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The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers



AUTHOR

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The SCPSW Office Bearers

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*Cover photo by Gopi Chandroth

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EDITORIAL

Summer is with us again. There are a number of literary events all over the country. I would welcome an article that covers all the important festivals, including the genres each one specialises in, locations and dates, whether it is a ticketed event or not, and other useful information. Any volunteers?

A member who is a regular contributor to Author and who writes pleasing prose recently wrote to me regarding the use of AI during the editing process. I would like to elaborate on this topic, although I am aware I have already discussed the matter in this editorial column and elsewhere.

Let me reiterate. I use AI tools for proofreading. It used to take me weeks before I realised I could make my life easier if I used AI for proofreading. Before you get alarmed by the fact that your work is being 'stolen' by AI to improve itself, I want to reassure you that there are settings in the tools that I use which explicitly prohibit it from remembering the material I supply.

The process I follow is roughly as follows:

1. Type in the prompt box something like, "Please proofread the attached using UK English as a reference. Do not change anything but give me a list of suggestions." This request results in a list of typos, grammatical errors, non-standard phrases, punctuation errors and so on.
2. Then type (for example), "Ignore items 3, 8, 15 and 21. Implement the rest and give me a clean version."
3. The cleaned-up version is then sent to the author of the piece.
4. The author either accepts or rejects some or all suggestions.
5. The final version is published.

While I will not publish a piece with typos, spelling mistakes and grammatical errors, I will be completely happy for you to reject other suggestions. This brings me to my final and most important point – AI is only a tool, just as your word processor, your screwdriver or your car is.

There are huge implications in terms of excessive consumption of energy and water to run the AI servers. Use of AI in war is completely immoral, but we watch helplessly as it happens under our very noses. The concern that AI corporations are stealing our creative work and taking away livelihoods is real. My only answer to this is that the human race is smarter and will eventually prevail.

AI is here to stay. Personally, I treat it with concurrent and conflicting feelings – disdain and respect. Respect for making my life easier in everything that I do, and disdain for the completely ridiculous outputs it sometimes provides. This approach works well for me.

My role as editor will end after the publication of the Summer 2027 issue of *Author*. The vacancy will be advertised well in advance, but if anyone is interested in the role, do get in touch with me at gopinath.chandroth@gmail.com and we could discuss the matter informally.

Please don't stop writing. Keep sending me your wonderful contributions.

Gopi Chandroth
Editor

FROM THE CHAIR

I am sitting writing this, facing the patio with a clear view of the tree at the bottom of my garden, which is intertwined with several bushes of a variety of shades of green and white plants which completely cover the brick wall. It is all in full bloom and I pause now and then to glance at it and it really cheers me up.

Now that the AGM is over, it went well and it was so very well organised by Bernie Bickerton. She has now retired from her role as meeting secretary and from the committee. She will be sadly missed. I want to thank her for her meticulous skill in organising meetings. She has kindly agreed to continue with the monthly zoom meetings as a member, which is much appreciated. Thanks also to Jenny Chamier Grove, who has stepped down as publicity officer from the committee after many years.

I am so pleased that a new member, Zoe May has agreed to be meetings secretary and deputy chairman. I wish her well in the roles. Nimmi Channa has now been voted in as Treasurer and has managed to produce the financial report despite limited access.

Gopi Chandroth, our editor and webmaster, continues in both roles, which he carries out with much expertise. Alex Tyler, the very knowledgeable competition secretary, does a great job organising the competitions. I intend to carry on as acting membership secretary. I get to know the current members better, and I want to focus on recruiting new members, which are much needed.

There are vacancies for Publicity Officer and Assistant Webmaster. Job descriptions for both roles will appear elsewhere in the Author. Please consider if you can take on one of these roles: the publicity officer would be particularly useful for a working member who would have contacts or a member who has time to find contacts. For the assistant webmaster, learning the skills required for running a website from Gopi would be a valuable asset to have.

We need new members, and we have discussed a new incentive which we intend to commence. If a member recruits a new member, the recruiting member's name goes into a draw with others for a gift voucher. An addition to the application form will reflect who has recommended them.

As a committee member of my local NHS Retirement Fellowship, which meets monthly for talks and outings, I would recommend it for any of our retired members who worked for the NHS who are not already members. They have some benefits like various discounts for goods, insurance, and holidays. I have been in touch with them about recruiting NHS members who might be interested in writing and they have agreed to publicise the SCPSW to members initially for this year.

My life is full of coincidences. My neighbour, Margaret, belongs to a book club. She recently brought along my published childhood memoir to a meeting, and one of the group said she was from Tralee, my hometown and asked to borrow the book. When she looked at the photos, she recognised so many childhood playmates, including my sister, and she then wanted to meet me. We have now met and have been in touch by phone as well.

I know Facebook is not for everyone, but we do have a Facebook page which is administered by me. I have not been updating it that much because of life events, but I intend to do so, so please have a look at it. The Royal College of Nursing, where I am a member, has been arranging some literary events, for instance, Writer in Residence where you can have a one to one with an author. I had a long one-to-one yesterday with a Hong Kong-born poet Jennifer Wong. One person had cancelled, probably because of the heatwave, so I had her slot as well. I was so impressed with Jennifer and her many volumes of poetry. We discussed her poetry and then mine, and we both read some. She told me about her life in Hong Kong and later in the UK and why she writes more in English than Chinese.

I will have another one to one with Christie Watson, a former nurse who has published eight books, including the award-winning *Language of Kindness*. She is a Professor of creative writing at East Anglia University. Look at Eventbrite as some of the RCN events are open to the public and you can also find other literary events, many online and some free.

I love reading about writing retreats, often in stately homes on massive grounds with cordon bleu cooking and a massive price tag. Others are in European countryside venues with award-winning writers hosting them at a high cost but leaving little time for exploring the gorgeous surroundings as you are indoors most of the daytime.

I am more likely to go for the day to the annual Bournemouth Writing Festival, which was in April this year. It is not expensive and easy to get to. I hope you all have a brilliant summer and enjoy any holiday, keep writing and stay cool.

Ethel Corduff
Chair

SENTENCES FROM STEPHEN

Stephen Bibby

‘Happenstance’, an appealing linguistic import from America, neatly combines ‘happen’ with ‘circumstance’. The resulting noun not only possesses rhythmic balance but also adds nuance to the concept of chance. It loomed large in my life during the month of March 2026.

When Tehran was attacked, my son was flying from Seattle, about to enter Iranian airspace. He was bound for Dubai where, at the behest of his employer, he is temporarily resident with his wife and our two teenage grandchildren.

Visiting his company headquarters in Dallas, he would normally have returned directly from there. It so happened that he was subsequently required to attend an executive retreat in Arizona. The most convenient route home took him from Phoenix to Seattle and onto the flight which found itself over a war zone.

He noticed from the on-board flight tracker that his plane had apparently halted, suspended over an indeterminate vastness. Eventually the screen’s flickering image executed a sharp right turn. Three hours later he landed in Germany. Happenstance had delivered him not to home in Dubai, but to Hamburg.

The family were greatly relieved that he had dodged death and destruction. He then experienced three days of worry, poor communication and confusion until his airline sent him from Hamburg to Munich, allocating a seat on one of the few planes able to fly back to Dubai.

In the face of appalling destruction throughout Iran and other Middle Eastern countries one family’s fears seem trifling. So too does the total disruption of my wife’s plans. A few days later she was herself due to fly from London to Dubai for a much-anticipated family reunion. The war developing, British Airways swiftly suspended its services, expressed its regrets and returned the price of the ticket.

There can be no adequate compensation for denial of time with those we love, but I tried to devise something. We had often considered visiting attractions relatively near to home, neglected while travels took us across the globe. The unanticipated cancellation presented an opportunity to turn reflection into reality and to seek consolation in this country. Thus it was that happenstance found us in fenland.

Once, on a train to Thetford, we'd been intrigued by the sight of the ship of the fens: not a vessel, but the soaring Ely Cathedral built on a high mound dominating the low-lying countryside around. We booked a last-minute visit.

Ely Cathedral is not only a commanding presence above the fens and fields, it also towers above the compact city. Entering through the west door you cannot fail to gasp in wonder at the beauty of the nave, one of England's longest, a vista of architectural grace and harmony. Its rounded Romanesque arches draw the eye eastward over the rood screen to a large distant window, then inexorably upwards to a magnificent ceiling. In the mid nineteenth century its full length was painted in vivid colours, predominantly greens and reds, strikingly depicting a series of Biblical scenes.

Originating as a shrine to local Saint Etheldreda, the cathedral is steeped in history. It was developed into an abbey by the Norman conquerors following the suppression of Saxon resistance. Some of its foundations proving unstable, in 1322 the central tower collapsed. As reconstruction was impossible, an enterprising medieval monk devised the Octagon for which the cathedral is now famous. High above the crossing this eight-sided lantern is a masterpiece of intricate carpentry, its panels brightly painted, its high windows gleaming with stained glass.

On the day of our visit, pupils from the adjacent school, **King's Ely**, had taken over the South Transept for a lunchtime concert. We listened, absorbed by the skill and enthusiasm of youthful singers and instrumentalists. I particularly enjoyed Mozart's Clarinet Quintet. In this intimate setting we both heard and saw the strings complementing the solo clarinet to produce a piece of delightful musical magic.

The highlight was a virtuoso display by a young lady from Hong Kong playing the guzheng. Totally unfamiliar with this instrument, we were entranced. Technically it is termed a zither, but I would describe it as a horizontal harp. It consisted of a soundbox, about the size of a small suitcase, inlaid with an attractive marquetry design. On its surface was a bridge supporting about twenty strings.

The musician firstly plucked as if playing the harp, producing plangent single notes. Running her nimble fingers over the entire string array she created cascades of rippling, reverberating sound. We were transported through calm and tempest, a mellifluous musical journey across continents, at once expressive and unmistakably Oriental in tone.

Happenstance took my son to Hamburg; it took his parents to Ely. He escaped horror; unexpectedly entertained by talented teenagers, we experienced hope and joy.

DEEP ROOTS

Alex Tyler

First prize: Lewis Wright Short Story Competition

I hear your car door slam. You are back from the golf club earlier than usual. I'm not used to you being at home all the time but, since your early retirement, it is like reliving the boys' teenage years, sharing a house with a petulant presence who always wants feeding. Mostly, you haunt the house but have begun making more forays into the garden, a space you viewed as just somewhere to send the boys when they were noisy.

But this is my garden, designed to remember so that I can – what? Not forget, the opposite of forgetting because, by my own hand, there is a living record of all your infidelities. Nor is this a place of forgiveness. No, I think it is my own way of keeping control: in my world, I decide what survives or dies, which is watered or left to wither.

We have lived here since our wedding. We chose the house together: you wanted it because the village was far enough from London to allow you to plead late finishes or early starts and regularly stay in hotels. For me, I was captivated by the plot of bare earth around the newly built house. I barely noticed your absence as I planned, paced out the ground and planted.

In memory of your first affair – or maybe she should be numbered zero as we were still only engaged when it happened – is the weeping willow. The way the strands of leaves play in the wind reminds me of our wedding when, even though she was my bridesmaid, she'd left her hair loose and your eyes followed each toss and flick through the reception.

The back door opens. Hopefully, you will settle on the patio and snooze in the heavy scent of the clematis. One of your early conquests used so much perfume I could smell it on your clothes when I unpacked them after your international trips: I can only assume you bought it for her in bulk at duty-free. But over the years, things have changed. Our sons, facing the world of work with temporary contracts, remote working and having to pay for their own Christmas meals, listen in disbelief to your all-expenses way of working. You were probably the last generation of workers able to enjoy business travel and corporate entertaining, all paid for by the company account because you were the big man who brought in big business.

You always boasted about seeing the world: to me, it sounded more like you saw identical airports and offices and hotel rooms, which happened to be in different countries. Beyond our regular fortnight in Portugal, I never felt the need to travel because I have brought the world here to grow around me, the native mingling with the exotic. In Spring, the soft joy of daffodils recalls your time with the temporary receptionist from Wales. Now as Autumn advances, red petals from the oleander form a blaze against the dark earth. When you took your secretary to the conference in Thailand, the delegate passes were the same bright scarlet.

We were both lucky in our roles. When we married, I had my little job at the solicitor's office which put me at the centre of village life. You kindly let me keep working, providing I took time off when the children were small and only went back part-time once they started secondary school. Having extra time suited me because, when space for their games was no longer a priority, I took bites out of the lawn for new beds, while you did the same in your own way.

You huff over to me. 'Those lilies in the front garden are a bit showy.' No, they are just right, planted because it's not every day a platinum blonde shows up on your doorstep. She seemed surprised to see me, your wife. The poor dear was convinced I was long gone and that you were upstairs packing, ready to fly away with her. White heads hanging down reminds me of her disbelief when I told her she had been led up the garden path.

Because I always knew. Every time, you told me what you had done. I tried to look surprised the first few times, then it took on the form of a ritual. Even after the boys had left home, you waited until after dinner, because that was adult time. You would stand by my armchair and recite your confession, like a child saying the prayers he's had to learn by heart. Always, you said you'd been a fool, though soon stopped saying it would never happen again. My reaction would be to turn back to my seed catalogue or switch on the radio for Gardeners' Question Time. You took this for absolution. I said nothing because, really, what could I say?

Afterwards, there would be a fallow period before your sap would start to rise again. You'd begin sniffing the wind for scents of new growth. In the first glow of a relationship, you grew more expansive before withering and drooping. But, times have changed as women's horizons have grown broader than the width of a man's wallet. It didn't help that your company decided sending people away to do business was too expensive, so you were grounded. And then you decided to use your patter on a young woman, not realising she was the new managing director of an old client and that business was lost. You were banished from your verdant kingdom of work to your barren home with the fig leaf of early retirement.

Now you are not working, you must fill the days. You looked down on my local social circle but my telephone rings with invitations and activities, while yours is silent. Your reputation is known in the village: you are blind to anyone not useful to you but those people still have eyes. I'm asked why I don't leave you but my roots are deep. It suited you to have a ring on your finger, the respectability of a wife, in the same way it has suited me to have someone to provide me with a garden and children, in that order. Wanting children was part of delivering the limited expectations instilled in me by my mother, along with not watching ITV and keeping my ankles crossed when sitting down but having a garden, my own garden was something I wanted for myself, the child which would stay after the others had gone.

Your shadow falls over me where I am weeding around the castor oil tree, admiring its red seeds. I'd smuggled a sapling back from Portugal after you had your thing with the widow in the next villa. Keeping it alive in our uncertain climate has made me very happy.

'Something happened at the golf club.' You stop: there is a familiar note in your voice.

I knew, of course. As a sign of how limited your horizons have become, I even could, at a stretch, call your latest woman a friend of a friend. She joined the Women's Institute after her husband left and was throwing herself into one activity after another, the latest being taking up golf. On a trip to the garden centre, the village taxi driver told me he'd driven you both to a hotel, so I used the opportunity to buy a Mountain Laurel for her. After only a month, the tubby little bush has already put forward some pale pink, apologetic little flowers.

'So I'll need to move to another club. In the meantime, I'm going to get a man in to lay turf. There are far too many flowers here and I want a putting green.' You stump back to the house.

I let my anger cool by scooping up handfuls of soil and letting the earth run through my fingers. I'd planned to rake up leaves but that could wait. A blob of orange tendrils jiggled into my palm. I would have to wash my hands thoroughly: the castor oil tree's seeds are full of ricin, deadly poison. Being a gardener means being prepared to deal with pests and for a garden to flourish, dead or diseased growth needs to be pruned back hard as soon as possible.

Second prize: Lewis Wright Short Story Competition

The sun had the decency to arrive gently that afternoon, as though it understood that certain things required time and a careful touch. It stretched itself across the patio stones in long, patient beams, warming the chipped terracotta pots and the wrought-iron table that had outlived three sets of garden chairs and at least one over ambitious attempt at repainting.

Margaret noticed the light first. She always did.

"Some heat now," she said, not looking at Arthur but knowing he would be listening.

Arthur shifted slightly in his chair, the movement slow but deliberate, like a man negotiating terms with his elderly body. "Mm," he replied, which was his way of agreeing without surrendering too much ground. He closed his eyes for a moment, letting the warmth settle onto his face. "Reminds me of Whitby. That year we went before the crowds got silly."

Margaret smiled, though the memory arrived differently for her. Whitby, yes, but also the wind, the way it had whipped her scarf loose so that it trailed behind her like some small, defiant flag. She had been younger then, which was, she often thought, a time she should have cherished.

"You lost your hat," she said.

Arthur opened one eye. "I did not lose it. It was taken."

"By the wind," Margaret said. "Which, last I checked, you were not in the habit of arguing with."

"I might have won," Arthur muttered. "Given the chance."

She laughed, a soft sound, worn smooth with use. The kind of laugh that had weathered decades and come out the other side lighter, somehow, as if it had learned what to carry and what to leave behind.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, the sort that did not need filling.

The patio, which Arthur had built when he was young and able, overlooked a small garden that had once been meticulously planned and was now more of a negotiation between intention and entropy. Lavender crept where it pleased. Roses bloomed with untrimmed enthusiasm. A single stubborn weed had claimed a crack in the paving and was thriving, which Arthur found both irritating and faintly admirable.

"You used to be out here gardening every weekend morning," Margaret said, following his gaze. "Six o'clock, rain or shine."

"I had a system," Arthur replied.

"You had a schedule."

"There's a difference."

"Is there?"

Arthur considered this. "A schedule tells you what to do," he said. "A system tells you how to do it properly."

Margaret nodded as if this made perfect sense, though she suspected it didn't. Arthur had always believed in proper ways of doing things. Proper knots. Proper tea. Proper silence, even.

"Do you remember the first tomatoes?" she asked.

Arthur made a small, dismissive noise. "Disaster."

"They were not a disaster," Margaret said. "They just didn't work out as well as expected."

"They were green," Arthur said. "All summer long. Green and stubborn."

"Like you."

Arthur allowed himself a smile at that, brief but genuine. "They had potential," he conceded.

Margaret leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes. The sun pressed gently against her eyelids, turning the darkness a soft, luminous red. Behind it, memories flickered, unbidden and slightly out of sequence, like a film that had been poorly spliced.

There was the kitchen in their first house, so small that you could stand in the

middle and touch both walls. Arthur had insisted it was efficient. Margaret had called it cramped. They had both been right, which was the beginning of many such dual truths.

“Our first kitchen, you burned the toast every morning,” she said.

Arthur frowned. “I did not burn it. I made it well done.”

“It was charcoal,” Margaret said. “I’m certain it’s why we never had children.”

Arthur opened both eyes now, turning to look at her. “That’s a bold claim.”

“Well,” Margaret said, “we have to blame something.”

There it was, then. Not sadness exactly, but something adjacent to it. A shadow that had softened over time, losing its sharp edges but not disappearing entirely. It sat between them for a moment, acknowledged but not examined.

Arthur cleared his throat. “We had other things,” he said.

“We did,” Margaret agreed.

And they had. A life assembled piece by piece, sometimes carefully, sometimes in haste. Jobs that came and went. Friends who drifted in and out like tides. Holidays that had seemed important at the time and now blurred together into a general sense of having been elsewhere. And Margaret had a sister, Agnes, who one day disappeared never to be found, a constant background of sadness

“Do you remember the car?” Arthur said suddenly.

Margaret opened her eyes, a small tear formed at the thought of her sister. “Which one?”

“The blue one. The one that wouldn’t start unless you spoke nicely to it.”

Margaret laughed again. “That car had standards.”

“It had issues,” Arthur said. “I replaced the battery twice.”

“Like Basil Faulty, you also kicked it,” Margaret pointed out. “Which I’m fairly certain voided any warranty.”

“It was out of warranty when we bought it.”

“That explains a great deal.”

Arthur chuckled and leaned forward slightly, resting his elbows on his knees. "We drove to Scotland in that car," he said. "Took us nearly ten hours."

"Twelve," Margaret corrected. "You insisted on taking the scenic route."

"It was scenic."

"It was mostly sheep."

Arthur considered this. "Scenic sheep," he said finally.

Margaret shook her head, smiling. The memory settled into place, clearer now. The long road stretching ahead of them. The way Arthur had gripped the steering wheel with quiet determination, as though sheer willpower could compensate for the car's many shortcomings. The way she had watched the landscape change, field by field, mile by mile, feeling as though they were moving not just through space but through some less tangible dimension of possibility.

"I thought we'd keep going," she said softly.

Arthur glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know," Margaret said. "I just had this feeling. That we could keep driving. That there was always something just a little further on."

Arthur sat back, considering this in his methodical way. "There usually is," he said. "Something further on, I mean."

"Yes," Margaret said. "But you don't always go to it."

"No," Arthur agreed. "You don't."

Another pause, but this one felt different. Not empty, exactly, but full in a quieter, more contemplative way. The sun had shifted slightly, its warmth now resting more heavily on their hands than their faces.

Arthur looked down at his own hands, turning them slightly as if examining an object of mild curiosity. "They don't work like they used to," he said.

Margaret followed his gaze. "No," she said gently. "They don't."

"I used to fix things," Arthur said. "Properly. Not just... temporarily."

"You still fix things," Margaret said. "Just differently."

Arthur raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"You make the tea," Margaret said. "Unlike me, you remember where we put things. You remind me to take my pills."

Arthur snorted softly. "That's not fixing things."

"It is," Margaret said. "It's just not as visible."

Arthur seemed unconvinced, but he didn't argue. He had learned, over the years, that Margaret's definitions were often broader than his own, encompassing things he might otherwise overlook.

A robin landed on the edge of the table, regarding them with a kind of cautious curiosity. It hopped once, twice, then flew off again, apparently deciding they were of no immediate interest.

"Do you think it knows?" Margaret asked.

"Knows what?"

"That we've been here a long time."

Arthur shook his head. "I don't think birds are concerned with that sort of thing."

"They should be," Margaret said. "It's important."

Arthur smiled faintly. "Is it?"

Margaret considered this. "I think so," she said. "It means something. To stay."

Arthur nodded slowly. "It does," he said.

The sun dipped a little lower, the light shifting from bright to something softer, more diffuse. Shadows lengthened across the patio, stretching toward the garden like tentative fingers.

"We should go in soon," Arthur said.

"In a minute," Margaret sharply replied.

Arthur didn't object. He rarely did, when Margaret used that particular tone. It was not a request so much as a gentle assertion, a way of holding a moment in place just a little longer.

They sat together, the years between them not a distance but a kind of shared landscape, familiar and intricate. There were things they had forgotten, of course. Names that slipped away, details that blurred. But the shape of it all remained,

the essential contours of a life lived side by side.

“Do you remember how we met?” Margaret asked suddenly.

Arthur looked at her, a flicker of amusement in his eyes. “Of course, I do.”

“You say that,” Margaret said. “But you tell it differently every time.”

Arthur frowned slightly. “I do not.”

“You do,” Margaret insisted. “Sometimes it’s at the library. Sometimes it’s at that dreadful party your cousin insisted on hosting.”

“It was a perfectly adequate party,” Arthur said.

“It was full of accountants,” Margaret said.

Arthur paused. “That might have been the problem,” he conceded.

Margaret smiled. “So, which is it?” she asked. “The library or the party?”

Arthur leaned back, folding his arms. “It was both,” he said finally. “We met at the library first. Briefly. Then properly at the party.”

Margaret tilted her head. “Properly?”

“Yes,” Arthur said. “We spoke for more than two minutes. That qualifies as properly.”

Margaret laughed. “And what did we talk about?”

Arthur hesitated. “Books,” he said.

Margaret raised an eyebrow. “Books?”

“And the weather,” Arthur added.

“Of course,” Margaret said. “The two great pillars of conversation.”

Arthur smiled. “It was enough,” he said.

Margaret looked at him for a long moment, her expression softening. “Yes,” she said. “It probably was.”

The light continued its slow retreat, the warmth lingering but less insistent now. Somewhere in the distance, a neighbour's door closed, the sound carrying faintly through the still air.

Arthur shifted again, preparing to stand. “We really should go in,” he said with a shiver.

Margaret nodded, though she didn’t move immediately. “In a minute,” she said again, more quietly this time.

Arthur waited. He had learned that there was no advantage in hurrying these things. Some moments required a certain amount of stillness, a willingness to let them unfold at their own pace.

Margaret reached out, placing her hand over his. It was a simple gesture, one they had performed countless times, but it carried a weight that was difficult to articulate. Not dramatic, not overwhelming, but steady. Enduring.

Arthur turned his hand slightly, closing his fingers around hers. His grip was not as strong as it once had been, but it was sure.

“The sun’s going,” he said.

“I know,” Margaret replied.

They sat like that for a while longer, watching as the last of the light slipped away, leaving the patio in a gentle, encroaching dusk. It was not an ending, exactly. Just another transition, one of many.

“Ready?” Arthur asked.

Margaret squeezed his hand lightly. “Yes,” she said.

When they stood, they did so together, moving slowly but with a kind of practiced ease, as though they had been rehearsing this particular moment for years.

Arthur looked down at the patio, shivered and quietly recalled how, after killing her, he buried Agnes beneath it.

“Come on into the warm,” Margaret smiled as she took his hand in hers.

KEEPERS OF THE VAMPYRE BOC-HORDE

Nadine Corscadden

Third place: Lewis Wright Short Story Competition

Into the stacks of the House of Life

The library did not sleep and time did not move in such places; it settled instead, thick and stagnant, soaking into leather bindings and curling pages until the past felt heavier than the present. Even the air bore weight. One did not so much walk through the aisles as press through them, like wading into dark water or deep memories. I had long since forgotten the smell of the living world — rain on stone, blossom in the sun, bread baking, the faint sweetness of decay in autumn — here it was its own unique ecosystem and there was something else in the air, ink, glue, vanilla notes of degrading papers, woody muskiness, floor wax and beneath it all, something coppered and thin.

My footsteps made no sound against the stone floor. I have walked through every inch of this building so many times over the last three hundred years seeking to be as quiet as possible that my feet now automatically stepped lightly and surely over the uneven surface. Perhaps I had finally been here too long as thoughts crowded my mind and there was a need to hear the echo of my own existence, to know that I occupied space, that I interrupted the world merely by moving through it with the knowledge and skills I possessed. Now, I passed between the shelves like a shadow flits almost unnoticed, unmarked, belonging to nothing.

I paused in the central archival chamber where the tallest stacks leaned inward, towering like a congregation bent in silent prayer. Above, the ceiling vanished into darkness. The beeswax candles in the lamps burned gently offering only a soft yellow glow at this late hour, yet I saw everything with perfect, terrible clarity.

That was the first thing I lost, not my energy, nor sense of time but the comfort of shadows, when I made the commitment to be the head librarian of this ancient and ever-growing store of manuscripts, books and other valuable papers. I'd wandered into this building as a gangling youth of 13, it was a mere half mile away from the monastery where I'd been left as a foundling baby, curious about the beautiful gothic structure and the studious academics that got to grace its

space once they'd turned twenty-one. It took me years to prove my value, work up the ranks, with many hours of drudgery, indeed it wasn't until I was thirty that I was finally apprenticed to the head librarian of the time. He was a tiny man named Titus, and he must have been young at some point but he was one of those people that one would consider had always had an old soul. Several decades passed under his tutelage but looking back now it barely scratched the surface of what there was to learn about this place and what it held. He had been quick to emphasise that the Boc-hord or archival book hoard dating back to the 5th century was affectionately known as the House of Life as it had been built to preserve what was possible of the lives and knowledge that had gone before.

The lost book returns

As I passed through the reading room, my eyes fell on a book rested on one of the tables, when I knew I had cleared away all the books back to the stacks several hours ago when the midnight hour had chimed and I knew all the usuals that haunted the space had returned to their respective roosts. So I was curious, who else was it in among the Boc-hord apart from me as that was most unusual. The book cover was unremarkable—cracked black leather, no title, no gilding—yet I knew, with the weary certainty of long habit, that it had not been there long. I did not reach for the book. Instead, I studied the surrounding shelves, their endless spines pressed tightly together with the miniscule movements of living things that cannot truly be completely still or inert, whispering in a language too soft for ears and too persistent to ignore. If I stood long enough, I could almost understand them, names, dates, fragments of lives reduced to ink and order. We had built this place to remember and in some ways to protect and evolve.

“Still pretending it is just a library?” Said the voice that came from behind me, dry as parchment.

I did not turn immediately. I recognized it well enough—knew the shape of its contempt, the faint curl of dark amusement concealed beneath it.

“You should not be here,” I said at last.

A soft laugh from him “Nor should you.”

He stepped into view, pale even by our kind's standards, his expression worn thin by years that no longer mattered. Like me, he bore no outward mark of what he was. That, too, had been taken. We were monsters without the mercy of appearing monstrous.

His gaze flicked to the book on the table.

“Ah,” he murmured. “It has found you.”

I said nothing not wishing to be drawn into his games.

“They say it begins like that,” he continued, circling slowly, as though the space itself might constrict around him like a snake if he moved too quickly. “It always starts with a single volume, personal, intimate, and then—” he gestured upward, toward the unseen reaches of the shelves “—the rest follows.”

“I did not summon it.” I said haughtily.

“No,” he agreed softly. “That is rather the point.”

At last, I moved closer to the book, while holding his gaze. The book seemed lighter than it should have been. Or perhaps I had forgotten the true weight of things. My fingers hovered over its cover, just shy of contact, as if some invisible boundary might still exist between ignorance and knowledge—between silence and what would fill it if broken.

“You have heard the stories,” he said. Not a question.

“I have heard many things, Genesis.” Hoping that in using his name I might retain some control over the situation.

“And yet you have been able to remain here so long.” He said quietly.

I let my hand move to the book and touch the cover. The leather was cold. Not the honest cold of stone or night air, but something deeper, more deliberate—like the absence of warmth had been carefully preserved within it.

“Some knowledge,” he went on, his voice lowering, “is not meant to protect or restore what was lost, but to remind us why it was taken.”

For a moment, I felt something flicker at the edges of my perception, a hesitation as I sought to grab onto something half remembered in the recesses of my mind.

“We should not speak of taking,” I said, though the words felt thin even to me, “this is a sanctuary, and a place to cure or at least soothe the soul and cherish life.”

His smile did not reach his eyes.

“No,” he said. “We may have to agree to differ in our understanding and wishes.” He paused with a stillness only attained by years of taciturn reflection and looked enigmatically at me before saying at last “I shall return for All Hallows Eve, and then we really ought to talk...”

The blood ledger

It had been several weeks since the eerie encounter with Genesis but still two days before we began the observance of Allhallowtide. I had first tried to ignore his doleful remarks but they had piqued my memory and I grudgingly had to admit to myself he was the oldest of the Vampyres in this region. I was only granted the limited gifts of an immortality that was bound to the building and the grounds that made up the sanctuary, in the way the pages of the books relied on the bindings to keep them in the right place. The sun had set – but slowly, ponderously, and even now tendrils still hanging on to the brightness of day – rays of the remaining silvery dusk light highlighted the dust motes swirling through the heavy air. I had necessarily had to retrieve some of our older papers and even with carefully wiping grime with soft cloths from the protective sleeves before transferring to my desk some had still transferred onto my hands. I sighed and wiped the detritus of years off my fingers before I picked up the last ledger I had to review before the end of observance.

I still remembered the first time Titus had placed these ledgers in my hands.

His stark words had resonated with a seriousness I rarely heard in his voice as he said solemnly, “You hold the traces of souls in these books. You must always treat them with reverence as with that power they have a life of their own and what they share must be considered gravely”.

I hadn’t known what to expect but nothing prepared me for what I found within those 12 tomes that were the blood ledgers.

This last ledger was actually known as the primus, the first, and hence the grubbiest, but it did have an ornately gilded cover indicative of its treasured status but still belied its interior worth. I rubbed my hands in the cloth one more time to be sure they were clean, and then gently opened the cover. The page fell open naturally on the start of the indexes and the golden embellishment of the first letters glowed in a way that drew the eye to certain names. And there was his as I had feared, Genesis Septentrionalis, and today’s date.

I may have stared at the name for a minute or a second, time truly was hard to track in this place and these were the moments I found hardest as there was no choice but to honour what was written in the ledgers.

My eyes flicked up to the gaunt figure I knew would be standing there even before he uttered the words in his inimitable way.

“So it is time to talk, Custos Relph”. He said without emotion but yet drawing in the weight of ages with each word.

I swallowed and pointed to the ledger.

“I am ready – I finished reading the chronicle of my sire – “ he paused almost as if he wished to say more but did not know how to as he slid himself into the seat opposite me and drew out his arm in preparation for the tradition in which Vampyres stories were written so that they could pass the remnants of their soul and those they had used to survive back to the sanctuary that supported all those that sought redemption. As soon as I had touched the book he took away all those weeks ago I knew this was the inevitable as the book had spoken to me as the Custos and I had recognised the name of the story within and the significance of it for Genesis.

I took out the gold quill and unused bound book. I hovered the nib over his arm and closed my eyes for a moment.

“As Custos of the Boc hord, I salute you one last time Genesis Septentrionalis and I will chronicle your tale – “ I gazed into his fathomless eyes as I said the traditional words before I then pressed the nib into his skin to draw the blood that would be the ink.

POEM COLLECTION

Kevin Morris

Eulogy

After the eulogy to you
And the polite talk
With your relatives and some other friends
I said my goodbyes
And walked to the station.
And, as I walked
I heard an owl cry.

He knew nothing of you or I,
Nor of Macbeth.
Yet the bird's cry
Reminded me of Shakespeare.

You would have understood
Were you still here,
For you loved Shakespeare
And other poetry.

And now I write of the eternal night
(Which you said did not frighten you).
I hope that was true
When you went where we all must go.
Though I will never know.

Your Shadow

On a day in early spring
I heard the birds sing
As we walked together
Through this ever-changing
weather.

And as we walked
I wished to talk
With you my dear old friend.

But it was my shadow
That walked in sunshine
For you have crossed the line
Where all things end.

I cannot cry
Or go where you have gone,
Yet our friendship lives on

And one day I will become
A shadow in sun
And shade
For life is made
Of fleeting shadows

And I know
That I must one day go
Were you have gone.

But other men
May see my shadow
Walking beside them
And know me
And their own mortality.

ACHING KNEES

Ivy Hudson

Held tightly in a splint
Healing slow
Doing too much.
Resting leg
Aching knee
How long before normality is restored?
Aching knee
Restrictive splint -
Who'd be 80
Strapped and hurt?
Patience, patience,
Peace restored
By books and tele,
Mobile phone.
But arthritic knee
Has won the day.
Lord of heaven
Restore my leg
For an old age cripple
I humbly beg.

THE SWEET PARTY

Andy Millican

After Eight there were Celebrations outside. Starbars Spangled across the Milky Way whilst Mars was a steady light in a Galaxy of dark chocolate night. All that was missing were some Flying Saucers.

Harry Bo and his Starmix band were playing some of the band's favourite tunes: Goldbears and Cola bottles, Rings, Heart Throbs and Fried Eggs.

It was busy but quite relaxed. In one corner under the Sarsaparilla tree a conversation was getting rather heated.

A woman was clearly irritated talking to a bloke. She gesticulates, Snickers at him,

Don't get Smarties with me mate. Like any good woman I like my Buttons pushed. I don't mind if you've got a Curly Wurly or a Yorkie but I like it to be a Marathon not a quick break like some Kit-Kat who just Rolos over after filling my chocolate cups!

But you, you're a Flake. The crumbliest flakiest guy I know. I want someone strong and tough like the Milky Bar Kid cos I believe only the best is tough enough and for your information no-one has ever given me a Sherbet Fountain!

He laughed and said,

There's Bounty be someone who could do that sometime. Your spending too much of your life looking for Heroes who you hope will bring you Roses. Forget it sweetheart, just join Matchmakers! After all it takes Allsorts.

She retorted,

Don' preach to me about partners. Listen love: Hearts are broken all the time. Someone or something often Torpedoes the best love affairs. Sometimes it's just best to Aero on the side of like not love someone and not fire off Bazookas if something goes wrong.

Against one wall there was a buffet with a very handsome selection of fruit and stuff: Coconut Ice, Pineapple Cubes, Pear Drops, Rhubarb and Custard, Fruit Salads and Sour Cherries.

A lad from Leeds was heard to say to the girl next to him, *E-Clair I don't know what to say sometimes. You're just so gooey and soft inside.*

Menacingly across the room stood some Quality Street Gang members. Gang leader Hazlenut aka The Purple One was surrounded by some of his minions. Fudge was fidgeting, Chomp-ing about. He badly needed some Acid drops to calm him down. He was tapping his Drumsticks against his leg.

Calm son, keep calm, the night is long, urged Hazlenut

I'd like to tap a few heads over there he said. I like the sound of a good Crunch-ie.

Fudge was always on the look-out for a bit of a Rumba some Hubba-Bubba. He was getting very *Wrigley* chewing his gum round and round and partly thinking on whose coat he would stick it.

I see Black Jacks here . No doubt spreading a little dark Magic said Hazlenut.

Exactly boss that's why I'm twitchy.

Hold off, I'm waiting for some smarmy geezer with a sports car to turn up which we are gonna nick.

Whilst Harry Bo and his band weren't brilliant an impromptu set wasn't faring any better in the courtyard. Two young lads in Polo shirts couldn't decide whether they were trying to impersonate medieval Minstrels or Little Richard with Tutti Frutties. Polite Ripples of weak applause followed.

Meantime the Quality Street Caramel younger gang members, the twins Fingers and Penny turned to look at the group who they considered rivals as spotted by Fudge. Fingers was the gang's speciality thief while Penny was Hazlenut's moll but as ever the two caramel kids were absorbed in their phones.

Penny said, Don't tell me you're on Tik Tok again?

No Tic Tacs replied Fingers.

You mean Tik Tok.

No Tic Tacs. Here try one.

Hey they're cool.

Pay attention! snarled ChocBlock who was the gang's simpleton.

In a corner two Karens were contemplating love.

Life's no Picnic one said. Who ever said it was all Roses and Parma Violets? Life sometimes Swizzles us and its Kinder to leave things be than try and find love.

Oh I dunno. When you first meet someone and you have that Gobstopper moment of being transfixed. It Refreshers your soul.

Bah Humbugs the first Karen said. I don't go for that. Its Balls, Aniseed it for what it is!

Yeah I suppose so. There are too many Fruit and Nut cases about that's for sure, crazy for those nuts and raisins.

Twix this and that its true. But you know the Fizz Wizz feeling at the beginning is memorable.

Black Magic was aware he was being watched by the Quality Street Gang but his own group hadn't arrived in numbers yet. His own minder was Freddo. Small he may be but a bit of a Bruce Lee capable of quick sugar hits. He disliked Fudge intently. Black Magic was getting irritated by some chit-chat about him while he waited for Munchie who was also his muscle and Praline who was always in the centre of things. And liked to fill them in.

Keep on Topic she said with a Wispa. Only a Cad-burys bad news.

Come on babe!. Give us a Twirl. I need a Boost tonight.

Wow I love those Cherry Lips!

You turn my legs to Jelly Baby!

Whoa Time Out man. No need for that.

Outside the sound of an approaching car. Mal tesers drew up in his bright red motor. He skipped out and leaned against his stunning motor. He's one who Revels in attention. His life had been one long honeycomb. People turn to admire his Ferrari Rocher. His girlfriend Lin Dor was Swiss and only in the luxury market. She Nestled in the beautiful leather upholstery. Over her shoulders she wore a Candy Necklace.

A voice from the onlookers called out; *What a Dolly Mixture! She can Whip my Walnuts anytime!*

Suddenly, there was a rustle of wrappers.... then a voice,

Oreo , what's going on here? asked Hazlenut striding towards Mal Tesers whose legs were rapidly turning as soft as Nougat and who M and M'd when he saw Hazlenut. Frantically he looked about for help.

The crowd stepped back. Oh, oh....

THEY SAY THAT I'M A DREAMER

Vivienne Orr

John Lennon was not the only one. He sang dreams. Artists, composers and writers fortunate enough to possess acute powers of retention use a brush, manuscript or pen to express or depict the unconscious Happenings. How many psychologists have professed to know the meaning and significance of those vivid pictures contained within a few seconds of wakefulness. And how many writers have sought to produce material in an acceptable format emanating from these visions, namely an interesting beginning, a development and a good finale.

If a dream has the right ingredients it can be massaged, be totally original and become a story. Take the maddening 'repetitive occurrence' dream. For example, being convinced that you have the ability to fly unaided, in a Superman pose, and fail to gain sufficient height to avoid tangling with skylights, chimneys and rooftops or remain at a short, uneasy distance above a thundering motorway. At a stretch you could identify this situation with a 'nearly but not quite' picture of someone who was confident they could succeed, but would always fail. Another scenario is The Search. Something is lost and there is a prolonged, stumbling, futile and immensely frustrating search. Or Improper Clothing. Here you are ill-dressed, if at all, in company. Shades of 'The King's New Clothes'.

Familiar faces flit in and out. They are the padding, are out of character and bear no significance. The story which is evolving contains strangers wearing a recognisable casing, like a shell. The Happening could be extended and given an acceptable finale with a generous dollop of drama. It is rare for a dream to have a decent closure, already wakefulness intervenes and perhaps that is the moment when imagination is at its height and pen needs to be put to paper before the experience limps away into the distance.

BOOK REVIEW : I HAVEN'T BEEN ENTIRELY HONEST WITH YOU (MIRANDA HART)

Ethel Corduff

Miranda Hart is one of my favourite actresses and comedians, so I was really pleased to get this book as a Christmas present. During a dull, cold January, I was looking forward to a barrel of laughs. However, in that respect, I was going to be disappointed, as most of the book was about how Miranda dealt with symptoms of unknown origin for many years.

She tries to make it amusing, and occasionally she succeeds, but it is not ideal trying to describe how you suffered for years entertainingly. It took many pages of coping, trying various holistic ways and trying to get investigations before the diagnosis of Lyme disease was finally made, and then there is a lot to say about recovery and treatment.

Yes, the book is well written and contains many nuggets of wisdom, advice, and how holistic methods worked for her. If you have an illness that you are struggling with, the book would be helpful. Fortunately, I do not have a serious illness, so much of the useful information was wasted on me.

I admire the fact that she managed to cover most of the four hundred and thirty-one pages with what she describes as Treasures: Share, Surrender. Grieve. Let the past be the past. Thoughts. Loving ourselves. Why we do what we do. Play, pacing and presence. Don't fear the setback. And finally, It's all about love in the end.

The book is much too long, and Miranda has to be commended for finding so much to write about, and there is a surprising ending. Published by Penguin Michael Joseph.

POETRY WORKSHOP NEWS

Chair: Mike Boland (Address below)

Treasurer: Ethel Corduff –10 Malcolm Road London SE25 5HG ecorduff@hotmail.com

Zoom Events Coordinator: Bernie Bickerton – scpswmeetings@gmail.com

Editor 'wavelengths': Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow, Middx, HA3 6JU – gothic.garden1@btinternet.com

GREETINGS FROM THE POETRY WORKSHOP.

Since the last issue the Poetry Workshop held its delayed 2025 Annual General Meeting. It is the intention of the PW Committee to hold the 2026 AGM later in the year, probably in September.

This June marked the publication of the 87th issue of *wavelengths*, the Poetry Workshop's quarterly magazine provided free to its members. The issue contains poems by members, an article about Simon Armitage, the current Poet Laureate, news of members, the Minutes of the AGM and the Newsletter section giving updates on the group's activities. Members of the Society who enjoy poetry but do not yet belong to the Poetry Workshop are reminded that they can join the group for just £7 a year. What are you waiting for! See below for some of the PW's activities.

Members of the PW are reminded that contributions to **wavelengths** are always welcome. Deadline for the autumn issue is **31 July**

Until the autumn, best wishes to all.

FOLIOS

Postal Folio

The PW organises a circulating postal folio in which participating members can exchange critiques of each other's poetry, encouragement and news. There is room for any member of the Poetry Workshop who would like to take part. If you are interested, please contact me, **Mike Boland, at 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, Middlesex, HA3 6JU** or by e-mail to: gothic.garden1@btinternet.com

e-folio

The PW also runs an e-folio for members who have access to the internet.

WAVELENGTHS

This is the Poetry Workshop’s quarterly magazine which is issued free to all its members and consists of twenty pages of poems, articles on poetry / poets and all the news of the group’s activities. It appears regularly in the spring, summer, autumn and winter. The editor is always looking for new material from members of the Poetry Workshop.

The Poetry Workshop

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our 20 page magazine **wavelengths** each year
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW’s annual anthology
- access to the popular circulating Postal Folio scheme
- access to the e-folio scheme

If you are interested in joining us, contact our Treasurer and Membership Secretary, **Ethel Corduff**, at the address above. The cost of membership is £7. Cheques should be made out to: **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

DATES TO REMEMBER

31 July 2026	Deadline: autumn issue of ‘wavelengths’
Sept 2026	Publication of autumn ‘wavelengths’
TBC	2026 AGM

NEWS, ANNOUNCEMENTS, NOTICES

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting 2026

SOCIETY OF CIVIL AND PUBLIC SERVICE WRITERS, ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, ON 9 MAY 2026 AT 1.30PM, AT THE CIVIL SERVICE CLUB, 13-15 GREAT SCOTLAND YARD, LONDON, SW1A 2HJ AND ONLINE (ON ZOOM).

Attendees: Ethel Corduff (Chairman), Gopi Chandroth (Editor), Alex Tyler (Competitions Secretary), Bernie Bickerton (Meetings Secretary) and members: Vivienne Orr, Michael Smith, Geoff Parkes and Mike Sedgwick and online: members: Zoe May and Tom Oulton.

1. Apologies: Jenny Chamier-Grove (Publicity Officer), Nimmi Channa (Treasurer), Mike Boland (PW Editor) and members: Jean Pound, Joanna Crawford, Phil Cook and Tony Oswick.

2. Minutes of AGM held on 10 May 2025. There were no comments or updates on the minutes.

3. Reports from the Committee. Report from the Chairman – agreed. There was an update on the number of members in the Society: 67.

4. Report from the Treasurer. Agreed. The Society was in a good position; it was operating with surplus funds. In view of the financial obstacles and setbacks Nimmi and Ethel had encountered over the last year one member commented “ it was a remarkable achievement” that accounts had been produced.

5. Report from the Magazine Editor. Agreed. Gopi encouraged new members and members who hadn’t previously submitted material to the Author to send him contributions. **Action. Members.**

6. Gopi would complete three years as Editor in 2027 and would stand down next year; the Summer edition would be the last Author he would edit. However, Gopi would continue as Webmaster beyond that date. Gopi asked members to let him know about amendments that needed to be made to the website, for example, out of date information. **Action. Members.**

7. Alex suggested a “ways of working” feature in the Author on questions such as: editing; how to fill a blank hole and use of AI to help writing.

8. Report from the Poetry Workshop. Agreed. There were 25 members.

9. Report from the Meetings Secretary. Bernie had decided not to seek re-election as Meetings Secretary as she no longer had the time to organise the AGM as she had health issues to manage. However, she offered to book the meeting room in the Civil Service Club for next year’s AGM. [Following the AGM, this has now been done as Bernie has booked the Trafalgar Room for 8 May 2027]. She also offered to continue poetry Zoom sessions and perhaps other Zoom meetings in her capacity as a member. Gopi cautioned this would need to be compliant with GDPR legislation. Ethel thanked Bernie for her work as Meetings Secretary and for her earlier work as Membership Secretary. **Action. Bernie**

10. Zoe May, a new member, asked if a membership survey had been done to find out what members wanted. Zoe would be happy to support the design. It was agreed it was a good idea to do a survey and Gopi would organise it. **Action. Gopi**

11. Report from the Publicity Officer. Agreed. Jenny had decided to stand down and not seek re-election following many years as Publicity Officer. At its earlier meeting, the Committee had agreed Committee roles could be job-shared and this could be done with the Publicity Officer role.

12. To publicise the Society and recruit new members it was suggested working with existing groups including public sector organisations was the best option. It was suggested the Society contact the Civil Service Sports Council (CSSC) to get listed with them so CSSC members were aware of SCPSW and could join if they wished. **Action. Publicity Officer**

13. To encourage interest in the Society, Zoe suggested members could upload videos of themselves reading out their work onto Facebook/You Tube and Tik Tok. This had worked for other organisations. Zoe suggested a question could be put in the survey such as “would you be prepared to read out your work on video for social networks?” **Action. Gopi**

¹For information. Bernie had resigned as ‘Secretary’ to SCPSW on 27 March 2026 in an email to Ethel Corduff

14. Report from the Competitions Secretary. Agreed. Competitions had been managed very efficiently.

15. Ideas for increasing competition entries. Alex asked what motivated members to enter competitions and what prevented them. One member reported it was receiving feedback on competitions, another member said it was to be a better writer and third said it was to get critique and be published. Zoe suggested the survey could include a question such as “would receiving critique make you enter competitions?” **Action. Gopi.** In respect of what prevents members from entering competitions one member said it was being asked to write about a specific topic.

16. A member suggested feedback on competition entries could include: plot construction and quality of characterisation. Zoe suggested there could be a guest judge for competitions, for example, an external person/Committee member/member. She also suggested the competitions could be advertised on Facebook, with entrants required to join SCPSW in order to enter SCPSW competitions. **Action. Alex**

17. Ideas for capturing feedback. Gopi had worked on a potential IT solution for capturing feedback but had been met with GDPR constraints.

18. Increase in SCPSW subscriptions to £30 from January 2027. The AGM agreed to the increase. **Action. Nimmi.** Zoe suggested SCPSW could introduce ‘gift card membership’, for example, where a relative could purchase membership for a member of the family. Other organisations did this and it could be promoted on SCPSW’s Facebook page.

19. Replacement webmaster. Gopi explained the offer is still open for members to work alongside him as an Assistant Webmaster. In the meantime, he would continue as Webmaster. Zoe requested the webmaster job description. **Action. Gopi.**

20. Elections for Committee 2026. A new member, Zoe May, put herself forward for the role of Deputy Chair and agreed to be Meetings Secretary until a successor was found. Zoe also said she would do part of the Publicity Officer role while it remained vacant.

Chairman (2nd term) 2nd of 3 years – Ethel Corduff
(no election required)

Deputy Chairman – Zoe May (proposed by Bernie, seconded
by Gopi)

Treasurer – Nimmi Channa (proposed by Bernie, seconded by Ethel)

Membership Secretary – vacancy

Magazine Editor – Gopi Chandroth (proposed by Bernie, seconded
by Geoff Parkes)

Meetings Secretary – Zoe will do this as part of her Dep Chair role
until the post has been filled

Publicity Officer – Zoe will do some of this, as Dep Chair, while the
post is vacant

Competitions Secretary – Alex Tyler (proposed by Bernie, seconded
by Geoff Parkes)

21. For the AGM in 2027 and beyond, the only meeting papers
which would be printed would be those sent to members of the
SCPSW who were not online. The survey could include a question on
communications. **Action. Gopi**

22. Any Other Business. Gifts would be sent to Jenny and Bernie in
view of their service to SCPSW and the Committee.

23. Readings, including stories and poems, were given by: Ethel,
Vivienne, Michael, Geoff and Mike.

24. The AGM finished at 15.45

Bernie Bickerton, Meetings Secretary, 28 May 2026

VACANCIES WITH JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Publicity Officer

An essential role in attracting new members. It would suit a member who is confident using the internet and willing to promote SCPSW to organisations that could be a source of new membership. Some proficiency in the use of social media, such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and the SCPSW website, would be helpful. Responsibilities include preparing suitable advertisements for noticeboards and libraries, responding to enquiries, or forwarding them to the relevant committee member. Full support will be provided by the committee.

Assistant Webmaster

This role would suit a member who is comfortable using the internet and interested in learning how websites are managed. It offers an opportunity to develop valuable technical skills that may be useful in professional or personal projects.

The Assistant Webmaster will help maintain and update the SCPSW website, gaining practical experience in website administration and online publishing. Full training in the use of WordPress website software, together with ongoing support, will be provided by the Webmaster.

This is an ideal role for someone keen to learn a new skill. Over time, the role can gradually take on more responsibility, leading to the opportunity to become the full-time Webmaster.

SOCIAL MEDIA

We are on Facebook – please ‘like’ us and contribute posts:

<https://en-gb.facebook.com/Society-of-Civil-and-Public-Service-Writers-255424157928851/>

Zoom evening on Poetry

We have a monthly Zoom meeting on poetry. If you wish to participate please contact Bernie Bickerton at bickerb03@gmail.com

Data Protection

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SCPSW competitions 2026

All entries to scpswcomps@gmail.com

Month	Format	Word limit	Theme
January	Short story	1000	Making a change
March	Herbert Spencer Poetry	Max 50 lines, 2 entries	Open theme
May	Lewis Wright short story	2000 words	Open theme
July	Flash fiction	Max 250 words	Open theme
September	Vee Bradley humorous poetry	Max 36 lines, two entries	Humour
November	Non-fiction piece	Max 1000 words	Open: e.g. nature, memoir, travel
December	No activity	N/A	N/A

AUTHOR DEADLINES AND SCHEDULE

ISSUE	Submission	Publication
Spring	1 March	15 March
Summer	1 June	15 June
Autumn	1 September	15 September
Winter	1 December	15 December

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES FOR *AUTHOR*

POEMS submitted for publication in *Author* must follow these guidelines:

Minimum: 12 lines or 75 words

Ideal range: 15–25 lines (100 - 300 words)

Very short forms (haiku, couplets, etc.) must be submitted as a collection reaching the minimum indicated above.

Maximum: 1600 words.

PROSE should be between 300 and 1,600 words.

AFTERWARDS

Andy Millican

When he has gone at last, passed like every single man before him
the world will move on.

No more churlish comments, unstatesmanlike behaviour,
gracelessness or diplomatic insolence. A man whose
blasphemy made even the devil blush.

Just an enormous sense of relief.

Grief will be confined to family and sycophants.

Those rewarded for their unbecoming loyalty and accorded positions
of influence and power they were showered with but unsuited for.

Who looted moral and material wealth, were serial liars, whose duty
to the manchild was naïve, pathetic, servile.

And while they mourn for a man – yes just a man – born to a life of
privilege, the world will struggle to believe that one such as he
could conceivably attain high office.

When he has gone and his recent history seized upon,
justice will quietly insist on righting the wrongs of his reign.

The stain of his influence will be erased.

Peace between peoples will return. His effigy will burn.

Bonfires and beacons will light the world.

Truths will unfold from cupboards and desks of conspiracy.

The untold disgrace of his office will be exposed and those
who ought to have known and stood up to him will be deposed.

When he has gone, when lawmakers, political movers and shakers
finally remove their cloak of obsequy and learn to stand tall again,
then the need to unwrap and reveal the scope of his debauchery
is an imperative. They will be truth's hope.

Those who fed his ego and sanctify his memory will tread
fearfully in the night as the light of honesty comes back to haunt them.

When he has gone and the world moves on, church bells will ring,
The muezzin will call out and the shrivelled world will unfurl with
new voices. Rejoicing shall echo into his distant tomb
and fill the ears of those who snivelled before him.

And honest men will say never...never again.

A FISH CALLED KAMI

Mike Sedgwick

Sri Lanka is famous for its wildlife. Tourists flock to see wild elephants, leopards, and water buffalo, and to indulge in colourful birdlife. They regard monkeys as cute as they play and cavort until one makes off with their sandwiches. They express dismay that the authorities allow mangy feral dogs to lie in the streets. The Sinhalese are aware of the dangers posed by snakes and crocodiles, and of the destructive nuisance caused by squadrons of fruit bats on their mango trees. Gardeners despair at the damage caused by porcupines and the uprooting habits of wild boar. Immigrants like us have to learn to live with monkeys, insects, geckos, and leeches.

All religions of the world have a commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” but Buddhists, and 70% of Sri Lankans are Buddhist, take it seriously and kill no animals. Maybe some make an exception for mosquitoes and snakes, but on the whole, one learns to control animals, rather than eliminate them. Unfortunately, the authorities cannot round up the feral dogs and dispose of them as we might. Rat poison is available, but a better solution is to provide accommodation for rat snakes.

Nobody has taken any notice, heard of, or seen a silver-grey freshwater fish, now called “Kami” or *Puntius kamalika*, to give it its Linnean name. Less than 10 Cm long, it is not worth a second glance, but it has its place in the ecology of freshwater lakes. Until 2008, this fish was *Puntius amphibius*, first recorded in India early in the 19th century and discovered in Sri Lanka in 1912 by Georg Dunker, a German ichthyologist. *Puntius* include carp, loaches, minnows and other barbs.

Medical student Anjana Silva loves nature. After a week of study in lecture rooms and hospital wards, he liked to escape to Sri Lanka’s wetlands in the south and probe the lakes and swamps for species of fish, lizards, snakes and frogs. Somehow, he could ignore the mosquitoes, leeches, spiders and ants as he camped on the boggy ground. His fascination with the wetlands’ fauna overcame the discomforts. He carefully examined *Puntius amphibius*, a species he had often seen before, but now noticed it did not look quite like the fish described. The disposition of its scales was different, and when he dissected one, he found differences in the internal organs. He arranged for modern molecular analysis of the DNA, which showed the fish to be a different species, so far unnamed. Was this a new species, not previously known?

Zoological taxonomists are an exacting group. They demanded many checks and measurements before finally accepting Anjana's newly discovered species. Finally, in 2008, he announced the new species to the world. A tradition among naturalists is that they may name a new species after themselves. *Puntius silvius*, seemed obvious, but Anjana was aware of a gross injustice visited on an admired doctor and saw an opportunity to counter it.

I did a lot of fieldwork in the rainforests in the South Western wet zone, observing this fish in the small streams of the Gin and Kalu river basins.

Before starting my medical internship, I worked with my friend Kanana Mudawage and Dr Rohan Pethiyagoda, a famed ichthyologist. We were discussing some potentially new fish species, and Puntius amphibius came up. I compared photographs, x-rays, and scale counts of specimens from Bombay and a specimen in a museum in Paris with our P. amphibius and became convinced that ours was a separate species. At the time, I was reading a biography of Dr Kamalika and chatting to my friends in the lab, and I thought, why don't we honour Dr Kamalika with this beautiful fish?

Dr Kamalika Abeyaratne, known as Kami, was a consultant paediatrician at the Lady Ridgeway Hospital in Colombo at the height of her career. She was driving to Tangalle on the South coast to conduct a clinic for disabled children in 1997 when she was involved in a road accident. Her injuries included fractures of her legs and ribs, and internal bleeding. She was airlifted to Colombo, where blood transfusion and life-saving surgery helped her to survive.

Her recovery was complicated when she became ill with hepatitis. Blood tests revealed that the cause was HIV/AIDS. Someone leaked the result, and the news that this respected and senior doctor had succumbed to a disease associated with drug addicts and sexual profligacy spread rapidly. Dr Abeyaratne was one of the last to learn of her diagnosis.

'That was the beginning of the end of my life,' she said. 'My life came to a standstill. I went through the whole gamut of emotions, from shock and disbelief to anger and then finally, resignation to what had happened.'

Parents refused to let her treat their children, and her colleagues ostracised her. Some doctors refused to treat her. The Lady Ridgeway Hospital terminated her appointment, and she had no work. The trauma hospital where doctors saved her life, Sri Jayawardanepura Government Hospital, intimated that she had contracted HIV before her accident. It was impossible that their blood could be tainted, they claimed. With no income, she could not buy the drugs she needed. No one would help her, and her friends avoided her. Injustice piled on injustice.

‘It was the most horrific time of my life,’ she said. ‘It deeply shocked and hurt me that medical professionals, who should be more sensitive to HIV patients, were callous and cruel in their attitudes. Although I didn’t appreciate it at the time, my own experience has given me the best platform from which to lobby for change. Losing my practice left a large void in my life, an emptiness that nothing can really fill.’

Not one to quit, Dr Kami had survived previous threats to her life. During a political uprising by the JVP party in 1988, doctors were ordered not to work on pain of death in a bid to cripple the government. Dr Kami and some others continued to serve their patients but the pressure mounted, and Dr Kami was forced to leave the country for a while when the shootings began.

President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga heard of her plight and ordered that her treatment be funded from the President’s charity. Eventually, an enquiry showed that the Colombo hospital was responsible for transmitting HIV through tainted blood, but the unfortunate doctor was still unemployed and unemployable.

‘The only limits are those I set for myself,’ she said. She took up the role of champion for those with HIV/AIDS: sex workers, drug addicts, homosexuals and those infected by blood transfusion. At the time, government figures admitted only 300 cases of HIV in Sri Lanka, but she knew that the real figure was over 7000. They were suffering alone and in silence, afraid to come forward. So she organised clinics for sufferers, offering treatment and support without judgement. She became a voice for her patients to speak to the government.

Later in life, she received honours and felicitations for her courage and work. Ironically, some were from the doctors who had previously ostracised her. The final limit, her death, occurred in 2006, at the age of 70 years.

Anjana had been appalled at his fellow professionals’ cowardly and bigoted responses to her illness. So when he had the opportunity to name the fish, he chose *Puntius kamalika* as a small gesture to right the wrongs done to Dr Kamalika Abeyaratne and to acknowledge her courage and contributions to medicine. Anjana received a letter of appreciation from Michael, Dr Kamalika’s husband, who found solace in his hobby of fish-keeping.

Twenty years on, the medical and scientific community recognised Dr Silva’s research on new species, seven so far, and snake envenoming when he was elected the youngest member of the National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka, the country’s highest body of scientists.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AGENT ROLLO LORIMER

Tom Oulton

Scene 1: The Rude Awakening

I awoke suddenly, not surfacing through dreams, but conscious and alert on the instant. Something must have woken me, but what?

I was half-expecting a visit that night, most probably from Baron von und zu Grabstein, reputedly head of Die Graue Hand, whatever that meant. (*The Grey Hand, you moron.* – Ed.) In the hotel lounge after dinner, the Baron had been watching me over the top of his cognac, that amused half-smile on his face, as if deciding exactly what lethal mischief he might inflict on me some time during the night. I was also on the receiving end of a fixed gaze from Comtesse Irma du Matin-Pluvieux. She might have been in league with the Baron, but her look was of hot-eyed lust that was almost as unnerving as the Baron's far cooler appraisal. You'd have thought they might have practised their stares on each other; but no, they only had eyes for me. It would be child's play for either of those two to obtain a key to my room through threat or bribery.

It was pitch black. I soon realised that this was because I still had my eyes shut. I opened them.

No one, neither the Baron nor any of his minions, not Irma in flimsy negligée.

I looked at the open door of the bathroom and the light shining from it. No sound from within. Had I really left the light and the door like that? Yes, I had. I remembered clearly.

I took my automatic from under my pillow and flicked off the safety...Hell's teeth, I'd better remember to put the safety catch on next time I put the gun there.

I went to the door and cautiously opened it, then stepped even more cautiously into the dimly-lit corridor. I looked left and right.

No one.

Was that the sound of a door quietly closing? No, it wasn't.

I went back into my room and closed and locked the door. I looked across at the long

curtains covering the double-doors to the balcony. Was that a slight movement that I saw? Yes, quite definitely.

I walked over the floor with cat-like tread, and in one quick movement pulled the curtains apart.

No one.

There was, however, a small current of air finding its way between the two doors. I carefully and silently turned the keys in each door, the one on the right in a lock, the other in a slider that withdrew the top and bottom bolts. I seized the handles and forced the doors violently – no, I didn't. The doors remained where they were. They must have originally been unlocked. I had just relocked them.

Although I had lost the element of surprise, I turned the keys back and leapt out.

No one.

The alpine air was dam' cold. I returned to my room and locked the doors.

Think, Rollo, think. What was it that could possibly have woken you up?

Suddenly with one bound I was through the bathroom door.

By now I *really* needed that pee.

Scene 2: The Baron's Challenge

Lady Araminta "Poison" Challis bagged - or rather debagged - men with as much assiduity as healthier types bagged munros. This made her very useful to the Agency as a go-anywhere honey trap. That last Saturday in March, however, she was at a loose end, as was I, so we agreed to accompany each other to the Savoy for dinner.

I jibbed at her choices only when she ordered a Pichon-Longueville from a top vintage that cost more than a week's salary, but conceded when she assured me that she had ways of getting her extravagances past Expenses.

Mellowed by that superb claret and some cocktails, neither of us was alert, and we unthinkingly climbed into the first taxi to present itself. I recognised Baron von und zu Grabstein when he turned round to check we were in and to gloat. I tried the door, but it was of course already locked. Minty's door, however, was unaccountably not locked, and she opened it and shifted through it like a Corner House nippy.

The open lock snapped shut, the window to the cab was closed, and I waited resignedly for the chloroform. Before oblivion descended, I remembered that in his younger days the Baron had been a champion racing driver and that even now he sometimes liked to keep his hand in with a bit of getaway driving.

I came round in a windowless room lit by a single hanging bulb, and was soon joined by the Baron.

I spoke first: "Why did you let Minty escape like that?"

"I preferred to deal with you separately. Lady Araminta Challis was detained by my Organisation before she could find a telephone and taken to a nearby location."

"Kidnapped twice in ten minutes. Must be a personal best, even for Minty. What do you want from her, anyway?"

"The names of the members of my Organisation that she has seduced."

"It's a lot to ask of Minty to remember their names."

"I know the name of two," said the Baron, wryly. "They are the two men who have been guarding her. I have already heard that in the time it took to drive you down here, she succeeded in seducing both of them, stealing their keys and escaping. At least she doesn't know where you are, so you should not expect a rescue attempt."

"And where am I?"

"On Romney Marsh, in a cottage cellar once used by smugglers of the type popularised by Mr. Russell Thorndike. With the sea close at hand, it is a good place for the disposal of a body."

A deep chill struck the back of my neck. It was caused by the door opening to allow entry to an athletic-looking cove with short dark hair carrying a folded camp bed which he proceeded to erect.

The Baron continued, "But do not despair, my dear Rollo - "

"I shall endeavour not to do so, my dear Vonundzu. What on earth were your parents thinking of, christening you - "

"The profound ignorance of that remark can only mean that you attended a minor public school."

"Well, at least I know the laws of cricket."

"As do I. I learned them when I was corrupting a member of the MCC Committee. If you get out of this alive, you can waste the rest of your career trying to work out which one."

"If I get out?"

"On the drive here I considered how much I have enjoyed our little duels, especially

as I always win. And if I disposed of you, the Agency might appoint someone much better. So I have decided to give you a sporting chance. Do you know of Alf Tupper, whose athletic exploits have been publicized in the pages of *The Victor*? This is Bert Tupper, Alf's tougher older brother. Whilst in your special forces he became expert in the biathlon, that is cross-country skiing with rifle shooting. Just the man to hunt you across the Marsh."

"He won't get far on skis out there at the moment," I pointed out.

"Bert will be running, like you. And, entertaining though it would be, you will not have to run in evening togs. Bert will fetch more suitable clothing and shoes for you."

Bert favoured me with a wolfish grin as he exited.

The Baron continued: "Now listen carefully. From precisely 8 o'clock tomorrow morning you will find that you may open the cellar and walk unimpeded from the cottage, seeing no one. Bert will start his pursuit at 8.30, so it is in your interests not to oversleep. If you attain the outskirts of Rye, you may consider yourself escaped."

"Jolly fiendish wheeze, old chap," I commented.

"Thank you; but not of the same order of fiendishness of my very old friend Dr. Fu Manchu, I fear. We will leave you some sandwiches, some water and a bottle of pinot noir from my own estate in the Rheinpfalz. It cannot compete with overpriced burgundies, but it is appropriate to our current modest surroundings. I promise you that nothing is poisoned or drugged, and you know that I, like Fu Manchu, always keep my word. It so helps to have one's threats believed."

The Baron's wine was a very decent tippie, and the accommodation was scarcely worse than the old school dorms. I would have slept soundly had it not been for the prospect of the morrow, or rather of later in the day.

I was wide awake at eight to push open the cellar door to find myself in the main room of the cottage. I also found myself in the company of the Baron and Bert Tupper, each with his firearm.

"Ah, Mr. Lorimer, I have been expecting you," said the Baron, "But an hour ago."

Bert contributed, "Yeah, mate, what you doing here?"

"I might ask you the same question. It's a minute past eight."

"Oh Rollo, Rollo," said the Baron sadly. "Are you really the best that British Intelligence has to offer? Do you not know that the clocks went forward an hour last night."

Scene 3: Burying the Hatchet

After I had retired from the Agency and the Baron from Die Graue Hand, he took to spending a few days at Christmas with Adèle and me.

When we were seated in front of the fire, he said, “Congratulations, Sir Rollo, the recognition is long overdue.”

“Thank you, Otto. I’m just pleased for my wife, who can now call herself Lady Lorimer. Tell me, with the perspective of a few years, how does it feel to have walked away from the world domination game?”

“I merely bowed to the inevitable. It’s a job that requires a younger evil genius. I have, however, taken over one piece of the world in the form of a Rheingau vineyard with the cutest little gothic castle high above the River. But I shall confine myself to cultivating the Riesling rather than sweeping down on the barges to extract tolls and plunder, as my ancestors used to do. Indeed, as they have done since they came out of the Teutonic Forest to pursue the Romans all the way to the Seven Hills.”

It was the Baron’s way of reminding me that his title was considerably older than mine. I did not resent it.

He continued, “I hear that our old friend Lady Araminta has passed on?”

“Sadly, yes; but the presence of Minty’s young friend and the absence of clothing suggests that she went the way she would have wanted.”

“I’m sure you are right, Rollo.”

On the morning of the Baron’s departure, Bert Tupper in chauffeur’s guise knocked on the door bang on time and, as usual carried in the Baron’s annual gift. The first couple of years the box had been inscribed BOMB, but not recently.

It is with a light and heavy heart that I lay down my pen, feeling that this may be the last time that I see the Baron. His gift sits on my desk, and I shall now open it to find the usual bottles of his wine.

*

Lady Lorimer told the Inquest that she had heard a loud explosion and rushed to the library. She had found her husband on the floor being gently showered by sparkling red and white confetti.

Baron von und zu Grabstein apologised to the Court for his heavy-handed German humour, but said that, like everyone else, he had been unaware that Sir Rollo had a weak heart,

The Agency disclosed nothing of the Baron’s nefarious past for fear of embarrassing the British Establishment (again).

POEM COLLECTION

Ivy Hudson

Is anything praiseworthy - think on these things?

Oh to feel the paper fill with doggerel or verse,
scribble my nonsensical language across the page.
Oh to add useless verbs, hyperbole or odes
but now to fill the blankness of a mind at rest and peace.
Lightness rests where there once was turmoil,
restlessness, dissatisfaction, even pain.
Welcome to patience, good things, control and praise
to each new day, grace coming my way.

My Better Half

Negotiating feelings, hang-ups, downs,
reduce behavioural pills and cling to sanity.
Suspensions resurrect, confusion reigns
seeing condemnation's labyrinthine ways.
But light shines, the way ahead, I cling to him,
who clears, disturbs the darkness, brings peace.
He brings light, freedom shines and clears the fog,
clarity functions, I rejoice and skip for joy.

CONTESTANTS

Vivienne Orr

They were very busy that morning.

They always were of course. Rarely were they still for a single second, but that morning it was different. The contest between the Rockery Ants and the Patio Ants was due to take place at noon and there was no time to waste. The usual nestwork, cleaning, food collection and preparation were completed in double quick time. This was no chore as the general excitement of the long awaited event had them all on high speed alert. They moved back and forth so fast you could hardly see them for dust.

At last all was ready and the moment had arrived. With a lot of hustle and bustle the contestants took their places. The air was electric with anticipation. The full length of the lawn stretched out in front of them. It was going to be tough, a test of maximum endurance, but all contestants knew the extent of their own limitations and were raring to go.

The timing of the contest had to be flexible. A shower of rain was no problem but a heavy downpour could mean some of them could stick in the mud. And the grass needed to be newly cut. Some team members had been lost during a practice session when the Great Cutting Machine thundered on to the course. Despite their own considerable speed, far greater than the sluggish GCM, accidents did happen, usually among the elderly or the very young as is normally the case with the confused and the unwise.

However today the conditions for the endeavour were perfect. The GCM had exhausted itself the previous evening and the ground was dry.

Collectively they gathered, the Rockery Ants on the left and the Patio Ants on the right, and at a signal off they went. The grass appeared to heave as hundreds of tiny bodies surged en masse towards the distant bird bath. A blue tit enjoying a morning splash raised its head in alarm at the disturbance and rapidly flew away.

Following a smart getaway the feverish pace was beginning to slow. Progress was hampered by patches of thick moss and weed roots, but the spirit and determination of the participants were unquenchable and they drove themselves ever onward.

Casualties were many. The rules of the road were bypassed frequently, unthinkable in the normal way of life. But this was war.

At last the goal was attained and a massive throng emerged at the foot of the bird bath. So exquisite was the joy of achievement that no heed was paid to the winning or the losing. The result was already forgotten and the contestants expressed joy regardless of team allegiance by scampering around in circles and over each other's backs. The contest had no further significance.

After a brief respite they tidied themselves up, returned happily to base and went back to work.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HARRIS

Phil Cook

Hampton Court's is probably the best-known maze in England. In *Three Men in a Boat*, Harris showed it off to a country cousin. He had a map and told his cousin, 'It's very simple. You just keep on taking the first turning to the right, we'll just walk round for ten minutes, and then go and get some lunch.' A string of bewildered people also followed Harris and his map and of course he got them all thoroughly lost.

Certainly on first acquaintance, an equally daunting maze is the souk in the medina of Marrakesh. For a birthday treat my wife, Val, took me on a memorable day trip to Marrakesh and the souk - with its vivid kaleidoscope of sights, sounds and smells such as we had never experienced before - was easily the highlight of the day. The labyrinthine covered alleyways seemed to go on to infinity. Most were buzzing with activity; a few seemed eerily quiet. Hundreds of stalls sold attractive goods of all kinds, some doubling as workshops for ironworkers, carpenters, dyers, tailors, etc, all hard at work.

We had a guided tour which seemed to shield us from the importunate stall-holders around unaccompanied tourists. Unfortunately, we by-passed many of the tantalising side passages, though given our usual navigational skills we would have got lost in no time. In the middle of the souk we were taken to a carpet factory where they tried to cajole us into buying delightful, but pricey, hand-woven rugs. A few people did buy - just as well perhaps so that our guide did not abandon us as he saw his sales commission vanish.

All too soon the tour ended back at the main square. We had a little while before the next event - a horse carriage drive to the Majorelle Gardens which Val and I had chosen rather than a Moroccan lunch - so we decided to absorb a little more of the souk atmosphere by ourselves. We made very sure that we kept firmly in touch with our known way out.

We were looking at some silverware from Berber villages in the Atlas Mountains, when I felt a tap on the shoulder. Thinking the stall-holder had crept up behind me, I turned round with a scowl, which I tried to turn into a smile when I recognised two of our party from the 'plane. In fact they were the couple whom we had been cursing since they boarded late causing the 'plane to miss its take-off slot, thus losing us a precious half-hour in Marrakesh. And all because they could not resist the duty-free shop. Again, they were laden down with goods; clearly compulsive shoppers.

'Hello,' gasped the man, red-faced and breathless. 'I thought I recognised you from the 'plane. Look, we're hopelessly lost and we'll miss that lunch if we're not sloppy. Any ideal of the way out of this madhouse on to the square?'

Val went to reply, but I butted in, 'Yes, it's quite easy. I've got a map here,' I said, taking it out of my pocket and studying it. 'You just go up there, take the second alley on the right, then first left and straight on. OK?'

'Great! Thanks!' said the man, and the couple panted away.

'But that's completely the wrong way,' Val said. 'I didn't know you had a map anyway. Let me see it.'

I handed over the sheet of paper I had been doodling on the 'plane. She looked at it incredulously, then a grin spread over her face.

'You couldn't have done it to a more deserving pair,' she laughed.

CRIME CORNER

Geoff Parkes

This month, Crime Corner focuses entirely on the recent Fordingbridge rape cases and their aftermath. There were two separate events. To recap:

In November 2024, a fifteen-year-old girl was raped by two fourteen-year-old boys in a Fordingbridge underpass. The girl had met one of them online and had travelled to meet him. On her arrival, they were joined by a second boy, and both raped her.

In January 2025, another fourteen-year-old girl was threatened with a knife and forced to leave her mobile phone in a shop, so that her movements could not be traced. The two boys – the same two as in the November attack – were joined by a third boy aged thirteen. The first two took it in turns to rape the girl, while the others laughed and filmed the whole thing.

One boy has been found guilty of six counts of rape and been sentenced to a three-year youth rehabilitation order.

The second has been found guilty of two counts of rape and been sentenced to a three-year youth rehabilitation order.

The third has been found guilty of two counts of rape and been sentenced to an 18-month youth rehabilitation order.

The leniency of these sentences has sparked widespread outrage – I have not spoken to anybody who thinks the sentences are appropriate – and it is unsurprising that the Attorney General has referred the case to the Court of Appeal.

Let's take a closer look. Is it the judge's fault that such ludicrously lenient sentences have been handed down? Well, yes and no.

No, because he has stuck – almost slavishly – to the wording in the Sentencing Council's paper *Sentencing Children and Young People*, produced in 2017. This document places great emphasis on the importance of "not criminalising children and young people unnecessarily." These words were reproduced almost verbatim in the judge's sentencing remarks. It's a pity they didn't pay closer attention to the wording. You might hope to *reform* a criminal, but you can't decriminalise a criminal or a criminal act. A criminal is someone who has committed a criminal act, irrespective of his/her age. All three boys have been found guilty of rape and they are therefore all, by definition, criminals.

Yes, because, despite the skewed viewpoint of the guidelines, they do leave room for flexibility in their interpretation. For serious cases, the judge always has the option of handing down a custodial sentence, especially if there are no mitigating circumstances. We have heard of no mitigating circumstances in this case apart from, perhaps, the defendants' age, and one expects thirteen and fourteen-year-olds to realise the seriousness of their actions. Oh, and the defence also played the ADHD card, which seems to have become the standard bulwark for protecting violent defendants. By contrast, the degree of planning, the recklessness, the threats with a knife, the cruelty, and the total lack of empathy add up to a significant list of aggravating factors, all of which would indicate a harsher sentence, not a more lenient one.

What is most striking, when one reads through the sentencing guidelines, is the almost total lack of consideration for the victim. The buzzword is *rehabilitation*: preventing an individual from committing the same act again and reintegrating him in society. The punishment element is largely ignored. This attitude is disgraceful and utterly indefensible. The girls involved have been traumatised and probably had their whole lives ruined. The girl in the first case said in court, "All I want to do is die." An element of rehabilitation can always be built into a custodial sentence, but for crimes of this magnitude, anything short of a custodial sentence is manifestly unjust. Frankly, the sentence in this case makes a mockery of our legal system.

One other point: the retirement age for judges is now seventy five – raised in 2021 from seventy so that the system does not unnecessarily lose their experience. I could not find the age of the judge in any newspaper reports, but whatever his age, one has to ask (a) whether he is seriously out of touch with modern public thinking, and (b) whether the raising of that retirement age was ill advised.

The hope now is that the Appeals Court will rectify what can only be classified as a tragic, avoidable mistake.

THE SOCIETY OF CIVIL & PUBLIC SERVICE WRITERS

Formerly *The Society of Civil Service Writers*, the Society was founded in 1935 to encourage authorship by present and past members of the Civil Service and other public bodies, and to provide opportunities for social and cultural activities related to literature.

Our quarterly magazine, *The SCPSW Author* welcomes contributions from members. Short stories, articles, reviews, poetry, illustrations, letters to the editor, and photographs may be included. Please email contributions to the editor. If you don't use emails, you could send a typed entry by post.

Contributions to *Author* should be limited to between 300 and 1600 words. Longer pieces will also be considered as exceptions. The author of the contribution will be the copyright holder, and will continue to hold the copyright after publication.

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