

VERACITY

The Magazine from Verulam Writers



Edition 46

www.verulamwriters.org

Winter 2021

NAOMI ISHIGURO GIVES TALK TO VW



Verulam Writers kicked off the 2021/2022 season with a talk by author Naomi Ishiguro on the topic of 'Writing What You Don't Know', hosted by Books on the Hill bookshop in St Albans.

Naomi spoke passionately in favour of writing about things you don't know, arguing that it is fundamental to fiction, but acknowledged that there are many examples where writers hadn't written with respect which has led to culture being misused and voices being silenced.

Naomi, daughter of Nobel prizewinner Sir Kazuo Ishiguro, recently published her first novel, *Common Ground*, about the unlikely friendship between two boys from different social backgrounds.

Naomi's top tips for avoiding any issues when writing what you don't know included thorough research, ensuring characters aren't standing as symbols, and approaching writing with empathy and compassion.

A full interview with Naomi is on page 24.

This time in VERACITY...

- Yes, it's back! **Christmas gift ideas** by Steve...
- Tina unleashes **childhood creativity**...
- Nick Cook on **Ovid, Sex and Shakespeare**...
- Plus our usual sprinkle of **festive cheer!**



From the Editor...

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

The 2021/2022 season kicked off spectacularly with a talk by Naomi Ishiguro on ‘Writing What You Don’t Know’ at Books on the Hill bookshop. Not only was it fascinating, but Naomi spoke with great passion and care. A full interview with her is on page 24.

I’m delighted that Jonny Rowland is on the Verulam Writer’s Block as it is long overdue (a parental advisory warning is in place!).

Some of the many highlights of this edition include Anne’s article on Christmas, Nick’s on the complex relationship between Ovid and Shakespeare, and Wendy’s winning entry to the Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition which gave us all food for thought... though perhaps that’s not the best way to describe it.

It has been a strange year for many of us, with many ups and downs. Here’s hoping that 2022 will bring peace and good fortune – and good writing – to us all!

Sam Ellis, Editor
VWVeracityEditor@gmail.com

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From the Chair...

Chairman of Verulam Writers Phillip Mitchell.

In September, we resumed physical meetings of Verulam Writers, and it's been great seeing everybody face-to-face, reminding us we're real people and not just pixels on a screen.

This season has been packed with good stuff. We've had manuscript nights, judged the David Gibson Cup competition with its massive fourteen entries and the Lisbeth Phillips competition with an enormous 12 entries. It was great to have Lesley Eames return to lead a workshop on getting published, and Antonia joined us from local independent bookshop, Books On The Hill. In addition, we hosted a packed workshop with Naomi Ishiguro on "writing what you don't know" at the aforementioned bookshop.

But just as we thought things were almost back to normal, Omicron hit hard, and we had to make the tough decision to cancel the Christmas Party, moving it to Zoom instead.

Our Zoom meetings have carried us through challenging times, but nothing beats being in a room together, and losing the party was a particular blow. Hopefully, we can resume physical meetings going into the new year as we've got loads of exciting things coming up, including workshops, and author guests, Howard Linskey, Kate Griffin and Stuart Clark. Please keep your eye on my emails and our website for details of any changes we need to make to the programme.

For those comfortable with Zoom meetings, remember that in between the formal meetings at St Michael's Parish Centre, members can join the alternative Wednesday meetings on Zoom which are exclusively manuscript critique evenings. If you want the invites to these meetings, give me a shout.

And lasty, my thoughts go out to those members who haven't yet been able to join us at our physical meetings as they continue to shield for their health or for loved ones. I hope their situation eases up soon. You are missed.

I hope 2022 is kind to us all and we manage to get lots of writing done.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Phil

Reading Time!

Wendy Turner on setting aside some time for reading.

There's reading. And reading. Devouring the absorbing book we're reading is one thing; going through a pile of magazines we've saved is quite another. If you're anything like me, they pile up unread. The truth is, I feel a bit guilty about 'just reading' about writing instead of getting on with it. So, undaunted, I put some time aside to plough through the ancient pile, notebook at the ready. From an hour or two of happy perusing, I sorted out *Writing Magazine*, *The Countryman*, *People's Friend*, *This England* and *Evergreen* magazines, and realised a few things:

- which magazines favour which sort of articles.

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- which magazines have recurring features to tailor your article to, e.g.: *Village Voices*, *Rural Rides*, *Cottages and Castles*, *Then and Now*, *A Day in the life of...*, *Roadside Relics* and *Living Museums*.
- 'Byways' was a regular article. One was about the streets of Glasgow and someone's 1911 home, left intact as it was then. There was another about a famous person living in the 1780s. 'Gleanings from the Fields of Memory' published a write-up of a childhood Sunday School outing which took over 200 children to the seaside. It included what they did, how they felt and what they ate. 'What are our childhood memories? Even better if you have an old photo.'
- 'TV memories' featured *Dad's Army* and *Are You Being Served?* 'Famous Names in Football' came up regularly with a short write-up, and did you know that *Smile*, sung by Nat King Cole comes from a song composed by Charlie Chaplin for his 1936 film *Modern Times*, which has its roots in Puccini's *Tosca*? Neither did I. Digging can be such fun! Quizzes are popular, particularly about bygone times.
- there are tons of features on animals and pets. Lots on why cats are appealing. One article included something about *CATS* the musical and the poems of T.S. Eliot and another suggested writing on animal-related phrases: 'Hold Your Horses: A Dog's Dinner.' We could bear that in mind for one of our competitions!
- there were lots of articles and poems on wildlife which included red deer, curlew and sea eagle. Poetry and humorous poetry are popped into little spaces. You can write to a theme in *Writing Magazine*. Guidelines plus an example are set out.
- strolls through villages for *Village Voices* and *Rural Rides* included local legends, forthcoming events and even dishes tried out while there. Little insights into places you have visited are popular, especially after the Covid lockdown. One article was entitled 'Holidaying with the person I love most in the world.'
- the sort of language appropriate differed between magazines; formal or more informal. Some magazines like small reflections on something personal to you, especially if you (or someone else) overcame an obstacle to succeed in something. They are mostly written in a friendly way, as though chatting.
- some magazines like descriptive language. I came across 'splashes of tumbling purple flowers,' 'the wildness of the heath in changing light,' 'sea shining in shades of blue and green,' 'trees with branches holding hands, like mother and child. Can you imagine it (the article asks), the little tree calling out Mum...mum...mum!' There are lots of articles about trees and the joy of walking in woods and forests. Short pieces and poems about trees in differing seasons are also popular. Highfield Park, St Albans, has a Tree Trail with around 40 trees. You can pick up a leaflet in the park with a potted history on each one.

All these titles were published in various magazines which will be on the lookout for more. So, this Christmas, why not give yourself a couple of hours off? Settle down with a mince pie and a nice glass of something and tackle the dreaded pile. Have fun!

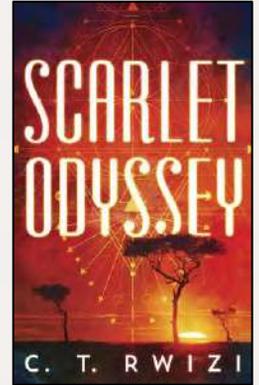




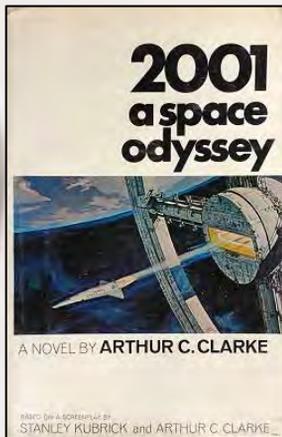
What We're Reading (and What We Think!)

Steve Barley is reading... the **Scarlet Odyssey** trilogy by debut author CT Rwizi.

It is simply astounding in how it blends cultural originality with high fantasy to create an epic tale of tribal warriors, complex magic, political intrigue and more spears than you can shake a stick at...provided it's got a pointy end of course! Two books in and I can't wait for the third due out July, 2022.



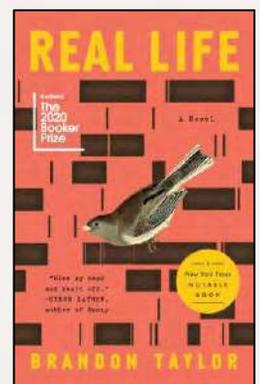
Robert Paterson is reading... the **Space Odyssey** saga by Arthur C. Clarke.



Nick Cook's science fiction talk earlier in the year inspired me to keep reading through the works of one of the rightful masters of science fiction. I've read through the 2001, 2010 and 2061 novels, and can truthfully say I am currently enjoying 3001. These are well-researched books, extraordinary and yet believable, with characters that you root for and a narrative that remains simple and pacy - insightful science-wise, yet perfectly understandable to the common man.

Phil Mitchell is reading... **Real Life** by Brandon Taylor.

I chose this novel from a recommended reading list put together by my workplace's BEAM group who ensure we're building a business that stands up for ethnic diversity. Shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize, Real Life is a stylishly written and deeply felt book on grief, desire, solitude, society, sexuality, and race, where the main character struggles with the death of his father and contemplates the future. Like the protagonist, I've worked in a laboratory, and can sympathise with the personal dramas that go on amongst the petri dishes and pipettes. It's a depressing read, but enlightening. I'll be reading more of Brandon Taylor's work.

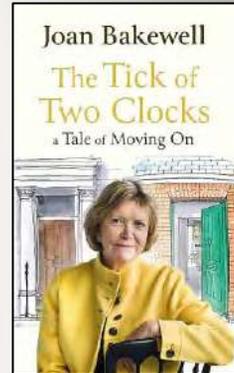


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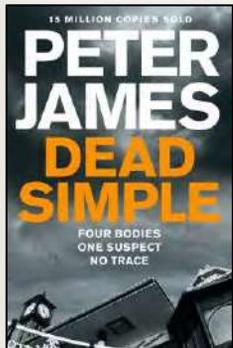
Yvonne Moxley is reading... **The Tick of Two Clocks** by Joan Bakewell.

Joan Bakewell is in her late 80s, has recently down-sized from a four-storey house to a small studio, and therefore had the life-changing experience of deciding what to keep and what to give away. This is a motivational book which has finally helped me to 'clear my own clutter'!



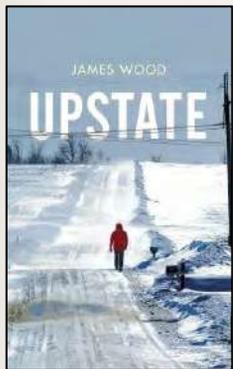
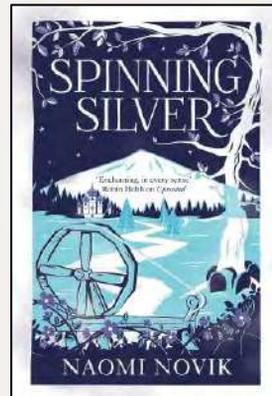
Wendy Turner is reading... **Dead Simple** by Peter James.

It's one of his Roy Grace cop series. It's a real shocker with someone buried alive for a prank but then they go off and are killed in a road accident. It's the story of how the police gradually put the pieces together to find the buried guy - a real thriller.



Anne Ellis is reading... **Uprooted** and **Spinning Silver** by Naomi Novik.

Both are magical, feminist works of fantasy based on Northern European fairy tales and Polish folklore. Excellent reads for the season.

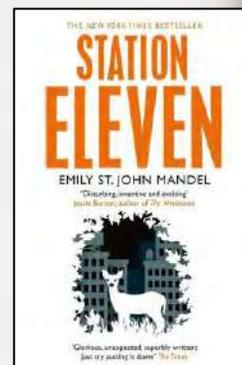


Tina Shaw is reading... **Upstate** by James Wood

A fictional account of a father and his two adult daughters, their lives and relationships.

Sam Ellis is reading... **Station Eleven** by Emily St. John Mandel.

The 'Georgia Flu' has devastated the world but a group of travelling actors roam the Great Lakes to bring their art to the survivors. A prophetic tale, given that it was published in 2014, and a good one - it won the Arthur C Clarke award in 2015.



It's Christmas!

Anne Ellis on the most festive time of year (which is not Halloween)...

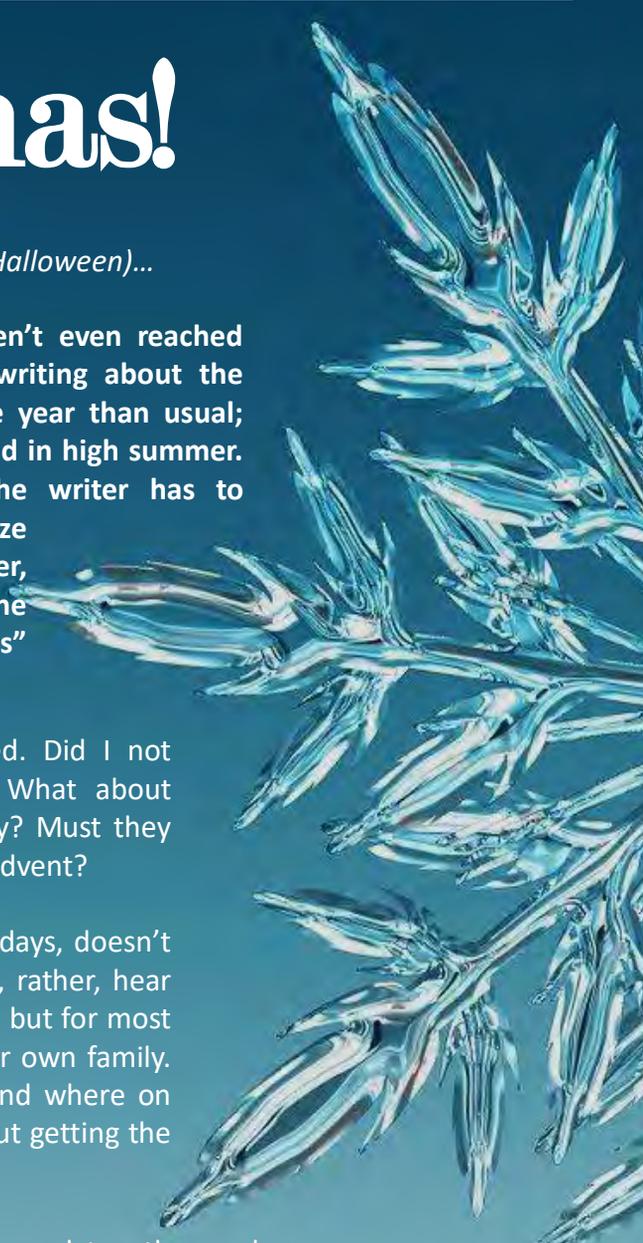
Ah, Christmas. As I write this introduction, we haven't even reached Halloween yet, which is pretty typical for anyone writing about the festive season. Or, dare I say it, actually later in the year than usual; magazine articles about Christmas are generally penned in high summer. So while everyone else is basking in the sun, the writer has to metaphorically don an ugly sweater and rhapsodize about chill mornings and hot toddies. At least in October, I'm happy in the knowledge that should I venture to the shops, they'll already be full of shiny baubles and "gifts" and blaring out jolly tunes to get me in the mood.

And by "happy", of course, I mean intensely irritated. Did I not mention we haven't even reached Halloween yet? What about people who don't even celebrate baby Jesus's birthday? Must they endure an entire quarter of every year dedicated to his advent?

Of course, Christmas, for most people in the UK these days, doesn't have a lot to do with actual religion. We may sing (or, rather, hear piped at us in the shops) carols celebrating Jesus's birth, but for most people, the seasonal celebrations are about family—our own family. It's about working out who's hosting the big dinner, and where on earth you're going to put all those extra guests. It's about getting the perfect—or at least, the acceptable—gift for everyone.

For a writer, there's conflict ready-made: families crammed together and forced to pretend they get on. Add alcohol to reduce inhibitions and you have the perfect recipe for explosions. Long-buried secrets, anyone? Seething resentments brought out into the twinkly light of day? How about a serving of no-longer-suppressed illicit desire?

Christmas is also about nostalgia. In many cases, it's nostalgia for something that never was: a Dickensian fantasy, with families singing carols by the fire while snow falls softly outside. Everyone chipping in to prepare a feast, then cosying up on the sofa to watch a movie, while the washing up mysteriously does itself. There's a wealth of imagery surrounding the season, which the writer can tap into to effortlessly induce a certain mood in the reader. Lonely characters gain extra poignancy at this time of year. Children are at their most idealised. Kindness to elderly neighbours, or the homeless, takes on



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added sentimentality. Mix up children, kindness and the lonely elderly and there won't be a dry eye in the house. Or you'll have created a new John Lewis advert. Or possibly both.

Let's consider Charles Dickens, often credited with creating Christmas as we know it. The most famous of his Christmas Books, *A Christmas Carol*, features a lonely old man whose heart is opened to the joys of family and practical goodwill to one's fellow men and women, saving the life of an ailing child in the process. The ghosts are just an added bonus: the real draw to the story is the emotional tug of the tale of lonely childhood, lost love and the overwhelming happiness of the old man and those he associates with once his life is transformed.



Of course, the tears that writers jerk don't have to be those of happiness. Hans Christian Andersen, himself by all accounts an unhappy soul, knew this well. His *A Little Matchgirl* contains similar ingredients to Dickens's confection: loneliness; childhood, poverty, bitter cold and visions of happier times, but the dish he serves us is, in the end, at best bittersweet.

But don't forget that emotional reactions aren't always universal. To some, *It's a Wonderful Life* is the ultimate Christmas movie: a heart-warming, morally uplifting tale of community coming together. To me, it's the long, drawn-out death of the soul. And don't get me started on *Love, Actually* (*cough* misogyny *cough* stalkers' charter). Writers should bear in mind that wish-fulfilment for one demographic may look like oppression and objectification to another.

The message of Christmas—and, ideally, of Christmas writing—should be goodwill to *all*.

Speaking of which, as I pick up my metaphorical pen once more after a hiatus of some weeks, it's now mid-November. While some trees still dazzle in golden Autumn hues, others have lost their leaves entirely, all the better to show off thick clusters of dark red berries. There's a chill in the air, and bright woollens in the shops. Shorter days make for cosy evenings in, while families plan for festive meetings. A robin is perched outside my window and you know what? It's actually beginning to feel a lot like...

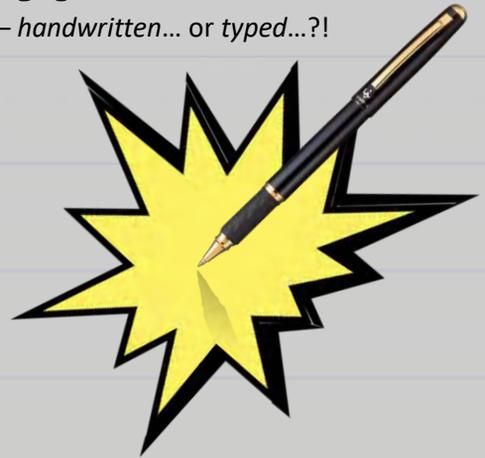
Humbug, anyone? Maybe it isn't so bad after all!





Written vs Typed

We asked Verulam Writers the age-old question – *handwritten...* or *typed...?!*



For me, it depends on the context. When you're writing long, important pieces where mistakes could be costly, typing is always best. Besides, you can't e-mail a sheet of file paper. Yet handwriting is useful when you take quick notes, especially when there is no power source or you have no desk to lean a laptop on. For personal letters too, handwriting feels like it comes from the heart.

– Robert Paterson

I write straight on to the computer.

– Tina Shaw

Both: I mostly prefer to type, but when I'm filling in the gaps in a first draft, printing the lot out and scribbling on it is always the most effective way to go.

– Anne Ellis

When I start a story, I jot it down by hand. I've developed a terrible habit of purchasing expensive Moleskine notebooks—I'm in love with the weight and feel of the cream paper and the luxurious soft touch cover, and my writing flows effortlessly onto the crisp pages. However, to develop my work, I type it laboriously into my laptop. And when ready for editing, I return to paper, printing out my work and marking it with black ink, often crossing out and adding so many words, I can barely see the original printout.

– Phil Mitchell

Typed – I like to think I'm a terrible writer but a brilliant editor, resulting in words that come out somewhere in-between. However, to save killing a forest the size of China I use a PC rather than paper.

– Steve Barley

I mostly use my computer but I do keep pads all over the place and scribble down things I want to remember and web addresses from TV. Bits of paper are dangerous (in my household!) so I do try and slip them into a plastic sleeve and pop them into pending....

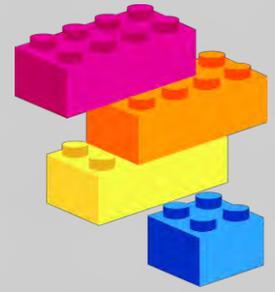
– Wendy Turner

I have never written anything in longhand. From my very first job in journalism I used a typewriter and with the advent of the word-processor which automatically counted my words and even my characters, I was in heaven!

– Yvonne Moxley



Teaching Children to Write Creatively



Tina Shaw on how children are taught to think and write creatively.

There is no magic formula for this and many of the prompts are similar to those that we use as adults.

In primary schools there is a lot of emphasis initially on learning to physically write letters on a line, with suitable finger spacing between the words. In Key Stage 1 the children are taught phonics, letters and sounds, spelling and basic punctuation. As they progress up the school, and learn to read, there is a continuing effort to get them to understand the mechanics of writing, and some complicated grammar, a legacy of Mr. Gove's time as Education Minister.

Teachers will use prompts such as asking children to write about an object, a picture, or on given theme, or about a favourite character. They may ask children to write their own version of a story, or to remix the characters from a story, or make use of key words, or opening lines. Using a story board can be helpful in giving children an understanding of the structure of a story. The school at which I volunteer has a whole school big write week twice a year, where every child reads the same book and then has to write a story stimulated by the text. Children also are encouraged to enter writing competitions; not so very different from us.

Children who are read to, and talked to at home have been shown to have a much greater vocabulary than those who miss out on this area of parenting. They need adults who are prepared to listen to what they write and to give encouragement and praise for their efforts, as well as positive feedback. A variety of reading material including fiction and non-fiction, comics and blogs and poetry, are all potential stimulants to creativity. Children need to feel that it is OK to experiment and OK to make mistakes. All these are potential learning tools.

School libraries initially are structured around a reading scheme which gradually introduces the child to a more advanced range of words. Once they have mastered the basics, the library should offer them a wide range of stories and non-fiction. Many schools are constrained by their budgets in stocking their libraries as well as they would like and children need to be encouraged to make use of the town libraries. In the spring term primary schools take part in Book Week, where the children are invited to come to school dressed as a character from a favourite book. Costumes are often very imaginative but for the more vulnerable children this can be another area where they are left behind.



Currently, Ofsted is concentrating on the left behind children and will be expecting schools to show what they are doing to bring these children up to the expected levels. Oracy is also being tracked as part of what children should be learning.

Creativity can be encouraged and stimulated in children, rather than specifically learnt. Like adults, some will gain great satisfaction from this activity whilst others will have limited interest in it. Let us hope that the current emphasis on the mechanics and structures of the written word does not result in the death of creativity.



A Wedding: The 2021 David Gibson Cup Competition

Robert Paterson *reports.*

Wednesday 6th October was a very special night. Not only were we voting for the winner of this year's David Gibson Cup, but it was the first time in 18 months that we were judging a competition back at St Michael's Church Hall. As in previous years, the entries were posted on notice boards and spread over tables so that everyone attending could read the entries and place a vote inside the trophy.

Sam Ellis had been last year's winner, and his chosen theme was *A Wedding*, which required entrants to write a story in which a wedding was central to the plot. Some of the entries were by members we have only recently welcomed into the circle.

There were 14 entries overall, of which 7 entries received at least one vote. The stories covered a great many genres and involved richly varied individuals. Sally Hewitt put in a serious story about a teenage bridesmaid who feels her sister's May-December marriage fits as poorly as her own dress. Yvonne Moxley submitted a funny story about a woman engaged to a convict whom she ends up doing something criminal to. John Spencer produced a science fiction story about two robots who are given a wedding as a publicity stunt. I myself put in a story about a bridegroom who uses his speech to praise his wife's uncle for bringing them together, even though serious criminal charges are hanging over the uncle's head. Phillip Mitchell told a story worthy of Edgar Allen Poe, about a woman who is forced to attend the wedding of her two dead friends!

Second place in the voting was Austin Best, with his entry *The Ghost Wedding*. This was tale similar to Phil's, whose central character is a man haunted (possibly literally) by an incident in the Far East many years ago. This man ritualistically married a dead woman's remains so her spirit could rest. But now he's marrying for real, can *his* spirit rest too?



Still, there can only be one winner in the David Gibson Cup, and this year's winner, with 6 votes, won by a landslide. It was Anne Ellis, who put in the darkly amusing story *Living In Sin*. Patience is attending a New Age wedding with her fiercely conservative guardian, Aunt Maureen. They clash over just about everything, but nobody suspects that Patience is secretly a vampire, clouding the guests' minds, and Aunt Maureen is in for a horrible shock.

Only 4 names received votes for the Gnome De Plume. Phil won this even more clearly than Anne, when he got 11 votes for his pseudonym, Marion Haste.

Congratulations, Anne! Let's hope the challenge you set us next year is something new, not something old!



Timelapse

A seasonal poem by Wendy Turner, originally published in Edition 33 of Veracity in 2016.

It's funny being back here again
Wandering along the country lanes
Seeing what's left of the old familiar place
And searching around for a long-lost face

I wouldn't have come, but I had no choice
Caesar Augustus has a loud voice
Demanding my presence with my family
Who live in the region of Galilee

Bethlehem's become such an over-crowded place
People pushing and shoving and jostling for space.
The hotels are full and the bars are packed out
It's getting late and there's no taxis about

***There's a strange, strange feeling in the air tonight,
A spark or a flame could set the place alight,
Like the rising mist on a cold and silent morn,
A stillness full of tension, like the calm before the storm.***

So I've fled from the town and I'm here in the park
On a steep hillside, although it's getting dark
But I'll stay for a while and take in the night air
And forget about travel and working and care

I'll sit here and watch the sun going down
On the horizon the silhouetted town
Looms dark and twinkling in the dying day
As darkness smothers the last escaping ray

Now here's a strange sight in the inky night
A star has appeared with an odd, vibrating light
I'd message Brian Cox if I were at home
It's rapidly moving across the night's dome

***There's a throb and a quivering in the air tonight
That touches the heart and sets the soul alight
An air of expectancy that filters through the town
A hushed and whispered sigh of bliss, re-echoing around***

Singing travels on the breeze, someone shouts aloud
Just my luck to be stranded here with a noisy crowd
But, no, I'm mistaken, the music's quite divine
Clear and flowing harmony, heaven and earth entwined

I feel the faintest stirrings of fear and awe arise
The melody's exploding and bursting from the skies
Angelic voices chorusing: 'Peace and Joy on Earth'
Singing of a wondrous love, and a baby's birth

I rise and head towards the path, I really need to go
But stand transfixed by shouts that rise from the field below
It's only shepherds round a fire but I think I'll go and see
If they can shed some light upon this startling mystery

I stumble blindly in my haste with panic gripping me
I've lost one shoe and dropped my gloves but I don't stop to see
I'm soon in their encampment, I'm breathless from my flight
But they grasp my hands and take me off with them into the night

***There's an air of excitement that carries me along
As I run with the shepherds and hear the angels' song
A deep and beckoning mystery that will not be denied
And sweeps us to a stable door on this first Christmastide***

I hesitate to step inside, it's really too dark to see
But a flickering torch affixed to a beam reveals the picture to me
There's a young girl who's fallen asleep, her head resting on her hands
And in the shadows, holding a child, a watchful bearded man stands

I hate to intrude but I'm somehow drawn in, the shepherds fall to their knees
And bring out their gifts, a mug and a spoon, some wine and a round of cheese
I race through my mind, what gift can I bring from my far-off world to this?
I've only my passport and mobile 'phone, so I give the baby a kiss.

It's funny being back here again
At the airport after an hour on the train
With my head in a whirl and my thoughts in a spin
It all seemed so real, I just can't take it in

I thought - for a moment - that time had stood still
And I crossed a wide chasm and waited until
The darkness was pierced by a dazzling light
That brought peace and joy to a cold winter's night

Was it only a vision, just a fancy design
Colouring a tired and over-active mind?
A distant dream that echoes so eerily
In the cold daylight of waking reality?

But when I think back to that night so wild
And the joy and elation, and the new-born child
Deep in my heart the answer rebounds
And I smile to myself as the 'plane leaves the ground



Fantastic Voyage: The 2020/21 Crystal Decanter Competition

Robert Paterson on setting and adjudicating this year's competition.

It was a delightful surprise for me to win 2020's Crystal Decanter competition, in what was certainly a dreary year for all of us. I've already described my intense quandary over what 2021's theme should be in a previous issue of *Veracity*, but after much deliberation, I suggested 6 top choices to the committee. *Fantastic Voyage* was their favourite.

My chosen theme set circle members the challenge of writing a story of 1,500 words or less about somebody taking a journey somewhere unknown and extraordinary, or taking a regular journey where something strange happens.

Adjudication night was Wednesday 5th May and I presented the entries and winners by means of a carefully constructed PowerPoint slideshow.

There were 9 entries overall, with themes ranging from a sabotage on the motorway, to a baby struggling to escape the womb, to a story similar to Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. As you can imagine, judging was a chequered affair for me. While 5 entries stood above the rest as particularly good, I wasn't initially sure what order to put them in.

In the end, I put 2 of the 5 entries in the informal category of "Specially Commended". One was the story *86th Street*, by Sally Hewitt, which was about the life struggles of a young investment portfolio clerk in Yuppie era New York. The other was Tina Shaw's story *Fantastic Voyage*, which followed the adventures of Arthur, an elderly man who is trying to hike from Land's End to John O'Groats, despite the Lockdown closing in on him.

Then came the winners. Third prize went to John Spencer, for *My Fantastic Voyage*. This story follows a time traveller who is trying to prevent the sinking of the Titanic. Little does he know that several others have had the same idea! Second prize went to Dave Weaver, for *The Light Across the Park*. It too was a science fiction story, in which a disillusioned man tries to walk back through a portal in time to commit a terrible crime, only to be saved when the hope he thought was lost is restored.

The overall winner, taking first prize for the second time that year, was Sam Ellis, for *Voyage to Mermaid Lagoon*. This story follows Ian, the operator of a plastic galleon in a theme park water ride, whose passion for the work has long dried up. Yet this all changes when his ride becomes real, and he has to save a helpless mermaid from becoming supper for a ruthless pirate queen!

The evening concluded with the awarding of the Gnome de Plume trophy. This became Sally's compensation for not winning the decanter. Her pseudonym was Sue Perfreak.

Congratulations, Sam, and to all those of you who made my job so tough! With luck, I'll get the chance to judge another competition again soon. And this time, I won't have to journey to the ends of the Earth to think of a theme!



Voyage to Mermaid Lagoon

Sam Ellis's winning competition entry to the Crystal Decanter Competition.

The time had come once again for me to reach for the microphone and say the words that haunted my dreams:

“Welcome to Mermaid Lagoon.”

I loathed those words, and all the others. I knew them by heart, which is easy to do when you have to say them ten times a day for years. They became very boring very quickly so I'd lost the battle to keep the monotony from my voice long ago.

“Come with me, your captain, to Mermaid Lagoon, where all the mermaids and creatures of Fantasy Island live. But beware, pirates sail here too. Mind your head on the awning, watch your step, and please keep your hands inside the boat at all times.”



I'd check everyone was seated, give a ring of the bell and press the button on the control panel next to the fake wheel for the ride to set off into the man-made river along its track. I could usually sit back for a few minutes before having to speak again. I'd see a pirate kidnapping a mermaid (both animatronic), then I'd get some kid to pretend to fire a model cannon with a tennis ball in it, controlled by me on my control panel, to scare the pirate and save the mermaid. I used to think I was a mermaid rescuer, not a theme park attendant. Those days were long gone.

This trip was the same as any. I'd left a note to myself saying 'pirate number three - missing leg' reminding me to report it. Last week it fell off mid-ride, much to the horror of the children and delight of me. I sat at the control panel, put on my Nelson-style captains' hat and asked the obligatory question to the nearest kid.

“Would you like to ring the bell?”

She glared. “Are you a *real* captain?”

Ugh.

“I'm Captain Ian. Do you want to ring the bell or not?!”

She folded her arms in a huff, so I rang it, pressed the start button and sat back in my chair, covered my eyes with the hat and revelled in the few minutes where I could pretend I was doing anything with my life other than this.

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It was short-lived. Among the usual chatter and clicks of cameras I heard the words “don’t do that!” Moving the hat from my face I could see a bratty boy, stood at the bow with his hands in the water. On this ride where the water’s only five centimetres deep it could be dangerous. I sat up and took the microphone.

“Please keep your hands inside the boat *at all times.*”

A woman tried to pull him back but he went into full tantrum, yelling “No! No! No!” and splashing his hands into the water with vigour. A robot octopus waved at us happily, but was largely ignored by the growing drama of the scene.

I rolled my eyes, got up and marched towards the child. “Will you *please* keep your hands inside the-” **BAM!**

I’d forgotten to mind my head on the awning – the thing I’d reminded others to do thousands of times before.

When I woke, I found myself splayed on the deck surrounded by vaguely concerned passengers. With profuse apologies and assurances that I felt fine, I stood up and made my way back to my chair. The brat was quiet and unmoving, clearly having had a significant telling-off. As I sat down, I brushed the fake wheel and the strangest thing happened – the boat moved. I didn’t think too much of it at the time except as another thing to add to the maintenance list.

I rubbed my temples and picked up the microphone. “Sorry about that folks – don’t forget to mind your head.” This created the first ripple of laughter I’d had in years.

The boat sailed through under the branches of the weeping willow, which was my cue for the next section.

“What is that sound?” The familiar noise of singing and harp-strings wafted across the water. “Is it – a mermaid?! Look to your left and you might just see one.”

Everyone looked to the sight of a mermaid sat on a rock, strumming a harp. In recent weeks the worn-out mechanics made it look more like a Kung Fu chop. The usual ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ came from the passengers, but I overheard one of them remark “what a great actress.”

‘*Moron*’, I thought to myself, but as I glanced over, I noticed that the mermaid did indeed look real, and the music seemed to be coming from her, not the speaker in the fibreglass rock.

We entered the main lagoon. Normally the boat would have turned on its track, but it kept heading forwards. This would be a major malfunction that could shut the ride for weeks. I leaned over the side to see if I could see the chain, but all I could see was water, as if it had become deep. I leaned back in to the boat. I turned the wheel a little – and the boat turned with it. I turned it again and it moved once more.

Before I could think more on it, I heard the familiar cries of “Help! Help!”, which was the prompt for my next lines.



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“What is that I hear? Cries for help? Is it our mermaid? And what is that?”

From the other side of the lagoon emerged the pirate ship. Except it wasn't the fibreglass model I'd seen thousands of times before. It was a huge wooden galleon with a torn-up Jolly Roger flying from the mast. It edged closer to the boat until it towered over it, and a figure stomped forward. With one leg upon the prow was a woman in an electric-blue frock-coat and tricorne hat, her black hair flailing in the wind. She looked the living embodiment of the animatronic pirate that should be stood at the front of the fibreglass ship. What the hell was going on?!

“Ye be Captain Ian, I presume?”

I nodded, mouth gaping in disbelief.

“Ye after THIS?!” One of the men on the ship dragged a thick net along the deck, inside of which was a mermaid, crying out for help.

The passengers pointed and gasped at the sight. I was stuck to the spot. What on earth was happening? Had actors taken over and nobody told me?!

“Avast, ye matey!” the woman barked. “Captain Ian, ye be no match for me, you landlubber! This wench of the sea be *mine*.”



“Ooh, it's very good, isn't it?!” said one of the passengers stood next to me, her clip-on sunglasses flipped upwards.

“Look” I called to the pirate, “This has gone far enough. Are you an actress?”

The woman burst into a thick cackle, like a lightning crack across the sky. “Ha! Me, a common strumpet?! I be the fearsomest pirate of the seven seas. I be havin' yur friend here for dinner. Quick lads! To the open water!”

The huge ship began to move away, the cries of the mermaid becoming more frantic.

“Captain! Cried the brat boy. Don't let her get away! She's got the mermaid!”

“Quite right” I said, straightening the Nelson hat. “How do you fancy firing a cannon?!” I directed him to the model cannon, which he aimed at the pirate ship.

“Ready! Aim! Fire!”

I pressed hard on the button on the control panel, and with an enormous explosion and shower of sparks a huge lead



cannonball flew out and straight at the ship, narrowly missing the pirate herself.

“Arrrggghhh!” she yelled.

“Again!” I cried, and the boy aimed again and I fired. Once more a huge cannon ball flew out and narrowly missed the pirate.

“Heave to, lads!” she cried as the smoke cleared from about her. “Stop yer chase gun, Captain, befor’ ye sink us. We won’t be feedin’ the fish today. You want the wench that much, you take ‘er!” With that the pirate drew a sword from her side and sliced the net with one stroke, freeing the mermaid. The mermaid flapped on the deck and darted into the water. “But mark my words, Captain Ian. I’ll return... I will return!”

The pirate turned on her heel as the ship made a sudden, low swing away.

The passengers burst into loud applause and some patted me by the back. “Great show!” “Brilliantly well-done!” and “This is the best thing EVER!” were some of the comments I could hear from over the ruckus, as the pirate ship disappeared from view.

From the water came a now familiar voice. “Thank you for saving me Captain Ian! Come back and see us again soon!” With that, the mermaid flopped into the water, her shadow fading into the fathoms below.

The next morning, the time came once again for me to reach for the microphone and say the words that haunted my dreams:

“Welcome, one and all! Adventure seekers! Thrill lovers! Voyage makers! WELCOME - to *MERMAID LAGOOON!*”

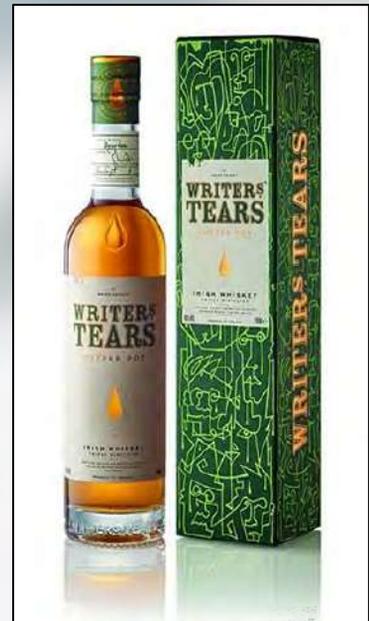


Christmas Gift Ideas 2021

It's back! Steve Barley researches the best Christmas ideas for writers.

Favoured by my old headmaster and writers alike, here are 'six of the best' gift ideas for your literary-minded shopping spree in the run up to Christmas. No turkeys here!

Celebrate the completion of your next novel with a smooth glass of Writers' Tears Irish Whiskey. After all that you've been through, you're entitled to make it a double. A 70cl bottle costs £34 on www.amazon.co.uk. Fancy a tot? That's the spirit!



The Attention Manifesto Notebook (also available in poster form) by Grant Snider is a beautifully illustrated reminder to any writer of what truly matters. If you can't pay attention then pay £12.99 and they'll chuck in a free pen too.



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There's no need to feel down the next time you receive a rejection letter for your literary masterpiece. Simply wear this Self Help T-Shirt, stand in front of the mirror, and shout out what it says. It's a bit pricey at £17.99, but you, and Clairol, know you're worth it.



www.clothinghandy.store

Gift ideas for writers wouldn't be the same without a Great Big mug, but enough about me, here're a few drinkable suggestions, all under a tenner, from a larger selection available at www.etsy.com



Why not gift someone an experience in the form of a writing course? Not that you need it I'm sure, but we can all do with honing our skills. Writing Magazine is a trusted publication which offers a range of courses with professional tutors starting from £243.



www.personalisedgiftshop.co.uk



www.writers-online.co.uk/writing-courses

And finally, when words fail, don't get frustrated, get hydrated! A Personalised Vacuum Water Bottle is guaranteed to get things flowing again, and it's a bargain at £12.95.

Happy Christmas shopping everybody!



The Verulam Writers **Buddy Scheme**



Do you have a specific writing goal that you'd like to achieve?

Would you like to be supported as a writer and provide support too?

Do you need someone to be answerable to?

If your answer to these questions is YES then the Verulam Writers Buddy Scheme is for you!

The Verulam Writers Buddy Scheme aims to match members of Verulam Writers to help, guide and support each other over a limited time to achieve specific writing goals. We hope that the scheme will build relationships and confidence, assist you to see things from another perspective, and help you to achieve your writing goals.

How does it work?

If you'd like to join, email phillipmitchell1@hotmail.com with the answers to these questions to help find the most suitable buddy for you:

- What writing goal would you like to achieve in the three months of the scheme?
- What are the challenges you face as a writer that you'd like to work on during the scheme?
- What kind of writing do you want to work on (e.g. fiction or non-fiction, and is there a particular genre you write in?)
- What is your level of writing experience?
- What other things would you like to achieve from the scheme?

What are the rules?

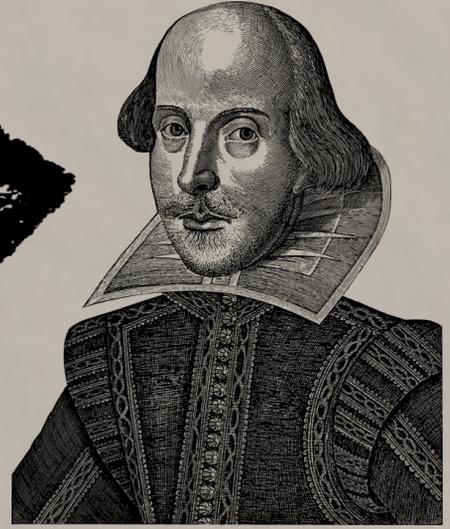
Being a buddy is a commitment to you as well as from you, so we ask that you:

- make sure you have sufficient time before committing to the buddy scheme.
- stick to the agreed dates for any feedback. If you're unable to provide feedback at the agreed time, please let your buddy know as soon as possible.
- maintain confidentiality.
- are professional.
- are respectful.
- are honest and constructive.
- You must agree for your contact details to be shared with Verulam Writers and potential buddies.



Ovid, Sex and Shakespeare

Nick Cook, *inspired by inspiration.*



Philomela is raped in a forest by her brother in law. To conceal his crime he cuts out her tongue and locks her in a cabin. But Philomela is resourceful. She weaves the story of her rape onto a fabric which is she smuggles out to her sister.

This story is just one of the many Greek myths retold by the great Roman poet Ovid around 8CE in his epic *Metamorphoses*.

Nearly 1600 years later William Shakespeare took Ovid's story even further. In *Titus Andronicus* the victim, Lavinia, is assaulted not by one rapist but two. They have clearly read *Metamorphoses* because instead of merely amputating Lavinia's tongue they also cut off her hands. But Lavinia has also read Ovid. And although she cannot now weave a tapestry she is no less resourceful than Philomela. Drawing attention to her nephew's copy of *Metamorphoses* she gets her father and uncle to turn its pages until they reach Philomela's story. This tells them how she came to be so terribly mutilated.

Shakespeare and Ovid both end their respective stories with cannibalistic revenge. The brother-in-law who raped Philomela is tricked into eating the freshly cooked flesh of his young son. In *Titus Andronicus* the mother of the two rapists is tricked into feasting on them, sliced and diced and baked in a pie. Justice for her for egging them on as well as for them.

Nor is the influence of Ovid's tale of Philomela on *Titus Andronicus* a lone example. Ovid's inspiration and influence fires Shakespeare's genius to an astonishing degree in most if not all his plays.

For example, Ovid's *Pyramus and Thisbe* is viewed today as a prototype *Romeo and Juliet*. Both works tell of two lovers kept apart by their feuding families. And in both works tragic misunderstanding kills the lovers.

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Pyramus and Thisbe also makes a guest appearance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This time as a play within a play, performed to hilarious and comic effect by a group of honest tradesmen (Act V. Scene 1). Today you can see this scene on YouTube performed by yet another group of honest tradesmen – The Beatles.



Nor is Ovid's influence on Shakespeare limited to plots. It seems that whenever Shakespeare wants a metaphor, simile or an allusion he reaches for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Of course this can cause problems for readers no longer familiar with Ovid or Greek mythology. For example take this extract from Juliet's second balcony speech. She is waiting with desperate impatience for Romeo to arrive.

*Gallup apace ye fiery footed steeds,
Towards Phoebus' lodging,
Such a waggoner as Phaethon
Would whip you to the west
And bring on cloudy night immediately.
(Romeo and Juliet Act III scene 2)*

When I first heard these lines I hadn't a clue what they meant. Only after reading Ovid's *Phaethon* did it make sense: Phaethon is the son of the Sun god Apollo (*Phoebus*). He persuades his reluctant father, in a "Dad can I have the keys to the Jag" sort of way, to let him drive the chariot (waggon) of the sun across the sky for just one day. *Phoebus' lodging* is where he should have ended his journey (i.e. where the sun sets). But he never makes it. He loses control of the horses and Zeus has no option but to strike him down with a thunderbolt before the blazing chariot destroys the whole world.

So what Juliet is saying is that she wants Phaeton to whip his horses to the west so that night will come quicker because when night comes so will Romeo. What gives her speech added poignancy is that Juliet beseeching Phaeton is one young, ardent, doomed teenager beseeching another.

VERACITY



Shakespeare's contemporary audience of course would understand all these allusions. At least those that went to a grammar school where they would have spent hours translating Ovid from Latin. As indeed would have Shakespeare.

Yet another example of Shakespeare's use of Ovid occurs in *Titus Andronicus*, in the scene where Bassianus and Lavinia surprise Queen Tamara and her lover in the forest. Tamara tells Bassianus that she wishes she could plant his temples with horns "as was Actaeon's" (*Titus Andronicus* Act II scene 3). In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Actaeon was a nobleman out hunting when he had the misfortune to enter a clearing and see the Goddess Diana bathing naked in a pool.

This may not sound much of a misfortune but it was for Actaeon. Diana was so affronted that she turned him into a stag whereupon he was hunted down and torn to pieces by his own hounds.

Shakespeare was clearly influenced by Ovid just as Ovid was influenced by the Greek myths that went before him. But both men took those influences and made them into something unique.

So what lessons can we as writers draw from all this?

The first lesson is that we are what we read (just as people say we are what we eat). What we read is grist to our creative mill.

Secondly, this does not make us pale imitations of the authors we read.

And the third lesson is that as writers we all need a good diet of reading. Like Shakespeare and Ovid, reading will inspire and influence us to express our own uniquely individual genius. And perhaps head off writers' block into the bargain.

I always feel sorry for writers who tell me they cannot find time to read. They are cutting themselves off from one of their most important well-springs of creativity.

Writers on your wavelength will inspire you even more. I think this is why Shakespeare was so inspired by Ovid. Both men were so similar. They were educated urbane and witty. More importantly they were both obsessed by what makes us tick as human beings. That exhilarating mix of friendship, animosity, desire, repugnance, ambition, dreams, good, bad, generosity, selfishness, greed, altruism courage, cowardice and jealousy and love and hate.

And of course, sex!





The BIG Interview...

Naomi Ishiguro

Sam Ellis interviews Naomi Ishiguro, author of *Common Ground*.



You recently spoke to Verulam Writers on the topic of ‘Writing What You Don’t Know’. How important do you think it is that writers write what they don’t know, or do you think it is something they should avoid?

I think it’s important that we feel that we *can* write what we don’t know, but it depends on the individual writer whether we do or not. For me it’s important that it’s a possibility because I like to interpret the world from someone else’s perspective. I feel I have to write what I don’t know to write anything that really examines something wider about human experience, but then equally plenty of writers I love delve into their own experience of the world and so write from a more internal examination. In the workshop I gave two examples – *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong and *Open Water* by Caleb Azumah Nelson. They’re books that say so much about the world, society and relationships, but they expand upon experiences that are quite close to the authors. I wouldn’t harangue writers to ‘write

more what you don’t know’, but I count myself among writers who come at it a bit differently. I would say though, write what you know in terms of emotions. That does connect with the audience.

At its core, what is your novel *Common Ground* about, and why did you choose to write about this?

It’s about a friendship. It charts a friendship between two young people from childhood into adulthood. The book opens in 2003 with a 13 year old boy called Stan. He’s bullied and is struggling with the recent death of his father. He’s riding his bike one day on the local common, trying to get away from it all, and the chain breaks on his bike. As he’s trying to fix it an older boy stops to help him, 16 year old Charlie. He’s confident and charismatic – a worldly character and very different from Stan. They become friends and various things happen, which I won’t give away, before the novel jumps to 2012, the year the hostile environment policy was put in place. I was

These independent bookshops like Mr B’s and the brilliant Books on the Hill become communities based around literature, and that’s very important to have.

interested in looking at friendship across societal boundaries and breaking outside of your bubble. I wanted to put the idea of wanting to maintain a friendship outside of your bubble under the microscope.

You mentioned bubbles – with COVID and the new meaning of the word ‘bubble’ do you think *Common Ground* has taken on a new meaning?

The word bubble has taken on this new connotation, but it was very much a 2016-motivated book. I’ve bumped in to other writers who started their books at a similar time and we’ve all had similar angers and

themes arising from President Trump, the referendum and toxic rhetoric around the Leave campaign. I wanted my book to be bigger than that, but I feel my book is rooted in that time when everything changed so bewilderingly. I was also interested in public spaces. Maybe lockdown did show how important those common areas are.

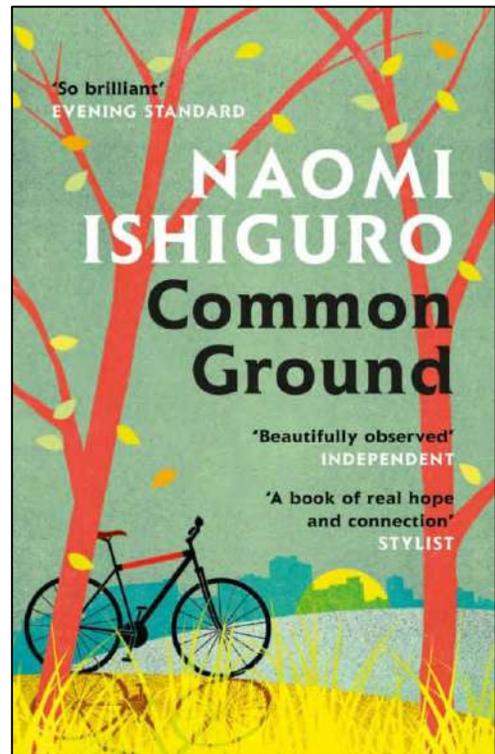
I never think in terms of wordcount – I think more in terms of emotional flashpoints.

You worked in a bookshop, Mr B's Emporium in Bath. What do independent bookshops like Mr B's Emporium and St Albans' Books on the Hill mean to you?

I love independent bookshops. I think they are really important as centres of literary communities; much more than as a retail spaces. You get to know your booksellers, customers and community, and I did love that. I used to keep books back for certain people as I knew they would like them. These independent bookshops like Mr B's and the brilliant Books on the Hill become communities based around literature, and that's very important to have. I also think they're important for debut writers too - to get away from the algorithms and move towards word-of-mouth, which is how debut writers can find readers and build a career. Without independent bookshops it would be really hard.

Freedom seems to be a theme in *Common Ground*.

My short story collection *Escape Routes* is about that, but I think I was thinking about freedom in *Common Ground* in an abstract way. I was interested in the capability of being free from the kinds of constraints and expectations that society puts on us, and whether the characters can be better rather than taking an easier route. Also the freedom to take up physical space was a concern. I was particularly interested in land ownership and in people feeling if they have a right to stand on the literal ground of this country and whether it can really feel like home. With the hostile environment policy too, and then the fact that so much of the space in this country is privately owned, it feels like the opposite of freedom. I wanted to write towards the idea of freedom.



Do you have a writing process?

I'm always fascinated by writers' processes! For me, I think it's different for every book. My short stories are quite abstract so I'd go to a different town, have a day out, have some ideas, listen to some music, sketch some things out and try some different characters – so very loose! With *Common Ground*, I had a much clearer idea of what I wanted. The beginning of part one was a bit more exploratory. I knew I wanted a Surrey town and for there to be a common, but I didn't know who Stan and Charlie would be. But then I realised quite quickly what worked, and I planned out sections of the book and which emotional and literal beats I'd have to hit in each chapter. I never think in terms of wordcount – I think more in terms of emotional flashpoints. I knew the emotional climax of part one but I hadn't planned part two at all, so that was interesting! I knew roughly what it was but then I sat down in a library in Brighton and wrote the whole of part two. It's cool because the book is now in that library. I hadn't planned out part three. I wrote it about 5 times and in the end I cut most of it. I think because it was my first novel, planning the whole thing would have been an enormous task. If I were doing it again I'd probably plan the whole book, but I think it's nice to have space to see where the story takes you.



You studied on the highly regarded creative writing course at the University of East Anglia. How did that course affect your writing?

It was amazing for me, but I think it depends on what you need as a writer. It made a difference as to how I read and process things, and I wouldn't have written two books without it. Being given permission to take yourself seriously as a writer really helps. A lot of people won't put aside the time or believe in themselves enough to sit down and write 80,000 words as one coherent piece of art, and this course really helped with that. You also get a great network of other writers. A lot of my cohorts have books published, which is a great sign.

Does writing energise or exhaust you?

I'd love to say it energises me, but I do feel drained after a day of writing. In the long term though, I do find it quite energising because you can take things that are wearing you down and causing heavy weights in your mind and synthesise it into something new and beautiful that you've crafted. You can put it between covers and on a shelf which makes you feel lighter and able to move on with your life. It's like Dumbledore's pensive! So I find writing energising in that it allows you to change direction, do new things, and reconceive your own identity, but on a day-to-day basis I do find it exhausting!



What projects are you currently working on?

I'm working on a new book, but slowly. I've been doing the odd short story and writing little things, but I'm focussing on other things at the moment like my PGCE teacher training.

Which five people, living or dead would you invite to your dream dinner party?

My partner and friends, but from a literary slant the person who jumps out is Terry Pratchett. I always wanted to meet him as his books were such a huge part of me growing up. I love that he had the popular touch though I knew he was annoyed that his work wasn't seen as 'proper' literature. He's such a human writer despite the fact he's writing in this other

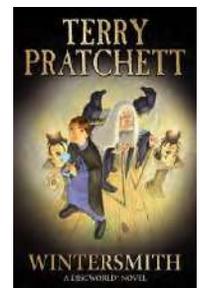
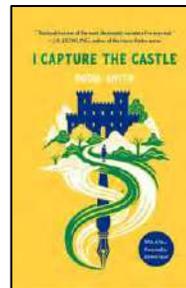
world, and while his books look at amazing themes they are whimsical and fun too.

What is your writing ambition?

That's an enormous question! I think it was to write a book like *Common Ground*, which is quite disconcerting - you spend your life aiming towards this thing, and if you're pleased with how it went then you're left wondering what to do next!

What was your favourite book as a child?

I always say *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith which I re-read it every year. I only fully read it when I was in my early teens, so I don't know if it counts, but it is one of those that you get more from the older you are. It looks at love and art and what it means to be a writer. Otherwise, probably Terry Pratchett's work. I love how the witches are self-reliant and practical, and the wizards are pretty useless! *The Wee Free Men*, *A Hat Full of Sky* and *Wintersmith* are all favourites.



What is your worst trait?

Poor time management! I focus on what I'm doing at the time and not on the twenty other things I'm meant to be doing that day. I feel like the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland* – always running late because I'm too absorbed in something else!

What is your one luxury item that you wouldn't do without?

Possibly a washing machine. Ours broke last Christmas and we had to hand-wash everything. Life is much more time consuming without mod-cons!

Tell us a joke!

...I'm drawing a total blank! Maybe it's a symptom of 2021!



on



@verulamwriters

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

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

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

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





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National Novel Writing Month



Phil Mitchell on November's NaNoWriMo.

As I write this, National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) is well underway with a goal of writing 50,000 words of a novel's first draft by the end of the month. That's 1667 words a day!

NaNoWriMo began in 1999 as a challenge to inspire people to begin writing. People from all walks of life could start the month as builders, accountants, and nurses, and finish the month as novelists. NaNoWriMo has now become a US-based non-profit organisation dedicated to supporting writing fluency and education. Its website (www.nanwrimo.org) tracks words for writers like Fitbit steps and contains a wealth of free resources to help writers get through the challenge. The organisation also runs writing events across the world. In 2020, over half a million people took part in the official NaNoWriMo programme. Hundreds of NaNoWriMo novels have been traditionally published, including Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus*, Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants*, and Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*. And alongside, there are thousands of self-published novels.

Of course, you don't need to register officially to complete the challenge. Last year, I participated inspired only by the idea of completing the word count. The challenge excited me. I'd finished my first novel and was sending it out to agents with little response. It was getting depressing. I thought it'd never get published, it just wasn't meant to be. So, I needed to start another novel and get the first one out of my system.

I began with a plan. Writing a novel in a month is a lot easier if you know where you're going with it (unlike my first novel, which grew organically over a couple of years). I downloaded a free guide to planning your novel (www.prowritingaid.com/en/Landing/Ebook2) and a couple of weeks before the challenge started, I wrote an outline. I created my characters, choose the settings, and plotted out a story, making sure I had a firm grasp of the beginning, middle, and end. On the 1st November, I started writing.

Some days the words just wouldn't come, and some days I could have written all night. On the tough days, I looked back at my novel plan. It put me on course. And if I was struggling with a particular section, I used my

plan to jump forward and write another. A novel doesn't have to be written linearly.

It surprised me how easily I could find the necessary time in my day to write with a full-time job and three-year-old to look after. The pandemic was raging, so I didn't have the daily commute, but I'd often used my commute for writing. Instead, I maintained the discipline of rising early, and wrote. Instead of lazing in front of the TV in the evening, I put myself in front of my laptop. When my son napped at the weekends, I wrote hundreds of words. And when I climbed into bed on the 30th November, I'd triumphantly completed my 50,000 words.

As a draft, it was pretty rough. I wouldn't dare show it to anyone. I call it draft zero. It was the bare bones of a novel, a stream of consciousness. But since completing the draft, I've been editing it to make it shine. I've changed the tense from past to present. I've added new characters and killed some off. Names have changed, subplots added, and timelines tightened. But it's still the same novel.

I'm proud of what I achieved. It was a significant challenge and I recommend it to any writer. It showed me my creativity works amazingly under pressure, I can find time to write every day, even though that time is shorter some days than others, and I should just get something on paper and not worry about its quality because it can be fixed later. Will I do it again in the future? Yes, I think so. In the meantime, I've got to finish polishing the one from last year. I wish I could have maintained the discipline I had last November and spent as much time per day developing my novel as I spent on draft zero. But I've set myself a new challenge, and I'll have this novel finished and sent off to agents ahead of NaNoWriMo 2022.

If you embarked on National Novel Writing Month this year, well done. Celebrate. And if you've thought about it, but never got round to doing it, my advice is just do it. You can write a novel, memoir, script, poetry collection or non-fiction book in a month—any month. Why wait until November? Good luck.

The VW Christmas Poetry Competition - Food Glorious Food!

The VW Christmas Party may have moved online at the last minute, but it didn't diminish the festive cheer! Members were asked to write a poem of no more than 20 lines on the theme of food for a festive poetry competition. Poems were read out on the night and after a vote *Conversations with my Christmas Pud* by Mandy Carter was chosen the winner. Ironically the prize was a Christmas pudding! Mandy's winning entry is below along with a selection of some of the other entries.

Conversations with my Christmas Pud

Mandy Carter

I swear it just winked, that last piece of pud
"Go on, just bite me, you know I taste good"

And now did it speak, that rich gooey treat?
"Oh yes", it responded, not missing a beat

I've eaten too much; the foods addled my brain
"Silly goose, don't you worry, you've not gone insane"

The smell of the pud makes me weak at the knees
"Oh, go on, just eat me, stop being a tease"

Oh, I can't I protest, I'll burst at the seams!
"But I taste so delicious when covered in cream"

I've no self-control, I'm cutting a slice
"You wont regret this, no need to think twice"

I'm pouring the cream and I'm starting to drool
"Christmas without me, would be breaking a rule"

I pick up a spoon and get stuck right in
"Slow down!" it squeaks, "wipe the cream off your chin!"

I'm scraping the bowl for that last luscious bite
"I hope you enjoyed me, to some I'm Marmite"

I want more already; I can't wait a full year.
"But you will, please be patient, I'll be back soon my dear!"

Christmas Poem

Tina Shaw

Too much pudding,
Too much cake,
Sweets and chocolate,
Too much Weight.

One more mince,
One more time,
Try some gin,
Instead of wine.

Resolutions down the pan,
Might be sober when it's Jan,

Boris tells us have some fun.
Guilty pleasures 'til we're done.
Banish covid, banish fear.
It'll all come around again next year.





A Dieter at Christmas

Sam Ellis

The Christmas party host appears
And proffers vol-au-vents, champagne, wine and beers.
I've been good all year to keep off the weight
And yet I find myself with a plate.

'Try this quiche, a slice won't hurt you.
Just the one? Go on, take two!
From thence I move on to the sausage rolls,
Triangle sandwiches and crisps in bowls.

No, I must stop and move away from here...
Then the delicious desserts appear.
Fruit cake, trifle, Eaton mess,
'This chocolate log, is it M&S?!

But there is one dessert I shall ignore;
Fresh fruit salad?! Shove it on the floor.
In one week's time on New Year's Day
I promise to burn the calories away.

But no! Today I will not dwell
On how my tummy does bulge and swell.
So with a smile and a huge big grin
I say 'just one more bite' and pop it in.



How many mini sausages can you fit in your mouth?

Phillip Mitchell

My son says, how many mini sausages can you fit in your mouth?
I have a big mouth, like a cave,
And stretchy skin.
All of them, I say.
He smiles.
One by one, I slide them into my cheeks,
Fingers emerging from my mouth
Glistening with saliva
Stimulated by the promise of sumptuous sausages.
In the right cheek I fit ten.
The same in the left.
And there's room for more in the centre.
I push them in
Until my jaws ache,
And my lips strain to contain them.
Then a sausage slips, hurtling towards my throat.
I gag.
And the sausages spray
Like bullets into the face of my son.
He laughs and laughs.





The VW Website

www.verulamwriters.org



Here you can find all the latest on our upcoming meetings, find out about new competitions, download Veracity, and more.

There are two features in particular that we want to draw your attention to;

First, there is the section **Writing by our Members**. Here we showcase one piece of writing per members. So if you have a particular piece of work that you are proud, whether is available for purchase or maybe downloadable on your own website, we can feature it in this section. Just send an email to verulamwritersevents@outlook.com. There are already a few items on this section. If there is a particular style you prefer or image, you'd like us to use, please let us know in the email.

Secondly, we have a **Members Forum**. Here we can have discussions on writing, share work for feedback and make suggestions about the Writing Group. You can register by signing up for an account. All you need is an email address and come up with a password. Then we'll need to check your membership and validate your account. That should only take us a day or two tops!

We hope you all enjoy the website. Feel free to share feedback on the forum!



The Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition 2021



November saw the adjudication of the Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition, judged by Ben Bergonzi.

Entries included pieces on a wide variety of topics, including family mysteries, unsolved murders and nail making. In third place came Carol Jacobi with her story *True Love Story*, about the romance between Alberto and Isabel beginning in 1930s Paris. Second was Jane Fooks with her story *The Difference a Day Makes*, about a tragic and sudden death. Jane also had the dubious accolade of winning the Gnome de Plume for her pseudonym, Annette Curtain. The winner was Wendy Turner with her fascinating (and stomach-churning) account of the life and death of Duke Humphrey, *The True Tale of Dining with Duke Humphrey*. Wendy's winning entry is below.



Carol, Wendy and Ben

The True Tale of Dining with Duke Humphrey

Duke Humphrey was the youngest son of Henry IV (Henry Bolingbroke) who deposed Richard II and seized power. He was also the brother of the famous Henry V, and uncle of the infant king, Henry VI. But Henry V died of dysentery aged just 36, leaving his nine-month-old son to inherit the throne, and Humphrey became Lord Protector of England. However, he had little power due to falling out with Uncle Henry Beaufort who put it about that Humphrey was unhinged and unfit for the Protector role. Humphrey eventually acquired the title of Regent and became Heir Apparent, which rapidly led to all sorts of plots and accusations of treachery.

The boy King eventually grew to adulthood and became Henry VI. He was a gentle and pious soul, totally unfit to take on a warlike, kingly role, and dogged with mental health problems. He married the shrewish Margaret of Anjou who, fiercely protective of her husband, became Humphrey's bitter enemy, fearful that he would covet the throne.

Humphrey was said to be hot-headed and short-tempered but he was also a humanist with a great love of learning. He often visited St Albans Abbey and struck up a lasting



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friendship with the learned abbot, John of Wheathampstead.

Humphrey's death was sudden, dramatic and remains unexplained but, hundreds of years later, it became even more bizarre. He visited Bury St Edmunds in February 1447 but was abruptly arrested by those loyal to Queen Margaret and accused of treason. He fell ill after dinner and was taken to a local hospital. Five days later he was dead. He was buried in St Albans Abbey, the church of which he was so fond and, after the Dissolution, his tomb was lost.

Jump forward 250 years or so to 1703, when a tomb was being created in the Abbey for former businessman and Mayor of St Albans, John Gape. As excavations took place, an underground burial chamber was discovered, with its coffin intact. It turned out to be Humphrey's. His body was remarkably well-preserved, steeped in a brown aromatic embalming fluid. The discovery caused a sensation. Before long, miracles and healings became attributed to Humphrey as well as the Abbey's Saint, St Alban. Humphrey's body was open to visitors and such was the fascination of the find that thousands of pilgrims flocked to the Abbey. Some purchased a thimble-full of the 'miraculous' embalming liquid, and young ladies are said to have splashed their faces with the fluid in a bid for eternal youth and beauty. Braver souls couldn't resist a taste of Humphrey's embalming liquid on dipped fingers. The practice became known as 'Dining with Duke Humphrey.' Others literally filched a souvenir of poor Humphrey and little bits of his body began disappearing. People openly boasted that they had secured a lock of hair or a nail. Strangely, the embalming liquid in the coffin remained constant, perhaps cheekily 'topped up' by enterprising local inn-keepers to prolong the lucrative tourist trade, to everyone's advantage.

In 1765 the famous actors David Garrick and James Quin visited Humphrey's tomb and were appalled at the tradition of 'dining' with poor Humphrey. Later, at dinner in the old Christopher Inn in French Row, they composed a poem to Humphrey saying that they would rather be in a pickle of Burgundy wine while alive than embalmed in a pickle!

Today, what's left of Duke Humphrey lies in a vault in the Abbey near St Alban's Shrine. A metal grille covers an ancient flight of stairs leading down to his tomb, poignantly worn each side by the feet of countless pilgrims over the years. The tomb itself was restored by the Hertfordshire Freemasons as a Millennium Project, as on the nearby inscription.

Humphrey was gone but not forgotten, for by 1480 he was widely known as 'Good Duke Humphrey.' A classical scholar, he read from Plato and Aristotle and even named his (illegitimate) daughter Antigone from love of Sophocles. His name lives on in the Duke Humphrey Library at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, which houses his priceless collection of manuscripts and classical texts.

Perhaps he is now at peace, content to feed the hearts and minds, if not the stomachs, of thousands of students and visitors every year. He is fondly remembered at St Albans Cathedral where, every few weeks, a fresh sprig of Rosemary for Remembrance is left in his memory on the old worn steps.





Verulam Writers: A Guide to Critiquing



This guide is intended to help members get the most out of sharing their work with the group.

Tips for giving criticism:

- **Arrive with the right mindset:** We're all here to help other writers (and ourselves) improve our writing. Remember you can learn a lot by listening to critique on other writers' work as well as your own.
- **Know what your feedback can offer:** You're able to provide the writer with something they can't get themselves: reaction to the piece by someone who *isn't* immersed in their story. You provide invaluable insight into a general reader's reaction, and that of a writer distanced from the work.
- **We all have different tastes:** You don't have to like a piece of writing to give it a fair critique.
- **Go beyond a "wow, great story!" type of response:** You don't need to know detailed writing techniques to comment on things like character, dialogue, setting and plot. Do the characters feel real to you? Can you imagine people saying those things? Can you picture the setting? Does the plot make sense? Can you spot clichés? Are there opportunities for the writer to show and not tell? What do you think about the level of tension, pacing, conflict, tone, voice, and theme? Are there bits that jarred and took you out of the story?
- **Be nice & show respect:** Even if you hate a piece of writing, the writer has invested time and effort on the manuscript. Phrase criticism in a way that wouldn't offend you if it were your writing. For example, use polite phrasing: your critique is more likely to be well received if you say something like, "I found this part slowed the pace a little," and then explain why, rather than say, "It was boring."
- **Use "I" statements:** It's your subjective opinion you're offering, so say, "I found this part slowed the pace," not, "This part slowed the pace."
- **Sandwich your feedback:** Try not to just give negative feedback. It's important for the writer to know what *does* work, as well as what doesn't. Start with something you liked, then provide constructive criticism, and end with something you liked.
- **Be specific:** If you liked the writing, why did you like it? If you didn't like it, explain why.
- **Offer suggestions:** If you didn't like something, offer ways to make it more appealing to you.
- **But, don't rewrite in your own voice:** Suggesting word choices or rephrasing sections can be helpful, but don't rewrite entire paragraphs or pages in your own style—how you would write it isn't the point.



- **Never criticise the writer:** Discuss the manuscript, not the writer. If you found a part boring, don't tell the writer, "you write boring manuscripts."
- **Remember your biases:** We all have biases and must critique around them and stay focused on the craft. Avoid criticising the writer's choice of subject or things like the race, gender, religion, or sexuality of their characters. You can of course point out inaccuracies and highlight where the work may cause offense.
- **Don't take ownership:** The writer makes the ultimate decision on whether to accept or reject any criticism. Even if you feel a certain change is required, do not push the writer.
- **Don't fixate on spelling or grammar mistakes:** It's fine to point out the odd spelling error or misplaced comma, but don't feel you have to correct every mistake. The writing brought for critique is often raw and the writer will fix these at a later stage.

Tips for receiving criticism:

- **Don't take it personally:** Criticism of your work is not criticism of you. Try to maintain a separation between you and your writing.
- **No draft is perfect:** You may feel strongly about your work, but there is almost always room for improvement. Don't stress if the other members have a lot of suggestions.
- **Don't get defensive:** You don't need to defend your writing – nobody is attacking it. If you don't agree with someone's critique, let it go.
- **Everyone has an opinion:** You might think it's perfect, others think it's too long, and others think it's too short. Learn the voices offering criticism and decide which you value most.
- **Don't be dismissive:** The ultimate decision of what goes into your manuscript is yours, but don't dismiss harsh or difficult to implement criticism. Following the hardest advice can be the most worth it.
- **Don't just hear – listen:** Be open-minded and challenge your assumptions. Try others' ideas out. The more you listen, rewrite, and see improvements in your work, the easier it will become to accept criticism in the future.
- **Take notes:** Write down everything people are telling you, not just the nice stuff.
- **Wait:** After hearing criticism, let it sit for a while before revising or thinking about changes.
- **Remember, you own your writing:** As Neil Gaiman said: "When people tell you there's something wrong with a story, they're almost always right. When they tell what it is that's wrong and how it can be fixed, they're almost always wrong." Listen to people's critique, and then decide yourself how you want to fix it.

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Verulam Writers 2020/2021 Competition Winners

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



Verulam Writers 2021/2022 Competition Winners

FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	GNOME
David Gibson Cup Topic: A Wedding (set by Sam Ellis) Adjudication Date: 6 th October 2021			
Anne Ellis	Austin Best	None	Phil Mitchell (aka Marion Haste)
Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition Topic: A True Story (set by ben Bergonzi) Adjudication Date: 1 st December 2021			
Wendy Turner	Jane Fookes	Carol Jacobi	Jane Fookes (aka Annette Curtain)
President's Competition Topic: TBC (set by Phil Mitchell) Adjudication Date: 2 nd March 2022			
Crystal Decanter Competition Topic: TBC (set by Sam Ellis) Adjudication Date: TBC			
Howard Linskey Competition Topic: Crime Adjudication Date: TBC			



The Verulam Writers' Block *The Verulam Writers Showcase*

An alumni of the University of Warwick's Creative Writing post-grad courses, **Jonny Rowland** has been with VW since 2014, and enjoys messing around with speculative fiction more than necessary. It has gotten to the point where he is actually convinced that he knows what magic realism is. He is passionate about role-playing games, anime and light novels with overly long titles. He is currently editing his traditional fantasy deconstruction novel, *The Path of Ashura*, while working on his new parody series, *Becoming a Legendary Hero in your Thirties*.

Fresh Start

Thank you for purchasing your Chinese Blooming Jasmine Dragon. We at the Lóng Qú International Trading Company hope that you enjoy our product, but understand this may be a difficult time for a young woman in your position. Nevertheless, please follow the instructions and you might feel closer to your old self.

1. As soon as you open the foil sealed package, please immerse the seed ball immediately to ensure maximum growth and flavour. Ideally you would use a clear glass teapot filled with water off the boil.
2. Only read Step 1 after you open the packet to see what the seed ball looks like, and spend the next 10 minutes panicking. Please be at ease. There is probably something you can use in your apartment, though you have moved so soon after the break that it's a trial to figure out where anything is right now.
3. Read Step 3, because there is nothing else to do right now while waiting for your kettle to boil. Everything is in boxes, apart from that and the white chimney stack you use to brew cha. When you left the flat - after Jason left you - you wanted to keep the bloody thing. Drop the seed in now. Unlike the other parts of your life, the Chinese Blooming Jasmine Dragon is not overly fragile.
4. Now the water has actually boiled, pour it on your Dragon. Do not worry too much about the order in which you progress through the steps. Nobody else does, and no matter how many times we tell them, consumers always muddle their way through the instructions in whatever fashion they can.
5. Please note that It takes ten minutes on average for a seed to bloom into a dragon, which will allow you time to think about what went wrong.
6. Do not focus too much on what was said. You have the rest of your life to destroy your resolve with questions. Questions like what more did he want, wasn't it enough, what was the point of the last few years if it was going to end in "I'm sorry, I'm just not ready." But you won't focus on that. You wanted a fresh start. That's why your mother bought you this dragon.
7. Think about the ancient wisdom of the orient, Confucianism, Zhuang Zhi and pages of philosophy about casting off utility and investing in uselessness. That's what your mother, bless her heart, thought when she bought you this. Give yourself to traditional Chinese medicine, says she, it helped me and your father.



8. Try to forget what your BFF Selena said. She says that Blooming Dragons are as Chinese as poppadoms, and that the Lóng Qiú International Trading Company are a two man hipster start-up that operates out of Covent Garden. There is no truth to this statement, and we have certainly not used Google Translate to find the translation closest to Jade Dragon for our company name. Please remind Selena about the dangers of fake news, and remind her to take stories on Facebook with a pinch of salt.
9. Since the Blooming is taking some time, salvage your laptop from the cardboard ocean. Power it up and search YouTube for Blooming Dragon tutorials. Lift the lid and compare the majestic creatures to the pathetic thing in your teapot. If it has started to unfurl into a frilled clump of seaweed, and is turning over in the steam, then you are successful, if not ecstatic at its appearance.
10. Think about what Selena said about establishing boundaries, putting some distance between you and Jason, doing anything but stay inside and feel sorry yourself.
11. Alternatively, call him a cunt. It helps. Not in the long run, but it helps.
12. Think about the fact that you are knee deep in cardboard boxes. Feel sorry for yourself.
13. Check the Blooming Dragon. Observe it reach out of the pot and plant a flowering claw on the rim, black eyes observing you from under a mop of umber petals, looking for all the world like a drowned shitsu. Ask it if it really thinks it's a symbol of luck.
14. Pour into any cup you find. Note that the instructions state this serves two people. Laugh for the first time in a while. You might as well find humour somewhere.
15. Please note that the average lifespan for a Chinese Blooming Jasmine Dragon is between four and six weeks, and that it is recommended that you dispose of the creature after this point. Life is transient, though our products maintain the illusion that life is part of the infinite mysteries of the universe.
16. Throw away the instructions. You have deviated so far from them that it is useless to follow them at this point. Keep the dragon for as long as you can. Give it fresh water. Prop it up with plant feed from supermarket bouquets. They are used to give dying fauna the illusion of life. You don't believe in the instructions anyway. You have a chance to keep a dragon going.
17. Apologise to the dragon. Say that you will take better care next time.
18. Take a long look at the creature looking up at you from the teapot. Think about how grimy it has become over the last few weeks, before you grab the scrubbing brush.
19. Prepare to disregard all advice and give your teapot a thorough wash. Allocate ten minutes for this task. Spend the longest hour and a half of the year so far.



20. Ease your dragon into its new home. Accidentally snap off a frond, and apologise as the creature flinches. Do not try to reattach or replant the fragment - even the tao sorcerers could not unbreak the broken. All you can do is move onward.
21. Let the dragon settle in. Try to figure out whether it is happy or not. Fail to do so for yourself.
22. Take a deep breath. This actually helps, if only on the molecular level.
23. Do what needs to be done. Boil the kettle one more time.
24. Make a pledge to your dragon, that from now on you will handling everything with more care.
25. Don't clarify as to whether you are talking about yourself or your partner. After all, you are not the only one who needs a fresh start.

About Us

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

Get Involved

If you would like to write for VERACITY (we'd love to have you!) or have any comments or feedback please email the editor at VWVeracityEditor@gmail.com

Publicity

If you have anything you'd like to publicise (a new publication, an event etc.) then we'd love to hear about it at VWPublicity@gmail.com

Events

Events are always in the works, even online, so if you'd like to volunteer please email Phil and Gerwin at verulamwritersevents@hotmail.co.uk

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

Our first meeting of 2022 will be on Wednesday 5th January,
8pm

For more details please visit <https://www.verulamwriters.org/>

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MERRY CHRISTMAS