# VERACITY

The Magazine from Verulam Writers

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# ANOTHER NEWSLETTER ALREADY?




This time in VERACITY…

- **Two guest speakers** give their two cents!
- Say hello to **ProWritingAid!**
- Find out how to get readers **right in the feels!**
- **Just desserts** for bad children!

**Yes, I know everyone. Late February or early March is usually the time that you get the newsletter. However, this one has to go out now because it has a little palate cleanser for the quiz night in it. That occasion comes on Wednesday 17th February and let me tell you, this year's quiz promises to be something truly special!**

Anyway, here we are, nearly halfway through the 2025/26 season. And what a year it's been already! We've had the Christmas party, two workshops, two guest speakers and three competitions. Better yet, a fourth is currently in progress! Good luck with that, if you're entering.

Better still, potential new members have been dropping in; a welcome development given the departure of certain members at the start of the season. What's more, our new committee members have been embracing their new responsibilities with gusto. Both chairman Philip Mitchell and myself send our best both to them and all of you!

Don't forget, the 2025/26 season won't be over until July, so keep checking the event listings on the Verulam Writers' website (www.verulamwriters.org), since they're subject to change and one or two may not have been decided. Keep encouraging potential new members to join or non-members to drop by. (£3 for a meeting, £5 for workshops and talks.)

Robert Paterson, Editor

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# In Memoriam

Normally this is where you would find my From the Editor piece, but a very sad event has occurred recently that has touched our lives. Therefore I give this space over to Wendy Turner, who has this to say about her late partner, Ray Wilkinson. [Ed.]



Ray joined VW fairly recently but his heart was always in writing. It took second place to flying though, but he combined the two by writing several articles for Pilot magazine. Most unfortunately Ray was involved in a flying accident in January in which he and his co-pilot lost their lives.

Ray's view was that both fiction and non-fiction writing shouldn't languish in a drawer for lack of a publisher. He got to grips with publishing on Amazon and worked with Judith, Clare and Steve to get their books up and running. He had recently finished his own book Fact or Fiction? with 250 questions on facts and myths. Ray taught in Aerospace at the University of Hertfordshire and is remembered by his colleagues for his love of the subject and his sharp wit! I was privileged to be his partner and to share many happy years and moments with him. His last day was doing something he loved – flying.

Blue skies and a tailwind, Ray (as your flying colleagues say).

Wendy Turner, 03/02/2026

You may donate to the charity Fly 2 Help, a cause true to Ray's heart, at this link.
Tribute to Ray Wilkinson, 1958 - 2026

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# The David Gibson Cup 2025

*By Robert Paterson*

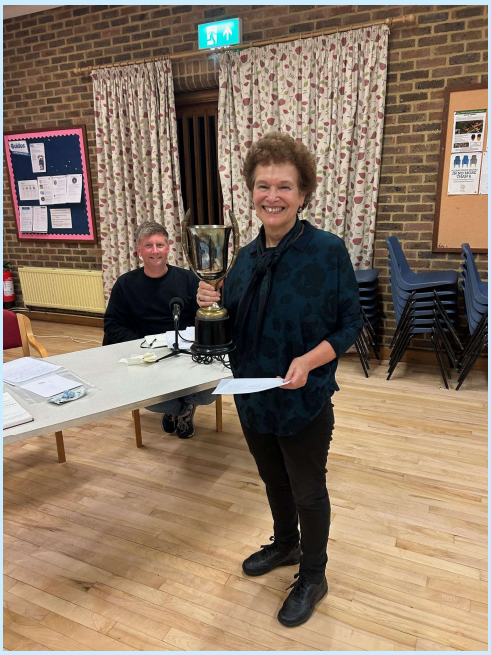
On the evening of Wednesday 15th October 2025, Verulam Writers members gathered in St Stephen's Church Hall to judge the only competition in our roster decided by members' votes rather than the subjective view of judges. Last year's winner was Dave Weaver, whose honour it was to set the theme; "An Act of Heroism".

His choice of theme must have stoked the fires of many imaginations, for there were 11 entries in all and most entries received at least one vote. The range of subjects was eclectic too. *Hero Or Zero* was a story about St Alban himself, while *The Fifth Voice* was about an act of political defiance in an oppressive society.

Some stories were based in reality. *Mort* was about a man who accidentally kills his lover's parrot, which *For She Can* was inspired by the true story of a lady who faked madness to expose corruption in a mental institution. *The Last Quest of Sir Benedict*, by contrast, told the tale of a knight of the Round Table whose last act is to become the avatar of an evil power so that he may destroy it.

Sadly, however, there could only be one winner, and that was Joan Crooks, whose winning entry may be found on the next page. The evening grew more auspicious still for her when she also won the Gnome De Plume trophy by popular vote! Heartfelt congratulations, Joan, and I hope the theme you pick this September is just as stimulating.

For now, though, let's see what she wrote…





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# An Act of Heroism: Sam Aged 5

*Winner of the 2025 David Gibson Cup*

*By Joan Crooks, writing as Ben D. Neese*

Mum was pleased that Sam had transitioned from nursery to reception class without too much trouble. He hadn't wanted to go and said he would rather stay in nursery, but once she'd explained that all his friends were moving on and some would be in his new school, which was for big children like him, he agreed to give it a go.

His teacher, Miss Jones, was newly qualified and the mums at the school gate thought she was a bit too soft on the children. "Some of them will run rings round her if she doesn't toughen up!" was the general comment. Sam liked her ok and was diligently doing his reading and times tables when he got home in order to please her.

Two weeks into the first term Mum got a phone call from the school. Could she go in and talk to Sam's teacher as he had been fighting. Mum was quite surprised because that wasn't Sam's usual behaviour. She was taken into the classroom where Sam and Miss Jones sat. She recognised the stubborn look on Sam's face and thought, "This is going to be interesting."

According to the teacher Sam had unprovokedly attacked three boys in the playground. He'd been taken to the Head teacher but had refused to say anything. The three boys all said Sam had pushed and punched them. One had fallen down and was bruised and shaken.

Mum smiled reassuringly at Sam and said, "I wonder what that was about? Were they boys from your class, Sam?"

He shook his head.

She looked enquiringly at Miss Jones.

"No, they were from the year above".

"Did you go into their playground, Sam?"

Sam shook his head again.

"Where did this take place, Miss Jones?"

"It was in the reception playground."

"Golly," thought Mum, "this is like getting blood from a stone from both of them." She persevered.

"Why were they in your playground, Sam?"

"They came to see Little Henry".



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## *An Act of Heroism, Sam Aged 5; David Gibson Cup winner, page 2*

Mum had heard a lot about Henry. He had a teaching assistant all to himself and struggled with doing what he was asked to do. He was very small and had a pronounced limp. Mum and Sam had talked about not joining in any of the teasing that went on and that being kind was important.

“Were the three big boys being kind to Henry?”

Sam shook his head.

Mum looked enquiringly at Miss Jones, again.

“I didn’t know they were interacting with Henry,” Miss Jones said. “I will make enquiries of other children in the playground and find out what was going on.”

Mum got up and took Sam’s hand.

“That’s a good idea”, she said. “Let me know what you find out”.

Later that day Mum had a phone call from the school to enquire whether she would attend a special assembly they were holding the next day. Sam was particularly well polished that morning. His hair brushed, everything clean and even his shoes were sparkling.

The Head brought up the subject of the school’s anti bullying policy.

She was very disappointed to hear of three older boys who had been found to have been unkind to someone in reception. The school treated this very firmly, and those three boys had been suspended for a day and would need to write out a letter of apology to the child before they could return. She also wanted to commend another child from reception who had seen the bullying and distress of the victim and had gone to his rescue.

“We have a gold medallion for children who stand out as upholding the values of our school. I would like to call on Sam to come up and receive this special reward for his bravery in standing

up to three bigger boys who were making another child cry. Please come up Sam to receive your medal. You can bring your mother too, as it can be daunting to stand in front of the whole school.”

Sam held on tightly to mum’s hand as the headteacher put the gold-coloured medallion around his neck. “Thank you, Sam. I think you are a fine example to the other children, not to turn away when something bad is happening to a classmate”.  There was a lot of clapping and cheering. Sam went a bit pink and Mum tried hard not to cry.

Later, Sam got into bed holding his medal firmly in his hand. “I love you, Sam,” said Mum.


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# Plotting; A Lesson in Building the Structure of a Story

*Article by Robert Paterson*

*Edited by Philip Mitchell and Ben Bergonzi*

***On Wednesday 29th October, Ben and Philip led us through an interactive workshop about how to develop the plot of a novel. This article is a summary of the session they ran, with challenges along the way to get you trying out the same sorts of exercises we engaged in.***

Plot is the path that winds through a story from front door to open gate. It is its life blood and driving force. It is the headlights to readers' or listeners' deer. It is why they are thrilled by the tale the first time and come back to it, literally or in their minds, once it ends.

This is why you cannot let a plot be weak, especially if your story is going to be submitted for publication. Therefore, Veracity posits six questions that you must keep in mind if you want to write a story that entices, thrills, surprises, satisfies and fills you with a sense of glory.

First of all…

## WHAT *IS* THE PLOT?

Metaphors aside, not so simple a question. While events happen thanks to the plot of a story, events themselves are *not* the plot. Take the following statements. All are examples of *events*.

- A boy from a struggling family arrives at his wealthy aunt's house in Kensington.
- A lady wakes up from a coma and talks to a nurse.
- A man discovers his neighbour's dog dead.
- A girl moves in with her father after her parents' divorce.



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# Plotting, Page 2

The plot of a story, by contrast, is the way in which events are *connected*. Read through these and see how they compare to the passages above.

- **Two siblings' father remarries and discover their stepmother has cruel designs on them.**
- **A convict serves out his time and seeks out his estranged son in order to make amends.**
- **Two ladies try out a new brand of furniture polish but then start to see unknown faces in the surfaces they apply it to.**
- **An acrophobic man decides to choose his next holiday randomly and ends up going mountain climbing.**

## CHALLENGE

*What examples of events or plots can you think of? What plots could you make from the events you think of?*

Second question…

## HOW DOES THE PLOT RELATE TO HOW YOU WRITE A STORY?

There are two types of story writers…

PLOTTERS; they think up the structure of the story in phenomenal detail before setting pen to paper.

PANTSERS; they write by the seat of their pants, churning out as much text as they're able before whittling it down.

Some people are a combination of these two kinds of writers, or might be one or the other depending on the story's genre and the context of its creation. Yet whatever way you write a story yourself, you must make sure your plot maintains a clear structure. You must especially not forget the *middle* of it. While the start and conclusion may the first thing you think of, the means by which they connect must never overlooked.


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# Plotting, Page 3

This leads us to ask…

## WHAT TYPES OF PLOT STRUCTURE ARE THERE?

There's the…

ACT STRUCTURE; Most plays are written like this. There could be stories within the story, each with its own beginning, middle and end. However, the end of one act must lead on to that of the next act in a believable manner.

CIRCULAR STRUCTURE; In a story like this, events lead back to a new beginning just like the original one. Stories in which a child steps into the shoes of his or her parent follow this pattern, *Forrest Gump* and *The Cider House Rules* for example.

RISING TENSION STRUCTURE; Adventure or thriller stories often follow this structure. The scene is set, the antagonist makes their move, the hero makes a move back, and this repeats until the climax occurs and the story wraps up.

And now, to save time and words, here's another…

## CHALLENGE

*Can you think of other types of plot structure and what genres would best suit them?*

Now let's consider another important facet of a story…

## HOW DO THE CHARACTERS FIT INTO THE PLOT?

Creating believable characters requires a whole other article, so best to be brief. Plotters and pantsers will likely develop characters in their own idioms, yet however you design your characters, make sure that they consistently take part in the plot as they would be expected to. Even the way in which they enter and exit should be appropriate to them.


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# Plotting, Page 4

And now the point that's very easy to overlook…

## WHAT DOES THE FIRST LINE TELL YOU ABOUT THE PLOT?

The first line or paragraph of a story can set up events within the plot, or give you an idea of what those events might be. Even the emotions that the opening stirs up can give the reader a hint at what's to come. Don't be too obvious though. The reader will be disappointed if they find you've given something away right off the bat!

## CHALLENGE

*Can you think up first lines for stories that set its tone or give tantalising clues to what occurs within the plot?*

And finally…

## HOW DOES ONE LEARN TO GET BETTER AT PLOTTING A STORY?

Practice, for one thing! Read often and widely, for another. You can even make learning fun by team-writing stories with people close to you, or organise game nights where you play Consequences or role-playing games (RPG's) where you inhabit the characters and play them through an adventure. There's even creative games like Dixit or the Storyteller's Card Game on sale that allow you to have fun while learning. It's up to you how you learn to improve, but if you want to write great stories, you mustn't ever lose the plot!

*Robert Paterson, Philip Mitchell, Ben Bergonzi*


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# Tracey Warr Q & A



Published novelist Tracey Warr visited the Verulam Writers on 19th November 2025, to give the groups some tips on writing and publishing. Having grown up in Barnet, St Albans felt very much like home territory for her.

Tracey opened her talk by mentioning the spyloft in St Albans Cathedral and how this features in her historical novel, *The Drowned Court*. The spyloft was used by the monks to make sure pilgrims did not make off with the cathedral's treasures. More frivolously, it was also used by King Henry I to gaze upon one of his many paramours!

Following the example of some of our past guests, Tracey has answered a few simple interview-style questions for the newsletter. Let us now get an insight into this lady that will pique your interest whether you were present at her talk or not.

Ed.

**Were you ever a member of a writing group yourself?**

*Yes, I've belonged to a writing group in France where I live for the last decade. It's the second group I joined in France. I was with the first one for a couple of years but formed a splinter group to focus on longform writing – novels – only. Before that, I had a writing group with three people from the MA in Creative Writing I was studying in Carmarthen, Wales. And after that I tried a writing group in Oxford, but that one didn't suit me – I found the chemistry/dynamics not very conducive to my writing.*


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# Tracey Warr Q & A, Page 2

***Do you have any fond memories of visiting writing groups?***

*My current group is brilliant. There are six of us, all writing novels. We meet monthly and critique two pieces of work in progress. The members are all strong writers, and the critique is always helpful. We're also a sociable bunch and have become very good friends.*

*The first writing group I joined in France was quite large and mostly covered poems and short stories, so it wasn't really right for me, but it did introduce me to the literary scene here – I wasn't expecting there to be one at all! – but there is the brilliant Festilitt, an annual literary festival in the village of Parisot. Speakers this year included Booker Prize winner, Alan Hollinghurst. www.festilitt.com Then there are LibraryLit author talks throughout the year in Parisot, and I've been invited to speak to them on several occasions.*

*The group I worked with in Wales was great too. I lived there for four years and four of my novels are set in Wales. One of our members was tragically killed in a car accident in Greece, and we set up and ran a writing competition in her name for a couple of years.*

***What handy advice do you have for our members?***

*Enter reputable competitions. Even if you don't get placed, it's a good way of giving yourself a deadline. I received my first publishing contract as the result of being runner-up in a competition. I just placed in the top 100 in the Bath Novel Award, which I was pleased with as I know they had 3,000 entries. I'm currently running the Historical Novel Society's First Chapters competition. An article I've written on writing competitions will appear in Historical Novels Review magazine.*
www.historicalnovelsociety.org


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# Tracey Warr Q & A, Page 3

*Many writers engage in handwringing about finding an agent and a publisher and it is beyond difficult to break into traditional publishing. To me, readers are what matter and what I want, so when my small independent publisher went into liquidation, I decided to self-publish my backlist and keep control in my own hands. Over 5,000 people have read my books, and I make a (very) modest amount of money from book sales. Over 80% of my sales are ebooks. I get some great comments from readers who get in touch. One reader from Australia told me she and her husband based their travel itinerary around France on one of my novels (The Viking Hostage), which worried me a bit as I made some of it up! I hope they didn't get lost.*

*If you are thinking of self-publishing, join the Alliance of Independent Author for their copious advice. www.allianceofindependentauthors.org I publish my print books with Ingram Spark (who do a beautiful job) www.ingramspark.com , my ebooks with everyone, including Amazon Kindle and Apple (using Draft2Digital www.draft2digital.com). And my fabulous cover designer is Jessica Bell. www.jessicabelldesign.com*

*Giving talks in libraries, festivals, castles has been a very good way for me to be in touch with readers. Carew Castle, Pembroke Castle, and Cardiff Book Space all stock my books. The two castles and Cardiff Castle feature in my Conquest novels on the turbulent life of the Welsh noblewoman, Nest ferch Rhys, during the Norman conquest of Wales. Details on my books on www.meandabooks.com*

*Writing a novel is a long haul. Don't write for the market. Write because you are fascinated by the topic.*

*And if you are marketing a book, Goodreads Giveaways can be good, and I've used Wordpress Blaze ads. I have a quarterly newsletter www.justmeandering.substack.com and blog on www.traceywarrwriting.com and www.traceywarr.substack.com. I cover topics in my research, such as a visit to a medieval reenactor, researching a particular manuscript, medieval poisonings, and an object I've seen in a museum that has sparked my writing.*


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# Tracey Warr Q & A, Page 4

***What did you write before you wrote novels?***

*I worked as a contemporary art curator and then was an art history university academic. I wrote books and articles on contemporary art. I recently published a collection of this work, called Writing in the Vicinity of Art.*

***Do you have a favourite writer, or book?***

*One is hard! I love Jane Austen. Penelope Fitzgerald's The Blue Flower is astonishing. I'm a fan of Donna Leon's Brunetti crime series set in Venice with a detective who reads the Roman writers and is married to a professor specialising in Henry James.*

***How do you balance writing with other responsibilities in your life?***

*I started writing fiction when my daughter had grown up and left home. I published my first five novels while I still had a demanding, full-time academic job. I had to take unpaid leave of a month to get one of my novels finished for the contracted deadline, but otherwise I just researched and wrote around my job. I've retired now from teaching and do academic editorial work part-time and writing the rest of time.*

*As we discussed in the group, turning off the email and social media is essential for focusing on writing.*

***Do you have any interests that assist with writing or provide inspiration for it?***

*I draw on my art history background and use images, maps, medieval manuscripts, sites such as castles, and artefacts in museums to inspire my writing set in the Middle Ages.*

*I'm an avid river swimmer and live next to a river in the south of France. That special headspace of swimming through green vistas and silky waters always helps give me ideas for a sentence or a scene.*

*Thanks very much for inviting me to talk to the group. Wishing you all happy writing!*

*Tracey Warr*


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# ProWritingAid Premium: A Review

***By Paul McNamara***

After months of having my Facebook stream bombarded with adverts for ProWritingAid, I decided to download a free version to try out, and was sufficiently impressed to 'invest' in the next level up, paid service, ProWritingAid Premium (PWAPrem). It wasn't cheap at £120 a year but, if I use it as much for the rest of the year as in the first few months, it should prove decent value.

## PWAPrem in Action

PWAPrem is a 'super-editor' with bells on. It runs equally well in Microsoft Word, Scrivener and other text software, and sits ready for action whenever I am writing. To assess PWAPrem software in action, I set out below some results from its recent review of a draft chapter of mine.

In this regard, the first thing PWAPrem provided me was a 'Summary'. This was a traffic-lighted assessment of 24 key aspects of my chapter, covering everything from grammar and spelling through to my use of "weak adverbs", "dialogue tags" and "emotion tells". This assessment identified what I'd done well and where more work might be needed.

Beyond this, PWAPrem delivered six subject-specific analyses. These reviewed the "Core" of my chapter (grammar, spelling, etc), the presence of repetition, sentence structure, readability, consistency (of capitalisation, hyphenation, etc) and pacing.

So, for example, in the "Core" analysis of my chapter, PWAPrem not only checked my spelling and grammar but, more dynamically, suggested some potential "rephrases" I might consider. It critically reviewed my use of adverbs and passive verbs, providing me with a "passive index" for the chapter (the percentage of sentences using passive verbs). It further identified words and phrases I had overused compared to wider publishing norms. In my case, this usefully revealed a previously unappreciated tendency of mine to overuse words like "just" and "then", "know" and "could".

In PWAPrem's review of my sentence structuring, I learned that I begin sentences less often with a subject and adverb, and more often with a coordinating conjunction and a verb, than the published norm. This same review revealed my average sentence length as 10.6 words (against a recommended "target" of 11). More usefully, it reported that my chapter possessed a good variety of sentence length, and helped me quickly locate four very long sentences to consider editing.


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# ProWritingAid Premium, A Review; Page 2

Under its “Readability” review, PWAPrem noted my chapter had a reading time of 10m 21s, and was “easy” to read. That said, it identified one “very difficult” and two “slightly difficult” paragraphs I should consider reviewing. It also warned me my sentences had a tendency towards being “sticky”, containing too many “glue” words (that bond sentences together but convey little meaning in themselves).

In addition to recording how often I invoked each of the five senses, this same “Readability” section also reviewed my use of “vague” and “abstract” words. Apparently, I had 76 of them in my chapter, including using the word “about” ten times!

PWAPrem also provided me with diagnostics on my use of pronouns, alliteration, and the consistency in my spelling, capitalisation and hyphenation. More importantly, it also picked out two “slow-paced” paragraphs requiring review, and three, five-word and four-word repeat phrases I had somehow missed. It also recorded several “Echoes”; words repeated in close proximity in my text.

For all the above functions, PWAPrem helped me move, case by case, through each example of the particular issue identified, leaving it up to me to decide whether to make an edit. (This function can be handed over to PWAPrem to do automatically, but that’s not something I’d ever be comfortable with.)

However, for me, the most remarkable PWAPrem function is its (presumably AI-driven) “Chapter Critique”. My subscription level allows me one such critique per day; plenty for my needs. Such critiques generate reports of around 800 words and provide direct feedback on a range of different aspects of the chosen chapter.

These include…

| | |
|---|---|
| • **plot clarity** | • **clarity of writing** |
| • **character development** | • richness of written style |
| • **level of tension generated** | • quality of description given |
| • **PoV used** | • how realistic the dialogue is |
| • **vividness of setting** | • the mood conveyed |
| • **Strength of the author’s voice** | • quality of pacing |


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# ProWritingAid Premium, A Review; Page 3

More importantly, this Chapter Critique also provided three or four suggestions on how the chapter might be improved, finishing with some concluding remarks about the chapter.

Given there can't be much of a market for products that tell their users they are rubbish, I suspect this PWAPrem function has an in-built positive bias. Furthermore, I also suspect it wouldn't matter whether the chapter was written by Jane Austen or Hilary Mantel, PWAPrem would still have suggestions to offer.

## Pro Credits

Naturally, the more you pay, the more you get with PWAPrem. Over and above the functionality described above, which you can buy more of in PWA Premium Pro, you can also buy additional PWAPrem "Credits". These can be expended on generating a review of your entire novel and its marketability, or engaging a virtual "beta reader" for it. I am nowhere near this stage yet, but could be tempted if ever I am. That said, even with the discount available through my PWAPrem subscription, these "Credits" also don't come cheap.

## Conclusion

If the above suggests I am impressed with PWAPrem, that's because I am. Building on Sam Ellis' excellent piece on AI in the last edition of Veracity, I like that, for all PWAPrem's processing power, I am very much in charge throughout the editing process. The software might invite me to consider edits, but I decide whether to make them or not.

I also like the fact that PWAPrem is educating me about my writing tics. It even provides weekly reports on the pattern of editorial prompts given to me, along with relevant educative material to help me understand what I might be doing wrong.

On the downside, PWAPrem is something of a "bouncy puppy", lurking at the edge of your screen, itching to be called into action. It will happily critique your shopping list if you let it.

*Paul McNamara*


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# VERACITY

## THINKING CAPS ON! IT'S NEARLY QUIZ NIGHT!

*The annual Verulam Writers quiz night takes place on Wednesday 18th February with I, Robert, your humble editor, hosting. Please, please come if you can, and to whet your appetites, here is a puzzle for you to solve. All the answers in the left-hand column are anagrams of those in the right-hand column. For example, the left-hand column might ask you what sport Jack Nichlaus played, while the right-hand one might ask you for a synonym for whipping or selling off; GOLF and FLOG.*

*With that in mind, can you get the rest? The answers are on page 32.*

| QUESTION | ANSWER A | ANSWER B |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| 1 | To exceed, strike, aerate or make music. | The second letter of the Greek alphabet. |
| 2 | Beefeater, Bombay Sapphire and Tanqueray collectively. | 2016 musical animated movie from Illumination Entertainment. |
| 3 | The animal Muriel was in Animal Farm. | A garment from the ancient world that featured prominently in *National Lampoon's Animal House*. |
| 4 | An animal or a villain's place of residence. | The unit of currency in Italy prior to the introduction of the euro. |
| 5 | The act of moving an event or a task to a future time. | The last volume in E.L. James' *Fifty Shades* trilogy. |
| 6 | The composer who founded Abbey Road Studios. | Adjective meaning relating to a king, or resembling one. |
| 7 | A drab but harmless region of the afterlife reserved for virtuous non-believers. | A brand of engine oil produced by the firm Exxon. |
| 8 | A benefit or advantage, sometimes a type of badge. | Something that might have trickling sand, turning hands or shifting digits. |
| 9 | What you might have said a mower does at harvest time. | The weapon that the centurion Longinus famously wielded in the Bible. |
| 10 | To have acted to make up for past mistakes. | To give money or something of value to a good cause. |
| 11 | Hedwig's children would be this animal. | The only item that ever gets wet while drying. |
| 12 | Verb meaning something has sparkled lightly. | Another verb that means someone has felt a thrill through their skin. |


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VERACITY

# Findings From the Recent Survey of Verulam Writers Members, November 2025

*By Paul McNamara*

## Headlines

- **55.6% response rate.**
- **The current balance of the in-person events programme has general membership support, but more 'guest evenings' would be appreciated.**
- **A range of potential topics for in-person meetings was suggested. (See main report below for details.)**
- **A majority supported continuing the writing exercises at the beginning of in-person meetings.**
- **Online ZOOM manuscript meetings are working well and are much appreciated.**
- **The current mix of articles in Veracity magazine was supported, but more pieces on 'member publishing and writing experiences', and 'writing tools and aids' should be considered.**
- **Members appreciate the VW website, using it primarily for information on the events programme. The Committee should explore providing more hyperlinks to external organisations and writing resources.**
- **Respondents provided a range of suggestions as to how VW could (a) help them become better, more productive writers, and (b) grow its membership. (See main report below for details.)**

## Main Report

A survey of Verulam Writers (VW) members was carried out over November 2025. Questions were asked about all the primary activities organised by VW. These include in-person meetings, online manuscript meetings, Veracity magazine and the VW website.

In summary, the survey established broad contentment among members across all these activities.

The main findings from the survey are presented overleaf.



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# VW Members' Survey Findings, Page 2

## Sample

15 responses were received from a VW membership totalling 27. This number was three more than responded to a similar survey in 2019, and represents a healthy response rate of 55.6%.

A clear majority of those who responded (86%) had over three years membership experience and, as such, were very familiar with VW activities.

## In-Person Meetings

Two-thirds of respondents were regular attendees at VW in-person meetings, with eight attending 'all or almost all' meetings and a further two attending once a month.

The survey asked whether members would like more, less or broadly the same number of 'manuscript evenings', 'guest speaker evenings', 'workshops', 'social events', 'open mics' and 'quiz nights' in the events programme.

The predominant response in all but one of these categories was to maintain the same number of such events in the programme as now. This was especially the case for 'manuscript evenings' with very few respondents wanting to have either more or less of them in the programme. This desire to maintain the current number of events was similarly true for 'social events' and 'quiz nights', with no-one voting to increase the number of the former, and only one to do so for the latter.

While maintaining the current number of workshops was also a majority position (eight), there was a sizeable minority (seven) who wanted more; nobody replied they wanted less.

Guest evenings were the only in-person event category that saw a small majority wanting more of them in the events programme than currently.

The above results confirm that VW members are generally content with the current mix of in-person meetings, but might appreciate more guest evenings.


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## VW Members' Survey Findings, Page 3

Besides asking about the current balance of the in-person events programme, the Committee was interested to hear about further topics members would like to see covered. Responses fell into five major categories, namely, to have more in-person events on

- How to get published
- The current state of commercial fiction publishing and the submissions environment
- Hearing from higher profile and literary authors
- The process of writing
- How and why we write

Members were then asked how VW in-person meetings might be improved.

Answers varied widely and included recommendations for the Committee to focus more on helping VW members to write and to talk more expansively about the specific writing problems they were wrestling with. Others wanted the Committee to encourage greater attendance generally at in-person events.

There was a specific request made to change the adjudication of the David Gibson Cup, either to have it judged by the previous winner rather than the wider membership at the relevant meeting, or to have entries published in advance to allow members more time to consider them.

Finally, VW members were asked whether the recently instigated writing exercises at the beginning of in-person meetings should continue. Notwithstanding a sizeable minority who wanted to see them dropped, there was a clear majority who wanted them to continue. The main suggestion for improvement was for members to be given advance notice of the topic.





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## VW Members' Survey Findings, Page 4

### Online Manuscript Evenings

Eight out of the 15 respondents to the survey said that they 'never attend' the online manuscript evenings. However, for those respondents that do, it is clear the meetings work well and are much appreciated. Indeed, one respondent felt they could be promoted more.

### Veracity*

As with the in-person meetings, VW members were asked whether they would like to see more, less or the same level of coverage as currently given to a range of topics regularly featured in the magazine.

In six out of nine listed categories, survey respondents said they were content with the current level of coverage allocated to them in Veracity. These were 'reports on VW competitions', 'the inclusion of competition winning entries', 'guest speaker reports', 'articles on what members are reading', 'book reviews' and 'VW committee reports'.

The three topic areas where members would, on balance, like to see more coverage were 'members' publishing experiences', 'writing tools and aids', and, to a lesser extent, 'members' writing experiences'.

It is clear VW members are well satisfied with Veracity. This said, a range of suggestions was forthcoming for the editor of Veracity to consider. These included a desire for more articles on how to become a published author, more stories that VW members could develop in subsequent editions, and a more general call for VW members to submit articles without the need to be prompted.

The only concern hinted at with respect to Veracity was that the length of some articles and the cumulative size of the magazine overall could, for some, make it a daunting read. Another respondent said s/he would be more likely to read the magazine if it were printed and not lost in a daily tide of email notifications.



** The Editor!*



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## VW Members' Survey Findings, Page 5

### The Website

The VW website is visited at least once a month by 40% of survey respondents, and once a quarter by a further third.

By far the greatest use members make of the VW website is to obtain information on the events programme. Secondary uses include locating copies of Veracity magazine and, to a lesser extent, finding VW member publications.

Survey respondents appeared highly satisfied with the current website, with only a few suggestions for improvements made. These related primarily to providing more hyperlinks to the online manuscript evenings, other writers' groups, the VW Facebook page, and to writing resources more generally.

### Helping VW Members Become Better and More Productive Writers

The survey concluded with two general questions. The first of these was how the Committee might help members become better and more productive writers.

Responses revealed that VW members value the current efforts made by the Committee and fellow members to help them develop as writers and become more productive. That said, there were some suggestions as to what more could be done.

Some expressed a desire for VW to develop closer contacts with publishers, potentially inviting them to review members' work and/or provide talks on how members might get published. A related suggestion was to have more guest presentations from authors and 'book professionals'.

Others encouraged the Committee to provide greater assistance to members working on long-form writing projects (e.g. novels), especially around how to better structure them.

One respondent wanted more workshops, with consideration given to potentially running some of them online.


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## VW Members' Survey Findings, Page 6

### Growing VW Membership in the St Albans Area

The second general question asked members for suggestions on how VW might increase its membership.

This was met with a wide range of ideas, including the group developing a closer relationship with U3A (which has a number of creative writing groups locally) and getting involved in the 'Discord Writing Club'.

Related to this was a view that VW should host more meetings aimed specifically at attracting the wider public. These might include arranging presentations from well-known authors and other book professionals.

To improve VW's outreach, respondents also suggested it should

produce relevant flyers and posters for (a) display in local libraries, bookshops, cafés and the like; and (b) for distribution at local cultural events in and around St Albans;

do more on social media; and

publish a book of members' Christmas poems.

Finally, there was a request for all VW members to ensure non-members attending in-person meetings are made welcome in the hope they can be subsequently persuaded to join the group.




**The Verulam Writers Committee would like to thank all those who took the time to complete the recent survey. The findings will help it maintain and improve members' experiences of being part of Verulam Writers.**

*Paul McNamara*



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# Gillian Knibbs Q & A

On 7th January, Gill Knibbs of the Ver Poets came to give a workshop on poetry. We started off by studying Gill's favourite poem; *Personal Helicon* by Seamus Heaney and selecting the most meaningful and expressive parts of it. Then we began pondering how you might observe yourself reflected in a shiny surface and wrote a few lines inspired by a childhood fascination, as Mr Heaney's poem was.

It was a satisfying evening and like Tracey Warr, Gill has taken part in a short written interview to give us a bit of insight into the real her. Thanks for this, Gill. Reader; enjoy.

Ed.



**Have you visited any writing groups outside the Ver Poets before Verulam Writers? Share some fond memories of it if you like.**

*I have visited Harpenden Writers a number of times to deliver workshops or judge competitions. I also used to run a creative writing course for the WEA. I always enjoy meeting and talking with other writers.*

**Do you have a favourite poet, author or book?**

*Of course one of my big favourites is Seamus Heaney which I spoke about last week. There are so many writers and poets I enjoy but I have always been a Dickens fan and a contemporary favourite is Murakami.*


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# Gill Knibbs Q&A Part 2



**How do you balance writing poetry with other responsibilities?**

*I don't. Other things in my life tend to take over.*

**Do you have any interests that assist with writing or provide inspiration for it?**

*Reading and listening and talking to people.*

**Is there any type of poetry you particularly like, or do you generally like it all?**

*I'm open to all kinds of poetry but I can't say I like it all. I am not a big fan of prose poetry unless it is done exceptionally well which sometimes it is.*

**What type of poems do you prefer to write?**

*I'm terrible at rhyme so I tend not to write in form, but I do use a lot of internal rhyme and other poetic techniques to give the music. To me, a poem is about encapsulating a moment, making the most of every word through its context and hopefully communicating something which resonates with others.*





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# The Lisbeth Philips Competition 2025

**By Mike Spurgeon**

Just hours after knowing that I would be judging the competition, the theme arrived in my head. As someone who has struggled to find those believable "enciting events" that change the course of a story, forcing characters to face new challenges, I had hoped that the topic of "A Moment of Madness" would provide them. I wasn't disappointed.

There were six entries. As always, there was an enjoyable mix of topics and styles, but after my first reading nearly all of them were worthy of a prize. I was also aware that I needed to justify my decisions, be aware of prejudices and try to read the stories from a wider perspective.

To bring objectivity to the process, I decided on the following criteria (which of course depended on my completely subjective opinions):

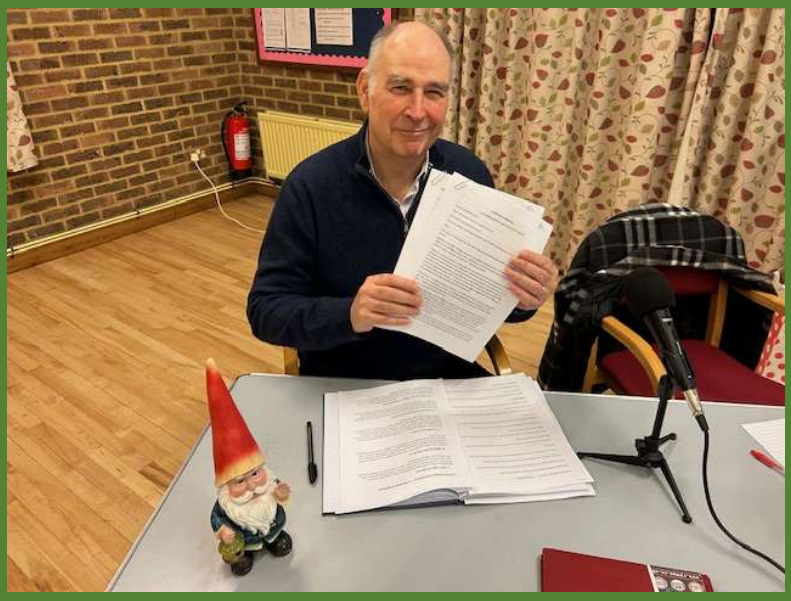
**Is it a story?** As a literary neophyte, I feel something must happen and not force readers to delve through layers of obscurity. Luckily James Joyce didn't submit an entry.

**Does it read well?** I asked do the sentences flow, are the events well-paced and is there a consistency to the narrative?

**Does the story have emotional impact?** Are there moments which move you so much that they come back to you days after you first read the story?

**Is it creative?** Some of the most satisfying reads are when you think "I never saw that coming" and your horizons are expanded by encountering new ideas.

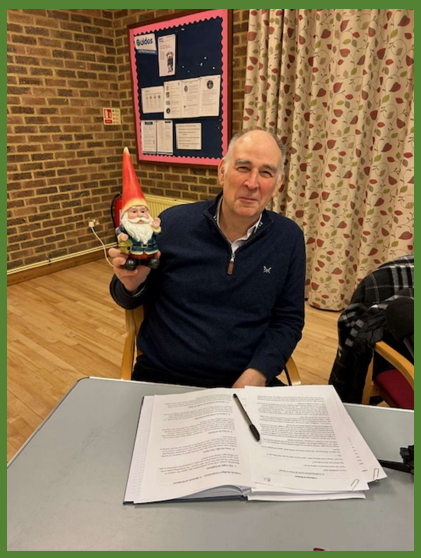
**Is the story structured well?** I can cope with a little confusion, but I find unnecessary jumping around annoying rather than entertaining.





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# Lisbeth Philips Competition 2025, Page 2



## Gnome De Plume

As a side note, following the mysterious disappearance of the old Gnome de Plume, a new Gnome named Robert has arrived to take over the role. The first winner of this coveted prize was Anne Ellis with Paddy de Selle.

The entries were as follows:

### A Moment of Madness, 28.7.14. by Hugh Stones

This entry arrived by email and was rather strangely formatted with carriage returns mid-sentence. I read it "as is" which made for a more difficult reading experience that may have gone against the writer. An examination of the consequences of the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand that led to the First World War. This piece had a clear chronological structure and was written in clear concise sentences. I would have preferred more variation in tone and pace and was surprised that the piece listed so many positive consequences to wars having taken place. The ending was a reminder of personal responsibility, but the story did not build to that conclusion.

### In Search of Sanity by Someone Doing Just Fine Clearly

Not so much a moment as an era. There was a nicely written historical discussion that mentioned but never fully explored issues relating to madness (class, political thought, revolutions, war and writers). There were some nice literary references but not enough gelling together of all the historical moments to make a clear point. The ending made me chuckle.

### A Moment of Madness by Ernest N. Devvah

An entertaining story featuring an exuberant character that was fun to read. The two main characters were likeable and written with great emotional depth. I didn't like the flashback on my first read through, but on subsequent read through's, I could see that it made sense. Another ending that made me chuckle.


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# Lisbeth Philips Competition 2025, Page 3

## 3RD Place

### A Moment of Mother Madness by Andy Mann (Joan Crooks)

Nicely introduced and paced, this is a sweet and charming story of a strong-willed little boy. The mothers love and concern are very evident with lots of inner thoughts and small details describing different scenes as the story unfolds. Everything builds to a satisfactory ending.

## 2ND Place

### Anne Neville: Her Story by Paddy de Selle (Anne Ellis)

Another well written account that uses intricate details to illustrate the terrible conditions of the asylum, including cold, poor food, inadequate clothing and cruelty from the nurses. Using the language of the downtrodden inmate to set the scene and tell the story was a nice device to introduce the heroine leading to the final twist.

## 1ST Place

Beautifully written, with many juxtapositions that capture the essence of an artist's life but also hint at his inner turmoil. The foreboding nature of the story, given that he is expecting to die soon, is reinforced by references to pale and fading light, adding extra pathos.

*Mike Spurgeon*



*Another side note; the silver plate was not presented to the winner until a subsequent meeting! But who won the plate and with what piece? Turn to the next page and find out! (Ed.)*



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# The Light of England

*Winner of the 2025 Lisbeth Philips Plate Competition*

*By Dave Weaver, writing as Walter Colour*

We all make mistakes, but few can trace a link from their careless choices to the end of their own lives. I admit now, in the cold piercing white light of this arctic dawn, that I have let my obsession run away with me. I am lost and will remain so until I meet my maker in a few short hours, an event neither of us is particularly looking forward to.

My name is Eric Ravilious, and my life has been a study of light. Not the fierce, blinding light of the Mediterranean, but the soft, pearlescent glow of the English Downs, the pale, flat wash of a winter afternoon where a shadow can hold as much colour as a sunlit patch of grass or a piece of rusting farm machinery. It is a light I have endeavoured to chase my whole life, right up until these final moments beneath a stark Icelandic sky.

I gained a lucky scholarship to the Royal College of Art when the true winner was forced to withdraw. Away from the bustling London I'd only read about in magazines, the sanctum of the RCA had a different kind of impulse, the excitingly strange current of modernism. I connected with it immediately and quickly met my lifelong friend and collaborator Edward Bawden. Later we would share studio space and art projects; a commission from Morley Collage to fill its walls with figures from Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas in Grecian temples and Victorian dolls houses.

We were taught by the wonderful Paul Nash to seek out the extraordinary in the everyday. Landscape became a living pulsing thing to be admired and captured but never tamed. We became architects of nature and translators of form, and I began a passionate lifelong affair with woodblock engraving.

There was to be another affair, this time with a living breathing creature. Her name was Tirza Garwood. I taught her, fell hopelessly in love and married her. I recognised a fierce talent and unpretentious wit rivalling my own. Though her class-conscious parents objected, we didn't care. Losing a generation of gilded youth to a war of unspeakable horror made past certainties no longer acceptable for those lucky to be born late to the slaughter.

We settled into a domestic rhythm in Brick House on the Downs with our children. My career found solid ground and my watercolours of green hills and chalk paths began to find their audience. I made commercial designs for both Wedgwood and British Rail.

Despite postponing her own career for the duties of motherhood, Tirza played the role of honest critic for my own work. We had our problems including a few quiet affairs when things were rough but after they got sorted out our love shone even brighter than any sun I could paint. She was the only light I could never fully capture.



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# The Light of England; Lisbeth Philips Plate Winner, Page 2

Then came the War. A German bomb destroyed the mural Bawden and I had painted at Morley College and my world of light turned dark. The long golden summer of Thirties England was cast beneath the gathering thunderclouds of Fascism and I felt it my duty to contribute what meagre help I could. I have time for neither establishment nor church, believing both to be comedic enterprises, but the comedy had turned to tragedy. I was commissioned by the Admiralty to be a war artist. It was a strange existence, flying here and there, travelling to far off lands in great ships which either sailed calm and silent oceans or rolled under intense fiery battery from enemy vessels. I found a stark beauty in the whale-like barrage balloons. I painted vast, empty hangars and deserted docksides, a squadron of fighter planes taking off at dawn like a swarm of angry dragonflies, groups of men standing around on empty runways in waterproofs gazing up to ominous skies.

I missed Tirza and the children dreadfully yet couldn't help but be entranced by my new subject matter, the steel grey battleships and fluid dark blue oceans, the white foaming waves and vivid yellows and reds of explosions. I knew my brave wife had her own battle to fight. The cancer we both feared had inevitably spread and it seemed only a matter of time before a decision needed to be made, yet I was not there to help her make it. I was at war with both the enemy and myself.

In the late summer of 1942, I was posted to Iceland. The light there was different from anything I had known. It was a clean, sharp, arctic light that laid everything bare. The landscapes were monumental, elemental; great sweeps of black sand and ice-blue water. The weather had been foul, but it had cleared. A Lockheed Hudson aircraft from RAF Coastal Command had failed to return from a patrol the day before. In a few short weeks of my posting these brave men had accepted me as one of their own, not some fancy artist but a man who loved planes as much as they did. After all, I'd drawn them for most of my life.

And that's when I made a catastrophic mistake. I had lived the life of a combatant this last year, but it was a false one. I was not a soldier, sailor or airman. I was a simple artist, employed to record, not take part. I had let myself become involved. A pilot offered to take me up to search for them and I was keen to see the icefields from the air. We began to run low on fuel. A decision was made to return to base, but we'll never make it now. I will soon become a part of the vastness I sought to capture. All is lost.

But my heart will still lie in the quiet of an English garden, the curve of a chalk hill, the serpentine flow of a river. I will be in the light on the Sussex Downs, a fleeting, beautiful moment caught for you on a page. I will be the light of England.


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# THE CHRISTMAS POETRY COMPETITION WINNERS

Settled as you now are into the New Year, I have to take you back to the festive season for just one page. This is to honour Anne Ellis winning our Christmas poetry competition by popular vote on the night of our Christmas party. Hers was a double entry about Santa's malevolent doppelganger, Krampus! Enjoy them, remember to always be good and don't be embarrassed if you shudder. (Ed.)

## Two Christmas Cautionary Tales

### Tale Number 1

'Twas the 5th of December and all through the night
Mischievous children were quaking in fright
For demons were running amok in the streets
Thrashing their chains and stamping goats' feet
With serpentine tongues and black horns on their heads
They snatched up all children who'd snuck out of bed
Whipped them with birch rods and took them away
To drown, or to eat, or to Hell—who's to say?
For none of those children would ever come back
From their woebegone ride in a Krampus's sack
So be good, little children, and do as you're told
Don't backtalk your parents, don't cause them to scold
For Krampus is coming, and him you should fear
But still, have a good Christmas, and a Happy New Year!

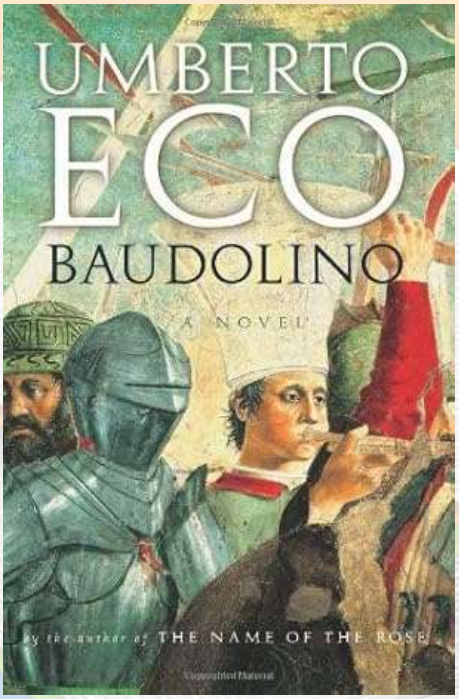
### Tale Number 2

There was a young boy one December
Whose manners he failed to remember
With a ring of his bell
Krampus whisked him to Hell
Where the boy, sad to say, was dismembered

Congratulations on winning the Christmas pudding, Anne! Let's see who it is next Christmas. (Ed)


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# Current Read by Judith Foster




***Baudolino* by Umberto Eco**

Umberto Eco was an Italian philosopher, historian and novelist. This marvellous mockery of a book is a twelfth century ramble through cities and sieges as confidant and éminence grise to an emperor by the world's most accomplished liar. He is on confidential terms with mythical monsters and at heart a Lombardy peasant. I believe every third word.

## Answers to the Puzzle on Page 17 (Turn the page upside-down)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ONE | A. Beat | B. Beta |
| TWO | A. Gins | B. Sing |
| THREE | A. Goat | B. Toga |
| FOUR | A. Lair | B. Lira |
| FIVE | A. Defer | B. Freed |
| SIX | A. Elgar | B. Regal |
| SEVEN | A. Limbo | B. Mobil |
| EIGHT | A. Merit | B. Timer |
| NINE | A. Reaps | B. Spear |
| TEN | A. Atoned | B. Donate |
| ELEVEN | A. Owlets | B. Towels |
| TWELVE | A. Glinted | B. Tingled |



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# Verulam Writers Current Competition Winners

| FIRST | SECOND | THIRD | GNOME |
|---|---|---|---|
| **David Gibson Cup**<br>**Topic:** An Act of Heroism (set by David Weaver)<br>**Adjudication Date:** 15th October 2025 | | | |
| Joan Crooks | Only one winner, I'm afraid! | | Joan Crooks again<br>(aka Ben D. Nees) |
| **Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition**<br>**Topic:** A Moment of Madness (set by Mike Spurgeon)<br>**Adjudication Date:** 3rd December 2025 | | | |
| David Weaver | Anne Ellis | Joan Crooks | Anne Ellis<br>(aka Paddy De Selle) |
| **President's Competition**<br>Topic: Print the Legend (set by Ben Bergonzi)<br>Adjudication Date: 19th March 2025 | | | |
| Jake Pirrie | Mellie Neville | Wendy Turner | Steve Seaton<br>(alias D.S. Calaishan) |
| **Crystal Decanter Competition**<br>**Topic:** Heavy (set by Philip Mitchell)<br>**Adjudication Date:** 21st May 2025 | | | |
| Tina Shaw | Mandy Carter | Robert Paterson | Wendy Turner<br>(alias Phil R. Monic) |
| **Howard Linskey Competition**<br>**Topic:** Crime<br>**Adjudication Date:** 18th June 2025 | | | |
| Anne Ellis | Cecile Keen | Steve Seaton | Philip Mitchell<br>(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 18th February at **St Stephen's Church Hall**.
For more details please visit
https://www.verulamwriters.org/

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Under review at time of writing



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