

UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

Creative Writing Newsletter

May 2019

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This is a bumper issue of the Newsletter, with two more pages than usual. Thankyou to everyone who has sent in material.

The editors of In My Own Write have contacted me about a new initiative. They have always featured books by members, but in their new format can accept stories too. All Writing group members are invited to send short stories to be featured. See the last item in column 1 of page 10 for details.

One of the things I aim to encourage in U3A is co-operation between interest groups. The report from Henley on page 4 is a great illustration of how this can happen.

Meanwhile in Sherburn & Villages, they're already thinking about Christmas. There is a helpful article by Lorna Pope on page 2, for anyone involved in writing a pantomime. This sort of project is an ideal way of getting several interest groups working together.

Writing prompt : There was a bullet lodged in the woodwork.

Marcia

Change of contact details ?

Please let me know if your postal, or e-mail address or group leader changes, or you no longer wish to receive Newsletters, I will alert U3A National Office, which sends them to you.

E-mails are the simplest way to collect Newsletter entries. Please find someone willing to copy your work and e-mail it to me if you have no access to a computer.

If you write a letter that needs a reply, please remember to enclose s.a.e.

Marcia

It's Pantomime Time.....oh yes it is, says Lorna Pope, Sherburn and Villages

About this time of year the creative writers sub-team of our U3A Players Group get together to produce a script for the next pantomime production at the Christmas monthly meeting.

We start by choosing which story we are going to use - so far we have done Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Aladdin, Jack and the Beanstalk, Dick Whittington, and Mother Goose. Having decided on our theme we do a bit of research on line to discover plots, characters and synopses to guide us.

Normally we have to cut back on the scenes a bit as we are a small group with limited resources and have had to develop methods of using lighting and props to depict scenes rather than scenery and backcloths. Then we look at the general plot and work out how to progress this through the scenes, writing our own synopsis as we go.

Next we consider the characters. Who are critical to the storyline? Who are peripheral? Who are dispensable? What new characters can we introduce? These have to be matched to our likely cast and their particular talents, strengths and preferences. There is no point writing in a character that we do not have a player for, and even then we often find we have to double up with players taking on an extra role. So now we think about our characters. Maybe we know how Disney has portrayed these people, or how they have been depicted on TV, but we like to put our own twist on them, knowing it will be the cast who mould them in the end in delivering our dialogue. This year (Mother Goose) our villain adopted a German accent to give depth to the character, his two henchmen became a comedy duo, the leading man was a bit of a wimp but the love of his life was a strapping lass who had wrestled crocodiles in Africa! The fairy had a terrible memory problem (hence Fairy Forget-me-not) but the goose was very expressive without saying a word. Mother Goose was wonderfully modest about her sweet nature and generosity until corrupted by the villain and her silly son had a great line in egg yolks - er -jokes.

Back to the script. The team now has plot, scenes and characters and a discussion ensues about how they might come together. Any brilliant ideas for cracking lines or scenarios are noted and each member of the team is given a scene to write - say scenes 1, 2 and 3. A future meeting is arranged and in the meantime any completed scenes will be exchanged by email.

Next meeting we read through the scenes to check if we are being consistent with our synopsis and characters and if any of us has some good ideas to bring in to each other's scenes. When we are satisfied that we are all on the same wavelength we divide up the rest of the scenes between us.

We have so much fun with our read-through meetings which are hilarious as we throw more ideas and jokes in and let our imaginations go wild. We always aim for comedy rather than glamour or romance - especially given our age range. Music, songs and dance opportunities are pencilled in and finally the stage directions (which are always challenged and changed during rehearsals) are added.

Late July and it's time to hand over the finished script to the Group with our recommendations as to who should play each part. Rehearsals start in September. Every year we are told this was our best pantomime yet, so we must be improving and I think this may be due to the pre- planning and thought that goes into it before we start writing the dialogue - and of course our fabulous cast.

North Norfolk Self-Publishing Event.

Robert Herring (Holt)

On 7th March, twenty-four of us met at The Pheasant Hotel, in Kelling, to hear authors speak about their experiences of getting published.

Our first speaker was Edward Hackford, whose novel 'Deadly Consignment', is about people smuggling. After his first publisher went bust, Acorn Publishers produced a book that has sold well, with good reviews. He wrote a chapter at a time, having no idea where the story was going. He just let the characters take the novel forward, and managed to bring them together for a dramatic conclusion. He said a novel needs a compelling beginning, a varied, believable middle, and a realistic end.

Then we heard from Joy Hodge. After a career in publishing, she produced her own book, 'The Rose Bower'. It was expensive going to a book designer but worthwhile.

Joy also mentioned her friend, former policewoman Anne Shilton, who self-published her crime novel 'Barricades', via Amazon. The speedy process produced a good profit.

Pat Pinsent used a publisher to produce her children's novel 'Life with Grandpa', which dealt with dementia. Sales have not covered her publisher costs.

Our final speaker, Ken Lake has had ten children's novels published by Sweet Cherry Publishing. He said "The simple but time-consuming route to publication is through a publisher, but once the editor gets their hands on your manuscript you lose control. They have the power of literary gods."

As for me, I have produced a book of short stories, sent direct to printers. I lost money on the fifty copies but at £2.40 it's about the price of a birthday card, and make nice gifts!

I presented the results of the questionnaire mentioned in the last edition of this Newsletter. They indicate that the traditional route through a literary agent is hopelessly optimistic; less than one in a thousand manuscripts is selected. The solution is either working with small publishers, who often demand up-front payment for costs, or Amazon self-publishing. Only one in five going to a publisher recouped their costs and the publishing process can take months. Those going to social media benefited from there being no up-front costs, and it is quick. People stressed the time and effort needed for sales and marketing.

The authors at the meeting said they put in a lot of time and money but were pleased with the result and the pleasure of holding in their hands a book of their own.

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



Porthcawl

Jo Brooks

We sold all 427 copies of our anthology 'A Write Crew,' raising over £1,600. After paying printing costs, we were thrilled, in March, to present Porthcawl RNLI with a cheque for over £1,100.....and they of course were delighted!

Also in March, we took up an invitation from Porthcawl Primary to take part in a joint writing project with the school. The Workshop was to encourage children to understand that we, as adults, write because we want to; not because we have to. So writing can be a lifelong pleasure & isn't necessarily about publication & monetary gain. Beforehand we, as well as the 37 children, had written stories using the literary device of 'flashback' set by their English teacher. 20 of the children were keen to share their stories with us & listened attentively to ours. We were astonished at the imagery, use of language & emotions some of the children produced. The Q&A session showed interest in why we write, how we plot, where ideas come from & more. We thoroughly enjoyed the experience. More importantly, the school considered it a great success & are keen to have more joint projects with U3A.

Keyworth and District

Howard Fisher

The group is a year old & has settled into a pattern of relaxed monthly meetings where we read our pieces from the previous month's subject chosen by the whole group. It is a personal choice whether to write prose or poetry. There is comment on the pieces which we insist has to be helpful and constructive.....it's often amusing. We also work on short exercises. Marcia's newsletter is shared with group members and we adopt ideas from it.

Our January meeting saw retired creative writing teacher Jacki Davies (a member of our U3A) visit us to lead a session on writing Haiku. She produced a programme which was challenging, informative and enjoyable. At the end of the session several members said she had changed their perceptions of poetry writing. We enjoyed it so much that Jacki is coming back in May to lead a session on a different writing subject. We have a monthly newsletter of our own in which news is shared and a selection of pieces from the previous month's subject is reproduced.

Henley

Charles Whittaker

We decided to produce an anthology of pieces written over our first 4 years, mainly memoirs and some fiction. A couple of members were involved with the Poetry Group and mentioned it there. The poets offered their work too. Having stepped out of that box, we approached the art group to add variety. That brought in sketches and photos to illustrate particular stories plus standalone drawings and paintings including a beautiful watercolour for the cover and an immaculately rendered drawing of Henley bridge for the title page. In this way we were able to showcase the talents of a wider range of the membership and produce a more interesting read. The end result was a 240 page book, 'Memories and Imaginings', printed by a local company to a professional standard. The first printing of 50 copies sold out in 3 weeks at £5 each. We are well on the way to selling the next one. This was a first in the 40 years of our small U3A and has become an inspiration for future combined work as well as a talking point among the membership. The newly formed Photography Group already want to add their work. Moving anthologies beyond the writing group might be an idea for other U3As to consider. It takes more work in the editing, of course, but well worth it.

Prudhoe

Pat Stott

We were asked by the library where we meet to run a workshop as part of Silence in the Library month. It involved the temporary installation of a 'pod' in which 6 or so people could sit quietly and read or listen to audio stories through headphones. Our workshop covered some of the exercises from 'The Creative Writing Handbook' (see back page) & attendees wrote a haiku before they left. We hope it was a good advert for U3A.



The report from Keyworth and District (page 4) mentions a session on Haiku. Here are more details.

Haiku Overview

Susan Poole

Jacki Davies led the session and began by explaining what rules make a haiku: present tense, and 3 lines of 5/7/5 syllables. They are always short, using just 17 syllables, and create an image, a snapshot. The images are usually sensory, involving hearing, seeing, feeling (as in tactile) or taste. They often deal with themes of nature, or emotion. She pointed out that occasionally they do not make much sense!

A haiku should be personal, instant, economic and uncluttered. Jacki picked out some phrases from haikus, "echoes of laughter" (emotional, spooky...why the echo?) and "a metallic taste", reminding us of putting pennies in our mouths as children.

She then passed around 3 envelopes, one containing nouns, one verbs, and one adjectives. We each had to take one from each envelope. I ended up with trolley (noun), break (verb), and better (adjective). We were then given a few minutes to assemble these words into a haiku..... two, if we worked quickly enough. Mine were:

Is my trolley full?
His shopping looks much better.
Oh no, now it breaks!

The trolley bus comes.
I need to break my work day.
I will feel better.

We read out our poems, followed by a general short discussion and comments by Jacki.

Then she passed around prose excerpts from novels, some with quite complicated concepts and images. We each had 2 excerpts, and each excerpt was duplicated, so eg each one I had was also given to someone else. We were then asked to jot down some ideas and words that came to mind from each excerpt, but we could not use any of the actual words from the article. Then we had to write a haiku of 17 syllables concisely expressing the gist of an article that had been written in 60 words or so. She explained that people tend to use too many words in their writing, and this exercise was to make us realise just how few words we actually needed to use. We each read out the resulting haikus, and the point of duplicating each article was to demonstrate just how differently two people approach the same task. My given article on feminism led to:

Break free from the past,
Spiral into a career.
But - a better life?

We worked hard - no chatting or time wasting, but enjoyed the session and all felt we had gained some new insights into writing poetry and prose.

Developing Characters

Pauline Rowson

Creating a likeable, interesting, complex main character the reader can have empathy with, one they want to trust & root for throughout the story is a vitally important ingredient in a successful crime novel. It's not just the main character but the supporting cast, the villains & walk-on parts who all need characteristics that are believable, even if eccentric, which will engage the reader.

DI Andy Horton has been described as 'an especially good series hero, a likeable fellow with plenty of street smarts & the requisite personal baggage - an abrasive supervisor & an antagonistic soon to be ex-wife.' Heroes in detective novels are often ordinary people with their own problems. The key to producing a successful crime novel is not necessarily that the hero saves the world, but that he learns something about himself along the way. Putting ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances builds tension.

Main characters can & do have faults, but change & grow throughout the novel. They make mistakes, sometimes learn from them & sometimes don't. Often they have a cardinal quality or trait that holds them back. DI Andy Horton is fearless in his search for justice, but hates conforming & so risks being alone, which is his greatest fear. Abandoned by his mother & raised in children's homes & with a succession of foster parents, he has a desperate need to belong. Yet because of his inability to trust, he is always on the outside.

When drawing up character profiles I ask what has shaped them? What is their background, family, education & experience? Some profiles are sketchier than others. That doesn't matter because when I start putting dialogue into their mouths & have them walking around & interacting with people they come alive. I can add to those character profiles as they take shape through my writing.

The characters' actions drive the plot. The surprises, twists & turns all spring from the characters' motivations & as I write I find ideas occur to me that I hadn't previously considered. I often discover that someone I thought was going to be a minor character turns out to be much more interesting when I write their part. Conversely a major character can become boring & sometimes unnecessary; if that happens, I cut them out.

As I write I ask myself what will this character do in this situation? What will they do next? I continually ask questions about each character & answer them as the novel progresses. I shape & reshape them. I put them in difficult or unusual situations, & as I do so the story unfolds & the tension builds.

Pauline Rowson is a regular speaker at U3A groups. You may confidently recommend her to your committee as a speaker at main meetings where she can talk about her life as a crime writer. She would also be ideal as a speaker at Study Days and can be contacted via her website: www.rowmark.co.uk The website is worth a look (you can also sign up for her free newsletter) even if you don't want to contact her quite yet. She also has a You Tube Channel showing videos of her interviews and talks. <http://www.youtube.com/paulinerowson13> You can follow her on Twitter & Facebook.

Marcia

Capturing Memories of National Service**Malcolm Cowper, Porthcawl**

Between 1945 & 1960 over two million young men were conscripted to serve two years in the armed forces, even though the country was no longer at war. It was called National Service. I was too young for it, but have always wondered what it was like to have two years taken from your life, with the possibility that you might be killed!

Via letters to the local press, I made contact with some 60 former National Servicemen in my area. I interviewed them using a voice recorder & wrote up notes when I got home. Then came the hard bit: to give some shape to the stories. Rather than tell the events in chronological order, I began each story with a statement designed to capture the reader's interest. So, I began one story: 'George recalls the bliss of his first hot shower after two weeks in a German pine forest'. I went on to explain that he had been on an army exercise, then filled in details - where he came from, when he was called up, where he trained, where posted, & so on.

I was interested in what the interviewees thought about having to do National Service, & ended each story with their comments. The majority said that though they may not have wanted to go, it had been beneficial. They had gained self confidence, personal pride, & in some cases new skills. Very few expressed resentment; only one man said he had hated the whole two years!

Although this was not a work of scholarship, I did carry out extensive research into events such as the Cold War, the Cyprus emergency, & the Suez crisis, in order to put their experiences into some sort of context.

For illustrations I asked for photographs of their time in the forces, & used my phone camera to photograph their pictures, which I emailed to my editor. These were supplemented by appropriate library pictures.

I chose to self publish, & when the stories were all written, sent them to my editor. About three months later the proof copy arrived by email. I printed it, proof read it & emailed a corrections. My editor sent ideas for cover design. I chose a soldier in uniform & the title 'Reluctant Warriors: Memories of National Service 1945 to 1960' in Stencil font, to give a military look.

The book is available at £9.50 plus £2.00 postage & packing from malcolmcowper@gmail.com.

Exploring the Inner Voice

Pat Stott, Prudhoe & District

Hearing the human voice was central to Charles Dickens' writing, he said he did not invent speech but wrote down what he heard or imagined. Virginia Woolf struggled to cope with the clamour of voices in her head when she finished a book, & actually drowned herself the day after her final novel was completed.

In 2018 we were invited to take part in a Durham University project exploring 'The Inner Voice'. The project is about what it is like to hear a voice that no one else does. It is hoped it will help people suffering from auditory hallucinations. One way that has already been shown to be useful, is to get the therapist to interact with the voice when the person verbalises it.

Our first session, in December, was led by David Napthine, an actor & writer whose plays are often on BBC radio. The exercise was to write a dialogue between two characters in a public place, one of whom has a secret. My characters were a mother & daughter. The mother was trying to say that her son wished to become a woman. As well as writing the dialogue we had to 'hear' the thoughts of the two characters. We were given about 30 minutes to do this, then read them out - the results were amazingly varied & perceptive & we concluded our pieces later at home.

The second session, in February, was led by John Foxwell, a researcher in the English department. He asked us to list 6 positive & 6 negative character traits, 6 items that could be held in a hand, 6 emotions & 6 specific places. He then rolled a dice & we were told to underline the corresponding item on our lists, then write a story using these words.

Later he gave us 6 scenarios from which we had to choose 4. Interestingly, several chose 'Prostitute on a summer evening'. Again we were urged to concentrate on dialogue & feelings & both came out strongly in our work.

As a group we felt what we had learned would enhance our future writing. It was also good to be told our participation would be valuable to the project & that the leaders had enjoyed their time with us.

For further information the website for the project is writersinnervoices.org

Manuscript

Don't make it hard to read, eg ink pale, fancy font. Name, address, title, pages numbered. Font size 12; paper A4, type double-spaced, at least a 1" margin on all four sides, black ink. Don't use staples, binders, ribbons, paper clips - use two rubber bands at right angles. Make headings, etc. consistent throughout; check spelling & grammar. Enclose s.a.e (A4 folded) for return of manuscript. Make sure it fits! Keep a copy of anything you send - & a checklist with date it went out. Give them 4 - 6 weeks to reply. Check a returned manuscript before re-submitting - there may be a hidden letter to the last editor!

Synopsis.....no more than 2 pages

Genre State this at the beginning e.g. contemporary women's fiction.

Tag-line e.g. *40-year-old virgin places a lonely hearts ad*

State where the tension is Steer away from reportage - explain WHY things happen, not WHAT happens .

Background & setting e.g Takes place over a year, set in Wales.

Organise important points Branches of the plot, not moment by moment.

Structure Summarise - no long details.

State point of view e.g 3rd person; first person; alternating.

Say where the market is Who will read it? Mention any similar writers.

Note key parallels e.g psychology & loss - any relevant research.

Covering Letter...1 page only

It must sell you & your work. Remember it is going to a professional with a very full schedule. Give information without padding, gimmicks or boasting. Sound interesting - point out what is unusual - totally new or new slant on an old theme Show a sense of the genre & awareness of the market. DON'T say 'It's the next Harry Potter,' rather 'Readers who enjoyed Harry Potter will buy this book' Say why the book/story NEEDS publishing! Mention anything you have had published. How many books can you produce? Is this a one-off? For Magazines -show you know the audience - READ copies beforehand.

ON-LINE FORUM U3ACW



Would members please consider adding to the files. We are not looking for examples of work but hints and tips on how to produce it. If you have material but are unsure how to upload it, send it to Paul Burns who will do it for you. Burns-paul@outlook.com

STUDY DAY SPEAKERS

Charles Whittaker (see page 4) has led Henley U3A Writing group for some years, He is available to speak at Study days and may be contacted at Xanadu212@gmail.com

COMPETITIONS

Free e-mail bulletin Chainlinks is a good way to keep abreast of what's on. Just e-mail Maria Owen and ask to be put on the mailing-list. maria.owen@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk

NEED HELP GETTING PUBLISHED?

Maghull and Lydiat member, Dr Alan Corkish, has experience as a senior editor and in typesetting and cover design. He is willing to advise U3A members or groups (including editing) free of charge. www.erbacce-press.com

HELP FOR PLAYWRIGHTS

Player Playwrights has provided space for writers to try out work since 1948. Professional actors read your work before a knowledgeable audience. This London-based group also holds regular play competitions and talks with agents, casting directors and other theatre professionals. www.playerplaywrights.co.uk tonydiggle@cainct.co.uk

In My Own Write showcases writing by U3A members. It has just moved from Third Age Matters magazine to its own U3A Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/U3AInMyOwnWrite/> It will now be able to include short stories from U3A Creative writing groups, so they reach an audience outside the groups themselves. For details of how to have your stories featured, contact the editors via Facebook or directly by email at simmsmaggy15@gmail.com (putting IMOW in the subject line).

USEFUL INFORMATION



Sources: An educational magazine on the U3A national website.

U3A Resource Centre: A collection of material (not books) to borrow free of charge, apart from return postage. email: resource.centre@u3a.org Among its most requested items are the online courses in creative writing and poetry writing.

Handbook for U3A Creative Writing Groups £2.50 (inc pandp) from National Office (address page 1) Cheques payable to The Third Age Trust

Subject Adviser

Please feel free to contact me for help. My contact details are on the front page.

Study Days

I have a useful handout for groups thinking of hosting one.

ARTICLES FOR NEXT ISSUE



Please send me items, however brief, as attachments to an e-mail unless there is no-one in your group who can do this and you have to send by post.

Please include: group news, comments, ideas, useful websites, magazines, books, competitions, anything worth sharing.....

U3Awriting@hotmail.co.uk

DEADLINE FOR NEXT ISSUE
15th August

Marcia