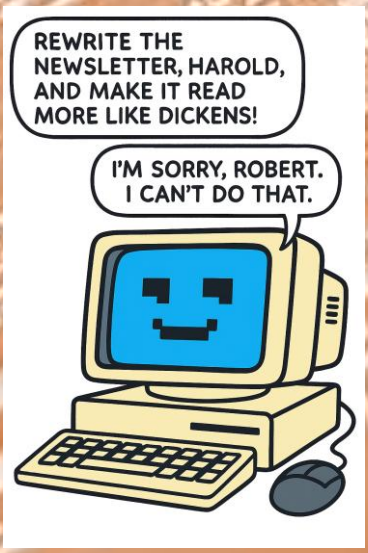
All of that being said, is AI really the Big Bad Wolf in Little Real Writing's 'hood? To aid an author, would there be objections to AI taking on the role of an editor? Probably not. A ghostwriter? Maybe. But would there be objections to AI becoming an author in its own right? Herein lies a bit of a problem, as even with disclosure that AI has been used, how do we know to what extent. How can we measure AI's role? Are we relying fully on the honesty and integrity of a so-called author? This is where things get very grey.

There are so many questions at the moment that it's hard to know where to begin. But I think for us writers (and readers, for that matter) a good place to start is to ask ourselves how much we really care. Personally, I don't particularly mind if a writer has used AI as an editor, or if a piece is fully AI-generated and clearly says so. But morally I don't feel comfortable with someone giving AI a prompt (such as 'write an article about AI's use in creative writing') and passing it off as their own. Then again, do I care if AI has crafted a paragraph or two with the oversight and instruction from a writer..? Agh! I don't know!

What I do know is this; AI isn't going anywhere, and it's presence in writing will only grow. In the meantime, full disclosure, BBC style, seems like a solid approach. It keeps both credibility and a clear conscious. After all, we're in the Wild West now, and it's high noon. Time to pick a side.

Oh, and finally…

This article was written by the author, and AI was used for editing purposes. For the original and unedited article please contact the author.



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SHORT STORY TO NOVEL

The genesis of *A Cruel Corpse*

By Ben Bergonzi

In 2016, when the Howard Linskey Crime Competition was relatively new to us, I submitted a story called *Garrison Duty* which began:

'The sun was going down as they brought Sergeant Beatty's body back to the Castle. I was sitting nearest the window, so I saw him first. The fellows were away down the Barrack Hall. They were clustered round the cold fireplace, cleaning crossbelts, polishing buttons, writing letters or dictating them, all to the background of the usual weary banter.'

The story is set in the aftermath of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion. The Garrison of the title was made up of redcoated English soldiers in the border stronghold of Carlisle Castle: among these is Private Hayden Gray. When a cruel Sergeant named Beatty is found dead, Hayden is suspected of having been the murderer. With the aid of a medical orderly named Jasper, Hayden changes out of uniform into a female dress and secretly goes out into the city, discovering how Beatty really met his end. In the final paragraph of the 1200-word story, the reader learns that Hayden is actually a female soldier whose secret is known only to Jasper.

The story was enthusiastically praised by Howard as a commercial idea – 'Why not try turning it into a novel?' His words were both an encouragement and a challenge. Little suspecting the work still to come, I completed the first draft by the autumn of 2019. It was called *Justicetown* and, like the story, was written in the first person from Hayden's point of view, though I did not attempt to maintain, throughout, the secret that the protagonist was a woman. It also starts with the arrival of the dead body at the castle, observed by Hayden Gray who fears the destruction of her secret life as a soldier. Before the killer is identified, Hayden plays other roles, further murders take place, jeopardy and danger ensue. During its composition, several passages from this book were read out at our manuscript nights, and I remain grateful for the comments that were made both then and by my longstanding VWC writing buddy.

This draft was quite vivid but suffered from a key problem that was pinpointed in feedback I had when entering it for a competition: if we start with the body being observed by the female soldier, we have a key piece of backstory to explain to the reader at the same as trying to get the crime story going. *Why* is Hayden there as a female soldier? Following on from that is the obvious question – who is she really?

I had lumbered myself with a story structure that was fighting the need to introduce my main character properly. My first attempt to deal with this was via going back and starting with an incident when Hayden decides to dress as a woman, to escape from some unpleasant captivity by a 'benefactor' back in London. But then I was losing the impact of the body appearing on page 1. .

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SHORT STORY TO NOVEL, PAGE 2

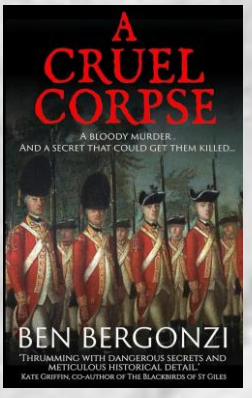
I still persisted in sending the book out, or at least its opening. But through the silence that speaks volumes when you query and you hear nothing, I realised that clearly not all was well. In some desperation I took a radical step and completely rewrote the book from the first person to the third person, primarily because I wanted more freedom to deal with the problems of opening the plot and introducing the characters. Having done this, I then had a further stage of rewriting scenes to alternative points of view. Eventually, I found I had gained much more freedom to involve other characters dynamically in the action. I was able to describe how Hayden actually looks. And most importantly, by changing the point of view I was able to overcome the problem of backstory cluttering up the story's opening.

The title was changed from *Justicetown* to *A Smooth Faced Rogue*, which refers to Hayden's disguise. I was recommended to send the whole book to a beta reader, and realised that as I was now acting as a review editor for the Historical Novel Society, I was well placed to enlist a skilled reviewer. With her kind agreement and the very helpful comment that I needed to improve my novel's voice, I finally got it to the stage where it was accepted by a small publisher for a 'digital first' edition. This acceptance came in November last year and was conditional on having a new title – this was not a surprising stipulation because I had already been told that *A Smooth Faced Rogue* was more like the title of a romance. I had no idea what to call the book, but at some point over the Christmas period, a very busy family time with children and grandchildren, the words *A Cruel Corpse* came into my head. The publisher liked this; the book eventually came out in June this year. I am pleased with that title – it sums up well the initial concept of the early chapters.

This is how it starts now. We still have Sergeant Beatty's body on page one, but now we see it from Jasper's point of view:

'*I may only be a drummer but I outrank you now, Sarge. You're starting to smell and I'm standing on my legs looking down at you. Only trouble is, you're the kind who doesn't need to be alive to cause trouble. These provosts – your friends, damn 'em – are dangerously good at digging things up. If my secret comes out I could end up as dead as you are, but with a rope round my neck. It happens to fellows like me. Jasper wiped his eyes, in an attempt to clear his mind of such worries, and hoped the officer who'd brought the body in would take it as a covert teardrop or two.*'

A Cruel Corpse, published by Holland Press, is available from Amazon at £3.99 for the Kindle edition and £9.99 for the paperback.



Click here to order!
A Cruel Corpse : Bergonzi, Ben: Amazon.co.uk: Books

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Writing Tools: The Experiences of a Novice

A bit more from Paul McNamara

I am a relative newcomer to creative writing and, frankly, need all the help I can get. As such, I'm always on the lookout for tools to assist me, and retain a keen interest in understanding how experienced writers go about their craft and what aids they find useful.

In what follows, I talk a little about my own writing process and share some information on what has recently become a key tool for me, namely, a specialist set of thesauruses I've discovered. In doing this, I hope to encourage other Verulam Writers to talk about their own writing processes and discuss the various tools they find useful.

Writing Process

My first step is usually to scribble down a chapter in handwritten note form. I then dictate these notes into Microsoft Word. After correcting Word's often hilarious attempts to decipher my North-Eastern accent, I then paste what is effectively a first draft into my main writing and editing software, Scrivener.

I have grown to like Scrivener a lot. It allows me to easily set up, arrange and rearrange the structure of my writing project, and store research sources and character profiles inside that same project file for easy access. Scrivener also has a 'Composition Mode' feature that effectively blocks any interruptions from notifications and messages coming into my laptop, minimising potential distractions.

After writing several further drafts of my chapter within Scrivener, I then use its inbuilt text-to-speech software to read my story back. Despite the somewhat robotic voicing, I find this process invaluable for identifying typos and highlighting those phrasings that just don't scan. When the drafting process is finished, Scrivener has the capacity to compile my work for exporting, sharing or publishing in a variety of formats.

I turn now to the main tools I use for editing.

I probably use spell- and grammar-checkers in much the same way you do. However, I have recently found myself making increasing use of a range of specialist thesauruses that may be of interest to VW members if they haven't yet come across them.

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Writing Tools: The Experiences of a Novice, Page 2

Ten Specialist Thesauruses

Regular thesauruses offer synonyms and near synonyms to help writers find appropriate words for whatever they are trying to express. Like others, I also use them to avoid repetition and make compositions more interesting. However, I have recently discovered a completely different type of thesaurus that can be used to good effect. For example, rather than simply offering word substitutes, the specialist thesauruses compiled by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi offer alternative ways to explain and portray the behavioural traits and emotions of characters.

To date, these authors have compiled a series of ten such specialist thesauruses, all available in book or electronic form. Two of the ten volumes deal specifically with the emotions and emotional wounds that characters experience. A third volume lists the factors that amplify those emotions.

In their two thesauruses that explore 'conflict', the authors lay out, in a structured way, the obstacles, adversaries and inner struggles characters in novels typically face.

Two further thesauruses are dedicated, respectively, to the 'positive' and 'negative' traits characters might exhibit through the course of a story.

The final three thesauruses in the set are dedicated to exploring 'urban settings', 'rural settings' and 'occupations'. These volumes are noticeably North American-oriented and have proved less relevant to someone like me writing about Victorian Liverpool. However, I am finding the other seven thesauruses much more useful.

Clearly, I don't have enough space to describe in detail what each of these ten different thesauruses does but, by way of example, I'll say a little about just one of them, namely, the *Positive Trait Thesaurus*. (Needless to say, I make similar use of its companion volume, the *Negative Trait Thesaurus*, to help build more complex characters.)

Ackerman and Puglisi's *Positive Trait Thesaurus* lists 97 positive traits that a character might exhibit, for example "sensuality" or "thriftiness". For each trait listed, the authors first define what is meant by that trait and the source of its positivity. For example, is it a positive 'moral' trait like "honour" or a positive 'interactive' trait like "patience"?

The authors then outline how a character might have gained that trait, what behaviours might be linked to it, what associated thoughts and emotions someone possessing it might experience, and what the positive and negative implications might be of exhibiting such a trait.

Then, finally, for each of the traits listed, the authors explore what attributes in *other* characters could lead to conflict with your subject character, and what situations your subject character might, therefore, find challenging.

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Writing Tools: The Experiences of a Novice, Page 3

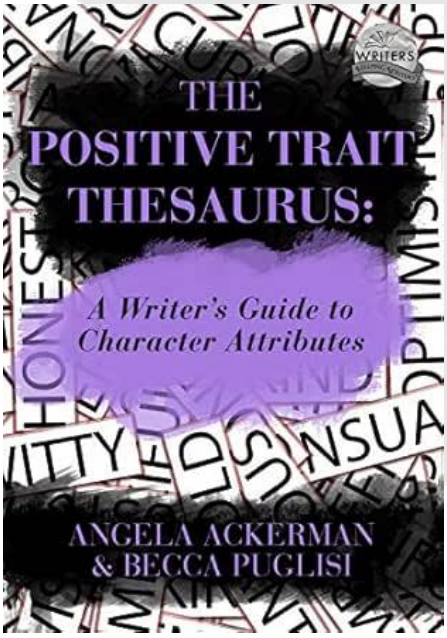
So, for each of my own main characters, I have reviewed the many positive (and negative) traits listed by Ackerman and Puglisi, selecting those I see them possessing, usually six or seven per character. Then, like a regular thesaurus, I have used the *Positive Trait Thesaurus* as a prompt to reflect on and flesh out how my characters came to possess those traits, how their behaviour is affected by them, how the character might react in given circumstances, and what other types of character they might be drawn to or repelled by.

A disciplined writer would probably have done all this character mapping before putting pen to paper, but I should confess that I was already well into writing my current novel before I discovered Ackerman and Puglisi. As such, I've been using their thesauruses retrospectively and interactively, but still to beneficial effect.

Finally, before signing off on thesauruses, I should relate one tip I collected from a fellow student on the recent Oaklands College Creative Writing course I attended, namely, to buy myself a copy of the Chambers Crossword Dictionary. Designed primarily for pencil chewers wrestling with cryptic crosswords, this dictionary feels like a thesaurus and regularly provides me with more offbeat options for word choice when editing.

Paul McNamara

Ackerman A., and Puglisi B. (2013) *The Positive Trait Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Attributes*, JADD Publishing



Order here:

[The Positive Trait Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Attributes (Writers Helping Writers Series Book 3) eBook : Ackerman, Angela, Puglisi, Becca: Amazon.co.uk: Kindle Store]

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What Handy Advice Do You Have For Our Members?

By Pernille Hughes

Editor's Note:

After published author Pernille Hughes visited Verulam Writers on 7th May, we put some questions to her to discover more about her. Unfortunately, one of those questions, which is now the title of this article, caused her to write an article we didn't have column space for alongside all the other answers she gave. Now, as promised, here is her very useful advice to budding writers. I hope you enjoy it.



I'm still a newish author, with much to learn, but I've picked up a few things after three books, random nuggets for writers wherever they're at in their writerly wranglings.

For the newbie writer - It's great to have a fantastic scenario for your story, but your characters are key. They need to feel real and rounded to your readers. They need to be flawed, even the goodies, not just the baddies. My tip;

1) Get a big glass of wine.
2) Shut yourself away from people with said glass of wine, a pad and a pen.
3) Take a long hard look at yourself and write down all your flaws on the pad. Be merciless. No one else needs ever see this list.
4) Drink the big glass of wine.

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What Handy Advice Do You Have For Our Members? Part 2

You now have a list of flaws (if it isn't a list then you haven't been merciless enough, or you're a saint, or deluded, or both). A list you can mine for your characters and dig really deeply into when you write, because you have an understanding of those flaws and what they feel like and possibly why they exist. *This* is 'writing what you know'…

For the editing writer – 'If you think it might need cutting, it probably does. I can't remember where I read this, but it is annoyingly true.

For the promo-shy writer – Start early in trying to build your platform and do this by connecting with other readers like yourself. Essentially, FIND YOUR TRIBE. No matter how niche your reading tastes there will be others like you to be found on Instagram, Facebook or Tiktok. You just need to use the hashtags and look. Join the conversation, let them get to know you over something you all love, no selling. Same for your writing. Find your readers, connect with them - again *not* selling - engaging and listening. One day, when you and your debut are ready, your social media friends will be there to beta read for you, review for you, cheer for you, and perhaps even buy your book.

For the querying writer – Rejection Chocolates. This is a VITAL part of your submission prep.

1) Buy a really good box of chocolates. Something fancy you wouldn't normally buy.
2) Hide them. (From yourself and any family members who like to share your stuff.)
3) If you get a rejection you may eat one. (ONE!!!)
4) When you get an offer of representation you may scoff what's left. The rejection will still be sad, but the chocolates take the sting off.

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What Handy Advice Do You Have For Our Members? Part 3

For the doubting writer – This should really be bolted into the submission process. Your Inner critic is a b*tch and Imposter Syndrome is real.

Make a new document. Title it "*Vainglory File*" and bury it deep in your folders where no one else will stumble across it. Any time a rejection letter says something nice, copy that line into your file. Add any other compliments you might get about your writing from anywhere. Have a little read of it whenever you are feeling low about this crazy business. Sometimes you just need a pep talk or a pat on the back.

For the newly-signed writer – CELEBRATE!!! This game can be slow and lonely and hard, so make the most of every single good moment and find some way, however small, of partying for it. Celebrate finishing your draft, getting your deal, signing your contract, sending in your edits, the cover reveal (Top Tip; have it made into a phone case so you always have an image easily to hand, have it made into a canvas - your walls need it!), Celebrate publication day (have that launch party - *do* it! - don't be bashful, this is a rare thing – your friends will want to celebrate you – accept it and bask in it!!), Celebrate your box of proofs arriving (film that #unboxing and sniffing the pages, it's all good social media content), Celebrate your bestseller flag on Amazon even if it only lasts twenty four hours in the most obscure category. Celebrate it all. Life is short, and hard enough, take the moments of glory wherever and whenever you can.

For the established writer – Help a newbie writer. Someone will have helped you at some point. Or else you wish that someone had. So, befriend a beginner, make an introduction, pass on some advice, give a quote. Whatever you can. Hopefully they'll pass it on when it's *their* time.

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL

PART 3: GOODBYE, GREYSTONE HALL

THE STORY SO FAR;

Simone Greystone and her three companions have returned to the Greystone family's ancestral home, hoping to find a way to lay the ghost of Lady Cynthia Lovejoy to rest. Their quest has proved very dangerous, however, for the ghost is able to manipulate the house's structure and summon hideous monsters to attack them. Simone and Felicity have narrowly survived encounters with such creatures and laying the ghost has now become subordinate to merely surviving…



Simone ran wildly down the corridor until she came to a brass-handled door. Mercifully, it was unlocked, so she charged through and slammed it behind her. She leaned against the door, shivering and hyperventilating until her heartbeats returned to normal. There was silence. The many-headed beast was no longer following her.

There was a whoosh as lanterns magically lit themselves once more. Simone found herself in a perpendicular corridor much wider and higher-ceilinged than the one she had been in, with many doors leading off it. Directly opposite her, there was a carved marble archway and a downward-leading flight of stairs. The Greystone vault! *Whatever challenges remained*, she thought, *the quest must end soon*.

Simone jumped a foot when another door banged open to her left. Felicity appeared looking just as petrified as Simone had been.

"Oh, thank heavens! Simone!" Felicity wailed. "I was being chased by the most awful beast that appeared from nowhere!"

"So was I," Simone replied. "Thankfully I don't hear either of them…"

Before she could finish, yet another door banged open and Gus raced into the lamp-lit corridor, weeping like a little child, shrieking about how he now looked like some hideous freak and that his skin was falling off.

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL
PART 3, PAGE 2

"What do you mean, Gussie?" cooed Felicity. "You look as lovely as ever."

And when Gus checked himself in a gilded mirror that hung on the opposite wall, he saw he had indeed turned into his normal (though not quite handsome) self.

"Maybe they were all illusions," suggested Simone, "But whatever they are, let's see what's in the vault. I'm as keen as any of you to get out of this creepy place."

"What the bloody hell are you talking about?" yelled out a slurred voice.

Onto the scene staggered Diana, her right arm holding a half-empty decanter of brandy and her left arm draped over an athletic, dark-haired gentleman of early middle years. He oozed charm as he surveyed the three stunned faces before him.

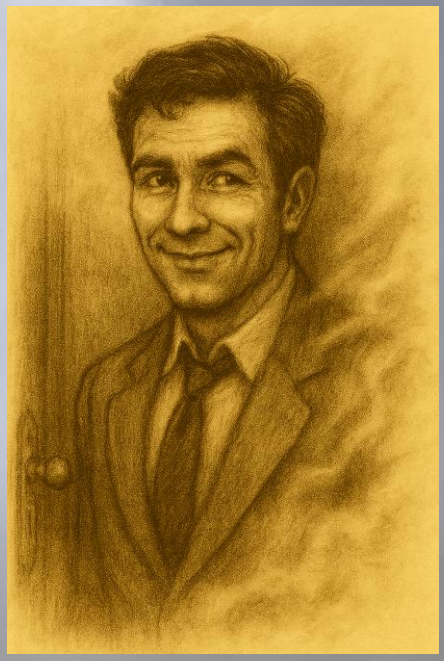
"I have just had the time of my *life* with this great big stud muffin here in some bloke's bedroom," Diana boasted drunkenly. "The place was packed with posh booze and saucy pictures, so, as they said in *Mamma Mia*… DOT DOT DOT!!! What do you say to *that* Simone, you old dry knickers?"

There was silence. Simone was gaping in fear; more fear than she had shown even when the wall started moving in the library, or when the many-headed beast had advanced on her. When she spoke, her voice rose from a mutter to a scream.

"Diana… *Do you have the slightest idea who that man IS*?!?"

12 years ago, Simone had had a big sister named Melody, also a mother and a father and an uncle. Uncle Andrew; her father's little brother, very handsome, good at making money, almost as good at spending it, charming enough that he felt no need to settle down too soon.

One day, all five of them had been driving up the Welsh coast to Anglesey in the family SUV when Uncle Andrew dropped a bombshell. It might as well have been a literal one given what happened to the others.



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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL
PART 3, PAGE 3

Simone had refused to sit next to Uncle Andrew in the back when they had set forth from Aberystwyth. This forced Melody, who was good at playing peacemaker, to sit next to him. The journey north was uneventful until they were part way up the A496, just south of Harlech on a stretch of road over steep, rocky slopes leading down to the sea. It had been Mum's turn to drive that day, so Dad turned around to face the back.

"Why didn't you want to sit next to Uncle Andrew, Simone?" her Dad had asked.

Simone had blushed at that.

"He's a bit… funny," she said haltingly. "Hey, maybe Melody shouldn't sit there either."

"Hold on!"

For some reason, Uncle Andrew was becoming angry.

"Are you suggesting I'm a risk to young girls?" he snarled.

And that was when Dad must have realised that Uncle Andrew's body language or tone had let something slip. His brother's defensiveness was covering up a shocking truth.

Shock turned to fiery rage and Dad had lashed out towards Uncle Andrew, hurling oaths and punches, heedless of anything else that was going on, even Simone's frightened weeping. He was so blinded with rage that his left knee got driven into Mum's hip.

Mum jerked the wheel to the right in pain and shock. She shrieked as she found the car in the path of a huge brown horse box. The blaring horn and desperate swerves of the vehicles were both too late. The Greystones' car was flipped over by the impact so hard that it went over the concrete bollards at the side of the road.

Down, down, down the slope the car rolled, windows shattering and metalwork buckling. Everything went black.

Five hours later, Simone woke up in a Llandudno hospital to discover she was the sole survivor.

"No," Simone managed to utter. "It's not real. I disavow this."

She pointed at Uncle Andrew as though her finger was the tip of a sword.

"You're dead. You can't be here. You can't hurt me anymore. Go back to wherever you came from! *I'm no longer afraid of you*!"

And just like that, Uncle Andrew's face became a mask of shock, and he vanished into a cloud of white-grey mist. *Most* of the others were stunned.

"Dammit, Sy!" said Diana, rolling her eyes, "You are *such* a gooseberry!"

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL
PART 3, PAGE 4

BOOM! The corridor shuddered as though there had been an earthquake.

"What's happening?" Gus wailed.

Simone gasped. "The map! The corridors have vanished. There's only one big room left. That means… Oh no…"

BOOM! Another impact shook the masonry dust and cracked the stucco.

"The monsters can get through!"

Now Diana squealed, for two new walls had emerged to their left and right. The corridor had been cut off. "Simone! We're trapped!"

"The vault!" ordered Simone. "It's our only chance!"

As the four of them fled into Greystone vault, torches fizzled into life on the walls. Fissures streaked across the walls of the corridor. The monsters would be through at any moment.

"Find something to use as a weapon," puffed Felicity, casting around among the stone sarcophagi.

"Diana!" screamed Gus. "Look at your face!"

Diana checked the mirror in her powder compact. She screamed shrilly as she saw the same disgusting pustules and deformities that had appeared on Gus's face earlier appearing on hers.

An earth-shaking crash in the corridor above silenced her. Step by step, the two unspeakable beasts were descending towards their helpless prey.

"What the…" stammered Gus. "That bear monster's a nardong from *Horror Hunters*!"

"*Horror Hunters*?" Simone uttered in amazement. "The TV show?"

"Yes," Gus explained. "They scared me so much I stopped watching it!"

"The dog beast!" Felicity choked out. "It's got the head of my old Great Dane, Sandy! And the human heads are my three sons!"

The adventurers backed against the wall as the monsters closed in smashing the sarcophagi and sending bones, dust and rubble flying.

"Oh God, take me!" Diana wailed. "I'm too ugly to live now!"

"Aren't there any weapons?" wept Felicity.

"*You bet there are*!"



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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL
PART 3, PAGE 5

Simone's boldness made everyone else stare.

"Gus," she ordered. "Look straight at the nardong. Felicity, look at the dog creature. Diana, look at your face in your powder compact. As you do so, push all the fear out of your hearts and say; '*I'm no longer afraid of you*.'"

"Simone, that is the dumbest…" Diana began.

"JUST DO IT!!!"

Simone was so forceful they all obeyed at once.

"**I'M NO LONGER AFRAID OF YOU**!" they roared.

The monsters bellowed in agony. A gale tore through the vault and they both dissolved into grey mist. The great wind sucked them back up the stairs.



"My face!" Diana cried happily. Her face was now restored to its old, enviable beauty.

She only had a moment to enjoy this relief however, before soft, amused laughter echoed through the vault.

Whitish-grey mist rose out of the floor in the centre of the vault, yet unlike when the creatures formed, it was tinged with orange and rosy pink, like the light of a sunset reflecting off clouds. Far from filling them with fear, Simone and Felicity felt relieved as it formed, while Gus felt intrigued and Diana felt queasy.

Then, they all watched in wonder as the mist took on a human shape. The spirit of Cynthia Lovejoy floated just above the stone-flagged floor. And she was smiling.

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL
PART 3, PAGE 6

"Congratulations, my friends," she said warmly. "For so many moons I have waited in vain for a kinsman of the man I loved and yet drove me to despair to face the challenge of the house. To face their darkest fears and conquer them, to prove themselves of better character than the dastardly Lord Edwin. Now you have all proved your mettle."

"But of course, we had to face the *right* fears," Simone replied archly.

"What are you on about?" Diana said, with deep confusion written on her face.

"We went through the wrong doors, Di," Simone explained. "I was meant to face my Uncle Andrew since he wronged our family so much. You were meant to fall apart when your face became hideous. Gus was meant to face a childhood monster and Felicity was meant to face the shock of seeing a perversion of those she loved the most."

"Exactly," the ghost said with glee. "The letters on the doors represented your *moons*, not your titles."

"So that was it!" Simone cried out, excited by the revelation. "Moons; she means *months*! I was born on December 2nd; that's why Diana got my door. D for December, not Diana. She was born April 29th, so Gus, Augustus, got hers. Gus, I'm guessing you were born in February and Felicity, you must have been born in September, right?"

"Right," Felicity and Gus both said in unison.

"But that was not the only mistake you made." The spirit's voice made all four of them turn round swiftly. "For after I took my life, Lady Cordelia, who Lord Greystone foolishly chose over me, married him, yet secretly she harboured a terrible hatred for him, knowing what his actions had driven me to. Two years later, Lady Cordelia was with child and gave birth while Lord Greystone left for a deer hunt. He returned home and was devastated to hear his wife's terrible news that her child had been still born. In truth, the boy had lived, and in her vengeful state she had given him up for adoption with a good family, content that she had secretly punished her wicked husband for his crime."

A deafening silence hung in the air at the ghost's revelation.

"And do you know what the name of the family who adopted that poor, innocent boy was, my friends?" Lady Cynthia's spirit continued.

She pointed an insubstantial finger at the most unlikely adventurer of them all.

"Merriweather."

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL
PART 3, PAGE 7

Gus staggered back as if someone had punched him.

"Me?" he said, his voice slurred by confusion. But then his whole body relaxed. An almost beatific smile crossed his protruding lips. "Oh."



He handed Simone the sheet of paper from his coat pocket, which contained Lady Cynthia's completed poem.

"Four shall set forth," she echoed weakly, "…But *three* shall return. Wait! This means that… The kinsman who was really meant to come wasn't me. It wasn't even Diana. It was…"

Gus completed her sentence as he stepped forward towards the ghost.

"Yes, Simone." Lady Cynthia's voice now resounded as if shouted against a canyon wall. "It is he, Augustus Greystone, as was his rightful title, kinsman to the man who wronged me, gifted with a moon's name, naïve to seduction and thus, the counterpoint of he who drove me to the grave. Only with a pure innocent such as he to hold me in his arms can I go on into the afterlife in peace. He shall keep me safe and happy… *forever*."

The ghost moved her hands about in midair, almost like a sculptress shaping clay. Out of the centre of the mist that filled the room, a tall portal came into being. It was just like the front entrance of Greystone Hall; the same height and breadth, with the same curling stonework and Greco-Roman columns on either side. Yet instead of doors within it, there was a great expanse of misty white light, like moonlight only nearer to the sun in brightness.

"Augustus Greystone," Lady Cynthia intoned, "It is the destiny of your blood to join me in the afterlife. Fear not, for in leaving this world you will find another, an eternal one, where we may dwell in mutual happiness forever, while the curse upon this house is lifted and only peace shall remain in its place."

The portal started to move forward and stretch out, becoming taller as it advanced. Gus looked towards Simone and Felicity, who were rooted to the spot with fear and confusion. It may be the only way to lay the ghost to rest, to free the house from its curse and ensure Lady Cynthia got the happiness she had been cruelly denied in life.

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL
PART 3, PAGE 8

But was it worth the sacrifice? It could be a trick. Gus might be sucked into Hell to be tortured forever. Lady Cynthia might not go to her rest. She might take them all prisoner, maybe kill them and have them haunt Greystone Hall with her. There were only seconds to act if they had doubts; the portal was now only about three metres from Gus.

"Well," said Gus wearily, reading their minds, "I doubt I'd get to marry anyone otherwise…"

"Hold on a sodding minute!"



It was Diana, of course, who was interrupting so cattily. She began striding forward towards Gus, apparently not even seeing the giant portal.

"This guy here is just the sort of muppet the likes of which you wouldn't spend ten minutes with IRL. I've set up enough of my mates with the right guy to know that you, Marie Antoinette, do *not* wanna spend gabillions of years with a guy so boring you'd need a boiler full of espresso just to…"

"Will you get out of the way, Diana?" Gus snapped.

He seized Diana with both hands and tried to swing her away towards Simone and Felicity. Yet that meant swinging her in front of him and, given his grip had been rather weak, he let go of her wrists.

"Diana, watch out!" Simone shrieked.

Her warning was in vain. Diana, caught off guard by being swung round and then released, was staggering backwards, trying to find her feet. But before she could, she collided with the shimmering white portal. Her startled scream echoed through the vault as she vanished from sight.

"NO!" the three adventurers bawled in unison.

Their dismay at seeing Diana accidentally thrown into the afterlife was awful enough, but worse was to come. The portal now turned blood red. Its columns started shuddering, as though powerful hands were trying to shake it apart. If the adventurers looked concerned, Lady Cynthia's ghost now looked positively petrified.

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL
PART 3, PAGE 9

"No! No, she was still of Greystone blood! That means…"

The walls of the Greystone vault started to ripple, like dusty carpets being shaken out. There were cracking noises and masonry dust started to shower the floor.

"The oath is still fulfilled! But now I shall be… No, not her! I could never be with… Stop, no! I would be with her until…"

A hideous scream filled the vault and ghost, mist and portal seemed to explode without the sound of a blast. Now there was only Simone, Gus and Felicity in the vault, yet the walls were shaking more violently still.

"What's happening?" Gus yelled at Simone.

Simone looked down at her map. Lines and shapes were shifting back and forth, forming, breaking and reforming at random. She jumped back as the ceiling sagged and part of the library sank into the vault, then melted back upwards again to where it had been. Then a wall bulged inwards and the washing board and pump from the scullery burst into view.

"There is such confusion and pain in the air," Felicity told Simone. "The ghost is going back to its rest, but the fulfilment of its covenant has been corrupted. Had Gus himself gone through the spirit would simply have left, but now…"

They all screamed and Gus jumped backwards as the floor morphed into a writing desk, which then melted back into the flagstones.

"Now the ghost is leaving in a state of agony rather than calm," Felicity went on, "And she can't control the power she exerted over the house in her death throes. If we don't get out of here fast, the house will collapse and take us with it!"

"We can't get out the way we came!" Gus told them. "The vault entrance has collapsed and isn't re-opening."

"It's okay!" Simone called out in relief. "Over there!"

The ceiling of the vault had now curled backwards so much that it had pulled the rest of the house off its foundations. A gap had opened up and, miracle of miracles, it led onto the lawns of the house.

"Hurry!" Simone cried. "Before it closes!"

Simone, Felicity and Gus raced for the gap like Olympic sprinters. The curvature of the floor allowed them to run right up the wall and onto the lawn. Felicity was last to come, and Simone and Gus pulled her onto the lawn just as the house, its wall now curling upwards like a sheet of paper, began to fall back down again. The rush of air that came as it crashed back down knocked them off their feet.

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GHOST HUNTERS AT GREYSTONE HALL
PART 3, PAGE 10

"Out of the grounds, come on!" Simone urged them.

They ran like mad until they had jumped the fence around a nearby field. Only there did they dare to turn around, watching open-mouthed as Greystone Hall bucked, warped, crumpled, folded in on itself and, like a deflating balloon, sank down into the earth, leaving nothing but an ashen grey pit in the centre of the grounds.



Simone, Gus and Felicity dropped to the grass and hugged each other. They stayed there gasping for air. Then Felicity began to snivel, Simone began to dab her eyes, and they all began to weep together, a choking mixture of relief and bereavement in their hearts.

"I thought I'd be overjoyed to see the curse lifted," sniffed Simone, "But not if it meant losing any of you, even Diana."

"Let's just hope Lady Cynthia's glad in the company of the Baroness of Bitchiness for the rest of eternity," Felicity joked half-heartedly. "I know I wouldn't be."

With the ghost of a laugh, Simone, Felicity and Gus got to their feet shakily.

"Do you think Lady Cynthia's really gone, Si?" Gus wondered.

Simone sighed wearily. "It seems so. Maybe we won't know for sure until it's our time too. But just for now… Home?"

The others nodded. And they made their way back the way they had come as the first rays of dawn light came into the sky.

THE END

Editor's Note: Thank you to everyone who helped this fabulous story come to life, both during February's workshop and when editing. I needed to change parts of it very slightly, just so it read better and it has taken up more space than I'd hoped, but the heart of the story remains very much there and we should all be proud of ourselves to have brought these unlikely heroes to life and seen them through their epic adventure. And just in time for Hallowe'en as well!

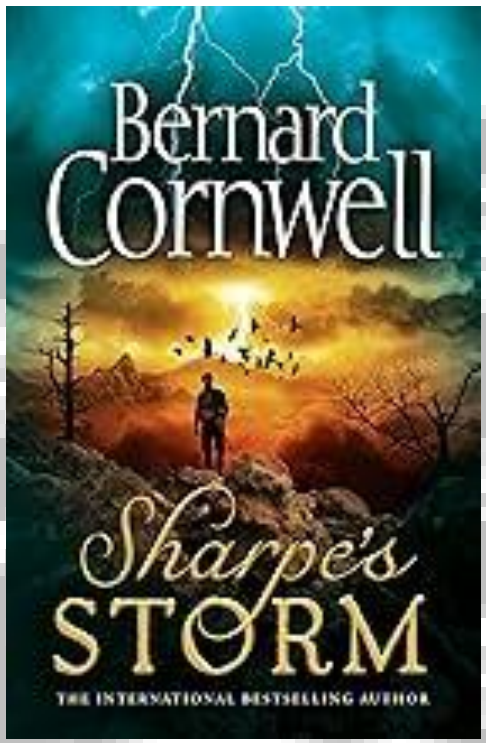
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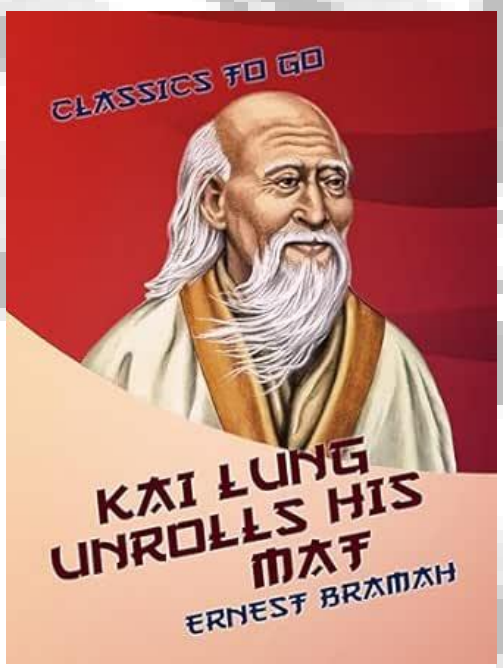
What We're Reading

(and What We Think!)

Ben Bergonzi is reading… **Sharpe's Storm** by Bernard Cornwell

This new book is the 27th novel in the Sharpe series, a benchmark of quality in military historical fiction. Here, we are in the final winter of the Peninsular war, 1813-14. Through driving rain, British soldiers have pushed the French back from Spain into the south of their own country; Major Sharpe is here given a series of independent commands. This story is always good value, with superbly described action scenes in which the tough, brave and loyal characters vividly leap off the page. Cornwell hints that this may be the last Sharpe novel. If so, the series has ended in triumph.





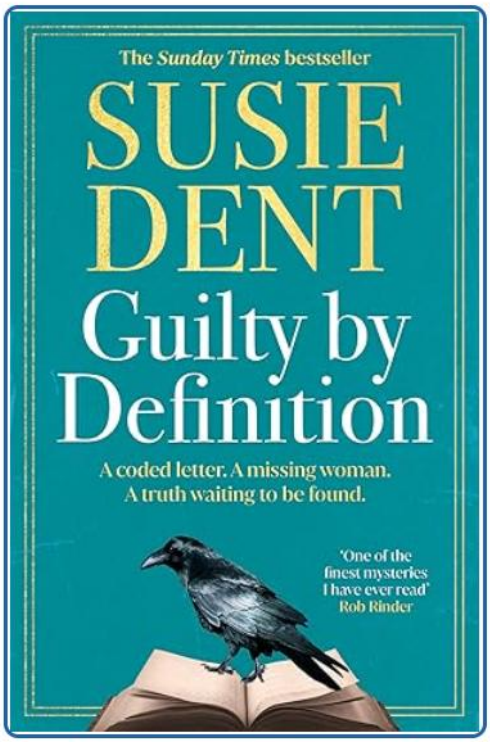
Judith Foster is reading… **Kai Lung Unrolls his Mat** by Ernest Bramah

If you relish the inventive proliferation of superfluous words, this [1928 novel] is the book for you.

Kai Lung is an itinerant story-teller in a distant oriental empire. Dour misfortune propels him to sustain his humble existence with philosophical expatiations for the requisition of his nutrition and repose. Humility triumphs.

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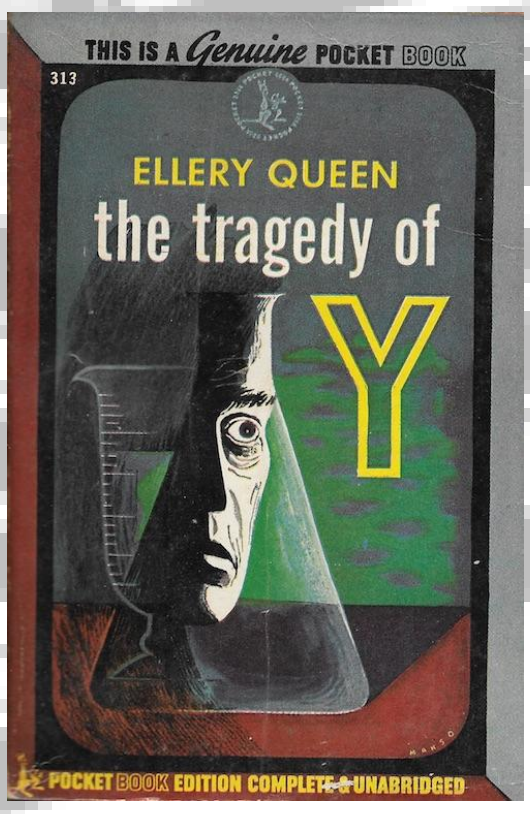


Yvonne Moxley is reading… **Guilt By Definition** by Susie Dent

Famous lexicographer Susie Dent is a regular guest on *Countdown* and other shows. This is her debut novel and is filled with mystery, suspense and many words which are far beyond my vocabulary! The story is set in the offices of the Clarendon English Dictionary in Oxford where four lexicographers are repeatedly sent clues as to the disappearance of one of the team's sister. It's totally absorbing and I highly recommend it, especially as the writer cleverly manages to slip in the meaning of some of her abstract words.

Jake Pirrie is reading… **The Tragedy of Y** by Ellery Queen (also known as Barnaby Ross)

I really enjoyed the exploits of this 1930s Shakespearean actor turned amateur sleuth, named Drury Lane. The writers did an excellent job of drip-feeding twists and red herrings. I must confess I had no idea who the killer was until Mr Lane revealed all. When he did, it wrapped up everything neatly. Full disclosure, this is technically a sequel but the Longstreet case from *The Tragedy of X* is only vaguely alluded to. I think this can be read as a standalone.



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Members' Book Reviews

Judith Foster reviews... The Earth; An Intimate History by Richard Fortay

Don't be put off by the title. Doctor Fortey is a geologist specialising in palaeontology of the Ordovician period, who writes about the Earth from a Romantic heart. In this book, published in 2004, he conducts us through three chronologies: the 4.5 billion years of the Earth's existence; the repetitive cycles of the creation of mountain ranges from mid-ocean volcanic islands like Hawaii to the raising of the Alps and Everest; and growing human awareness of the Earth's activity from the two Plinys recording Vesuvius's eruption in 79 AD to modern controversies concerning the evolution of the high plateau of Tibet.

This story, like our world, rides on the back of the tectonic plates, shifting and shoving continents and displacing oceans, themselves under the deeper influence of the tides within the Earth's molten core.

The text is bound to be loaded with technical terms, but these are explained and used with discretion. They do not numb the attention of the non-specialist, who will be drawn along by stories of scientists of distinction arguing pigheadedly, and sometimes finding themselves proved wrong, their reputations unjustly eclipsed. The very theory of active tectonic plates has been generally accepted only since the 1950s.

The passion of great geologists for their subject convinces me that they are all Romantics, driven by the enchantment of their dreams, and finding, perhaps almost accidently, that the logic of their science has created a structure more Romantic and awe-inspiring than ever was Chaos. Richard Fortey himself relives his own travels: past the writhing lavas of Mauna Kea; photographing his daughter in the Alps with one foot in Africa and one in Europe; gazing into the crystal eyes of his first trilobite in Svalbard; counting successions of Scottish raised beaches. He rejoices in his discoveries, as he guides us through the revealed history of our planet.

The appeal of the subject was enough for me, who also look at geology through Romantic eyes. But to that, Fortey adds playful humour, his obvious affection for his 'scuttling trilobites' (dead, alas, 500 million years ago) and wide, lightly carried, literary knowledge. He writes like a novelist, gripped by his loving enthusiasm for his characters, Gondwana, Tethys, Pele, Karakoram, lounging on their nappes and subducted crusts.

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Members' Book Reviews, Page 2

Wendy Turner reviews... Robert Harris's Cicero Novels

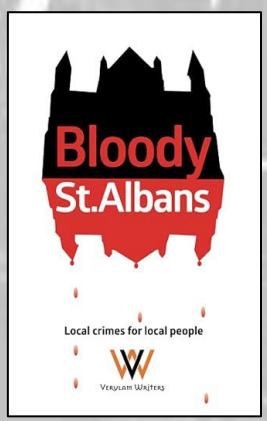
These four books tell the story of Marcus Tullius Cicero through the eyes of Tiro, his slave and secretary who became his closest friend. Tiro invented a system of shorthand to capture Cicero's speeches. Although mostly now redundant, two short forms derived from it are still in use today: the Tironian et and the ampersand (&).

Tiro brings to life the perilous times of the Triumvirate that dominated Roman politics from 60 to 53 BC – Pompey the Great with his huge military influence, Julius Caesar with his little 'bite by bite' incursion into Roman power ending in Dictatorship (which might seem a little familiar today!) and Crassus, the wealthiest politician of his time but also hugely cruel in that he crucified around 6000 slaves after the Spartacus revolt. Cicero treads a prickly path with Pompey who is something of a tricky friend, Crassus has a skillful passive-aggressive threatening style of persuasion, and Cicero's simmering friendship with Caesar is always on a cliff-edge. In the end Cicero declines his friendship, telling Tiro he will not become Caesar's creature.

Tiro almost drags us through court cases with both colourful and dastardly characters. Sometimes Cicero has to prudently defend rogues as well as those unjustly treated, and there's always the risk of being murdered, often most foully. We listen in on his home life with his volatile wife Terentia, daughter Tullia with her marriages happy and unhappy, and little son Marcus. We meet some who would-be great given half a chance, their lifestyles, loves and lovers, plots and poisons. We sit in the Senate marveling at how Cicero's skillful oratory turns the political tide, his clarity of vision and dire warnings. When his beautiful (and expensive) house on Palatine Hill is burned down the family are forced to escape into exile, often by rickety boat with graphic bouts of seasickness.

We relax with Cicero at his seaside home in the Bay of Naples where he enjoys away-from-it-all tranquility, even with Terentia firing off her little verbal arrows – usually correctly. And we see him in creaking old age recalled to fame in Rome because of the crisis caused by the rise of Caesar. He frees Tiro from slavery and, even though Tiro has his own farm and wife, he ultimately decides to risk all with Cicero in Rome.

We are treated to many of Cicero's wise sayings, among them, 'raise, praise, erase', his advice on how to treat the upstart Octavian who later became Emperor Augustus, the longest ruling Roman Emperor. They clearly never reached the 'erase' stage!



I hope we've given you great ideas for books to buy. But don't forget Verulam Writers' own anthology Bloody St Albans, filled with sinister crime stories set in St Albans. Order now to be in time for Christmas, or even Hallowe'en!

BLOODY ST ALBANS: LOCAL CRIMES FOR LOCAL PEOPLE: AMAZON.CO.UK: WRITERS, VERULAM: 9798351646756: BOOKS

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Verulam Writers Current Competition Winners

FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	GNOME
David Gibson Cup **Topic:** An Act of Heroism (set by David Weaver) **Adjudication Date:** 15th October 2025			
Joan Crooks	Only one winner, I'm afraid!		Joan Crooks again (aka Ben D. Nees)
Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition **Topic:** A Historic Moment (set by Judith Foster) **Adjudication Date:** 4th December 2024			
Mike Spurgeon	Nargis Walker	Ben Burgonzi	Ben Burgonzi (aka May B. Troo)
President's Competition Topic: Print the Legend (set by Ben Bergonzi) Adjudication Date: 19th March 2025			
Jake Pirrie	Mellie Neville	Wendy Turner	Steve Seaton (alias D.S. Calaishan)
Crystal Decanter Competition **Topic:** Heavy (set by Philip Mitchell) **Adjudication Date:** 21st May 2025			
Tina Shaw	Mandy Carter	Robert Paterson	Wendy Turner (alias Phil R. Monic)
Howard Linskey Competition **Topic:** Crime **Adjudication Date:** 18th June 2025			
Anne Ellis	Cecile Keen	Steve Seaton	Philip Mitchell (aka Anita Alibi)

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Information Resources and Contact



The VW Website www.verulamwriters.org

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

This newsletter may be found there too!

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

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

Venue Address St Stephen's Church Hall, 1 Watling Street, St Albans, Herts., AL1 2PT. We meet at 8PM on the first, third and, if 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 29th October at **St Stephen's Church Hall**.
For more details please visit
https://www.verulamwriters.org/

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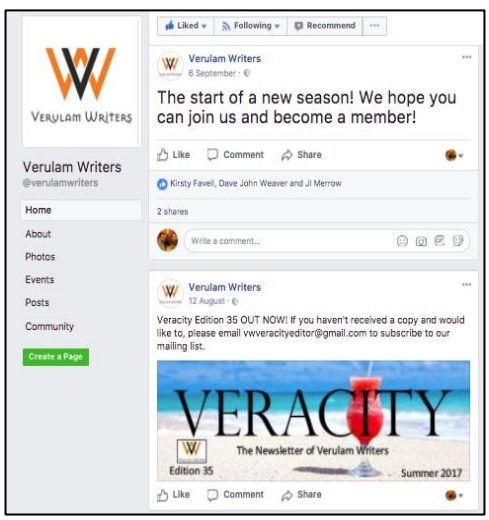
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Please do use these pages as VW members. Just keep the posts writing-related and don't feed the trolls!

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