

VERACITY

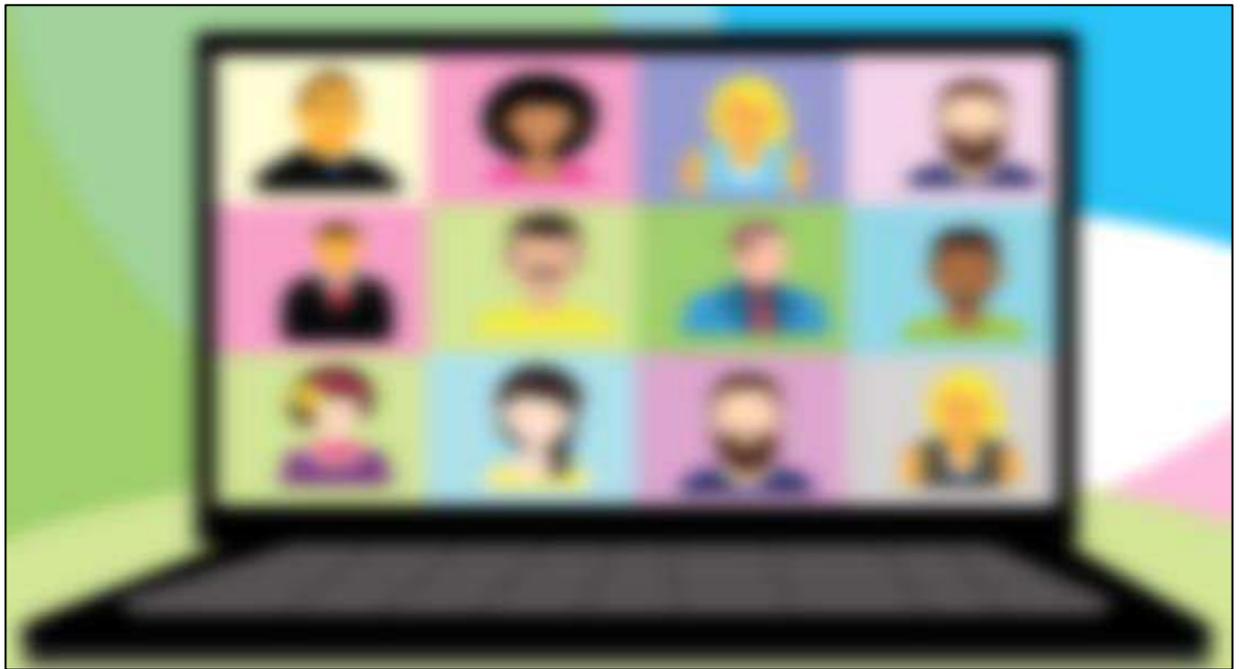
The Magazine from Verulam Writers



Edition 44

Autumn/Winter 2020

VERULAM WRITERS GOES ONLINE



This time in VERACITY...

- Wendy 's **unusual source of inspiration...**
- Tina gets inside **some heads...**
- Anne gets the **creativity flowing again...**
- Robert's a whiz at a **quiz...**
- Steve on the **Writer's Block...**

Verulam Writers has reacted to the COVID crisis by moving entirely online.

The decision was taken at the start of the lockdown to move meetings online, via Zoom.

Verulam Writers' online Zoom meetings are free and open to all writers – see our website for details of the programme.

Email phillipmitchell1@hotmail.com to receive meeting invites.

From the Editor...

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

We have all been thrown into a new and strange world that I doubt will ever be the same again, but echoing chairman Phil's sentiments in the new 'from the chair' section, and Anne's in her article on giving a boost to your writing – we are not alone. I hope this edition attests to that.

In this edition you'll find the usual reports on what we have been up to, including our competitions and some of the winning entries. Robert Peterson's *Atlanta Story* and Ben Bergonzi's *Masks* are gripping reads, if very different!

We also have some fantastic pieces on the art of writing – about getting inside your character's head and how to get creative. *Ovid's Covid*, not only serves as a reminder that this isn't the first pandemic but provides a thought-provoking analysis on Ovid's work.

In addition, we're pleased to include a guide to critiquing. Critiquing is an important part of Verulam Writers, so we hope this guide helps.

Finally, I wanted to remind everyone of the call for submissions to our upcoming anthology *Covidity*. This exciting project is our first anthology in some time, and we hope to hear from you. More details on page 7.

Sending you all winter wishes.

Sam Ellis, Editor

VWVeracityEditor@gmail.com

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From the Chair...

Chairman of Verulam Writers Philip Mitchell.

It's been a few months since I had the honour of being elected chair of Verulam Writers, and I'm thoroughly enjoying my role. The group has had to adapt to the COVID situation by moving online, and I'm pleased with how everyone seems to have embraced it. We've made some changes, making membership free this year, and introducing a new competition, the flash fiction competition, and stay tuned for news of a remodelled and simpler website. We've put together a guide to critiquing so we all have the skills and confidence to provide feedback on each other's work — see page 20. And we're putting together an anthology of work in response to and influenced by the coronavirus situation entitled, *Covidity* — see details on page 7. On top of all that, we've recently launched a writing buddy scheme, so if you have a specific writing goal you'd like to achieve, and need someone to be answerable to, and want to help another writer achieve their goals as well, then the buddy scheme may be for you — details have been sent to members.

When we used to meet up in person at St Michael's church hall (which we'll hopefully do again soon), we passed around the Success Book to record our publishing successes. In our virtual world, I'm keen that we continue to celebrate successes. For me, success isn't just about having something published or a competition win, it's starting something new, finally getting something finished, it's the sending out of manuscripts to agents and publishers, learning or trying new things. It's important we all find those little successes and share them with the group so we can celebrate together and keep us all motivated.

A big success for me is that I participated in National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) for the first time this November. As I write this, I ought to be contributing to the required 1,667 words per day I need to write to meet the 50,000-word target of a completed first draft by the end of the month. I'm pleased to say that it went well. I've had some days when the words just wouldn't come, and some days where I could have written all night. It's fair to say that it is only the bare bones of a novel, almost a stream of consciousness, and as I edit it into something more publishable, I'll probably end up changing every sentence of the draft. The spelling and grammar are appalling, it's all tell and no show, I've changed character names halfway through, and some chapters may be entirely lost to the delete key. But I've learnt a lot from the challenge:

1. I can find time to write if I need to — generally by watching less television or reading a chapter or two less of the book I'm engrossed in that day.
2. A word target and deadline are great motivators.
3. I should plan future novels in more detail.
4. Writing a load of drivel, which I can shape later, is better than writing nothing at all.

Finally, if you have suggestions for guest speakers or workshops, or there are any topics you'd like to discuss or announcements you'd like to make at future meetings, please drop me an email at phillipmitchell1@hotmail.com

Stay safe everyone, keep writing, and I'll see you at a meeting soon.

Phil

MASKS

The annual Howard Linskey Crime Competition took place in July. In third place was Dave Weaver with his story Amsterdam, second place was Phillip Mitchell with Birdie, and first place to Ben Bergonzi for Masks. This is his winning entry.

It's a great thing, this virus. It's clearing out the dead wood, freeing up inheritances and levelling up society. So that people like me can - maybe - get level with people like you.



You. I don't really know you. I just know where you work and what chances you've had. You're my age but with a better education. You always come past my garage the same time every evening, riding your expensive bike in your lycra leggings, a stupid cycling mask on your face even though it's all fields round here.

So now the time has come. This is the night we're going to level up. I rev the engine on my crappy old Fiesta and let in the clutch, so the car lurches out of the driveway and into the main road. And slams into you. A glancing blow, perfectly judged. You're off your bike and sliding along the tarmac. I've lost a headlight bulb but I don't care.

I jump out and run over to you. 'Oh shit, I'm sorry.' You're lying face down, but you're moving your arms and legs, checking yourself out. 'Are you are all right?'

'Nothing broken, I think,' you say, 'but' – you shake your head muzzily – 'you should have bloody looked.' There's blood on your chin and your cheek as you push yourself up. You kneel up.

'My fault. Totally. Sorry. Let me help you.'

'Just hold the bike, will you?' I take the handlebars. You gingerly pull yourself upright. There's a bit of blood on one of your hands, and on your chin and your nose.

'Your bike looks OK,' I say brightly, though I hope I'm wrong.

'No it's not,' you say. 'Look at the front forks.' I see that the forks are bent back so that the wheel is rubbing on the diagonal of the frame. 'Can't ride that anywhere.'

'You'll have to tell me whatever I owe you.'



'If I can even find a bloody bike shop that can fix it.'

'You'd better rest,' I say. 'Come and sit then I'll give you a lift to wherever you're going.'

You look doubtfully at me, then wince as you turn your head, and put up a hand to rub the back of your neck. 'I shouldn't go in the house or the car.'

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'Come in the garage. Look, let's get everything off the road.' I take your bike over and prop it against the fence. 'Just wait there.' You come over and put a hand on the saddle, then lean against the fence just inside the narrow driveway that leads down to my detached garage which stands at the bottom of my long garden. No-one can hear us.



Once the car's off the road, I push the door up, then stand back. 'Plenty of room,' I say encouragingly, 'we can keep social distancing.' Inside the garage there's an old wicker settee with a blanket over it. 'Come in and sit down for a few minutes.' You still hesitate. 'No-one's been here for a long time.'

You slowly come past me into the garage, then sit down heavily on the settee. 'Let's keep that bike safe,' I say, and fetch it in off the driveway. Then I close the door and come and stand in front of you. 'You take your time and rest.'

You take the bike helmet off your head and put it on your lap. There's a deep scratch across its plastic surface. You're wincing as you move your head.

'I've got some plasters here,' I say, moving behind you.

'I'll have to put them on myself,' you say.

'Rest for a minute.'

I pick up an iron crowbar with a hook. It's hanging against the brickwork and I'm careful to grasp it very cleanly so as not to make any noise. I lift it up, swing it, and down it comes on the back of your head. And you fall down, swift and silent. I catch you as you fall, and lay you down gently on the settee. As you lie, the basket work creaks under your weight. I bend and listen to your breath. Yes, you're really out cold, sleeping peacefully. I feel your head. There's no blood, just a nice warm bruise. But you'll probably only be unconscious for a quarter of an hour. I fetch the chain over, the one that's secured to the iron downpipe in the corner, and lock the cuff to your ankle. Then I go through your pockets –your wallet, your phone, your staff pass. It's all there. Finally, because I'm not cruel, I get the bucket and the bottle of water and the bread and tinned beans and sausage, and leave them all ready for you.

Goodnight, goodnight. Thanks for your help with my training. I might have one or two questions for you over the next few days.

I leave the garage by the side door. The sun's low, shadows are lengthening, as I make my way down the garden to my house. Thank God it's all mine now. All silent. There's no more moans and curses from Dad, fretting in his Alzheimer confusion. Thank you, Covid. Of course when he finally went, it was too late for me to pick up the scraps of my wrecked education. Too much time lost. But still. Other opportunities are arising.



The next morning I'm there at your workplace bright and early. I'm coming into the building on the opposite side to where you would have arrived, a different department – they'll not be expecting you today as you phoned in sick (or I did for you.) I straighten my mask and stride right up to the receptionist, then show her the email I've just forged.

'Morning. I'm booked in for my Emergency Medicine rotation. Dr Earnshaw.'

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She barely looks at the letter or the badge round my neck. 'Right. Go straight through, doctor. See Dr Gupta. She'll give you the orientation.'

Gupta's a short lady, her eyes hardly visible over her mask and through her plastic visor. 'Now I would show you all the ropes,' she says in old fashioned Indian English, 'but it'll have to wait. There's been a big RTA on the A1. We've got the air ambulance inbound.'

'Just as well I'm here then,' I say, 'I'll get scrubbed up.'

Twenty minutes later I am elbow deep in a mangled mess of bone and blood. It had been the chest of a forty year old man whose car had been struck head on by a TIR truck. Somehow his heart is still flickering weakly. In the middle of the mess I see a piece of oily metal, some remnant of the impact. Perhaps a piece of the steering column? There's a theatre nurse with me and the anaesthetist over in the corner with her tubes and cylinders. No sign of Gupta – she has an even worse casualty. I'm on my own. I put a hand on the lump of metal.

'Doctor, are you sure?' says the nurse.

'Thank you, nurse, when I want tips on how to give a bed bath I'll come to you.' I pull the metal out, and sure enough there is a jet of blood squirting over my hand. 'Clamp,' I bark.

The nurse passes me a number six plain clamp.

I take it and put it on the artery, but I say, 'Haven't you got any spring clamps? Serrefine?'

'Yes we've got a Dieffenbach. Here.'

'That's more like it.' I take the familiar tool in my hand and flick it open and shut the way I used to do when I was selling them. Then I put it down into the bloody cavity and close it over the spurt of red. And now we wait and watch. Either the clamp will work and I've saved him, or the flow will go on, he'll die, and I've helped him on his way. Either way, I'm in charge. I wonder how you're getting on in the garage? Sooner or later I'm going to have to let you go. I think we both know that.

But these masks aren't going away any time soon.

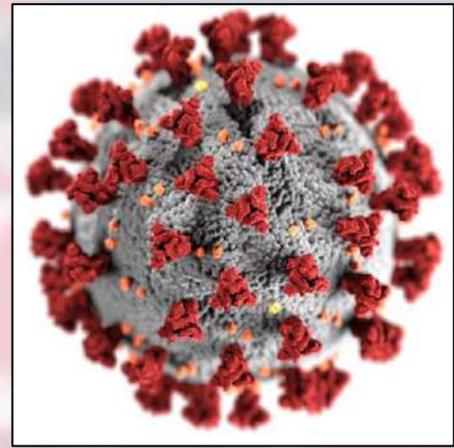
After a minute, the spurt of blood under the clamp reduces to a slow ooze. I look across at the nurse and there's a moment of grudging respect in her eyes.

I tell her, 'You do get what you pay for, you know.'



Call for Submissions!

COVIDITY



There's no two ways about it, 2020 has been a challenging year, and as writers our work will have been influenced by it, either directly or indirectly. To mark the passing of this year we'd like to create an anthology of work influenced by or responding to the COVID-19 situation — a time capsule of sorts, which we hope to publish as an e-book, titled *Covidity*.

Perhaps you've written a piece directly about the current situation, or maybe the situation has influenced the themes of your fiction and poems — your work doesn't have to explicitly state anything about coronavirus. Short stories, flash fiction, poems, non-fiction, letters, and emails are all welcome. And if anyone is fond of illustration or photography, then we'll include your images too (as long as they are not subject to copyright).

If you have something to contribute, please email your work to verulamwritersevents@outlook.com by the 10th January 2021 and keep a watch out for announcements on when it will be published.

From Zero to Creative – Jump Start Your Writing

Anne Ellis *helps your creativity.*

It is a truth universally acknowledged that it can be hard to be creative in troubled times. And times, of late, have been more troubled than most.

So what can we do to help coax the muse into cooperating? Here are a few ideas I've come across, starting with the more obviously writing-related:

Writing prompts. I've recently signed up to a website that provides weekly writing prompts (<https://blog.reedsy.com/creative-writing-prompts/>,

but I'm sure there are many others). Each week, they send an email with five separate, but related, prompts. These can then be used singly or combined, or may send you off at a totally different angle – whatever works for you. I've found getting a few prompts, regularly, more helpful than trying to wade through a large list of prompts when looking for inspiration, as too many can be overwhelming.

A similar but different idea: **Random words.** You can find a random word generator online, or you can do it the old-fashioned way by writing words that intrigue you on pieces of paper and chucking them into a hat to be drawn out at leisure. Pull out, say, five of these words and challenge yourself

to write them all into a story.



Online random word generator result...

Some people find **visual images** helpful. Creating a mood board for your WIP, with images of your characters and settings, or simply pictures that fit the mood of your story, may help restart your writing if it stalls. Those pictures could *literally* be worth a thousand words.

Similarly, some writers swear by **music**. This can be helpful in more than one way: relevant tracks may get you into the right emotional frame of mind to write a particular scene. Or background music may simply help you to concentrate, particularly as that old writers' standby, ambient café noise, is now not so easy to come by.



Sometimes we all need a jump-start...



Music can be good for relaxation...

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Sometimes the problem can be that we're too close to what we're writing and we can't see the story for the words. **Getting some feedback** could be all that's needed, which is where your fellow VW members can come in handy. Manuscript nights work much the same on Zoom as they do in person. Often, the simple act of sharing your work with someone else can help you pinpoint what needs changing about it. Even just *contemplating* sharing your work can be useful: I've more than once found myself making last minute edits before a manuscript night. And don't forget, those nights can be used for general discussion of a piece of work, as well as for reading out a section.

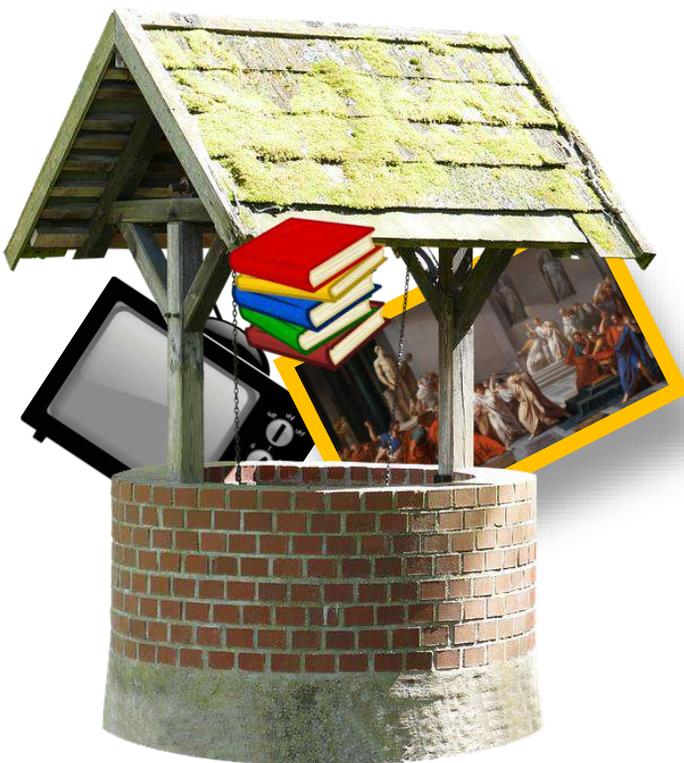
But there can be times when nothing seems to work. What then? It may be that your well of inspiration needs topping up. None of us sprang forth from the head of a Greek God as a fully-fledged writer; we all build on the work of others who have come before

us. **Fill that well:** Read a book, watch a TV drama, or look at some art—many museums have virtual tours available online. It can be easy to slip into thinking we're only furthering our writing careers when we're actually getting words down on a page, but feeding our imaginations is a vital part of it too. As Stephen King said, "If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write."

And lastly, although it may seem counter-productive: **Get away from your computer.** One positive thing to come out of the current situation is that more of us have been taking walks outdoors.



Time to take a walk?...



Top-up the well of inspiration...

Connecting with nature can be an inspiration in itself, and exercise is vital for health both physical and mental. Taking a short break from writing can also allow plot points and ideas to work themselves out in your subconscious, which is a lot easier than actually consciously doing the work!

One (absolutely) final note: if you're finding it difficult to be creative at the moment, you are not alone. Many, many people have been struggling to keep writing in the current situation, so don't beat yourself up about it if you are too. Remember: this too shall pass. Good luck!



Introducing 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.

Crystal Decanter Competition 2020

Judge of this year's Crystal Decanter competition on the theme of tension, Gerwin de Boer.

I've had the Crystal Decanter on my bookcase for a year. It was nice having it there and I enjoyed the process of handing it on: deciding on the winner of Crystal Decanter 2020 competition. This year's theme was 'Tension' and there were eight strong entries bringing that theme to life. Some subtly, some over the top. All entertaining.

The entries were:

Atalanta Story by Tom Wolfwhistle

Big Bad by Justin Case

Orange by Mandy Rin and Clem Entine

Spring on the river bank by R.U. Rich E. Nuff

Tension by Cliff Hanger

The Double Agent by N.S. Cape

The Joys of Parenthood by Ben D Rules

The Waiting Room by Anna Thema

Deciding on the top three among these entries was not an easy thing. How do you compare eight completely different stories? I used three main criteria: the quality of the story, the quality of the writing, and dedication to the theme. I am not going to pretend this turned out to be an exact science: a mathematical formula that would give the same results to everyone trying to solve it. I've got my own story and style preferences, so I am sure that influenced the outcome as well. Having said that, the winning entry is not something I would have written, but a story I thoroughly enjoyed reading:

First prize goes to *Atlanta Story* by Tom Wolfwhistle, also known as Robert Paterson. It is a timely story about living through dark times, again and again, and seeing the bad days come to end and live going on. *Atlanta Story* builds tension by having us worry about the health of one of the main characters, only to reveal something else entirely was going on. The attention to detail is impressive. The writing takes you back to the southern USA in the 1930s. Might it

have been slightly over the top in certain places? Perhaps, but not glaringly so.

Second prize goes to *Spring on the river bank* by R.U. Rich E. Nuff, also known as Ben Bergonzi. This is a story about domestic machinations, greed, and getting what's coming to you. The story benefits from strong writing, setting a lively scene closer to home on the Thames. It also takes place during the lock down. The ending is abrupt, but it comes foreshadowed.

Third prize goes to *Double Agent* by N.S. Cape, also known as Claire Morgan. A story with a twist at the end that makes some at-first-glance odd scenes look suddenly very logical. This story covers a lot of ground. Going from England to France and back again. The writing style is short and punchy, and out of all the entries perhaps causes the most nail biting.



Pick Up... a Leaflet!

Wendy Turner *on an unusual source of inspiration.*

‘What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?’

So said the vagrant-poet W H Davies. He may have had time to stand and stare, but do we? And what is worth taking a bit more time to ponder? To pick up a leaflet wherever we go is to broaden our horizons and get us interested in things that may surprise us.

Leaflets are everywhere. They are gold mines of information. They tell us everything we want to know about what we’re looking at or where we are. It’s all here for us in one compact hand-out, complete with links for further information.

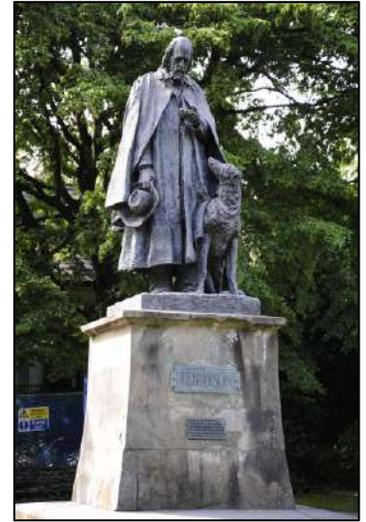
When I was in Lincoln in the summer, I picked up a leaflet on the Water Rail Way which follows the former Lincoln to Boston Railway Line. It looked an interesting combination of a walking/cycling path and nature trail following the River Witham. At around thirty-three miles, I decided not to walk it all (!) but the couple of miles I did walk revealed a panorama of fenland countryside with artistic viewing points for spectacular views over the Witham. The Water Rail Way is also known as the ‘Tennyson Trail’. ‘Local lad’ Alfred Lord Tennyson grew up in Somersby in the Lincolnshire Wolds and Lincoln is buzzing with statues and words ascribed to him. To celebrate Tennyson’s 200th anniversary, artworks were commissioned along the Trail, many bearing words from his poems, including this, from *The Brook*:



Pike (credit: Nigel Sardeson)

‘I slip, I slide, I
gloom, I glance’

The words are inscribed on a huge carved pike, conjuring up visions of a great pike prowling in the dark Witham! The Sculptor, Nigel Sardeson, created it for children to explore and play on.



Tennyson statue at Lincoln Cathedral (credit: Ray Wilkinson)

While you are out there, take some photos of your interest with a camera rather than a mobile phone for a high-res shot to submit with your article.

Ideas for articles spring up from leaflets like daisies. Try to find a different angle or focus from the obvious. Diving into the Tennyson Trail and the River Witham, so to speak, culminated in an article combining poetry and water. Off it went to People’s Friend magazine with some photos, just in time, as I discovered, for National Poetry Day in October. Now that I know, I will make sure my article for the next National Poetry Day is sent off in good time!

I wish I could say I keep all my leaflets in some kind of order. The truth is they are stacked in an in-tray or tucked away in plastic sleeves, but I know they are all there somewhere if I need to dig up a piece of info. Remember to look at the recommended links and to credit photos sent to you, as in this one of the lovely pike, by kind permission of Nigel Sardeson.

Have fun lingering over your library of leaflets!

Back... and Tougher Than Ever!



Robert Paterson, *Verulam Writers' resident quizmaster*, on this year's quiz.

This year's quiz night was an evening almost a year in the making. As early as December 2019 I'd prepared the draft of the 2019/20 quiz for testing on my family at Christmas. (They all delight in my capacity to design games and puzzles!) The quiz had been scheduled for 18 March 2020, but the first Lockdown began less than a week before it was due. Yet my efforts were neither gone nor forgotten. When meetings recommenced on Zoom in September, the VW Committee decided that it was time to have some special events to regenerate interest in the meetings.

THE QUIZ WAS BACK ON!!!

Wednesday 18th November was the appointed evening and by then, I was raring to go. Hosting the quiz Zoom even allowed me to share both questions and answers on PowerPoint, which was harder to do in St Michael's Church Hall. Although people couldn't group into teams, everyone was on equal footing since they all had only one person's knowledge to draw on.

There were 10 contestants in total, answering 6 rounds of questions. Most were general knowledge, but there was one subject-specific and one visual round too.

Round 1 The Trivia Trail

A general knowledge round covering subjects both casual and erudite, where each answer's first letter is the last letter of the previous answer, and vice versa for the next answer along. This allowed people to guess tricky answers if easy questions lay either side...

What species of animal is Pepe Le Pew?

Which race of people built Angkor Wat in Cambodia?

What would you call playtime if you went to an American school?

Only this and Round 5 were not timed.

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Round 2 Only Connect

Inspired by the BBC2 quiz show of the same name, contestants needed to find the connection between 8 sets of 4 items. For the first 4 sets the connection lay in a concept, for example...

Elizabeth I, Cyndi Lauper, Yosemite Sam, Irish setter

For the second 4 sets, the words themselves had connections...

Egg, badge, cabbage, edged

After those came 4 more sets, this time sequences of 3, where the contestants had to find the fourth item in the sequence...

April, August, December, ???

Too tricky for you? The answers are at the end!

Round 3 Who Wrote What?

Contestants had 3 minutes to name which author wrote each of 10 books.

Round 4 Max Out

Contestants were given 5 minutes to name as many items in 10 categories as possible. The maximum possible score was 93! But could you have maxed out without checking Google or an encyclopedia?

*Which cities have hosted the Summer Olympics?
Which American states begin with M?*

Round 5 Who's Who?

This round required users to name a person the question refers to, be they modern, historical or fictional.

Round 6 Say What You See

Fans of the quiz show Catchphrase will recognise the round's title. Displayed on a PDF rather than a PowerPoint slide, contestants had 3 minutes' total to name the popular expression depicted in the graphics shown. For example, can you say what you see below?

AZ PHILIP JASON MATTHEW URE

DID I MAKE IT TOO DIFFICULT?

Sadly, although the committee has urged me to make my quizzes easier in future, I probably did. Some rounds were easier than others, with 9 being the top score for Round 1, the Trivia Trail. For Rounds 3 and 5, the

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highest score was 6. Yet the maximum score was only 4 for the more visual Round 6, and for Round 2, scores varied between 2 and – horror of horrors – zero!!! Perhaps the committee should test market my quizzes in future too, just like we now do with competition themes.

AND WHO WON?

Total scores ranged widely, with high scorers ranging anywhere from 40 to 65. Yet a clear winner emerged in the end.

Judith Foster scored an impressive 74 out of 145, a hair's breadth over half marks and over 10 more points higher than her nearest rival. She attributed this to the fact she was able to name all letters in the Greek alphabet, which was one of the requirements in the Max Out round.

We couldn't award Judith a prize, but we did give her a rousing clap. I can only hope those who didn't win had fun all the same and are looking forward to next year's quiz as much as me, which will hopefully be in the church hall once again.

Better luck next year, everyone.

Answers to Article Questions

The Trivia Trail

ONE, Skunk. TWO, Khmer. THREE, Recess.

Only Connect

CONCEPT, They all have red hair. WORD, These can all be spelt with musical notes. NEXT IN SEQUENCE, February, if you list the months alphabetically rather than chronologically.

Max Out

OLYMPIC HOST CITIES; Athens, London, Paris, Berlin, Munich, Antwerp, Rome, Barcelona, Helsinki, Stockholm, Moscow, Atlanta, St Louis, Montreal, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Rio De Janeiro, Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, Melbourne, Sydney.

AMERICAN STATES BEGINNING WITH M; Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, Missouri, Mississippi, Montana, Michigan, Minnesota.

Say What You See

The Boys in Blue.

Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition 2020



Sam Ellis on the results of the 2020 Lisbeth Phillips plate competition.

On Wednesday 2nd December the Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition for non-fiction writing was judged by last year's winner, Tina Shaw. This year's theme was 'great lives'.

As usual the results showed great variety and flair, but the five entries also informed the readers of some truly extraordinary people. However, Tina felt that one entry in particular fulfilled the brief.

Granny the Astronaut was about author Ben Bergonzi's grandmother. This was a moving and personal piece about a fascinating life, leaving everyone wishing they had met her.



Don't Pull Down Powell focussed on the life of the creator of the Scout movement, Baden-Powell. Robert Paterson put up a staunch defence of Baden-Powell against recent criticisms, and highlighted some extraordinary details of his life, including his leadership of under 1,000 men in fighting off over 6,000.

Anna Margaret Castor by John Spencer was about the wife of astronaut and senator John Glenn. As a stutterer from a young age, Annie devoted her life to raising awareness of speech impediments, as well as a being lifelong supporter of her husband.

Judith Foster's piece *Undercurrents* focussed on a number of people who have influenced her life, notably in education. R A Butler, hailed as the father of the modern education system, was a particularly prominent figure.



Barnes Wallis was the focus of Wendy Turner's piece. The inventor of the bouncing bomb of Dambusters fame, Wendy illuminated Wallis' achievements that also included helping to design a series of bomber aircraft.

In third place was *Undercurrents*, by Judith, second was *Don't Pull Down Powell* by Robert, and first place was *Granny the Astronaut* by Ben. Wendy scooped the gnome for festive name Holly N Ivy. Congratulations to all.

Ovid's Covid

Nick Cook *on disease and death in Ovid's Metamorphoses.*

What a difference a year makes! Only last October we could shop without face coverings. GP appointments were face to face rather than phone to phone. And when we waved our children off to school we could do so without fretting about any little friends they might be bringing home.

We may think that nothing like Covid-19 has ever happened before but of course disease and death have been part of the human condition ever since the Garden of Eden. And it didn't take long before it spread from our bodies to our books.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* contains an early example. In retelling the story of the plague of Aegina* the poet takes a break from poems of erotic love for a rare excursion into sick lit. Not only is this poem great story telling; it is an object lesson in creative writing.

And one really good way to start a story is to intrigue the reader by planting a question. Ovid does this near the beginning as he describes a visit to Aegina by Cephalus, an envoy from Athens. As he greets his old friend Aeacus, the king of the island, Cephalus observes:

Young men, so handsome so alike in age came to meet me. Even so I miss many I saw when you last welcomed me here in your city.

Here, Ovid has planted not just one question



Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid) © The Trustees of the British Museum.

but two:

- What happened to all the young men who greeted Cephalus last time he came?
- Who are all these new young men that appear to have replaced them?

Not content with that he plants two more in King Aeacus reply:

A tragedy befell us first but better fortune followed. I'll tell the tale in order...

Ovid's description of the plague, seen through the eyes of Aeacus, is a well-structured

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masterpiece of 'show not tell'.

First of all:

The hot south wind blew fiery blasts of death.

Initially, however it is only the animals that suffer. Ovid's writing does not just tell us about the plague, it makes us experience what living through it must have been like. One of the ways



in which he does this is through the use of explicit detail. Here are some examples:

From fleecy sheep... wool falls off unclipped.

The racehorse... groans in his stall and waits a weary death.

The boar forgets to rage, the stag to trust His speed.

Even sacrificial animals are not spared:

...before the knife could strike

The bulls dropped dead

Further detail highlights the horror. For example, the entrails are so diseased the priests cannot read them.

After all this specific detail Ovid then switches focus. He gives us a panoramic view.

...in the woods

Foul corpses lie, their stench tainting the air

No hungry birds would touch them rotting there

They decomposed as they putrefied

Their effluence spread the infection far and wide.

Notice how Ovid combines the visual with the olfactory. Not only is this description in your face. It is up your nose as well. Even the birds will not touch the rotting carrion.

Ovid draws on his extensive learning to reinforce the authority of his description. For example, the reference to effluence draws on Ovid's knowledge of the then current 'miasma' theory of the transmission of disease. This held that that putrescent flesh creates a 'miasma' in the air. It is this miasma that spreads disease.

This mention of spreading disease links nicely



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into the next escalation of the plague. This is its spread from animals to humans (a jump that may echo coronavirus).

Switching the focus from animals to humans also ratchets up the pressure on King Aeacus, the story's hero. Ovid's powers of graphic description now race into overdrive.

Human infection begins as:

fever first inflamed the intestines and initial symptoms were short breath and flushing skins.

It gets worse as:

Tongues become furred and swollen, bedclothes, unendurable. Mouths gape open and strain to gulp the suffocating air. Not unlike today front line workers are particularly at risk as the savage plague broke out among doctors.

As in his description of the plague's effect on animals Ovid then adopts a wider view as Aeacus observes:

*Wherever my gaze the people lay
As rotten apples fall from swaying boughs.*

A good rule in writing is to pile as much pressure on your hero and then add more. Ovid does not disappoint. Not only does the plague devastate the living. It robs the dead of destiny.

*...either they lay
Unburied or were raised in high raised byres*

*Unhonoured. Now all reverence was lost
...No one was left to mourn*

Lack of enough manpower to ensure proper burials with the proper rites meant that the dead were unable to progress to Hades. As a result:

*Ghosts – old men, youths, brides, mothers
– drifted around*

It cannot get much worse. We now need a satisfactory ending, for example where the hero or heroine overcomes inflicted pressures through their own efforts. So how does Aeacus do this?

I am not going to tell you.

Nor am I going to give you the answer to Cephalus' second question. I do not want this piece to become like one of those awful TV programs promising 'the thirty best songs of Elvis.' You sit back anticipating an hour enjoying wonderful music from the king of Rock and Roll. But instead all you get is a series of micro-second sound bites punctuated by centuries of self-opinionated comments by 'experts,' all well past their sell by dates.

Instead, please get yourself a copy *Metamorphoses* so you can enjoy each song, unadulterated and in full. You will get a master class in creative writing from a master storyteller.

You won't regret it.

*All quotes (in italic) are taken from *Minos, Aeacus, The Plague at Aegina, the Myrmidons*, book V11, p158, *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, translated by A. D. Melville, published by Oxford University Press.



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.

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- **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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Atlanta Story

Tom Wolfwhistle (aka longstanding VW member Robert Patterson) shares his winning entry to the Crystal Decanter competition.

Virginia Stanton Garfield's household was usually a peaceful one. Her husband Maurice was usually balancing the books upstairs when not down at his tobacconist store. Her son Danny delivered telegrams on his bicycle or read Tarzan books when not in school. As for Mackie, she cooked and cleaned splendidly and with nary a complaint.

Her eighteen-year-old daughter, Viola May Garfield, was loyal, helpful and never mischievous. Something as mundane as going to the movies would never normally cause a fight between them. But when Mrs Garfield learned that Viola May was going with a boy named Ralph Henderson, insisted that although it was short notice, she had to take a chaperone.

"I'm not stupid or a baby," Viola May fumed. "If someone had stopped you having your first date with Pa and he went with someone else, where would you be? Where the Sam Hill would I be, or Danny for that matter? If this were a movie, *you'd be the villain!*"

"I am not going to tolerate this unchristian talk from you, Viola May!" Mrs Garfield snapped. "I have *heard* what goes on in those movie theatres when the lights go out; groping and pawing and all kinds of degeneracy! What if you get with child? It's no chaperone, or no date, end of story!"

"But Ralph's driving round in an hour!" Viola May shrieked. "You and Pa are doing your taxes tonight, Danny's too young and you know darn well Mackie can't sit with Ralph and me! Who else is there?"
"I'll do it."

Viola May looked round and gasped in surprise, for her grandmother had just walked into the kitchen. Cornelia Finchley Stanton was a portrait of old age, with bony, arthritic hands, pebbly glasses, a back shaped like a haystack and a face like a jovial peach stone. It seemed a miracle that this virtually bedridden old lady had managed to get out down the stairs unaided.

"Mama, were you eavesdropping?" Mrs Garfield said sharply.

"Ginny, they musta been eavesdroppin' in Biloxi, the racket you two were makin'," Cornelia scoffed, hobbling forward. "Now, I'm not gonna let Viola May's chance with this young fellah slide 'cos of some petty squabbles and silly rules. Viola May, I will *be* your chaperone tonight."

"Oh thank you, Grandma!" Viola May planted a kiss on the old lady's flaccid cheek.

"Ah, s'nuthin," laughed Cornelia.

"*Nothing?*" Mrs Garfield was stunned. "Mama, how can you..."

"Ginny," her mother snorted, banging her cane, "I don't do anythin' these days 'cept sit around upstairs! And

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sittin' around is exactly what you do at a flicker show, but at least it's fun. *I'm goin'!*"

She used her free hand to take Viola May's.

"Now, Viola May, let's go into the livin' room and play the radio until your beau comes."

Virginia Garfield turned away as they left, incensed but helpless. She was quite convinced that something would go wrong.

Ralph Henderson arrived at Viola May's house in his bottle green MG an hour later. His eyes went wide when he saw Viola May leading Cornelia out of the house towards him, but when Viola May explained the situation, he helped Cornelia into the back and got her seated comfortably. He knew the game and how to play it.

Cornelia didn't pay much attention to Viola May and Ralph on the drive through Atlanta's suburbs. It was a particularly lovely evening, with the sun setting over the magnolia trees like a great shimmering persimmon. She thought back to when her late husband, Warren, was courting her. She couldn't recall any real details, but visions of hansom cabs they rode in, gas lamps they kissed under and the terraces at the park where they enjoyed po boys and lemonade were as vivid as ever. Simpler times, but fine ones.

"Here we are, Ma'am!" Ralph shouted.

Cornelia followed his gaze and found herself enraptured. If only Warren had taken her here!

They had reached the Luxor Cinema; the grandest building in its neighbourhood. Its light displays flashed and glared like a gaudy lighthouse. It was built hot on the heels of Howard Carter's excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb, so the display's centrepiece was a glittering replica of the boy king's gold mask, flanked by reclining, long-eared cats.

"Oh Ralph, I feel like a queen off to her coronation!" Viola May squealed.

"An' I hear the movie's fit for a queen too," said Ralph. "It'd have to be, given what people think o' the book."

"What book's that, Ralph?" Cornelia enquired, as they swung into the parking lot.

"Oh, *Gone With The Wind*," Ralph shrugged, "By Margaret Mitchell. Ya know it?"

Cornelia didn't reply. She didn't say anything, even as Ralph found a spot and turned the engine off.

"Mrs. Garfield, are you OK?"

Cornelia had gone as still as a statue. Her stick hardly quivered in her ancient hand. The folds of skin about her cheeks turned ashen. The smile had faded and her kindly eyes were wide with apprehension.

"You don't look well, Grandma," Viola May remarked, leaning over the seat. "You know, we could leave the movie and drive you to a doctor if..."

"Oh no, no thank you, Dear," Cornelia interrupted, as if snapping out of a trance. "I'm quite alright, don't

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worry 'bout me. Just help me inside and I'll be good. Oh, and Ralph, my name's Stanton, not Garfield."

"Oh, sorry for the mistake, Ma'am," said Ralph.

He helped Viola May lead Cornelia into the cinema, where they bought tickets and snacks. Cornelia took a seat in the row behind the lovers; bright red and very comfortable. Yet as the organ finished playing and the house lights dimmed, her apprehension returned with a vengeance. The liver spots on her hands faded to rose pink as she gripped her cane desperately.

Dear God, please let me not face it again, not after so long...

When the movie was over, Ralph and Viola May came out talking a mile a minute, enraptured and moved by what they had just seen. Tears traced rivulets down Viola May's cheeks; testament to the emotions that had welled up within her. She was so distracted she almost forgot about her grandmother sitting behind them.

Cornelia said nothing at all as she hobbled out of the Luxor just behind them. Her sunny manner from earlier was now replaced by a positive malaise. Viola May thought she looked older than ever. Helping her into the MG was a lot more trouble than before.

"Thank you for a lovely evening, Ralph," Viola May sighed. "And thank you, Grandma. We owe you big time."

"Must it end so soon?" said Cornelia. "It's only nine thirty. Why don't you two spend a little time without me? What Virginia don't know won't hurt her."

She smiled as she spoke, but without the same twinkle in her eyes as before. Viola May was nervous about leaving her grandmother alone somewhere, but Ralph knew a local drive-in which had a nice seafood restaurant on the opposite side of the street. They sat Cornelia by the window with a bowl of clam chowder and kept an eye on her as they ate their own food.

An hour later, they driving back to the Garfields' house in the MG. Cornelia was quiet again, but remained uneasy. An air of tension surrounded her; an aura of unspoken misery and ingrained pain.

"You look unhappy, Grandma," said Viola May. "What's wrong?"

Cornelia's mouth opened as if to reply, but her eyes alighted on Ralph and she closed them again.

"Is it sumthin' private, Ma'am?" Ralph inquired.

Cornelia took a breath before she spoke. "How old d'you reckon I am, Ralph?"

Ralph studied her a moment. "Seventy to eighty, I reckon. Why?"

"I am 83 years old," Cornelia said slowly. "I was nine in 1864. Nine... when it happened."

"When what happened, Grandma?" asked Viola May.

Again, Cornelia had to take a breath before speaking.

"I was there," she said. "I was there watchin' the sky turn red over Atlanta, that same horrible night they showed in that movie. Even now I remember houses crashin' down and smoke chokin' me... the women were screamin', kiddies were cryin', and men cursin' Lincoln and Davis in equal measure. Worst of all though, that night my daddy took up his sabre to go and defend the town... and never came home."

There was silence again. Ralph spoke first.

"I've screwed up, haven't I?"

"No, no, Ralph," Cornelia sighed. "You couldn't know. But remember, if dark days like that ever come again, never give up hope that you'll pull through, or that sunshine won't be waiting on the other side."

Cornelia Finchley Stanton died on January 9th 1946, aged 90. One of her last fond memories was to have Ralph Henderson, now her grandson-in-law, return home having survived three years of fighting in the Pacific, and tell her he had never forgotten what she had said that night.

The David Gibson Cup Competition 2020

The 2020 David Gibson Cup Competition.

The 21st October saw the adjudication of the David Gibson Cup Competition on the theme of 'sunrise and sunset', set by last year's winner Wendy Turner.

The David Gibson Cup is voted for by those in attendance on the evening of adjudication and despite not meeting in person this year was no exception.

The voting was close, with the first round of voting tying three stories, *Fake News* by Anne Ellis, *Bird Upside Down* by Philip Mitchell and *The Performance* by Sam Ellis. After two further rounds of voting and each writer reader their story, *Fake News* placed third, *Bird Upside Down* placed second and *The Performance* placed first.

The Gnome de plume went to Anne Ellis for *Made It Up*. Congratulations all!

Sam's winning story, *The Performance*, can be found overleaf.



The David Gibson Cup

The Performance

Sam Ellis' winning David Gibson cup competition entry on the theme of 'sunrise and sunset'.

I waited for my cue.

One of my five eyes was on the lookout for a sign. I was nervous as it was meant to be the performance of a lifetime, especially as I had no idea what the performance was going to be. No-one had actually told me what I was meant to do. I was just expected to know.

My nerves weren't helped by the fact that I was never the most attractive nymph. The very name suggests a beautiful god of the riverbed, but I was too fat, had long gills and my skin wasn't transparent enough. My lack of attractiveness was not ideal, as today was all about performing to entice a mate.

It's a mystery as to how I knew today would be the day. I simply thought it might be. As I sat, waiting patiently at the bottom of the river, that thought grew, like a bulrush, into a compulsion.

Then, unceremoniously, I got my cue. The sun – that great spotlight of the sky – started to rise out of the ground and sent a golden shimmer to me through the water. I found myself leaping into the current and pushing as hard as I could against it until, in a flurry of bubbles I was launched up to the surface. 'Ta-da!' I said as I broke free of the watery curtains and on to the surface - my stage.

There was not a soul in sight. I suppose it's something every performer has to go through; the crushing disappointment of no audience except yourself. At least the set was magnificent. A long, winding river stretched ahead, surrounded by trees as still as the rocks that sloped down to the water's edge. The only sound came from others just like me, who were popping up to the surface in ones and twos. I kept one of my eyes on them.

This was *not* going to do. As a performer, one must stand out from the crowd. Instead of an audience, I found myself increasingly surrounded by tens, then hundreds of others, equally as eager to perform as me. As I fretted on what to do another thought popped into my head. What I needed was some dazzle. What I needed was a costume change.

'Intermission!' I cried as, once again, my thoughts grew into a compulsion, and as it did, I felt a tingle in my back. Then another, and another until it was a scorching pain. Then - zzzipp! I felt a split. I rolled my back over and over again until I could feel myself stepping out of my very own skin. There it lay, in front of me, like a worn old coat.

One of my eyes glanced into the water, where I could see a shimmering reflection of myself. I looked good. Very good. It was like a whole new me! My body was amazingly colourful, with patches of black and gold – a far cry from the translucent skin, but I hoped that wouldn't put anyone off.



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As I stood there admiring myself and balancing carefully on the surface, I caught a glimpse of something large and looming behind me. My initial shock gave way to curiosity as I realised that not only did I have a brand-new skin, but also a set of wings. I was astonished, and yet somehow it felt normal. Without a second thought I took in a gulp of air and leapt into the sky.

Suddenly there was uproar. The hundreds of other newly-winged nymphs who had popped up to the surface also had the same idea, no doubt copied from me, and in an instant the sky was filled with fluttering little bodies. That was it! My time to shine was upon me, and with competition literally growing there was no time to lose.

But I froze. I didn't know my lines. What was I to do? Thus far all of the important decisions had been made in the spare of the moment and by my raving mind which was now as barren as a dry riverbed. My wings even gave up. The elegant flapping halted abruptly and I started to fall.

My lack of confidence had overwhelmed me, which was by far the saddest thought I'd ever had. Perhaps it was that which made me take stock of myself. A well of energy had been tapped. I was not going to be beaten!

My wings burst into life, and up I darted up. With the same quickness I swept down, then back up, then down with the same hypnotic sway of the grasses on the riverbank. I was following the beat of my heart and danced through the sky without a care. Time became as free-flowing as the river below me until I sighted quite a crowd gathered about me. Spinning and twirling, up and down, up and down, up and... Suddenly I felt a sharp tap on my abdomen. I halted, turned, and observed that another creature, just like me, had attached itself.

We crossed together to stage-left which instantly caused the audience to disperse and seek another to watch. We two landed, as graciously as we could, and forged the shape of a heart with our bodies. Then, without a second thought, my mate unclasped herself and launched into the sky.



Upon the instant I too took off, but the strength which led me to dance so brilliantly had all but gone. I caught a final glimpse at my mate as she rose higher and joined the throng of gently beating wings, now glowing in the twilight. My wings stopped for the last time and I floated down until I landed gently on the water.

As I lay there, gazing up at the crowd of gold fluttering wings in the light of the setting sun, I noticed the sound of the flowing water sounded rather like applause.

Getting Inside a Character's Head

Tina Shaw's perspective on understanding character.

VW members will probably have noticed my tendency to write about people, using dialogue rather than extensive descriptions of places to develop my stories. I often leave out a physical description, partly because I have one already in my own head, but also, I hope, because I prefer my readers to develop their own image. Why has this bias in my writing occurred, even though I love nature and being out doors? The answer probably lies in my choice of career. As a Social Worker I have had the opportunity to meet a huge variety of people from different backgrounds, living in very different situations. Many of these people have provided a rich source of material for my creativity, although family and friends from my personal life are also not excluded from being written about.

I credit my social work training with being responsible for helping me to better understand my characters. I studied Felix Biestek's social work principles which contained the mantra 'start from where the client is.' This phrase has served me well both in my professional work and in my writing. Its very simplicity is at the basis of good communication, whether you are trying to support a client, or a friend, or indeed, trying to sell a product. At its core, it is the art of effective listening to another person, and to understanding where they are coming from, which enables you to get inside their head, and hear both their positive and their negative thoughts, and the mixture of feelings they are experiencing. Such listening has, I hope, provided me as a writer with the material to create characters who stand out from the page as real people.

Of course, confidentiality prevents me from writing totally accurate accounts of real life people and situations, but I have enough material to describe composite characters, made up of aspects of different adults and children whom I have come across in my work. Their everyday life experiences, sometimes troubled and traumatic, have provided a backdrop for settings, or situations which need to be resolved. Writing for me is a way offloading some of the pain and frustration clients have shared with me.

The other contribution from my training comes from the increased capacity to understand myself. By being able to recognize my own prejudices, and strengths and weaknesses, I can hopefully function more effectively as a Social Worker. By understanding myself I should be better able to understand the characters about whom I am writing. This could raise the issue of 'cultural appropriation', currently a 'hot potato' with publishers. Do I have the right to get inside the heads of people whose experiences and circumstances are very different to my own? This is a whole other topic but I support the right of authors to write about any character who sparks their creativity. It is for others to judge whether the words produce a believable character.

Verulam Writers 2019/2020 Competition Winners

FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	GNOME
David Gibson Cup Topic: The Revelation of a Secret Adjudication Date: 2 rd October 2019			
Wendy Turner	<i>Four runners-up with equal votes:</i> Suzanne Stanton, John Spencer, Robert Paterson and Tina Shaw		Richard Bruckdorfer (aka Tanya Hyde)
Lisbeth Phillips Plate Competition Topic: For the Betterment of Mankind Adjudication Date: 27 th November 2019			
Tina Shaw	Richard Bruckdorfer	Ben Bergonzi	Philip Mitchell (aka Ewan I. Makepeace)
President's Competition Topic: 20-20 Vision Adjudication Date: 4 th March 2020			
Sam Ellis	Ben Bergonzi	Gerwin de Boer	Wendy Turner (aka Markus Absent)
Crystal Decanter Competition Topic: Tension Adjudication Date: 13 th May 2020			
Robert Paterson	Ben Bergonzi	Claire Morgan	None
Howard Linskey Competition Topic: Crime Adjudication Date: 8 th July 2020			
Ben Bergonzi	Philip Mitchell	Dave Weaver	None

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: TBC Adjudication Date: TBC			
Crystal Decanter Competition Topic: TBC Adjudication Date: TBC			
Howard Linskey Competition Topic: Crime Adjudication Date: TBC			



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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?**

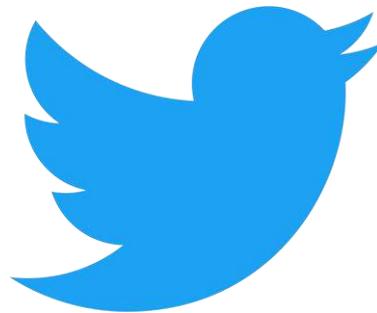
Then head to @verulamwriters on **facebook!**

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The Verulam Writers' Block *The Verulam Writers Showcase*

Steve Barley has been a VW member for over a decade, including a stint on the committee as Veracity's first editor. He used to 'dabble', as he puts it, in full-length humorous narrative non-fiction, but now simply enjoys writing short stories with a puzzle element '...for fun and to see if I can make people smile.'

I invented the phuzzl, the phonetic puzzle story, so I could combine three of my favourite things – writing, puzzles and truly groan-worthy puns – and now have a dedicated website called phuzzl.fun. Phuzzls are (hopefully) humorous short stories where readers are challenged to find well-known titles of movies, books, songs etc. hidden phonetically in the text. The words used as part of the story will always sound the same as the search title even if they don't always look the same in print. To help you, three examples are bolded in this story, **Bond's Back**, that first started my obsession with phuzzls. There are twenty five Bond movie titles – listed in the same order they appear – for you to find. The simplest answers are written exactly the same way in the story, slightly harder ones have component words split over consecutive sentences or paragraphs, and the hardest of all substitute different words which have the same phonetic sound when spoken aloud or in your mind. Good luck, and if you get stuck, then all the answers can be found online at <https://phuzzl.fun/bond-movies-answers/>.

Bond's Back

The balding, shriveled figure in the high backed leather chair scornfully eyed the approach of a suavely dressed man. A man whose air of confidence, rugged good looks and steely eyes thrilled all those he passed.

Raising a withered hand, the shrivelled figure waved dismissively at a nearby stool. 'Sit down, James.'

'Hello, Father,' said the man.

'Don't you "Hello Father" me!' said the balding man with a snarl. 'Not a word for years and finally you decide to drop by.'

'Actually, it's only been a wee...' started James but he wasn't allowed to finish.

'Thousands your mother and I spent on medical school fees. And did you qualify as a doctor? No you bloody well didn't. Gallivanted off round the world instead without a single goodbye.'

'Because I knew you wouldn't approve,' said James under his breath.

- 1. Dr No
- 2. From Russia With Love
- 3. The Living Daylights
- 4. The World is Not Enough
- 5. GoldenEye
- 6. Quantum of Solace
- 7. A View to a Kill
- 8. Tomorrow Never Dies
- 9. Die Another Day
- 10. Licence to Kill
- 11. Casino Royale
- 12. Spectre
- 13. Goldfinger
- 14. Diamonds Are Forever
- 15. Moonraker
- 16. Live and Let Die
- 17. For Your Eyes Only
- 18. Octopussy
- 19. Thunderball
- 20. Skyfall
- 21. You Only Live Twice
- 22. The Man With the Golden Gun
- 23. On Her Majesty's Secret Service
- 24. Never Say Never Again
- 25. The Spy Who Loved Me

'All we got was one lousy postcard saying "From Russia, with love" and you didn't even sign it!' A skeletal finger stabbed accusingly. 'I tell you, that postcard knocked the living daylights out of your mother. Every day you were absent she would cry, "the world is not enough for him" or "I'm sure he'll be back home soon." Only you weren't, were you?'

'I got a job' said James, trying to explain for the thousandth time. 'Not the sort of job where it's wise to have a family in tow.' His father snorted.

'Your mother always said your future was golden. Aye, she had faith in you, right up to the end. Poor decision if you ask me.'

'But it wasn't me who tipped her over the edge,' said James. There was a bitter tone to his voice.

His father leaned back in the chair. 'Your mother was prepared to overlook my infidelity for your sake. But not after you left. If you'd given her even a quantum of solace that you were safe somewhere then she wouldn't have done what she did that evening.' His eyes took on a faraway look. 'We were staying in the town house that week. Day after day your mother stared out of the window as if waiting for your return. It was just a view to a Kilburn high street but she kept saying, "He'll call tomorrow." Never dies you know – a mother's hope.'

His claw-like hands gripped the arms of the chair as he continued, 'I felt that I'd die, another day cooped up with your mother's pain, so I left her alone and walked to a nearby off licence – to kill some time – and that's when I saw the casino. Royally screwed your inheritance that night, I can tell you. Returned to find your mother lying on the pavement beneath the open window...' He paused. '...at least the inspector said it would have been quick.' From his dressing gown pocket he removed a Hermes scarf. On it were letters embroidered in gold. Fingering each in turn, he whispered her name, 'Monique. It's the only thing I have left of hers,' he said as tears began to well.

James's eyes narrowed. 'What about her jewellery? She loved her grandmother's diamonds.'

'Ah, forever observant, even as a child.' James's father thrust the scarf back in his pocket and avoided his son's accusing look. 'Cash converters. Ten grand the lot. Of course, I'll buy them back when I'm flush. They give you a sixth month honeymoon. Ray Kershaw – he's the manager – says I'm his best customer. His motto is "Live and let diamonds pay the way." Only I've none to sell now.' He looked around quickly to see if anyone was near, then pulled a crumpled piece of paper from under a cushion.

'This is for your eyes only,' he said thrusting the paper at James. 'Ray Kershaw has a mate in the Bahamas and wants me to go thirds on an aquatic farm. His mate's discovered amazing medicinal properties in the ink from an octopus, see.' He jabbed the paper. It was blank. 'Guaranteed cert, only you'll need to sub me £50k. Are you in?'

James slowly shook his head.

His father stuffed the paper back under the cushion. 'Okay, I've got another plan. There's this thing called the Thunderball, you only have to match five numbers...' His voice took on a pleading tone. '...and I've still got an account at Ladbrookes. How about you lend me £20k and we bet on the sport on Sky. Fall in with me and we'll both be rich men. What do you say? Go on, you only live twice.'

Before his son could correct him, a loud bong resounded from across the room.

James's father looked confused. 'What's that? It can't be Jeeves announcing dinner.' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'I'm afraid, with my temporary money imbalance, I've had to let the man with the golden gong go. I've pulled a few strings at the Palace though. Jeeves isn't so much on her majesty's secret service as her silver service now. Shame to lose him, he was a good butler.'

'Visiting time's over,' said James. 'I've got to go.' He rose and made way for an orderly pushing a tea trolley before turning back to his father. 'By the way, you never told me if you liked the DVD boxed set of spy movies I brought you last week.'

James's father watched the orderly place a cup of tea and some cherry pie on the now-vacant stool. 'Pah, load of rubbish, never watched 'em, never will,' he said.

James sighed, 'Never say never. Again, it's time I was off. Goodbye.'

His father wasn't listening. 'This pie? Who loved me enough to bake my favourite type of pie?'

James straightened his shirt-cuffs, nodded at the orderly and strode off down the ward.

'Goodbye, Sir,' said the orderly. He turned back to his patient with a smile. 'I'm sure James Bond will return soon.'

The old man scowled and, through a mouthful of cherry pie, said, 'My cat. What have you villains done with my damn cat?'

About Us

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

www.verulamwriterscircle.org.uk

Get Involved

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

*Wishing all our readers
Season's Greetings
and a
Happy New Year*

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