

The Write Stuff

The Magazine of Writers 2000

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CHAIRMAN'S CHAT

The annual lunch and awards afternoon was a great success. The Afrodisiac provided a wonderful atmosphere, good food and, apart from the odd glitch with the sound system, everything went without a hitch.

Thanks to Geraldine for managing the guest list, Louis for the publicity, Joan for the programme with its quiz and funnies, Annette for attending to the finer details, Barbara for keeping the record and Roy, Robin and Big Louis for taking photographs.

There was a great spirit of fellowship and fun, culminating in the raffle that ended the afternoon. The raffle table was loaded with books courtesy of Exclusive Books and Jill van Zyl and a great variety of other treats. Thanks to everyone who contributed and especially to Jackie who made it all so much fun. Congratulations to Pat and Roy who won the two-night retreat at Kurisa Moya.

A highlight was the new award presented by our patron, Marion Scher for 'someone who has pushed the boundaries with their writing.' The award went to Louis for pushing the boundaries for the club by creating our blog and promoting flash fiction. Judy Barnes awarded her on-line writing course to Jill Jacques.

This year's judges, Alison Lowry of Penguin Books, Fred Khumalo of The Sunday Times, Mapula Nkosi of True love and Dr Christine Marshall of UNISA were amazingly generous with their time, their praise and their feedback. They were also great fun and joined in the spirit of the event.

The heroes of the day, however, were the competition winners. Congratulations to you all. I hope that you will take the next step and look for wider publication as Jill did last year when she had her two winning Back Pagers published in Fair Lady and Femina. To assist you in this, Marion Scher will be speaking to us on 30 August about making your work, especially articles, marketable.

Maureen

EDITORIAL

Hello Everyone,

What a wonderful function we had in July. A BIG

THANK YOU to our Chairman for spearheading the arranging and organising. Congratulations to all the winners and runners up and well done to all who entered. I think the judges did a superb job and their comments were very encouraging.

I'm going to be traipsing around the UK end September so I'm going to make the deadline date for the Editor's Christmas Competition 31 October. I hope this means that those of you who are still pooped from the rush of getting your annual competition entries finished on time, will feel relaxed enough to think of a fun, heart-warming tale to tell and will send in an entry. (We need many to fill the November/December issue let alone to distinguish a first, second and third prize winner.)

All the winning entries of the Annual competition fill this issue – I'm sure you're all going to enjoy seeing what other members are good at writing and be encouraged to sharpen your pencils/fill those fountain pens/flex those fingers for the keyboard and get writing.

Looking forward to reading you,

Joan



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Editor,

I'd like to advise you and friends that I have reinstated my resignation from Writers 2000. My reasons are that I now find the distance to attend meetings too far to travel and the associated, rapidly escalating costs, becoming a heavy burden on my restrictive budget.

I sincerely regret having to make this decision thereby placing the chairman in a predicament in finding a replacement trustee, especially when our most reliable and honest treasurer in Ricky Jacobs has elected to relinquish her position. I shall seriously miss meeting my friends but accept the invitation to attend future annual lunches.

I praise the chairman, secretary, treasurer, editor, and other helpers and wish all members the excitement of success and happiness for their future.

Laurie Jones.

Greetings all,

Thank you for organising such a lovely afternoon at the Aphrodisiac. The food and company were great, and the judges gave so generously of their time to give feedback - this made it rather a long afternoon but it was worth it!

thought. Anyway, you can hardly chivy a judge who is giving the feedback we requested!

Thanks again to everyone who worked so hard to make it such a memorable occasion.

Jill Jacques

Dear Joan,

All credit to the organising committee and our Chairman, who made Saturday such a stunning success. In particular thanks to Maureen Martus, Joan Evans, Jackie Ford, Annette van der Merwe and the others who worked so hard and unobtrusively behind the scenes to make sure that events on our 'Big Day' proceeded on oiled wheels. Despite their busy lives and full-time jobs, they all introduced innovative ideas and ensured that everything ran without a hitch. An absolute joy as a chairman, Maureen is an ex-teacher and a skills-trainer and her experience and expertise is very evident in her application in running the club, despite her self-deprecating remarks that as a "control freak" she needs to know that all the ends have been tied up.

Mention must be made as well of the influence of Zara Jackson's Creative Writing sessions, as three of this year's winners have attended Zara's classes which have helped so much to improve their writing skills. The writing workshops organised by the club have also played a large part in members' continuing improvement and success. The occasion was very much enjoyed by everyone.

Thanks must also go to the panel of judges who gave up so much of their time and made such an effort to attend, and who, with their interest and insight brought such expertise to judging the entries. Their work is sincerely appreciated.

Barbara Durlacher



WHAT MY MOTHER TOLD ME...

Things my mother told me...

by Joan von Memerty

My mother was the Night Superintendent of the then Salisbury General Hospital in Rhodesia. She was a beautiful, quiet woman of Scottish descent, although she could be a hard-nosed matron at times. She would come home and regale us with horror stories of what occurred nightly in the wards - sudden deaths, inept doctors and incompetent nurses. She was an expert diagnostician herself, although, because she was not a doctor, and a woman to boot, in those days her skills went largely unrecognised.

Her favourite patients were the children in the Fleming ward. (At one stage one of them being me). The Fleming

ward was named after Sir Alexander Fleming who, my mother insisted, haunted the ward.

She would tell me that when the ward was quietest, around three in the morning, the ghostly steps and tapping of the walking stick of old man Fleming could be heard on the solid wooden floors – doing ‘the rounds’ of the children’s ward. Only a privileged few had ever actually seen his gaunt grey form, his pale face and glasses, and thinning white hair. Although she had never seen him herself, my mother said she had heard him many times during her night shifts.

Alexander Fleming was born in Lochfield, Scotland, 1881. He became a bacteriologist and discovered penicillin, winning a Nobel Prize in medicine in 1945 for his efforts. The Wright-Fleming Institute was created at Saint Mary’s Hospital, London, and Fleming was its first director. He died in 1955 and is buried in St. Paul’s Cathedral.

There are possibly many Fleming Wards all over the world, but according to my mother, her ward was the one he liked to haunt.



THE EDITOR’S CHRISTMAS COMPETITION

Closing date ~~30 September~~ 31 October 2008

A first, second and third prize to be won.

Winners will be announced at the Christmas meeting, end November and ALL entries will be published in the November/December issue of *The Write Stuff*.



Uplifting and encouraging tales, fiction or non-fiction, prose or poetry, not necessarily about Christmas but something you would like to read as you say goodbye to the old year.



Up to 350 words prose or 35 lines poetry.

Email entries – clearly marked Editor’s Christmas Competition – to me at je.fmf@mweb.co.za



MEETING HELD ON 28 JUNE 2008

Liesl Jobson

Notes by *Barbara Durlacher*

Liesl Jobson, known to us from her previous talks on Flash Fiction, was welcomed, having brought along not only her husband but her new book ‘100 Papers’ fresh from its launch at the Cape Town Bookfare.

As haiku is to poetry, so flash fiction is to the short story: condensed, tight and tiny. Flash fiction was fostered by internet technology, where a computer screen enables one to read some 400 words at a time. Yet much older examples of the form include Aesop’s Fables, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and scriptural parables. Modern short-short stories come by a range of names: microfiction, vignette, postcard fiction, palm-of-the-hand stories and smoke-long fiction: when the cigarette is smoked, the story is done. As with the camera’s flash, the image is snatched and every word counts.

The magic of flash fiction lies in its brevity, succeeding best when the reader recognises what is implied and completes the text. The miniatures found in ‘100 Papers’ are gleaned from Liesl’s diverse experiences as a police officer and psychic; an orchestral bassoonist; and a weekend mother. Parrots and gossips, eccentrics and vinegary teens people her stories in this collection.

For a comparatively young woman, Liesl has done and accomplished much. Born in Durban and educated in Pinetown and New Canaan, Connecticut, she has been writing for much of her life. Mother of two, and now happily married to Tim, she was recently awarded a three-year scholarship to work in Canada, following the completion of her Masters in Creative Writing.

Her varied work experiences have given her plenty of material, but it is her ability to catch the moment in her topical, punchy tales, and her unique use of dialogue that makes her stories so different. Serving for a short period as a Communications Officer in the SAPS, she doubled up as a bassoonist in the Police Band. She taught the flute and bassoon part-time at The Sacred Heart Convent in Observatory, Johannesburg; tutored English second-language students in creative writing; and has worked as editor on several publications in the literary and poetry fields. Liesl is a frequent contributor to a number of American and British websites, and publications devoted to flash fiction and poetry, and these too have given her plenty of ideas.

‘100 Papers’ is published locally by Botsolo, partly funded through creative writing awards from Lottery funds and the National Arts Council. It is with this book that she was awarded her Masters in Creative Writing.

Liesl stressed that with South Africa’s comparatively small reading public it is important not to harbour unrealistic expectations that writing will bring instant fame or riches. Most authors write because they have something to say

and need to express themselves. Many times there is very little hope of reward.

She told us about the pains and pleasures she had experienced while preparing '100 Papers' for publication. She pointed out that to stand *any* chance of having anything accepted it is important to present your work in 'publication ready' form.

She kindly circulated the pre-publication mock-ups for us to examine and stressed that, before signing off the publisher's proofs, it is essential to ensure that there are no spelling errors, no incorrect punctuation, and no grammatical mistakes. The best test, she and others had found, was to read your work aloud. Since the eye tends to compensate for mistakes in a familiar text they often go unnoticed, but by reading your story aloud errors are spotted more easily.

Liesl's enthusiasm and undoubted determination to succeed in her chosen field of expression, well demonstrated by the long list of her successes, will be enormously enriched by her forthcoming three-year stint in Canada.

Wishing her well, Maureen thanked Liesl for her inspiring and candid talk. We look forward to seeing her again and hearing about her experiences when she returns to SA.

Members were able to buy copies of Liesl's book and she kindly donated a signed copy for the Annual Lunch.

After tea the Chairman announced the names of the judges for the Annual Competitions and urged members to reserve their places for the lunch.

The phrase chosen for the July 200-worder was 'A Fast Worker'. A 65-worder was not selected.

The meeting closed at 16.30.



200-WORD COMPETITION **May 2008 – BROKEN GLASS**

There were 13 entries and the judges were Elizabeth Harper and Ruth Kriszanowsky.

1st Place

It's the Little Things that Count
by Khoisan (aka Janine Egan)

The hide pouch bumped against her hip in harmony with her running rhythm. Its contents tinkled with each barefoot step. The small cappuccino girl glided across the white desert sand.

The little runner's velvet-brown eyes scanned the horizon. They rounded with delight as she glimpsed the familiar cluster of huts from the top of a dune. "Not long now, Grandma," she whispered to the wind, "I'll soon have what you need to get better."

The lime-washed building with a cross painted above the doorway was easy to find. The dusty little traveller rested patiently on her haunches before it. Her bird-like hand felt for the pouch tied to her loin cloth and rested there. "Can I help you, little one?" the white medicine man asked her kindly.

When her grandma's ailment had been explained, the man placed a collection of miniature bottles in her hand with instructions for their consumption. Nodding in understanding, the little brown girl proffered him her pouch.

"What is this?" he asked.

"It is only **broken glass**," she replied, emptying the contents onto the sand, "but precious to me. Thank you for helping me."

At the doctor's feet, a handful of diamonds sparkled in the sun....

2nd Place

Aachen: 1938
by Jewel (aka Jill Jacques)

Samuel was walking along the ridge of hills when he became aware of the faint sounds of a commotion in the town below. He decided to retrace his steps to where he had a clearer view. In the fading evening light he couldn't really make out much, but knew he had to return at once.

Then he saw the smoke. It was above the synagogue. He broke into a run, stumbling over the rough ground. At the beginning of the street he stopped and stared. As far as he could see, the pavements were covered with glimmering fragments, like a path of crushed ice. His heart pounded in his chest as he headed towards home, slipping and slithering on the **broken glass**. The sound of weeping filled the air.

At the door of the bakery he stopped. The glass display counters had been smashed and the window shattered. On the floor knelt his mother, blood running unheeded from multiple cuts on her arms and face. In her arms his father, head lolling to one side, his shirt stained deep red. "Nein, nein," whispered his mother between sobs.

Always the scene would hunt Samuel's dreams.

Kristallnacht – the night of broken glass.

3rd Place

The Smiling Oil
by Lisa (aka Joan von Memerty)

The first thing she noticed as she entered her apartment was the **broken glass**. Her eyes darted round in fright, expecting someone to leap from the shadows. She shuddered with relief once she realised there was no one else in the room. Cautiously she switched on the lights,

gasping in dismay when she saw the place had been ransacked.

"Oh yes," she thought to herself with dismay, instantly realising what must have happened. She had, in a way, been expecting this. After a long, drawn out court battle, her ex-husband's last words had been a venomous "We'll see about this!"

She closed the door behind her and locked it. And, stepping over the mess he had left, rushed to where she had hidden the only thing he had wanted back since the day she had parted.

The safe was hidden behind the smiling oil he had done of her when they were young and in love. She figured he wouldn't search there.

She lifted the painting off the wall and breathed normally again – the safe looked untouched. Quickly she opened it. "Still there," she thought with satisfaction. He hadn't found the coveted 'family jewels' which now belonged to her.



ANNUAL AWARDS LUNCHEON

26 JULY 2008

Notes by **Barbara Durlacher**

The 2008 Annual Awards Luncheon was held once again at The Afrodisiac Restaurant, an African-themed setting, in Linksfield, attended by some sixty members and guests.

With a warm welcome to everyone present – in particular our judges – and to members and guests, Chairman Maureen Martus opened by announcing that, first, the presentation of Trophies would be made, to be followed by the Judges' Awards to the prize-winners in the writing competitions.

The Carpenter Cup awarded to members for the quality of their writing success went to **Jill Jaques** for her work which has appeared in *Fair Lady* and *Femina*.

The Pen Cup awarded to a member showing greatest progress and improvement went to **Robin Denill**.

The Judy Bees Writing Course Award was given to the writer of "Why I Want to be a Writer" – **Jill Jaques**.

The Editor's Award for members showing strong and positive support for the magazine was presented to joint-winners **Barbara Durlacher** and **Brian McGrady**.

The Ford Award given to an 'unsung hero' who helps the club in many quiet ways, went to **Gillian Wilkinson** in recognition of her dedicated effort to promote reading by collecting and distributing books to schools in Soweto.

The Marion Scher Award 'Pushing The Boundaries' awarded to a member who has moved out of their comfort zone and taken their writing to a new level, was won by **Louis Harris** for initiating the Writers 2000 Blog and introducing speakers from a wide range of spheres.

The Chairman's Cup awarded to a member who has made a really significant contribution to the group, went to **Geraldine Letowt-Vorbek** for stepping in as Treasurer when Ricky Jacobs was unable to continue.

The Chairman then thanked our hard-working Editor **Joan Evans** for the excellent magazine she produces (with best wishes for her birthday the previous day!), with thanks also to **Mavis Briggs** for her overview of the magazine and the book and film reviews; and to **Joan von Memerty** for keeping the flame of poetry alive and encouraging our enthusiastic poets. Thanked also was **Annette van der Merwe** for her invaluable assistance with arrangements for the luncheon.

In particular, the Chairman thanked **Jill van Zyl**, lately Distributions Manager of Exclusive Books, who, despite her recent retirement, arranged a generous donation of books for prizes.

Past Chairman Graham Bates then took the floor to address our thanks and warm wishes for the future to members **Laurie Jones** and **Joanne Mallet** who, for different reasons, would be taking their leave of the group. Joanne, a founder member since 1988 – one of the original four who began with get-togethers in each other's homes, was moving to Hanover, NE Cape – and Laurie who joined a little later and became one of our most prolific writers, featured in more than 80 magazines worldwide. His articles on correct English usage in our own magazine will be sorely missed.

Chairman Maureen Martus then introduced the Judges:

Mapula Nkosi Assistant Editor *True Love Magazine* – Backpager.

Fred Kumalo News Editor, author and journalist *Sunday Times* – Non-Fiction.

Dr Christine Marshall, Dept of English, UNISA – Poetry.
Alison Lowry, Publications Manager, Penguin Books – Fiction.

Backpager

Mapula Nkosi said briefly that as a journalist she is paid to write but also hopes to write a book some day. The criteria used in judging the Backpager was that it must be captivating and leave a sweet taste behind. She was impressed by the high standard of the writing, and commented on the interesting range of subjects, but pointed out the importance of correct punctuation. She said some of the work was badly presented, giving the impression that the writer was rushing to catch a deadline, which does not endear a writer to an editor.

First	Janine Egan	<i>A Process of Elimination</i>
Second	Brian McGrady	<i>Royal and Ancient Hooks and Crooks</i>
Third	Jane Leitch	<i>Charles</i>

Non-Fiction

Fred Kumalo introduced himself as a working journalist, which most members knew from his previous visit when he told us about his books *Touch My Blood* and *Bitches Brew*.

He is currently writing an unauthorised biography of Jacob Zuma.

Since he had never adjudicated a writing competition before, he said, he had set his own rules, his criteria being topicality, marketability and whether it would catch the reader's interest. He had also considered presentation, finesse and writing ability. He agreed with Marion Scher's dictum of 'know your market' and said non-fiction authors must consider their style; write in a way to satisfy all types of reader in order to appeal to the widest market. Brian McGrady's entry '*Peggy, The Shebeen Queen*', he said, did not fit the category and should rather have been entered in the Backpager slot, but since it was so amusing he felt he had to read it to us. Commenting on the winning entry, he said it was a story any newspaper in this country would love to publish.

First	Maureen Martus	<i>Don't Steal My Son</i>
Second	Dorothy Grist	<i>Munchausen Syndrome</i>
Third	Barbara Durlacher	<i>The Owl House</i>

Poetry

Dr Christine Marshall, who has been teaching and alerting her pupils to the beauty and possibilities of poetry for some sixteen years, is presently researching English curricula in the Third World. In judging the poetry her criteria was the use of sustained or connected imagery and an effective use of sound, including the use and overuse of onomatopoeia. She also looked for something unexpected or surprising; using words in different ways; and new or interesting techniques. Common pitfalls were difficulties in keeping unity, in using titles to mesh with the content and give a clue to the whole. She also looked for alliteration, or words linking thoughts and ideas to create atmosphere. She warned of the dangers of abstraction as this tends to distance the reader and alienate attention.

First	Duncan Stepto	<i>A Cup of Coffee</i>
Second	Brian McGrady	<i>Greatest Shoal on Earth</i>
Third	Jill Jaques	<i>Finger Painting</i>

Fiction

Judge Alison Lowry, Publications Manager for Penguin Books, is a graduate of UCT and has worked for Oxford University Press and Jonathan Ball. She later established Lowry Publishers, an independent publishing company, which published David Gowry, Margaret Roberts and other well-known authors.

She said that writing a good short story is one of the most difficult tasks there is and had been surprised to find 20 entries. They were all wonderful, and, because she found it so difficult to pick a winner she had decided to donate twenty short story books from Penguin so that every one of the entrants can go away with something – adding that she was sorry they couldn't all come first! She said that when writing a short story it is important to beware big themes, include all the details and, most importantly, to remember to 'show, don't tell'.

She said that each of the winners offered the following: they were evocative, had atmosphere, created a sense of

landscape and depicted a moment in time and place. While the authors used language creatively and imaginatively, it was disappointing that there were no original or different use of words. In addition, the stories lacked an unusual angle to surprise and inform the reader. One story that had made it to her short-list of five was '*The Concert*' by Barbara Durlacher. A lovely vicious murder story. She had enjoyed it immensely.

First	Joan von Memerty	<i>Spring in the City</i>
Second	Jill Jaques	<i>The Betrayal</i>
Third	Joan von Memerty	<i>Hour of the Dragon</i>

After congratulating all the winners, Chairman Maureen Martus expressed our grateful thanks to all the judges who'd given so much of their time in consideration of the many entries. Their comments were an invaluable encouragement to all our members.

Maureen then pointed out the raffle table groaning with prizes and thanked members and friends for their many generous offerings.

The fun continued with the drawing of the raffle and the event ended around five o'clock.

A TRIBUTE TO JOANNE MALLET & LAURIE JONES *by Graham Bates*

THE END OF AN ERA

I have been given the bittersweet task of paying tribute to two very special people. Bitter, because, sadly, they are both leaving us, and sweet, because I have had the privilege of knowing them for many years and welcome the opportunity to sing their praises. These two stalwarts have made huge contributions to Writers 2000 over the years.

Joanne was a founder member and our second Chairman in the days when we used to meet in each other's houses, and subsequently held several other offices. She was a pillar of strength to me during my two years as Chairman. She has had a number of her stories published and has won numerous Writers 2000 competitions. Joanne showed great talent as a maker of teddy bears and raised a lot of money for us by raffling them. She will soon be moving to Hanover, in the Northern Cape. There is an artists' colony there and, from her description, it sounds idyllic. The town lies just off the main route to Cape Town, so be sure to look Joanne up if you're travelling that way.

Laurie has always been there for us, even when he was seriously ill. He is a prolific writer and has been a major contributor to '*The Write Stuff*'. As Financial Trustee, he has kept us on the straight and narrow and his advice on financial matters has been invaluable. He has enjoyed a great deal of writing success, especially overseas. Laurie was responsible for drawing up our constitution, which gave the organisation legitimacy. This modest individual has a dry sense of humour and can produce an anecdote

for every occasion. His mastery of the English language is legendary and we have learnt much from his regular columns in the magazine.

Both of these wonderful people will be greatly missed and we hope that they can come back to visit us from time to time. On behalf of Writers 2000, we wish them health, happiness and continued success with their writing. I'm very proud to call them my friends. §

2008 ANNUAL COMPETITION WINNERS

BACKPAGERS

1ST Prize

A Process of Elimination by Janine Egan

The only time that I've associated the words 'fibre' and 'glass' is when we fitted that pink stuff into our ceiling for insulation – you must remember the 'think pink' advertisement that promised fibreglass would keep you warm in winter and cool in summer? Well, I found out a whole new association of these two words, where the one is used to eliminate the other. If you're confused, read on...

It is a Saturday night (of course it is – nothing, and no-one is available!) when my two daughters, Pia and Kelly, and I spend two hours at a desolate petrol station waiting for those car-gods of mercy, the AA, to raise my elderly Honda from the dead. It had started losing power on the highway and, only just, limped into the nearest Caltex station. Why is it that whenever problems of 'boy-stuff' category arise, none of the family's three male members are within 500 kilometres of the problem? Stoically, we resign ourselves to Murphy's luck as we drive home crammed into the cab of a tow-truck, with the 'old lady' happily piggy-backed behind – nobody's idea of a scintillating Saturday night out with the exception, perhaps, of said old lady. Not a good start to the evening... and it was about to get worse.

Once home, my kitchen explodes into a blur of activity, the result of five excited dogs and three hungry (and rather grumpy) females. Twenty canine, and six human legs vie energetically for traversing rights over the limited territory.

"Out, Lassie!"

"Mom, who ate all the chicken?"

"I don't know. It must be one of you two. Get out dogs, go, go, go!"

"It wasn't me – it must be Kelly..."

"Why do you always blame me, Pia? Move, Scrat, can't you see I'm trying to get a plate?"

"Dear God, I need a glass of wine..."

It was inevitable, of course. The fridge door, flung open in a fit of pique collides heavily with Scrat's Irish Wolfhound-butt. The resultant thud is followed closely by a resounding crash as a jar of mayonnaise bounces out of the door's innards and lands on the tiles in a congealed, splintered mess.

"Oh crap!" – I always knew that girl had foresight – announces Pia eloquently. We crash heads trying to collect the larger pieces of glass. My need for a large glass of wine is growing by the second. I'm gingerly dumping a handful of shards into the dustbin when...

"**Nooo... Scrat!**" deafens my senses and I turn around to see the dog lick up the last morsel of his mayo-and-glass entrée. For a hound that considers potato peels delicious, he must have rated the smashed condiment gourmet.

Tears, recriminations, and panic ensue.

Thirteen telephone calls later (yes, I counted them) and a vet who obviously has no life (10 pm on a Saturday?) advises Pia that surgery is not an option.

"Feed him as much bran as he can eat," instructs the vet, "and then examine his stools for evidence of glass. Call me in the morning."

Aspirin I can do late on a Saturday evening, but *bran*? I know my First Aid kit is in for a whole new look, but that's in the future and this Mother Hubbard doesn't boast bran in her cupboard.

"I'll go, mom," says Pia grabbing Kelly's visiting, now bewildered, new boyfriend by the hand, "and you can ride shot-gun with me, John. We'll feed *you* later."

I haven't seen him since that night, come to think about it...

Five all-night petrol stations later (yes, Pia counted them) and the intrepid duo arrive home brandishing two boxes of All-Bran flakes. In a large bowl milk is heated and, as the *pièce de resistance*, sugar lies like snow on the cereal mountain. Scrat is presented with his fibre feast.

He must have been a horse in his last life. He scoffs the lot (much to the irritation of the other dogs) and looks for more.

The next morning, Kelly draws the short straw by the *other* process of elimination (alright, so I knew which one not to choose – I was holding them, damn it!) and evokes much sympathy from the neighbours as she spends hours dissecting multiple molehills of dung.

I watch the exercise from a safe distance, my guilty conscience eclipsed by the fervent hope that this will be a case of 'all's well that ends well'.

"Mission accomplished," Kelly reports, "there's glass everywhere!"

Child abuse, I hear you say?

Hey, that's the fibre of family life... §

2nd Prize

Royal and Ancient Hooks and Crooks

by *Brian McGrady*

Many centuries ago, Scottish shepherds led tranquil, rustic lifestyles. Except for the brief, but hectic lambing season, life was rather humdrum.

So, while the sheep were quietly ruminating and releasing vast volumes of methane gas into the atmosphere, a shepherd would pass the time decapitating dandelions with his crook, a long pole with a curved end normally used for flock control. If a randy ram decided to set off in pursuit of an attractive ewe the shepherd merely hooked his crook around the ram's hind leg, thus restraining the errant beast. This action was accomplished 'by hook or by crook'.

Occasionally, when swinging at a dandelion in a tight lie, a shepherd would dislodge a desiccated dottle of sheep dung and send it spinning over the dunes. For amusement, shepherds would compete to see who could hit the longest dottle.

Across the North Sea, Dutch shepherds were playing a similar game by hitting tulip bulbs with their crooks. Gholf was their name for a staff, or club, hence the association. However, the game never developed properly in the low-lying Netherlands. There was far too much water in this pre-dyke era. Rueful golfers know that a shot will finish more often in the water than on the fairway. So Dutchmen reluctantly gave up the game and found that growing tulips was much less stressful and far more profitable.

Meantime, in Scotland the game went from strength to strength. Now, you don't have to be an animal scientist to realise that small balls of dried dung have an infuriating habit of disintegrating in flight.

Some crooked shepherds, if you'll pardon the pun, doctored their dottles with lime and similar hardening agents for added distance and durability. This form of ball tampering angered the honest players, just as handicap cheats today enrage their fellow golfers, particularly at prize-giving functions.

Considerable tension developed among the shepherds until one day big-hitting Hamish MacTavish, a giant with a flaming red beard, exploded with frustration.

"Och hoots, mon," roared Hamish, "I'm sick an' tired o' playing this s*** game with fules who tamper with their balls. The whole thing stinks. However, I've got a gude idea to wipe out all this corruption."

"We can mak' a ball from sheep-gut stuffed with feathers. We'll call it a feathery. That'll gie us improved flight performance and it'll mak' ball-tamperin' more difficult for all those shameless bluddy crooks that we've got in our midst." Hamish's suggestion was greeted with a chorus of 'Och ayes' and a skirl of the bagpipes. Soon the Scottish skies were buzzing with featheries much to the consternation of birds of a feather such as the ubiquitous Famous Grouse.

Increasing numbers of shepherds took up the game. Springy shafted crooks were in great demand. Chicken farmers grew rich producing feathers for the featheries.

Shepherds began to bet on who could reach a distant landmark in the least number of strokes. This led to the establishment of rough-and-ready golf courses carved out of the dunes. The game was made more challenging with the introduction of pot bunkers, stymies, swales, water hazards, trees, lateral hazards, loose impediments, immovable obstructions, unplayable lies, out-of-bounds, ground under repair, outside agencies and occasionally, Valleys of Sin.

Then rubber, called gutta-percha, was discovered and everything changed. Rubber-cored golf balls with a tough outer skin came into fashion. These dimpled balls, or gutties, could fly much farther than the earlier featheries. Shepherds' crooks were replaced by hickory-shafted clubs with unusual names like baffies, brassies, spoons, mashies, niblicks, cleeks, mid-irons and putters. Eventually the hickory shafts gave way to the metal type. Everyone who could afford it was swinging a club and shouting 'FORE' at anyone in danger of being brained by a dimpled, misguided missile.

Today the featheries, gutties, plus-fours and tweed jackets are all part of history. If big Hamish MacTavish were around today he would be surprised at the enormous improvements made in golf clubs, golf balls and golf courses. However he would not be at all surprised to see, even without the presence of dottles of sheep dung on the fairways, how many modern golfers continue to play absolute crap.

As Old Tom Morris, the great Scottish golfer, and connoisseur of fine Scotch whisky, was wont to say, "Och aye laddie, the more things change the more things remain the same. Slainte mhath." §

3rd Prize

Charles by Jane Leitch

He stands precariously on the corner of a busy intersection, alternately rubbing his stomach and putting his hands to his mouth, demonstrating his need for food and water.

The bib he wears which states BLIND is hardly visible. Charles is a heartbreaking sight. The first time I saw him on the edge of the road, I got such a fright I nearly ran him over.

His stick is not as white as it should be, and is so thin it gives him very little support. He taps it on the edge of the road.

One eye is enlarged, with that special sightless look, and the other doesn't open at all. Unlike so many Africans he doesn't have perfect white teeth, but an assorted variety in colour, shape, and size, some protruding and others pointing inwards. He has the nicest smile you could

imagine, and as he does, his big eye seems to roll in its socket.

He comes from Soweto alone in a taxi, depending on the drivers to tell him when he's reached his destination. I worry that passers by might be tempted to take advantage and help themselves to his day's takings, but to date, thank God, that hasn't happened.

When I first asked him about his family, he said his wife had left him. As I was digesting this, his voice trailed off and he said sadly, "She died three years ago and left me alone to bring up our three children".

I got him some warm clothes and shoes as winter was approaching, but he prefers to wear his down and out's as it obviously adds to his cause.

I think Charles has been put into my life for a reason; He is a constant source of compassion and irritation. The latter, because his official days on our corner are Friday, Saturday and Sunday, but his attendance is very erratic.

I have given up bringing fresh food in the car as when I do, as sure as eggs are eggs, he won't be there. Now I travel with a bag of non-perishables and Coke, not forgetting what he needs most, cash.

At first when I gave him money he'd say in his beautifully modulated voice, "Ah thank you, but I need food". When I gave him both he'd say "Ah thanks; but you know I need clothes for my children." Books, medicines, the lot, that's Charles for you.

I try to make sure that the many people who pass in their luxury cars on the weekends see me helping him, just to show them it is possible to stop. Some look with interest, others look straight ahead. He doesn't seem to have affected others as he has me. They can drive past with a free conscience. What is it about this man that wrenches my soul?

I hadn't seen him for nearly two weeks, and thought he had found a better place to my relief. Then out of the blue one Saturday he appeared again. Luckily I had the non-perishables in the car. As I approached with my "Hello Charles, its Jane", my reward was a big smile and an "Ah its you. I haven't seen you for a long time!"

We sat on the pavement and he handed over his coins for me to double check. He was spot on and knew every single one, even the little brown jobs. Then he said, "I got some paper money today but I don't know what it is." I think I was more delighted than he was, as he had a grand bundle of notes.

What a joy to see his happiness. As we drove to the taxi, the groceries stuffed into his bottomless carrier bag, and the money in his pocket, he couldn't keep the smile off his face. Neither could I.

Maybe the days of apprenticeship standing on that unfriendly road, will pay off. Who knows, maybe someday he won't have to stand begging people for help, but will be able to sit down against the large mound of clay on the

pavement that I call 'Charles's Throne' and have the people come to him.

Yes, it's a dream. But they sometimes do come true. §

NON-FICTION

1st Prize

Don't Steal My Son by Maureen Martus

With many South Africans leaving the country, families are divided, sometimes with devastating results for children. The Hague Convention was introduced in 1980 for cases where parents abduct children across international borders.

Until recently South African children involved in a parental tug-of-war had no say, but the introduction in 2007 of amendments to the Children's Act considers the interests of the child and, from the age of twelve, the child's views can now be heard.

A recent case highlights this tragedy all too clearly. A mother fears losing her son, an absent father demands more contact and the boy in the middle finds his life determined by lawyers and judges, who follow the law without considering the emotional impact on him.

Elizabeth is small and softly spoken. She starts worrying a cuticle as she explains the background to this increasingly common story.

"I'm terrified that my ex-husband is planning to keep my son Jamie in America if he goes there for the school holiday."

Elizabeth married Frank, a successful South African entrepreneur in LA. Soon patterns of the classic controller emerged. She says, "He was never violent, but I was always on edge, scared of annoying him."

"At seven, our son was diagnosed with ADD. Frank insisted he was fine, he just needed firm discipline." The battles around Jamie's schooling intensified when they moved back to South Africa.

"I could see the tension was affecting him. I had never stood up for myself, but I had to stand up for Jamie."

"The divorce was brutal. Frank tried to prove I was a bad mother." She was granted full custody. A few years later Frank challenged the ruling, but she got full custody again. Frank never accepted that.

"He takes me to court at least twice a year, disputing my parenting and changing holiday agreements. Each case is a lawyer's game of scoring points of law. No-one cares about my child."

Frank has moved back to LA and wants Jamie to go there for a holiday. Frank and Jamie are American citizens. Elizabeth fears that once Frank has him there, he will go to the American courts, cite the high crime rate and low

educational standards in South Africa and try to get custody. He could keep Jamie there for years pending the outcome, and she would need considerable funds to keep fighting the battle.

She says, "I have no hard evidence, but I know this man."

The Hague Convention only comes into effect after a parental abduction takes place. There is no recourse for a parent who only suspects and fears that it may happen

At the last hearing they had yet another new judge. He would not consider the history of the case or listen to the Children's Advocate who had interviewed Jamie. The judge ignored it all, declaring, "Any boy would love a holiday in LA. Get him on that plane or go to jail for contempt of court."

But the boy in question was determined not to go and he took the law into his own hands.

Jamie, with his mop of dark hair and engaging grin, is very articulate for a twelve-year-old.

"My parents are always fighting over who owns me. Last holiday my father wanted me to go to LA. I was terrified of flying on my own and so scared that he would make me stay there with him."

"At the airport the hostess taking me to the plane kept talking on her cell phone, so I ran and hid under some stairs. I waited a long time to make sure the plane had gone. Now my father wants me to fly there alone next holiday. He never listens. He keeps saying how happy the two of us will be in America."

We do not have the father's views, but it is clear that there is no easy solution to this case. The good news is that South African laws are focusing more on the interests and views of children instead of treating them like pieces of property with no feelings. It may take time for the courts to get used to hearing the children, but for Elizabeth, her cry is desperate and immediate.

"Don't let him steal my child."

The Hague Convention	Children's Act 38 of 2005
Established 25 October 1980	Protects rights of children as contained in the Constitution
Multilateral treaty Protects children from the harmful abduction across international boundaries	Sets out principles regarding the care and protection of children
SA adheres to the Convention	Amendment 9, effective 1 July 2007: The interests of the child are paramount Amendment 10, effective 1 July 2007. Children from the age of 12 may participate in matters concerning them and their views must be given due consideration.

2nd Prize

Munchausen Syndrome by Dorothy Grist

Definition of Munchausen Syndrome is repeated fabrication of physical illness – usually acute, dramatic and convincing – by a person who wanders from hospital to hospital for treatment.

As a young radiographer I worked in a busy General Hospital in Scotland. There was only one senior and seven junior radiographers and, as the Casualty Department had to be covered by us for 24 hours a day, the duty schedule was quite tight. Usually one of us would volunteer for extra duties as there was payment involved. The Chief Radiographer used to put up a duty list for the fortnight, and we promptly changed it around to suit our social lives. The understanding was someone had to cover the duties.

Not long after joining the staff, a colleague, Joan, was stricken by a mystery illness involving her alimentary tract. This was 1960, and tests such as barium meals and enemata were carried out on her at intervals, but little specific was found. Other non-invasive tests were carried out and samples were also analysed. Her symptoms were mainly vomiting and diarrhoea. Joan was ultimately hospitalised for observation from time to time and we all used to visit her when we were on night duty. Generously, she shared her tidbits, such as grapes and chicken sandwiches with us. The junior radiography staff were all naïve young females and unsuspecting. The concession for sick leave in the National Health Service was 3 months full pay and 3 months half pay per calendar year. To the day, Joan returned to work full-time at the end of her six-month lay-off. The rest of the staff had carried her duties during her 'sick leave'.

After Joan had moved on, one of the radiologists revealed what had been suspected but never proven viz. Munchausen Syndrome. We felt duped. She had been craving attention from the medical profession and must have been taking emetics and laxatives intermittently, which had fulfilled all the requirements. These types of patients are usually intelligent and resourceful, which Joan undoubtedly was, and have been known to desist from the medications if tests were due. Fortunately, in her case, very little harm was done and as psychology was in its infancy she was not referred. Perhaps she has moved on to another area and is practising on a new unsuspecting group.

Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy is a bizarre variant of Munchausen Syndrome in which usually a child is used as a surrogate patient. The parent falsifies the history, and may injure the child with drugs, or add blood or bacterial contaminants to urine specimens to simulate disease. The parent seeks medical help for the child and always appears to be deeply concerned and protective. The child is often seriously ill, requires hospitalisation, and may die.

Recently on television, a cold case investigation was opened into the death of a child in the Mid-west of America. Nothing had been suspected as the mother was

a nurse, and the child had been having fits. However, when her second child began displaying odd symptoms, doubt was cast on the first death. It was revealed that the mother had been administering excessive doses of insulin and the diagnosis was Munchausen Syndrome by proxy. This was an extreme case where she was duly convicted of the murder of her first-born.

I heard this term yet again when watching a fictional forensic pathology programme in which a young couple's first child had died of 'cot death', which is a well recognised diagnosis. However when their second child died of no obvious symptoms, the parents were investigated. One expert decided it was Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy although his colleagues disagreed with him. After various deductions and red herrings the outcome was that death was due to toxic pollution and, as it was in the same district as the babies' deaths, the parents were subsequently cleared of the charge. It was decided that the first baby's death was confirmed as a true cot death, whilst the second child's was due to toxic pollution. The one pathologist, who diagnosed Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, was thus proved wrong. Although this was fictitious, it was a well-crafted episode.

These two conditions of Munchausen Syndrome differ from run-of-the-mill malingering. The patients are very emotionally disturbed and require psychological help. §

3rd Prize

The Owl House: Helen Martins, 1879 – 1976 by Barbara Durlacher

Deep in the mountains, in South Africa's Cape Province, there is a tiny isolated village on the edge of the Great Karroo. It is called Nieu-Bethseda.

Some years ago, a woman called Helen Martins died in this little village, but not before her strange creation, 'The Owl House', had made her famous outside South Africa – something she never expected.

Born in Nieu-Bethseda in 1897, old photographs show a gentle, sensitive young woman. Training as a teacher in the small country town of Graaff Reinet, she married a local man with interests in the theatre and acting. Briefly involved in teaching, Helen later divorced, returning in the late 1920s to Nieu-Bethseda where she nursed her elderly parents until their death.

Stories about her life abound, including another marriage that lasted a few weeks, and at least one abortion, but it seems that she found it increasingly difficult to relate to others, and became more and more withdrawn; circumstances and lack of money conspiring to force her into spending the rest of her life in this remote community.

Living in the small tin-roofed family home, alone and friendless, her closest associates became her two coloured labourers. Perhaps as a measure of her strangeness, from this time onwards she directed all her energies and considerable determination towards creating

the extraordinary artistic achievement that is not only the single most important asset of the tiny Karroo town, but is known and celebrated as far away as New York.

The enigmatic nature of her creations contrasts with the utilitarian medium in which she executed them – a chicken wire frame covered by roughcast concrete – creating a dramatically different collection where businesslike ordinariness is imposed upon imaginative fantasy. A detailed study of the groups shows that each piece was placed deliberately to create a pattern and illustrate her ideas. Being particularly fond of the works of Omar Khayyam and the poetry of William Blake, and brought up in a strongly religious home, these combinations produced an enigmatic language of sun-faces, owls and other images.

Inside the house, pieces of broken mirror and roughly ground glass are interspersed with painted bands of colour to reflect light. Additional pieces of broken mirror set in the walls create kaleidoscopic mosaics reflecting fragmented images of the interior, and the coloured glass windows increase the impressionistic play of light and shade. Perhaps this was an attempt to bring colour and light back into her life, or to create something of beauty in an area where colour and originality were difficult to find? Who can tell, her life and her creation remain as inscrutable as ever; it is up to the observer to interpret the creations in their own way.

Outside the house, in 'The Camel Yard' there is a group known either as 'The Road to Mecca', or the 'Road to Bethlehem'. Composed of nearly life-size camels and walking, kneeling and prostrate figures, it represents pilgrims or the Three Wise Men, surrounded by a collection of fantastical beasts. These figures do not face due east, but as Helen has chosen to orientate them, their arms raised in wonder, pointing to a star in an 'East' only she can perceive. Perhaps in this way she was trying to impose her fascination with the Orient and Christianity on reality.

As she grew older and odder, she withdrew entirely. She spent her tiny income on raw materials and her assistants' tiny wages. Penniless, she could barely afford to eat, and suffered badly from malnutrition. Possibly this contributed to her weird visionary images and increased her eccentricity.

In earlier years she created a series of elaborately bell-skirted 'ladies' possibly intended to depict welcoming hostesses in her fantasy world, but her growing withdrawal, demonstrated by the wire fence and the line of spiky Queen-of-the-Night cactus guarding the entrance, seems to warn visitors that they are tolerated rather than welcomed. The house has a sadly forlorn air redolent of troubled dreams and a lonely soul.

In her 79th year, life became too difficult for Helen. She realised her work was nearly finished and the limited space in her yard was filled by her creations. Her funds were exhausted; her ostracism from the community so intense she exchanged barely a word with others from year to

year. Desperate, frightened and with her mind temporarily unhinged, she decided to end her life. Swallowing a large dose of caustic soda she suffered a hideously painful end, lingering in agony for several days until death released her.

Now the little house is a national monument and a protected building. Visitors come from all over the world to view Helen's creations, some lingering to savour the very special ambience of this dusty village ringed by mountains on the edge of the Great Karroo. §

POETRY

1st Prize

A Cup of Coffee by Duncan Stepto

I dodge the rattle
of cup in saucer,
to weave my way through words
that clutter the silence
with the clatter of your day,
and discern
faint wings of hope,
more than a smidgeon of fear,
bracketed by a question,
does he really like me?
All in the silence
between the words,
and I wonder why
your hands dance so
in this needless performance
to keep silence at bay,
when it is so articulate.

Surely going out for coffee
is not such a big deal,
or is it?

2nd Prize

The Greatest Shoal on Earth by Brian McGrady

Excitement mounts. It's the month of June.
The Fundis cry, 'They're coming soon.'
But forecasts tend to be erratic
concerning matters sub-aquatic.
The experts all can wax effusive.
but small sardines can be elusive.

There's not a seagull to be seen
from Port St Johns to Hibberdene.
Hopes are dashed and hopes are raised,
then one fine day we're all amazed.
'The sards are here,' the lookouts cry'.
A million gannets cloud the sky.
For seabirds it's a mighty spree.
Like feathered hail they hit the sea.

Then come the dolphins, sharks and whales.

This ocean madness never pales.
Non-anglers fish with strange containers
baskets, beer-crates, kitchen strainers.

Commercial catchers join the fray.
Their rubber duckies hit the spray.
They net the sardines by the ton.
No need for scales. Excuse the pun.
Shop signs scream, 'BUY FRESH BAIT HERE'
or 'CHAR-GRILLED SARDS WITH ICE COLD BEER.'

3rd Prize

Finger-Painting by Jill Jacques

Mountain ranges finger-sided
Grey on grey
Finger-traced wrinkled ridges
Down green stained hills
Black-backed with shadow
Olive-knuckled distant trees
Behind reversed thumb-print bush
Reflected on water
Nail-etched pale grasses
Cosmos dit-dot lilac
Wiped off white light
Touches peak and rock face.

Brow furrows smudged and smoothed
Hard-edged colour
Wetted and softened
Soothed by windtouch
And sunwarmth
Open-handed release
Of finger slid tension
Lightly brushed spirit
Lifts and sings
Rests in the deep silence
Of the finished canvas.

Submit
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for publication
in *The Write Stuff*
to
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Joan von Memerty
at
joanvm@absamail.co.za
(remember to add your name)

FICTION

1ST Prize

Spring in the City by Joan von Memerty

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.* (Ezra Pound)

Jamie loves the early spring mornings as she waits for the bus. When she is early, she climbs up to the second deck and goes to the back of the bus. There she gazes out of the window at the colours in the sky spread across the eastern horizon. Sometimes she gets the number ten bus that drops her off right outside the Braamfontein building in Johannesburg, where she works, or if she is early like today, she takes the seventeen and walks a few blocks, passing the smiling street vendors.

Jamie has inherited her mother's looks, with hazel eyes that sometimes look brown and long dark mostly straight hair, although, on days like this, her hair begins to curl from the damp air. Her skin is pale olive and her full lips, a pretty pink. She has a face that could grace the cover of a beauty magazine.

She steps off the bus, quickly caught up in the current of city people in a hurry to get to work. Today she stops near the end of the first block where Nomshado Nkosi is setting up her stall, a large woman with a happy round face, cheeks plumped out beneath small but friendly eyes. When she laughs, which is often, her whole body shakes, so she is regarded as the number one most popular woman amongst the black men.

Nomshado comes from a very good family but she made one terrible mistake – she chose a lover who brought her to the city and promptly abandoned her for more pliable women. Nomshado quickly learnt the ways of the city and over the years has grown fatter on her profits. Like many city women she scorns the idea of a husband and instead boasts one long stream of lovers. Her family has long ago given up any idea of rehabilitating her.

"What will you do, Nomshado, when you are old and cannot earn a living?" they would ask her.

"And what difference will a man make," she would reply. "Husbands are more trouble than they are worth."

Today she is full of high spirits and beams at Jamie.

"*Jammy*, I have new beads," she beckons, her pronunciation a rich mixture of several different dialects, none of them English. "Beads will help you find *reech* men like mine."

Jamie obediently goes to examine her new stock. She is already wearing bangles and a long beaded necklace that she bought from Nomshado a week ago but she bends over the array of beaded finery laid out on an old sheet on the pavement. And marvels at the intricate patterns woven out of colourful beads.

She looks up from her kneeling position and notices a face in the crowd. A tall man is passing and for an instant their eyes lock. She looks away hurriedly.

She is about to tell Nomshado that she has enough jewellery for the moment when the man approaches. He says to her quietly, "Let me choose something that will do such beauty justice." A somewhat over-worked line of approach.

Nomshado is there like flash-lightening with the possibility of a sale.

"Such a beautiful girl," she agrees. "She must have the best." She winks at Jamie.

Having said that, she picks out her most expensive items while Jamie begins to protest. The man fingers the jewellery that Nomshado is passing to him at a rate of startled buffalo.

Jamie knows neither Nomshado nor the man are going to listen to her protestations, so, without a word, she hurries away. She moves quickly, slipping through the crowds. Her heart beating rapidly for the man, with his charm and good looks, has overwhelmed her.

Jamie works in the bookshop near the University. The owner is a thin man who walks with a stoop. His face is lined and his long grey hair emphasises the gauntness of his bony face. Jamie soon discovered when she began working for him that he was incredibly kind, but a poor businessman. She worries, at times, whether she is going to get paid, especially since he told her some weeks ago that he was trying to sell his shop because of debt.

The new, popular books that all the students want to buy are priced low so they are sold immediately, but they are difficult to replace, whilst, for the old books that Jamie feels are ready for the rubbish heap, he asks a large sum of money. And so, of course, they rarely get sold. Yet, from time to time, a very expensive book does sell, so Jamie respects old man Erskine's knowledge but the fact remains is that he makes very little money.

Today the old man is notably excited. Jamie thinks that perhaps yesterday, after she left the little shop, he may have made a good sale. He closes the door quickly behind her for it is not yet opening time.

"Jamie, a man's coming to see the shop," he says excitedly, gesticulating with waving arms that appear too long for his frail body, and flexing thin weathered fingers. "He's a sharp book-dealer, he can make it work... but I won't sell this shop unless he keeps you on. The customers love you and you do wish to stay here don't you?"

Jamie nods, but she knows things will be very different without old man Erskine.

There is a knock at the shop window and the old man turns.

He says, "That must be him now. I suggested he come before we opened."

Jamie goes to let the prospective buyer in. She pauses at the door in bewilderment.

It is the man she had met at Nomshado's stall. He is holding a brightly beaded bracelet – Nomshado's most expensive ware. He too, looks astonished to see her.

Laughter bubbles up as she begins to realise why he is here.

"Hello," he says as she lets him in. The old man comes hurrying up to him.

As the man is hustled away, he turns to look at Jamie with a comprehensive and somewhat intimate smile. Nomshado's necklace is dangling from his jacket pocket. Suddenly Jamie smiles back, it is going to be interesting times. Along with the distinct odour of aftershave, she can positively smell the changes in the air. Perhaps Nomshado will not have the monopoly of all the men, she thought slyly. She switches on the radio, there is crackling, muted voices, then familiar music; the classical piece most radio announcers choose to celebrate the first day of spring. She turns up the radio and allows Vivaldi's 'Spring' to blow in gusts through the bookish atmosphere adding a touch of joy to stale air. She is **swept away** with the thought of romance.

At the end of the day, Jamie makes her tired but happy way home. She has developed a far away look in her eyes as she passes Nomshado without seeing her. But Nomshado notices the latest adornment and with a knowing eye lets her pass. §

2nd Prize

The Betrayal by Jill Jacques

On Saturday mornings we went to the bioscope. In the 1950s no-one worried too much about whether the films were suitable for children. They all were. Except perhaps for Disney's Snow White, which gave me nightmares for weeks afterwards, but I'm not aware of any long-term traumatic effects. Perhaps kids were just tougher then.

Sometimes Estelle helped her mother on Saturdays and Irwin went to classes for ultra-brainy children, but Alan and I always went to the bio. We set out armed with wads of comics under our arms and seven pence clutched protectively in our hands. Once Alan dropped his and the sixpence rolled spitefully down the sloping tarmac and into the storm water drain. He lay full length in the dried sticks and jacaranda blossoms, cheek pressed to the dirty concrete, eyes narrowed against the dust, and slid his arm down into the spidery depths. The purple stains on his shirt remained stubbornly in place for as long as I can remember.

Alan was the first to speak to me when we moved into the house in Orange Grove with its stained-glass front door and polished red verandah. He stood on the pavement in brown sandals and short grey pants, his legs thin and pale, his chin tilted slightly in characteristic protectiveness

against a world that favoured more manly boys. The days of Superman and Tarzan.

"Hello," he said, a giveaway flush spreading blotchily up his neck.

"Hello."

"I'm Alan. I live next-door. How old are you?"

"Nearly eight."

Imperceptible chin lift; the triumphant smile of one who seldom wins.

"I'm eleven."

Alan and I spent time together: nattering and gossiping over the brick wall that separated our backyards; summoning each other with our secret call – 'Hu-hu-huyoo' lilted softly into the hot afternoon air; perched confidently in the Y of the apricot tree and passing sweets in a cunningly devised bottle and pulley system slung from branch to branch; swatting flying ants with tennis racquets in the dusk-lit road on summer evenings; and for three long months, me sitting on the edge of the bed where Alan was confined with rheumatic fever that was to leave him with a weak heart for the rest of his life. We played Monopoly and Snap, ignoring the sullen presence of the humped, blanketed cage over his legs. I sometimes let him win on purpose because he looked so tired. Thin white hands against a thin white sheet.

That Saturday in October Alan and I set out to watch the sixth episode of 'Superman and the Spider Lady'. The title of the main feature was generally inconsequential and during my bio-days I sat happily through Esther Williams smiling under water while streams of glittering bubbles rose from her mouth; screamed with anguish and relief as Roy Rogers, the singing cowboy, vanquished hordes of Apaches; and wept copious tears when Bambi lost his mother and Lassie didn't come home.

On that Saturday our ginger tabby performed his usual daring farewell, pad-pawing beside us along the tops of walls as far as Louis Botha Avenue, tail a supercilious question mark, full-furred. There was a queue when we arrived outside the Royal Bioscope – a multi-garbed motley of children waiting for the ticket office to open. We joined them. A confident, pushy boy of about thirteen was striding up and down the line organising the comic-swapping. I was already planning how to spend my seventh penny.

For one penny you could buy a thick square of Sharp's toffee that glued your teeth together and lasted through the whole film; or three nigger balls that changed colour in your mouth as each layer dissolved; or, my current favourite, a wafer cup filled with sweet marshmallow and sprinkled with multicoloured hundreds and thousands.

Then it happened.

I became aware of muffled gulping sounds followed by the wet splat as the stuff hit the concrete. Alan had thrown up right there on the pavement. Those of us near to him

flattened ourselves against the wall as cries of “Yuck!” and “O sis!” rose from the crowd around us. I glanced at the lumpy orange mess on the ground then looked quickly away as my gorge rose briefly in sympathy. I looked up to where Alan, a handkerchief pressed ineffectually to his mouth, moved hurriedly across the road towards home; he was momentarily trapped on the island, helpless in the face of the traffic rushing past.

An older girl in front of me said, “Ag shame, your friend’s sick.”

“He’s not my friend. I don’t even know him.”

The treacherous words slid out, over-loud and defensive. The girl stared at me for a moment, opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it and shuffled forward with the now moving queue. It took forever to reach the ticket window. My body felt so hot I could hardly breathe and my heart thudded in my chest. Behind me girls voiced their revulsion as they skirted the offending puddle and boys mimicked the whole incident in loud coarse voices with exaggerated sound effects and gleeful threats to push each other into it.

At last I was at the door of the darkened cinema where Mad Jack tore our tickets in half and threaded them onto a long string held in his left hand. He greeted me in fumbling tongue, smiling his weirdly vacant smile. For one terrifying minute I thought he would ask, “*Whez* Alan?” He didn’t and I was **swept away** by the jostling children into the anonymous dark and sat down in the first vacant seat I saw. For sixpence you could sit anywhere downstairs.

I jumped as a torch flashed in my face and then flickered down the row.

“OK!” the usher’s voice cut through the dark like a cat o’ nine tails. “You kids all hold up your tickets sose I can see *youse* have all paid.” I groped for mine in my pocket, hands sweaty and shaking.

A smart-alec called out boldly, “Course we paid! What you think – we cheats or something?”

The boy next to me grinned as I put my ticket back in my pocket.

“Hey, you skrikked so much when he asked for tickets, I thought you’d sneaked in.”

I almost wished I had. Then I could be caught and punished. Now I sat there with the memory of betrayal sour in the pit of my stomach. The familiar rhythmic accompaniment to *The African Mirror* started up and the young audience gleefully stamped their feet in unison. I tried to join in but every stamp was like a knell of judgement. As the tension at the back of my neck subsided, an unspeakable bleakness filled my eight-year-old being. “O lord, we do earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable.”

On the screen, Spider Woman stepped out of her web and moved menacingly towards Lois Lane. Yells of “Look out behind you, Lois!” gave way to a chorus of “Yay!”s as

Superman burst into the room. The “To be continued” text flashed white on a black screen. §

3rd Prize

Hour of the Dragon by Joan von Memerty

The man walks along the lonely beach. The day is mildly overcast but changing. Seagulls circle and in the distance he can see a gull as it dives into water, shooting back up into air – he catches a glimpse of a silver sliver in its beak. Although he is a teacher, he is a man clad in the poorest clothing, wearing only shorts, shirt and sandals. Around his neck he wears a good-luck medallion to protect him from life’s adversities. He is watching for the boat people and is expecting the boat to arrive with the help of a divine wind. He looks up. The clouds are darkening. How fast the weather changes its face. Tirelessly he scans the horizon where the sea merges with the sky. The sea grows greyer. Its voice stronger.

A gust of wind whips at his thin body. He stands still – waiting.

There, on the horizon, he sees the boat. As this phantom grows larger and more authentic, the whole aspect of his body changes.

Kim puts down her pencil. She is torn between feeding the baby and writing. Her breasts feel uncomfortably swollen and she longs to present each nipple to her baby’s little red pouty lips. She touches her right breast gingerly. Then she hears him cry.

“No, no, Ananda. Wait. I am busy. Be still for a while.”

She uncurls her legs and half rises from the mat, sinking back when his cry changes to a happy murmur at the sound of her voice. She begins to write again but looks up at the sound of Ananda’s cooing. She thinks he must have found something to amuse him. It was a cute baby sound, irresistible to a mother. She is small and fragile with long black hair, which swings as she crawls nearer to the makeshift cot to see what is capturing his attention. It is a glint of light on the metal hanging from the cot. When he reaches for it the image on the metal appears to shimmer and move. If only such little things could please us as we grow older, she sighs, and then continues to write.

The boat draws nearer and the man begins to wade out to it. Splashing against the shore waves, then swimming as the water gets deeper. He can hear the people on the boat shouting excitedly as he swims towards them.

A pregnant woman with a small child hesitates, then, seeing the swimmer, gathers the child into her arms – and jumps.

This flight into life is a desperate journey. She can hear the boat people cheering as she takes that leap of faith. The water envelops her and the waves, so tame from the boat, are mountains as she gasps for air. She tussles with the ocean for the child but she has lost her grip of her. She sees her husband. He is tiring from the swim, his frail body not up to the powerful thrusts of the sea. They wish to

clasp each other in one long embrace of love but the sea keeps them apart, and the child is being **swept away**. He sees her look of desperation and nods, understanding the anxiety of a mother for her child. Quickly, pulling the talisman from his neck, he throws it towards her and she manages to catch it. Swimming after their child, she watches, struggles to follow, but the tide is pulling her closer to shore. She realises the distance between husband and daughter is widening. They are disappearing, she screams out their names but her screams are joined with the screams of many others who have plunged into water although some are unable to swim. Some panic and sink, some try to find something to hold on to, one or two try to grab her in an effort to keep afloat. She does what she can to help.

The scrap of paper is not large enough to contain the words as they pour from her heart. The baby begins to whimper, almost as though he can sense his mother's distress. He squirms in the cot and starts to cry – sensitive to every nuance of this being on whom his life depends. He also realises he is hungry.

The water is full of bodies, some still threshing in distress, others drowned – bobbing in the waves. Most are making it to shore. The pregnant woman arrives, exhausted, on the beach. Determinedly the ocean has separated them, and, somehow, she knows, she will never see her husband or her child again. All she has left is the chain with the good-luck medallion he threw to her in one moment of confusion. A parting gift.

Defeated, lying prostrate on the wet sand, she has already begun to grieve. The wind has grown angry, there is a rumble of thunder amongst the dark clouds and a soft river of rain turns into a torrent. She does not care. She feels she has nothing now to live for.

Kim reaches past the baby into the cot and pulls the metal amulet down and swings it back and forth. The dragon appears to shift its shape. Dragons are for luck. He had passed on his luck to her but somehow she does not feel lucky. She still hears his voice as if in a breath from the sea, calling 'Kim-long, Kim-long'. She did not relish the irony, for her name 'Kim' means 'gold' and 'long' means dragon.

Golden dragon. He used to tell her she was his golden dragon and she brought him luck. She writes bitterly:

The man and child were never found – perhaps if he had kept the chain around his neck the pregnant woman would not have to mourn for the loss of her family.

'Shh, Ananda,' she says, 'don't cry baby-boy don't cry. I will feed you now.'

She takes the medallion from the cot and fastens it around her neck before lifting the baby to cradle him. The crying stops and quickly, turning his head from side to side, he nuzzles her breast. Gently she guides him towards the nipple. §



WORDPOWER

by Mavis Briggs.

Punctuation

Anyone who reads and writes for pleasure, or profit, needs to have a sound knowledge of grammar in their chosen language. In English that includes punctuation which renders the printed page much easier to read. As Graham King states in his invaluable book 'Good Punctuation' (Collins 2004), "Any piece of writing will fall apart without the nuts and bolts of punctuation."

Punctuation also provides that enviable 'white space' that publishers look for to make the printed page more attractive to potential buyers of books. Density in print tends to repel readers.

Space

Space also punctuates, separating larger units of print. It can also be introduced by dialogue:

'Hallo, Ambrose,' I said.

'Ah, Gerry!' his voice rang out. 'I've got you a pig. It's a lovely pig. It's called Blossom.'

'What sort of pig is it?' I inquired.

'I'm not sure, but I think it's what you call a Red River hog.'

'Good lord! That's marvellous!'

(from 'Catch me a Colobus' by Gerald Durrell)

Numbers

I tend to balk when I see numbers within a sentence. King says that the rule of thumb in using numbers in sentences has been that those from one to ten are spelled out. Round numbers and approximate amounts can be expressed in words or figures, according to taste, but that beginning a sentence with a numeral is not acceptable. Although he suggests using the 12-hour clock (as in UK) when expressing time, in *fiction* one could use words, thus:

'They arranged to meet at ten in the morning.'

Commas

Correct comma placement is important in sentence construction, eg:

They were sick and tired of the seemingly endless journey.

Or: *They were sick, and tired of the seemingly endless journey.*

Use of the comma is more difficult to describe than any other punctuation mark, and there is much variation in practice. Essentially, it gives detail to the structure of sentences, especially longer ones, and makes their meaning clear. Too many can be distracting; too few can make some writing difficult to read, and to understand. The comma is widely used to separate the main clauses of a compound sentence when they are not sufficiently close in meaning or content to form a continuous unpunctuated sentence, and are not distinct enough to warrant a semicolon. Since it would be incorrect to join the clauses of a compound sentence without a conjunction, one such as *and, but, yet, etc.* is normally used:

The river runs through a beautiful green valley, and the road follows it closely.

Commas are also used between adjectives preceding a noun:

*An intelligent, vivacious woman.
A badly-heated, untidy room.*

The role of the comma is to prevent ambiguity or misunderstanding.

Ellipsis

An ellipsis is denoted by three full stops. . . , marking an omission in a sequence of words. When the omission occurs at the end of a sentence, a fourth point is added as the full stop.

Semicolon

Its main role is to unite sentences that are closely associated or that complement or parallel each other in some way, as in the following:

East of the town lies a large industrial estate with little private housing; to the north is the hospital.

It is used in a similar way in lists of names or other items, to indicate a stronger division:

In closing I should like to thank the chairman, Bradley Bates; my assistant, Molly Martin; and my driver Shakespeare.

Sentences

How long should a sentence be? King says the usual answer is 'neither too long nor too short', but, to paraphrase, 'whilst short sentences are more easily understood, an endless succession of them would irritate.'

Last word. . .

arcane *adj.* mysterious, secret; understood by few.



George Moore wrote brilliant English until he discovered grammar.
(Oscar Wilde)



THE BLOG

Remember to visit the blog for up to date news about club activities, competitions, and to publish your work.

www.writers2000.iblog.co.za

THE CONCERT

by Barbara Durlacher

Ruritania, 1811

The small group of survivors moved fast through the forest, keeping to the deep cover. They carried rucksacks stuffed with antiques stolen from the castle on the crag above them. A younger woman struggled with the baby in her arms; a small boy clung whining to her skirts and she impatiently urged him forward. Reaching the cave, they melted into the darkness inside, pulling rocks and branches across the opening. Everything they had known before had been swept away. The sound of shouts and galloping hooves echoed through the quiet forest, while far off, the *whump* and crumple of an exploding shell made them cower in fear.

1992

The coach party kept together, following the leader's faint torchlight as he walked rapidly through the forest. The older ladies grumbled and panted, but did their best to keep up, fearful of losing their way along the faintly marked track.

Arriving at the castle, they filed into the gold and white concert hall, where the glow of candles cast a soft light over the audience. Arranging themselves on delicate gilt chairs, they marvelled that this fragile furniture could have supported the voluminous skirts and well-fed bodies of 18th century courtiers accustomed to lives of leisure and ease.

The soloist seated herself at the piano, the violinist took up his bow and the concert began. Entranced by the soaring music, the time passed quickly and it was not until the first half ended that the visitors relaxed and took stock of their surroundings.

"Such a beautiful room," murmured Agnes, the liveliest of the ladies. "And the setting is exquisite. Don't you think so, Mabel?" Turning to her companion, "It makes you think of 18th century ladies in their beautiful full-skirted gowns, with huge powdered headdresses, low-cut bodices, their heaving bosoms covered in pearls and diamonds, listening to music by Mozart and Chopin in the soft candlelight. Do you agree, Mabel dear? So lovely and tranquil; a delightful way to spend a summer evening."

Addressed by the indefatigable Agnes, who impatiently awaited her reply, Mabel was, as always, at a loss for an answer. She smiled vaguely, hoping that someone else would pick up where she could not and fill in the sudden silence.

This had always been the problem of travelling with Mabel, thought Agnes. Such a dull woman; never an original word or thought out of her. In Agnes' opinion, she lacked the social graces; had no background of scholarship or culture. Sometimes Agnes wondered why she chose her to accompany her on her annual round of the 'Finest European Cities'. After all it was not as if it was costing Mabel anything to come on these trips. One would really expect her to make a bit of an effort.

Agnes always paid, and it was difficult to find an amenable companion for these jaunts, as not everyone wanted to be dragged around Europe listening to classical concerts and looking at churches and cathedrals while accompanying a fault-finding snob.

Heaving a sigh, Agnes settled down, noisily sucking a large toffee. She decided it was not worth making a fuss about Mabel's lack of stimulating conversation. For the moment she'd be content with Mabel despite her faults, glad to have her on these summer tours, but next year she'd find somebody more stimulating. It would be interesting to do something different with a more adventurous companion. Somebody who could act on her own initiative without needing constant instruction.

The concert ended, the group quickly gathered together before being led back to their hotel. The night had grown darker and an icy breeze had sprung up, flinging the trees about in a wild dance. Suddenly ahead of them, the flickering beam of the torch disappeared and the two women were left stumbling in the darkness with nothing to guide them. An owl hooted, startling them with the sudden noise; underlining the silence and isolation. Then Agnes tripped on an exposed root and fell heavily, hitting her head against a rock. Mabel let out a muffled scream, and joints creaking, bent over her friend, lifting her to a sitting position.

"Oh, Agnes, have you hurt yourself? Oh, you poor dear, are you in pain? Are you bleeding?"

Agnes moaned and heavy rain began to fall. The temperature dropped further and Mabel burst into tears. She sat on the muddy path cradling her friend's head in her lap. "Help me, help me, please help!" she cried in a faint voice, too soft to be heard from the depths of the forest.

At last she roused herself, kicked off her shoes and began to drag Agnes's heavy body. Mabel was out of condition, and it was hard going. Slipping and sliding on the muddy ground, bruising her feet on rocks and stones, she struggled on, until at last she saw the outline of a rocky bluff and the opening to a cave. "Must get her under cover and somewhere safe," Mabel muttered and gathering the last of her strength, rolled Agnes down the slope. Suddenly furious with this silly, selfish woman, she pushed and kicked her insensible body into the cave. Then, she fell into a deep sleep and did not stir for hours.

The pain in her hip wakened her. Her fingers touched something hard, and she rolled over until she could sit up. The faint daylight showed a crumbling sack and a glint of metal. Grabbing a pointed stick, Mabel scraped away until she had exposed a group of metal objects which included candlesticks, goblets and large plates.

"Looks as if this came from a church somewhere, or maybe even the castle," she thought, and brilliantly awake for the first time in years, re-buried her find, stamping the area flat before covering it with stones and leaves. Feeling for a pulse, a breath of life, she nodded, gratified when she found nothing.

"Knew she'd enjoy those toffees," she murmured.

Slipping her hand into Agnes' waistband she deftly removed her money-belt with passport and travellers cheques, remembering the hours she'd spent practicing Agnes' signature in anticipation of just such a moment. Then, slowly and carefully, she hobbled out of the cave, using a stout branch for support.

When she emerged from the forest, the peasants she staggered up to could not understand her mutterings and ramblings, but they took pity on her and sheltered her until she was strong enough to leave.

The coach party had moved on, and for years the disappearance of the two women remained a mystery. Over time Mabel quietly sold off the items she had recovered from the cave, amassing a fortune from the mediaeval treasures.

Covering her tracks and comfortable in her new identity as a retired secretary of a high-powered businessman, her movements and lifestyle was never in question. Soon she was a pillar of the community, the owner of a sizeable share portfolio, and the envy of many.

"It never pays to show your hand too early," she often commented to her friends at the bridge table, smiling inwardly as she spoke.



CREATIVE EXERCISE

submitted by Maureen Martus

Turning Your Worst Memories Into Money

The most common piece of advice that everybody gives to hopeful writers is 'write what you know' but most of us cannot believe that readers will be interested in the mundane events of our own lives.

If you look through any popular magazine, however, you will find stories of tragedy survived, illnesses battled and everyday frustrations turned into hilarious Back Pagets. You can raise your spirits if you reframe a bad moment into a learning or a laugh, but if you can also make money out of it, so much the better.

Dedicate a page in your writer's journal to a 'frustrations list.' Capture the feelings and slide them into your next piece of fact, humour or fiction.

Some trigger ideas

- A holiday from Hell
- The Terrible Two's
- Car and traffic mishaps
- Trapped in queues
- Battles with the bank/bureaucracy
- Eskom blackouts
- Raising a puppy



BOOK REVIEWS

Compiled by Mavis Briggs

THE TENDERNESS OF WOLVES

By Stef Penney Pub. Quercus (2006)

This novel was awarded the 2006 Costa Book of the Year award and it certainly is an extraordinary first novel.

Set in the snowy wastes of Canada, the story revolves around a woman's determination to clear her son's name. Aged just seventeen, he disappears after a man is found brutally murdered in his cabin, and the boy's mother sets out to find him and prove his innocence. The plot reveals many of the old tensions and hurts of the people living in the small town and includes a moving love story as well as convincing insights into the characters' personal growth and revelations.

The evocation of the desolate, icy landscape is striking, echoing the bleakness of the woman's soul as she searches for her son and for herself. (Interestingly, during a radio interview the writer said that she has never been to Canada – so much for always writing from experience?).

Penney is a consummate storyteller and the novel is also a suspenseful adventure tale and a gripping page-turner, permeated throughout by an underlying sense of unease. It is beautifully written and something that intrigued me was the ease with which the writer moves from first to third person in successive chapters, allowing her to inform the reader of everyone's thoughts and feelings convincingly, yet arousing deep empathy for the main character, who is written in the first person.

Jill Jacques

THE MEMORY KEEPER'S DAUGHTER

By Kim Edwards Pub. Penguin Books (2005)

Set in a small-town America of the 1960s, this is a sensitive and penetrating study of social attitudes towards children afflicted with Down Syndrome at a time when they were viewed as unfit for normal society. It is a heart-warming story of one woman's determined efforts to give her daughter a normal life accepted by her peers. It traces the effects on a family of a fateful decision taken by the father in his attempt to save his wife the sadness and worry of living with a 'retarded' child failing to reach what, at that time, were considered normal standards.

Perceptively tracing the course of two families intimately associated with a Down Syndrome child, it explores the effects a hasty and unwise decision can have on the futures of a number of people, bringing joy to some and misery to others. With the passing of time and the efforts of interested pressure groups associated with such children, it shows how a change in understanding can lead to acceptance and happiness. Before achieving this equilibrium, a destructive downward spiral of self-blame

leads to the break-up of a family, but with greater insight and tolerance, understanding and joy is achieved.

A lovely read on a subject seldom explored, by a master storyteller with a gift for beautiful expression.

Barbara Durlacher

PERCEPTION OF DEATH

By Louise Anderson Pub. Random House (2004)

Erin Patterson runs her grandfather's law firm in Glasgow. Her sister is running off the rails, her mother is losing it and, despite her reputation as an uncompromising aggressive negotiator, her personal life is in bad shape.

This first time author is to be admired for penning an interesting and exciting crime novel set in Scotland. For me it falters a little toward the end but redeems itself well before the dénouement.

But, I did find it irritating continually to read the truncated word she uses to indicate hesitation at the start of dialogue. Instead of the usual "Mm..." or "Um..." she used "Em" all through. As her name is Erin, and the diminutive used by her nephew is Ern (E r n), it became very confusing.

Mavis Briggs.

THE MASTER

By Colm Toibin Pub. Picador (2004)

This is a fictionalised portrait of the writer Henry James, based on extensive research (faction?). The writing is superb in terms of imagery and turn of phrase, but most of all Toibin seems to get right inside his subject and help us to experience his emotional restrictedness and reticence; his difficulty in forming intimate or fulfilling relationships; and his vivid intelligence.

I hadn't read any of James's novels for many years, but they came back as Toibin described characters that may well have been inspiration for *Portrait of a Lady*, *The Turn of the Screw* and *What Maisie Knew*.

One thing that really struck me was the way Toibin conveys the fact that a born writer can't do anything other than write; how every sense is always alert to the way people behave and speak, and the possible implications; how the significance of the subtlest nuances of speech or body language are noted and stored for use in creating credible characters and situations.

This novel was short-listed for the 2004 Man Booker Prize – not necessarily a recommendation! – but in this case I thought it well deserved.

Jill Jacques

Please share with us any book you've enjoyed by sending a *short* review to mvbriggs@absamail.co.za

MOTHERS

by Gillian Wilkinson

It was a somnambulant day. A bee buzzed lazily in the purple lavender. Nearby, old Mrs Jones lay back on the striped deck chair, her handkerchief rising and falling over her face in time with her breath. Her gnarled, veined hand lay casually on page two-hundred-and-ninety-one of the latest Jeffrey Archer novel. A passing cloud cast a light shadow on her printed skirt. It was her second day in the Retirement Home and her tears were dormant as she slept.

Two kilometres away, her grandchildren played in the garden of their suburban home, running through the forceful spray of the hosepipe staked into the dry lawn. Her daughter Jane smiled at their antics as she watched the water splash against their young and agile bodies, silvering them for a moment in the glittering sun. She was a tall, thin young woman with serene eyes. But, at that moment, part of her was free and alive and dancing with her children under the sparkling water; part of her was grieving with the pain of putting her mother into Harvest Homes.

"Wonder what she is doing right now?"

Guilt surged through her and obliterated the joy of the children's laughter.

"Drat that people have to get old."

She put her head in her hands and the pain of yesterday encompassed her.

"Mommy, mommy, can I have a drink?"

Tim's bright eyes shone with enjoyment as he stood shivering in front of her. She sighed as she took his hand to go to the kitchen.

"Being a mother has its moments," she thought to herself. "Having a mother has its moments, too."

Mary Jones was eighty years old when Dr Petersen had suggested that she stop driving.

"But I am not old," she had blustered. "I can still do everything for myself. I enjoy my independence."

It had been hell to give up the car, but a near accident had made all the family tetchy. She had felt as if part of her had died when the young man had come to fetch the Tazz that had been her friend for so many years. She felt, 'cabin'd, cribbed and confined' to the flat and her spirits had started to droop at that moment of loss. She felt that her world had become cramped and dependent. She would never admit to her family that she actually felt tired out some days and that the flat was becoming a burden.

Jane had suggested Harvest Homes. Her daughter was kind and she still regretted her anger and bitterness towards her child. She could feel the flurry of fear that had gripped her.

"But Mom, it's a pretty place and there will be company for you. You won't have to worry about the bills and the water

and the damp on the walls. It's taking a burden off your shoulders."

"I am not going to go and vegetate among a whole bunch of aimless geriatrics!"

Jane had that patient look that came over her face when she was exasperated by her mother.

It was the mild stroke that had done it. She would never be able to tell anyone the frantic fear of not being able to move. Her face had felt frozen and her right leg just wouldn't move. She had lain on the floor for at least an hour when, miraculously, she felt her knee bend and her brow frown.

"It's very mild," said Dr Petersen. "She will be fine, but it is time to think about full time care."

Mary stirred on the chair. Her knees felt stiff and the sun was very hot on her face. She was thirsty. She heard footsteps behind her: Sister Thandi was standing behind her with a tray of tea.

"Thank you so much," she said, sitting up slowly.

"Your daughter phoned while you were asleep. She just wanted to know if you are alright."

"What did you tell her?"

"I said that you just needed time to settle in but that you would be fine. It always takes a month or two. How are you feeling today?"

"I feel a bit down but this cup of tea is delicious."

Later that evening, Mary held the telephone receiver in her hand for quite a while before dialling Jane's number.

"Oh, Mommy, I'm so glad that you phoned. This afternoon Tim wanted some juice and I gave him a new orange drink. He had a terrible reaction to it and his breathing went all funny. I don't think that I have ever been so scared in all my life."

Mary felt her heart flutter.

"What did you do?"

"I took him to Dr Petersen and he has filled him with cortisone and sprays. I am so glad that you are there to talk to. I couldn't tell any one else just how scary and jittery I felt."

Suddenly Mary realised that she wasn't useless to her daughter. Just because she was in Harvest Homes didn't mean that she stopped being mother to her child.

"Why don't you come and fetch me tomorrow morning and we'll have a cup of tea together. You can tell me all about it and I can see my grandson for myself."

"Mommy, you are so special. I'll see you around ten o'clock."

"My mother is my mother," thought Jane gratefully.

"A mother is always a mother," thought Mary.



MEMORIES OF THE MOVIES

by Stella Leonard

When I was 10 years old, Saturday mornings were looked forward to with great anticipation. Huddled in thick coats and scarves to keep out the chill northeasterly winds, my friends and I walked 3 kilometres through Sunderland, to queue outside the Palace theatre. Television had not yet arrived on the British scene and everyone was fascinated by the movies.

Patiently we shuffled slowly forward, ignoring rain, hail or snow, as we waited to enter the promised land. Clutching sixpence in sticky palms, hordes of children voiced loud opinions about their favourite stars. This week it was 'Tarzan' on the screen, a popular choice. Next week might be 'The Three Musketeers'. Warring factions almost came to blows over their heroes.

Once inside the lights were dimmed, a ripple of excitement passed through the crowd, and we were transported to another world. Halfway through the film at a point of great tension there would be a short interval. A spotlight would shine on the ice cream lady standing in the centre aisle. Stepping forward like a mannequin, with her overloaded tray, she graciously dispensed ice cream tubs and cones to clamouring hands around her.

An unruly mob in the upper gallery took great pleasure in bouncing their empty tubs off unsuspecting heads below. This provoked rage and threatening gestures from the lower regions, subsiding only when the movie resumed its magic. At the end of the morning we sighed contentedly knowing that next week there would be another intriguing episode.

Conveniently next to the 'Palace' was a pork shop that did a roaring trade after the movie. Most of us queued to buy a 'penny dip', consisting of a large round bun dipped in gravy with just a hint of pork on it. Munching happily we marched home at a brisk pace, filled with the after glow of a splendid morning.

By the time I was a teenager venues had become much more sophisticated, but my girlfriends and I still stood in long queues to see the popular films. 'Singing in the Rain', 'The King and I', and any Doris Day movie required meeting early to get a good place ahead of the crowd.

Then television entered our lives, and movies didn't seem to have such an alluring impact. The last time I remember queuing was around 1958 when 'South Pacific' exploded onto the screen, starring Mitzi Gaynor and Rossano Brazzi. That really was an enchanted evening, with beautiful music, captivating scenes of Bali, plus lots of sizzling romance between the stars. Much later we stepped out of the cinema into the frosty night air. It was late, but the old man serving hot potatoes from a flaming brazier was still there plying his wares, and we bought a packet. I was with my first serious boyfriend and many years later these magic moments are still fresh in my mind.

Somewhere along the way I lost enthusiasm for the movies. Was it because they became so easily accessible? Now when I go occasionally, the cinemas are half empty and lack that feeling of anticipation. Or is it just that I miss standing in a queue, chatting to people around me, looking forward to an evening of shared enjoyment.

In my young days collecting empty glass lemonade bottles was a major source of revenue. These were returned for the deposit, and two shillings purchased a seat at the cinema, plus a steaming fish and chip supper afterwards.

My memories are always tinged with glowing cheeks on winter evenings, and walking home under a starry sky. Grateful as I am for all our modern technology, there will always be a part of me that looks back with nostalgia, and treasures the simple pleasures of long ago.



WHEN I AM OLD!

*When I'm old and I'm wrinkly, I shall not live alone
In a pensioner's flat or an old peoples home,
Or take an apartment on some distant shore.
I'll move in with my son and my daughter-in-law.*

*I'll return all the joy that my son gave to me
When he sat as a child on his dear father's knee.
He will welcome me willingly into his home
When I'm old and I'm wrinkly and all on my own.*

*I'll spill coffee on the carpet, leave marks on the wall,
I'll stagger home drunk and be sick in the hall.
I'll sing really loudly and slam every door,
When I live with my son and my daughter-in-law.*

*I'll rise from my bed in the late afternoon,
Throw the sheets on the floor and mess up my room.
I'll play ear-splitting music late into the night,
Go down for a snack and leave on every light.*

*I'll rest my old feet on the new leather chairs,
I'll drape dirty underwear all down the stairs.
I'll talk to my friends for hours on the phone,
When I live with my son in his lovely new home.*

*I'll come in from the garden with mud on my shoes,
Flop on the settee for my afternoon snooze,
Expect that my tea will be ready by four
When I live with my son and my daughter-in-law.*

*I'll leave all the dishes piled up in the sink
And invite all my noisy friends round for a drink.
I'll grumble and mumble, I'll complain and I'll moan
When I'm old and I'm wrinkly and all on my own.*

*I'll watch television hour after hour,
I'll not flush the toilet or wash out the shower.
Oh, bliss, what a future for me is in store,
When I move in with my son and my daughter-in-law.*

(Anon)



FILM REVIEWS

by Mavis Briggs

DARK KNIGHT

Once again *Batman* (Christian Bale) is back, this time crossing the world to fight a new criminal threat. With the help of *Lieutenant Jim Gordon* (Gary Oldman) and a refreshing new face, the brilliant *DA, Harvey Dent* (Aaron Eckhart), Batman was containing crime in Gotham City... that is until a criminal menace, known as *The Joker* (Heath Ledger) appears, causing havoc. He is superb, deserving all the accolades he has garnered. Maggie Gyllenhaal and Morgan Freeman also star, together with Michael Caine as before. It is a long (and dark) movie but the excitement is maintained throughout. It is, of course, remarkably violent, but as always very well done.

THE X-FILES: I WANT TO BELIEVE

With director Chris Carter back in charge, we meet up again with *Fox Mulder* (David Duchovny) and *Dana Scully* (Gillian Anderson). As their complicated relationship reveals itself we are introduced to a situation where people are disappearing, which is why the FBI, with the assistance of a psychic cleric, played by Billy Connolly (an odd casting), have sought their help. Dana, now a dedicated paediatrician, has problems to solve in her own field, but Fox still seeks her aid despite her misgivings. Set in the snows of Virginia, as the story evolves it becomes somewhat gruesome, and, although I found it a little disappointing, I was happy to see them back. Amanda Peet also stars.

BANGKOK DANGEROUS

A professional killer (Nicholas Cage) works the city's toughest streets with a sociopathic coldness as he brings down the marked enemies he is paid to eliminate. When he takes on a helper, and then meets a deaf shop assistant who demonstrates a warmth he'd never known, he begins to change. As he becomes stricken with remorse for his past, he turns on those who would force him to remain a killing machine. Directed by Oxide Pang Chun and Danny Pang, this is another violent movie with little to redeem it.

MISS PETTIGREW LIVES FOR A DAY

Set in London during the Thirties, Miss Guinevere Pettigrew (Frances McDormand), a middle-aged governess, finds herself once again unfairly dismissed. Without money, and genteelly desperate, she intercepts an employment assignment for a 'social secretary', and finds herself swept into the heady social world of actress/singer Delysia Lafosse (Amy Adams). In attempting to help her new employer manage her love life and career, she too finds herself drawn to a man within her circle, but it's not all smooth sailing for her.

This movie is charming, and a pleasant change of pace with no hint of violence.

WALL-E

If you haven't seen this yet, and it is still showing, this is the complete antidote to all the present big box-office mayhem. Wall-E is the adorable little garbage collector, a job he's undertaken for the last seven hundred years. It is quite the best of the animated movies we've ever seen. Do make a point of seeing it if you can.

CARAMEL

This highly recommended art-house movie tells of the romantic liaisons of five Lebanese women. Set in a beauty salon in Beirut it tells the story of the women of several generations who meet regularly, and confide in each other.

Layale loves a married man; Nisrine, a Muslim about to be married is no longer a virgin; Rima is attracted to women; Jamale is refusing to grow old; and Rose has sacrificed her life taking care of her elderly sister. It is between their haircuts and waxing with caramel that all their most intimate and liberated conversations take place. (95 mins)

Don't miss MAMMA MIA!

And, coming in September. . .

HANSIE

"How do you start over once you have betrayed a nation's trust?"

Hansie Cronje (Frank Rautenbach), once SA cricket's golden boy, is stripped of everything he holds dear after the news of his involvement with the Indian bookmakers, followed by his confession, rocks the international sporting community. The stinging rejections of the cricket administrations, and the humiliation of his life dissected on international TV, made his retreat into depression almost inevitable. Just as we may have done at the time, we feel his agony but are inspired by the power of his wife's unswerving support. Hansie's journey takes us to India, England and South Africa, and his team's fiercest battles against the mighty Australians. It is a captivating movie about, like many others of us, a flawed individual. It opens 24 September.

SWING VOTE

Bud Johnston (Kevin Costner) is an apathetic, beer slinging, lovable loser, who is coasting through a life that has passed him by, except for the one bright spot in his mundane existence, his precocious, over-achieving, twelve-year-old daughter, Molly. She takes care of them both, until one mischievous moment on Election Day when she accidentally sets off a chain of events which culminates in the presidential election hinging on one vote, her dad's. Suddenly Bud Johnson's vote is of paramount importance and everyone is waging war for it. Kelsey Grammar, Stanley Tucci and Dennis Hopper also star.

With many thanks to
NuMETRO and STER-KINEKOR

PEGGY THE SHEBEEN QUEEN

by Brian McGrady

It is said that revenge is sweet and here is a little story that somehow relates.

I vividly remember old Willie John's illicit drinking den. His shebeen was situated in the harness room in a stable behind his house. It smelt of stale beer, horse dung and musty hay. The shebeen only opened on Sunday mornings because, by law, all the licensed pubs in Northern Ireland were closed on the day of the Lord.

One lovely Sunday in the late 1940s when he should have been at morning service, Willie John was busy uncorking bottles of foaming Guinness for his parched customers. They were all seeking the proverbial 'hair of the dog' for their Saturday night hangovers. Willie John was the only man in town who could provide such a cure. So instead of listening to the words of an impassioned preacher, here he was listening to the impassioned nonsense of his garrulous friends and flouting the laws of the land into the bargain.

Still, his shebeen did a roaring trade and, like a good Samaritan, wasn't he providing a service of sorts to the community?

Yet while Willie John wrestled with his deeply inculcated religious scruples, his customers worried more about the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The possibility of a police raid was always a nagging cause for concern. The officers of the RUC did not look kindly on people who desecrated the Sabbath in such dens of iniquity.

While everybody seemed to have something to worry about, nobody worried at all about Peggy the piebald pony in her stable at the end of the barn. Peggy gloomily munched her hay and shook her head. She wondered why Sunday, her only day of relaxation, should have to be disturbed by an invasion of stupid oafs who drank too much, spat too much, talked too much and polluted the atmosphere with clouds of cheap cigarette smoke.

One small consolation was that today she didn't have to pull a wobbly old cart around the town. Her master, Willie John, was the municipal dustman, a fancy name for a street cleaner. His unenviable task was to shovel up, and load into the cart, the prodigious quantities of waste matter deposited on the streets by carhorses and herds of cattle. Poor old Peggy then had to haul the odoriferous cargo to the municipal dumping site.

Peggy did not enjoy the working week. At an early hour she would be hauled out of her cosy stable to be harnessed. The irascible Willie John was never in a good mood in the chilly light of dawn. If Peggy showed any reluctance to reverse between the shafts he would punch her in the ribs and call her a stupid ould bitch, a most inappropriate term for a handsome piebald pony. Life, she reflected, was not fair, at all at all.

Peggy's melancholic reverie was suddenly interrupted by the rasping of the stable hinges. Two grinning idiots,

bottles in hand, staggered in and proceeded to pee in the corner. They were followed, at short intervals, by a procession of drunks all with bursting bladders.

The drainage system in the stable was poor. Soon the tide of urine had reached the top of Peggy's fetlocks. The piebald pony was agitated. She became even more agitated when old Willie John himself, belching loudly, staggered through the gloomy doorway into the improvised toilet. As he squelched across the flooded floor he bumped against Peggy.

Instinctively, or perhaps intentionally, the long-suffering Peggy lashed out with her hind hoof. The metal shoe caught Willie John square on the backside. Down he crashed head first into a lake of urine dotted with small islands of floating debris. His language was not fit to be heard on the Sabbath, nor any other day of the week for that matter.

Hearing the commotion, Willie John's drinking mates rushed into the stable and dragged him out. The man of the house was soaked to the skin. He stank like an upturned septic tank.

To his inebriated rescuers this was all a great joke and they choked with barely suppressed mirth. Peggy also thought the whole business was very funny and whinnied happily.

Meantime, Willie John was not enjoying anything. Stunned and smelly, he lay on a pile of hay. He could hear his pony's delighted whinnying. He could hear the barely muted guffaws of his so-called friends.

Then, in his muddled state, he heard the ringing of church bells calling the faithful to Sunday service.

Willie John's eyes rolled heavenwards. He groaned as spasms of pain and remorse of conscience racked his body.

SUCCESS!

Remember to keep us informed of your successes. Bring a copy of any articles or a book cover to paste into the Success Book.

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*When I want to read a book,  
I write it.*

*(Benjamin Disraeli)*

*Reading is thinking with someone else's head  
instead of one's own.*

*(Arthur Schopenhauer)*

~~~~~

About WRITERS 2000

Meetings take place on the last Saturday of each month, except July and December. The venue is **The Main Hall, Elphin Lodge, Modderfontein Road, Lyndhurst, Johannesburg (next door to Edenvale Hospital)**. Meetings begin at 13h30 for 14h00. Parking is secure.

In July, an Annual Award Luncheon is held at a chosen venue.

At monthly meetings there is a nominal door fee of R5.00 to cover the cost of the room hire.

Catering: If your surname begins with A-K, please bring cake or sandwiches for the meetings in January, March, May, August and October. If with L-Z, please bring for the meetings in February, April, June, September and November.

Visit www.writers2000.iblog.co.za for up-to-date information about competitions, events and to sample members' work.

Membership

To join, please submit the form below with payment/proof of payment of your membership fee. Paid-up members are eligible to enter club competitions and have their work published in the club magazine, "The Write Stuff". Magazines are distributed at meetings and may be posted to members who live beyond Gauteng.

Contributing your writing

The next issue of The Write Stuff will be No. 119 – September/October 2008. **The deadline for submissions is 30 September 2008. Suggested theme – One day I am going to...**

Please send submissions to The Editor. Material preferably by email as an attachment, or on disk. Articles should be between 300 and 800 words, Stories between 500 and 1,000 words, and Poetry 50 lines maximum.

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