

Up!

SEPTEMBER 2023
WRITING



Making the world a better
place - one page at a time

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Up Front!

Hey Up-pers!

Ever get the feeling your timing has gone awry? We know that last month was our Heroes edition, so that makes us a month out in telling you that we have one of our own heroes writing for the magazine this month. Introducing the one, the only, brilliant songwriter - Mr Jez Lowe (no relation to our very own Steve Lowe as far as we know!) - who has joined our team for this month only. Jez writes about a hero of his, Tommy Armstrong, the original Pitman Poet.

This is by far our biggest issue to date and we've loved chatting to all of our contributors. We hope you enjoy this bumper edition.

Grab yourself a cuppa and get comfy for the long read ahead!

Bridget & Harry x

Book Up!

BORDERLINE BOOKS

Up! speaks to Anna Kenolty, book fairy extraordinaire

Tell us a bit about the work of Borderline Books and how it got started ...

Borderline was set up by Amina Marix Evans in 2016, when she saw unwanted books being thrown into a skip. Our aim is to save books that would otherwise be thrown away or destroyed, and give them to people who don't have access to books through bookshops or libraries. That first year Amina gave away about 100 books; so far in 2023 we've given away just over 15,000. Around 10,000 of those have gone to local organisations like schools, hospices, foodbanks, shelters and refugee charities. The other 5,000 have gone to prisons, which is the part of the project I work on. Prisoners anywhere in the UK can write to us and request books, and this week we hit the lovely double milestone of having heard from 1000 prisoners in 100 prisons so far this year. In 2017 we were fulfilling about a dozen requests each month, now it's 150 a month. (Sorry about all the numbers, my other job is teaching maths!).



We know books alone can't fix systemic issues (although literacy should certainly be part of the conversation), but a lot of what we do is just about making a human connection, showing people that they haven't been forgotten about or given up on.

Tell us about some of the more interesting or satisfying requests you've been able to help with.

I love fulfilling any request that starts "I know this is a long shot, but...". Some good ones recently have been a Portuguese Bible, a fifth edition D&D (*Dungeons & Dragons*) rulebook, and sheet music for ballroom dance tunes on the organ. Sometimes it's the response that makes it special, like when someone asked for a copy of *Kes*, then told us in his thank-you letter that it was based in the village where he grew up, and reading it made him feel closer to home.

Sometimes people who are studying will ask us for resources as they go through the course, and let us know how they're doing in their

Book Up!

BORDERLINE BOOKS

modules each year - as someone currently doing an OU distance learning course, I can't imagine completing it with no access to online resources or teaching, so I'm really glad we can help a little there.

Do you have repeat or regular customers or are there many one-offs?

A real mixture - some people write every month or so, but the majority of people only ask once. Certain topics of book come in and straight away we know who we'll be sending them to. We also have links with a few prisoner-run wing libraries, so we'll send them regular deliveries, then they can rotate their older stock into the main prison library.

What kind of books do you tend to always need?

One of the biggest surprises for me when I started here was that our most commonly requested book is the dictionary. But really it makes sense - with no access to internet or smartphones, dictionaries are suddenly vital again, especially for studying or writing letters. A recent thank-you letter started "Thank you so much for the books. I have already put the

dictionary to good use writing to my sister - I haven't done that in a long time." We're always looking for books on business, mental health/self help, fitness, maths, art... 'keeping busy' type books. Comics and complete fantasy series are much prized. And on the non-prison side of things, junior fiction and YA (Young Adult) goes out much faster than it comes in.



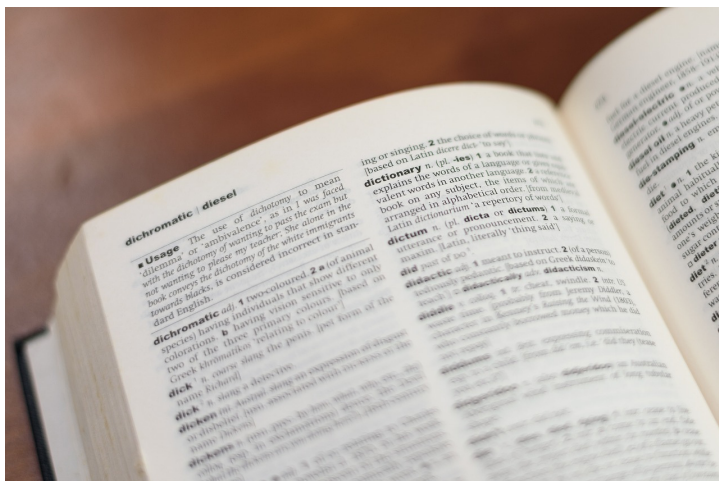
Do you accept any genre of book?

We do indeed! The things we would probably struggle to ever give away/use are outdated copies of time-sensitive books like a 1997 guide to French campsites etc. But a lot of things that people are hesitant to bring turn out to be absolutely great!

If any Up! readers can help, how do they get in touch?

If you enjoy sorting books, we are desperate for more volunteers to get books on shelves and organised, and of course we always welcome donations of books at our warehouse in Pelaw. Our opening times vary because we're a tiny team of part timers, so email me on prisons@borderlinebooks.org to arrange a visit. This also applies if you work for or know of a community group or organisation that could benefit from free books!

And with that she's away, to drop a few more books down a few more chimneys ...



Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WRITING

This poem is a Flipping Nuisance

It reminds me of my father
when mum called out, Dinner's ready.
Pause... count to three, Where's Daddy?
He'd slunk off to wash his hair, have a nap.

An idea sparks and I think Yes !
Then it vanishes, like a smart phone.
Back of sofa, kitchen cupboard, under car seats.
No matter how I wait, or attend workshops
with daily prompts- it's gone
bloody AWOL.

I'll ignore it, pretend not to care.
Watch telly, play solitaire,
and pray that one day
I'll remember where I left it.

Rachael Clyne

Apostrophe

Cantankerous motif
of correctly written English,
you are so difficult, so awkward.
moodily inserting yourself
between a word and an 's'
like an elbow sticking through a hole
in a sleeve.

Gill McEvoy

The Running Away Fund

I wrote you a cinquain upon a beermat;
carefully measured syllables
of love and trust and absolute honesty.

You laughed and called it scribblings .
Wasn't I a clever girl? A little one trick pony
trotting obediently behind you.

I never wrote another thing
for you. I saved my words in secret
in the places you never looked.

A haiku, tucked behind the clock.
Some short stories, in that old Post Office account.
The scattered crumbs of sonnets

at the bottom of the biscuit tin.
When I had enough scraped together,
I took all the words you never heard

and wove myself an escape ladder.

Penny Blackburn

Sing for Me

Sing for me, little words.
Somehow, you must find a way
to hold, in frail curves of black on white
the sweep and colour of this life,
play back, for those who cannot hear,
the orchestra of love and death;
to make real half-imagined worlds,
reach out across infinite space
and capture, like a camera lens
a single moment for all time.

Tim E Taylor

Sing Up!

JEZ LOWE

One north-eastern folk legend writes about another: the original Pitman Poet, Tommy Armstrong

I'm an East Durham lad myself, born within sight of the grey North Sea and brought up being lulled to sleep by the sounds and smells of a coal mining community that dug deep-down and then out under that seabed for a living. My mother's family had made their way from County Tyrone to settle here, bringing their Irish parlour ballads and travellers' songs with them, whereas my father's folks had started life in the west of County Durham, working in the pits around Grange Villa, Tanfield and Sacriston.

Those old Irish songs undoubtedly had a big influence on my life and subsequent career, but my dad also had a song or two up his sleeve when the mood took him, learned at his own father's knee, songs with bizarre titles like "The Cat Pie", "Wor Nanna's a Maizor" and "The Sheel Raw Flood". He had no idea of the origins of these songs, other than they had been common currency when he was a boy, and it wasn't until I



Photo: the Tommy Armstrong Society website

myself became besotted by the so-called folk songs and music of North East England that I was able to tell him that they had likely been written on his own boyhood doorstep by a much-celebrated "Pitman Poet" and "Balladeer of the Coalfields" called Tommy Armstrong.



Armstrong was born in 1849 in Shotley Bridge, County Durham, and seemingly he remembered enough about that occasion to write about it in one of his most famous compositions, "The Birth of The Lad" a few years later. Indeed, he never seemed short of inspiration for his songs and poems and was known as a ballad-maker from a young age when, despite life-long infirmity due to his crippled legs, he was working as a trap-lad and later as a pony boy in pits around the Stanley area. His reputation both as a writer and as a performer quickly grew, enhanced by printed copies of his songs that he sold around the local pubs at a penny each to supplement his beer money. He was a prodigious drinker by all accounts and also found time to father fourteen children, yet all the while turning out a wealth of songs and verses that vividly captured the flavour of the time, with its poverty, frivolity and solidarity.

Many of Tommy's songs are comic in tone, and while much of the humour might be lost on modern audiences, they still vividly reflect the absurdities of life in a working-class community with all the pit-falls, pleasures and pretensions that can still be seen today, despite their being wrapped up in twenty-first century tinsel.

Armstrong's songs were written to be performed in pre-jukebox pubs with music-hall atmospheres and an eager public, and it's easy to imagine the impact they must have had when

Sing Up!

JEZ LOWE

sung by the man himself, tiny in stature, vivid in language and insolent in attitude. He was a wordsmith rather than a tunesmith, and his songs were invariably set to pre-existing melodies that would have been familiar to his listeners, giving them an instant attraction and adding to their wit and cheekiness. Thus the well-known tune “Nae gud luck about me hoose” is transformed into the (possibly) autobiographical “Nae gud luck in Durham Gaol”, complete with an audaciously smutty last verse that must have had people helpless with laughter whenever he performed it.



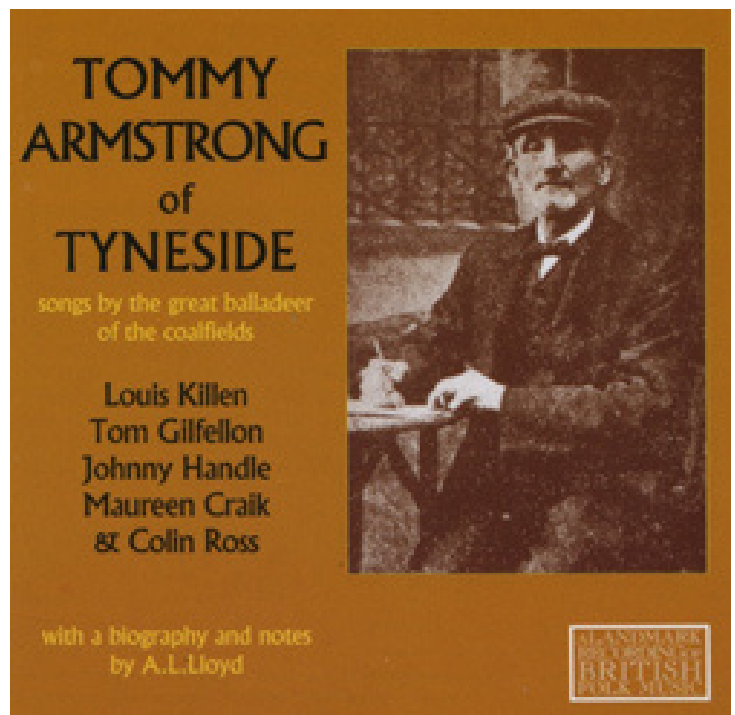
Picture showing Tommy seated c. 1912 outside the Oak Tree Inn, Tantobie.
Photo: [The Tommy Robinson Society](#).

But the other side of Armstrong’s coin is just as well-known. His reaction in verse to tragedy and injustice spawned an impressive roster of songs that have arguably stood the test of time even better than the lighter material. His 1882 ballad “The Trimdon Grange Explosion”

has proved to be one of his most enduring efforts, with cover-versions constantly cropping up by artists across many genres and generations. The sardonic tones of songs like “The Oakey Strike Evictions” and “The South Medomsley Strike” barely conceal the anger and wrath that must have swept across the region in the face of the injustices being hurled at working-class communities by avaricious mine owners bloated by

their own self-entitlement and greed. The way these songs echo across the decades and resound through our own times is both impressive and depressing.

Tommy Armstrong died in 1919, and the sound of his voice and the impact of his performances died with him, but interest in his legacy has hardly waned. Some of his songs easily drifted into the local oral tradition, one that my father unwittingly was part of. Later they became prized and valued in the much-admired Tyneside folk-song tradition, where they are still cherished, but as living, singable entities rather than museum pieces.



A 1965 album on Topic Records called “Tommy Armstrong of Tyneside”, and featuring fourteen of his best-known compositions is still available on CD and features renditions by Tom Gilfellow, Louisa Killen, Johnny Handle, Colin Ross and Maureen Craik. More recently, the much-admired singer and raconteur Benny Graham, who comes from the same streets of Stanley and Shotley where Tommy himself spent most of his life, has delved deep into the great man’s repertoire and background, and his performances of Armstrong’s songs are not easily surpassed. Benny and myself

Sing Up!

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are part of the quartet known as The Pitmen Poets, alongside Billy Mitchell and Bob Fox, and I have watched and listened in awe as he has delighted audiences all over the UK, most of whom have probably never heard of Armstrong, the “bandy-legged songster from Shotley”, before walking into that theatre, with his timeless delivery of songs like “Stanley Market” and “Wor Nanna’s a Maizor”. It’s an impressive testament to Tommy Armstrong’s skills that such a thing inevitably happens.

My own debt as a songwriter to Tommy Armstrong is something I can’t overstate, due in part to my regional as well as musical influences, but I also see his spectre and his sneer lurking in writers from other locations and musical fields, people like Billy Bragg, Grace Petrie, Steve Earle

and even local lad Sam Fender.

Surely Tommy’s physical disabilities, as well as his combative nature as both a writer and an individual, vividly brings to mind the persona of Ian Dury, whose use of his own local slang and dialect proved to be no hurdle in his journey to worldwide acclaim.

Yes, can’t you just imagine Tommy, a cap on his head, his walking stick twirling in one hand and a bottle in the other, on mainstage at Glastonbury backed by a raucous band of Geordie musos and leading a ten thousand strong crowd of delirious voices in a deafening chorus!

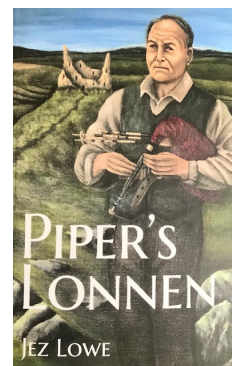
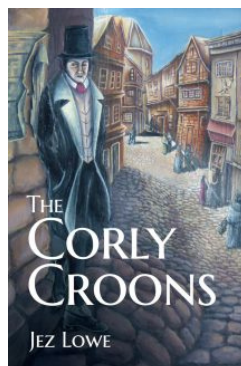
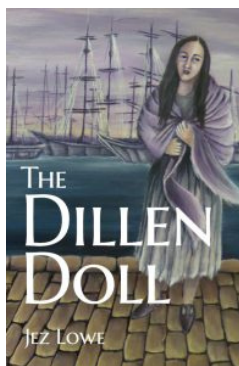
“What would Ah dee,” they’d be singing, “if Ah had the power mesel’? Ah’d hang the twenty candymen and Johnny whe carries the bell!”

Well, that’ll never happen, but his songs are there waiting to be discovered and sung, so you never know, one of them might make it to mainstage one day. I for one would not be surprised.

A double nomination in the 2015 BBC Folk Awards – for best singer and best new song – was a timely reminder of Jez Lowe’s standing in the UK folk and acoustic music scene, after four decades of performing, writing and recording, during which his songs of Northern England have reached audiences all around the globe.

His Latest album, “Crazy Pagan” (2021) was described in the UK’s Daily Telegraph as “Another triumph for one of the UK’s foremost songwriters and troubadours”, and a five CD box-set of his 1980s and 1990s albums has now been released. Jez also published his third novel, “Piper’s Lonnen” in 2022 and a new solo album is being readied for release in 2024.

www.jezlowe.com



Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WRITING

Let Me Write That Down

“Let me write that down.”
Her pencil scrawls a dozen words.
Another line is added to the notes
of what she had to eat,
of who came round, who rang,
and what they said.
They are not like shopping lists,
appointments – written down
to guide the reader, map-pins
for a future date and time.
These words are for the moment –
once written, they become the past.

But don't suppose they do not matter.
She guards those notebooks,
clutches them in arthritic fingers
to the end. When other words
have been forgotten,
or filed away in cobwebbed
storerooms of the brain
those trembling lines
will be the stuff of her;
not just the record
but the breath and heartbeat
of a living human mind.

Tim E Taylor

A Wartime Log

A wartime log of khaki green
clawed red lion, a soldier within
chalked prison number, his thinnest face
black and white photo, lucid grace
from camps of war, where life was lean.

In tiny italics, prison routines
numbered remembrances of battle scenes
contents of parcels opened in haste
a wartime log.

The last page fanfare, men are freed -
'The Yanks are here, they come in Jeeps!'
My father's return to this tranquil place
his closing episode can still be traced
in a stranger's autograph, a sign of peace
a wartime log.

Rosalie Alston

Next month's theme is: **TREASURE**

Feel free to interpret the theme as you see fit
and send up to 3 poems to:
admin@positivelyup.co.uk

Full submission details can be found on our
website: [https://positivelyup.co.uk/poetry-
submissions](https://positivelyup.co.uk/poetry-submissions)

Write Up!

J A BAKER

Up! meets a best-selling author with a penchant for the darker side of human nature

You're such a prolific author (with 16 books published to date!), where on earth do you get all your ideas from?

Good question! I'm a magpie and use a bit of everything. If I read about an interesting or bizarre scenario in a newspaper or online, I'll store in it my head along with excerpts from films. I also use dreams quite regularly. I have always had vivid and inexplicably weird dreams, many of them nightmares, which I can now put to good use in my books.

We live by the River Tees, next to a large area of woodland, and that has provided me with a fair amount of inspiration over the years. My first book, *Undercurrent*, which has now been renamed *The Girl in the Water* by my new publishers, was inspired by the walkway and the river that runs at the back of our house – picturesque by daytime but isolated and eerie once the sun sets and the darkness begins to creep in.



When it comes to writing your novels are you a plotter or a pantster (as in 'fly by the seat of your pants')?

I think I'm a bit of both. I need to have a good strong theme in mind before I set off writing but quite often whilst writing, other ideas will sneak in which are too good to leave out. This often means going back and rewriting many parts of the book which can sometimes prove to be both tricky and time consuming, but if it's a strong enough tangent that has me wildly wandering off course, then it's definitely worth it.

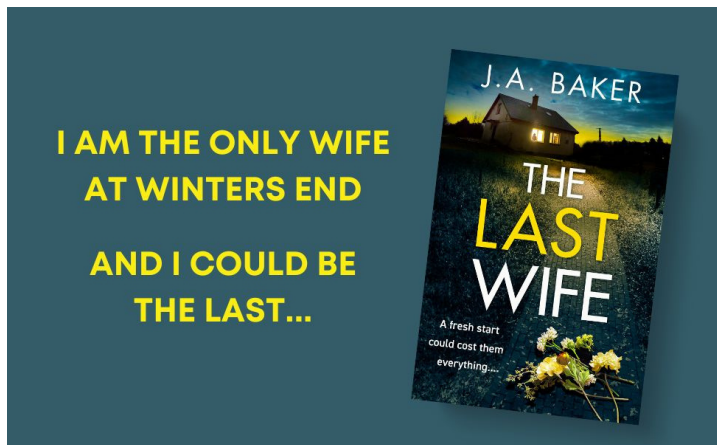
Do you have a disciplined daily writing routine?

I used to be highly disciplined but lately with many lifestyle changes, I've become fairly lax about it. Most of my books were written when I worked full time so I had to put all my efforts into writing on an evening which proved exhausting. I then reduced my hours in the school where I worked which meant I had two full days I could dedicate to writing. Then my grandchildren came along and I started babysitting two days a week. The babysitting plus working in a school and writing all became too much so I took the leap and retired from the school which has made life a lot easier.

Write Up!

J A BAKER

I recently signed a new four book contract with my publisher and rather than have just four months to write a book (I know!) I now have nine months. I'd love to say that I'm up by 8am and sitting at my laptop, tapping away and not looking up until after lunchtime but I'm afraid that isn't how it works for me. I fit my writing in around my lifestyle, which is a busy one - we have four children and three grandchildren, plus a dog. There are days when I will write solidly for five or six hours then other days when I barely have time to open my laptop.



How important is having a social media presence for authors nowadays?

I personally think it's essential, especially for lesser-known writers like me who are signed up to smaller digital first publishers. Many publishers, especially the independent ones, encourage authors to promote themselves on social media. It's not something I'm particularly comfortable with but it's getting easier with each consecutive book that I have published. I, like many other authors and artists in the creative industry, suffer from imposter syndrome, but being part of many online book clubs has boosted my confidence, and



also given me the chance to make many friends and meet some wonderful like-minded people.

There are many online forums on social media where self-promotions are encouraged and sales can benefit tremendously from these. Publishers and readers really like authors who are able to share and promote their own brand. LJ Ross is a self-published author who has successfully done this, selling millions of books. She is also very active on social media and does what she does brilliantly, while the rest of us look on in awe!

Whose books do you turn to when you're not writing?

Ooh, that's a tricky one! I don't have a favourite author but am swayed by a good mystery and a certain style of writing. One of my favourite books is one that very few people know - *Tideline* by Penny Hancock - and this is the one that set me on the road to writing a full novel and being published. I shamelessly emulated the style and theme and it all went from there. I really like Sabine Durrant and last year read *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier which blew me away. I understood why it is a classic and held in such high esteem. There are so many brilliant writers out there and too many to name as my favourite!

If you'd like to take a look at any of J A Baker's books, you can find her here:

**Facebook at - [facebook.com/thewriterjude](https://www.facebook.com/thewriterjude) and
Amazon at - <https://www.amazon.co.uk/J-A-Baker/e/B06XSNWB4T/>**

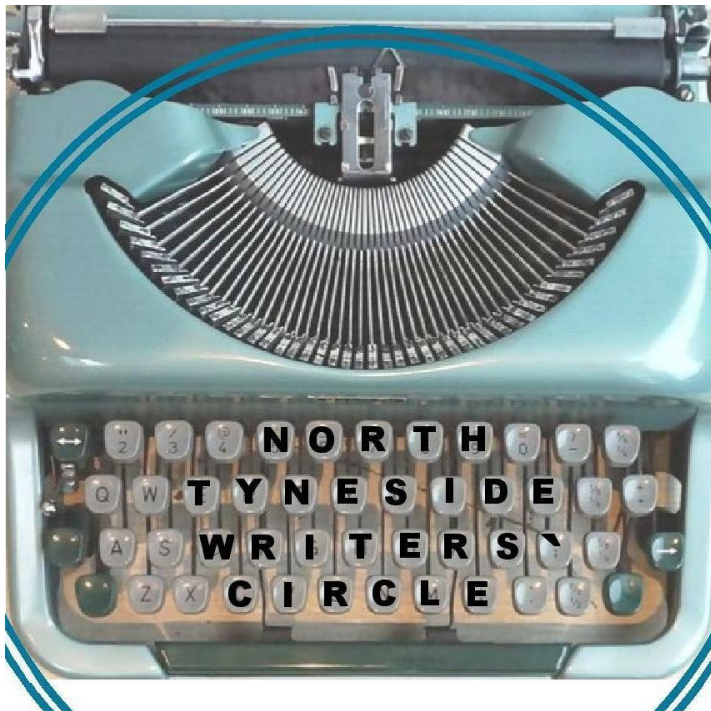
Meeting Up!

JENNIFER C WILSON

Regular Up! columnist on her monthly writing fix

This month, for Up!, I've got my other hat on, as host of North Tyneside Writers' Circle. However, there'll still be a reference to the sea later, don't worry.

Since January 2016, I've been a host of NTWC, having co-founded the group following a one-off event during 2015's Age Takes Centre Stage. We meet on the third Saturday of every month other than December in North Shields Library, 10.00-12.00, and honestly, it's my favourite weekend of the month.



Writing can be a lonely activity, whether it's a full-time profession, a hobby, or anything in between, and when I asked recently what Circle members wanted from our meetings, getting together with other writers was given as one of the top answers. So that's what we do. Over two hours, we write to prompts and share news, yes,



but there's as much emphasis on the social side. This can be sharing details of events we're running or performing at, or heading to the pub once Circle is officially over. Here, the news-sharing continues, along with more detailed

discussions on what we're writing. Many plot-holes and character motivations have been resolved over a cup of tea or a glass of wine!

As host, there's always a moment of panic when I set a prompt, to see whether people actually put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboards), but when I do see writing start to happen, it's a great feeling. We always give members the chance to share their work for any immediate thoughts / feedback (although there's no pressure on anyone to do so) and listening to what people can produce in just 15-20 minutes of writing time is fabulous. I'm so often blown away by the variety of things people produce in such a brief period, and from the same prompt too. It really does demonstrate the range of writers we have in the room.

It's not just that though. As I mentioned earlier, we share news of events we're either hosting or reading at, and whether as headliners or open-mic participants, a large number of Circle members regularly get up in front of audiences and perform their work. There's nothing quite like the feeling of sitting in an audience and hearing a piece of work being performed that started as a prompt that I set, and hearing how the writer developed it from the initial germ of an idea which came about on a Saturday morning in North Shields Library. I regularly get quite

Meeting Up!

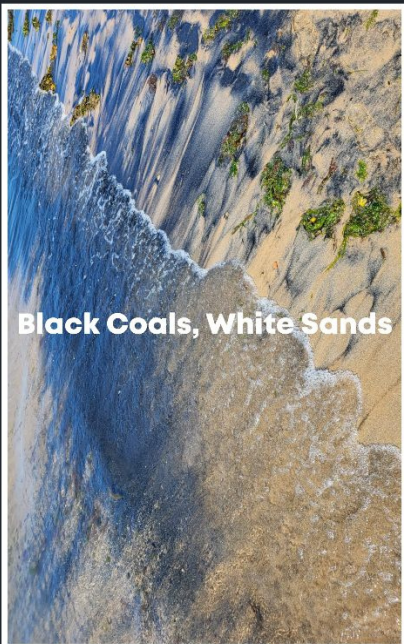
JENNIFER C WILSON

‘mother hen’ about it, feeling so proud that ‘my’ prompts resulted in such wonderful pieces. If only I was on commission!

As a side-effect of running NTWC, I’ve also made some fantastic friends. I often joke that if it weren’t for writers, I wouldn’t have a social life, but it’s not far from the truth. Because what started as discussions of prompts and works-in-progress soon became chats about our wider lives, and I’ve genuinely met some of my favourite people on the planet in that room. And that’s before the fizz starts flowing ... Also – all those events I mentioned, which get shared during the ‘shameless plugs’ section? We seem to have one happening at least every fortnight, keeping us nice and busy, and more importantly, in touch with other writers.

This year, we’ve also pushed ourselves into a new

challenge. In October 2023, North Tyneside Writers’ Circle will be publishing its first anthology: “*White Sands, Black Coals.*” We tried previously, towards the end of 2019, but then thanks to ‘events’ of 2020, that sadly stalled, until we restarted the scheme back in



North Tyneside Writers' Circle Anthology 2023

January 2023. Bringing together poetry and prose, across a wide range of interpretations of the theme, I’m so pleased with how it’s all coming together. As a bit of treat, we’re giving you the first view outside of the small editing committee, of our cover art! We hope you like it...



We’re having our official launch on the 26th of October, in our regular ‘home’ of North Shields Library, and we’d love to see you there. Tickets will be available soon, via the library.

If you’re interested in joining our little group, we’re always open to new members, with no need to book or even contact us in advance (although if you do have any queries, you can find the group on Facebook, or me on Twitter (X?) as @inkjunkie1984.

More than anything, our focus is on keeping writing spirits high, keeping inspiration and ink flowing, and have a flipping good time on a Saturday morning.

As well as being a full-time marine biologist, Jennifer also writes historical fiction.

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/jennifercwilsonwriter/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/inkjunkie1984/>

Blog:

<https://jennifercwilsonwriter.wordpress.com/>

Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WRITING

Writing Poetry

'That's a beautiful poem', she said.
'Where were you sitting when you wrote it?
I would imagine you by a river
with the water babbling by
and the birds singing'
I had to tell her, 'no',
that I was sitting by my computer.
That that is where I always write.
No pencil or pen for me
with my endless edits
and illegible handwriting.
Except when an idea occurs on a sleepless night.
Then it's off to the bathroom to catch it
and hold it fast.
The bathroom,
where there's a supply of tissue
that will do the job
and a pencil
kept specially for the purpose.

Lynn White



I Write

I write because I don't want to forget
how foreign I felt at school lunchtime
eating my tomato dipped in sugar
instead of salt, perhaps a Polish tradition.
I write to make sense of thoughts, feelings,
desires, assumptions - everything that
my brain experiences.
I write to capture moments from my childhood
and also the daily mundane minutiae.
I write because it sates me, removes my hunger,
coats my tongue with lyrical speech.

I write because I need to understand
others and their actions.
I write to open my eyes to situations I thought
had no depth, but they did.
I write because I will lose time with idleness,
waste an afternoon that I could have
made good use of.
I write because a blank page to me is like
a red cape to a bull.
I write because I believe the wonderful
authors who tell me I should.
I write because it expands my walls,
my world, my vision, my mind.
I write because my imagination
needs freedom, someplace to graze,
wander in the pasture.

I write because I get to implement
my decisions in cursive and then type
them to give them permanence.
I write because I like the surprise
of reading words I did not know
I was going to say.
I write because it's the kind of
busy I want to be.
I write because my hand automatically
reaches for a pen when it is idle.

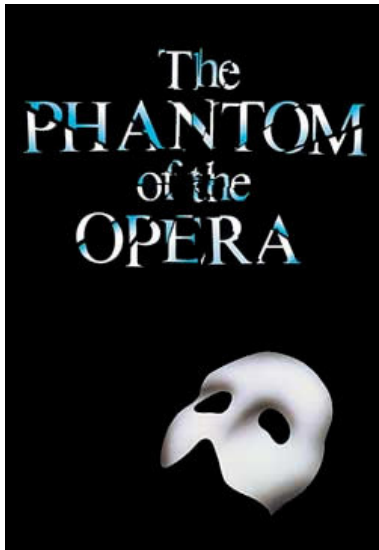
Evie Groch

Don't Give Up!

JENNA WARREN

Everyone has at least one book in them. Just ask Up!'s regular book reviewer-cum-debut novelist

The idea for my novel started with a silly YouTube video. It was created by the cast and crew of *The Phantom of the Opera* musical, as part of an event called West End Eurovision. In a pitch-perfect parody of *The X-Factor*, an actor in character as the Phantom auditions for a place in a singing contest, fails to get through, and throws a magnificent tantrum before jumping on a bus.



I should probably rewind a little at this point and say that I absolutely love *The Phantom of the Opera*. The first writing I shared with total strangers was *Phantom of the Opera* fanfiction via the internet. The fanfiction community was a supportive one

and it encouraged me to take my writing more seriously. At university, I tried my hand at original fiction, studied for an MA in Creative Writing, and started several still-unfinished novels.

A few years after graduating, I went to a series of workshops with Writers' Block, a development service for writers based in Middlesbrough. One of the exercises had us pulling slips of paper out of a hat. The slips had different genres and location written on them, and my combination



was 'coffee shop' and 'musical'. While the coffee shop didn't really grab me, I loved the idea of writing a novel inspired by musical theatre.

That's when I started thinking about the YouTube video. Could I write a modern-day Phantom-inspired story, set in the music industry? I created my main character, a trained tenor called Eric (after the Phantom). In the early drafts, he is invited to provide the vocals for a handsome, charismatic performer who mimes to his voice. Eric soon falls in love with his duet partner, Angela, who doesn't realise Eric is the person singing (think a musical *Cyrano de Bergerac*).

I showed the first few pages to a literary agent who I met through Writers' Block. She liked the main character and the concept, so I decided to persevere.

Unfortunately, I couldn't make it work. The characters felt flat, and the story contrived. I spent an awful lot of time trying to work out how Eric could possibly keep his vocals secret from Angela. I tried to write it in several different

Don't Give Up!

JENNA WARREN

genres, starting with rom-com and then veering towards modern Gothic psychological thriller, then back to romance again. Should I add a ghost? What should I do?!

This was around 2014. I stopped writing for a while and focused on opening my bookshop. But the story wouldn't leave me alone, and once the shop was up and running, I returned to it.



Fortunately, a bit of distance helped me realise why I was struggling. The plot had become fixed in my mind, and I was trying to force my characters to fit into it, rather than letting them behave naturally and take the lead.

At this point, I had to ask myself what I was actually writing about. Although he's treated very badly, I realised my main character's struggles were largely internal. He suffers from low self-esteem, anxiety, and is absolutely convinced that he's ugly. When I let him take the lead, I realised this was due to a combination of teenage bullying, social isolation, and a traumatic experience during an audition when he was a student. I also realised that Angela should be aware of the deception with Eric's singing

voice, which made her a more interesting character.

A member of my writing group kindly read the latest draft (we swapped manuscripts). Her feedback was very helpful, and I redrafted the novel again. I changed the protagonist's name to Matthew, because when he was Eric I was still vaguely picturing the Phantom, and a new name helped me make him his own character.

I also introduced a new positive influence in his life: Lucy, his next-door neighbour, who just happens to be in the indie rock band that Matthew is coaxed into joining (and yes, you probably know where this is going...). From that point, it turned into a story about a character learning who he really was.

There was still something missing. In the early drafts, Matthew was going through a period of unemployment before he got the call from the record label. He seemed a little bit unmoored from his surroundings, so I decided to give him a job. I created the fictional Moon and Stars Theatre, which I found tremendous fun, and made Matthew the general manager. Despite being essentially good-hearted, he's pretty bad at customer service, which gave me the chance to write more humour. It also gave him a place to sing, alone and unobserved, when the theatre was dark and empty.



At this point, I thought the novel was ready (spoiler alert: it wasn't), so I decided to send it to some literary agents. I had no reply from most, but the agent I'd met at Writers' Block still liked it. But it turned out she didn't represent my genre anymore, so she passed it

Don't Give Up!

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to one of her colleagues at the same agency, who unfortunately wasn't so keen.

I shelved it for a while and started to work on something else.

Then the pandemic hit. Suddenly, I couldn't open my bookshop and had to fulfil orders from home. I decided to take advantage of the additional time I had to write, and asked Carmen Marcus, a local published author, to write a manuscript assessment for me.

Carmen was brilliant. She gave me in-depth feedback about every aspect of my novel. I redrafted it twice with her help, and I think it became a much stronger novel as a result.

At this point, I knew I'd done all I could, so I decided to bypass agents and send it to some independent publishers who were accepting novels directly from writers. I sent it to around six. I received no reply from four. One of the others said they liked it but thought it read more like a Young Adult novel.

I think all writers have a really big moment of self-doubt with every project, and this was mine. The publisher had been kind and considerate with their feedback, but this was the point when I seriously considered giving up. Fortunately, I'm a member of two lovely writing groups who cheered me on and reminded me that this was only one publisher's opinion.

I decided to send it to one more place.

Fairlight Books are an independent literary fiction publisher. I didn't see my novel as particularly literary, but I knew they'd published several novels based around music and the arts. I sent the first three chapters to them, and almost fell off my chair when they asked for the full manuscript a couple of months later. And I almost fell off my chair a second time when they asked to meet me via Zoom and offered me a publishing deal.

Working with an indie publisher was absolutely lovely. I feel very lucky in this respect. Fairlight seemed to really understand what I was trying to do, gave me sympathetic editorial suggestions, and commissioned a beautiful cover from illustrator Laura Barrett.

The Moon and Stars was published in October 2022, around ten years after I'd had the initial idea. It came out in paperback and ebook, and there's also an audiobook version published by Saga Egmont and read by voice actor Matthew Biddulph (He's amazing. I'm honestly in awe of voice actors).

I'm now in that weird place where I can officially call myself a published author. I thought this would help to clarify what I should write next, but it hasn't. Not really. I'm coming to the conclusion that every book is different. I just hope the next one won't take ten years...

The Moon and Stars is published by Fairlight Books. It's available to order from independent bookshops, Waterstones, bookshop.org, and Amazon.

You can also order a signed copy from the author here:

<https://bookcornershop.co.uk/product/9781914148217/>

Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WRITING

The Art of Looking

Sometimes, when I read a poem, I don't understand.
Must be for someone cleverer than me, I think,
Someone who understands this stuff.

Sometimes, when I look at a painting, I don't understand.
Must be for someone cleverer than me, I think,
Someone who understands this stuff.

But swinging into the Manchester Art Gallery
I am invited to sit, to settle into sofas,
To just look.
No questions asked.

Perhaps we should hang poems in frames
Not publish them in books.

Sometimes, when I try to write a poem, I don't
understand.

But that's OK: it's only stuff.

Sarah Russell

Galahad's Rite

If you're saying a poem
you need your words to be clear,
But if you are re-siting it
onto a page, you can play.
You can write wrongs,
diphthongs, strong enough
to stay anchored on the paper.

To right a poem, one that's
gone awry, try citing
another poet, noting the
warp and weave of the metaphors
foretold, four-fold, moulded to
the shape of a
smile, like a simile that's
lost an eye.

If you're reeding a poem
on your clarinet,
create a cleriheuw, whose
clarity is obtuse, an
excuse to air the silliness.
Then, still a mess, you can
end on a skirling chord,
a swirling cord with witch
(always have one handy)
to wrap the words up tight.
Good knight.

Gerda Pickin

Next month's theme is: TREASURE

Feel free to interpret the theme as you see fit
and send up to 3 poems to:
admin@positivelyup.co.uk

Full submission details can be found on our
website: [https://positivelyup.co.uk/poetry-
submissions](https://positivelyup.co.uk/poetry-submissions)

Join Up!

WHITLEY BAY POETRY TRAIL

Up! talks to community activist Sue Miller about the unifying power of poetry

What exactly is a Poetry Trail and where did the idea come from?

A trail is a series of markers left, usually on purpose, for someone to follow. The idea of those markers being poems was first tried in Whitley Bay in 2019. Locals were invited to write about what features of the town they loved. Poems were pinned up in shops and windows and some of our collective favourites gathered into an anthology. At a time when Whitley Bay was starting to enjoy a resurgence, the event fed into that collective emerging narrative recognising and celebrating what we

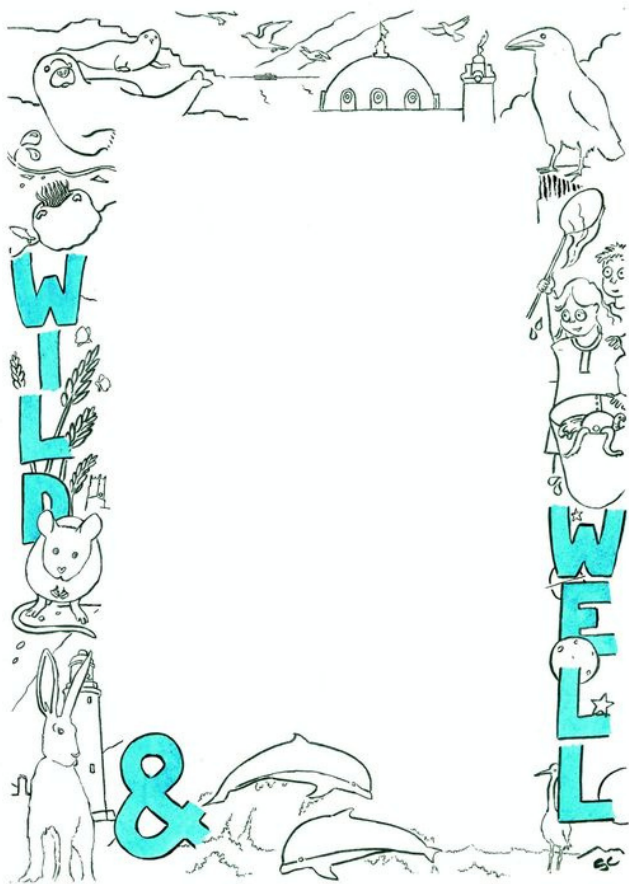


were lucky enough to have on our doorstep.

Covid put paid to a proposed follow up. But in July this year a few local enthusiasts decided it was time to give it another go. Five residents form the core team: Steve Lancaster, a talented poet, cartoonist and illustrator, designed a downloadable 'frame' for the poems and a beautiful Trail Map. Emerging writer, former teacher and home educator Jenny Smith produced materials and prompts to encourage people's creativity. Writer, artist and creative facilitator Mel Eaton contacted schools and helped run workshops. Writer and poet Siona Abrahams delivered Poems for a Pound at the Whitley Bay Fiesta in July to promote the idea, while I led on advertising and communications.

That all sounds great ...

Yes, the magic of community engagement comes when an idea speaks to people beyond an initial few, gathers momentum and starts to develop its own identity. Before we knew it we had over 800 poems from 18 schools and community groups, around 40 venues wanting to display poems or hold poetry events and organisations coming forward to help with in kind help and funding. The wish to express ourselves in poetry is



Join Up!

WHITLEY BAY POETRY TRAIL

definitely alive and well in Whitley Bay!

The Trail is housed in public spaces so it's open and accessible to anyone. Steve's Trail Maps will be given out at the Whitley Bay Fiesta on October 1st and the programme for that day, the theme for which is Express Yourself, will include readings of some of the poems. They will be on display in countless venues till October 10th and online. The poems are variously funny, touching, thought provoking and raw.

The trail is called Wild and Well. What was the thinking behind the title?

American writer Clarissa Pinkola Estes once wrote: *There's a reason poets often say: 'Poetry saved my life,' for often the blank page is the only one listening to the soul's suffering, the only one registering the story completely, the only one receiving all softly and without condemnation.*

We wanted to help normalise talking about feelings. Together the poems offer an insight into how 'Wild and Well' we are right now, act as a barometer for our individual and collective emotional climates and outline what we each do to build resilience.

The world has moved on since 2019 and we need to recognise the impact of lockdown and all the other pressures and anxieties with which many of us battle. Listening and talking matters, but not everyone is lucky enough to have a safe place to turn. We hope the Trail contributes in some small way in supporting each of us to ponder on the glue that holds us together as a community; helping to strengthen the fabric that wraps around us and keeps us safe.



You can follow Whitley Bay Poetry Trail on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100092989634699>



Poetry: the best words in the best order.
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Any healthy man can go without food for two days - but not without poetry.
Charles Baudelaire

Up! & Coming

BAY TALES

Meet Vic Watson, the co-founder of a criminally good writing festival

So, what's Bay Tales up to at the moment?

We're super busy preparing for next year's festival which is taking place at Whitley Bay Playhouse on Saturday, 2nd March 2024. It's an all-day event featuring some of the best and brightest crime writers.

Our business model is a little different from other festivals as we give publishers the opportunity to sponsor a one-hour slot and then feature their authors on a panel.



In 2024, we'll be hosting our patron, Ann Cleeves, in conversation with Emma Flint, author of the acclaimed *Little Deaths*. Our final slot sees Steph McGovern interviewing Val McDermid.

Throughout the day, we have panels featuring Gillian McAllister, Nicci French and Alice Feeney. We're also delighted to welcome back favourites from previous years - Vaseem Khan, CM Ewan and JD Whitelaw - as moderators.

For the full line-up, visit:

<https://baytales.com/baytaleslive2024/>



Ann Cleeves (Bay Tales Patron), with organisers Vic Watson and Simon Bewick

Our hope with Bay Tales is that we attract readers with some familiar names but introduce them to some debut or mid-list authors that they're not familiar with. Earlier this year it was great to see the audience response to Brian McGilloway who appeared with Ann Cleeves. By running fringe events - Noir at the Bar on Friday 1st March (at Crab & Waltzer), Northern Crime Syndicate (Crab & Waltzer on Saturday, 2nd March straight after the main event) and Red Hot Chilli Writers at Whitley Bay Library on the morning of Sunday, 3rd March - we are able to pack more writers onto the bill, ensuring diversity and giving readers the opportunity to hear writers from a range of backgrounds - from



unpublished to independently published and everything in between!

Our fringe events are currently free to ticket holders for the Playhouse event but they've been so popular that we are now operating a waiting list for all three!



We try to involve as many local businesses as possible and drive

Up! & Coming

BAY TALES

patrons to them to support the local economy. We also raise money for the RNLI and The Bay Foodbank on the day with collections and a raffle featuring money-can't-buy prizes.

We're fast gaining a reputation for being the "kindest" festival and the crime writing festival with "the biggest heart", which is so rewarding. We've seen that, since the pandemic when we ran virtual shows, people have been happy to come to our event alone because they have spoken online to people who'll be there on social media. We've even seen people saying online: 'if you're coming to Bay Tales alone, don't worry, you'll leave with plenty of like-minded friends. It's really heartening.

You can get in touch with us via Twitter - https://twitter.com/bay_tales - or email us at baytales20@gmail.com to order your tickets or if you have any questions.



It's a one-day event with three fringe events happening across the weekend but there are only two of us who run Bay Tales so, as you can imagine it's pretty full-on to arrange. Not to mention the fact that I'm due to have a baby in a few weeks so there's a lot of preparation happening to ensure that things are sorted before I have my wee "break"!

Why do you think that crime fiction is such a popular genre?

Personally, I think crime fiction gives people a chance to transgress without fear of repercussions. You can read about serial killers, people who snap, ordinary people who experience extraordinary things with no fear of retribution. I wouldn't go so far as to say it's wish fulfilment for people but I think there is something transgressive about crime fiction.

Alternatively, some people derive real pleasure from solving the mysteries posed in the novels. I'm not very good at solving "whodunnit" or "why-dunnit" but I know some people who get very upset if they've been outfoxed by the author!

Give us some of the most ingenious methods of committing murder you've come across.

Great question. I still love the Roald Dahl short story - *Lamb to the Slaughter* - where a woman bludgeons her husband to death with a leg of lamb then cooks it and feeds it to the detectives investigating the murder.

I think an ice pick is always a good one, too, the evidence can be easily discarded or melted.

Which is more important in crime fiction, plot or character?

They both have their place. I don't think a story can be strong with one but not the other. The really successful writers manage to balance the two seamlessly, just look at Ann Cleeves. All of

Up! & Coming

BAY TALES

her novels have what I consider to be the perfect trio of wonderfully realised characters, a perfectly executed plot with beautiful descriptions of the setting.

Which upcoming crime fiction authors should we be looking out for?

I love this question! As great as it is to work with renowned authors, my passion is shining a spotlight on up-and-comers. Robert Rutherford, a

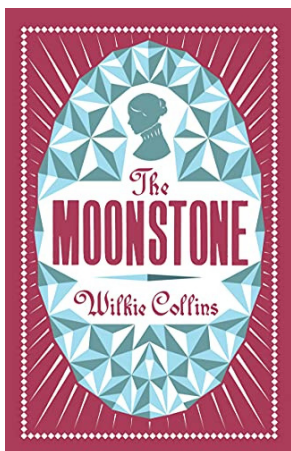
Whitley Bay resident, has *Seven Days* coming out with Hodder next April. It's a high concept thriller featuring Alice whose father is on Death Row - she has seven days to save him, but should she? It even features a scene outside Nine Streets Coffee in Monkseaton!

You'd Look Better as a Ghost by Joanna Wallace (published by Viper) is an outstanding debut. It's darkly funny, perfect for fans of *Dexter* and *Killing Eve*. It is rather gruesome at times due to the protagonist being a serial killer so it's not for the faint of heart.

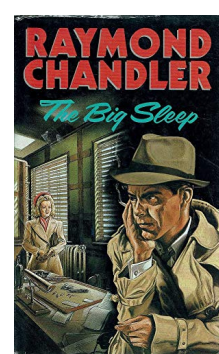
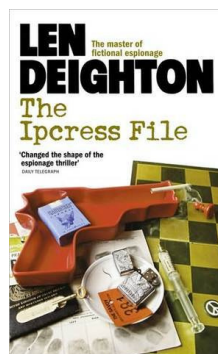
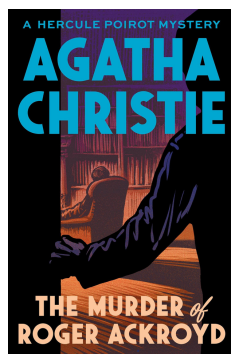
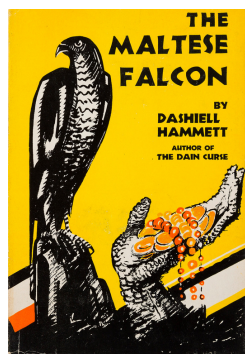
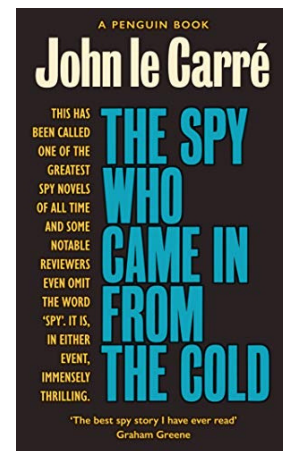
If you like your crime fiction with more than a dash of action, I'd recommend the *John Tyler Trilogy* by DL Marshall (published by Canelo).



Looking for some classic crime? Why not try The Crime Writer's Association's top 10 crime novels of all time:



- The Daughter of Time* – Josephine Tey (1951)
- The Big Sleep* – Raymond Chandler (1939)
- The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* – John le Carré (1963)
- Gaudy Night* – Dorothy L. Sayers (1935)
- The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* – Agatha Christie (1926)
- Rebecca* – Daphne du Maurier (1938)
- Farewell My Lovely* – Raymond Chandler (1940)
- The Moonstone* – Wilkie Collins (1868)
- The IPCRESS File* – Len Deighton (1962)
- The Maltese Falcon* – Dashiell Hammett (1930)



Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WRITING



UNDERCOVER POET

It's the Spring into Wool Show at The Grammar School
and I'm going in with my sister even though last time
I knitted was 1989 and it ended in holes.

It's all spinning wheels, looms, needles,
no writing, no politics, no opinions,
not a rhyme or a rhythm to be seen.

At lace-knitting class I can't follow the pattern;
it's not like writing – you can't snip a bit out,
put something else in, take it apart, change direction.

Before we leave, we go for tea, a scone with jam;
I haven't bought wool but I have found material,
with any luck, enough to make a poem later on.

Liz McPherson

Fishing For Words

This poem has something to say,
but not in these words. If my passion
and love could speak, what a fine poem it would be.

Somewhere between the too-much/too-fast and
the obvious cracks, lies the real poem. I must learn
to cast my fly on the water and wait for a jiggle from below.

The nibble of a true poem lurks beneath silt.
Once it's hooked, my poem will flash, writhe and yield to my net.
I'll admire its singular beauty, feel its heft

I will honour its name, then lower it back into the water
and let it follow the current
to its spawning ground.

Rachael Clyne

Type Up!

STEVE LOWE

Up!'s bold adventurer goes writing retro

When was the last time you wrote anything? Did you use a pen or pencil? I bet you didn't. Just like me sat in front of my laptop, tapping in text, which is automatically checked for grammar and spelling, which can be changed instantly into a whole new font, of which millions exist. Or most likely a text message on a mobile phone device?

My age caught up with me recently when I was asked what a typewriter was and how would you use it? Or what is the point of a fountain pen, despite the fact that my own handwriting is hugely enhanced by a lovely nib and real ink – it seems to flow better somehow, and I like the action of blotting it dry.



Photo credit [here](#)

I have recently found myself migrating back to these items, probably considered prehistoric by my siblings. My wonderful Olympia 1956 typewriter, rescued from EBay for a tenner, has proven itself over and over again, for short things like poetry, giving it a little more character. Hilariously, I am now reminded of my first day at work (Newcastle Magistrates Courts). Having been shown around and met the lovely staff team,



I was plonked in front of a desk, given a big pile of carbonised paper summonses, and asked to type in the details. Both myself and another new colleague said “type?” only for the office manager to realise that had not been on the advert or asked at interview. I survived.

My apparent regression into “old tech” (which is becoming a bit fashionable now) has coincided with my starting to work with an artist who is using natural materials to make prints or other forms of creativity. Charcoal, especially, is such a tactile and useable medium that I noticed the young hands loved it. Having made charcoal in an ecological setting, you realise it may have been a very early writing implement as a waste product from burning wood as fuel or for industry. Yet although there is often charcoal in archaeological sites too, writing in charcoal does not seem to survive.

I think it's really interesting to look at “ancient” writing materials as many of them are “environmental” and it would be quite exciting (to me at least) to do some environmental writing using these items!

We know that Chinese scholars wrote on bamboo stalks as long ago as 500 BCE, using small knives to scrape away mistakes. These knives actually

Type Up!

STEVE LOWE

became a symbol of political stature, as the owners had the power to change records. In a similar way, scholars seem to play important roles in other society, presumably for the same reason (if you look at history, those with such skills were usually higher up on the social spectrum.

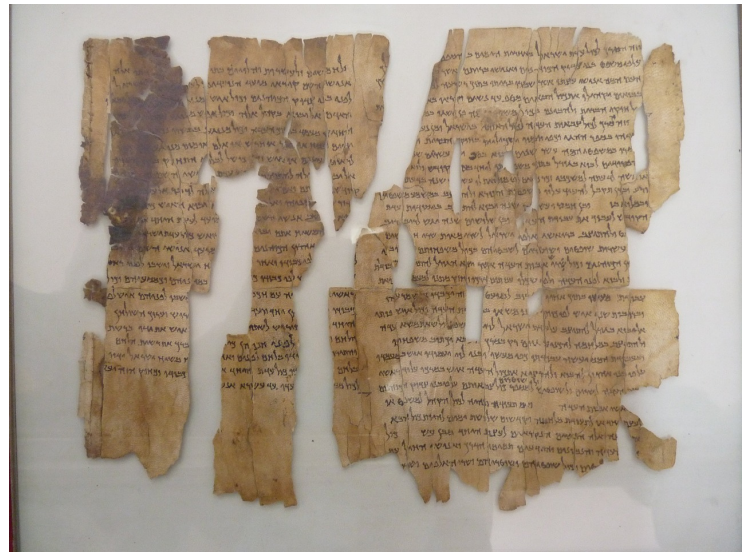
Birch bark manuscripts have been found in India, Russia and the Middle East. It is easy to cut and flatten and takes ink without losing legibility. Birch bark used in medieval Russia has survived as school exercises, personal letters and even business ledgers. Another plant based material, palm leaves, were used in Southeast Asia as early as 1500 BCE. Scholars theorise that Southeast Asian scripts contain mostly rounded shapes because angular letters split and broke the palm leaves.

Ancient Chinese oracles used shell and bone fragments to predict future events. Oracles carved questions onto the bone or shell, then applied heat until it cracked. They interpreted the crack patterns as answers from deities. These “oracle bones” date back to 1400 BCE and represent the earliest records of Chinese writing. Bones were also used as scribes or pens and items such as whale bone were also used as a surface (Saint Cuthbert’s personal prayer book has whale bone covers).

Clay tablets were widely used in ancient civilisations. Thus Cuneiform, one of the earliest writing systems, is often found on clay tablets and the first “libraries” consisted of clay tablet archives. Ancient Mediterranean civilisations used clay tablets for sophisticated accounting systems.

It’s commonplace for only fragments to survive. Ostraca, or broken pieces of pottery, are considered the “scrap paper” of ancient civilisations. Ancient Athenians used ostraca to cast votes when the government wanted to banish a citizen, giving rise to the term “ostracise” which means “to exile or banish”.

The word “paper” derives from the word “papyrus.” The oldest discovered papyrus scrolls date back to 2500 BCE. However, it was expensive to produce and became a monopolised resource. It was often washed and reused to save money. Imagine what might have been lost as a result!



Some of the earliest known manuscripts of I Ching and Tao de Ching were written on 2,000 year old silk. Such manuscripts were used for philosophical, mathematical and military records in China. It didn’t appear elsewhere until the Silk Road was “opened”

Wax tablets, made of wood panels covered in soft wax, were also reusable and tablets could be erased by melting the layer of wax, giving rise to the Latin expression “tabula rasa” or “clean slate.” During recent excavations at the Roman fort at Vindolanda on Hadrian’s Wall, archaeologists uncovered some well-preserved wax tablets in waterlogged ground. The tablets were made from a non-native wood and originally contained beeswax - which has long since disappeared. The writer

Type Up!

STEVE LOWE

would use the stylus to inscribe the surface of the wax with whatever message he wished to relay and would then reuse the tablet for other messages by warming the wax up and using the flat end of the stylus to erase his previous work. Tablets were portable and versatile and were commonly used in schools of the period. They remained in use until the Middle Ages when paper became much more common.

Parchment is made from goat, sheep or cow skin. Its use as a writing medium was perfected in Pergamon (modern day Turkey) as a cheaper alternative to Egyptian papyrus. It accepts ink well and was often used as it has an added benefit of relatively easy removal of the ink using a sharp blade, a frequent need in many a monastery.

The magnificent *Book of Kells* is a fine example of an illuminated manuscript, a formally prepared document where the text is decorated with flourishes (often borders and miniature illustrations). Often used in the Roman Catholic

Church for prayers, liturgical services and psalms, the practice continued into secular texts from the 13th century onward and typically includes proclamations, enrolled bills, laws, charters,



inventories and deeds.

I was immensely lucky to view part of the Lindisfarne Gospels as they came back temporarily to the North East last year. It was an amazing thing to view and incredibly inspirational. Just a few short weeks later I was fortunate to obtain a place on a workshop looking at medieval writing, based at Jarrow Hall, which is also the location of the early monastery where the Venerable Bede produced some of his many important writings, which include illuminated scripts and also included texts on nature.

We started by making ink. This was made from oak galls, small spherical growths that form on oak trees where the gall wasp lays its eggs in the buds of the tree. The tree grows tissue around the egg which protects the wasp until it hatches, leaving a small hole.

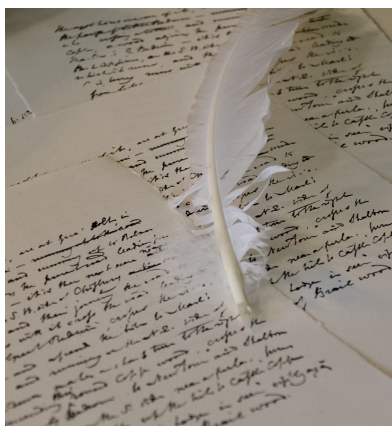
With the addition of iron, oak galls make a permanent ink. The method involves a reaction between tannic acid extracted from the galls and ferrous sulphate.

The ink would once have been used with a quill (later a dipping pen). A good way to start was to use straw to for a similar “nib”, dipped in ink and applied to vellum before moving on to a hand cut nib made using a goose feather. Sounds easy but was one of the hardest things I have tried to do! I found that every letter looked like an “O” because the ink swept downhill in a blob, depositing itself on the surface before pooling. I also found the straw was easier (in my case, held upside down) but the quill held ink for longer, although it always misled me by doing one letter then half of another before another dip was needed, only for another “O” to form. I was constantly scraping off the ink but looking around noted a few others doing the same. It acted in a similar manner on paper as well, but

Type Up!

STEVE LOWE

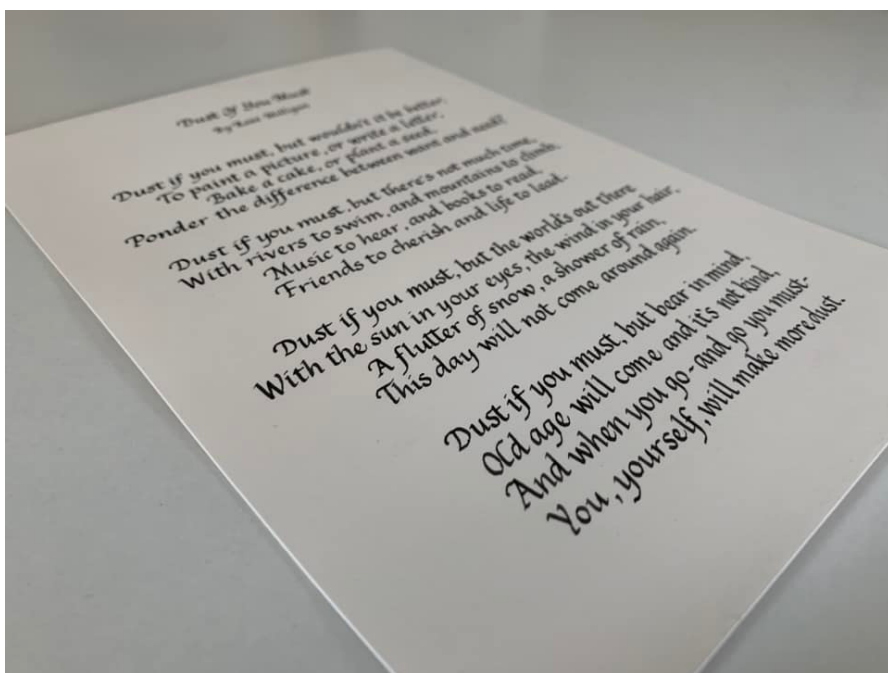
after a couple of hours I did have one legible word (fail!). Perhaps I am not cut out to be a scribe, although in my defence, it was my first time!



Oak gall ink can still be seen on early manuscripts, although many are damaged due to the acidity of the tannic acid, which eats away at the natural fibres of paper, parchment or vellum.

An experienced wildlife professional, Steve currently works freelance with Northumberland Rivers Trust as well as undertaking work with volunteers on local heritage and archaeology projects.

His hope is to leave the world a better place.



I would heartily recommend giving this a go (it's calligraphy really and can look amazing) and will probably return to it at some point (perhaps at Jarrow again which is such a great place) but most probably using a modern pen and ink. The artist in me, who exists somewhere I am sure, might even have a bash at the "illumination" bit. Bearing in mind that this would have been done in badly-lit spaces, possibly with a candle, I do wonder if the description is a misnomer though!

Meanwhile, I will continue to use my "ancient technology", especially the typewriters, of which I have become very proud and something of a hoarder. If anyone has one (or more) that they don't want, please let me know. It's rewarding to get them all clean and functional ... and I don't need to charge them to get writing!

Here at Up! we love the sentiment behind this lovely poem *Dust If You Must*. Written by Rose Milligan, it's been beautifully copied out by calligraphy artist Angela Reed of Creative Calligraphy.

The more hawk-eyed of our readers may remember Angela from December 2020's edition:

<https://positivelyup.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Up-December-2020-Edition.pdf>

You can check out her work here:

<https://www.facebook.com/creativecallig>

Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WRITING

Quantum Poesy (or, Schrödinger's butterflies)

Under the pen,
The dancing letters
Make love and words,
Words and love,
Like flirting butterflies
Twining to and fro
On the page,
Until, caught startled
In the mind's eye's net,
They collapse
In an instant
And leave a poem
Formed by the shadows
Of their scattered wings
Where they fell

John Wilkins

Seeking Inspiration

I am inspired by the art of nature.
I run away from the concrete forest,
Where everyone can get easily lost.
Between the blinking lights
of puzzling intersections
And the roaring noise on the city chaos.

I catch the bliss of the sun in the morning,
Chant to the moon in the misty nights
Hug the trees in the winter forest,
And hear the whisper of the shimmering stars.

I look at the colors of every season
- At this never-ending kaleidoscope;
The song of the birds and the chirping crickets
In the scented meadows. I never stop

To love the cheering drums of the rain drops
And the rainbow shining above.
Gliding hand on the little creek,
I dive deep in his morning water.

Petrouchka Alexieva

PENCIL FACTORY

Linden wood, graphite, glue;
machined, boiled, waxed,
seared, shaped, pressed,
lettered, sharpened, dipped,
picked, checked, packed.

Sent out to grow into;
doodles, letters, lists,
plays, pictures, maps,
stories, songs, sketches,
laws, fictions, facts.

Liz McPherson



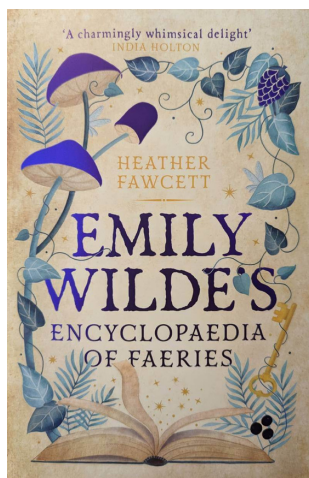
Read Up!

JENNA WARREN

Find out what our resident book reviewer has been reading ...



For the last couple of months, I've been drawn to fantasy and science fiction novels, so this article is going to lean heavily in that direction. But I've also read two lovely historical romances, so I'll include those, too.



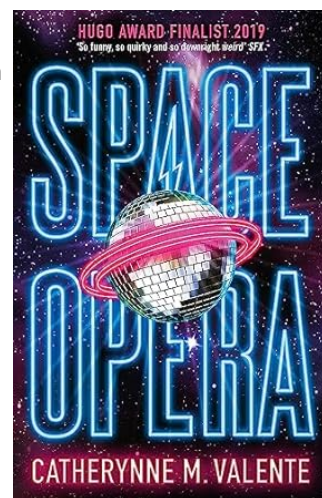
My first recommendation is *Emily Wilde's Encyclopaedia of Faeries* by Heather Fawcett (Little, Brown/Orbit). This lovely novel is a combination of romance and fantasy (or 'romantasy' as the publishing industry has recently started calling it). Set in 1909, it tells the story of Cambridge academic Emily Wilde, who travels to a fictional Scandinavian country to research the Hidden Ones – elusive faerie folk. Emily is compiling the first ever encyclopaedia of faerie lore. She finds herself staying in a remote cottage, completely out of her depth, with only her dog, Shadow, for company.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, in Emily's initial opinion), she's soon joined by Wendell Bumbleby, her academic rival and only friend. It soon becomes clear that Bumbleby is actually a faerie, banished from his home. He's handsome, charming, preening, and arrogant, but essentially good-hearted. The book is written with humour and a lightness of touch, and much of the comedy comes from the contrast between spiky and unsociable Emily and effortlessly suave Bumbleby. They make a great odd couple.

The novel is fantastic fun. The fictional country, Ljosland, is described beautifully, with some wonderful worldbuilding. The other supernatural beings range from endearing to sinister (sometimes both). The book is the first in a series, and I'm very much looking forward to the others.

My next choice is the magnificently bonkers *Space Opera* by Catherynne M. Valente (Little, Brown/Corsair). This is a comic sci-fi novel in the grand tradition of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams, but considerably more 'out there'.

The novel begins in the near future. Earth has just been invaded by the Esca, a race of aliens who look a bit like the Road Runner from Looney Tunes (bear with me). Apparently, it is time for Earth to participate in the Metagalactic Grand Prix, a musical competition with more than a passing resemblance to the Eurovision Song Contest. The aim is to prove that human beings are sentient and worthy of their place in the universe. All they have to do, to escape annihilation, is avoid coming last.



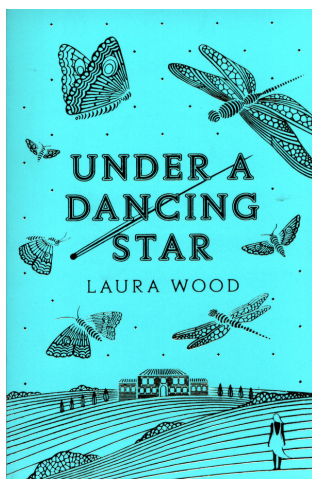
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Fortunately, the Esca have compiled a helpful list of human bands and performers who they think might stand a good chance. Unfortunately, the musicians are all either dead, unavailable, or maligned by snobbish music fans. It seems Earth's only chance is Decibel Jones and the Absolute Zeroes, a washed-up glam-rock band who haven't had a hit in years.

The Zeroes embark on a journey across space to take part in the competition, and then things get really strange...

I'll be honest here and say that I put off reading this book for a long time. I love comic sci-fi and fantasy, but the concept felt a bit quirky even for me. But I'm so glad I finally read it, because I loved it. It's one of those books that crept up on me slowly. I began by relishing the humour, the playful language, and the inventiveness of the worldbuilding (especially the different aliens). I was enjoying it as entertainment. But then, quite late in the novel, there was a moment which made me realise what the story was actually about. It's a striking moment, quite moving in an odd sort of way. I finished this book feeling deeply impressed. This is the first Catherynne M. Valente book I've read, and I would definitely like to read more.



Under a Dancing Star by Laura Wood (Scholastic) is a Young Adult romance novel with crossover appeal to an adult readership. Inspired by Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, it's set in the 1930s and follows Bea, who is fascinated by natural history and science. Bea is rebellious and wants to study, but her parents are determined to marry her off to someone rich and boring to preserve the family estate.

Then an invitation arrives, asking Bea to visit her uncle at his home in Italy for the summer. Her parents think her uncle will be a good influence, so they let her go. However, upon arrival, it turns out that her once conventional uncle has turned into a bohemian. He intends to marry a glamorous artist and former model, and the house has become an artists' commune. One of the young artists in residence is Ben. As in the original *Much Ado*, Bea and Ben infuriate each other, but also share an attraction. Their new friends suggest a challenge: Bea and Ben should play at having a summer romance, but not, under any circumstances, fall in love.

This is a very sweet romance novel, beautifully written, with real heart and warmth, and a nice touch of humour. But there's also darkness. War is looming on the horizon.

My final recommendation this month is *Madensky Square* by Eva Ibbotson (Pan Macmillan). Ibbotson is one of my favourite authors, and I love her historical romances. *Madensky Square* is set in Vienna in 1910, and follows Susanna, the owner of a lady's dress shop. The novel takes the form of her diary over

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the course of a year, with a chapter for each month.

Susanna introduces us to the various residents of the Square, including her best friend Alice, and a child piano prodigy. It's a little like a darker precursor to Alexander McCall Smith's Scotland Street series, offering us a glimpse into the lives of very different characters.

Ibbotson's novels are romantic, witty, and steeped in her love of music and the arts. This novel has all these things, but it feels more melancholic in tone than her other works. There's a definite feel of the approach of war here, too, and some of the characters lead very difficult lives. We also learn that Susanna carries a painful secret.



It's a beautiful evocation of Vienna, and the characters are wonderfully observed. I would recommend it to anyone who enjoys historical fiction or sagas. *Happy reading!*



Write Up!

Come and join Bridget and Harry for a quick chat followed by a precious hour of your own creative time. There's nothing like being able to set aside a little time in the company of other creative people and seeing what you come up with!

These regular zoom sessions take place on the 3rd Thursday of the month, so the next one is **Thursday 19th October, 7pm - 8pm (GMT)** with joining instructions [here](#) and on the Up! facebook group page.



Coming Up!

Well, we don't know about you, dear readers, but here at Up! HQ our meagre candle which dimly flickers in these autumn months has pretty much burned down for the time being with all that reading!

But before we bid a temporary farewell, a quick word about next month. We've chosen as our theme, 'Treasure'. Treasure comes in all forms; one person's cast offs are another's diamonds. We'll be digging deep to bring you the richest jewels we can lay our hands on!

In the meantime, look after each other and as a dear Northumbrian friend of ours has a habit of saying, 'stay safe and keep a haad'.

Love
Bridget & Harry (and Alfie) xx



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