



# Edinburgh Writers' Club

*The Bulletin*

**2015-16**

## **TRAIN YOUR BRAIN**

by Sheila Adamson

Reading is good for you. You may not be surprised to hear that. What is, perhaps, reassuring is that science backs this statement up.

There has been particular attention on the benefits of reading for children. A recent study found that access to books makes a significant difference to children's attainment at school. Even allowing for variations in their parents' educational backgrounds, children who live in a house that contains 500 books are, on average, three years ahead in terms of test scores compared to those who have no books. A smaller library at home makes less difference, but as few as twenty books can be shown to be better than none.

Other studies have concentrated on the benefits to children's general communication skills. By reading, children are exposed to 50% more vocabulary than they would hear by watching TV or listening in on an adult conversation.

At the other end of the scale, reading is important for older people as, like other forms of mental exercise such as bridge or crossword puzzles, it helps to slow mental decline and maintain brain connections.

But there are benefits for every age group. Losing yourself in a book is a great way to de-stress. Reading before you go to bed can be a useful part of a bedtime routine that triggers your brain to wind

down and go to sleep. Note, however, that you should avoid e-books at this time of day, as exposure to any form of screen stimulates the brain and makes you less sleepy.

One interesting study claimed that reading literary fiction improves readers' ability to judge other people's emotions and increases empathy. Literary fiction, specifically. Why this genre only? One theory is that literary fiction is more challenging to the reader and requires them to think about characters' motivations and work out for themselves why they do what they do. Another is that in literary fiction there is simply more emphasis on creating complex characters than there is in more low-brow forms.

Those of us who write non-literary fiction might take exception to that assumption. Don't we all try to create complex characters?

Another area that is under-researched is whether writing confers all the benefits listed above. If we as writers spend all this time seeking to understand the nuances of our protagonists, shouldn't that also increase our empathy?

What can be demonstrated is that writing helps you to communicate better and is a good way to manage your emotions and reflect on your life.

But perhaps most of us just do it because we enjoy it.

## CLUB COMPETITION WINNERS

### Flash Fiction

- 1<sup>st</sup> Beverley Casebow
- 2<sup>nd</sup>= Kath Hardie
- 2<sup>nd</sup>= Sheila Adamson

### Poetry

- 1 - Mary Johnston "The Blue Bootees"
- 2 - Mary Johnston "Flytin' and Fechtin' in Heaven"
- 3 - Kath Hardie "Cutting down the branch"

### Highly Commended -

Kathleen Allanach "Peter Pan Say"  
Beverley Casebow "The Random Librarian"

### Commended –

Angela Blacklock-Brown "At Sunset"

### Children's Writing

- 1 – Sheila Adamson "Indigo"
- 2 – Beverley Casebow "The Amazing Mr McKenzie"
- 3 – Dorcas Wilson "Do you not get it?"

### Gothic Novel

- 1 – Cecilia Rose "The Truth of the Story "
- 2 – Lorna Fraser "Calderstone"
- 3 – Sheena Guz "Wax"

Highly Commended – Sheila Adamson

### Crime

- 1 – Gillean Arjat "Jazza"
- 2 – Anne Vokes "Going Out"
- 3 – Lorna Fraser "Today is the first day of the rest of your life"

### Short Story

- 1 – Kate Blackadder "Seeing Red"
  - 2 – Beverley Casebow "First Name Terms"
  - 3 – Lorna Fraser "Don't Look Down"
- Highly Commended - Anne Graham

### General Article

- 1 – Kate Blackadder "Say ch ... chopsticks"
- 2 – Gillean Somerville-Arjat "Welcome to Fortress Europe"
- 3 – Anne Stormont "The Rise of the Author Publisher"

## CLUB NIGHTS

The opening speaker was **Elaine Di Rollo**. Her theme was never give up. Elaine had two novels published traditionally but the publisher did very little promotion and the books didn't sell well. They decided that she wasn't marketable and dropped her. Nothing daunted, she wrote a new book under a pen name. Interest was so high it went into an auction between publishers for the rights – so she must be marketable after all! Food for thought and hopefully inspiration for all of us.

**Marjorie Lotfi-Gill's** poetry workshop aimed to inspire members to use their creativity. She used pictures as prompts and asked the group to come up with phrases. It was an opportunity for members to bounce ideas off each other and learn from each other's process.

**Linda Dryden** treated us to an insight into the joys of Gothic horror. 'Gothic' describes a range of genres and continues to influence fiction today, in books, comics, film and TV. Important themes include:

- transformation and the supernatural
- duality and identity
- anxiety and claustrophobia

Just as fairy stories used magic and monsters to explore the fears of medieval society, Gothic fiction uses the supernatural to explore our concerns about identity, the good and evil in human nature, and the fear of a changing, anonymous and uncontrollable world.

While *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* may be some of the best known examples of the genre, Linda showed how many books use Gothic themes to create a more dramatic effect. Classics include *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (James Hogg); *The Double* (Fyodor Dostoyevsky); and *The Island of Dr Moreau* (H G Wells).

Linda will also be the adjudicator of the Club's Gothic novel competition later in the year. She advised that she would accept any brand of Gothic, eg crime, science-fiction, thriller etc. Key features she would look for would be:

- An internal as opposed to an external threat. In Gothic fiction the main character 'haunts themselves'. They are always asking 'Who am I? What am I? What am I capable of?'
- Themes of duality: good versus evil, beauty versus ugliness, nature versus science etc.
- A strong sense of setting. Gothic stories are often set in a confined space from which the protagonist cannot escape. Early in the nineteenth century haunted castles and lonely rustic settings provided a

sense of threat; later it became crowded, dark, anonymous cities.

### Writing for children

The children's writing competition was adjudicated by Ross MacKenzie, known for middle-grade fantasy novels *Zac and the Dream Pirates* and *The Nowhere Emporium* (shortlisted for the Blue Peter Book Awards 2016).

Ross was passionate about children's fiction and the eclectic range of books that are currently being published: from magical fantasies, to dystopian critiques of consumer society, to quietly disturbing murder mysteries such as Frances Hardinge's *The Lie Tree*. Many of the best children's books work on multiple levels, with adult readers getting something more from the story that children won't notice. But it is of course essential that they do work for their intended audience.

How do you make sure of that? Firstly, all the usual rules. Good story, good characters, good writing. On the whole children will have less patience for description or philosophising so get on with the plot. Most of all, think about your audience. Try to remember what was important to you at that age. Remember how difficult it was, having very little control over your life, and often not understanding what was going on.

Key pitfalls to avoid include unrealistic dialogue that doesn't sound like a child talking, or, worse still, unwise attempts to mimic the way young people speak by employing badly chosen slang. Keep it simple and read it out loud to see if it sounds right when spoken.

Another danger to avoid is talking down to your readers. Children are smart and hate being patronised. It's not even necessary to modify your vocabulary too

much. If readers don't know exactly what a word means they will probably be able to work it out from the context, or look up a dictionary. On the other hand, Ross advised steering clear of complex sentence construction which might be more of a hurdle to readability.

Adult characters in children's books are often larger than life, unpredictable and dangerous, reflecting the power that adults have over children's real lives. But children warm especially to childlike adults who seem to be on their wavelength.

Ross pointed out that events that happen at night are automatically more intense and scary for child readers as simply being up and out of bed at that time feels rebellious and dangerous. So if your story needs pepping up, just move the action to night time!

Ross's final advice was to keep writing and keep submitting. "It only takes one yes," he reminded us.

#### **Categories of children's fiction**

Picture books – usually for ages 3-7. The story is told through a mixture of text and pictures.

Chapter books – ages 6-10. The story is told primarily in prose, but with illustrations. The book is long enough to divide into short chapters.

Middle grade – ages 8-12. Designed for children to read by themselves, rather than being read to. Books specifically for older pre-teens (10-12) may be referred to as 'tween' books.

Young adult – ages 13-18. Pretty much like adult books but with teenaged protagonists and themes that relate to a teenaged audience.

#### **HOW TO ... WRITE ROMANCE**

by Sheila Adamson

Rosemary Gemmell, prolific writer of romantic and historical fiction, came to the club on 11 January to talk about the challenges of writing about love and relationships. Rosemary will judge the short story competition (deadline 7 March), which this year has relationships as the designated theme (maximum 2000 words). She was happy to provide her expertise to help us to shape our entries.

One of the reasons for selecting this particular theme is that, when it comes to short story writing, the women's fiction market is one of the biggest. What exactly is "women's fiction"? No doubt that is the topic of many a dissertation by Gender Studies students, but in pragmatic terms, it is a genre of stories about women, for women, usually focusing on emotions and relationships, including romantic love. Wikipedia notes dryly that "there exists no comparable label in English for works of fiction that are marketed to males."

A number of magazines accept submissions. (See box.) As ever, the rule is that you should read the magazine first and get an idea of what they are looking for. Get a sense of the range of tones that are acceptable (usually not too dark) and the different types of stories (not always happy-ever-after romance).

#### **Markets for women's short stories:**

Woman's Weekly  
The People's Friend  
Prima  
Take a Break  
Yours  
Bella

Also look out for anthologies and competitions.

Although love often features as a theme, it is also common to see stories about friendship, or family. On the whole unhappy endings are best avoided – readers want to see problems being resolved. But not every romance has to end with a proposal. ‘Happy for now’ endings are perfectly acceptable.

For those who are willing to write longer stories, there is a growing demand for romantic novellas (usually 10,000 – 30,000 words long). These are often published as e-books.

Having discussed the market, Rosemary went on to concentrate on some of the particular features and challenges of writing romance.

### **Boy meets girl**

*“It’s the same old story. Boy finds girl, boy loses girl, girl finds boy, boy forgets girl, boy remembers girl, girl dies in a tragic blimp accident over the Orange Bowl on New Year’s Day.”* (Leslie Nielsen, Naked Gun.)

The trouble for writers is that ‘boy meets girl’ is such a familiar story. How do you make yours different, without resorting to blimp accidents? First of all, you will need a good reason why two people who are obviously right for each other don’t get together until the final act. It’s not a story if the love comes easy; but equally it’s not satisfying if the reader doesn’t believe that the characters truly belong together.

Jane Austen inadvertently set the blueprint for many romantic novels in *Pride and Prejudice*. Since the success of that book innumerable tales have seen the girl taking against the arrogant hero initially, only to discover eventually that he really is a good guy at heart. In fairness to Austen, she didn’t use this device

herself in any of her other published novels. But in most of them the problem was difference in wealth or social class, which isn’t so easy to use in contemporary fiction. What is important is that there should be some journey, whether it be an external obstacle or something the heroine has to overcome in herself (shyness, preconceptions, something else ...)

Secondly, you will need an evocative setting. People generally read romance for escapism, so let them escape. You can use a beautiful setting to heighten the sensuous quality of your scenes. Using all five senses in your writing is something you hear about all the time but it is particularly important for romance. The reader wants to feel the story with your protagonist.

Showing not telling can be a challenge in this genre as so much of the story is about feelings. Part of the answer is the focus on the senses, describing a few crucial details that evoke the emotions of the character. Taste and touch are key senses here but don’t forget smell too. Rosemary offered some examples of ways to evoke the sensations:

- Show the touch of a hand, the smooth pebbles on a beach, the coolness of waves on bare feet, toes sinking into sand.
- Describe the sudden dryness of a nervous mouth, or the taste of salty tears.
- Use the unique smells of a country or location: city fumes, countryside manure, spices in Istanbul.

Similarly, use body language to supplement and counterpoint the dialogue. Remember that what is not said out loud often tells the reader more than what is.

## Getting intimate

Rosemary then introduced us to the 12 Stage of Intimacy. It is essential that encounters between the protagonists build in intensity throughout the story. Anticipation is definitely part of the pleasure! So start with glances; moving to the brush of the hand against a shoulder; then maybe the touch that lingers longer. Once you get up to kissing there are of course different levels of kiss. That way when you finally get to stages 9-12 (second base and up) the reader will feel as eager as your heroine.

Finally, if this is your genre you might want to consider joining the Romantic Novelists' Association, which runs an annual conference and other means of linking with other romantic writers.

<http://www.rna-uk.org/>

**Russel McLean** adjudicated our Crime Writing Competition and talked most entertainingly. He has a crime column the first week of every month in the *Herald*.

Crime has many sub-genres. There are the 'Golden Age' Agatha Christie-esque locked room puzzles. Then there are various series based round a police detective such as Maigret/Rebus. James Oswald includes a supernatural element. 'Cosy crime' such as M C Beaton's Agatha Raisin books remain popular. Especially in the US, gimmicks are used, eg cross-stitch mysteries (free cross-stitch pattern included)/cats as sleuths - all in a search for uniqueness.

Sometimes the focus is on the criminal, eg in *Silence of the Lambs*. The trick is somehow to make villains fascinating.

Read what's gone before, advised Russel, but never 'chase the market'. Serial killer books are less popular now. Ditto *Da Vince Code*-inspired titles. *Gone Girl*

started a trend for domestic noir – the law of diminishing returns comes into play. Publishers think they want 'the next *Gone Girl*' but what they really want is that feeling of novelty they got on first reading it.

Russel employs a technique used by TV script-writers. This is the 'five-act structure'. He'll make five headings and write them down one underneath the other. Under each of those he'll have five 'beats', labelling them 1.1, 1.2 etc. Each beat is some action that moves the story on. He builds up the story from there. But planning is all very well – 'writing is rewriting' and he advises close line-editing too.

He very much admires *The Wire* TV series. It's written in such a way that if you don't pay close attention you miss vital information. It's complex in its plotting and characters, but not complicated – there's a difference.

See <http://www.russeldmclean.com/> for more information about Russel's writing.

## Reading your work

Janis Mackay provided an unusual but valuable workshop on using your voice and reading aloud. Janis is an award-winning children's author (*Magnus Fin*, *The Accidental Time-Traveller*) but also a professional story-teller and voice coach.

She reminded us that reading your work is an essential part of the job description for a writer. You have to be able to perform and hold an audience's attention. To illustrate this, she recounted how when she won the Kelpies Prize in 2009 she was standing there at the ceremony, basking in the moment. Her bubble was burst when the presenter nudged her. "You're a

writer now,” she was informed. “You have to make a speech.” She realised that you can’t do one thing without the other.

Public speaking may not come naturally to many of us. The key is to give the air of confidence. If the speaker is nervous the audience will start to tense, wondering if it’s all about to go wrong. Most of all, Janis said, you must have faith in your story. Believe that it’s worth listening to. “Imagine you’re about to give them the gift of the most gorgeous puppy,” she said.

Confidence comes from practice. The more often you read your piece the more fluent you will be. She gave us exercises to do at home so that we could get into the habit of enunciating clearly and projecting our voices. Janis suggested we find a quiet place at home and practise for 10 minutes, at least twice a week. Some of her favourite phrases included:

- hum ham hem him
- reach rage rush race rough
- children chiding, chaffinch chirping, choking chimneys, cheerfully chattering
- ‘Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue’

Under her instructions we stood up and raised our arms like ham actors doing Shakespeare – yes, we felt stupid, but we also found that lifting the hand helped the voice to lift too. Letting your voice drop at the end of sentences is a common trap that people fall into.

Some other useful tips included:

- Bend your knees slightly to help to keep your body relaxed.
- Breathe in through the nose; breathe out and release your voice.
- Remember to pause, especially after commas and full stops.
- Make eye contact and connect with your audience. Don’t just launch in – look at them and connect before you start.
- Let your personality come through.

A few brave volunteers read aloud and Janis gave useful feedback. It was noticeable that each reader improved every time round. So practice does make perfect.

## **NEVER SAY NEVER**

by Anne Stenhouse (Graham)

Having stopped writing magazine fiction in order to concentrate on novel length romances, I was a little out of practice when I read the brief for the People's Friend Serial writing competition. It appeared in the late summer 2015 editions of the magazine and could also be found online. They wanted a 1,500 word synopsis and first instalment of 6,000 words.

A serial is not a short story, but at sixteen thousand words, it was a lot shorter than the work I'd recently been producing. Could I restrain the bubbling effect of finding a theme, characters and setting to sixteen thousand words?

Well, never say never...

The brief was clear and maybe a little didactic, but then a magazine that has been around for as long as People's Friend knows what the readers' want and, therefore, what the editors need to ask for. I wrote the synopsis in blood.

Okay, it was on the PC, but I'm such a seat-of-the-pantser and so allergic to synopses that it felt like blood. So here's a thing. I found it incredibly useful when I came to do the fun bit – writing the first 6,000 words. For a start, I realised within pages that I had TOO MUCH STORY. Cramming information into phrases and clauses while trying to keep the main theme on track was hopeless. The writing looked over-stuffed – which is what it was.

Paring down is never easy. You've all read the wonderfully expressive 'murder your darlings' and for a while it was like that. Eventually, however, I recognised my main theme, consigned all the others to walk-on parts with a sideways nod to

them that when I write the full length book (oh, yes, there's a superior motive) their day will come.

And so 'I Joined the Shows' was born. Some of you will have read the opening pages at our work in progress night.

Competitions are great. This one was free to enter, but there was only a prize for the winner. I'm one of six short-listed, but not the winner. It is the case though that the short-listed entries were likely to be offered the chance to complete and publish. I have been offered that opportunity and I know of one other.

It is also true that competitions are a distraction if you need to be focussed on building your name and a body of work. That's where I am with my novels. I have three out online and Mariah's Marriage in the library system, but I need to spread the word. So, it was a risk, but the benefits may yet be great. Maybe appearing in this high circulation magazine will boost sales. For your Kindle, look here <http://goo.gl/F1iJBg> Also in other e-formats.

DC Thomson have been a good friend to many beginning writers. They published my own first short story in Scots' Magazine an eon ago. Several of the EWC have done very well with them. Most notably our own Kate Blackadder who now leads their short story workshops and writes stories and serials for them regularly. Kate also got in through a competition at SAW level. Former member Roy Stewart, too, was picked up by My Weekly through an SAW comp and now writes serials and short stories for People's Friend. Are you a man? Never say never.

I Joined the Shows.

## WORST-KEPT SECRET

by Mairi Wilson

It's a long time since I've been as nervous as I was on November 4<sup>th</sup> this year. The diary appointment loomed: 6pm *Waterstones Princes St Book Launch*. The ebook version of *Ursula's Secret* had quietly slipped out on October 15th but that had felt safely anonymous. This, the Waterstones event, was the real thing for me and the culmination of three years of struggling to work out how to write a novel (which I don't think I ever did) and pushing through to the end.

I'd finally cobbled together a full draft whilst I'd been in Spain in February on a writers' retreat<sup>1</sup>. The Sunday Mail Fiction Award deadline was a day or two after I came back so I entered. It justified the time away and I always try to have work 'out there' anyway for two reasons. Firstly, if it sits in the drawer it will never be read and secondly, it gives me a different, more objective perspective on my writing when (as happens much more often than not) it's returned. It's much easier to spot flaws with distance.

But that didn't happen this time. In May, I got an email saying my novel had been shortlisted, and that felt just as good as winning. I'd entered because every manuscript was to be read by Black & White Publishing who would publish the winning entry and I'd hoped mentioning that I'd entered when a polished draft was finally ready to submit would be helpful in attracting their attention. A spot on the shortlist made that a real possibility.

The email also asked if I had a full draft. Well, yes. But it was peppered with notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Casa Ana ([http://www.casa-ana.com/courses\\_writers\\_retreats\\_andalucia.html](http://www.casa-ana.com/courses_writers_retreats_andalucia.html)) as recommended some years ago by EWC member San Cassimally and subsequently frequented as often as possible by me...

and had no chapter breaks. A long night followed but adrenalin forced me to make decisions I'd been avoiding. Should I revise the timeline here? *No*. Kill off this character? *Yes*. And so on. The chapter breaks were particularly arbitrary; one was 5000 words long, another not quite 600 and I later discovered (after I'd submitted, of course) that there were two Chapter 29s.

A few weeks later I heard I'd won. I was incredulous, delighted, overwhelmed. My novel would be published. Before I knew it, I had a contract and the first set of edits were winging their way back to me. By the end of August, final proofs had been signed off and we'd agreed on a new title. Then it was over to Black & White for cover design, blurbs, publicity plans and so on. All these were out of my control so I could either spend the next few weeks worrying or get back to work, which is what I did and novel number two is now well underway.



When it came to it, I'm pleased to say that wet Wednesday evening in Princes Street went well. I looked out to a room full of friendly faces and found myself genuinely enjoying answering questions and talking about *Ursula's Secret*. Waterstones staff and the Black & White team were great and took care of everything. We even had cake.

## SCOTTISH ASSOCIATION OF WRITERS

### Fiction in Fact and Fact in Fiction

by Kate Blackadder

I attended this fascinating workshop at the SAW Conference, led by journalist / non-fiction-writer turned crime novelist, Douglas Skelton. He talked about factual writing in popular non-fiction and emphasised that engaging story-telling was just as important here as in fiction. Don't make your book look academic by having footnotes. It's very important to get your opening right; he cautioned against 'jumping about', telling the story chronologically is the safest bet especially when you're starting out writing.

He read us the first few paragraphs of Jimmy Boyle's autobiography – taken out of context you might assume they were from a novel. He admires John Prebble's writing style – he is always historically accurate and doesn't let the story-telling get in the way of the facts, but his original way with language and flashes of humour bring those facts to life. He also cited naturalist Mike Tomkies' books, and Michael Elkins' *Forged in Fury* (about Nazi atrocities) as great examples of story-telling non-fiction.

He told us about his own book *Indian Peter* – an amazing true story of a small boy abducted from Aberdeen in the mid eighteenth century and sold as an indentured servant. His subsequent adventures included being captured by Indians (Native Americans) and fighting in the French/Indian wars; he eventually returned to Scotland and wrote a (probably embroidered) account of his life which was a best-seller before being burnt in the streets of Aberdeen by the authorities who connived in the kidnapping of boys for financial gain. Skelton's task was to test, where he could,

the veracity of Peter's story (eg official records of the wars in the US/Canada); and use his imagination when writing about Peter's time with the Cherokees or how soldiers feel before going into battle.

Research – there is a saying: 'Stealing from one source is plagiarism, stealing from many is research.'

Fact in Fiction. Don't let the facts get in the way of a good story/the aim of your story. Tom Clancy, for example, will 'interrupt' the story to go into technical detail about, say, nuclear submarines. Skelton finds *War and Peace* has too much information that takes the reader out of the story. (Although of course not all readers will share his opinions on these examples.) Historical novelist Manda Scott who does meticulous research has a rider being unseated when his horse stumbles over a rabbit-hole – this could not have happened to her pre-Roman character as rabbits were brought here as food by the Romans.

Use the facts in story-telling but sticking rigidly to them would make it non-fiction. Skelton's crime novels are set in the Glasgow underworld – made-up but believable. Use enough of your research to make your story believable.

#### Tips on establishing a historical setting (from Rachel Hore)

- focus on a few glimpses of life in the past, eg queues at shops during food-rationing, the cold and darkness of life without electricity
- make information relevant to the story – if you're going to describe how bread was made it should be because of something that happens in the plot
- use smells - often more evocative than visual description

## HOW TO ... DECIDE WHICH TENSE TO USE

by Sheila Adamson

Once upon a time, all prose fiction was written in the past tense, third person ... because that is how oral stories used to be told.

Nowadays we're all much more free and easy. Authors use both the first and third person, past and present tense. (You can even try using the second person or the future tense but you will probably find that it is hard to maintain for anything other than short fiction or poetry.)

The first person is the most intimate way of telling your story. The narrator becomes the main character (normally) and the narrative voice brings the nature of that character alive. It also allows for all inner thoughts to be revealed very simply.

You can play tricks with the first person, adopting a conversational tone, or hinting that the narrator is not entirely to be trusted.

The most obvious advantage of the third person is that it makes it easy to switch between point of view characters. Authors are advised, however, not to switch too readily. It is expected that a scene will be told from only one view point. You should make clear whose that is from the opening sentence so that the reader knows whose head they are in. So, for example, don't say 'The river glittered in the sunlight.' Say 'Jenna shaded her eyes against the sunlight glittering off the river.'

The downside is that we are never quite as close to the characters when we write about them as 'other'. To mitigate this, authors will often write as if the narrative is the thoughts of the point-of-view character. In this example, Kate Atkinson

slips into her character's stream of consciousness:

*Did all criminals turn soft if they survived to old age? (Did police detectives? Probably not.) Maybe they could just move in with Harry now that he'd transformed from career criminal into twinkly granddad. How many bedrooms in this house?*

The third person allows for a more epic feel, if you deliberately want to distance the narrative from the action. For example, in *The Return of the King*, where Tolkien adopts a more mythic tone:

*East rode the knights of Dol Amroth driving the enemy before them: troll-men and Variags and orcs that hated the sunlight. South strode Eomer and men fled before his face, and they were caught between the hammer and the anvil.*

But what about the modern taste for the present tense? The advantage is that it can give your story more immediacy, a sense that everything is happening right now and nobody knows what will come next. This can be particularly useful for children's and young adult writing, reflecting the young protagonist's lack of hindsight. It can also simplify the handling of flashbacks if the main narrative is in the present and the rest is in the past.

Pacing can be more difficult, though. In the past tense it is easier to skip through the boring bits ('The next two weeks passed without incident.') And you lose the ability to employ dramatic foreshadowing ('If she had known what he meant perhaps she would have said no.')

Usually you will pick a voice that feels right and go with that. But the message is don't be afraid to change – it might help more than you expect.

## SCBWI CONFERENCE

by Sheila Adamson

SCBWI stands for Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. It is a world-wide organisation, originally founded in Los Angeles in 1971. Its aim is to support authors and illustrators writing for children and young adults. As well as allowing writers and illustrators to network amongst themselves, it also provides a gateway for links with publishers, librarians, agents and editors.

The British Isles branch of SCBWI holds an annual conference in Winchester. This year I joined SCBWI for the first time and, unsure what to expect, signed up for the conference. Here are some of the things I learnt.

Firstly, SCBWI is a cumbersome acronym. Most people pronounce it 'Scoobie', even if that doesn't really make phonetic sense. Suspend your disbelief and go with it.

Secondly, there are an enormous number of people producing fiction for children. The vast majority of them are female, which may not be a surprise. The range of work covered includes picture books, chapter books, 'middle grade' (ie novels for children aged 9-12) and Young Adult.

A lot of the people there had been published or at least had an agent; but many did not. The atmosphere was nonetheless very much publication-focused. There were agents and editors present and numerous opportunities to pitch your work. The raffle had an unusual but enticing set of prizes – the winners were offered one-to-one feedback from an industry professional on their manuscript. You could select which agents / publishers you most wanted and buy raffle tickets for your favourites.

The conference programme contained a mixture of sessions about the craft of producing fiction and sessions about the business side. For example, there was advice about how to run school visits, which is an important aspect of promoting your work if you target this age group.

I enjoyed a two-hour low-down on what agents are looking for from authors. The speakers were refreshingly frank and explained the problems they have negotiating the best deal for their authors. They said they did read the slush pile but admitted they probably only took on about one new author per year via that route. For them, networking events such as the SCBWI conference were a more fruitful way of picking up new clients.

Much of their advice was as you would expect. I did note that one agent said she would automatically reject any potential writer who hadn't read what she thought were the big books in that target market. She would take it as a sign that you didn't really know what you're doing.

There was also a long session on story structure. This covered the Three Act Structure that many of us are familiar with (and yet still struggle to put into practice). The idea of focusing on key scenes that need to take place at certain points may help me with plot planning.



*There was a pirate themed party*

I enjoyed the event but realised I would get more out of it if I have a manuscript ready to go. I suppose I just have to get back to editing!

## NEWS

Congratulations to **Lorna Fraser** who won third place in the Scottish Association of Writers' Write Down South Short Story Competition. Earlier in the year, **Olga Wojta** was also third in the equivalent Write Up North contest.

Well done to **Anne Stenhouse Graham** for being shortlisted in the People's Friend serial competition.

**Victoria Hendry's** new novel *The Last Tour of Archie Forbes* has been published by Saraband. A taster extract was published in the Scotsman:

Archie didn't smile because there was something wrong with his smile. People flinched when he bared his teeth. His lips turned up alright, but when their gaze raised itself to his eyes on the smiling cue, what they read there frightened them, and he usually apologised and turned away.

For the full extract see:

<http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/books/the-write-stuff-the-last-tour-of-archie-forbes-by-victoria-hendry-1-3941447>

And if you want to read the whole book, you know what to do!

**Kate Blackadder** has published a collection of her short stories, called *Three's a Crowd and other family stories*. It's available for pre-order on Kindle and a paperback will be out by the end of February. [myBook.to/B01BP9UDRY](http://myBook.to/B01BP9UDRY)

For a taster see her blog:

<http://katewritesandreads.blogspot.co.uk/2016/02/threes-crowd.html>

Earlier this month, *Ursula's Secret* by **Mairi Wilson** was Amazon's best-seller in the category of Women's Fiction. Mairi appeared on STV's Fountainbridge Show in December to talk about the book.

Honorary President **Alanna Knight** has released a new Inspector Faro mystery, *Akin to Murder*.

**San Cassimally** is publishing online his novel 'Magnetite', set across seven continents and four centuries.

<http://magnetitebook.com/about/>

'Leith Docks: A Way of Life' is a play by former EWC member Laure Paterson which will be put on by the Citadel Theatre at the Leith Festival at the end of June. The play is based on reminiscences of former dockers. Here's the link:

[https://www.leithfestival.com/?page\\_id=507](https://www.leithfestival.com/?page_id=507)