Write On!

Celebrating 10 Years of High Town Writers' Workshop
2014-2024

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Further Writing from High Town Writers can be found on
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Write On!

Celebrating 10 Years of High Town Writers' Workshop 2014-2024

An anthology of writing from Bridgnorth to enjoy all year long.

Like an almanac, these pages contain something new to discover month by month throughout the year as members of the High Town Writers' Workshop share some of the stories and non-fiction, poetry and songs they have written over the past few years.

Encouraged by writing prompts, workshop exercises and local inspiration, it is remarkable how many different roads the human mind explores when setting off from a common starting point. This book contains many different things to read and enjoy.

All are welcome to join the High Town Writers' Workshop, whether you're setting out at the dawn of your writing life, gathering your thoughts after a life of work, or just somewhere in between.

Everyone is
Welcome!

Remembering

Geoffrey Speechly

Val Pedrick

John Bowler



High Town Writers – A Decade of Delight

It's hard to believe that it was really ten years ago when a small group of us nervous strangers straggled into the cosy upstairs cocktail lounge at Peepo Pizzeria for the inaugural meeting of the "Bridgnorth High Town Writers Club". I was one of the beginners beginning together on that nerve-wracking night.

We were each clutching our pristine notepads and pens and seemed surprised at the demographic range included in the room. Our chair and chief organiser, Jim Anthony explained the format from his experience, and before we had chance to duck out, there we were, Audrey, Alex, Geoffrey, Marie and Adam and I and …. scribbling away the end to an intriguing starter sentence he had thrown out, like a hook, to get us biting.

Of course, we were all hooked and returned week after week to try new challenges, gathering more members along the way such as Liz, Sam, the two Sarahs, Kay, Jennie, Val and Kath. Between laughing and learning we regularly revelled in our gentle progress and enjoyed the marvels that our fellow writers effortlessly produced with such wit, elegance and drama.

It was always fun, sometimes silly, often poignant, and always rewarding, uplifting and strangely pride-filling at what we could write when push came to shove.

But the writers' group became so much more than a group of disparate people with shared purpose. We became firm friends, following each other's lives and each other's writing progress. Every book proposal, published e-book, and communication from a publisher,

pored over with relish and pride and lots of fingers crossed for each other as we willed each other on. More members came including Sue, Andy, Paul, Stuart, Jayne, Tanya, the two Tonys and the two Johns and some went, due to work commitments but returned when they could and some, sadly, passed on.

Like a sprouting pre-teen, suddenly this fledging creation has turned ten years' old, and it seems fitting to mark the occasion with suitable celebration.

Over the years different members have taken the lead to keep the group going and coming up with new initiatives: blogs, online meetings, publications, social media. I confess I have been less active in recent years but have watched with awe as Liz, Adam and Martin have taken the group forward with such aplomb.

I hope they are suitably proud of their outputs and achievements, as our creation has blossomed into a lasting web of friends, bound together by our love of words, and joy in playfully experimenting with new ideas in a supportive environment.

Well done Hightown Writers! Keep writing; keep supporting and keep the beauty of your words alive.

Julia Buckley

Bridgnorth writer at heart



January

Change

New Beginnings	Val Pedrick
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New Beginnings

tiny white and green faerie swords
pierce January's frozen earth
gathered brittle birch twigs
crackle warmth to homely hearth

ochreous clouds storm purple skies
break glimpses of brilliant blue
a young thrush practices phrases
brings hope that spring is due

searching for signs of new beginnings
to ease the pain of the passing year
I sow seeds of love for life renewed
and fond memories of someone so dear

by Val Pedrick
(*For Sister Sarah – with love – January 2017)*



Snowdrops by Val Pedrick

Technological Change

Binary code, genetic code
Passing on instructions, data
To the next generation,
Information, knowledge
Passed on from cloud to smartphone,
From smartphone to the internet.
Stored on world networks
For generations to research, to enjoy

Learn from generations past, shape the future,
Darwinism, digital evolution,
Binary computer evolves not quantum computing
Binary code turns into qubits
Giving logical answers decades to come,
Changing human life,
Biological machines transform into cyborgs
Sharing memories, feelings, information
Through neural networks
Wired into our DNA.
Humanity genetically engineered by technology.
Machines spread through the solar system,
Colonising humanoids into cyborgs,
Conquer the entire universe,
Technological race,
A dominant force of the cosmos
Covering multiverses.

by Adam Rutter

Donald's Faithful Friend

(change from 2020)

by Marie Sever

In the waning hours of the presidency, Donald huddled in the Oval Office with his last remaining friend and pondered his final decisions. At that moment he felt as though he'd botched every decision in the previous four years, and he was not overly confident that he could, somehow, so late in the game, get things right.

'No one appreciates everything I have done for the country, Herbert. Apart from you, they have all abandoned me. If the election hadn't been rigged, then they would have all been fawning over me. They haven't let me finish building the wall, and it took months to get a few dollars for just a few sections. And what was all that talk about putting seesaws on some of it? It's not a playground. And this virus, I get that and does anybody care? If I hadn't been so squeamish about needles, I would have injected myself with bleach. Much cheaper for everyone than these expensive vaccines. I must admit I didn't understand what all the fuss was about when Covid first hit the USA but accept that it isn't a particularly pleasant disease. A few people have died.

Herbert, do you agree that I should have nuked China when they finally told us about Covid? That would have stopped it moving around the world and stopped all their shoddy Chinese crap being exported. After a fortnight when all the one and a half billion bodies had been buried, I could have claimed it as another state of the USA, built a wall around it and shipped over all the criminals from the USA, and perhaps some Democrats. There's a thought. Little old England sent their criminals to Botany Bay, so it's not a new idea but would have kept me in office for another term.

Melania has gone off me now that she will no longer be First Lady. I will need something to do after tonight so as she is now 50 years old it's time for me to trade her in for a younger model and have more children to prove my fertility. I'm only 74, lots of life in the old dog yet. Dopey Biden is four years older than me, and his wife is 69 so I can easily beat that. I think I will interview some 35-year-olds. I've proven I'm not racist with two of my three wives being foreigners so that should widen the field. It's a pity that Queen Lizzy of England is so old and still married. I fancy my chances with her. It would be fun to go haggis shooting in Scotland, and having a butler to iron my newspapers, and sit on the throne wearing a crown when Lizzy and I watch Netflix. Funny, but when I said that to an English MP, he burst out laughing. Something about the throne meaning something different in little old England. They are a quaint race.

Herbert don't look at me like that and stop opening and shutting your mouth. If you have something to say, then just say it.

I wonder if I can take my new wife to see my mate Kimmy in North Korea. He and I got on swell although I think they could have put on more interesting nosh. Rice and noodles with everything. Western media claims that everyone is starving in North Korea. I know this to be false news as I had lots of huge meals with many courses with Kimmy who loves his food, just like me. However, when I wanted a change, I couldn't find a McDonalds, KFC or even a Dunkin' Donuts anywhere. If Kimmy had come over here, I could have taken him to lots of great restaurants and diners. Me and him could have painted the town red, he'd have liked that.

I love his idea of having his photograph everywhere, inside and outside buildings and on billboards. I look a real statesman and it would have helped me get re-elected if my photo, of my best side of course, was 30 foot high everywhere.

What could I have done differently? Not a lot, except for the few examples above as I have proven business sense, apart from some of my enterprises failing. Lots of people are made bankrupt six times. None of them were my fault; you just can't get the staff and my children haven't a clue.

Well Herbert, you're still gasping, so hang on in there Bud while I change your water.'

Donald goes to the sink and pours out almost all the water and refills the bowl, not realizing he has used the hot tap.

'There you are Herbert, have a good drink of that, my friend. What's up? Why are you now floating at the top of your bowl? OH NO … … … My last friend has left me. Goodbye Herbert, my little buddy, but in your memory, I'll buy another goldfish and call him 'Herbert Junior.'

Donald's shoulders slump as he leaves the Oval Office for the last time, patting Winston Churchill's head on the way out.



Deep Winter Reflection
by Andy Harrison

Early morning in mid-January.

The River Severn glides sluggishly through the Severn Valley and past the Country Park. As it has since the last Ice Age ended around 10,000 years ago and glacial meltwaters broke through at Ironbridge, taking this new path southwards...

First light reveals a white and frosty landscape coated with tiny, sharp ice crystals formed as overnight temperatures dipped after dark. Relatively warm and humid air contacts colder surfaces to allow icy crystals to form. New shoots, grasses, bracken, and dead vegetation left over from the summer months lie with a frosty coating in open areas. Under thicker tree cover and in more sheltered spots, the frost has not penetrated. Long pale-yellow furry catkins hang from hazel twigs like nature's decorations, and frozen water droplets cling like jewels.

A warm yellow-orange glow in the east hints at the rising sun. As the skies grow light, song thrushes, robins, and blackbirds strike up an early morning chorus. Soon, jackdaws fly over. Their recognisable 'chuck-chuck' call joins in with a green woodpecker's piping laughter that resonates from the trees. In the distance, Canada geese honk faintly. Further upriver, three red-breasted mergansers silently glide out from the bank before taking off northward on beating wings towards Bridgnorth.

The sun finally breaks the horizon as an orange globe hidden behind the trees before climbing into the clear blue sky. As air temperatures lift, the frost dissipates to mist rising above the river. At the Country Park's bird hide, the first rays turn reeds and rushes on the pool edges a golden yellow. The warming sun encourages smaller birds such as blue and great tits, dunnocks, and robins to head for the feeders, looking for breakfast. Thin ice covers the pool surface, remaining undisturbed until waterfowl arrive to break it up.

Twelve months previously, mid-winter temperatures were milder. The sky was overcast and heavy with grey nimbostratus clouds, from which the rain fell. The scenery differs from that of Victorian ideology. No thick snow covers the ground, and temperatures are not cold enough to cause the river to freeze over.

As with recent winters, mid-winter 2021-2022 appeared to follow the same trend to be yet another 'hottest one' on record. Due to a warming climate, the summer's high-pressure systems are lingering longer, preventing the low systems, which bring our colder weather, from sinking south in winter.

Nature's delicate seasonal balance turned into turmoil.

A (further) Sonnet to Green

'Tis hues of tangled green afloat the pools,

Encircling bundled trunks in Hurcott's wood-

'Tis oft the colour my fair cheeks have donned,

When I have piggy-gorged on sump'tous food!

'Tis woodland rolling far before my eye,

'Tis jewelled moss and lichen in the dew,

'Tis snowdrop spears and ivied arbored paths-

Ah b*** I am lost, what can I do?**

Lost maiden wand'ring on and further on,

In labyrinthine trails of tangled green,

While verdure sweet I smarted for, desired,

Conceals me close, when I must needs be seen!

As long as men can breathe or eyes can see,

I crave, prithee, their eyes may light on me!

by Irena Szirtez



Woodland Walk by Val Pedrick

Deep, Deep Winter

by Paul Jennings

Bond trudged on, head down. The snow was getting deeper here, blown into waist-high drifts, which he had to pick his way around. It had stopped snowing about 30 minutes before, but now the going became harder as the incline steepened to at least a 1 in 5, he estimated.

In front of him, in the distance, he could just make out the roof of a building, the outline becoming more indistinct against the mountain in the fading light. This was his rendezvous with a person he did not yet know, save for a few sparse lines in an intelligence report with an accompanying and frustratingly grainy photograph and the code name "Thalab," the Arabic for fox.

The road was deserted, impassable to vehicles as he crunched his way forward and upward, thankful for his Canada Goose arctic jacket, a veteran of many a mission and a lifesaver in some of the most extreme destinations throughout his long and eventful career. A gentle breeze stirred up the loose snow into little swirling flurries like miniature twisters that danced across his path, for which Bond was sure the Sami peoples of Northern Scandinavia would have a word.

The trees were sparse here, scrubby high-altitude Mountain Ash, their upright branches scratchy against the roof slate grey sky, bringing to mind his two linocut prints of winter trees bought for a song in Montmartre a few years before and which now adorned the lounge of his Chelsea apartment, just off the Kings Road.

Breathing heavily now, his mind wandered back to another mission in similar conditions—to a time when he was much fitter and stronger. It was Zermatt, Switzerland, and, in the shadow of the Matterhorn in a suite at the Grand Hotel Zermatterhof, Bond broke the neck of his old adversary, The Big Russian, killing him instantly.

But this wasn't Switzerland; this was a single-track road called "The Struggle" off the A591 in Ambleside, in the English Lake District. Aptly named, it was 3.5 miles long, steep, isolated, and one of two routes to the Kirkstone Pass and ultimately Bond's rendezvous point, the Kirkstone Inn, a long, squat whitewashed stone Lakeland pub that Bond could now make out above the tops of the drystone walls that bounded either side of the road and which was still some 1.5 miles away. Behind him, in the distance, the lights of the small town of Ambleside picked out Lake Windermere as darkness descended in the valley, while the altitude at his location allowed the wintry sun's rays to still touch the tops of the hills looming above and around him in a horseshoe.

He didn't know what to expect at the inn and wasn't even sure that he could handle things if they went pear-shaped. It had been 5 years since he'd lost his double "O" status; having then reached the statutory age of 45 when the SIS decreed that all agents were removed from state-sanctioned assassination roles, especially given the emphasis placed on a more empathetic, welfare-based environment within the Service, claims for PTSD were never far away.

Bond had been placed in a mentoring role, presumably to still make him feel part of "The Hornbys," as the "Double O's" were jokingly referred to. Bond remembered the conversation

with "C," the head of MI6 (why do people insist on calling him "M"), as if it were yesterday. It was a difficult conversation on both sides. Bond suspected it was coming, but still, it hurt all the same. He felt he had many more years of front-line service left in him and said so in no uncertain terms.

“Stephen (all first name terms in the Civil Service, no “Sirs or Ma’am’s” here), you bloody well know I’m the best asset you’ve got. I have an impeccable record with 6, and you damn well know it. The ones coming through now don’t know their bloody arse from their elbow, all risk assessments, and proportionality. You HAVE to make an exception in my case. This place would be a shambles without me.”

“Have to?” “C” bristled. “Have to? How long have I been head of 6 James? Well, I’ll tell you, long enough to know that you’re not as good as you think you are. What’s the most important rule in the Secret Service?”

Bond stared at him, refusing to answer, his temple visibly pulsating.

“Remain in the shadows at all times, just in case you've forgotten. And yet you, YOU,” said C loudly now, “not only give your name out freely to anyone who asks, but you insist on repeating it. ‘Bond, James Bond,’” he spat, “you may as well go around with ‘I’m in MI6’, printed on a T-shirt. And as for keeping a low profile, why do you insist on killing people or blowing things up when you have the option to walk away?”

“It’s a decision made at the time,” Bond replied haughtily, trying to defend himself. “That’s for the operative in the field to decide, not some pen pusher,” referring pointedly to ‘C’s’ lack of operational experience.

“Oh, yes? And I suppose sleeping with the target’s girlfriends all the time is an operational imperative, is it?” countered his boss. “These people are psychotic enough as it is; what with trying to steal the world’s gold reserves or creating a deadly plague against humanity using nanobots, without you pissing them off on a personal basis. I’d have put you on paper clip duty years ago if it hadn’t been for Her Majesty. God knows why, but she’s always had a soft spot for you. Look, I do like you, James. I really do, but from a policy point of view, this is a convenient way for me to have an easier life. I won’t kid you. I can’t and won't bend the rules for you. But, in recognition of your dedication, I’ll assign you to Training. It’ll do the young ‘uns good to have the benefit of your vast experience, AND it’ll give you a chance to reacquaint yourself with the Bible,” referring to the name given to the SIS training manual. “Close the door on the way out.”

And so it was that Bond found himself staring out of an office window high above the Thames, some five years after that exchange. It had been a mixed experience. Yes, he was still attached to the operational side of things, but he was, to all intents and purposes, a ‘desk jockey’, bound to the daily life of office politics and gossip with people for whom he had no respect: people with small hands who wore short sleeve shirts with ties and had pens in their top pockets. Young women, a number of whom, or so he believed, were secretly attracted to him but, in reality, regarded him as something of a curiosity, and who, despite being extremely competent at their various jobs, felt the need to talk a little too crudely as if emulating the men. Bond, despite being an anachronistic, sexist roué, was still a gentleman at heart and felt very uncomfortable with this kind of behaviour.

Another aspect of office life that he could live without was the forced bonhomie surrounding birthday collections, Secret Santas (the only secrets they know, he thought), and sponsorship forms, and so most days would find Bond seated at a table in his favourite nearby Portuguese café with a strong coffee and a Pastéis de Nata.

Bond continued gazing out of the window towards The Oval cricket ground and beyond, to the Docklands skyline. He knew he was arrogant and possessed of the sort of level of self-confidence that grated; Eton and Britannia Royal Naval College can do that to you, but those were the qualities needed to have done his job so successfully, surely? He was also a snob, only the best for our James, suits from Saville Row, toiletries from both Trumper and Floris, and the finest wines.

But what else had he got to spend his money on? Yes, he had a daughter, Mathilde, on whom he doted, but they were destined to be apart, and it had to be for her own safety. He may be dead, but loyal members of his deranged foster brother's organisation would love to find her and exact their revenge. Bond wanted nothing more than to see her, but all he could manage by way of support was an anonymous trust fund, as untraceable as it could possibly be.

He was getting old, and that near-death experience with Safin on that island with the missiles should have been a red flag to have packed it all in. But the Service was what defined him and gave him purpose. He also owed his life to MI6. The best medical minds in the country had managed to purge the Safin nanobot virus from his body, giving him a normal life once more. And so he compromised and took what was called 'phased retirement,' a Civil Service term meaning a gradual winding down, a reduction in hours and responsibilities, culminating in a handshake, a possible gong, and a pension.

He couldn't even retire to Skyfall, his inherited Scottish pile—pile being the operative word since that showdown with Silva had left it in ruins. Yes, that was an interesting conversation he'd had with the insurance company, who "would have loved to have paid you out, sir, but our assessor is a little concerned that it appears to have been rigged with propane cylinder booby traps. And there's also the little question of the wrecked helicopter found there as well."

He'd had a number of other interesting conversations since, he recalled. The world that Bond had known was fast disappearing; no more the "Old Boy Network," whereby you were virtually guaranteed a second career in the City or HM Government. No, this was a world of level playing fields and equal opportunities, which, in Bond's opinion, made for even more square pegs in round holes. One such conversation arose as part of his phased retirement. In the interests of 'welfare', Bond had found himself sitting across from something called a 'New Start Advisor', a thin, oily-skinned, shaven-headed young man who put Bond in mind of a slowworm and who was reading from Bond's CV.

"It says here, Jim; you don't mind if I call you Jim, do you?"

Bond stiffened and replied coldly, "Please don't."

The slow worm moved uncomfortably in his seat while repeatedly clicking his cheap pen. "It says here that you are proficient in at least four recognised martial arts, are trained to police advanced driver standard, including motor cycles and cars, are skilled in pursuit and tactical driving plus mobile and foot surveillance, hold a current pilot's licence for both fixed wing