

# The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

## Former Presidents:

Humbert Wolfe (1935-40)  
Lord Vansittart (1940-57)  
Sir George Rostrevor  
Hamilton (1957-67)  
Bernard Newman (1967-68)  
James Laver (1968-75)  
Lord Snow (1975-80)

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Charles Neilson Gattey

## Vice Presidents:

Richard Adams FRSL  
John le Carré  
Iain McIntyre

## Chairman:

Alan S Watts

## Vice Chairman:

Terry Rickson

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Vacant

## Diary

AGM

11<sup>th</sup> May 2002

Writer's Workshop

29<sup>th</sup> June 2002

Poetry Workshop Weekend

12-14 July 2002

Chairman's Awayday

10<sup>th</sup> August 2002

Annual Luncheon

26<sup>th</sup> October 2002

## DATA PROTECTION ACT

**Members' names and addresses are held on a computer database which is used for mailing copies of the Civil Service Author.**

## DISCLAIMER

**The views expressed in the SCPSW Author are those of the contributors and are not necessarily those of the Editor or of the Society.**

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# The SCPSW Author

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## **Editorial**

Adrian Danson

There is an unfortunate contrast between those generous members prepared to donate additional sums with their subscriptions, those who give up a great deal of time to serve as officers of the Society and those who are not even prepared to confirm their names and addresses on renewing their membership. Fortunately the former outnumber the latter, but I do wish the latter could be persuaded to make the Treasurer's job a little easier by contributing this information.

Enough of the nagging! I hope you have all been busy creating new stories, poems, articles, etc., and are filling the Competition Secretary's letterbox with your work. For those who have yet to win but would like to see some recognition of their efforts, please send them to me for possible inclusion in future "Authors". On behalf of Joyce Thornton may I also make a plea for poetry for publication in "Author". She has none left for me after those included in this issue.

At some time in the future I hope to invite members to judge items from Author that were not the winning entries from competitions. I trust everyone will agree that we all need encouragement, but cannot all win, though we should never give up trying to do so. Our tastes may also differ from those of the judges who select the winners. Perhaps what may be entertaining to some may be judged as of poor literary standard. Whatever the reason for such work not winning I suggest popular opinion can be expressed by voting for those members most enjoyed. This will need a little organising, but I think a list of such on the back of the annual renewal form, to be annotated 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, would be a cost effective way of obtaining votes – watch this space!

May I apologise to the members that I listed as being successful in having their work published, by referring to them as readers, though I hope they are that also. Having a book published is a great achievement and I am sure we all share in the pleasure of seeing our members succeed at this level. However, I would also like to include details of those who were successful in having poems, articles, short stories, or even letters, published in

newspapers and magazines. Three letters published in the Financial Times is my contribution. Let me hear from the rest of you.

The next important date for the diary is our AGM. Many members are unable to attend due to it having to be held in London. For those who can it provides an opportunity to comment on the way the Society is run and to meet those who serve on your committee. For those who cannot attend, yet have a view they would like to express, please write to me and I will try to have it read out at the AGM, subject to the railway unions permitting our presence.

Alan Gibb, who publishes Author, has suggested that we create a new front cover. Those of you who are artists, graphic designers, photographers, etc., in your spare time might consider this. Please send me your efforts, or ideas, and I'll see what we can offer Alan. As Author is the name of an even more prestigious publication than ours (how is that possible?), we must be careful to designate our magazine as SCPSW Author.

Whilst on the subject of artists, Barbara Stewart, one of our most active members, is also Chair of the Association of Civil Service Art Clubs (ACSAC). They hold an annual exhibition and membership costs £5 p.a. For more information write to Barbara at, The Old Malt House, Brockhampton Mews, BRINGSTY, WR6 5TB.

In the centre pages you will find an invitation to attend a workshop at St Vincent Centre on 29th June. The object is to deal with any issues that any member attending wishes to raise, when the rest of us will give our experiences of such matters and initiate pursuit of any outstanding issues. Those who wish to bring along work to read and invite comment are welcome to do so. It is also intended to prepare a few items of advice that might initiate open discussion on problem matters, e.g. how should I start my story, how long should it be, is a twist in the tail necessary? It is intended to make it a bit of a free-for-all, but how successful it is will probably depend upon who attends. If you need advice, have some you can give, or simply wish to attend, please do so. St Vincent Centre is conveniently positioned within 2 minutes of Victoria Station, so easy to get to.

**Congratulations to Stephen Bibby on winning the Froud Memorial Competition. Full details will be given in the Summer edition.  
Spring Sale**

Do you ever let friends borrow your copies of Author? I know that when I do I worry that they will not be returned, or that they will be damaged. One answer would be to have a spare copy. For those who would like an extra copy, we now have the SCPSW Spring Sale. For £1.50 you may buy one back copy, £2.50 for two back copies and for £4 all four 2001 issues. Please send me your cheques, payable to SCPSW, and I will arrange for them to be posted to you.

**Guidance For Members**

I believe members will find the contributions from Margaret Hothi, Joan Hykin and Terry James of considerable interest and no further guidance is included in this issue. As I plan to offer advice on using computers in the near future, your comments on such would be welcome.

**Advice From The Treasurer**

On behalf of the committee I would like to thank those members who have kindly donated extra money with their renewal subscription. We have raised around £350 in total, including a very generous £100 from Brian Scott. Hopefully this will ensure the survival of our society for at least another year.

Louise Lloyd

**All contributions for the Summer issue must be received by the Editor not later than 18<sup>th</sup> April 2002.**

UUUUU

**Letters to the Editor**

Will any members living in the Brighton/Hove area who would be interested in meeting sometime for a writers workshop, please contact me on 01273 208987.

I am willing to host an occasional get-together in my flat in Hove.

Doreen Dugdale

Dear Editor

I attend a Methodist Church and amongst our members was an ex-headmistress. Greatly feared and respected in her day and remembered long after she retired. You did not address her unless it was in perfect English.

One Sunday morning a young prospective Minister preached her first sermon in our church. She was obviously nervous but I thought she coped very well, so turning to person sitting next to me (guess who!) I said:

“Well that was quite a good sermon wasn’t it, considering her inexperience.”

“Humph,” was the reply. “It would have been a lot better if she had taken more care with her grammar,” and several minor errors were pointed out to me.

How unchristian I thought to myself, but I said flippantly:

“I don’t suppose God minded too much. After all she was doing her best.”

“Well He may not mind,” came the sharp reply, “but I do: I’ve got standards.”

OOPS!!

Betty Westcott

Dear Editor,

Like you I found Martin Kelly’s ‘cri de coeur’ most enjoyable. He wants us to help him to be able to say that being a writer is ‘exciting and rewarding’. When he uses the word rewarding does he mean the personal satisfaction that comes from having achieved a certain proficiency, or is he thinking of a fat cheque from some publisher? If the latter then he’s bound to be at a loss when studying what gets published these days.

In thinking of a style to adopt, should he follow the poetic descriptive language of lady writers or the precision more typical of men, he asks. I

would say neither specifically. Be a hermaphrodite! In my opinion, judging from the two novels of hers I have read, Margaret Atwood (who was a famed poet before she ever published a novel) comes into the hermaphrodite category. She has a vigorous, manly style leavened with touches of the poetic. Unfortunately, with some poets their poetic imagery doesn't always add to the reader's deeper understanding. In Margaret Atwood's 'The Blind Assassin' she has a simile which in my opinion is ridiculous rather than enlightening. She writes: 'The hot beef sandwiches were ... flavourless as an angel's buttocks.' Is there some connection here – perhaps a bawdy one – which I in my poetic ignorance am missing? Of course, there'd be a connection if the angel were to sit on a hot beef sandwich.

Yours sincerely  
Miss D Shaw

As you asked for comments on correspondence courses, I thought you might be interested to hear my experience, though this did happen many years ago. I chose a course in "Christian Writing", though the only thing specifically Christian about it proved to be the choice of magazines to which work was to be sent. In fact their list of magazines proved to be out of date, some having ceased to be. I was told that there would be 24 lessons, and I would soon recoup the cost of the course in payments received from grateful editors. If not, the sum would be refunded, provided I completed the course in 2 years. I thought I could easily manage a lesson a month, so I signed up. In excuse I may say I was very young at the time!

I chose to pay by instalments over 6 months, and during that period the lessons arrived regularly, though I was a bit put out to discover I was expected to send a stamped addressed envelope for the next lesson every time. Also I found the tutor was constantly changing, so there was no continuity. The lessons consisted of duplicated sheets. At first the comments on my work were fairly positive, though the only piece I had published was in a magazine that didn't pay. Later however I found the lessons were taking longer and longer to arrive. Also my work would be returned and I would be told to rewrite it. Eventually I realized that these were delaying tactics on their part. They were making sure I couldn't complete the course in 2 years.

I struggled on till I'd done about 20 lessons, by which time I was sick of the whole thing and gave up.

I don't know whether I learnt anything from the course, though I suppose it gave me an interesting hobby for a while. It's quite possible that there are some good courses around, but I would advise anyone considering one to be extremely cautious.

Mrs Margaret Hothi

Referring to Mr Martin Kelly's article I do agree about the present day waffle in articles or stories – using twenty words when three would do.

As for Dickens his wordiness is due solely to the fact that he was a journalist and paid at the rate of a penny a word. So a description of Mr Pickwick's finery would probably earn him about half-a-crown.

He became a friend of Wilkie Collins who was more interested in plot than verbiage and is supposed to have had a good influence on Dickens.

Many many years ago in the late twenties or early thirties our school Literature Class gave out a list of Dickens books at the beginning of term. You read them and hopefully could answer the questions at the end of year exams. The reading was done in your own time: ordinary L C C school not University! (The one that bored me stiff was *Barnaby Rudge*.)

Iris Breese

[I asked for some controversy and here's a bit more. Keep it coming – we need it to warm us on these cold nights – Ed.]

I must reply to Alan Watts' letter on good English Grammar. I don't think it is taught in schools. When my daughter brought home a story she had written in her English class at school, she received good marks but it wasn't grammatically correct. When I asked the teacher about this I was told that pupils were encouraged to express themselves. I agree with this but not at the expense of good written English. I have recently read the Defence Management Training booklet on Effective Writing and under the heading Grammar, the words 'and' also 'but' were used to start a sentence. If the text books can't even get it right, what hope is there?



‘Being A Writer’ by Martin Kelly made me smile. How true it is and one I can identify with on several occasions. An enjoyable article.

I know I have benefited over the years from attending a Creative Writers’ evening course and the feedback I get on my own work. I would encourage anyone interested in writing to join one.

Jan Jefferies  
Stanwell

### **Record of our last AGM on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2001**

Mr. Charles Neilson Gattey was re-elected as President, as were Vice-Presidents Richard Adams, John le Carré and Iain McIntyre.

Election of Officers: It was proposed by Adrian Danson that Terry Rickson be elected as Vice-Chairman, seconded by Ethel Corduff and agreed unanimously. Roy Froud’s proposal that the committee be re-elected en bloc, was seconded by Brian Scott and agreed unanimously.

Membership: Current membership was reported to have fallen to 157 and every effort was being made to attract new members, e.g. advertising in magazines and on notice-boards with members’ help. (Membership by the end of 2001 was approximately 200.) It was agreed that membership be extended to serving and retired members of the Armed Forces. The means by which this should be publicised to such has yet to be established.

Finance: The annual statement was tabled, accepted unanimously and published in “Author”. The meeting agreed with the Treasurer’s suggestion that members be asked to consider adding a codicil to their will in favour of the Society. (Please regard this as an invitation to do so.)

It was agreed to let the subscription to the Civil Service Drama federation lapse temporarily.

Mr Roy Froud agreed that his second competition in memory of his parents be open to outsiders, again in the form of memoirs and this time based upon, “I remember the day that ...” It was hoped that this would contribute to publicity and recruitment.

Writer of the year: Dr. Vivian Edwards was proposed and unanimously agreed, for contributions to “Author” and the consistency of her success in competitions over the years.

Poetry Workshop: Mr Rickson reported a reduction in membership in the poetry workshop. At their lively weekend it had been agreed that a split was undesirable but the PW would publicise in their own right and also promote the Society.

The change of name of the Society was discussed. Adrian Danson wanted this to be put to members via the annual renewal form. Roy Froud proposed the change of name forthwith. This was seconded by Vee Bradley. Mr. Watts said that the AGM had the right to make the change under the constitution and the proposal was carried, with Adrian Danson the only vote against immediate adoption of the name The Society of Civil and Public Service Writers.

The death of Victor Negus-Moore was recorded, as he had been long associated with the Society and had been Vice-Chairman for a number of years.

### **A report by Ethel Corduff on the Annual Literary Luncheon held on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2001**

The Luncheon had a Dickensian theme. Guest speaker, Mr Cedric Charles Dickens, great grandson of Charles Dickens, was most amusing and entertaining. He and Chairman Alan Watts, who is a Dickinson expert, have collaborated in a new illustrated book “The Miracle of Pickwick”.

Our President Charles Neilson Gattey also regaled us with many amusing anecdotes.

There was a moment’s silence in memory of our late Vice-Chairman Victor Negus Moore.

Writer of the Year Dr. Vivian Edwards held us spellbound as she told how writing had been a healing medicine for her and described how she was trying to fulfil her wish to have a novel published. She praised “The Author” and all its Editors.

Vice President Iain McIntryre, just out of hospital after an operation, sent his best wishes.

All current committee members were present as well as members and guests from London, Dorset, Devon, Middlesex, Essex, Kent, Lincolnshire, Buckinghamshire, East Sussex and Worcestershire.

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## **Market Information**

A Guide To Reference Books

by Gordon Gompers

As we enter the new year it is time to think about markets and to acquaint ourselves with the relevant directories. Perhaps the main directory for home markets is the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*. This caters for the needs of both writers and photographers and is a mine of information. It can be ordered at most major book shops.

*Writer's Handbook* is preferred by some. It even covers territory that the other does not. Both books can be ordered through:

Angela Cox,  
Dept W1,  
Freelance Market News,  
Sevendale House,  
7 Dale Street,  
Manchester M1 3JH  
Tel: 0161 228 3533

Both priced £12.99 + £2.30 postage for W&AYB; and £2.55 for WH.

[Both can be bought at W H Smith and similar shops – Ed.]

Many of our members have expressed an interest in selling to American markets. The best American directory is *Writer's Market*. Again orderable through Angela Cox, priced £19.99 + £4.15 postage. Americans always seem interested in the British scene. I once sold a literary magazine an article on W H Davies.

*Willings Press Guide* is most useful. It can be found in most reference libraries. It comes in two volumes: a Home; and an Overseas. The Overseas edition is invaluable in discovering that rich travel writing seam: the in-flights. Of course, *Willings* to advertisers rather than freelance journalists but addresses are given so if your enquiry letter is sent to the wrong department it is usually passed to the right one. At least I have always found it so.

## **Poetry Pages**

Edited by Joyce Thornton

### **Watchers In The Wildwood**

Mike Boland

If you walk some way into the park-land  
When September's sunbeams dim and shimmer  
And the great oak trees brood the year away,  
You will find a small lake with an island,  
A pagan precinct, you would probably say;  
This island too is tree-rich. A barrow,  
Thrusting through the lush of forest litter,  
Rises, moulders mutely on the island.  
And here the wildwood's heart holds all in sway.

Autumn rusts upon the water.  
It is dark and shadowed under-tree.  
And if it stays so still and peaceful,  
Will you come and watch with me?

Will we watch within the chapel ruins?  
What shall we wish for? Wish away!

While the soft slow, slow heartbeat of the woodland  
Whispers, whispers, whispers through the day.  
Night locks like winter on the woodland,  
But fear has no meaning in this place,  
For the wildwood and all contained within it  
Coalesce in timeless states of grace.

## Deus Loci

John Abrahams

Between the water and the forest  
Stands a house. In the house lives a man,  
He writes about journeys across the sea  
In ships where the crews have  
Complicated tasks, concerning  
Computers,  
Charts,  
Engines,  
Ropes,  
But he will never leave. He is busy writing.  
The earth has grown over his feet,  
The elder-tree holds berries over his shoulder,  
Highways approach and run past him,  
He has disappeared by staying,  
The moon chants to him at night,  
The sun hums to him by day,  
And stars sustain him through a powerful flight,  
Propelling him towards stasis.

## Creative Light Stanley Gunn-Matthews

Spiritually purified natural light,  
The essence of positive might.

Heat radiated from outer space,  
Atmospherically filtered whilst interlaced.

Reflection from the planets' waters,  
Deflection against landmass contours.

Warming currents arouse all seeds,  
Rainfall; germinated by natural deeds.

Darkness; dispersed with a shining moon,  
Pressurising tides a monthly boon.

Constantly recharged by accepted souls,  
Celestial given life from deathly tolls.

## **Poetry Workshop**

Mike Boland

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Chairman: Liz Rowlands, 19 Arkley Court, Maidenhead, SL6 2YR

Treasurer: Terry Rickson, 48 Marlborough Road, Ashford, TW15 3QA

Secretary: Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, HA3 6JU

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## **Poetry Workshop 2002**

The Poetry Workshop's annual Weekend is booked for 12-14 July 2002. It will take place at our usual venue, Chamberlain Hall at the University of Birmingham. The University conference manager has told us that the price will be unchanged from this year. A booking form was included in the Winter 2001 Newsletter, so all of last year's members should be in possession of a copy. If you didn't receive one, or have misplaced it, let me know and I will send a replacement. Similarly, any members new to us for 2002 who would like to have a booking form, please write to me at the address above.

## **Bill Barnes Competition**

At the time of writing this article, which because of deadline dates for *The Author* means I'm penning it just after Christmas, the results of the 2001 competition are not available. However, once received, the results

plus all the poems entered will be published in a special Competition issue of the Newsletter. This will be sent to all PW members for 2001, and any new members who have joined us for 2002.

Details of the 2002 competition will appear in the Spring Newsletter.

## Waves 2002

Don't forget that the deadline for poems for the 2002 edition of *Waves*, the annual collection of PW members' poetry, is 31 March 2002. If this issue of *The Author* reaches you as planned in early March, you should just have time to submit your poems for consideration.

Submissions are invited on the same basis as in previous years; no more than three poems to be submitted, none longer than forty lines; each successful contributor will be asked to buy six copies (approx £2 per copy).

Poems should be sent to: Bill Douglas, 47 Walkerston Avenue, Largs, Ayrshire KA30 8EP.

## Subscription

The subscription fee for 2002 is £3 for Society members. This gives you:

- ◆ three lively Newsletters each year, plus a fourth, competition special issue
- ◆ the chance of publication in *Waves*
- ◆ access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- ◆ eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition
- ◆ eligibility for the annual PW Weekend at the University of Birmingham.

If anyone is interested in joining the Poetry Workshop, please contact Mike Boland at the above address. He will be pleased to provide further details.

## Poetry Workshop Dates

date to be confirmed

Competition Special Newsletter

31 March 2002

Closing Date for *Waves* submissions

30 April 2002

Spring Newsletter

12-14 July 2002

PW Weekend 2002

31 August 2002

Summer Newsletter

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Silence!

Adrian Danson 1986

Hush said the doors of the underground train

As it clattered and banged to a halt

Hush said the brakes of the number nine bus

As it crashed in a shower of glass

Hush said the giant who stood hard on my foot

And perforce interrupted my scream

Idyllic Igles

Ethel Corduff

(3<sup>rd</sup> prize in the 2000 Travel Article Competition)

**W**e travelled through the Bavarian countryside with its breathtaking forests and hills and lovely houses which lacked the murals we were to see all over Austria. In the fields were sheds of varied sizes some people could be seen putting farming implements in them. I was fascinated by their variety and the fact there were few houses in their vicinity.

As we passed over the German border into Austria, there was a gradual change, apart from the many spectacular murals everything looked much cleaner. Also there were more flowers in gardens and window boxes and growing wild. The coach climbed higher and higher into the mountains leaving people off at various hotels particularly at Seefeld, bypassing Innsbruck, capital of the Tyrol. It was dark when we eventually arrived at the village of Igles a few miles from Innsbruck.

The Hotel Gastrop Stein was a mixture of traditional and modern, a new wing had been opened only last year and we were to sleep there. The older



part of the hotel had the colourful murals outside, the hall had wonderful black tiled floors and a very wide staircase surrounded by wrought iron.

The reception area was upstairs and a lovely mixture of light woods and pink flowered settees. Our bedroom was more like an ultra modern flat with its own balcony overlooking the mountains and village. The room was lined in light wood with a separate kitchenette with every cooking implement you would need, also a fridge.

That night we had a late supper, all sorts of cold meats with gherkins followed by ice-cream and a tiny coffee with cream not sufficient to cure our thirst, we had to ask for more.

The next morning we had our welcome meeting at a nearby hotel with our tour representative discussing trips, we were the only two from Enterprise Travel at our hotel and my daughter was the youngest of the group.

We explored Igles for several hours and listened to a band concert beside a lake in the local park, afterwards we had a delicious lunch at the Patisserie shop. That evening at the hotel we had a dinner of melon, fried calves head which was delicious, my daughter played safe and had lasagne.

A rain storm was starting as we went to a concert in the lovely little church a few yards from the hotel, its bell tolled every waking hour, it woke us every morning. At midday the bells pealed longer for the angleus as it does in Ireland. The church was rich in tapestries and gold symbols and filled with holiday makers. No locals seemed to be present though in the daytime they flocked to the adjoining graveyard with their watering cans.

The picturesque tourist office was just down the road and we went there to put our names down for a guided mountain climb next day, then we took the tram to Innsbruck. What a lovely winding journey it was through the heavily wooded countryside with the panorama of Innsbruck's spires and steeples in sight at every turn.

After browsing in the fascinating but very expensive crystal shop and in the many souvenir shops in the medieval streets, we refreshed ourselves with apple strudel and strawberry and chocolate cakes. Afterwards we

visited Hoflurg Imperial Palace which had some splendid paintings of the Austrian Royal Family, the ceiling in the great hall was a work of art in itself. We took photos of the famous Golden Roof and travelled back to Igles by bus but it was not as good as the tram ride.

We decided to have an early night to prepare for our mountain trip next day. We met our guide Dietrie at the tourist information office, there were two other climbers, a German lady who spoke no English and a French lady called Annie who spoke excellent English and was very good company, she had spent a year working in England. We took a cable car to Heilirasser first then another to Herienilfahrtslouif and followed our guide up the Mountain, Dietrie talked all the time, he kept saying "No problem", he spent the winters running a ski school in Maryland but returned to Innsbruck every Summer to spend time with his mother. He was wonderfully fit for fifty one, bronze and lithe.

We were not tired when we got to the top, we had drinks at a rather primitive cafe there and admired the breathtaking panorama spread beneath us. We took some photos with some Germans, one was very funny, he played a little horn and a mouth organ.

The descent down the mountain was far more difficult, we walked through forests, meadows, saw many cows with bells tinkling and in the woods immaculately kept grottos, some seemed to be symbols of the rosary, it was a holy place of pilgrimage. We were exhausted when we got back to Igles having been walking for hours we felt we had earned our bronze medals. The German lady got her silver medal and was going to mountain climb again the next day!

I went to the Tyrollean evening with a couple from Lincoln as my daughter was so sore, it was lively and fun. Next day we browsed around the village shops, after much deliberation I bought a white Austrian blouse, everything was so expensive. I tried the drink Guvan, a very hot fruity wine, very tasty.

Thursday we went to Innsbruck again this time to the Court chapel where we saw Maxamillan's tomb. It started to rain and we went to the Tyrollean folk museum, that was very interesting. The Tyrollean people were very artistic and creative and in the past they handmade everything for home and farm. That night we went to Annie's hotel and met her

Mother but she did not have any English and she could not understand our weak French and we had some Guvan again.

We went on a day trip to Italy passing the hut where Hitler had met with Mussolini, after the spotlessness of Austria, the villages and towns we passed through seemed a bit rundown and grubby, but it was cheaper for souvenirs, particularly leather goods.

The couple from Lincoln had been unable to find the Tyrollean museum and they were disappointed as they would not have time to see it. I promised to send them a copy of the extensive guide book when I got home. Having done so I was overwhelmed some months later to receive a video from them which they had filmed in Igles, Innsbruck and surrounding areas and they had also filmed the Tyrollean evening. When I play it I am back again in that beautiful country.

## Is Poetry Easier To Write Than Prose?

Terry James

**T**his was the question posed recently in one of the small-press literary magazines. And it is not a question that can easily be answered. Poetry and prose are just so different. Indeed, not only poetry and prose, but poets and prose writers differ greatly in their approach to the business of writing. Prose is practical; poetry is not practical. Nor are poets – generally speaking – practical people. Many poets really do walk around with their heads in the clouds. And why not when one considers that the poet's stock-in-trade is daydreaming?

Poetry, by and large, is not cost-effective. The amount of time spent on even a short poem can be considerable. Thus, a full afternoon's work for the poet may yield, say, a verse, a few lines, or nothing at all; such is the elusive nature of poetic inspiration. But then, a poem cannot be evaluated in the same way as one would evaluate an article or short story. Prose needs publishing in a magazine, journal or whatever; whereas a poem can stand on its own, as it were. Publication is desirable – but not essential. A poem is like a song, it can be spoken aloud, just as a song can be sung. A

poem can be written or typed out and passed around people. Thus, a poem has a life of its own – independently of publication. This is not to suggest that prose is in any way inferior, yet a large amount of popular prose reflects quantity first and quality second.

Poetry is condensed; it is the distillation of thoughts, impressions, emotions, feelings, dreams, moods, and much more. The late Bill Barnes described poetry as ‘An honest art for honest people’ – and so it is. Insincerity in a poem sticks out a mile. One of the fundamental truths of poetry is that it is largely an instinctive art. In this context, the poet is a million miles apart from the trained professional journalist who has to study and obtain qualifications for his calling. Poetry needs no qualifications; it is too ethereal, too other-worldly. And how can you teach someone the art of chasing rainbows, which is what poetry is?

Consider the fact that prose writers are advised to get a minimum of ‘X’ words down on paper each day. This is worth aiming for, and can often be achieved, simply through hard work. And because journalists and novelists make words work for them, they can control words, as it were. The poet, on the other hand, must ‘wait’ on words, so to speak. He ‘ponders’ a poem. Many writers too, can work effectively against a background of noise. Not so the poet; noise and chatter block a poet’s creative channels. Indeed, for poetic inspiration to bubble forth, one requires peace, solitude, plenty of time, and if possible, a pleasing environment. Poetry is the subtlest literary art of all. Most poets are sensitive, highly strung individuals. Perhaps it is true to say that the more sensitive a poet is, the better. And whilst the novelist’s ‘canvas’ can be huge and sprawling, the poet’s canvas tends to be miniscule.

In effect, poets are miniaturists, the ‘jewellers’ of the literary world. The high-pressure, dog-eat-dog world of blasé journalism and deadlines is not for the poet. He stands apart from all this. Nor does he primarily write for a specific market. Short story and article writers will aim their work towards a specific market. Poets cannot be so specific. They will write the poem, and direct it towards a market looking for a particular theme. A poem belongs to a poet, just as a painting belongs to a painter. This is the uniqueness of poetry that distances it from other forms of writing. In short, poetry comes from the heart. And it doesn’t give a toss for technology. Where other forms of writing have been influenced indirectly by the massive changes brought about by electronic gadgetry and the hi-

tech revolution, poetry is largely indifferent to all of this. Pen, paper and person is all that is needed to produce poetry.

But is poetry easier to *write* than prose? To help answer this question, let us listen to the words of that fine English novelist and playwright (but not poet) – Somerset Maugham:

‘The crown of literature is poetry. It is its end and aim. It is the sublimest activity of the human mind. It is the achievement of beauty and delicacy. The writer of prose can only step aside when the poet passes.’  
Need I say more?

UUUUU

### Don't Forget To Shut The Gate

Adrian Danson (1976)

Sweet faced child with curling hair,  
    In garden played without a care.  
Then skipping into the road to die,  
    In pursuit of wayward bouncing ball.  
That speeding car with vacant eye,  
    Heeds not her brief and final call.

### Can You Teach Me To Write?

Joan Hykin

**I**n Summer '95 I spotted in the Library notice of a new course – ‘The Art and Craft of Writing – something of everything and everything to be attempted’ and signed up for 2 years’ evening classes at Leicester University.

I’d been scribbling since I was about ten but had reached the doldrums, not knowing if I could write fiction (certainly I couldn’t sell any, only seldom did I place a short story with a small magazine). Non-fiction had brought more success. I remember dancing for days when ‘Caravan’ took a cynical piece on avoiding cooking on a self-catering tour of Europe.

Twenty-two students arrived on the first night but we settled down quite soon to a dozen, who battled on for three and a half hours a week and an occasional Saturday. We were guinea pigs. The quartet of lecturers who envisaged the course had viewed others – Malcolm Bradbury’s, of course –

and then designed their own. It didn't always work as planned and two of the four left for various reasons after the first term. Thank goodness Veronica Angus, writer and lecturer, graduate of Sydney University's Writing Degree, took the course and us by the scruff of the neck and bullied us for two years. We knew from the start we had to try everything – drama for stage, radio or TV, fiction (all genres), non fiction, newspaper and magazine articles, poetry, criticism ('take Dickens', Shaw's sentences to pieces – what was he saying with each word? and in whose voice? now try and do that').

Prima donnas were not tolerated. If you were a poet who didn't fancy sleazy crime fiction, then 'tough'. If you were a factual, non-fiction person then science fiction/fantasy was dragged out of you. It's amazing what you can do when pushed!

The course was modular so that new students could slot into Year 2 – this didn't work too well and I believe restructuring has meant a new entry every 2 years. This must mean no new blood half way through, something we had appreciated.

Homework became the bugbear you remembered from the VIth Form – every week we produced one or more items, to be read out and torn to pieces. Each module had a major and minor assignment, deadline one week after end of term. If these weren't completed, then no certificate would come your way. Although I hadn't joined for a piece of paper I soon found that I wanted something to show for the grinding pace and the 40-mile round trip weekly in all weathers. That first winter threw everything at me, the most scary being freezing rain which slowed me down so that I reached home just on midnight. To illustrate what the course meant to me: I drove at 15 mph for an hour and a half in driving snow on the A47 to join a Saturday seminar on writing for the Press.

Our poetry lecturer, a sixties' time-warp black leather man, disciple of Jack Kerouac and devotee of Philip Larkin (the Leicester connection, of course) was very kind to me. A definite non-poet, I curled up when asked to write a poem in ten minutes and he sensed my terror, not asking me to read out my efforts. He gave me confidence to have a go, and I managed to produce for him three pieces which John Ward later took for the 'Author'. At other times I wrote a radio play, a crime story and a long science fiction piece which I've since been told to turn into a novel. One

visiting lecturer was kind enough to say if 'Woman's Weekly' ever publishes science fiction I'll be in with a chance.

The final term encompassed the nitty-gritty. We studied Marketing in depth and breadth. The last big assignment was in two parts: firstly to break down one current magazine, identifying our target membership, giving statistical data on lifestyle, ads, income etc. and obtaining guidelines from editors where possible. Secondly we were to write a target article for that magazine. I chose 'Best of British' because its requirements are pretty obvious. I wrote on my experiences with the Girls' Guildry from age 5 to 20, and used membership certificates and keep-fit display programmes as illustrations. I was told to submit it and happily 'Best of British' published it.

So was I taught to write? Difficult to answer. I certainly learned what not to do and to think hard about what I was trying to do with the words I used. I was made to realise that my style had become the pedantic one of an Immigration Appeals statement writer! I learned that short fiction was not my genre (but longer might be), that I could sometimes produce poetry and that I was probably wise to stick to non-fiction. But I can't stress enough that in spite of the slog I did enjoy the course a great deal and that the wise words of Veronica Angus still reverberate in my head when the Muse plays up. And the Certificate helps.

## The Stock Car Dance Floor Orgy

Joe Rosser

Ramjit Patel had been on the same line of the paperback he was reading for about half an hour. Lead eyelids forced themselves down after every word. He was getting too old for this. Hassan would have to do more graveyard shifts. His son could sleep with his head on his arms sitting by the till, and wake up the instant a customer banged on the window. Ramjit had tried it once, carefully checking the pumps were off first, and woke up to an irate man bouncing a brick off the metal night service counter. After running out of petrol, he had walked over two miles in the rain, finally reached a garage, and become lucid with rage when he could not wake the comatose attendant drooling on the counter behind the safety glass.

He closed his eyes. Hassan would be here in an hour, at six; then Ramjit could go home and sleep all day. With any luck the Sunday papers would be

here soon and he could pass the time putting the masses of supplements together. Bloody Sunday papers. They were always late. And no one actually read the mountains of crap inside. He always said ...

The sudden rumbling of approaching cars and tooting horns startled Ramjit out of his doze. He looked up and peered into the darkness. There were no street lamps out here, and beyond the light cast by the forecourt spots, all you could see were black silhouettes of the hills in the distance.

A set of headlights popped into view, coming over the hill and down the road towards the garage. They twinkled in the black and were quickly followed by more. Then another set. And another. Ramjit, with growing astonishment, counted ten sets of headlights, all hurtling down the dual carriageway at speed. They were alongside each other, falling behind, jostling for position, overtaking on the hard shoulder. Horns honked and lights flashed. At one point he saw three pairs of lights running abreast. They were making a racket that reverberated around the countryside. It looked and sounded like the night stage of Le Mans.

The headlights approached the forecourt light spilling out onto the road, and Ramjit prepared to get a good look. It was then he noticed they were slowing, as if to pull into the garage. Horror gripped him as he saw the first pair of lights indicating left. The headlights began to file into a straight line, still approaching far too fast. As the first pair of lights emerged from the darkness and became a car, he had to laugh, despite the apprehension.

The car swerved right, widening the angle of the corner before screeching left into the garage forecourt. It was a rusty, battered old Ford Fiesta that belied the uproar it made. Bright purple, with a huge rear spoiler, wide alloy wheels, and a thick Cherry Bomb exhaust attachment, it looked and sounded ridiculous.

The amount of danger it was putting half of Hertfordshire in was ridiculous too. The Fiesta tore left, smearing wide black marks on the forecourt concrete and whizzing past the pumps. A rainbow of ludicrously coloured and customised cars followed, first swerving right, then whipping left into the garage. Fiestas, an Escort, a wine coloured Mini with a huge yellow smiley face on the bonnet, a ...

A din of screeching tyres, racketing engines, and booming dance music overtook Ramjit's garage. Cars were swerving in through the exit. Cars were doing handbrake turns through the entrance. Cars were playing chicken with the pumps. He stood open mouthed, gaping at the stock car race taking place on the forecourt. An orange Fiesta lurched sideways, towards the big glass door of the shop, and Ramjit's heart lurched upwards towards his throat. The Mini hand-braked to a screeching stop by a pump, the driver's door almost touching the hose, as Ramjit's testicles drew up and almost touched the



underside of his stomach. Two more Fiestas were performing tyre-smoking doughnuts on the pavement over by the car wash. Kids in their late teens were hanging out of the windows, blowing whistles and shouting, “*OI, OI!*” at the tops of triumphant voices, their arms raised out of the cars in fistful salutes.

Cold sweat ran down Ramjit’s back. His hand unconsciously reached for the phone by the till and lay there ready. The cars came to skidding stops; doors opened, and babbling youngsters were getting out. Speeding music boomed around the concrete, shaking the ground.

Ramjit watched, his heart pumping, as teenagers piled out of cars, and his five-minutes-ago sleepy garage turned from a stock car race into some kind of dance floor orgy.

The amount of people that vacated the ten cars and were now on his forecourt amazed him. There were at least four in each, a mix of boys and girls all roughly eighteen or nineteen. They were covered in mud and grass. The boys were topless, or wore bright flowery tops. The girls wore skimpy dresses or belt-like skirts, in luminous prints. There were smiley face tee shirts and baggy Day-Glo tracksuit bottoms everywhere. They wore an array of bizarre accessories. There were woolly hats with baubles, bandannas, swimming caps, toy trumpets on strings, floppy hats. And white gloves. Almost every single one of them wore white gloves. They blew whistles in time to the absurdly fast music. They waved fluorescent sticks. They hugged and kissed. They yelled, “*I love you!*” to each other. Ramjit Patel watched with something approaching pure terror as a fat, muddy skinhead removed every stitch of clothing except his white gloves, climbed onto the roof of a Fiesta and leapt about, waving his arms and peep-peeping his whistle. A large black man ran around the pumps in a figure of eight, with his arms out stretched. He was making aeroplane noises. There was a couple having frantic sex in the back of a black Metro parked by the unleaded pump.

It all confirmed what Ramjit Patel had known since these kids were twinkling headlights on the horizon. As his grandfather in India would have said, they were crazy as a pregnant elephant.

“This garage is ... the place where I land ... *NEEEOOOWWWW!!*”

Aeroplane man flew past the window, grinning insanely.

*The place where I land?* Ramjit was lost; wandering wild eyed and confused amongst the mayhem in his garage. His expression was a comical patchwork of confusion, disbelief, and fear. His dry mouth hung open and his eyes, big moons on his face, darted around the forecourt. His hand remained on the telephone. He noticed some of them were unhooking pumps. They chatted and hugged and shouted, “*Oi oi!*” as they attempted to fill their cars. Ramjit

watched, increasingly baffled, as at least ten minutes passed before any of them realised the pumps were off.

A kid with sweaty long hair roared at him. “Oi, oi mate! Dish the petrol! *Oi, oi!*”

His mate screamed. Everyone was screaming. The noise was insane. It seemed the entire universe was being consumed by a deafening clamour of music and teenagers.

Perhaps they were escaped lunatics. They could be aliens. He was dreaming. Yes, dreaming, that was it. Ramjit Patel turned the pumps on; vaguely hoping he’d wake up soon.

*The place where I land.*

Groups of mucky kids were trundling towards the counter. Ramjit Patel clenched his buttocks. It seemed to take them forever. They stopped to hug and dance, dawdling along the twenty yards from car to shop. Naked man continued his manic car roof dancing. Aeroplane man continued flying. The windows of the rocking black Metro were steaming up.

The first one to finally arrive at the counter was a pale boy with wavy ginger hair. His eyes had rolled so far back only the whites were showing. He fumbled in his pockets and looked at Ramjit with his zombie eyes. His head tilted back at an odd angle, as if he could just about see from under the tops of his sockets.

“Nah ... I ... shit, sorry mate ...” He stumbled away, shaking his head. A girl with her face painted luminous green jumped on him, and screamed she loved him at ear-bleeding level. Ramjit winced and attempted to make sense of the next incoherent customer, a blonde girl in a white satin dress. Ramjit assumed it was a dress, and not her slip. He wasn’t quite sure of anything anymore. Her nipples pointed at him. She was wearing swimming goggles. She stood behind the glass looking at him as her boyfriend nuzzled her neck. Her eyes were rolling around in her sockets, and she was chewing gum at an amazing rate. She stopped chewing and attempted to speak. What came out was a kind of garbled “*hmmmp!*” Her jaw was locking, pushing out and pulling in, twisting like a puppet’s. She seemed to be fighting it when she spoke. She turned and giggled into her boyfriend’s face. She chewed some more. When she spoke again, it came out as slurred phrases, in between bouts of jaw locking frenzy.

“Er ... twenty B & H ... um ... king size Rizla ... Lucozade ...”

Every exchange was the same. Requests were jabbered at the glass. Everyone bought cigarettes, cigarette papers, and Lucozade or water. And petrol. They all said they loved him, told him to “Get on one matey!” shouted “Oi, Oi! Mental!” and blew whistles at the glass. He served about twenty five

insane, ill looking people, silent and open mouthed, ringing up totals on the till and running around the counter to get the drink bottles from the large fridge at the back of the shop.

Once he had served everyone, there was another age of deranged madness before they were all back in the cars. Ramjit watched the bedlam, still standing behind the counter, still in a trance, his mouth still open. It crossed his mind this was all on camera, he had their registrations, but what would be the point of reporting them? For having a party on his garage forecourt?

They began to drive off, and the roar of blowing engines and screaming tyres ensured all coherent thought was banished by total fear again. Ramjit stood still, sweating, as the motor race began an encore, and car bodywork came within inches of blowing them all to smithereens.

Then they were gone. The roar of cheap exhaust attachments faded away and silence enclosed the garage again. He looked at the clock on the till and was shocked to see it was 6:15. Dawn was breaking. He sat down.

“What the fuck was *that*?” Ramjit Patel asked the shop. “Just what was that all about?”

The papers came soon after. They were late, as usual. The paper man left feeling slightly concerned about the vacant fellow on drop 14 who was normally so cheerful.

Ramjit Patel watched the paper man drive off. The birds were singing and the sun was rising into a sheet of pale blue. It was going to be a fine day.

## The Roar Of The Crowd

Michael O’Connor

(3rd prize winner – Lewis Wright)

**I**t happened so very long ago, when I was young and therefore foolish, and at the time I did not understand what I had discovered. But understanding has come upon me slowly, with maturity, and with that understanding comes horror. Now it threatens to engulf me like the most treacherous of swamps, sucking me into its noxious depths no matter how desperately I struggle to pull myself free. The horror has come upon me because I have, for the second time in my unhappy life, seen the damnable poster.

The first time I was still a boy. I lived then in a bustling little town sandwiched between a motorway and a triple-tracked railway line. It was a place easy to reach but even easier to leave, so no one seemed to stay there very

long. Maybe the transient nature of Bridgevale was why I had no friends there. I hope that's why it was, anyway.

Although the poster must have been new, because I had never seen it there before, it somehow seemed to convey the suggestion of great antiquity. I felt it could have been stuck on to a tree outside some medieval village and remained there while time flowed around it and the tree became a telegraph pole and the village became the soulless minor conurbation it then was. "Fab," I probably muttered, a favourite word at that time of new words and new ideas. "If their show is as good as their advertisement, it might be worth seeing." I dragged my glasses out of my jacket pocket and put them on the better to read the extravagant Gothic lettering. "Grand Guignol Theatre Company," I quoted aloud. "Bringing you the classics which have chilled your blood for decades. See Dracula wake in the icy moonlight. Watch as Frankenstein's creature lumbers across the boards in search of his faithless creator. See men become wolves and other fearsome creatures before your very eyes. All this and more ..."

"What's that?" asked Lauren, making me jump. Lauren was my sister, younger than me by three years.

"I wish you wouldn't creep up on me like that," I snapped. "You could give me a heart attack!"

"Oh don't be such a sissy," she mocked. "You're only fifteen. Who ever heard of a fifteen year old having a heart attack."

"Mickey James' Dad down our road had one when he was thirty-seven," I told her, willing myself not to pout. "And he didn't even have his obnoxious sister trying to scare him into it!"

"What's Guignol mean?" she asked, standing on tiptoe and reading over my shoulder.

"It's a place in Transylvania," I lied, mentally resolving to look it up as soon as I got home. "It's a sort of primitive Grand Duchy where they have nothing to do except tell each other horror stories during the long winter nights. They've obviously decided that they are so interesting that more sophisticated people like the British should hear them as well." I did not want to let Lauren know I was actually quite excited by the idea of attending the show. It would not do my teenage image any good to be enthusiastic about anything, so I adopted my usual supercilious and world-weary tone.

"I'd rather stay indoors and watch the TV," Lauren announced. "And you're too nervous to go to anything creepy on your own."

“The doctor says I am highly-strung, not nervous,” I responded angrily. “And I won’t be going with you anyway, even if I do decide to see it. I’ll go with some of my friends.”

“Friends!” echoed Lauren spitefully. “Name three!” She poked me in the ribs and ran off before I could think of a suitably witty retort. She was the most fearless person I ever knew. What a formidable woman she might have become.

‘I’ll show her who’s nervous,’ I remember thinking, staring after the dwindling figure. ‘I’ll creep into the theatre, find out how all the tricks are done, and then make her come with me and explain them all in a loud voice during the performance so she’ll see I’m really cool.’ Taking another look at the poster to double-check where the Company were appearing, I climbed onto my bike and pedalled swiftly away.

Bridgevale had an aroma all of its own, which became stronger yet less identifiable the closer you got to the centre of town. Part of it was petrol fumes, of course, and there was always a faint meaty odour emanating from the dog food factory on the outskirts. But there were other smells mixed up in it, fish and rotting vegetables and tar and things I could not begin to guess at. My father suggested it came from stuff that the goods trains carried, and that seemed a sensible enough idea. The funny thing was that, when you put all the horrible smells together, the overall aroma was rather nice. Maybe I just associated it with home, and now in my lonely middle years I long to have it waft through the air around me again.

As I leant my bike against a litter bin in the Town Square and crept down the side alley towards the stage door of Bridgevale’s only theatre, the smell was thick and heavy. Dark red plaster crumbled from the outer walls of the building, and the wide black stage door seemed to bleed paint as I stood in front of it. Though it was mid-afternoon, the alley was in shadow, and a chill breeze shook me as I tried to pluck up the courage to try the handle.

Maybe a cloud passed over the sun, or maybe I shut my eyes for a moment, but when I looked closely at the door, I could plainly see that it was ajar. The show would not be on for more than four hours, so the theatre would almost certainly be deserted, yet I was suddenly far from sure I could go in. But then I thought of Lauren’s mocking little laugh and of my plot to get my own back on her, so I forced down my fears. I opened the creaking wooden door and peered short-sightedly inside. The hallway was empty and the building in darkness. I took a step forward, and softly closed the stage door behind me, taking care that the lock did not click shut. A few more paces took me past the doorkeeper’s uninhabited box and into a large room lined with windows partly hidden behind

cracked wooden shutters. Though countless specks of dust danced maniacally in the dim shafts of light spilling through the gaps in the wood, there was a sense of stillness about the room, about the whole theatre in fact, which put me in mind of a gigantic mausoleum.

I felt relieved to have got so far without being challenged. I had been to that theatre on many occasions, mainly to pantomimes and amateur variety shows, so I vaguely knew its internal layout. Though I had never been behind the scenes before, I knew where the auditorium was located, so it was easy to work out how to get backstage. If anyone caught me, I would tell them I was doing an article for the school paper. I didn't intend to steal anything, so it did not seem to my innocent mind that anyone would be all that annoyed if they caught me. But this did not stop my heart from pounding and my palms becoming clammy with sweat.

Relishing the trembling excitement of my own uncharacteristic courage, I correctly chose the door which led upstairs to the dressing and storage rooms, and crept as quietly as I could up the creaking uncarpeted steps. The corridor I found myself in had several doors leading off it. I stood at the top of the staircase, scarcely breathing, and strained my ears to listen for any sound which would warn me that I was not alone. But I could not discern the faintest breath. So, licking my dry lips, I stepped forward and opened the first door I came to.

When my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, I was able to distinguish what looked like a miscellany of musty fur and suede coats hanging up, neatly displayed on a bar a couple of feet away from the right hand wall. I found a bit of string which operated a dull light-bulb, so entered and let the door swing shut. When it did so, I could see that someone had written on the back of it, in chalk, the peculiar word 'Were-Drobe'. Underneath, in a different hand, someone had added 'Ha Ha, very funny, Fenric.' Deciding that these were just old costumes and that I would find no apparatus or special effects machinery in this room, I left it and tried the next door along the corridor.

In this small room stood what appeared to be a rough hewn statue, little taller than me but much broader, and vaguely man-like in appearance. There was an empty hole in its chest and it stood with its hands crossed as though in an attitude of prayer. On a shelf at the far side of the cupboard a red stone, slightly smaller than the hole in the statue, throbbed and glowed as if it were alive. A roll of parchment lay on the shelf next to it, but it looked too fragile for me to risk touching. This was obviously a piece of scenery, designed to frighten the more gullible members of the audience, though I was impressed by the glowing red stone. I could not see any wires or batteries connected to that at all.

I smiled when I entered the next room in the corridor, for laid out on a slab there and bound by metal chains, lay a very creditable life-sized model made up to look like Frankenstein's monster, the gruesome one I'd seen on the new Hammer film advertisements rather than the old black and white one, who always seemed a bit soppy to me. It was darker in that room than the previous ones, so I could not be at all sure, but it looked very much as if its left arm was crooked. As I stared, it seemed as if the dummy was breathing! It must have been a trick of the light, but it revived my fears, and I was much more tentative opening the next door.

I was strangely disappointed to find that this room was only full of old coffins, all with their lids on and smelling disgusting. The only light in the room was that which came from the hallway behind me. The windows had been covered with thick black cloth and the bulb removed from the dangling flex in the centre of the room, so I could not inspect the interior too closely. But it did not seem like a very imaginative idea to use coffins in a horror show, especially ones that looked like they were second-hand rather than sleek and shining black, and the organisers went down in my estimation. In fact, my whole inspection was proving to be a big let-down. Though the poster promised spine-chilling wonders, all I had found were some tatty costumes and drab scenery.

A fearsome growl made me whirl around, expecting to face a slaving guard-dog. In fact, what I saw was far worse, a short, immensely fat man with a horribly disfigured face and a hump on his back, dressed in jeans and a tattered smock. He was brandishing a wooden club with metal spikes through the end of it. I was no athlete, but neither was he, and I scampered past him and down the stairs before he could swing his clumsy body round to follow me. I was out of the building and on my bike long before he could have reached the stage door. It was only when I was safely pedalling towards home that I realised he must have been one of the actors rehearsing his part in full make-up, and was probably killing himself laughing at my fright. I resolved to attend the show, and sit right up at the front, so that he would see me and realise that I wasn't the least bit scared. I'd never really minded Lauren's teasing, if truth be told, but I did not want anyone else thinking I was a coward.

The most annoying thing was that I would not be able to show off to Lauren after all, for I had found no trickery to explain to her, apart from the obvious props. But somehow I knew then that I would never have done it anyway, maybe because I was too timid to speak up in front of a crowd of people. Or maybe because part of me envied her innocence and was loath to spoil it. I would not have wanted her to be any different.

The show was popular and tickets went quickly, so Lauren and I, unexpectedly accompanied by Dad and Mum who had been as enticed as I was by the poster, were seated quite a long way from the stage on the first night of the show. But we had a good view, and I have to confess it was much more impressive than I had expected. The tired looking coats I had seen behind the first door somehow transformed their wearers into really convincing monsters when they draped them over their shoulders; on one occasion, a man dressed up as a wolf got so carried away that two or three of the other actors had to drag him off the stage to stop him jumping into the audience and savaging a little kid in the front row who had thrown something at him. With the red stone placed in the hole in its chest, the odd looking dummy moved awkwardly about the stage, apparently obeying commands read in some foreign language from the parchment, though I suppose it was machinery that worked him really. The announcer said it was a Golem, and the best part of its act was when it crushed a pile of bricks into dust between its stubby hands. The Frankenstein creature didn't do much other than stumble about, though from the way it moved I thought it was probably a man dressed up rather than the model I had seen. There was an Egyptian Mummy which did much the same thing, and I thought these two were pretty boring. Then there were vampires drinking goblets of blood and being shot with live bullets but not getting killed, and trolls fighting each other, and a witch who made lots of flashing lights and loud bangs that made me jump. Funnily enough, the little man with the hump never appeared at all, though he had by far the most bizarre appearance. But as he was the only one I had seen close up, maybe I wasn't in a position to judge fairly.

During the few days the Grand Guignol Theatre Company was in town, pretty much everyone I knew went to see them, and they were the prime topic of conversation until the morning after they left. Because then a lot of genuinely horrible things happened. Several people travelling home from a late night party were found with their throats cut and all the blood drained from them.

A burly railway worker who had failed to report in for night shift was found in a shallow grave by the tracks several days later with his left arm neatly sliced from his shoulder. And there were a number of other deaths or disappearances around the same time. All these gruesome tragedies made the play acting of the Grand Guignol performers seem rather childish by comparison.

One of those who disappeared was my sister Lauren. She had gone out very early to ride her bike because it was a clean, crisp morning and she felt restless and too awake to stay in bed. That's what she crept into their



bedroom and told our semi-slumbering parents, anyway, skipping out before anyone could stop her. For weeks afterwards, the police scoured the country for Lauren and the other people who had disappeared, and naturally tried to find the travelling Guignol Theatricals, but they had vanished as completely as my sister.

It was impossible to accept that she was never coming back again. My parents died still hoping that one day she would, while I have lived on with the same desperate hope.

And now it is almost thirty years later and I have seen the poster again, and torn it down from the boarded up shop window near my South London home where it appeared. The unthinkable thoughts that had always scurried around the corner of my mind but never quite settled have finally taken a solid form and grown into crystal clarity. I hold the poster in my hands now, and it is much the same as when I saw it the first time. But there have been a few changes. Maybe some of the wandering outsiders met their end in some suitably macabre way. Maybe not all of them were satisfied by the way of life that enabled them to move freely among normal people, by that evil irony of hiding secret reality by pretending it was public illusion. I don't know what happened to those who had gone from the company. But as they traced their murderous trail around the world, they clearly recruited new performers along the way.

At the bottom of the poster, a few words stand out in scarlet lettering. 'See the world's youngest vampire. Watch her drink blood and weep. Come and see lovely Lauren, the little girl who can never die.'

## The Road To Bor

William Wood

(Winner of Vincent Brennan 2001 Competition)

You can no longer drive the Bor road. Today it is planted with landmines. I must have been one of the last civilians to have made the journey when there was a promise of autonomy for the Southern Sudan. I set off from Juba the regional capital to follow the Nile downstream into another world. Crossing the Bailey bridge out of town I was faced with a simple choice: right to Uganda or left to Egypt. I turned left.

For the first half hour the Land Rover rattled over a gently curving, rolling plain, denuded of trees by the townsfolk's insatiable need for charcoal. Only ten years previously this was still elephant and leopard country. Soon however the road passed through the vulnerable game reserve, an area of grassland and low trees where, despite poaching by the military and recreational hunting by French and German aid workers, elephants, antelopes and giraffes, and a few lions and leopards still survived.

After the Mandari town and former river port of Mangalla, not quite a ghost town, but already a dying skeleton of a place, known mainly for its cheap sugar cane, the bush thickened. The road branched away from the river.

A large eland, a beast larger and more agile than a cow, stepped out of the forest, pricked up its round, furry ears and watched with curiosity as I tugged my balloon of dust along behind the Land Rover. I crawled within metres of this a massively powerful, yet cuddly antelope.

A troupe of baboons chose this moment to cross the road, panicked as I approached and split into two groups, one on either side of the track. At the last minute a baby decided to change sides and rushed screaming across in front of my wheels.

More surprising still and belonging equally to the bush were the Mandari women. Usually the Mandari cut a black and wiry figure. Every so often along this road, however, the most startling golden girls would appear like advertisement hoardings. One moment there was nothing but few trees, next moment these young goddesses appeared flashing smiles. They wore short grass or cloth skirts. Their strong thighs and large bare breasts glistened in the sun. They were robust, sensual and positively glistened with health. I was told (Anita Roddick, where were you then?) that they rubbed the red earth mixed with urine and vegetable oil into their skin as a beauty potion. Always alone and never intimidated, these young women were truly statuesque, both in physique and in colouring, some cast in bronze, others in pure gold. Even when I got no smile or answering wave, they returned a frank and curious stare.

An hour later I found myself in Dinka country and the road became dotted with people. Men and women were tall, thin and weary. They walked with big, slow steps that carried them over huge distances. The men more often than not were naked except for their spears, a wooden club and bracelets on wrists and ankles. Sometimes they wore a short cape on their shoulders like a French gendarme, only the Dinka favoured primary colours.

Every so often I had to stop to let herds of cattle by, some of forty or fifty head, others of several hundreds. Two or three men walked behind each slow moving

herd. The men would carry around their shoulders any calf born along the road; sometimes they carried their own children, but the real beasts of burden were the women, who followed, sometimes a mile behind, with cooking utensils and camp materials on their heads. All these people looked tired to death. They had marched from 2 until 10 a.m. when they rested in huge cattle camps. Some of these skinny, footsore cattle, many of them large bulls, stood staring in utter amazement at my Land Rover, too bewildered to make way. One bull bumped into the vehicle and shot back in horror. All of them had wide horns and the road ahead looked like a moving forest.

In the camps stood thousands upon thousands of cattle. The air above them was a cloud of dust. The smell of dust, urine, dung, ash and of warm bovine bodies reminded me of English cowsheds, a homely feeling in the wild. The sound was unceasing, deafening, the lowing of a thousand complaining beasts. The migration was never ending, broken only by cattle raids and varied according to the season.

The red marram road, straight but corrugated, gave way to pale grey earth tinged with pink and mauve light. Now it was baked and hard, but in the wet weather it could not bear the weight of a vehicle.

The landscape here was more open. To the East there were no roads or towns before Ethiopia, days away. The bush was still at this time alive with game and people, all prey to rebels with Russian weapons smuggled over the border. Because of the guns tribal fighting was worse than it had been when the worst deterrent was spears. Nevertheless wild life still abounded as scavengers such as vultures, ungainly marabou storks and kites testified.

This stretch of the Nile was rich in water bird life. Every kind of stork, heron and crane was busy snapping up fish and frogs from shrinking pools or flying along the river where brilliant kingfishers glinted and darted.

Where the road flanked the river I could see the Sudd stretching away, a vast labyrinth of papyrus among which grotesque shoe-bill stork flourished and people paddled dug-out canoes. Even in colonial times when paddle steamers linked Khartoum with Juba it must have been difficult in places to recognise the main stream of the Nile. Just here the channel was obvious, fast flowing and dotted with clumps of floating water hyacinth and Nile cabbage. On the far bank cattle and yet more cattle gathered, their greys and roans masking the bright green of the Sudd or merging with the dry bush and dust of their camp. There was a constant to-ing and fro-ing across the river in log canoes and people calling over the quarter of a mile of water, their voices carrying clearly and mingling with the bird cries.

Every so often on this journey I had to pull in to register at police checks. Here, as all over the South, I met with utter lethargy. One policeman was lying on his back in the crook of a low tree, another sprawled in a wooden chair, his legs splayed, heels propped in the dust, arms dangling behind the chair back. They watched impassively as I drew up. I might have been something on a screen. Gradually they realised I was real, but made no move until I unstuck myself from the seat of the Land Rover and walked over to them.

They stirred, we shook hands and strolled together to the little mud room to fill in details in the book – time, registration number, destination etc. and I continued on my way.

Occasionally they searched the Land Rover in a desultory fashion, occasionally late in the day when they were drunk they could be abusive and obstructive, but usually they regarded the effort of checking me as much of an inconvenience to them as it was to me. The police were all Southerners, black Africans and on the whole good-natured. The people I feared were the army, Arabs far from home. They controlled the bridge in and out of Juba and would speak no language other than Arabic.

The main problem about the rural police checks was the delay. The longer they took, the more difficult it was to keep potential passengers out of the vehicle. Everyone wanted a lift. You let one in and a dozen were installed, before you could shut the door. Then it was difficult to remove them.

This time I gave two Dinkas a lift. Their spears just fitted in. The policeman himself tried to bribe me to take them, with their money, forcing the notes into the breast pocket of my bush shirt. I returned the bribe but accepted the hitchhikers. After all, I had to pass back through this check point. Best to humour them.

Small talk over the engine whine and shaking of a Land Rover on a dirt road with two, naked seven foot strangers is not easy. I admired their spears and asked whether they would consider selling me one. They explained haltingly but with dignity that their spear was an extension of themselves. Since childhood they had protected themselves and their cattle against raiders human and animal, they had used them in various ceremonies and rites of passage; to part with their spear would be like losing a limb or a friend. I apologised for even suggesting that they would want to sell. They said I was not to know and anyway, for forty pounds they might be able to make the sacrifice.

I refused, not so much because of the price, but convinced by their earlier protestations I did not want to see a weapon imbued with such significance

hung as a memento on the wall of a European living room. Any trophies I took would be captured only in words.

Again the scenery changed and for a while we drove across open land where only palms and cactuses grew, and sisal with long, central stalks. Goats were turning the grasslands into a desert.

I waved to a boy, about ten years old, black and naked as a stick of charcoal, who stood holding two shiny white kids, one under each armpit. I was tempted to stop and take a photo but did not want to intrude. I had others, an old Dinka smoking his pipe under a tree, cattle, people in canoes. Why steal this boy's image?

Other sights contained more of pathos than of the picturesque. A little girl led a blind grandmother along the road by means of a long stick. A group carried a sick woman somewhere for help.

Nearer Bor the army camps became evident, the schools were closed, occupied by soldiers as poor and as ragged as the people they had no real desire to oppress. And surely the rebels were better armed.

Attempts were still being made at normality. The usual bundles of grass and sacks of charcoal were on sale at the roadside. Some people were re-roofing their tukuls with the new, yellow grass in preparation for the rainy season. I passed a big, conical cow byre, a grass tea cosy large enough to cover a London bus. It was still difficult to believe I had driven across a country at war. But when I reached my destination the first thing I heard was that just North of Bor three aid workers had been shot dead. The American Company employing them had decided to evacuate all personnel.

As I write this the Northern Islamic government is again waging a war of genocide against its black inhabitants, fellow citizens it has historically regarded as slave fodder.