

Edinburgh Writers' Club

The Bulletin

2016-17

WHAT EDITORS WANT

by Sheila Adamson

At this year's Edinburgh Book Festival, four editors from different publishers across the UK took the time to deliver a session explaining what they look for when signing up a new author.

It is worth clarifying what an editor's role is. This is the person who works with the author to get the book ready for publication. Sometimes the original manuscript can be radically changed, with revisions to structure or characters or the resolution of the plot. In other cases the changes may be minor. The editor attempts to see the book from the point of view of a potential reader and make it work best for them.

In light of this, it is no surprise to hear that editors particularly appreciate writers who are willing to receive feedback constructively. (Bringing work to the club for feedback and entering competitions is excellent practice for this!) It is normal for the writer to be asked to do at least one complete new draft of the novel, no matter how much the publisher claims to love it. Editors like it best when they identify a problem and the writer comes up with their own creative solution. Writers like it least when the editor demands they kill off a character, but sometimes it has to be done.

One tip was to write one page character studies for each main character in the book. This should include their back

stories and key features of their personalities, so that you understand them and how they behave. Most of the information will not end up in the actual text but it will help you to see them as three-dimensional individuals.

Note that an editor will be thinking about what will be successful in the market, not what might impress a literary critic. Similarly, when a new author is taken on it will be because the publishing house believes the books will sell.

What features are they looking for, then, in deciding what to take on? Some of these will be more obvious than others:

- Good voice
- Good story
- Good villain
- Imagination
- Humour
- Drama – don't be afraid to let your characters suffer
- Surprises and (if appropriate) scares
- Dialogue - listen to how real people talk. Read it aloud to check how it sounds. Vary the way different characters speak.
- Most of all – originality. "An editor can fix problems with the plot," one said, "but we can't make a dull book original or memorable."

Even if you have no plans to submit work for publication, this is all good advice that can help to improve the quality of your work.

CLUB COMPETITION WINNERS

Flash Fiction

- 1 – Cecilia Rose "Blind Date"
- 2 – Jenny McDonald "Stuck"
- 3 – Olga Wojtas "The Winner"

POETRY

- 1st A Journey through Lisbon – Beverley Casebow
 - 2nd Winter Mindins – Mary Johnston
 - 3rd The Long View – Anne Stormont
- Commended:
Trees in Autumn – Beverley Casebow
Sea Eagle – Anne Stormont

GENERAL ARTICLE

- 1st Catherine Sinclair: A Forgotten Scottish Writer – Beverley Casebow
- 2nd Park Life – Anne Stormont
- 3rd Prickly Wanderers in Bonnyrigg – Joan Sumner

SHORT STORY

- 1st Photo Opportunity – Olga Wojtas
 - 2nd Voice of Tomorrow – Cecilia Rose
 - 3rd Boundaries – Beverley Casebow
- Highly Commended:
Nailing It – Anne Stormont
- Commended:
The Shimmering Shores – Kate Blackadder

YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

- 1st What Monsters Want – Sheila Adamson
- 2nd The Murder Game – Dorcas Wilson

DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

- 1st Down the Car Boot – Kate Blackadder
- 2nd Mandy – Cecilia Rose
- 3rd A Simple Life – Lorna Fraser

Worried about entering a competition?
Remember that new members are

allowed to enter one competition free of charge.

CLUB NIGHTS

Zoe Strachan

Zoe talked to the Club about writing short stories prior to our submitting our stories for her adjudication.

Her own favourite short story writers include Lucia Berlin and Muriel Spark. She quoted Muriel Spark as saying that a short story 'deals mainly with the middle'. Zoe added to this by saying that you should have very little set-up for the action in a short story – the writer must involve the reader in the 'middle' as soon as possible and must trust the reader to pick up what is happening. Have one commanding idea or theme.

Introduce your main character right in the first paragraph, even the first sentence. It is the characters that drive the plot in a short story. Everyone in real life has a secret side – so too should your characters, and although you needn't spell out a character's most private thoughts or actions you can hint at them, have them bubbling underneath.

Zoe asked us to write down three things about ourselves that we are happy to tell others – and then to write down three secrets. It was an interesting and useful exercise, because if you apply that to your characters you get to know them better and make them more believable.

If your story seems flat she suggested trying for a change of tense or a change of viewpoint. Or lob in something unexpected and work out how your characters would react.

When reading a story she prefers not to have too much resolution, not too neat an

ending. Leave the reader with an atmosphere in their mind.

Margaret Elphinstone

Our opening speaker was Margaret Elphinstone, the author of numerous historical novels, including *The Sea Road*, *Voyageurs* and *The Gathering Night* (published by Canongate).

Margaret's approach to historical fiction was surprising in some ways. She revealed that often she picked the location for her story first and only then looked for the historical time period that would provide the most story possibilities. For example, having lived in Michigan for a year she decided she wanted to write about the area. She chose the time of the 1812 war between the USA and Canada, also bringing in the confrontation between Europeans and native Ojibwe tribesmen.

Margaret admitted that the themes of her books often only became apparent once she had finished them. Conflict between cultures often features in her books, and times of historical change are a natural draw for any novelist.

Research is always crucial for historical fiction. Margaret spoke about how understanding place is as important for her as reading up on facts. She will visit the location and take notes, so that she can set scenes in real places and describe them in detail. For example, as research for the book *Light*, about Victorian lighthouse-keepers, she spent time with bird-ringers on Sule Skerry. A full, tactile description of a stormy petrel features in the book, including an evocation of its smell.

She also advised talking to the locals and supplementing desk research with oral tradition. To add authenticity to characters' voices, read primary sources

such as letters and diaries to hear how people used to express themselves. However, a balance has to be struck between recreating old dialects and leaving your text readable. Take care to avoid modern idioms. One trick she shared was that when writing about Vikings she used mostly Germanic root words – that gave the impression of a rugged pre-Norman language without employing actual Old Norse.

But when it comes to using 'artistic licence' regarding known facts she advises against. "Someone somewhere always knows," she said. The writer has to accept that sometimes inconvenient truths will throw a spanner in the works of the plot when it turns out that the characters simply can't do what had been planned. More often than not, this will inspire a creative solution that is actually better.

If this all sounds like a lot of hard work, it may be worth knowing that it usually takes her around four years to complete a book.

For Margaret, historical fiction complements non-fiction – its mission is not to tell you what happened but to try to get inside the heads of people in the past and imagine their inner lives. Her preference is to invent all the main characters in her novels, drawing on real people from history and real events only as background characters and context.

To read more about Margaret, see: <http://www.margaretelphinstone.co.uk/>

Valerie Gillies

On 17 October, former Edinburgh Makar Valerie Gillies came to the Club with a single mission – to help us overcome our fear of poetry. She focused on haikus, which normally take the form below:

5 syllables
7 syllables
5 syllables

However, it turned out that variations on that are allowed (shorter length lines, not longer). She demonstrated this through examples of well-turned haikus from other poets. The key features are:

- observation
- a sense of the season
- colours and the natural world
- some sort of surprise in the final line
- always in the present tense
- punctuation not required

Valerie advised that a poem should be like a photograph of a moment, and should be based on first-hand experience and emotion. Brevity is important and good poets will pare out every redundant word to come down to the essence of the poem.

As an exercise, she asked us to list things that evoked autumn and then compile them into a haiku. Everybody had a go, although not everybody managed a beautiful poem on the spot!

See <http://www.valeriegillies.com/> for more information about Valerie's work.

Hamish Macdonald

Hamish MacDonald, the first 'Scots Scriever' came to the first meeting in January to talk about writing in Scots. He read from some of his own work, giving us a flavour of how the distinctive rhythms of Scots can work in both prose and poetry.

Part of Hamish's role involves outreach work to schools and community groups, encouraging people to read and write in Scots. But another part is research into

the National Library of Scotland's collections to help understand and promote the history of the language.

From this work the website 'Wee Windaes' has been developed: <http://wee-windaes.nls.uk/>

Take a look if you are interested in Scots writers from ages past. As examples, Hamish talked about *The Buke of the Howlat*, possibly the oldest printed book in Scots. This is a fifteenth century fable and performance poem featuring an owl, the Pope and a number of other birds as representations of human society. We also heard about the work of Alexander Wilson, an eighteenth century weaver and radical from Paisley, who later turned into a respected ornithologist.

To those who argue that Scots is a dialect rather than a language Hamish counters that whatever you call it, the way everyday people speak should be reflected properly in literature. There are distinctive Scots words and expressions and we should have no embarrassment about making use of them. It is true that in earlier centuries Scots and English were more similar, but they diverged from the sixteenth century onwards. Scots tends to make more use of words with Germanic, Dutch and Norse roots while English became more mixed with Norman French.

Many writers avoid using Scots as they don't want to limit their audience. There is also a legitimate fear of being artificial, ie plucking words from the dictionary rather than concentrating on language as it is actually spoken. In Hamish's view there is no one 'standard' Scots and each writer should do their best to use the language the way they would themselves in their own speech.

To support those who might still feel intimidated he talked us through an exercise where we composed a short poem about Donald Trump (mining the rich corpus of Scots words for an idiot).

Hamish finished by urging us to try writing in Scots if it felt right. 'What have you got to lose?'

Claire McFall

Claire is a writer of young adult fiction, and also a teacher, so she was well-placed to tell us about writing for this market.

Firstly she advised us to consider how people in this age group tend to come across books. Often they have books bought for them, or are directed to them in libraries / schools. So physical books tend to be more successful and self-published e-books don't work. Teenagers may also pick their next book via recommendations on blogs or Goodreads (or similar websites). It's important to have a publisher that is big enough to have access to these networks. And you will usually need an agent for that.

Claire warned against agents who try to sign authors up with small publishing companies that are actually their own. Be careful when seeking an agent and check their bona fides.

She spoke about her experience of first getting published and noted that writers had to accept that editors might demand considerable rewrites. The publishing industry was obviously focused on making a profit so their first thought was to look for books that they believed would sell, not necessarily the books that individual editors and agents liked best.

Publishers would take control of marketing in that they would decide the cover. But writers were expected to make themselves available and connect with readers through social media, do school visits, and write articles for other people's blogs. "Fifty percent of the job is selling yourself; fifty percent is the actual writing."

Claire recommended sites such as Goodreads to see what other readers liked and get a sense of the market.

In terms of adjustments to make for the young adult readership, she advised caution with swear words and darker themes, while noting that readers liked to be challenged too. It was no use writing about perfect characters who behaved well. Protagonists needed to be relatable and flawed. Wrapping the danger and violence up in a fantasy element sometimes made it more palatable.

The opening chapter was hugely important to grab the reader's attention, introduce the main character and throw the reader into the middle of the action. It was generally best to introduce the main obstacle / conflict as early as possible.

Anne Hamilton

Anne Hamilton from Lothian Life judged the general article competition.

After saying she was impressed by the high quality of all the General Article entries and would publish the winners, Anne reiterated how keen she is to get articles for Lothian Life (although sadly she is currently unable to offer payment). If you'd like to write for the magazine have a read of it first to get a feel for it (<http://www.lothianlife.co.uk/>) and then email her either with an article or with an idea if you're unsure about its suitability for the magazine. Photographs are very

welcome – if an article is not illustrated it should have 500-600 words but if there are pictures to break up the text readers will scroll down to read up to 800 words. If your submission is longer she is happy to edit it to fit.

Don't just give facts on a subject – information on everything is just a Google away these days. But using your own voice and/or making the story personal will appeal to readers, even if the article may not be on a subject they were previously interested in. A little humour is welcome and can be injected into most topics.

Mark Leggatt and Neil Broadfoot

We were grateful to Mark and Neil, two local crime writers, for stepping in at short notice when the previously booked speaker had to cancel.

Mark Leggatt writes international thrillers (Names Of The Dead, The London Cage, and The Silk Road) featuring former CIA technician Connor Montrose. Neil Broadfoot comes from the tradition of Scottish police-based crime, with his series of books involving Edinburgh investigative journalist Doug McGregor and his police contact, DS Susie Drummond.

The session was informal, with the two writers inviting questions from the audience and answering them together as a double act. Both have clearly done a lot of research into their genre and know a fair bit about how to murder someone. (For what it's worth, nobody does poisoning anymore because it's too easy to detect and women usually kill people with knives.)

But much of their advice was applicable to writing in general, regardless of genre.

Some of the key points they stressed were:

- Characters should never be one-dimensional. Nobody is all good or all evil. Good stories are about how different characters react to difficult situations – some may react selflessly, some may choose violence.
- Characters should drive the plot, not your theme or message.
- Give the reader something they're not expecting. (But don't try to be different just for the sake of it. You may end up being simply odd.) Draw on your own perspective and experience to make your story uniquely yours.
- 'Use reality in a way that advances the story.' In other words, yes, try to be realistic but not to the detriment of readability. Real police investigations may take months and months; the reader will want a quicker resolution.
- Writing is like a muscle – you need to keep exercising it. Write as much as possible if you want to get better. Make mistakes so that you can learn from them. 'If you want to write a book, write a bloody book.'
- Throw your ego aside. Find out what doesn't work with your writing and be willing to fix it. Edit out words that aren't needed. Be ruthless.

HOW TO ... REVEAL BACK STORY

by Sheila Adamson

As a writer we always know a lot more about our characters than the reader does. Learning how to share this information, and how much to share, can be one of the trickiest things to master. Every time we stop the story to provide a potted history of a character's life we lose the momentum of the narrative. If we dump too much information all at once it can be, quite simply, boring.

Tastes have changed, of course. I recently read *Waverley* by Sir Walter Scott. Now, my grandmother loved Scott with such passion that in our house it was a capital crime to even hint that any aspect of his style might be outdated. But look at how this novel starts!

Chapter 1 – waffly introduction

Chapter 2 – long explanation of the lives of the hero's father and uncle

Chapter 3 – the hero's early life

Chapter 4 – his adolescence ...

You get the picture. All that was needed was to say that Edward Waverley was a young man, uncertain of his path in life, and that he lived with an uncle of mildly Jacobite persuasion. Other details would in fact be better demonstrated by seeing the character in action.

Nobody takes the Walter Scott approach these days. But what should you do instead?

The advice is to keep it minimal. Focus only on what the reader needs to know to picture the scene. Usually an idea of gender, approximate age and setting. For example, the first paragraphs of Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder* tell us remarkably little:

The journey was no worse than she expected. A train from London to Liverpool; the steam packet overnight to Dublin; a slow Sunday train west to a town called Athlone.

A driver was waiting. "Mrs Wright?" Lib had known many Irishmen, solders. But that was some years ago, so her ear strained now to make out the driver's words.

So we know she's called Lib Wright and she's not Irish. We also immediately pick up that she's pretty stoical and unfazed by travelling on her own to a strange country. Her reason for being there only becomes evident later. In fact, wondering why she's made this journey and what the nature of her job is keeps the reader turning the page. Only much, much later do we find out about her family, her background and who Mr Wright was. A good author feeds the reader only a little bit at a time.

Generally, facts should come out as they're needed. The exception would be a Chekhov's Gun scenario. If it's going to be crucial to the plot that your main character is an expert plumber then you should probably find a way to mention that earlier so that it doesn't feel too convenient at the key moment.

There can be a temptation to pass on information to the reader through dialogue, ie one character telling their life story to another. This can be good and suitably dramatic for a big reveal of a dark secret. But it is a cumbersome way of transferring information. The benefit of prose is that you can slip in a short paragraph of facts whenever you need it.

Everyone tells you to start the story when the action starts – not before. By definition back story is from before the start. Don't let it get in the way.

SCOTTISH ASSOCIATION OF WRITERS CONFERENCE

by Sheila Adamson

The Scottish Association of Writers is a confederation of writers' clubs all round Scotland. It holds an annual conference in March, usually at the Westerwood Hotel in Cumbernauld.

The Conference includes competitions, workshops and speakers, along with plenty of opportunities for socialising. A strong contingent from EWC was present.



Members did well in a number of competitions:

Children's Short Story

2nd Lorna Fraser

3rd Julia Graves

General Novel

3rd Joan Sumner

Highly Commended Kath Hardie

Young Adult Novel

1st Sheila Adamson

Flash Fiction

1st Olga Wojtas

Crime Novel

1st Joan Sumner

General Article

3rd Kate Blackadder

General Short Story

Commended Anne Stenhouse (Graham)

Commended Olga Wojtas

3rd Anne Stormont

Woman's Short Story

1st Kate Blackadder

2nd Anne Stormont

3rd Lorna Fraser

Sheila Adamson and Dorcas Wilson participated in the Dragons' Pen pitching session. This involved each pitcher talking for four minutes about their book (which was scary) and then answering questions from the Dragons (published authors and agents), which was scarier. It does provide good practice in presenting your work, and gives an insight into the kind of questions agents and editors might ask when reading your synopsis cold. Sheila won with her Young Adult novel 'I Wouldn't Start From Here'.



Dorcas



Sheila

This year was a special one for the Edinburgh Writers' Club, as we are marking our 70th anniversary. To honour this we sponsored the John Severn Inkwel Competition for a general short story. Other clubs may have suspected that this gesture wasn't as generous as it appeared, with three club members featuring in the top places. A grand total of 59 stories were entered. First place went to Sylvia Hehir from Sunart Writers. Her dark and unsettling story centred on an awkward relationship between an

outsider and a family working with a travelling fair. She also displayed her considerable knowledge of how ferrets are used to catch rabbits!



Sylvia receiving her certificate from EWC club president, Joan Sumner



Olga, Sheila and Kate with their trophies

As well as the competitions, there were various workshops and talks. On Saturday night we had an after dinner speech from Helen Lederer, who is best known for her comedy work on TV. Recently she has taken up writing and her novel 'Losing It' was nominated for the P. G. Wodehouse Comedy Literary Award. She didn't talk much about her writing process but many other speakers did. A selection of notes and tips is below.

Victoria Gemmell, young adult author and former winner of the T C Farries trophy at the conference, spoke about where to find inspiration for stories. You may be familiar with the maxim that a writer should never be far away from a notebook. She expanded on that,

describing how she would see something – an interesting looking person, an image, a phrase – and note it down. Then as soon as possible afterwards she writes a short paragraph or mini poem that draws out ideas for future development. Since most of us carry our phones everywhere these days, it is easy to take photographs and file these as writing prompts.

Claire Wingfield is a literary consultant who has mentored writers for the Scottish Book Trust. She was plugging her book '52 dates for writers' which contains exercises to help you deal with problems in your manuscript or visualise your characters more clearly.

Sue Reid-Sexton judged the non-fiction competition. She advised that there is more to writing good non-fiction than simply knowing your facts and writing well. It is also crucial to be clear about your intended audience so that you can pitch your material at the right level of detail.

Keith Gray adjudicated the Young Adult competition. He said that the key to writing for this age group is empathy. In his workshop he invited us to do an exercise where we remembered an incident from our own teenage years and described the emotions we went through. However, the other point to note is that when you write for young adults you have to keep your story involving enough to compete not just with other books, but with the play station and television.

If you have never been to a SAW conference do think about going next year. Look out also for their other competitions, including the summer solstice competition:

http://www.sawriters.org.uk/downloads/solstice_competition.pdf

NEWS

Congratulations to **Olga Wojtas** whose short story won the short story competition in Women in Comedy Festival for her story *The Mystery of the Second Olga*. She is also one of ten short story writers whose work will be in the latest Hysteria anthology following the annual Hysterectomy Association competition.

Congratulations to **Kevin Nowbaveh** whose story *Pearls Before Swine* was published recently in the comic anthology *Future Quake*, sister magazine to *2000AD*, artwork by Norrie Millar.

Several members have publications out:

Gillean Arjat has a story *Happy Never After: Crime and Publishment Anthology Vol 1*

Anne Stenhouse's (Graham) fourth Regency novel *Courting the Countess*, a reverse Beauty and the Beast story, was published in September by Endeavour.

Sheena Guz has published her humorous sci-fi novel *Murder on Muckle Plugga*.

Kate Blackadder's first full-length novel *Stella's Christmas Wish* was published on 3 November by Black & White Publishing.

Arthur Greenan has two titles: (1) a memoir *From the Heights of Greenlaw*; and (2) a collection of true short stories and poems *The Robeson Tree*.

All the above are available on Amazon.

Books by **San Cassimally** have been reviewed on Kirkus Reviews:

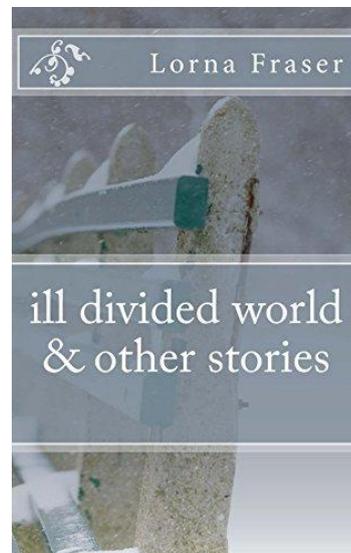
<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/author/san-i-cassimally/>

Anne Hamilton mentioned that she had interviewed EWC member **Olga Wojtas** for *Lothian Life*. You can read the interview here:

<http://www.lothianlife.co.uk/2015/06/words-with-olga/#more-16283>

Congratulations to **Lorna Fraser** who has brought out a collection of her short stories on Kindle and in paperback: *ill divided world and other stories* –

<http://amzn.to/2kyj2Mx>



Congratulations to **Gillean Arjat** who has four poems on this timely website – <http://thebelongingproject.co.uk/category/public/>

(One of the facilitators of the project is former EWC member Marjorie Lotfi Gill.)

Sheila Adamson was shortlisted in the Mslexia Children's Novel competition, for her YA time travel / relationships novel *I wouldn't start from here*.

Caroline Clayton (who was a member last year) has signed with Black & White for her children's picture book, *Maggie's Mittens*, due out in Autumn.