



Edinburgh Writers' Club

The Bulletin

2014-15

CLUB NIGHTS

by Sheila Adamson

Flash Fiction competition

The annual flash fiction competition saw sixteen entries this year, read out and voted for on the night. Members explored the versatility of the format, with some serious and thought-provoking entries, some comic, and some packing a lot of story into 150 words.

For those who were inspired by this competition to write more flash fiction, you might be interested in the following outlets and competitions:

Flash 500 – stories up to 500 words

http://www.flash500.com/index_files/flashfiction.html

Fish Flash Fiction Prize – up to 300 words

<http://www.fishpublishing.com/flash-fiction-contest-competition.php>

Nano Fiction – up to 300 words

<http://nanofiction.org/submit>

Flash Fiction Online – 500-1000 words

<http://flashfictiononline.com/main/submit-guidelines/>

This season we are meeting at the Wash Bar, on the Mound, which we hope members will find easier to get to than the Eric Liddell Centre. We have an

upstairs room to ourselves – not a terribly big room, as we found when we tried to cram everybody in for our opening speaker, **Shirley Blair**. Shirley is the fiction editor for *The People's Friend*. She spoke about the importance of characters in all forms of fiction.

If the characters aren't interesting, she argued, readers won't care what happens to them, no matter how dramatic or surprising your plot. When characters provoke an emotional response in the reader, the events of the plot will have more impact. She reminded us that 'provoking an emotional response' doesn't mean that the characters have to be good guys. Some of the best characters in fiction are not 'good' people, but they have a vulnerability or enough of a grain of humanity to allow us to empathise with them. (Think, for instance, of Heathcliff's love for Cathy or Becky Sharp's friendship with Amelia.)

The first thing is to think about how you would sum up the character in two or three sentences. What are the most important things about them? What makes them stand out from the crowd? And what do they want most? Then, when you're writing, get under their skin and tell us what they're thinking.

Shirley fielded numerous questions about *The People's Friend* and what they will or

will not commission. (Note that this magazine is one of the major buyers of short stories in Scotland – Shirley said she bought 17 stories a week.) Writers were advised to read the magazine and get a feel for the broader range of stories that are being included these days. It is an editorial approach that Shirley described as ‘reality with softer edges’. She advised that stories didn’t have to have happy endings, but the ending would have to feel satisfactory for the characters at that stage of their lives.

Members were encouraged to write and submit stories of 3000 or 3200 words in length as there was currently an over-supply of the shorter stories. It should also be noted that the Friend has slots for features and travel writing.

See the website for details:

<http://www.thepeoplesfriend.co.uk/footer/guidelines/>

Next, we were pleased to welcome back former member **Margaret Skea**, who won the 2011 Harper Collins / Alan Titchmarsh People’s Novelist Competition with her sixteenth century novel, *Turn of the Tide*. Margaret noted that in both historical fiction and any other genre, the writer has to create a believable world in which the story takes place. With historical fiction, the trick is knowing enough about the period to be able to focus on the story without always having to stop and check facts.

Margaret admits that she loves research and sometimes indulges in it as a displacement activity from writing. (That’s probably the attitude you need to have to succeed with historical fiction.) But she also advised against taking research and authenticity too far. For instance, any

attempt to render faithfully dialect from long ago would probably make your dialogue unintelligible. Sometimes changing the sentence structure slightly can be enough to evoke an earlier era, without requiring readers to consult a glossary. Consider these two examples:

‘You will depart with but a small retinue.’
‘My husband is from home.’

The words are all still used today but usually not in that way.

Not all the period details uncovered by your research will be relevant to the story and as such they should be ruthlessly excluded from the narrative. Readers generally want to be entertained, not instructed.

An interesting point of discussion was how to deal with the very different social attitudes of earlier times compared to today. Practices that seemed normal in the Middle Ages would sometimes seem barbaric and distasteful to modern readers. As an author you have to decide whether you are going to show everything ‘warts and all’, or if you might tone down some aspects to make your book less disturbing to read. Similarly, it can be difficult to give female characters active roles in the plot if that wouldn’t be plausible within the cultural context of the book.

Margaret also covered the pros and cons of using real historical characters in your fiction. Real historical events will often feature in the story, as that is one of the joys of this genre, but they can be in either the foreground or the background, depending on the story you want to tell.

Members had lots of questions for Margaret and she helpfully provided advice as to sources to use for research. Everyone came away with a lot of good, practical hints.

On 3 November the Club welcomed **Janne Moller** from Black and White publishing. Janne provided a behind the scenes insight into the publishing industry. Some sobering statistics were revealed. Black and White publishes 10 novels and 35 non-fiction books a year. They receive 25 submissions a week. Clearly the chances of being published are small. But there is a chance, and publishers are always looking for a fresh idea that will capture the public's imagination.

HOW TO ... SCARE YOUR READERS

by Sheila Adamson

Anyone who writes stories wants to get the reader fully involved in the drama of the moment. You want them to care about what happens next – to be worried for the characters, to be sad when they are sad and frightened when they are scared. This isn't an easy technique to master.

Consider, for example, Mary Shelley, describing the morning after Dr Frankenstein has brought life to his creature:

He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. He jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled on his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed downstairs.

I took refuge in the courtyard belonging to the house which I inhabited, where I remained during the rest of the night, walking up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively, catching and fearing each sound as if it were to announce the approach of the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life.



Now, it might sound heretical to say so, but this isn't an example of brilliant suspense writing. There are a few things Shelley could have done to get more drama out of this moment.

First of all, she could have slowed down the narrative. If you listen to anyone telling a ghost story you will note how they instinctively modulate their pace. The voice will slow almost to a stop at the scariest moment. 'And then she heard it. Tap tap tap on the window ...'

Shelley could have drawn the scene out more, allowing us to experience the tension. As it is, Frankenstein leaps out of bed and escapes within three sentences.

We then have one extremely long sentence, telling us how agitated Frankenstein felt. You will all have spotted by now the basic rule that Shelley has broken. Yes, she's 'telling, not showing'. (In her defence, she was a teenager and probably never attended any sessions of the Edinburgh Writers' Club.)

If you have described your peril effectively, it will be obvious that your characters are alarmed. You won't need to explain to anyone that they are in the greatest agitation. You may, of course,

want to highlight it if one of your characters is not scared – if they are so brave or devil-may-care that they laugh in the face of danger. But otherwise, you shouldn't need to bolster your prose with claims about how frightened people felt.

Compare this extract from *Room*, by Emma Donoghue. The protagonist, a young boy called Jack, is trying to escape from the man who is holding him and his mother captive:

The ground breaks my feet smash my knee hits me in the face but I'm running running running, where's Somebody, Ma said to scream to a somebody or a car or a lighted house, I see a car but dark inside and anyway nothing comes out of my mouth that's full of my hair but I keep running *Ginger Jack be nimble be quick*. Ma's not here but she promised she's in my head going *run run run*. A roaring behind me that's him, it's Old Nick coming to tear me in half *fee fie foe fum*, I have to find Somebody to shout *help help* but there isn't a somebody, there's no somebody, I'm going to have to keep running forever but my breath is used up and I can't see and -

Donoghue doesn't tell us at any point what Jack is feeling. It is all there in his inner monologue, in the rush and ungrammatical tumble of his words, in the obvious terror of the situation.

Note also how she draws the scene out. She needs the reader to be in Jack's mind, unsure if he's going to get away. Compare the way this scene is written to Shelley's brusque 'I escaped and rushed downstairs'.

In the extract above, Donoghue uses the absence of full stops to evoke panic. Another way to increase tension is to go to the other extreme and use very short sentences. A lot of short sentences one

after the other can give the impression of many things happening at once, rat-tat-tat. Similarly, short paragraphs can help to slow the story-telling down and make each moment stand on its own. Long sentences with commas and sub-clauses are rarely what you want in this situation.

It isn't difficult, perhaps, for Donoghue to establish Jack's fear in the extract above. The situation of his captivity has been established and it is obvious what the consequences might be if he fails to escape. It can be more challenging to introduce a new character and describe it in such a way as to make clear that the reader should be worried.

H P Lovecraft wrote many horror stories and became famous for his imagination and his lavish use of adjectives and adverbs. Here is an example of his writing:

As the man mumbled on in his shocking ecstasy the expression on his hairy, spectacled face became indescribable, but his voice sank rather than mounted. My own sensations can scarcely be recorded. All the terror I had dimly felt before rushed upon me actively and vividly, and I knew that I loathed the ancient and abhorrent creature so near me with an infinite intensity. ... He was almost whispering now, with a huskiness more terrible than a scream, and I trembled as I listened. (*The Picture in the House*)

Again, there is more telling than showing here, and the adjectives and adverbs are signs of a writer trying too hard. (Although resorting to 'indescribable' smacks of giving up.)

Often it is the one well chosen detail that has the most impact. In *Jamaica Inn*, Daphne du Maurier describes the character of Joss Merlyn as ‘a great husk of a man, nearly seven feet high’. He is obviously physically powerful, but what tells the reader to watch out for him are the unexpected touches, the ‘quick and exquisite moving of his hands’, the unprovoked laughter, the remnants of his good looks:

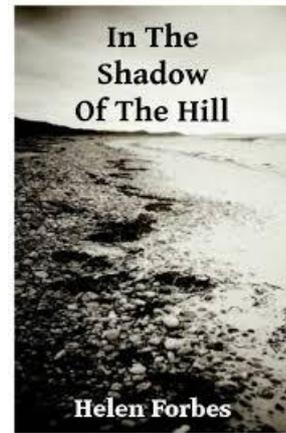
The best things left to him were his teeth, which were all good still, and very white, so that when he smiled they showed up clearly against the tan of his face, giving him the lean and hungry appearance of a wolf. And, although there should be a world of difference between the smile of a man and the bared fangs of a wolf, with Joss Merlyn they were one and the same.

For anyone who wants to write suspense, horror or action, it is worth looking back at your favourite books and considering how other writers have managed situations like these. What do you think works best?

Don't have nightmares ...

NEWS

Congratulations to EWC country member **Helen Forbes** on the publication of her first novel. *'In The Shadow Of The Hill* skilfully captures the intricacies and malevolence of the underbelly of Highland and Island life, bringing tragedy and vengeance to the magical beauty of the Outer Hebrides.' Published by Thunderpoint Publishing Ltd www.thunderpoint.co.uk/books.html



The **Mulgray Twins** have released another book in the DJ Smith and Gorgonzola series. *Acting Suspiciously* embroils the pair in the world of Mary Queen of Scots historical re-enactments.

Despairing of ever getting published? At least we live in the right place. A recent report found that the UK publishes more books per head of population than any other country. In 2013 there were 2,874 new books published per million people.

Club members **Olga Wojtas** and **Sheena Guz** will be among the featured writers at the Scottish Book Trust's Story Shop at this year's Book Festival. Story Shop, now in its eighth year, is a series of daily 10 minute flash fiction and short story readings by local emerging writers. Competition was fierce and only 17 slots were available. If you're at the Festival look out for the Story Shop readings at 4pm in the Spiegelent.

To learn about Book Trust competitions and to use their resources for writers see www.scottishbooktrust.com.

Tony Shephard's first novel, *Namestone*, is available from Instant Apostle press and via Amazon. Twenty-first-century scientist Frank Scanlon and a sixteenth-century monk are thrown together in a personal battle between good and evil.

LIFE WRITING

This year, in a break with tradition, we invited our competition adjudicator to speak to the Club *before* the deadline for entries. This allowed her to give us tips and warnings before we submit our manuscript.

Professor Bashabi Fraser from the Centre for Literature and Writing at Edinburgh Napier University is the judge for the Life Writing competition. The term 'life writing' covers a wide range of genres: biography, autobiography, memoir, travel writing, descriptions of societies and ways of life. The connecting thread is that what is written must be based on fact, but told as a story; in other words, with the same attention to narrative, pacing and general technique as you would use when writing fiction.

For the purposes of the EWC competition (deadline 2 March) members are asked to focus on memoirs. (See definitions) Bashabi made clear that she expected the piece of writing to be about our own life experiences.

There was a lively discussion at the meeting and it was evident that members were full of creative ideas about how to approach the format. There was scope for including diary extracts, letters or poetry. For the purposes of the competition, which has a word limit of 2000, a straight narrative is probably best.

Definitions

Biography: written in the third person, factual account of somebody's life

Autobiography: written in the first person, complete account of your life, with your thoughts and feelings

Memoir: written in the first person, account of part of your life, with your thoughts and feelings

Some of the key points to bear in mind when writing a memoir are:

- You must structure the narrative. In a memoir, you choose which events to include. It is up to you to impose some order on the story you tell.
- Choose the stories and events that are the most interesting to other people.
- The author and the narrator are the same person. Don't adopt a 'voice' as you might when writing fiction. Be authentic. Be yourself.
- Set the scene. Give a flavour of the place, the time, the ambience.
- Write with conviction.

See <http://www.memoirsbyme.com/> for examples.

NEW WRITER AWARDS

by Olga Wojtas

It has to be the best Christmas present ever: a phone call in December to tell me I had won a New Writer's Award from the Scottish Book Trust. I certainly hadn't expected it, since I had already applied twice without success. I still have no idea what went right this time. There are ten of us: five in fiction, three in poetry, and two in young adult, with another two in Gaelic still to be appointed. Declan Colgan, a former EWC stalwart, is another winner, and says he hasn't abandoned the club, but has just had other pressures on his time. So we can hope to see him back before too long.

There are rumours that to get an award, you have to be young, but I'm the proud owner of a bus pass. There are rumours that you have to have done a creative writing MLitt, which I haven't, although I've done an OU diploma. I have no insight into the criteria, and can only tell you about my submission. This included a 2,600-word short story (a modern take on the epistolary novel in being told entirely through emails). I also had a publications list of 20 short stories (and one four-line poem). And I outlined the classes I attend: the Words on Canvas group attached to the National Galleries; a weekly community centre group; and a fortnightly short story writing course. I also spelled out the difference that the £2,000 award would make. I am a freelance journalist, and my own writing always ends up at the bottom of the to-do list. Financial support gives me the luxury of being able to turn down paid work, allowing me to ring-fence time for creative writing.

In March, I will be given a mentor, whom I'll meet four times over the coming year. I don't know the details yet, but I would like someone who can critique my writing. Other people may want help in terms of presentation, or finding an agent.



Olga Wojtas

Right now, three other newbies and I are going for a week's writing retreat in Cove Park in Argyllshire, with the others sensibly going in April when the weather's likely to be better. I had never heard of Cove Park, and when I Googled it, the accommodation looked like the pods in the BBC series *Castaway*, which was set on the Hebridean island of Taransay. I've now discovered that they are the actual *Castaway* pods, which were moved from Taransay in 2000. However, we are not staying in pods but in cubes. According to the information sheet, "the six cubes were devised by the London-based company Urban Space Management and are constructed from recycled freight containers."

It certainly sounds as though it will be an experience, and I'll report back if I don't succumb to hypothermia.

More information about the award:

<http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/writing/scottish-book-trust-training-awards/new-writers-awards>

HOW TO ... PITCH YOUR WORK

by Sheila Adamson

Writing a book is complicated enough; then you have to persuade somebody to read it. While many of us may write largely for our own pleasure, we would all love to see our work on the shelves at Waterstones. In order to do that you either have to pitch to a publisher or an agent (who then pitches to the publisher). And pitching is a skill in itself.

On 2 February, the club held a session to focus on skills of promoting your work and pitching, either orally or in writing. Honorary President Alanna Knight was on hand to offer one-to-one advice.

(NB The session focused on pitching novels rather than non-fiction and the advice below relates mainly to fiction.)

Most agents and publishers prefer submissions to take a format roughly like this:

- covering letter or email
- synopsis
- first few chapters

The synopsis is a factual summary of the plot of the book. It is in the covering letter that you have the opportunity to sell yourself as a writer and the book as a concept. Alternatively, you may include the pitch as a separate document of up to 500 words. This would read like the blurb on the back of the book.

Synopsis

The length of the synopsis will normally be one or two pages – check the guidelines of whoever you are submitting to. (It is usual to format the synopsis in single spacing, by the way, which makes one page more feasible.) Write in the present tense and include the key

elements of the plot, including the ending. Don't try to tantalise the agent by keeping back your big twist ending. They don't like that sort of thing.

When each new character is introduced, put their name in capitals or bold and describe them briefly. Highlight the main conflicts. Also, make sure to specify where and when the story takes place.

Alanna advised us to write the synopsis in a similar style to the novel itself, so that it gave a flavour of what to expect. This can be challenging and may not be practical if you have written your book with a distinctive or unusual voice. But try at least to make the tone of the synopsis match with the narrative.

Members split into groups and shared some synopses they had prepared earlier. I think it's fair to say that none of us had perfected the knack of it. Decisions have to be made as to what to include and what to leave out, which tended to give rise to unanswered questions. It was undoubtedly salutary to see how people who had no previous knowledge of the plot reacted to the synopsis they were provided with, and how easy it was for them to fail to pick up the author's full intentions.

Pitch

The pitch requires a very different focus to the synopsis. Its purpose is to sell the idea of the story and to demonstrate why people might want to buy this book. (And most agents and publishers will be primarily looking for something that can make money, rather than something that is mind-bendingly original or artistically brilliant.) So you're looking for emotional hooks that will catch a reader's attention.

The pitch should be short and should focus on the following key points:

- Who is the main character? What makes them interesting?
- What is the theme of the book or the central conflict?
- Where and when is it set? What makes this setting unusual or dramatic?

Here are a few examples stolen shamelessly from Amazon. Would you want to read these books, based on their brief descriptions?

We are locked into the frenzied consciousness of Raskolnikov who, against his better instincts, is inexorably drawn to commit a brutal murder. From that moment on, we share his conflicting feelings of self-loathing and pride, of contempt for and need of others, and of despair and hope of redemption: and, we follow his agonised efforts to probe and confront both his own motives for, and the consequences of, his crime.

Crime and Punishment,
Feodor Dostoyevsky

Violet has always been in the shadow of her mesmerising, controlling brother Will, and when a shocking secret about Will's past is revealed, things get even worse. Violet retreats further into her own fantasy world, built around the fairy characters created by her favourite author, Casper Dream. The arrival of a new girl at school, Jasmine, seems like it might change Violet's life for the better. But is Jasmine a true friend? And will Violet ever manage to break free of Will's spell?

Midnight, Jacqueline Wilson

In the rugged Australian Outback, three generations of Clearys live through joy and sadness, bitter defeat and magnificent triumph - driven by their dreams, sustained by remarkable strength of character... and torn by dark passions,

violence and a scandalous family legacy of forbidden love.

The Thorn Birds,
Colleen McCullough

Unlike the synopsis, pitches don't tell you the ending. Their role is to engage the interest of a potential reader (or publisher). A common feature is that they all emphasise the central conflicts of the stories and the questions that the main characters have to resolve.

Note that they are all written in the present tense and make use of emotive language. Natural diffidence can sometimes make us wary of using words like 'shocking' or 'magnificent' when talking about our own work, but in this situation it pays to be colourful.

It is also important in the cover letter to be clear about where the book would sit on the shelf – genre, target market, (if appropriate) similar authors.

Dragon's Pen

At the meeting we also discussed the Dragon's Pen competition at the Scottish Association of Writers. This is a form of event that is becoming more popular, where the author has to pitch their work out loud to an audience and a panel of industry professionals.

The same points apply but it is also important to employ good presentation skills. This means speaking slowly, sounding confident (and smiling!), and reducing your spiel to the three main messages that you want to get across.

The Club was grateful to Alanna for giving her time and her advice. Undoubtedly, it will take a bit more practice before we all become expert at selling our work.

BLOCKED UP?

by Sheila Adamson

You hear a lot about ‘writer’s block’, although more often in movies than in real life. In the film *Throw Momma from the Train*, Billy Crystal’s character is trying to write a novel, but he can’t get beyond the first line. (“Do you say the night was humid? Or the night was moist?”) In *The Shining* Jack Nicholson spends hours staring at a blank sheet of paper in a typewriter. Does that ever happen? Or is it just a cinematic shorthand?



I like to think most members of the EWC would have the sense to just pick a first line and get on with it. You can always go back and edit later. And you should certainly never stare at a blank page. There are other, more productive things you can be doing. Here are some tips for the different types of situation where blockage can arise.

You don’t know what happens next

This can come up if you are writing a novel without a plot plan. Not everybody feels comfortable with planning a novel and it’s a lot less fun than writing itself. But it does help to avoid this problem. Try to always have at least a broad idea of where your novel is going and the key events that you have to work in. If that doesn’t work for you, skip ahead and write a scene that interests you. That might help to inspire you and to make things clearer.

Another thing you can try is throwing a sudden setback at your characters out of the blue. That may send them off in a new and unexpected direction.

The story isn’t working

Always a tough one as nobody wants to admit it and face up to the pain of re-writing. Perhaps it *is* working, perhaps you’re your own worst critic Swallow your pride and seek a second opinion – then you’ll know.

If you do have to make changes, the first thing is to give yourself a break from the book so you can gain some perspective. Then come back and look at the text again fresh. What *do* you like? What should you keep? What isn’t so good? What is the story *really* about? Focus on the important elements and strip out the others. Try tweaking characters – make a nice one more complicated, give an unpleasant person a sympathetic aspect.

You don’t have anything to write about

This is rarer. Most of us get into writing because we have stories to tell, not for the glamorous perks. But when you’ve finished one story you may have a gap where the next big idea isn’t coming along. That’s where writing exercises can help (such as the picture prompts we used at the club).

There are all sorts of exercises to get you started. See these websites:

<http://writingexercises.co.uk/index.php>

<http://www.writersdigest.com/online-editor/a-12-day-plan-of-simple-writing-exercise>

And of course, one of the best ways of dealing with creative blockage is to talk to your fellow writers at the club. We know how you feel!

SO YOU WANT TO BE PUBLISHED?

by Joan Sumner and Sheila Adamson

In the last few months two of the most pragmatic voices in the Scottish writing scene have offered advice on how to get your novel published: Nicola Morgan, young adult author, and Al Guthrie, crime writer, agent and publisher.

At the Scottish Association of Writers conference, Al covered a lot of ground in the hour that he had for the workshop. He discussed briefly the alternative options (self-publishing through 'print on demand' or Kindle) but warned that previous self-publishing might inhibit traditional publishers. The most straightforward route was still to write a good novel and get an agent. Al's key tips:

- find an agent that deals in your genre
- think in terms of a unique selling point by considering why a publisher might *not* want it and turning the story round
- success also relates to the tenacity of the writer
- make sure that your manuscript is always finished before you submit
- send it as a Word.doc as initially most will be reading your work on a tablet or Kindle
- length for publication – paperbacks are 80,000+
- improve your credibility by evidence of publication, competition successes and learning (eg conferences)
- beware of writing series beyond 1 and 2 until they are sold as further publication will depend on sales
- have a stand-alone (something different) ready and waiting

Nicola Morgan's workshop for the Scottish Children's Book Writers and Illustrators was focused on the covering letter and blurb – how you make that good initial impression. She advised that the synopsis

was not the most important element of the submission. What mattered was demonstrating that the book had something about it that would make readers want to buy it. And, of course, the quality of the writing.

She recommends a four paragraph letter (email) that covers the following points:

1. Introduction, stating title, length and genre of the book.
2. The 'hook' paragraph that describes what the book is about. This should include the protagonist, the key conflict, and the emotional stakes.
3. A paragraph about you: credits, prizes, relevant professional skills, ability to market yourself, give readings etc.
4. Polite conclusion.

For more detail on the above (and lots of useful examples) you can buy Nicola's guides from her website:

<https://www.nicolamorgan.com/shop/>

SAW CONFERENCE 2015

The annual Scottish Association of Writers (SAW) conference was held at the Westerwood Hotel, Cumbernauld, in the last weekend of March. A strong contingent of EWC members attended and picked up a selection of prizes.

SAW winners

General Novel

3rd Joan Sumner

Highly Commended Joan Sumner

Non-fiction book

3rd Kath Hardie

General Short Story

1st Helen Forbes

2nd Sheila Adamson

Highly Commended Charlotte Bray

Poetry

3rd Angela Blacklock-Brown

Mini Short Story (Flash Fiction)

2nd Olga Wojtas

3rd Helen Forbes

Book Review

Highly Commended Anne Stormont

Self-published book

2nd Anne Stormont

The conference isn't just about competitions, though. There are various workshops and opportunities to learn more about both the craft of writing and the business of getting published.

Two specific competitions offered writers the chance to get direct feedback from industry professionals. Firstly, in the Dragon's Pen event eight shortlisted authors were given three minutes to pitch their book to a panel made up of Scottish-based publishers. Joan Dunnett pitched her historical novel (set in early 18th century Edinburgh).

In a one-off event, Al Guthrie of Blasted Heath invited submissions of crime novels. The four finalists received one-to-one advice and the winner was taken on by his agency. Joan Sumner was one of the finalists.

Workshops and wisdom

Glasgow-based writer **Liz Rettig** (*My Desperate Love Diary*) held a workshop on writing generally and writing humour specifically. "Luckily I had an unhappy childhood, an angst ridden adolescence, and my adult years have been characterised by an almost unremitting catalogue of failures. The ideal background then to nurture an author's talent," she told us.

The most important thing in a story is character, since we have to care, she said. Weaving together dialogue and action is the way to show, not tell.

Telling would be "Mike was a bad-tempered bully." But showing would describe what he says and does, eg, scowling at his over-fried breakfast eggs, throwing them against the wall, and shouting at his wife.

In another helpful example, she showed us how to go to extremes for comic effect:

1: "But I don't want to visit Great Aunt Victoria," Emma protested heatedly.

2: Emma folded her arms and glowered at her mother. "But I don't want to visit Great Aunt Victoria."

3: Emma folded her arms and glowered at her mother. "Visit Great Aunt Victoria? I'd rather be slowly skinned alive with a rusty cheese grater than spend an afternoon with that old crone."

Some of the pithy advice from competition adjudicators included:

"The purpose of fiction is to portray feeling not transmit information." (Linda Gillard, author)

"Be ruthless with your readers. Don't reveal information all at once. Leave them guessing, wondering. Trick them." (Lesley McDowell, author and critic)

"The difference between a published author and an unpublished author is that the published author didn't give up." (Al Guthrie, writer, agent and publisher)

Alexandra Sokoloff (*Huntress Moon*) offered a two-part workshop on structure, as well as providing the after dinner speech on Saturday. Alex is both a novelist and screenwriter and it is the discipline of screenwriting that informs her view on

structure. You can find out more about her and her 'screenwriting tricks' on her website:

<http://www.alexandrasokoloff.com/for-writers.php>

In the early days of film, reel changes had to be made every 15 minutes and screenplays were written so that the audience remained hooked – the structure of them remains the same today.

Alex suggested testing this by looking at your favourite films, stopwatch in hand, and timing when something happens, eg a new character appears to push the story on. Then apply this to your novel. (She has notes you can follow in her book *Screenwriting Tricks for Authors*.)

The inciting incident – the 'call to adventure' – should happen very early. All major incidents that move the plot in a new direction have to be dramatised to reflect their importance. (It's not just a matter of getting a phone call.) People aren't usually ready to have their life changed so the protagonist needs to be pushed into the story.

Let your readers know what the protagonist's plan is to get what s/he wants eg in *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy's plan is to get home. Realise, as the story twists and turns, that what a character *wants* is not the same as what they *need*, so that the ending is logical but not predictable.

Plot your book using the Index Card Method: cards/post-its, attached to a wall or board. After you write a scene scribble a few lines about it on a card. Cards of different colours could be used, eg, for different characters. Move the cards around, add new ones – your mind will work towards recognising the high points of your novel.

In a novel, normally the first act will take up approximately the first quarter of the book. The climax of Act I moves the protagonist into a new direction. The next two quarters comprise Act II, ending with the 'All Is Lost' moment. After this the protagonist regroups, and finds the new direction or self-realisation that allows them to succeed (final quarter of book). You can plan this in advance or you can write the book and then edit it with this structure in mind.

Linda Gillard (*House of Silence, The Glass Guardian*) shared her experience of self-publishing. She has been successful in promoting and selling her cross-genre books that were rejected by traditional publishers who weren't sure how to market them. Her key tip was not to publish just one book at a time. Have others ready to go, so that if a reader likes your first book they will immediately be able to find another. If you feel faint at the idea of writing three publishable novels, let alone just one, an alternative approach is to focus on novellas, which can be finished more quickly.

For more see her blog post:

<http://triskelebooks.blogspot.co.uk/2015/05/iaf15-genres-busting-out-all-over.html>

CRIME AND PUBLISHPMENT

by Gillean Somerville-Arjat

Graham Smith has a passion for crime fiction – reading it, reviewing it, writing it and encouraging others to do likewise. Three years ago he co-founded what is now an annual event, the Crime and Publishment Crime Writing weekend at the Old Mill Forge on the long straight road between Kirkpatrick-Fleming and Gretna Green. This year he was assisted in organising it by Ayrshire-based Scottish crime writer, Michael Malone, author of *The Guillotine Choice*, known to EWC members from SAW and for his talk on empowering self-motivation.

The programme was intense, covering in two full days the focus of tuition it takes an Arvon course five days to do. There were morning, afternoon and evening sessions and then as long a stint at the bar as you could handle. The tutors this year were Argyll-based Caro Ramsay, author of the Anderson and Costello series of Glasgow-based crime novels; Bob and Carol Bridgestock, combining their years of service in the West Yorkshire police service to write the D I Dylan series of police procedurals under the combined name, R. C. Bridgestock; David Headley, literary agent and co-founder of Goldsboro Books in Cecil Court in London's West End; and Neil Whyte, a lawyer experienced in both defence and prosecution work and lately turned crime writer.

Caro Ramsay focused on the techniques of gripping your reader, ratcheting up excitement and pace. Her signature note was the shark's fin from *Jaws* moving in for the kill. The Bridgestocks had a fund of

police procedural experience to share. David Headley provided insights into the work of a literary agent and his/her value to a writer. During the weekend he was accepting pitches from delegates who were ready to do so. Neil Whyte had two strings to his bow. One was writing fiction against a background of historical fact; the other was advising us on issues of legal procedure or on finding an alternative rather than getting it wrong. All delegates, of course, had to remember that there are aspects of police and legal procedure that differ north and south of the Border.

On the Friday evening Graham and Michael provided an open interactive session on the nuts and bolts of crime-writing. On the Saturday evening they ran a peer feedback session on short tasks the delegates had been asked to submit in advance.

The presenters were energetic, engaging and entertaining, very willing to respond to questions or requests for help about individual writing issues. The talks were all meticulously prepared and we came away with copious notes and handouts to ponder over. The delegates were passionate about their writing and prolific in what they were producing. There were about 25 of us and many had been before, some since the beginning. In 2014 three of them, including Graham Smith himself, signed contracts with the publishers Caffeine Nights as a result of pitches that were made during that weekend. Time will tell whether David Headley will choose anyone from the 2015 cohort.

For more information, see:

<http://www.crimeandpublishment.co.uk/>