The Story Bazaar Compendium 2015

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2015, when The Story Bazaar began, I didn't know quite where it would take me. To publishing my own work, certainly, that was planned and it has happened. '*The Village; A Year in Twelve Tales*' was published in April 2015. To publishing the work of others, I had hoped so, and, while that hasn't happened yet, new Story Bazaar authors are writing books, even as you read this.

What I hadn't anticipated was the pleasure I would get from the writing of essays and articles on varied subjects. It is a source of constant surprise to me that what I find interesting – history, culture, art and people - and what I have to say about it, might be of interest to others. The readership is growing. There are readers out there who might not read The Story Bazaar books, but who regularly follow the blog posts. So I decided to pull these together, with the articles and short fiction published in Readers Club, add some new fiction and publish what I hope will be the first of many annual Story Bazaar Compendia. The old fashioned Annual or Compendium is a book form for which I have much affection and owe not a little.

Thank you all The Story Bazaar readers. I hope you continue to follow the web-logs and, maybe, try the other publications. For now, Happy New Year and I hope you enjoy this collection.

PART ONE

Essays

ONE

Spain

The Story Bazaar's home thoughts from abroad are from Jerez de la Frontera, Spain. Jerez is the largest city in the province of Cadiz, in Andalucia, the southern-most region of modern Spain. An ancient place, populated in pre-history by *Homo sapiens neanderthalis* as well as *Homo sapiens sapiens*, its very long history is rich, complex and intriguing, linked, irrevocably, with the continent to the south as well as the rest of Spain.

February & March - Flamenco

This week and next is the Festival de Jerez, in Jerez de la Frontera, the home of Flamenco (despite what some Sevillanos say). It is two weeks of classes, symposia and, above all, performance, when the whole town resounds to gypsy rhythms.

Walking about the lovely old centre one is never far away from the sounds of dancing and music, whether from the numerous schools of flamenco, the flamenco *penas* - or clubs which open their doors to visitors during the festival - or the occasional flamenco 'flash mob'. These are often led by famous flamenco performers. The Festival has plenty of those. It is a magnet for the best, both established performers as well as those who want to make their name. They come to perform, but also to teach and to simply enjoy being part of the Festival.

It is a fortnight in which to immerse oneself in music all over town. My favourite venue is in the Palacio Villavicencio, a grand room in an 18th century palace inside the Alcazar, which itself dates back to the twelfth century. The recessed windows of the first floor salon overlook the arab style gardens and its wooden floor and arched ceiling provide the perfect acoustics for the more intimate musical experiences. A large portrait of Elizabeth II of Spain gazes down, looking like a young Victoria with her severe, centrally parted hair and tiny waist. The salon is lit by heavy glass chandeliers.

But I don't think this is the oldest venue. That distinction probably goes to the Sala Compania, which is a converted 16th century church. This has been beautifully restored and is used for art exhibitions and film screenings as well as live performances. The seats here are large and amazingly comfortable, so take care, when waiting for very late performances to begin, it's easy to nod. Talking with ones neighbours is the obvious solution.

The distinction of being the oldest is 'probable' only because I don't know the age of many of the buildings which house the small Flamenco Clubs and the Tabancos, sherry bars where the ubiquitous drink can be purchased cheaply, straight from the barrel. One such, with a burgeoning reputation for flamenco performances, usually by

local artists, is El Pasaje. It is just as its name suggests, a passage between two streets and, though it's been smartened up of late, it's still pretty authentic. Given its size, it gets very crowded, especially as the tables near the performers (sometimes all the tables) are reserved for folk who have paid for food, drink and a table throughout the evening. I can recall very enjoyable evenings when I have stood with friends, amidst the crush, to listen to the music and consume more sherry than was good for me.

The largest venue is the Teatro Villamarta, Jerez's 1920s theatre, where the ballets and the flamenco company touring performances are staged. It's a big theatre, but I have never seen an empty seat at a festival performance (and I have been to more than a few). The audience is international, but with locals in the majority. It was here that I first heard the distinctive Jereziano demand for an encore, a rhythmic clapping and stamping which just doesn't stop (and shakes the auditorium) until the artists return to the stage. The theatre doesn't have a

bar or a restaurant, but there is the Teatro Bar next door, where tapas and glass of wine are available for a few euros and there is often live flamenco music too.

Prices for these venues vary, depending upon artist and, in the theatre, class of seat. My rough estimate is thirty to thirty five euros for the theatre, fifteen to twenty for Sala Compania, fifteen for the Palacio and twenty for the Sala Paul, a converted bodega. The Tabancos and other bars are free, but you are expected, not unreasonably, to make a purchase of some kind while there.

Reviews 2015

At the Teatro is the Compania Antonio Gades in '*Fuego*' a ballet by Gades and Carlos Saura, inspired by *'El amor brujo'* Manuel de Falla's ballet. Gades is a well respected figure in the flamenco world and he has been experimenting with a fusion of flamenco and ballet, on stage and in the cinema. This performance had moments of exquisite artistry and some truly outstanding and memorable stage pictures, but it did not engage me fully.

The story of Candela, who falls in love with Carmelo, only to be pursued by the spectre of Jose, her dead lover, is the same as the original ballet and provides great opportunity for drama. Unfortunately, at the third appearance of El Espectro, to divide the young lovers yet again, this particular member of the audience began to get impatient with our heroine (though the young Spanish girl sitting next to me was in floods of tears). This is not to detract from the quality of the dancing, especially of Esmeralda Manzanes as Candela and Jacob Guerrero as Carmelo and the excellent corps de ballet. Nonetheless, I found the mix of live flamenco music on stage and recorded orchestral score was disconcerting. All in all, a bit of a curate's egg to begin the week.

My stolid English reserve vanished the following evening at the Palacio Villavicencio when the first *a cappella* notes of the husky-voiced Eva Rubichi raised the hairs on the back of my neck. And not only I, the whole audience felt a tingle down its collective spine as all were transfixed. Rubichi's sultry and powerful rendition of traditional

flamenco songs and themes, such as the inevitability of death, love and loss, resonated with a force which seemed age-old. The call of the muezzin from the minaret, the ululations of the wedding guests, the wailing of the bereaved could all be heard in her songs and she and her guitarist accompanist and husband, Domingo, were cheered to the rafters in a standing ovation which would not allow them and their small band to leave without encores. Amazingly, this astonishing singer appears regularly at the Pena Flamenca, (flamenco club) La Buleria in Jerez throughout the year.

In the Sala Compania, I saw the excellent dancers Claudia Cruz and Marina Valiente, from Cadiz and Seville respectively, presenting the different styles and dances from their particular cities. The choreography for the alegrias was credited to one Manuel Linan (remember that name). The picture which stayed with me was of both dancers, dressed, identically, in white, dancing in perfect unison at the end of their set.

One of the most memorable concerts, however, was less traditional. David Carpio and his collaborators, Manuel Valencia (guitar) and Pablo Martin Caminero (double bass) had been working on their set for two years (since Carpio's last appearance at Jerez in 2013).

The double bass is not usually associated with flamenco, but here it fitted perfectly, occasionally giving a jazzy feel with plucked rhythms, but also blending beautifully, when bowed, with the guitar, which was played in masterly fashion by Valencia. Over and through the music Carpio threaded his strong and sinuous voice, most stunningly in an *a cappella* duet with the remarkable young dancer, Manuel Linan. Playing the older man of experience, Carpio counselled the younger man, played by Linan, who replied in dance. This would have brought the house down, were the audience not so eager for more music. So the standing ovation was reserved for the end of the performance.

I reserve a word for Linan. He first appeared backlit on stage and in dramatic profile, his hair half drawn back into a topknot and wearing a flounced flamenco skirt, which made the audience think again about what they had read in their programme. Wasn't the dancer a man? Yes he most certainly was, but he used the trailing skirt, worn over trousers, as a prop, and a link to the flamenco tradition. It was discarded after the first number, though it reappeared later, as did a suit jacket and a waistcoat. His dancing was astonishing, rapping out the rhythms with feet and hands in flamenco manner, but displaying the strength, grace and balance of a ballet dancer as he leapt and spun. His level of artistry, like that of his collaborators, was supremely high and they were doing what they wanted with their art, taking the traditional to a new place.

Back in south London

It is already a week since my last night of flamenco in Jerez, but the rhythms are still going round in my head. I recall rippling guitar melodies and the brightly lit stage pictures of stamping dancers when I am undertaking the most mundane of household tasks (though it's

difficult to tap out a rhythm on the kitchen floor when wearing carpet slippers, I've found).

I talk about the flamenco (to the increasing desperation of my friends) and someone recently pointed out to me that 2015 was the 20th anniversary of the first Air Guitar World Championships. Thousands will gather in Finland to contest and watch this year's event. Was flamenco guitar included? I don't think so.

Not to be outdone, however, by those officianados of non-music, the air guitarists of the rock world, here is my list of pseudo instructions should anyone wish to emulate them in flamenco. Please note, the would-be air guitarist is assumed to be male, mainly because, if you look at the Air Guitar World Championship web-site and videos, it seems that this is the gender of most air guitarists. Why am I not surprised?

First, choose your seating. Unlike his rock contemporary, the flamenco air guitarist sits, rather than stands. Not for him the bracing of legs apart, the better for invisible instrument thrashing or, if the rock air guitarist has a 1980s bent and a desire to demonstrate a startling grasp of rhythm, striding forward and back in time to the beat. Rather the subtle, ankle across knee approach, better to balance and caress the strings of his invisible guitar. This also allows the showing off of highly polished, black patent leather boots (if the flamenco air guitarist possesses any).

Second, clothing. Black, dark colours or black with a startlingly white shirt, are de rigeur. Spangles and denim give entirely the wrong impression and hair, while permitted to be longish and tousled (and preferably black) should on no account be beyond shoulder length (or if it is, should be tied back in a fashionable pony tail or top knot and worn with a close cut beard). There is to be no frenetic tossing of the head and hair in quasi-drug induced manner, but the occasional shake of the head with suppressed, volcanic emotion is permitted.

Third, facial expression. The flamenco air guitarist should cultivate an expression of sublime serenity, often with eyes closed, punctuated by brief explosions of intense emotion (eyes scrunched and mouth twisted, as if in pain). Given the lack of any actual music, the

flamenco air guitarist might accompany these occasional outbursts with bending close over his invisible instrument, making a violent strumming motion with his right hand while manipulating the fingers of his left in imitation of the fine fingering of actual flamenco guitarists.

Finally, general demeanour. The flamenco air guitarist is courteous and controlled, elegant and artistic, but definitely manly. He does not grunt, shout, head bang or generally gain enjoyment by leaping up and down. He is a man of the people, but aloof and slightly separated by his art, which, in the absence of a world championship similar to that of his rock colleagues, is performed mainly alone or in small groups. Yet, unencumbered as he is by a physical instrument, he may travel widely to perform across the globe, though usually in hotels or friend's apartments, with like-minded flamenco airistas. Happy flamenco air guitar playing.

Semana Santa (Holy Week)

Easter in Jerez brings the daily parades of penitents from the ancient churches and chapels of the town, complete with bands, choirs, watching masses and especially published programme. It's impossible to move during some of the processions - I can attest to being flattened

against a stone wall for about ten minutes while a black-clad procession of bare-foot penitents, complete with huge candles, singing children and massive religious paraphernalia, was stalled for a while. The men bearing a statue aboard a heavy, shoulder-height bier, or *paso*, were negotiating, bit by bit, a ninety degree turn in the narrow street and the whole procession backed up.

Churches parade every day from about six in the evening to one in the morning and no church parades more than once. All roads in the centre of town are closed and on Good Friday the processions continue throughout the night. This amazing communal spectacle is free, but get there early to avoid disappointment, as they say, the streets are very, very crowded.

On such occasions it's fun to look out for interesting juxtapositions between the ancient and sacred and the modern and profane. Sitting in a café, we watched a participant, resplendent in red robes and obviously already late, trying to affix his pointed hood while rushing along the pavement. He failed to take account of the café awning under which my party was sitting. Cue much decidedly unreligious language, then a rapid re-attempt to don the headdress which, we saw, was lined with the iron-on starch once commonly used for shirt collars, the better for it to retain its shape and remain aloft. He smiled, sheepishly, as he hurried on his way.

May - the Feria

April and May are wonderful months in which to visit Jerez. Most streets and even alleyways are lined with orange trees which bloom in April. There is also Porvera, a street running alongside the ancient city walls, which is lined with jacaranda trees. This becomes a tunnel of purple blossom in May. Their perfume comes in two waves, first when the flowers bloom and second when the blooms fall and are crushed by the passing cars. It is intoxicating.

As in most towns and cities at this latitude, much of life is lived outdoors, so there are plenty of well cared for, and well used, public spaces. In Plaza Arenal at the moment there is a science fair and I saw several crocodiles of school children being shepherded through the

winding streets towards the wooden kiosks lining the square. They were entirely oblivious to the orange trees, jacaranda and pomegranate trees and gave not a glance to oleanders and palms, but then, this is just what they are used to.

Even the police station in Jerez has a garden. It is located in an old palace in Plaza Arroyo, around a central courtyard. The gun-toting police guard at the entrance has become used to tourists who want to see the garden and is quite happy to allow people in and for photographs to be taken (though not of him). Police motorbikes can often be found propped up against the plinth of the benign Madonna who watches over the garden amidst the lilies.

The science fair kiosks will disappear soon, when the Circuito de Jerez hosts its annual Moto Grand Prix and the bikers come to town. This year the GP itself takes place on May Day weekend and it attracts enthusiasts from across Europe, who travel to Andalucia in great convoys along the motorways. People stand on motorway bridges to photograph the phalanxes of bikes and bikers, processing at speed towards Jerez.

The town is always noisy on the weekend of the Moto GP and, needless to say, the influx is not universally liked (especially by the local cab drivers). Nonetheless, it is good for trade and, the post-crash economy being what it is, will be most welcome to many of the businesses in the town. As early as 27th April there will be a parade of antique motor bikes from the Circuito on the edge of town to Arenal in the centre, steered by their, sometimes equally antique, riders. It's free to watch and to walk through the bikes on display in Arenal. Interest in the machines is welcomed by their proud owners. Later in May, however, there is another, much older, festival.

In the north west of the city on the Avenida Alvaro Domecq, in what was once the outskirts of town, there is a large, enclosed open space, the size of two football fields. This is the Parque Gonzales Hontoria, the sole purpose of which is to house the annual, week-long Feria del Caballo (the Festival of the Horse). Already, at the end of April, the tented city that supports the Feria is taking shape, as rows of *casetas*, or tented rooms, are constructed along the Parque's wide

avenues. This year there will be over two hundred of them. The casetas will barely contain all the visitors to the Feria, as they move between them - a fino here, a tapa there - with the object of seeing and being seen and having a good time.

The fair dates back to the thirteenth century, when it was established by King Alfonso X, conqueror of the, formerly Moorish, city. There are formal proceedings and competitions, in dressage, show jumping and carriage driving, in the large indoor exhibition hall in one corner of the park and other venues across the city, and as part of Equisur, the horsey commercial fair which runs parallel to the Feria. Many of these are ticketed and sell out in advance, but some are free.

My neighbour once described the Feria as 'a week long party, where you meet everyone you have ever known'. A pardonable exaggeration perhaps, but this ancient fair energises the whole town and provides an annual opportunity for Jerezianos to come together. People return from all corners of the globe for the Feria, to catch up, talk, dance and drink sherry. I know people who retain a pied de terre in the city for the sole purpose of being able to stay in it when they return for this event. And the flamenco guilds are out and about, singing, playing and dancing along the Paseo de las Palmeras, one of the

major, palm-tree lined avenues which runs the length of the park, to ensure that it has that distinctive, Jereziano flavour.

Traditional dress is de rigeur, whole families, three or four generations, stroll around the park in gaily coloured dresses or matador pants and boleros, from aging grand parents to tiny children. There is exquisite beauty on show, the warm skin tones, raven hair and dark eyes of both genders, slim and beautiful in this unforgiving garb. There are plenty of shops in town where costumes may be bought, though the cogniscienti have theirs made. Even those folk who don't dress traditionally tend to dress their best (it is, by and large, the tourists who are be-jeaned). The real accessory of choice, however, is a horse or a horse and carriage.

Sherry houses, associations, clubs and the richer families own and maintain horse-drawn carriages, which parade up and down the avenues. It was at the Feria that I first saw a carriage with five, and even seven, horses in harness, (although the latter is very rare) instead of the more usual two, four or six. There are also many single horsemen and women. After all, this is a city in which, within ten minutes walk of the centre of town, one can find vast stables occupying bodega like buildings for the housing of horses.

Most people cannot, of course, afford the expense of a horse, but they can afford to belong to unions and associations, which occupy the best, corner sites for eating, drinking and viewing the *paseos* within the park. Tourists please note, one may find oneself exiled to one of the smaller avenues away from the main drives, if one wants to eat and eating at the Feria is expensive! If a formal meal is what is required, then book well in advance, for a table at one of the restaurants which spring up in the park, outliers of those in the centre of the town.

In the evening the Feria becomes even more vibrant. The lights are switched on just as dusk darkens to night and, especially at the weekends, the whole city seems to come out to play with the *casetas* full to bursting and everyone dancing.

It is the citizens of the town who make this such a wonderful event as they walk along the wide avenues, ready to dance and sing,

clapping to a flamenco rhythm and looking out for friends, old and new. The Feria del Caballo is a phenomenon, but a phenomenon which belongs to the Jerezianos.

June - Corpus Christi

The Feria is over, only the skeletons of the *casetas* remain in the Parque Gonzales Hontoria. Soon they too will be dismantled. It's been a quieter Feria than usual, my neighbours say, it's austerity. Even the town band (a very good band, including a number of Conservatoire de Jerez musicians) is now defunct because of cuts. In a city where music is part of the lifeblood, this is a serious matter.

The municipality is ungoverned at the moment, local elections (only five days ago) having resulted in a complicated situation. The PP (Partido Popular, christian democrats of the right) gathered most votes, but insufficient to form a council if PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol) and the Podemos supported candidates unite against it. There seems to be a consensus that they will unite to form a coalition of the left. Elsewhere in Spain, Podemos gained 117 seats in regional governments. It augurs well for them in the national elections to be held on or before 20th December.

There is speculation among English-speaking expats about what the recent Tory victory in the UK elections might mean for the EU. Few people I spoke to understood that a referendum might take place as early as next year. Whether or not UK citizens living in the EU will be allowed to vote is a big issue, as it is for the foreign nationals currently resident, long term, in the UK. The terms of suffrage could be crucial as both those groups are likely to vote to remain in the EU and, if the vote is close, they could make the difference. People need to mobilise to ensure they are enfranchised. Especially as one possible impact of an exit vote may be the return of those taxation measures deemed discriminatory by the EU, making residence abroad more expensive and, perhaps driving some ex-pats back to the UK. Taking money from the 'foreigners' is a demagogue's rallying cry everywhere and it has already been heard in France and, in a different context, in the UK.

Meanwhile life goes on. It is Corpus Christi on Thursday and preparations for the celebration are underway. In Plateros on Saturday night we're treated to an interesting co-incidence, as one Spanish religion, Catholicism, meets another, football. It is the Copa del Rey and Barcelona are taking on Athletic Bilbao, so the bars and cafes are full, inside and out, with folk there to watch. The square is also crowded with those there for a religious procession. The cheers greeting Barca's goal (and subsequent groans, as it is disallowed) mingle with the applause for the *pasos* of the virgin and the cruxification and the music of the band following them. All is good humoured, but it's sufficiently noisy to drive our party away into a restaurant and our table is quickly taken by a be-suited group of male wedding guests, who are clearly bunking off from the ceremony taking place in the Town Hall nearby. The last time I saw that happen was many years ago at a wedding in a suburb of Manchester.

Summer

With Summer come lots of international visitors, which is good news for the town. The *Noches de Verano* programme, of cultural events in historic and scenic venues, has been announced. This is a wonderful way to use beautiful, old spaces, like the 13th century monastery of San Domingo - I heard a magical classical concert there a couple of years ago, Mendelsson re-sounding as a full moon rose above the cloisters.

In the ancient Alcazar I saw flamenco but the stage there has lots of different artists - a Queen tribute band could be heard Radio Ga-ga-ing beyond the old twelfth century walls last Summer. There is always something to see and listen to in Jerez.

One change since my previous visit is that Jerez now has a local government, albeit a minority one. The PP has taken office, on the basis that they garnered the most votes in the recent local elections (34%). The other parties, together, gained considerably more votes - PSOE got 24% , Ganemos (what Podemos calls itself in these parts) 16% and other, left-leaning parties 7% (with the Citizen's party gain-

ing almost 9%). But, the parties of the left having failed to form an alliance, the PP are in power.

I had a quiet time, sketching out the narratives which will form the basis of another year in my Village. It took me two years to write *The Village*, though I was learning as I went along. I hope it won't take quite so long to write the next one. The positive comments (and reviews) have prompted me to write about the village again. But I will be working on the next set of stories for some while to come, I think, they need to be at least as good as the first set.

Alcazar Gardens

One of the places in Jerez where I like to sit and think, jotting down ideas, is the 12th century Alcazar, in gardens where fountains burble in the shade of cypress trees. There are tourists wandering around, but the place is never crowded and I always get lots done, watched over by the statue of the thirteenth century King Alfonso X, a remarkable monarch, called 'El Sabio' - 'The Wise'. He was the son of a famous warrior King, who had much success in pushing back the Moors from central Iberia. Alfonso was brought up in multi-cultural and sophisticated Toledo and, throughout his life, surrounded himself with Jewish, Muslim and Christian scholars. Though he had some martial successes, his legacy is of a different kind.

He formulated a system of laws and *Fueros*, or city charters, which devolved some governing powers to cities (thereby restraining the ambitions of his barons). Giving citizens some say in their gov-

ernment was a fairly revolutionary thing for a monarch to do at the time - the English Magna Carta, signed in 1215 by King John, gave rights to barons only. The system was imported into the Americas with Colombus and, later, in a completely different form, into U.S. governance. So Alfonso X is honoured by another statue, in the U.S. House of Representatives, as 'The Law-giver'. But he has an even more amazing monument.

Alfonso was a keen astronomer. When the Christian armies finally overran western Al Andalus, he ensured that the works of important Moorish astronomers were saved and circulated, commissioning the *Alfonsine tables*. This allowed western cosmology and astronomy to develop towards Copernicus and Galileo. So his finest memorial can be found on the Moon, where *craterus Alfonsus* bears his name. Incidentally, while doing all this and expanding his own domains by over a third, he managed to co-author the first book about games and gaming in the western world, as well as being an accomplished poet and musician. An interesting king, little known outside Spain and the Americas, I think he should be known more widely.

It was very hot in the Alcazar gardens, even more so than usual. May was the hottest May since records began in Jerez, it is said, June was the hottest June and now July is sizzling too. By lunch-time the streets are empty of all but tourists, as temperatures hit the forties. The siesta normally ends at about five thirty or six, but, when temperatures are this high, the town doesn't re-energise until much later, when things are cooler. This means that the squares and bars don't fill until ten (though the tourists are there earlier) and the buzz continues until two or three in the morning. On a roof terrace on Friday I watched the sun setting behind the cathedral, accompanied by the clack-clack of the storks nesting on the top of the nearby church tower (two offspring this year).Above us Venus and Mars were in conjunction. King Alfonso would have approved.

The roof terrace overlooked Plateros a square which features strongly in '*Reconquista*' the eventual title of my novel. It's where one of the main characters lives, in the Juderia, or jewish quarter. He and his friend escape confinement by climbing over the roofs from their

attic, onto a roof-scape not unlike todays. For many of the old cobbled streets of the Juderia are still there, in the south-east corner of the walled centre.

Jerez also has many fine houses and palaces, although most are of more recent vintage than the 1200s, when '*Reconquista*' is set. But there are still buildings from the 13th century and before, the Alcazar, the cloisters of San Domingo and many a church (or ex-mosque). The old city walls can still be seen, either free-standing or incorporated into later constructions. An ice-cream parlour, an hotel and three restaurants, to my knowledge, exhibit sections of wall with pride. If you buy a house on Porvera, the street of the jacaranda trees, you get a portion of the old city wall too, including the battlements, which some folk have turned into gardens or seating areas (it's a selling point). Unfortunately you are also, I am told, responsible for its, often expensive, up-keep.

Newly opened to the public this year is the Palace of the Viceroy Laserna, in central Jerez. The foundations of the Palace are Moorish in origin, though exactly who owned it then isn't known (its proximity to the Alcazar suggests that it was someone important). In 1264, after King Alfonso X finally re-took the city, the house was given to one of his Christian knights, one Basco Martinez de Trujillo. The Palace passed through generations of the family, including, via an entailment, to the de la Sernas, thus giving it the name it bears today.

That name is of the Viceroy or Virrey de la Serna, first Count of the Andes. He was, primarily, a soldier, who became Viceroy of Peru. The early nineteenth century was a period of tumult in South America as Spain's colonies first tried to retain their allegiance to King Fernando VII, (imprisoned by Napoleon) then to become independent. De la Serna represented the Spanish crown and fought, successfully, against the nascent independence movements. He must have been an exceptional individual, as he also managed to gain the respect of his antagonist, Simon Bolivar. Returning to Spain, injured, after the defeat at Ayacucho, he was made Count of the Andes. He died in 1832. The title, along with others, has stayed within the family, which has

remained staunchly monarchist - the 7th Count being imprisoned by General Franco for his loyalty to the King in exile.

The interior decor of the Palace is a mixture of the European Rococo style, found in the gilt, plaster work and silken walls of the various Salons, and the traditional Andalucian, such as the white walls, wooden beams and fine tile work floor of the Gallery. The renowned flamenco singer, dancer and actress, Lola Flores, first danced in public in the Gallery, at the age of eleven. The tiled floor flows out into a tranquil private garden.

Throughout there is fine furniture, old master paintings and some exquisite sculptures. Upstairs the rooms are very grand, but the numerous family portraits and photographs attest that this remarkable building is still and always has been a family home.

In the event a coalition was formed by PSOE and Gademos under a PP mayor

September - Vendimia

It's grape harvest time in Jerez, as it is across the Mediterranean. My first encounter with the celebration which traditionally accompanies

the harvest was in Italy as a child. The most famous red wine made around Lake Garda was Bardolino and the Bardolini celebrated in social, outdoor fashion (spoiling this up-tight English child, probably irretrievably). Since then I have followed the town band in Corbieres, in the Langedoc, from eglise to mairie, to taste both the red and the white of that year in the town square. But neither of these occasions compares with the celebrations in Jerez. Perhaps it's because Jerez is sherry, its ancient name, Xeres, giving us the very word.

The harvest is in early this year, the summer has been so hot that the grapes have ripened more quickly than usual. In Bardolino or Corbieres this might be a cause for concern, but not in Jerez, where the *solera* system of production, a blending of wines of different vintages, ensures consistency of quality. You will never see a vintage year on a bottle of sherry, for this very reason.

As elsewhere across southern Europe the church plays a role in the celebration, in this case Jerez Cathedral, outside which a group of grape harvesters, dressed in traditional costume (an unfeasible white) tread the grapes. The production of the *mosto*, the first pressings, is heralded by the Hymn of the Harvest, sung in the Cathedral and the wine is blessed. This setting is particularly appropriate in Jerez, for it was the taxes from the sale of sherry and brandy which funded the construction of the Cathedral.

This being Jerez the celebration is accompanied by much eating and drinking and, of course, music. La Fiesta Gastronomica takes place in the Alameda Vieja, just outside the Alcazar. This open square is lined with '*casetas*', tented booths for wining and dining. The city's restaurants offer their wares within as Jerezianos stroll, listening to the music from the bandstand on the Alameda under the coloured lights after dark. At least that's the theory, but, in fact, it's incredibly difficult to get a table at any of them after nine o'clock, as I can attest. The *casetas* open from one in the afternoon until two in the morning and are very reasonably priced.

Many of the sherry houses open their doors, free, for the duration of the fiesta. There are seminars and guided tours, including master classes in sherry tasting and in the marriage between sherry and the best of the local cuisine.

Jerez and Cadiz also produce some excellent wines aside from sherry. Bodega Luis Perez produces the first-rate Garum, Vino Tierra de Cadiz, named after the Roman word for the fish sauce which was produced in industrial quantities near Cadiz in the time of Imperial Rome. There is also 'CJ' an honest red wine purchased for very little from the monastery shop on Calle Medina (just round the corner from me) and Entrechuelos, both white and red, from Bodegas Miguel Domecq in Jerez, an old name re-launching a new product.

Music also features at Vendimia, with the City of Jerez International Piano Competition taking place in the Cloisters. A flamenco cycle of songs is given nightly at the Tabanco El Pasaje, except for when the Fiesta de la Buleria takes place for a day at the Alcazar. The 'buleria' is a flamenco dance invented in Jerez and the Fiesta event, which has been going for over 50 years, draws several thousand aficionados.

There is also music of different types. This year 'Medieval Jerez' presented exquisite early music from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries in the chapel, formerly the mosque, of the Alcazar. The mosque became a chapel and was dedicated to Santa Maria by King Alfonso X after his successful victory at Jerez in 1264. The altar set into its west-facing wall records this dedication and panels upon it

display the words to the 'Ave Maria' and reference another song, written by King Alfonso for performance in this very chapel.

The acoustics in the hexagonal chapel were excellent and it echoed to *a capella* monastic part-songs, as well as jolly dances and marching songs from Carmina Burana (the more delicate original, not the thumping Orff version). Included in the programme were four pieces by King Alfonso X 'El Sabio', himself, two of them written specifically for or about Capilla de Santa Maria. He was a fine composer. Now I must work some music into my novel.

The Fiesta de la Vendimia 2015 runs from 1st to 20th September in Jerez in 2015. Most of the events within it are free or at moderate cost e.g. a ticket to my lovely concert cost 10 euros.

Autumn

Watching a big Atlantic storm roll across the ocean towards the seawalls of Cadiz is a fine, if humbling, experience. Even standing there on a sunny day prompts a feeling of exposure, being on the edge of the solid world, knowing there is nothing between you and America but water and air. When the rain lashes and pours there seems to be nothing but water, the sea before, the lagoon behind, the rain filled air and the gushing rivulets on the flat-cobbled roads of this tiny ancient city.

The tall buildings and narrow streets provide places of respite from the wind-whipped rain. Yet sometimes crossing from one corner to another on the grid-like streets means a drenching - some of the streets run straight back from the sea side. On the lagoon side it is often less fierce, the town providing the shelter.

Cadiz has a unique topography, built on the rocky tip of a long sand spit on the Atlantic coast of southern Spain. It took me many journeys and several trips to the top of the *miradors*, or watchtowers, which are scattered across Cadiz, before I finally fixed the topography of the Bay in my mind. It is half sea, half marsh and has been panned for salt since pre-Roman times, you can see little mountains of the white mineral piled up near the railway track. Land has been reclaimed and settled, San Fernando and Puerto Real grow bigger

every year. But the Bay it is still a desolate and eerie place, especially when there is a mixture of driving rain, low cloud and sea fret. On my last visit there were all three, as well as sunshine and a rainbow - the weather here is idiosyncratic too.

The Bay area has been inhabited since pre-history and one good thing to do on a rainy day in Cadiz is visit its excellent Museum, which contains treasures going back to seven centuries BCE. There are some exquisite and unbelievably delicate pieces of jewellery which I, at first, mistook for something from a much later period. There are Phoenician sarcophagi and votive statues to Astarte. Melqart was a major deity here, subsequently conflated with Heracles or Hercules, and his columns form part of the coat of arms of the city. It has been called Gadir (Phoenician), Gadiera (Greek), Gades (Roman), Qadir (Arab) and Cadiz and is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in Western Europe. So lots of history then.

The second floor of the Museum is devoted to the Fine Arts, with pictures by Zubaran, Ribera, Rubens, van Eyck, Van der Weyden and Murillo, who died after falling from the scaffolding in Santa Catalina church on the Campo del Sur in Cadiz when painting his 'Marriage of St Catherine'. The Museum stands on the Plaza Mina, one of Cadiz garden squares, often planted, like the public gardens at the very tip of the landspit, with exotic species brought back, by Columbus and others, from far-flung voyages.

Another visit for a rainy day would be to La Casa del Obispo next to the 'New' Cathedral (begun 1772). The Bishop's House holds fine art and ceramics but also allows the visitor to walk, on glass floors, over excavated archeological sites, mostly of the Roman period. La Casa is a small, but excellent museum.

*

In Jerez the oleanders are still blooming. The sky is pure blue. Not as deep an azure as at high summer perhaps, but blue nonetheless, against the white-washed walls, as the shutters are opened in the morning. At latitude 36 degrees, N, the sun is still shining, sufficient to give this individual's face a healthy glow and families stroll about town on a Sunday morning in T-shirts. In London, at latitude 51 de-

grees, N, it hails and rains and there are high winds. The temperature has dropped (though it's still unseasonably high), along with the leaves which have given this Autumn such glorious colour. What a difference 15 degrees makes.

In Jerez at this time of year dusk falls at about five forty-five and lasts until six thirty. There is less twilight the closer to the Equator you get, given the angle of the sun's position to the horizon, but even after dark people wander around in shirt sleeves. There are fewer foreign visitors in town, the air-lines' summer schedules have ended and any travellers will have to drive to Jerez or come via Seville (by air, as I did) or Cadiz (by sea). This didn't reduce the Saturday night buzz in the centre, where we were very fortunate to get a table at a favourite restaurant (and only through acquaintance).

Soon the zambombas will begin, though this year anyone holding a zambomba will need a licence. A wheeze by the Town Hall to raise money, yes, but also a way of monitoring the festivities. Zambombas are traditional in Jerez, until recently being linked with specific places around the old town. The neighbours in a community, in a barrio like San Miguel, say, would gather round an out-door bonfire during the days before Christmas, to eat and drink together and sing traditional songs. This still happens, with the places nearest to the fire being reserved for the older ladies in the neighbourhood, who know the words to all the old songs. These are as unlike English carols as you could find, often being scurrilous, rude and anti-Church, an antidote to the out-pouring of Catholic piety at this time of the year. They are accompanied by tambourines and the zambomba drums. Food is often free.

Today these have proliferated, with many hotels and bars holding their own zambombas. People come into town to watch and take part, so they have become something of a tourist attraction. Most Jerez dwellers I know will go to at least one zambomba, but they lament the increased frequency, even while acknowledging that the zambombas bring people and money to the town. They are glad, especially if they live in the old centre, when Christmas comes and they hear the zambomba drums no more for another year.

December - Advent

Jerez old town always dresses well for Christmas. This year the lights are somewhat more subdued, the Town Hall is economising - it's austerity. Like every year, however, in this pre-Christmas period, the centre is a wonderful place to stroll after dark and lots of people do exactly that, anticipating the holiday to come.

There are tasteful white lights along the Calle Larga, the main shopping street and the shops are, of course, open until nine o'clock in the evening. Calle Larga leads up to Arenal, one of the city's main squares, where a large modern Christmas tree sits, made entirely of lights. The orange trees which line the streets are also light-festooned, although their oranges have been removed, presumably for fear of electrical accidents. Even the narrow central streets have coloured lights strung across above the cobblestones.

In the Alameda Christina, outside the monastery of Santo Domingo stands the town Nativity, a life-size depiction of stable, occupants and livestock. Time was when the animals would be real, donkeys, sheep, cattle and all. No longer. But there is a traditional Christmas market in Arenal which sells, among other things, the little plaster

statuettes and figures with which to create a nativity scene. Many Jerez households set up their own nativity scenes at home and I can remember from childhood that many English households used to do the same. My neighbour, not someone whom I would consider especially religious, has a little display of delicate nativity figures in her otherwise modern flat. My Christmas card was placed, incongruously, next to it. The giving of cards at Christmas not being a Spanish tradition, it was the only one.

I bought presents at the market - fresh local honey, books and dishes. When one stepped back from the stalls and looked up one saw another traditional aspect of Arenal, as a centre of protest. The Confederacion General del Trabajo, or CGT, has its offices there. The anarcho-syndicalist trade union represents approx. 80,000 workers, mostly in Spain, though it is especially strong in Catalonia and in transport-associated trades. When the 'indignados' protest began, back in 2009, when the Puerto del Sol and town squares all over Spain were occupied by protesters, it was in Arenal that the tents appeared. They stayed for months, but are no longer there, yet still one often sees people selling or distributing progressive literature there. The banners hung from the windows above the Christmas market, with its religious paraphernalia, proclaim 'Macho Violence is Terrorism' and 'No human being is illegal'. Religion and trade unionism seen together - in Spain that is a mixture which is highly combustible.

The protesters will shortly have the opportunity to make their opinions known at the ballot box. Spain goes to the polls for a general election on 20th December. When I was there the postal votes were distributed and the political campaigns and the media covering them ratcheted up a gear. Watching the TV and reading the newspapers was interesting, with a vast amount of coverage being given to the two main parties, the PP and PSOE, and much less to Podemos and the Cuidadanos (especially on TV). Social media was trending a 'merged' photograph of Rajoy (leader of the PP) and Rivera (leader of the Cuidadanos), which pretty much summed up the position of the right (though the Cuidadanos, or 'Citizens' party claims it is centrist). In Jerez itself a Gademos/PSOE coalition governs. Like the UK election back in May, however, there are wild cards. In particular the Catalan independence parties, which are, it is predicted, going to take a huge chunk of the Catalan vote, rather as the Scottish Nationalists did in the UK. This is more likely, it is thought, to weaken PSOE and the left (see CGT above), just as happened in the UK. It's very interesting.

But I enjoyed other more traditional pleasures during my visit. Lunch at an out-of-town Venta - at a table outside - was excellent (the oleanders and roses were still in bloom, see picture, left, taken at the time). And on Friday I went to see flamenco in a local bar. It was packed, but the audience was not disappointed. Unable to get a seat, however, we went on to Pantilla and stumbled into a local zambomba.

Zambomba!

I am not sure of the origin of zambombas. They are a traditional celebration and peculiar to Jerez. To my knowledge no other city has them, although, given the number of tourists drawn into town to witness and take part in them, other towns in the region are setting up their own, pale imitations.

Tradition has it that they began as a way of local communities getting together to celebrate, and satirize, the season without the presence of the Catholic Church. The 'impromptu' street parties, of music, singing, dancing and, traditionally, eating and drinking, simply

'appear' in squares or courtyards in the pre-Christmas period. Sometimes hand-printed posters tell you where they are to happen, sometimes it's word of mouth. Though this year the Town Hall has insisted that anyone holding a traditional zambomba has to have a paid licence to do so (given their proliferation and the number of bars and hotels which are getting in on the act).

On Saturday, ten days ago, I had almost given up hope of attending one. The weather had been kind, warm with blue skies, but at about six o'clock the heavens opened. Given that one traditional aspect of a zambomba is a fire, usually in an oil drum, and that the rain was becoming a torrent, I resigned myself to missing out. Then I received a text saying 'Get to Plateros for the biggest zambomba in the known universe.' So off I went.

Regular readers will know that Plateros, or the square of the silversmiths, features frequently in these reports. In part because it's very central to the old town of Jerez, in part because I have friends who live there and in part because it also features strongly in 'Reconquista'. On Saturday night it was full to bursting with people. The chairs, tables, heaters and parasols of a local bakery and café had been appropriated by musicians and zambomba attendees.

When I arrived the celebration was in full swing, though without the traditional fire - it would have been far too dangerous, not to say destructive of the large parasols and might have prompted objections

from their owners. The zambomba drum, an instrument made of terracotta and, traditionally, animal skin, with a distinctive booming sound, was keeping the rhythm, assisted by clapping and tambourines in the crowd. The song being sung when I arrived was 'Los Caminos de Hicieron' telling of the road to the stable.

The zambomba songs are a mixture of traditional folk songs for Christmas, like old English carols, and mischievous (and dirty) ditties. Like many old carols, much is made of the natural world and the form of the songs translates too. There are 'list' songs like 'De Los Doce Palabras' ('Of the Twelve Words') which recall 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' and round songs. Even the dirty ditties have a familiarity. 'La Micaela' tells of Micaela, a doctor and a physical examination which is only superficially a medical one. The songs which don't translate are the anti-clerical ones, like 'El Cura non va la Iglesia' ('The Priest who doesn't go to Church'). Most unusual are the place-specific songs. Not just songs which reference Jerez, like 'Vente Pa Jerez', but references to actual roads and squares. Calle San Francisco, Calle Dona Blanca and Calle Medina (the road at the top of my street) all feature.

When I left, the zambomba was still going strong, with people dancing as well as singing and the crowds growing denser (if that was possible). Folk come into town from miles around and from other parts of Spain to see them. On my way back home I was asked for directions on three occasions, all by visiting Spaniards. For once I felt very (though spuriously) Jerezian.

T W O

London

The Story Bazaar's home thoughts from home are on varied subjects ranging across history, interesting places, art and architecture. My own stamping ground of south London figures frequently.

London is a never-ending treasure trove of delights for me. Living here with a wonderful array of galleries, museums, concert halls and theatres available, is a joy. I am immeasurably lucky to have lived and worked here, while living here was still just possible for ordinary working folk, not millionaires.

March

Spring, when a young man's fancy turns to love and a middle-aged woman's turns to gardening. But not yesterday when, for the first time, I explored the Kensington Roof Gardens. A stone's throw from the tube at Kensington High Street, the entrance to the roof gardens, at number 99, Kensington High Street, is actually just around the corner in Derby Street. There a lift takes you to the sixth floor and another world.

Turn right out of the vestibule door and, across the English flower garden, the pink of the cherry blossom vies with that of the flamingos as ducks and geese swim on the little 'stream' beneath the Chinese bridge. Turn left and you are in an Alhambran garden, complete with pruned cypresses, a rusticated colonnade with seating for when the weather is more Guildford than Granada and a remarkable view of the spire of St Mary Abbots just across the High Street. Continue round and you walk through a series of English Tudor garden rooms, complete with flowering urns, honeysuckle and tudor roses.

Originally built as part of Derry and Toms department store, the grade 2 listed gardens, stretching over 1.5 acres, were designed by landscape architect, Ralph Hancock. They took two years and £25,000 to build, during 1936 and 1938. Several of the original trees remain in situ. They are open to the public on a regular basis, but the pavilion within the gardens is often used for functions and events, so it's best to call ahead to see if they will be open when you want to visit (0207 937 7994). Entrance is free and there are outdoor heaters at this time of year. There is a restaurant on the 7th floor which overlooks the gardens and has spectacular views over London (and a three course Sunday lunch can be had for £30 per person). All are now owned by the Virgin group and more information can be found on their web-site.

March -South London

This week I've been out and about in Clapham, tracking down the remarkable 18th century reformist group known as The Clapham Sect. Its most famous member, William Wilberforce, resided at Broomfield, a house which stood where Broomwood Road is now, on the south west side of Clapham Common. This was then part of the estate of his cousin, Henry Thornton of Battersea Rise House. The Thornton family were merchants and bankers who hailed, originally, from Kingston-Upon-Hull, as did Wilberforce, who was Hull's MP.

The family settled around the Common in what were grand country houses, some parts of which still exist. The most unusual may be the façade of 'The Orangery', newly restored amidst the tower-blocks of the Notre Dame Estate, the municipal housing which replaced the convent of the same name. Its classical façade, complete with pilasters and Ionic capitals, still stands, somewhat incongruously, next to Notre Dame School in Worsopp Drive, a reminder of the Thornton estate and gardens which once graced the South Side of the Common.

The Thornton Orangerie

At No. 5, The Pavement, now Waitrose by Clapham Common Tube station, lived Thomas Babington Macaulay. It was his father, Zachary, who, after some time spent in Jamaica on a sugar plantation, became a supporter of the abolition of slavery and, in 1794 was appointed Governor of the newly-founded settlement for freed slaves in

Sierra Leone, where he and fellow reformers founded Freetown. The Macauleys returned to England in 1799, to stay with Henry Thornton. They were accompanied by 25 African children, whom he installed at 8, Rectory Grove in what became The African Academy.

Holy Trinity, Clapham

The Macaulays, the Thorntons, the Grants and other families, together with James Stephen, maritime lawyer and eventual Master of Chancery (and great grandfather of Virginia Woolf) and Hannah More, (playwright, writer and reformer) worshipped at the recently erected Holy Trinity, Clapham Common. Built in 1776, in the Georgian colonial style, the large, galleried church retains some original features, although much has been replaced and a new Chancel and organ added. The plaque on the south wall of the outside of the church commemorating the Clapham Sect is scarred by the bomb blast which almost destroyed the church during World War II.

Holy Trinity, with the Reverend Henry Venn and his son, the Reverend John Venn, was the centre for sustained and passionate commitment to social and religious reform by the Clapham Sect, which eventually lead to the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807 and the final Abolition of Slavery Act in 1833, three days before William Wilberforce died. It also produced the Church Mission Society and the British & Foreign Bible Society, support for legislation to pro-

tect factory children and the establishment of schools for the poor and leading opposition to cruel sports and the mistreatment of animals. It is proof that people, even a small number of people, can change the world for the better.

The names of the reformers are familiar to Clapham residents and to passing motorists in the many street names around Clapham Common. The lives of the more famous members of the Clapham Sect are richly chronicled, but this blogger's main source was *Clapham, Saints & Sinners*, by Eric E.F.Smith, The Clapham Press, 1987. I was also fortunate to receive a tour of Holy Trinity by its current Rector, Canon David Isherwood, who, most kindly, allowed the photography

April - Easter

Given the time of year I thought a visit to a number of, newly cleaned and restored, churches might be in order this week. My first was Christchurch, Spitalfields, Hawksmoor's chunky masterpiece (take the Central line to Liverpool Street station, cross Broadgate and head towards Commercial Street). Currently gleaming white, Christchurch almost didn't survive many years of neglect until its restoration, not to say resurrection, in the 1960s. This has only recently been completed at a cost of £10m.. Built between 1714 and 1729 as one of the churches of the Fifty New Churches Act of 1711, Christchurch's huge spire amply fulfilled the requirements of the Act and it still towers over the surrounding area. At the time of building it would have towered over the non-conformist churches and chapels of the French Huguenot silk-weavers who were populating Spitalfields in the early 18th century. This was the intention of those who sponsored the Act. The godless masses were to be cowed and brought within the fold (and woe betide any of those pesky non-conformists, who would be made to look up at a true Anglican Christian edifice).

Preachers here include John Wesley (so much for over-aweing the non-conformists) and the 18th century curate Samuel Henshall, inventor of the modern cork screw. When Mr Henshall eventually died, he owed, it is said, £400 to his wine merchant. More recently, in the

1980s and 90s, works within the crypt led to the excavation of over 1,000 cadavers. Suspicion that this was a newly unearthed plague pit led to press and public speculation about the longevity of the plague carrying bacillae. Needless to say, modern London was not troubled by a replay of the Black Death. Today the church often hosts public performances of music and the art of locals, Gilbert & George. Entry is free though the church is only open at certain times.

Christchurch shares with the second of my churches the lack of interior pews The new St Paul's Cathedral, a stunning monument not only to the Saint, but also to Sir Christopher Wren its creator, has always been an open church. So much so that, in late 18th century the men of business who thronged the western part of the church implored the church authorities to heat it - hence the brass floor grills which can be seen today, through which heat from hot coals down in the crypt would pass. It too is newly gleaming white, after ten years and £62m worth of cleaning and restoration.

Built after the Great Fire on a site occupied by a church dedicated to St Paul since CE604, this building is only the latest in a series of phoenix rising from the ashes. It is, however, the crowning glory of Wren's prodigious church-building career, in which he was often helped by his assistant, Nicholas Hawksmoor. Wren also managed to find time to build so much else - the Monument, a large parts of Hampton Court and Kensington Palaces, the Wren Library at Trinity, Cambridge, the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich... and the list goes on. He is buried in the crypt and his epitaph asks its readers to look about them for his monument. What better?

Thanks to Eileen, my guide on this visit, who was most knowledgeable about 'the people's church' (no royals), although she isn't a

fan of the most recent installation, a piece of video art by Bill Viola. At the end of the south Quire Aisle there are four oblong video screens, each showing a person in extremis, not a comfortable piece of art, but particularly appropriate at this point in the church calendar. My visit there preceded Palm Sunday and we were treated to Eileen's description of the Palm Sunday Parade from Paternoster Square to the High Altar, complete with live donkeys (who only get as far as just inside the West Door, for fear of 'accidents').

Readers will not need me to tell them more about St Paul's or the famous people interred beneath the massive flagstones in the crypt. It is so much the public monument these days that it charges £17.50 for entry (£15.00 concessions) though worshippers are provided with a separate side chapel with free entry.

My final church is exactly the sort of non-conformist chapel which Christchurch was designed to out-shine, though constructed much later. It sits in Spital Square just north of the old market and its red-brick and stone mullioned windows are newly scrubbed. Its latest incarnation accommodates a modern restaurant, where a good Sunday lunch may be had for £35 per person. There is a galleried area, as well as the main body of the former chapel, for dining and live jazz on Sundays. It was enjoyed by all the party.

May - Chelsea

It's that time of year, when the quiet shade under the Royal Hospital beeches echoes to the sound of the Guards brass band. Champagne corks pop, TV crews talk and there's a lot of shopping amidst the viewing, noting and collecting. The English (and many other nationalities besides) are at the first of this year's annual events of the season, the RHS Flower Show at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea.

Chelsea precedes the Summer Exhibition (8th June - 16th August), Henley (1st - 5th July), Wimbledon (29th June - 12th July) and there's a test match about to begin at Lord's. As usual no-one told the weather gods. Yesterday was blustery, sometimes wet and cold, but the sun did appear and the afternoon was more pleasant.

We began with the show gardens. It was possible, though not easy, to see them properly in the morning (before the added influx of people at lunchtime). There were some real highlights. The Beauty of Islam garden was tranquil and serene, with sculpted white stone and running rills and fountains, planted with herbs, citrus trees and palms. It was a particularly precise and well defined version of the Moorish style, capturing its purity. The Perfumier's Garden too was a delight, with olive and fig trees, wild poppies and irises and the canal and 'lavoir' typical of Provence. There were also more traditional, formal English gardens of understated formality, most particularly a knot-garden planted with a cloud of perennials from Morgan Stanley.

The Beauty of Islam garden

Digitalis and irises abounded, as did euphorbia and aquilegia, to be expected at this time of year. And there was a slight move away from the 'scattered' planting which had become ubiquitous in recent years.

Our party was divided over Dan Pearson's Chatsworth garden, which had been given 'best in show'. Was it a garden or a piece of manicured wilderness? Did it belong on the edge of a plot, somewhere between garden and open country? The planting and skill were admirable. The huge stones were less universally admired.

* * *

Breaking News; Triffid seen on Circle Line

by our Nature correspondent

Passengers on the London Underground are reporting sightings of that most rare, and deadly, form of plant life, Triffidus Wyndhamii, or the common triffid, between Sloane Square and central London today. 'It's foliage was swaying, reaching for the carriage windows,' one eye witness said. 'There was no sign of the venomous stinger, but everyone got off at Victoria just in case.' British Transport Police have been alerted. A spokeswoman said, 'We'll be waiting for it at Embankment, where it'll probably have problems minding the gap.'

* * * * *

We were forced indoors by the eventual downpour, having ignored for long enough the occasional spots of rain. Inside the Grand Marquee we managed to lose each other within minutes, mainly because there was so much to see. My companion, a young lady from Ecuador, was entranced, though she expressed disappointment that she hadn't seen the 'flamboyant English' whom she had expected to see from her research. Silenced only for a moment, I pointed out the man with pink hair and blamed the weather.

Fortunately the weather improved by the end of the week and grand sell-off day. One didn't have to be a resident of SW3 to catch sight of many a gardener bowed under the weight of a huge plant highly unsuitable for transporting via bus or tube. There have been some very fine larger specimens this year. My favourites were the Bismark Palm in the Islam garden and the various multi-stemmed trees, in the Sentebale garden, the Telegraph garden or the Royal Bank of Canada garden.

The Living Legacy garden commemorated the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, its use of a blasted tree trunk and sharp metal shards was interesting, the latter brought to mind the WW1 paintings of Paul Nash. I liked less the brick and iron gateway which

rather resembled the entrance to a newly built gated housing development, though it is meant to represent the gates to Wellington College, an institution set up in the first Duke of Wellington's memory.

Chelsea seems to have been everywhere this year - the BBC's coverage, though excellent, seem to grow ever larger and more ubiquitous, rather like the grassy planting in many of the gardens. If you're going, you really have to watch.

June - An Anniversary

June 18th 2015 is the bicentennial anniversary of the battle of Waterloo. What better time to pay a return visit to Apsley House, London home of the Duke of Wellington? Worth visiting at any time of year, Apsley House is an excellent art gallery - Wellington was allowed to keep much of the royal Spanish art collection he rescued from looters of the Napoleonic baggage train, so you'll see Velasquez, Goya and other old masters on show. It is also a public celebration of its owner's life - I have seen very few other houses in which portraits of the owner cover quite so much of the wall space - and, above all, it is a commemoration of one of the great historical turning points - the epic battle itself.

It stands to the side of Decimus Burton's screen-entranceway to Hyde Park at the junction of Park Lane with Piccadilly, where the old toll house used to stand at the western approach to London. It therefore glories in the address, No. 1, London. Many drivers will have passed it on a regular basis without even noticing its existence, as they, rightly, concentrate on negotiating the large traffic roundabout before which it stands. Within that roundabout is another monument now opened to the public for the first time - the Wellington Arch.

The house is operated by English Heritage, though it is still the London residence of the Wellington family. The public rooms are very much as they would have been during Wellington's day and, currently, the Waterloo Room is set out as if for one of the famous Waterloo Banquets, held annually on 18th June. There will be three such banquets this anniversary year.

Apsley House

The house originally belonged to the Iron Duke's elder brother, who was regarded, before his younger sibling attained military glory, as the stellar member of the aristocratic, but impoverished, Irish family. He was appointed Governor General of India and he encouraged his younger brother's career (Arthur Wellesley was the third of five sons). Wellington was made a Colonel and took part in the battle of Seringapatam, against the forces of Tipu Sultan and thus began his military rise. Incidentally, an interesting relic of Tipu Sultan is the wonderful automaton displayed in the V & A Museum, known as 'Tipoo's Tiger'. When set working, the mechanical creature devours a mechanical redcoat.

Apsley House also contains a remarkable number of portraits, statues and other *objets* relating to Wellington's great adversary. The two men were contemporaries, both were 46 years old at the time of Waterloo and Wellington never met Napoleon, although he had the opportunity to do so. Maybe he regretted it, we'll never know, but he certainly collected memorabilia belonging to and about his opponent, including his death mask, which is on show here. Napoleon's is an almost tangible presence at Apsley House, which seems only proper, as the wealth and adulation heaped upon Wellington by various royal families wouldn't have accrued without him. The crowned heads of continental Europe were certainly very grateful, for the battle was a real turning point, they stood to lose everything.

Was I the only visitor who, remembering Wellington's later intractable opposition to any sort of social reform, wondered if victory by the begetter of the *Code Napoleon* might have meant a more progressive Europe and, maybe, a more progressive Britain? But then, by the time of Waterloo, Napoleon's republican fervour had been replaced by dynastic personal ambition.

Apsley House is a very male house (though not necessarily an overly 'masculine' one in decoration and taste). In part this is because, from the outset, it was Wellington's public, not private, face. Kitty Pakenham, Wellington's wife, did not live here, preferring their country house and she doesn't feature much at all. There are, however, plenty of mentions of women, as 'friends' either with inverted commas or without.

From the house one can see the equestrian statue of the 1st Duke, which stands on the traffic island. This would have been dwarfed by the version once mounted atop the Wellington Arch and since melted down. The Arch itself has had a interesting life and one storey of it houses a small museum setting out its history. It has been moved on at least one occasion and was once the smallest police station in London, complete with station cat. On the upper floor is a comprehensive exhibition to the battle of Waterloo, including a flat screen computer depiction of the battle itself. The viewing galleries give an excellent prospect down Constitution Hill and there is a lift for those who want or need it.

Standing on the island within the traffic roundabout for the first time, we also had the opportunity to look at other monuments there, all military memorials. The recent Anzac Day commemoration meant that many had flowers and wreaths laid before them. There are traditional memorials - to the Royal Artillery for example - as well as unusual and very modern ones, such as the collection of bronze pillars to southern hemisphere forces, Antipodean, Indonesian and Polynesian. It seems fitting that the house of one of Britain's greatest generals overlooks these memorials to the common soldiery.

July - A day at the races

Yesterday was Ladies Day at Sandown Park Racecourse in the salubrious, not-quite-London suburb of Esher (Great South Western trains approx. 20 minutes from Waterloo). The sun shone kindly on a few thousand race goers, many dressed to the nines. Not as grand, or as grandiose, as its regal cousin in Ascot, nor as rural as its historic, but more plebeian, relative in Epsom, Sandown still hosts some first class racing, such as today's Eclipse Stakes. Fifteen thousand people, a full house, are expected today (Ascot can host seventy thousand and Epsom, probably, a hundred thousand, given the free view from the Downs) to see if this year's Derby winner, Golden Horn, can follow up his win with another big prize. Yesterday was quiet by comparison.

Like many race courses, especially those which serve large urban populations, Sandown Park has, to an extent, sacrificed charm to capacity. The newly refurbished Ascot reminds me of nothing so much as a shopping mall and even Newmarket looks a bit like an out-of-town superstore, with that ubiquitous 'municipal building' architecture so over used in the '90s for tax offices and leisure centres. It's all about accommodating the crowds. Aintree can hold up to one hundred thousand, and it isn't even a rural course, while York can now hold forty thousand plus. Nonetheless, on a sunny and relative quiet race day Sandown is very pleasant, though London race goers looking for old-world charm, as opposed to better quality racing, might try Windsor, where a river boat takes a new arrival from railway station to antique race course.

Proceedings were enlivened, if enlivening was needed, by the 'best dressed lady' competition. Decent prizes meant that efforts were made and there was more than a smattering of extremely stylish women. Fine exceptions to over-kill were those who went for a slightly period, elegant look and/or were, quite frankly, so good-looking that they would have drawn admiration anywhere and in whatever garb (such as the winner of the competition). Heels abounded and not just those of the relatively sensible variety, but six or seven inch stiletto heels on shoes which were themselves raised,

their wearers heading inexorably for Hammer toes, bunions, Morton's neuroma and probable lower back pain. There is, nonetheless, a link between high heels and horses.

High heels were first worn, historians of apparel think, by men - Persian horse riders of the 9th century - to prevent the foot slipping forward in the stirrup. Riding shoes with raised heels first appeared in Europe in the 1600s with this entirely practical purpose. They still feature today on riding boots and cowboy boots and, as 'Cuban heels', on boots worn by men to dance flamenco. Historical figures who wore them include Catherine the Great and Mary I of England, whereas Napoleon, though famously short, poured scorn on high heel wearers and led to them going out of fashion on the continent (and becoming more fashionable in Britain).

Incidentally, the considered opinion of those in my party who claim to know, (I do not), was that Golden Horn will not win the Eclipse Stakes (I post this piece before the race is run). That said, this uninformed race goer, your writer, managed to come out with a greater cash return than any of the rest of my party yesterday.

N.B. Golden Horn went on to win the Eclipse Stakes, the Irish Champion Stakes and the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe .

August - Lords

Monday was spent in glorious sunshine at Lord's cricket ground in St John's Wood. The 'all's right with the world' invocation of the sound of leather on willow and the cricketing whites, is over used in my opinion, but then, sitting under a perfect blue sky, looking at a checkerboard of green and listening to the low susurration of anticipatory talk around the ground, as the MCC flag fluttered in the breeze above the Grand Stand, was, indeed, a fine experience.

Lord's itself is full of history and I visited the MCC and Lord's Museum during the lunch interval. I was fortunate to coincide with the start of a Lord's Tour and listened to the informative and entertaining guide. The first Lord's cricket ground was east of the current site, where Dorset Square now stands. It was set up in the 1780s by an en-

terprising Yorkshire man, Thomas Lord, then employed by the White Conduit Club in Islington, one of the leading London clubs of the day. He was, fortuitously, also a wine merchant. The first match there was in 1787 between teams representing Middlesex and Essex. Thomas Lord opened a wine shop, through which people had to pass to get into the ground and soon Lord was purveyor of wine to high society (and making far more money than from the cricket).

The White Conduit members used it regularly and began calling themselves the Marylebone Cricket Club, because of the location of the ground. When the lease ran out in 1811, Thomas Lord refused to pay the increased rent and closed the ground, moving it (including the turf) a few hundred yards westwards to the rural St John's Wood. This ground did not prove popular with cricketers, but Lord turned it to his advantage when the proposed route of the new Regents Canal ran south of Regents Park and he received hefty compensation and an alternative lease, on the current site. The first match at the new Lord's took place in June 1814, when the MCC beat Hertfordshire by an innings and 27 runs.

Thomas Lord did not endear himself to members in 1825, when he announced his intention to build houses on the site (the property developer has ever been the scourge of London). Only a hastily written cheque for £5,000, by a member, one William Ward, a director of the Bank of England and MP for the City of London, rescued the plot. The MCC didn't gain ownership of its ground until 1864 and, until the early twentieth century, Lord's was not even the premier cricket ground in London - that being The Oval in Kennington, a much flatter pitch preferred by players.

The memory of Thomas Lord's wine shop lives on today in the Tavern Stand - the old hostelry with iron balconies was demolished in 1967. Another iron symbol of the ground is the 2m tall Father Time weather vane, a gift from the architect of the second Grand Stand, Sir Herbert Baker, in 1926. It now sits atop the lift-shaft between the Mound and Tavern Stands (out-lasting Baker's stand).

For the museum of an institution which fought so long and hard to maintain the ways of Empire, the MCC and Lord's is very frank and

open about its past. There are sections entitled 'Politics', 'Race' and 'Gender'. The first deals with the infamous 'bodyline' series and displays memorabilia and artefacts belonging to those who took part in it, as well as referencing other 'diplomatic incidents' including the 'rebel' tours during the era of apartheid. The second details not just the well-known D'Olivera selection debacle, but an older scandal, involving Ranjitsinghi and it documents the less than respectful treatment of early touring West Indian sides. The third celebrates modern women's cricket, but also looks back to its long history, a history of which I was entirely ignorant. Did you know that W.G.Grace first played cricket, because his mother, rather than his father, was a cricketer? That women's cricket goes back to Napoleonic times? No, I didn't either. Huge wagers would, apparently, be laid on the outcome of games - so no change there.

The highlight of the Museum, appropriately enough in an Ashes Summer, is the coveted urn, which sits in a section all of its own (and full of folk, like me, taking photographs). The famous four inch symbol of sporting rivalry was presented to the England captain upon England's victory in Australia, during the touring series of 1882-83 which followed the defeat of England by Australia in 1882 at the Oval. It was that defeat which gave rise to the mock obituary appearing in the Sporting Times, lamenting the death of English cricket and announcing that 'the body will be cremated and the ashes taken to Australia'.

The nearest tube station is St John's Wood on the Jubilee line. For those interested, on Monday Middlesex beat Glamorgan by an innings.

August - pubs & walks

On Sunday a visit to The Prospect of Whitby, a Grade 2 listed public house on Wapping Wall (turn east out of Wapping Overground, or DLR to Shadwell and an easy walk south). It claims to be the oldest riverside pub in London, dating back to the 1520s, when it was called The Pelican. Only the flagstones remain of that period, but there is much else which is of interest. It was renamed 'The Prospect..' following a fire in 19th century, after a Tyne collier which used to tie up nearby.

Intertwined with the history of sailing and the sea, as is all of this part of Thames-side east London, it was a notorious haunt of smugglers. It was also the base for the ill-fated expedition to discover the North East Passage to China, attempted by Sir Hugh Willoughby in the *Bona Esperanza* 1533. A Russian expedition discovered his frozen body and those of his crew about a year later.

In the 17th century it was a favoured tavern of Judge, Lord Jeffreys, the notorious 'hanging judge' responsible for the 'bloody assizes' after the Monmouth rebellion. Although Jeffreys has become something of a pantomime villain in the popular imagination, he was not particularly harsh for his time. Probably 200 people (out of almost 1,400 found guilty of treason) were executed, though the manner of these executions, including 'burning by fire', was deliberately harsh. He was said to frequent The Prospect to watch the slow demise of those prisoners, usually pirates, sentenced to death by drowning, who were affixed to posts in the mud at low tide. This practice supposedly took place at Execution Dock, the site of which was probably further around the river from The Prospect, closer to a tavern called The Town of Ramsgate, which was where Jeffreys was finally run to ground after the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

He ended his days in the Tower, but his penchant for riverside pubs (one of his biographers referred to him as 'an alcoholic') is reflected in the claims of several hostelries hereabouts - such as The Angel (Kings Stairs, on the south bank), as well as The Prospect and The Town of Ramsgate. Also on the south bank and visible from The Prospect is another pub, now called The Mayflower, formerly The

Shippe, from whence the Pilgrim Fathers' ship departed in 1620, en route for Plymouth to collect its passengers before sailing into history.

Prospect of Whitby

More sympathetic habitues of The Prospect include Samuel Pepys and Charles Dickens and the artists J.M.W.Turner and Rex Whistler, both of whom drew views of the river from the Prospect's riverside balcony.

On a sunny Sunday, however, it was The Prospect's riverside garden which attracted. In it can be found a plaque to the first fuchsia introduced to Britain, brought ashore in 1696, apparently, by a sailor who traded it, illicitly, for his rum. A more grisly reminder of the inn's past is the noose which hangs from the balcony, over the Thames. Although it was high tide when we visited, the waves lapping gently on the other side of the low garden wall, it is possible, at low tide, to walk along the 'beach' beneath the garden wall for quite a distance.

A pub which isn't as old as The Prospect and has more rural antecedents, is The Windmill on Clapham Common. Built in 1665 it still stands, its interior much altered, on Clapham Common South Side.

The first written mention of the Manor of Clappenham, including the 220 acres of the Common, is in King Alfred's time. At a marriage feast held here in 1042 Hardacanute, then King of England, is supposed to have drunk himself insensible, collapsed and died soon after.

It was ever a drinker's place. By the time of the Domesday Book the de Mandeville family own Clopeham Manor and it seems to have been pretty wild for the next seven or eight hundred years. In the 1600s it was common heathland, with some pasturage for villagers and rewards for killing polecats. It was notorious for highwaymen and people were robbed at gun and knife point.

Samuel Pepys died, in 1703, to the north of the Common where Cedars Road now lies. John Lanchester's novel '*Capital*' is set in the fictitious Pepys Road, just north of the Common. But Clapham became really fashionable as a retreat from London in the mid to late eighteenth century. Samuel Johnson visited the wealthy Thrale family here (as in *'According to Queenie*' by Beryl Bainbridge). In 1761 Christopher Baldwin, a wealthy merchant, built his house on what is now Clapham Common West Side and proceeded to drain and improve the common land. His friend, Benjamin Franklin, conducted his experiments with oil and water on the Mount Pond in 1768. The rich families which comprised the Clapham Sect settled around the Common at this time. It became quite the place for wealthy bankers, including the Barclay, Deacon, Hoare and Lubbock families. City money bought big houses here (no change there then). In *'The Newcomers'* Thackeray wrote that 'of all the pretty suburbs that still adorn our metropolis there are few that exceed in charm Clapham Common.'

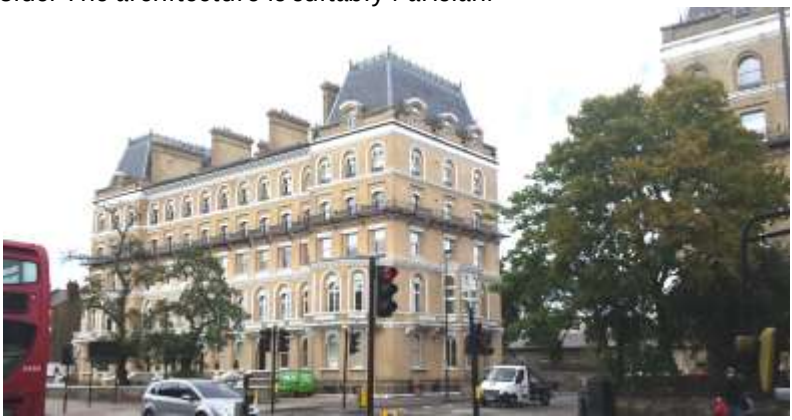
One of the large Georgian houses which remain on the North Side of the Common is that formerly called Gilmore House at No 113. Built in 1760 by Isaac Ackermann, a later owner was John Walter founder of The Times newspaper. John Doulton, founder of the ceramics firm which still bears his name, died at Springwell Cottage, now No. 81.

'Haymaking is general about Clapham...wheat looks well and turns colour' recorded Gilbert White, the naturalist, as he passed through Clapham in 1788. Already the wild and marshy rural area which is now Clapham Common had been drained and, to an extent, tamed.

At the start of the 19th century the Common was open, with trees and hillocks, as painted by J.M.W.Turner. It wasn't flattened until the first world war. But in 1877 the Metropolitan Board of Works bought

the land and made it a public park. The Bandstand, the largest in London (and possibly the UK), was constructed in 1890. It was restored in 2011.

The Common was used during war-time During the Jacobite Rebellion the Duke of Cumberland's army camped there. In WWI trenches were dug. WWII storage bunkers built in the north-western corner are still there, as are the deep air raid shelters next to Clapham Common and Clapham South stations. Barrage balloons, anti-aircraft gun emplacements and farming destroyed what was left of the wild aspect and one of the first V2 rockets hit the Cock Pond. The Common in war-time featured in '*The End of the Affair*' by Graham Greene and, more recently, in '*Atonement*' by Ian McEwan. I was also told, by an aged and charming Frenchman, that De Gaulle's Free French were based, in part, in one of the grand Knowles terraces on the North Side. The architecture is suitably Parisian.



Clapham Common North Side

Sport and gambling have always been part of the Common. There were archery butts here and horse racing took place from 1678. J.F.Herring's painting shows the Derby winner returning home from Epsom accompanied by a jolly and drunken looking crowd, crossing Clapham Common. Cricket was played from 1700 and the oldest yacht club in London still meets on the Common at the Long Pond, where model boats are still sailed.

In an echo of an earlier era, Ron Davies, Welsh politician, was robbed at knifepoint in 1998 after he had given a lift to strangers he

had met on the Common (when certain places on the Common were known to be places of assignation for gay men at night). Crossing the Common at night time was ever a walk on the wild side, but there is more sedate night-time activity – the Chess Club meets on Summer nights and matches have been known to continue until dawn.

Clapham Common can be reached by tube, the Northern Line to Clapham Common or Clapham South stations and overground to Clapham Junction.

Back north of the river is our final, most modern pub - the Princess Louise on High Holborn. It's worth a visit to see the wonderfully preserved Victorian interior, complete with mirrors, tiles, floor mosaics and polished wooden panelling, with booths arranged around a central bar.

Built in 1872, the interior was constructed in 1891 and refurbished in 2007. It too is Grade II listed, even the urinals, but still functions as a pub, currently under the aegis of Samuel Smiths Breweries. Its entrances are on the busy High Holborn and its important to enter correctly - enter through the doors which are side on to the street and you find yourself confined to the front part of the pub, beautiful but open, enter through the doors facing the street and you enter corridors which run behind a series of wooden booths, affording drinkers comfort and privacy but each opening on to the central 'island' bar and with a view of the elaborate plaster ceiling, with its deep, swag cornicing.

Each wooden booth has room for up to a dozen people (at a pinch) - there were eight folk in ours when we last visited. The opening on to the bar is flanked by marble columns and corridors running behind the booths have ornate floor mosaics, fine gilded wall tiles and intaglio'd mirrors.

Historically it was, because of its location, associated with the academics, students and workers of the University of London and the British Museum. I remember coming here with academic friends when visiting London in the early 1980s, when it was still one open room, before it was restored to its full glory. The beer was good then too. So was the music, something of a tradition at the Princess. In the

1950s and 60s it was part of a resurgent Bloomsbury and, in particular, of the folk music revival. Famous musicians who have played here include Bert Jansch, Pentangle and Ewan McCall.

The front elevation of the exterior of the pub is currently (October 2015) undergoing refurbishment, so scaffolding obscures the street view of the building - including the pub sign. Approaching from Holborn station, the nearest underground, (Central Line) the pub is on the left of High Holborn, passed the super-market and a number of banks and offices. It is open from Monday to Friday 11.00 a.m. to 11.00 p.m., 12 noon until 11.00 p.m. on Saturday and 12 noon until 6.45 p.m. on Sundays.

September - Childhood

Today a visit to an exhibition of 'Small Stories', specifically, doll's houses, at the V & A Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green. The Museum, a cavernous space just north of Bethnal Green tube, is free to enter. I ventured there this morning and, Central Line outage not withstanding (thank you, kindly Scotsman with the impenetrable accent at Aldgate and nice old gentleman on the 254 at Whitechapel) I was delighted by what I found.

The museum itself is one big, galleried space, its iron balconies and pillars remind me of old Wilton's Music Hall and it houses the largest collection of toys in Europe. It's fun spotting remembered items, a Bagatelle, a Kaleidescope, though I couldn't see an Etchasketch anywhere. It's worth a visit here, just to spark the memories. I wish I had owned the model railway and the pagoda park, though I fear I would never have actually been allowed to play with them.

But, one childhood possession I did play with was my doll's house and the current exhibition showcases twelve of the most amazing doll's houses in the V & A's collection, dating from across 300 years of childhood. From exquisite but grand 'cabinet houses' from the 18th century, to Queen Mary's doll's house, an 'Arts & Crafts' house and a 1920's Art Deco house, to a distinctly 'Bauhaus' house. Each item is individually lit and there are recorded narrations by 'characters', to illustrate what life was like in the real, life-size versions of some of

the houses. My favourite was the grand Georgian house, but I liked the turreted house too. The exhibition ended in September, but the Museum is open through-out the year.

THREE

The Story Bazaar

Since its beginning, The Story Bazaar has included articles and posts about my experiences in the brave, new world of writing and publishing. Often these pieces were written with a view to helping others avoid the mistakes which I have made, but also because it is a fascinating world, at least to me and I hope that others enjoy learning about it, as I have done.

Once upon a time…..

I have been asked, a number of times, where the name 'The Story Bazaar' came from. I have replied with varying levels of seriousness ('It seemed like a good idea at the time'). But, in truth, I did give it some thought. I wanted something demotic, not high brow, so 'story' or 'tale', rather than 'literature' and I didn't want anything formal, like 'publication'. It also seemed important to me to indicate a place, especially given the virtual nature of the publishing imprint, where such things might be got. So, a market, a shop or a bazaar.

My early childhood was filled with wonderfully illustrated compendium books, often belonging originally to uncles, aunts or older cousins and handed on to me - *'The Favourite Wonder Book'* (pub. 1938), *'Tales from Our Islands'* (1949) and *'One Thousand and One Nights*' (1935), to name but three. I wanted to capture something of their residual, often exotic, magic in my naming. The books, which are still stored, carefully, in our study, were inspirational in their introduction to the classics - *'The Favourite Wonder Book*' includes stories by Dickens, Thackeray and Wilde as well as by contemporaries, Wodehouse, Milne, Karel Capek and O.Henry. There was poetry by Christina Rosetti, Keats, Browning and William Wordsworth. They were exquisitely illustrated, by, amongst others, Arthur Rackham, Anne Anderson and Bernard Venables and seemed to lead me on, seamlessly, into other books.

It was only, years later, when I came across Bruno Bettelheim's '*Uses of Enchantment'*, his study of the role of the traditional story or fairy tale in a child's cognitive development, that I understood that magic a little better. N.B. Readers of *'The Village*' will spot the connections, both with the old library book which Molly takes to Peter and with Paul's journey into the 'forest'.

So, 'Schaherezade' being taken - by a lady advertising services quite different from books and reading - I lit upon 'The Story Bazaar' and proceeded to purchase the name, for my company and my domain. A perfect example of books begating books and, in this case, Compendia begating a modern Compendium.

Names and naming have provided writers with much subject matter over the years. Umberto Eco wrapped up a discussion of Plato, and the realist v. nominalist philosophical debate, in a medieval detective story. Henry Reed used an army instructor's brusque description of the parts of a Lee Enfield rifle to make a comment upon war. H.P.Lovecraft's ruined city has generated many a nightmare and it, too, reaches back to the Arabian Nights, to Rudyard Kipling and Omar Khayam. And we all know that 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet...' - back to that debate again.

Place names too are evocative. I am a lover of maps and the map of London provides much fuel for the imagination. There are many Hills, Greens, Oaks and Steads. Indeed trees feature heavily - Seven Sisters, for example, was named for seven huge elm trees - possibly because of the afforested nature of this part of the Thames basin when London was but a small settlement. So, presumably, people Scratched Wood in what was part of the ancient Middlesex forest, long before it became, of all things, a service station? But there are names which are less self-explanatory and not without intrigue. Who was Ponder (the keeper of the pond?) and how, most mysteriously, did he meet his End? Now thereby must hang a tale.....

Readers interested in Bettelheim's theories and others of similar vein might enjoy Francis Spufford's *'The Child That Books Built*' a personal example of those theories. I recognised that child as someone

like myself. The works mentioned above are, of course, '*The Name of the Rose*', *'Naming of Parts'*, *'The Nameless City*' and *'Romeo and Juliet'*.

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Almost all of us read stories of one kind or another. I know someone who reads only non-fiction, but the best of that has stories too. Many of us write. The art of letter writing may be dying, but the Facebook post and the blog are common, and there are lots of people write longer fiction (and non-fiction), be they full or part-time, professional or writers 'just for fun'. Meeting 'book people' of all kinds is one of the great enjoyments of being a writer. I have met more writers since I became an author than in the whole of my life until this point.

I have discovered three fellow writers, one of them quite famous, living within a half mile radius of my home (and that's not counting the really well-known novelists who live in this part of London, like Will Self and Julie Myerson). A number of us are considering setting up a local writers group, or collective (anarcho-syndicalist of course) to get more leverage with joint promotions and establish links into existing organisations like arts centres and libraries. I have promised to arrange our first meeting.....

I have also met with writing professionals, the editors, booksellers, cover designers, conference organisers, who are unfailingly helpful to a newcomer like me and often very insightful, mainly because they are writers themselves. Such a small percentage of writers are able to make a living from writing, that we often have to have more than one string to our bow. So I now know novelists who are also actors, editors and screenplay writers and actors who narrate books. Others work in book shops or libraries. Many have started out as self-publishers/designers/promoters and, having had success, now make a living out of offering help and advice to those who are just starting out. Many, many moonlight as writers while earning a crust in 'day jobs'. I know that I'm very lucky to have the time and wherewithal to allow me to write and publish.

For people who work in isolation writers are a chatty bunch, or, at least the ones I've met are. I've heard some interesting anecdotes.

John Taylor, former soldier and a military historian, has just taken a first step into fiction writing, as J.M.Taylor, with his novella *'Departing Vienna'*, (Forbitou Books). He told me about his experience checking out a military history book of his on-line. *'The Sharpest Fight*' is a detailed analysis of a Napoleonic-era battle which took place at Tarbes in south-west France. It's carried by Foyles and good military history bookshops. It is also sold on-line by Abebooks, a web-site which sells new and second-hand books. Abe is a linking site, used by bookshops around the country.

John searched for his book to see if shops in certain locations stocked it. He found it in several locations, priced at £55, £50 and £70. The bookshops selling it clearly thought it was a collector's item and had priced it accordingly. Yet *'The Sharpest Fight*' is still in print, retailing at £12.99 and it's still selling, even though it was published a while ago (military history books continue to sell for much longer than most fiction). At least John's book was priced at more than retail. The fate of many an older book, long past its first flush of sales and unlikely to sell more than a handful of copies a year, is the bargain book sale or the free giveaway.

There is a move, within what a news bulletin would doubtless call 'the writing community' to encourage authors not to go down the giveaway route, which is now often resorted to from the outset, to get the Amazon algorithms working for a book or to establish an audience. Although this has been a career launching move for some, for many others it means that readers are discouraged from paying the full cost of a book, even the lower on-line price, thereby making earning a living even more difficult for writers. Digital and self-publishing is still so new that it opens up possibilities and has consequences which are not yet widely or fully understood. So there are also a number of campaigns to promote ethical behaviour amongst writers, see the 'Ethical Author' badge on The Story Bazaar web-site; and campaigns and petitions to encourage institutions and prize-juries to include independently authored works, to be considered on their merits, rather than always resorting to or relying on the Big Five pub-

lishers, thereby allowing access to markets and publicity currently denied to the independent author.

So things are changing, but slowly. In the meanwhile I am enjoying the unlooked-for social benefits of being a writer. And I did so this week by meeting yet more 'book people'.

At Omnibus, the Arts Centre in Clapham, I met Marie McCarthy, its Artistic Director and George Owen MBE, its Chairman. The building that houses it was formerly Clapham Public Library (which has moved, not closed, like so many others). George led a seven-year, successful campaign to retain it in public ownership, not sell to developers and now the building is at the hub of a thriving arts scene, including the Clapham Opera Festival. I was fortunate to be given a tour of the wonderful performance and rehearsal spaces and a welcoming bar and café area, all to the melodious sounds of Thelonius Monk being played by a pianist practicing in the large upstairs room. The former life of the building is reflected throughout, with books forming external sculptures and lining the stairway. As they say 'We believe in stories. Especially the made up ones.'

At a local café I met Monisha Saldana, full of energy and commitment, even with two young children, one still a babe in arms. When she's not doing her day job in digital publishing and publicity (Monisha did Jamie Oliver's digital press) she is one half, with Maya Cointreau, of Momaya Press, based in South London and Connecticut, an organisation dedicated to the short story and its writers. I'll be going along to its Writers Anonymous Night in November to read from a latest work, probably not my own, but from another Story Bazaar author. For those of you who fancy trying your hand at writing short stories, Momaya runs an annual competition, which is gaining in reputation. Judges include writers and publishers, with publication for the top ten stories and others which are considered to merit a special mention. The 2016 competition is now open, with a theme of 'Ambition' and a deadline of 30th April 2016.

I didn't even have to leave the house to meet up with M.C.V.Egan of Florida, U.S.A. Catalina is another super-powered American, who manages to survive family life and a writing and blogging career and

we met through Book Blogs, an on-line organisation to which we both belong. Catalina has been kind enough to feature *'The Village; A Year in Twelve Tales'* on her own site and I will be blogging on her history BlogSpot shortly.

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More convivial bookish doings in Clapham this week, with a return to Clapham Books to hear J.M.Taylor read from his new novel *'Departing Vienna'*. Although the weather was warm, John chose to read inside, thereby avoiding the competition of low flying planes and helicopters - very wise. The reading was very well received and there was much discussion afterwards.

Other writers were in attendance, notably Alice Wooledge Salmon, drawn by her interest in Vienna, and a playwright, to whom I wasn't introduced. I really must hone my journalistic skills if I am to report on such events in this blog. It would be good to gather information which may be of interest to readers when I am actually taking part in them, as opposed to realising that I don't know things when it's too late to find them out!

Alice is a poet, a writer of short stories and an essayist, writing for publications like the Guardian. It was a co-incidence that I met an essayist during a week in which I attended a seminar on blogging and books. Regular visitors to this site may have noticed that The Story Bazaar will be bringing out a Compendium for 2015, probably just before Christmas, which will be a collection of articles which first appeared as blog pieces, the short fiction and articles already enjoyed by subscribers and some new material. But there is more to creating a satisfying book from a blog than lumping together material which already exists, so I decided to try to learn how to go about making such a book.This made me think about just what a blog is and what I am blogging about.

The words 'blog' and 'blogging' are so well-used now that it's easy to forget their very recent vintage. And, as is often the case with web-based phenomena, there seems to be no consensus about what a blog is, other than about the technology used to produce it. The form can run from about three hundred to over a thousand words (though The

Story Bazaar likes to keep to about six hundred or so), it can be immediate and topical, ongoing and confessional, give 'expert' advice, review current arts and events or consider abstract ideas. It is, in many ways, an essay.

And an essay is *'a literary device for saying almost anything about almost everything*' (Aldous Huxley, prolific essayist, amongst other things).

The Story Bazaar blogs are, guest bloggers aside, a reflection of its founder's preoccupations, with writing and publishing, with history, music, art and architecture, with her immediate environment and with what's happening in the world around her. It's akin to writing a newspaper column, I suspect, and there are some excellent examples of books made out of newspaper columns, see Julian Barnes' *'Letters from London*' (Picador 1995). There are also plenty of fine journalists/novelists in the past, Mark Twain, Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Dickens, to name but four. I don't compare myself to any of these, please note, I merely state that it's possible to be both journalist and novelist and to use one skill in the service of the other.

So, I feel rather more capable of publishing a collection of essays (amongst other literary 'shorts') as opposed to managing a completely new form. Plus ca change. That is not to say that other, less traditional bloggers than I, aren't breaking completely new ground. If you know of any please point me in their direction. Anyone interested in reading Huxley's analysis on essays can find it in the Preface to his *Collected Essays*.

The Village

More than one reader has remarked on what they describe as the 'quintessential Englishness' of *'The Village'*. This is, in part, because of the descriptions of the seasons and the countryside, which are clearly the English seasons and the English countryside; but it's also because of the archetypes employed - the village fete, the harvest festival, the pub, the social hierarchy - which are instantly recognisable as part of English life and other English stories.

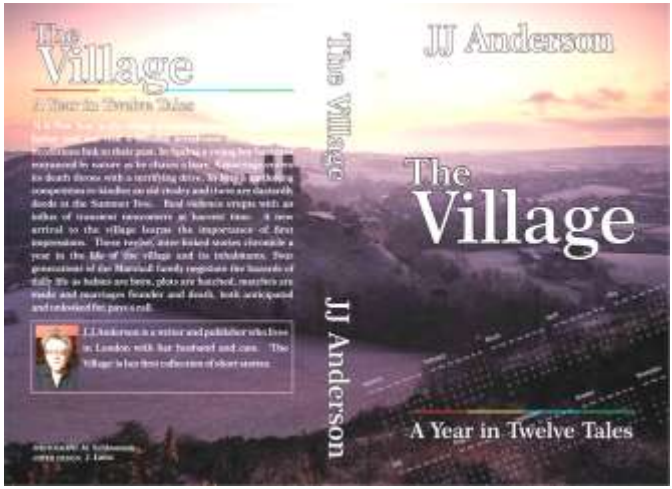
Many people ask me if '*The Village*' is based on a specific place and, if so, where. I've had suggestions that it lies in Yorkshire, in Somerset and in Kent (none of which are correct). Yet it is never named and its location is not signalled. It is rural, in or near 'the Vale' (*'The Lion'*), though about fifteen miles east of a town (also unnamed, but appearing in *'Not Even Waving'* and *'The Fourth Estate'*). We know where it isn't - in 'Sunday' Paul Marshall refers to Biggin Hill and Northolt as being 'down south'. In the same story Ray Marshall says that Cambridgeshire is 'not far away', but this village is not located near to Crabbe's late eighteenth century version, nor to Gray's (though his Elegy appears in *'Open Gardens'*).

Its population doesn't give the reader any clue either. There are some 'old', indigenous families, like the Marshalls and the Lucks, but many 'incomers', such as Hari Mistry (*'The Summer Fete'*) from 'Yorkshire folk', Mandeep Dhaliwal, ('*Harvest*') who has a stubborn Bradford accent, Basil de Silva and family from Sri Lanka and Howard Goodman (*'Open Gardens'*) from Manchester. There is a larger village called Bridge several miles further east, one of two named fictional locations in the whole book, (the other is Lockley) though there are references to real places like London and Duxford.

The village is an old one, it goes back to Tudor times (*'The Lion'*) and the landscape around it is an ancient one (*'In Calley Wood'*). If, as is said in another place specific work, *'Time present and time past Are both perhaps present in time future*' then this sleepy place overflows with accreted activity. It has seen its share of momentous events and there are reminders of them all around (*'Sunday*'). The early industrial revolution touched upon it - a canal runs through it, meeting a larger version out in the countryside (*'Mixed Doubles'*).

The church, St Agnes, and the green are at the centre of the older part of the village, from which Victorian and more modern housing radiate around the formal, early twentieth century park, and there is a 1930s municipal development on its edge. Employment and industry is largely rural, people work in farming and land management, or in local services. Many inhabitants, like Scott Castle and Lynda Marshall, commute to work in the town and a conurbation isn't too far away

(where Kings Electronics started out). It has three schools, Priory Road Primary, Furzedown Comprehensive and St Jerome's College (a private, boarding, institution). High Acres Hospital sits outside the village in a former grand country house (*'The Volunteer'* and *'Accident and Emergency'*). But it is also a modern, twenty first century village, with modern technology and modern mores.



There are certainly aspects of the village which reflect its author's idea of England. It is a safe haven for the refugee, from close by (*'In the Salon'*) and further afield (*'Open Gardens'*), with its respect for law, its tolerance and dislike of extremes and its refusal to take itself too seriously. But there is also a tendency towards complacency and traditionalism and it's not immune to current English controversies, such as immigration and the mobile nature of labour (*'The Li*on') and the right to free speech as compared to the fomenting of hatred (*'The Fourth Estate'*). It is not urban England and has nothing of the metropolitan about it, though neither is it modern, socially conservative, rural England.

The village is, above all, a place of the imagination. All it's antecedents are literary - the settlements of Wilder, Thomas, White and Keillor - not physical. The landscape of English literature is dotted with vividly drawn and wonderful fictional places, some traditional -

Casterbridge and Coketown, Barchester and Sanditon - and some less so - Ankh Morpork and Khazad-dum. Without wishing in any way to make comparisons, (for fear of coming off much, much the worse) the village has its own little place in that shifting literary cartography. Many of the stories contain literary allusions and, in some instances, direct quotations or near quotations, from the specific works which inspired them. *'The Village'* is shot-through with other English stories.

There was quite a lot of discussion on Thursday evening at Clapham Books, of this element, mainly because the story I chose to read at the 'Meet the Author' event was *'Not Even Waving*' (April). The title of this tale is a reference to Stevie Smith's famous poem, *'Not Waving But Drowning'*, in which a dead man, drawn from the water after drowning, speaks, saying, 'I was much too far out all my life, And not waving but drowning.' Eloquently suggestive of solitariness, loneliness and emotional sterility, these are character traits often associated with a type of Englishness. But in this instance it relates to Diane, narrator of the story, a woman who doesn't realise that she is unhappy, but is about to find out. She is 'drowning' but, all unknowing, she isn't even waving.

Every work of literature owes something to that which precedes it. No writer can create a story which doesn't somehow call upon other stories which they have read or absorbed and no reader, of age and experience, can read a story without placing it among or alongside other stories. So *'The Village'* too has its literary antecedents.

One of these is *'Under Milk Woo*d' by Dylan Thomas with which it shares its opening line 'To begin at the beginning'. That 'play for voices' is set in another imaginary village, Llareggub. Another is '*Our Town*' by Thornton Wilder, who is an over-arching influence on '*The Village*'. He described his play, set in the fictional Grover's Corners, as *'The life of a village in the life of the stars'* and I have tried to place the annual cycle of my village's life into stellar alignment. Thus we have the regimental mascot - the goat - for Capricorn in '*Sunday*'. Molly carries water in *'The Volunteer*' for Aquarius, and so on, but not all are so obvious. What violence there is in the stories fall within the constellations most associated with fire, so, April, August and De-

cember. Please note, these are not meant to be astrological references, a la Eleanor Catton's *'The Luminaries'*.

Poetry is also represented in '*The Village'*. In '*Sunday*', a story which includes a time-slip to an era which, in part, defined the modern idea of Englishness, Ray, the protagonist, imagines 'tumult in the clouds'. This is from W.B.Yeats' WWI *'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*'. In *'In Calley Wood'* there is the first line, *'There was a roaring in the wind all night*' from *'Resolution and Independence*' by arguably the greatest English poet of nature, William Wordsworth. For those unfamiliar with the poem, it follows a young man, the Wordsworth of *The Prelude*, engaging with the natural world and meeting a solitary 'nature spirit', in that case a leech-gatherer. The protagonist emerges, changed, from the encounter.

In *'Open Gardens'* Basil quotes another first line, this time of Gray's *'Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*' a poem often regarded as quintessentially English. He is standing in St Agnes churchyard, next to its *'ivy mantled tower'* when he does so. Andrew Marvell is the guiding spirit of this tale.

Molly Morgan, in *'The Volunteer*' was a character who almost wrote herself, but she owes much to Patrick White's heroine in his short story *'A Cheery Soul'*.

'The Summer Fete' is a bloodless English homage to the Scottish play, in which a King is, as Paul's text would have it, 'stabbed in the back' by an ambitious couple who would supplant him. Having abandoned attempts to render 'Come you murdering ministers...' into modern, conversational English, I placed a paraphrase of Macbeth's 'If it were done...' lines at the start of Act I, Scene VII into Beth's soliloquy in the Park House parlour. *'Foul whisperings are abroad*' at the denouement seemed to me to be an appropriate description of what can be found on social media every day. In the story it refers to Paul's text.

'The Fourth Estate' is a nod to Trollope's Barchester Chronicles, particularly *'The Warden'*, though here church takes on press using law, rather than the other way about. Tanya Towers' 'What has fairness to do with the law?' plays upon the Archdeacon's 'What has mo-

rality to do with the Church?'. *'In the Salon'* is my admiring offering to Jane Austen, in which Diane quotes Mr Bennett directly *'For what do we live but to make sport for our neighbours...*' and there are characters both prideful and prejudiced.

The other over-arching influence across the stories is another American (although he became thoroughly anglicized) - T.S.Eliot. He is why there is the desiccated rose garden in '*Harvest*'. He too references the whirling constellations *'the dance along the artery, the circulation of the lymph, are figured in the drift of stars'*. And prompts my Introduction and Coda because *'the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time'*.

I don't imagine readers spotted all these references, but I like fictions which work on a number of levels. That doesn't mean that a reader has to respond to all of them and, indeed, some may say they are so well hidden as to be invisible, but I suspect that depends on what you are looking for. It might be a reason why the stories would be worth reading again, at some later time, to see what you haven't seen before.

The first Eliot quote above is from *'Burnt Norton'*, the second from *'Little Gidding*', two of *'The Four Quartets'*. For an inventive exploration of the relationship between author and reader try Italo Calvino's *'If on a winter's night, a traveller'*, if you haven't already.

'*The Village*' Audio-book, *Sometimes voices...'*

Reading is a complex activity. When we read we assimilate and process lots of information. There are the words themselves and their meaning, and how, together, they form a narrative, telling of actions or occurrences. To this add the suggestive elements - word-images and metaphors, the subtle word-prompts which access existing knowledge or memory and trigger a mood or atmosphere. Then, on top of it all, our imaginations re-produce this information in another form, such as what a character looks like. Often we say that we can 'see' this or that character, or 'hear' his or her voice. We create whole scenes and backgrounds to that character's actions, creating mental

images of places which don't exist anywhere else but in our heads. Our senses 'experience' the imagined events - we 'smell' the newly baked bread which is placed on a fictional kitchen table. We 'feel' the heat of a firestorm raging through war-time London streets.

But the primary sense which we use to relate to and exist within the world is visual, not aural. How many of us re-create in our heads the voices of the characters we read about and are we logical and consistent about it? Do Thomas Hardy's characters all speak with a Wessex accent, strong or weak, for you? Not for me. Gabriel Oak and Farmer Boldwood do, but not Bathsheba Everdene or Sergeant Troy. Do the characters in '*Kidnapped*' (the English aside) all have Scottish accents? Again, for me, no.

And what if a reader doesn't know what a certain accent sounds like? Or if his or her frame of reference doesn't encompass what a word describes? African writers now writing in English have described their childhood confusion when reading British 'children's classics' in school, when the activities, let alone the words which described them, were entirely unknown to them. And, when our vocabularies are still forming, we all have our unpronounced words, words only read and not yet spoken. One of mine was 'awry', which I always read pronounced in my head as 'orey'. When someone first said 'Awry' to me in the correct manner, I didn't recognise the word.

I suspect the answers to these questions depend on a large range of factors, aside from frame of reference and acquired vocabulary. Is the way in which a character speaks described to the reader? Does a character have a specific vocal trait, like a lisp, which informs how he or she might sound? Or do they over-use certain words or phrases which makes what they say distinctive? Lots of Dickens' characters have one, the other, or both. It's part of what makes them so particularly themselves (and sometimes adds to their grotesquery).

Have the characters been portrayed on film, radio or television? When I read *'To Kill A Mockingbird*' I hear, as well as see, Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch. Sir Ian McKellan isn't my Gandalf - that's not how Gandalf looks to me, even with the correct props - though his voice is closer to my Gandalf's. Donald Pleasance, an actor so famous

for his sinister villains, will always be, for me, the near-saintly Mr Harding of Hyram's Hospital, his voice was so precisely how I heard Mr Harding from the page. Likewise, Alan Rickman's Obadiah Slope, the voice of ambitious, wheeling-dealing and unscrupulous underlings everywhere (the BBC Drama department has a lot to answer for in my case).

So, how does a writer help an actor or actress who is about to say their characters' words? This is the question I am grappling with right now. I have drafted some notes, general background on my village and some suggestions as regards voices - but these are almost all to do with accents. There are fifty four named characters in '*The Village*' and, as Elizabeth Bergstone, my narrator, pointed out, '*War and Peace*' has twenty eight! It also has scenes in which quite a large number of characters contribute dialogue, such as the Summer Fete committee meetings and the Board meeting of Herald Newspapers. How to differentiate characters aurally in such scenes? Especially when they come from different socio-economic, geographic and ethnic backgrounds.

So we debated the use of accents. This was difficult, as I have, quite deliberately, not located the village in a particular place. At first we decided on a general 'country' accent and Elizabeth listened to episodes of 'The Archers' BBC radio series to get a general idea. (This long-running series is set in a fictional place - Ambridge - somewhere in the English Midlands, for those who don't know.) But, subsequently, we have abandoned this idea and only the older characters, who have lived in the village for a long time will have a 'country' accent.

If anyone reading this has ambitions to produce an audio-book I would strongly recommend that s/he thinks long and hard before asking their narrator to incorporate accents, unless they are really pertinent to the story, or unless everyone has roughly the same one. I was too inexperienced and Elizabeth too helpful, to agree that using a variety of accents wouldn't work. The narrator has enough to think about when telling the story, without 'doing' a wide range of different accents, or variations on the same one.

As Elizabeth explained to me - 'When I'm narrating, I like to totally focus on the meaning of the words I'm saying; it's as if I'm actually telling the story to someone, and seeing, in my mind's eye, what I'm talking about. I think the best storytelling happens when the narrator really wants the person to "get" what they're narrating, how sunny the day is, how fearful the character is, how imposing the room is, etc. Even if you have thousands of words to get through, you can't put it "on automatic" and think about what you're going to cook for dinner that night.' So adding lots of accents just adds a layer of complexity, which makes it even more difficult for the narrator.

I can only praise Elizabeth's patience with this author, who, I confess, asked far, far too much of anyone in asking for voices to be differentiated by accent. Consistency of accent in multiple-voice stories is, I have learned, accepted as one of the big problems that narrators have to deal with when narrating a book.

We've been using the International Dialects of English Archive, or IDEA, to identify exactly the accents to be used. This is a tremendous resource, containing a range of voices from every region of England, though some regions are better represented than others. I had fun looking for the 'rural' accents which I remembered from childhood. Some are there, some aren't (maybe my own recollection has changed over the years). The variations of accent within region are sometimes startling, as is their staying power. There is one recording of a woman, born in the south of England, but having lived in Wales through-out her childhood. Even though she returned to southern England thereafter and is recorded later in life, there is a Welsh intonation in her pronunciation of certain words and phrases. As a resident of south London I found the London accents especially interesting.

For *'The Village'* Winnie's accent proved the most problematical. As a life long resident of the village and representative of the old, indigenous families, she had to be just right. She also features in a lot of the stories, in varying situations and she experiences a wide range of emotions. After trawling the archive I lit upon the recorded voice of an 81 year-old woman who seemed perfect. Elizabeth duly interpreted it into the recording.

It's been an interesting experience and I've learned a lot. I'll use IDEA again, when writing dialogue. I can often 'hear' characters in my head as I write, but, having to consider how a character sounds at the outset, rather than after a book is written will inform how I write their dialogue, the language they use and its impact on the characters around them. It will be good discipline. Also, I know that, when I listen to the radio, TV or just conversations in the street, I now listen to 'dialogue' rather than voices. Having created the audiobook will make me listen to voices too. That's very useful.

'Sometimes voices' - is from Caliban's speech to Trinculo and Stephano in The Tempest.

Reconquista

This week I am working hard on The Story Bazaar's next publication, an adventure story provisionally entitled *'On the Frontier'*. It's set in 1264 in the Spanish region of Andalucia, or Al Andalus, and is the first in a planned series. I wrote a version of this story over a decade ago, for my god-son and nephew, who was about to visit Jerez de la Frontera for the first time. He was, at that time, a very mathematically focussed youngster and the things which I would have found enchanting about Jerez at his age - the pretty streets, the history, its Moorish architecture - in short, its romance, wouldn't appeal to him. So I decided to write him a story, set in the Jerez of the past, to bring it all to life for him. The first draft manuscript of *'On the Frontier'* was what resulted.

Ten years, and many re-writes, later and I am currently imposing a new structure on the tale and working on my characters. As always, I have too many of them and have had to remove, or kill off, more than

a few. I had to do this with *'The Village'* too. Next time I start the writing process I will focus on having a much smaller cast of characters if I want to cut out this phase, though this method of writing does allow one to create especially rich characters as aspects of the personalities of those characters who are ultimately chopped are often incorporated into those who remain.

But 'journey' stories do tend to have a wider cast. '*Kidnapped*' has 15 named characters (though some of them very minor), '*Treasure Island*' has six main and lots (15 or more) of minor characters, '*The Silver Sword*' has six main and the same number of minor characters, '*The Hobbit*' has even more. The main characters come across others as they journey and surrogate families are formed. Classic journey stories tend to start in one place - home - as part one, travel across the world in part two and return, the characters changed, in part three. The difference in my story is that, while some of our heroes are having their adventures in far away places, one, the main protagonist, actually stays at home. His journey is of a different sort, but one which, I hope, every teenager (and quite a few older readers) will recognise.

What is interesting to someone thinking about the structure of a novel is that writers of 'classic' adventure stories tended to formalise such sectioning, by actually dividing their novel into Parts. So I'm doing that right now - though whether or not these Parts will survive into the final structure I don't know.

I am also concentrating on capturing my characters' experiences in a vivid and immediate way. What is it like to be caught up in a riot, for example, as happens to a character called Nathan? Or to be out in the countryside at night, with no light to see by but that of the stars and, when it rises, the moon (there aren't that many places today where that is possible, light pollution being so pervasive). How would a young woman maintain a disguise as a youth on board a ship? Quite aside from the practicalities, how would the character feel? What were ships of the time like? This was before the period of 'tall ships' and the one-sail galleys of the Greco-Roman era were still being used in the Mediterranean. I've done my historical research, the fruits of

which are already in the manuscript, but now I have to have my characters inhabit that long ago world.

There are documented instances of woman going to sea as men, with woman-as-men serving in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic era. They tended to become gunners, apparently. There was also the famous Civil War era U.S. Army doctor who, after a long and successful career, was only discovered to be a woman upon his/her death. And 'Sweet Polly Oliver', the old English folk song, tells of a young woman who follows her lover into the army - she 'lists for a soldier' - dressed as a man. So this isn't as far-fetched as one might think.

Jerez Alcazar

My four main characters go on a journey; two of them together (although they first meet en route) and two separately. All are known to each other, to a greater or lesser extent, linked through ties of family or friendship. It is the details of what happens to them and how they encroach on each other's journeys which form my plot. Jeopardy is a very large part of that. Characters can only develop if they are given challenges and obstacles to overcome and dangers to face down and survive. Some of these are internal fears, one character is afraid of heights, for example, while others are natural phenomena, a snow storm or a foundering ship. It is overcoming these and resolving the conflicts that provides the drama.

And, of course, we have the villains. Where would a good adventure story be without a good villain? In time-honoured fashion, especially as so much of the action of the story takes place upon a ship,

one of my villains is a pirate (well, he styles himself a 'warlord' and claims he is an ally of the Christian invaders, but I don't expect anyone to believe him, not even the protagonists).

N.B. '*Reconquista*' replaced '*On the Frontier*' as the title of this book following a Story Bazaar reader participation exercise in Autumn 2015

The name or title of this book, '*Reconquista*' is the term used by historians and others for the gradual re-taking of the Iberian peninsular from its Moorish overlords by the northern Christians. Originally the territory of a loose collaboration of Visigothic tribes, Hispania was invaded when Tariq ibn Ziyad and his army of arabs and berbers crossed what we now call the straits of Gibraltar (*Jebel Tariq*, the mountain of Tariq) in 711. The Visigothic King, Roderigo, was defeated in battle near the Guadelete River near to modern-day Jerez de la Frontera. The creation of the Caliphate and Al Andalus followed, with Moorish armies getting as far north as the River Garonne in modern-day France.

Thereafter fighting in southern France and northern Spain never really stopped altogether and often the sides weren't split along religious lines at all. But it was during the era of the Crusades that Christian knights and princes were encouraged to religious wage war on Al Andalus. Christian kingdoms, like Leon, Navarre, Castile and Aragon were established in the north with Portugal in the west. While waves of north African invaders, the Almorovids and the Almohads, took over, then lost control of the Caliphate. None the less, things weren't clear-cut and often Christians fought on the same side as Muslims, against other Christians and Muslims. By the opening of '*Reconquista*', however, most of the southlands west of the mountains was under Christian control. The Emirate of Granada, east of the mountains, lasted until 1492 and capitulation to Fernando and Isabel.

So the book title indicates setting and historical period, one of turmoil and conflict. It opens on 9th October, 1264, the day King Alfonso X, of Castille and Leon, was supposed to have marched into the

city of Jerez. This is also the day of Saint Denis, or San Dionysio, the patron saint of the city and he and King Alfonso are celebrated every year on that day in Jerez, with a church service in Mudejar church of San Dionysio, near Plateros, followed and preceded by processions, music and general enjoyment.

Writing

In the beginning there is the idea (it comes before the word). Very shortly afterwards there is the research. I do all the research for my own books, it's part of the writing process for me and part of the fun. Unbelievably, some authors of fiction (usually those who make a lot of money, lucky them) use researchers to discover facts, figures and 'atmosphere' for their books. I'm not sure that's for me, I like identifying the telling detail too much. Were my next book to be set in a frozen chicken factory, I think I'd have to work in one such, at least for a short time. Fortunately for me, my next book is set in Spain.

I was asked recently how I did the research for novels set so long ago, like the one I am currently working on - set in the 13th century in Al Andalus – and a later work which I have already begun - set in the Age of Discovery in 15th century Spain. My answer was glib - that it was easy and a pleasure, I look around when I am in Jerez, or visiting Cadiz. Indeed, if we did not have a home there I may not have been inspired to write these works in the first place, my imagination may have been caught by something else and taken in an entirely different direction. But there is, of course, much more to it than that.

I have read a lot of histories about the specific events and the culture of both those periods. For anyone wanting to understand the broad sweep of history, as it is bound up with religion, I would strongly recommend '*Sea of Faith; Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World*' by Stephen O'Shea, a remarkably accessible introduction to the ebb and flow of faiths around the, formerly Roman, Mare Nostrum. For an understanding of how the Inquisition worked, two centuries later, there is '*The Spanish Inquisitio'n* by Hel-

en Rawlings, a slim volume but erudite, based on the records kept by the Inquisition itself (they were startlingly efficient bureaucrats).

I make copious notes, on everything from the flora of the marshland between Jerez and Cadiz to calculating the likely position of the Alfonsine walls around the old city of Cadiz (many of them having been destroyed or built over, land being at such a premium in that crowded city). And, in so far as it's possible, I check my plot, as well as my facts, to ensure that it hangs together in period. How far can a young woman on a mule travel in one day, for example? Setting stories in the past begs lots of questions like these.

At least one can get help with stories set in the more recent past. I recently had a conversation with a friend who said he found the mixture of fighter planes and bombers in Sunday, the first story in *'The Village*' to be historically inaccurate. My response was that I would look at the story again to check, but I was pretty sure there wasn't a mixture, the RAF base is Bomber Command; the only fighter planes mentioned are those in the imagination of the story's main character, Ray, whose knowledge of WWII is largely from films made after the war. In this particular instance I had consulted, when writing the tale, with those who were there, always the best form of help, and my thanks to Wing Commander Tony Gunby and his veterans for looking over this story to check for verisimilitude. People are very generous with their time and their knowledge and I haven't yet been faced with even one refusal to help.

I try to visit as many of the locations of my stories as I can. I insisted on climbing through the interior of the, then incompletely excavated, Roman theatre in Cadiz despite my friends' reluctance to head into stony floored pitch darkness (please note it is now excavated and well worth a visit, flashlights not being needed). And I have stood on the open top of the tallest watchtower in Cadiz (a not inconsiderable feat for one who suffers from vertigo and is afraid of heights) so as to gauge how far one can see. The answer is for miles and it was only after doing this that I really understood the topography of the watery, marshy world that is the Bay of Cadiz

This isn't a bibliography, but I should reference David Nicholle's books on medieval warfare and Syed Inamuddin's on the sociology and politics of Al Andalus. The books of Sir Stephen Runciman I ate up many years ago and regularly return to the feast.

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Not too long after that you think about what the book is going to be called. A working title may suffice for a while, but, at some point, one has to give some thought to the title. So, what makes a good book title?

As the first book of the Al Andalus series moves towards publication it's been called *'On the Frontier'*, the title I gave to the story I wrote for my nephew many years ago. It has changed, significantly, since then, so I think the title should change too. Both my editor and my husband concur (their reasoning is, however, more commercial than mine - *'On the Frontier'* doesn't really grab the attention).

An ongoing Goodreads poll to find the 'best' book title of all time placed *'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*' (Philip K Dick) and *'Something Wicked This Way Comes*' (Ray Bradbury, after Shakespeare) at one and two, closely followed by *'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*' (Douglas Adams). The list runs to 2,375 titles and it includes classics as well as modern, general as well as genre fiction (though 'clever' modern titles predominate). Incidentally, I have always liked *'Brother of the More Famous Jack'* by Barbara Trapido.

So, a good title has to be arresting and, if possible, intriguing. A good 'hook'.

It also has to be relevant to the story. If 'Gunfight at the OK Corral' turns out to be a modern romance, more than a few readers might feel cheated, regardless of any 'post-modern irony' claims.

What do I want my title to convey? A sense of adventure and excitement, maybe, the location or the period and/or the main subject. But that's rather a lot and, all the advice suggests, short is better than long. In part because a very long title doesn't have the same punchy impact and can turn readers off. If I was choosing a title for '*The Village*; *A Year in Twelve Tales'* now, it would be much shorter. Length also becomes material when one considers technology - how search

engines operate, for example, or how many characters of a Tweet might be consumed by a long title. But, also, beware the single word title. Many will have been used already - try looking up 'Haunted' on Amazon books.

Amazon is a useful place for research. In the 'Young adult' books section, many carry series names, like 'Cherub', 'Legend', 'Magisterium' in bold type, the actual title almost takes second billing (these are fantasy series). This is a form of brand recognition. My book is the first of a series, but, as the series is as yet unknown, I'm not sure what's to be gained by putting the series name up front.

Given the frequency with which they are used, it also obviously helps to have any of the following in the title - throne, shadow, fire, hunger, midnight or demon. I will certainly be doing some word analysis. There are some really rather scary titles too - *'Now You See Me*' and *'Better Left Buried'* are two good examples by Emma Haughton.

To narrow down the search criteria, I look at the sub-head 'Historical fiction' and it's 'Medieval' category. A couple of the most popular medieval books also feature high up in the larger category, which is heartening - setting a story in medieval times isn't necessarily the kiss of death. From reading the reviews it is also obvious that it's not just young adults who read these books (that's good, I want adults to read the Al Andalus books too). Popular words in titles include - bow, prince, lady, king and sword.

The title also has to read well when spoken out loud. It's not just going to be written, but, one hopes, talked about. So, avoid the *mondegreen* – a term new to me, but which means the mis-hearing of a phrase, leading to the creation of different, homophonic phrase. It derives from the folk song 'The Bonnie Earl O' Moray', which includes the words *'They have slain the Earl of Moray and laid him on the green*'. Misheard, this becomes 'Lady Mondegreen' and we have two corpses. This is quite a common mistake, apparently.

Finally, I have to be as sure as I can be that the title will travel to the rest of the English speaking world. No embarrassing misunder-

standing of the 'knocked up' variety - though the globalisation of English should preclude most of these.

So, now I've run through all that, I just have to find a good title.

*

Then it's head down and on with the graft of writing, sometimes total immersion in the story, sometimes being a wordsmith. This is where you spot your own particular writing tics.

I am told that all writers have 'tics'. Shoes and hair are, apparently, mine. As tics go, they're disappointing. They suggest shallowness, vanity and a focus on the superficial. Where's the profundity in shoes and hair? What deep meaning in a pair of kitten heels? (Note to self - check personal grooming, this could be a warning from my subconscious, going where my best friends fear to tread.) Perhaps it's best not to psycho-analyse too much.

Every one who writes has writing tics - words, phrases or descriptive traits and character gestures which are repeated, without realising it, again and again. You don't have to be a professional or full-time writer to qualify for some. Readers of this blog piece will have writing tics too.

Some of the most common are

- repeated words - 'just' is a good candidate for the most over used, but 'also', 'always', 'very' and 'even' feature frequently. Adverbs - quickly, loudly - can be over-used. Why write 'spoke very softly' and not 'whispered'?
- Repeated phrases e.g. 'not the least of which', 'time will tell'.
- Characters repeating the same gestures - I have a tendency to make my characters 'set her/his jaw' apparently, but other typical repeated gestures (not mine) include eye narrowing, lip curling and shrugging.
- Characters repeating the same actions - in 'On the Frontier' I often send characters off to get their shoes (in part because my young heroes would go about bare-footed for much of the time - well, that's my excuse). Mary Wesley might win the prize for the strangest tic of this type, my editor tells me; in

one novel her characters all open oysters and drink fresh orange juice.

- Repetitive descriptions - I describe characters' hair. I was astonished when this was pointed out to me in an early draft of 'The Village' the hair of almost every character was described.

Of course some characters' tics define and distinguish them. In *'The Village*' Molly regularly uses proverbs or common sayings, but gets them confused every time. Winnie is fond of the phrase 'My giddy aunt', a phrase I remember older people using from my youth (but now appearing in Dr Who as part of the vocabulary of the 'Missy' character, maybe the writers of that series remember it from their youth too).

Dickens used character tics to good effect. His novels have huge casts of characters, many of whom are made more memorable by their tics. Think of Uriah Heep, Mr Jaggers, Jeremiah Flintwitch or the entire Squeers family. Dickens' stories were read in serial form, once a month, so the character tics were an aid to memory for the readers. They also add to the quality of hyper-reality in so many of his stories.

Similarly, in the days when stories were told aloud, not written down, tics or tags were necessary. So Achilles is 'fleet footed', Beowulf is 'sea-wise'. These made remembering the long poems easier for the story-teller as well as providing a quick sketch for the listener, who would then identify the characters by their attributes. The personal prop performs the same function, Diana's bow, Wotan's staff, Heracles' club. But these are conscious and deliberate.

Writing tics aren't either. When you next write a letter, a long e-mail or text, or a story or report (it doesn't have to be fiction) take a look and see if you can see your writing tics.

*

What about the process of writing? How does one begin? What should one avoid?

Each writer has a process of writing unique to her or him. This depends, I suspect, on how someone's imagination works, how organ-

ised she/he is and what their personal preferences are. But, learning by trial and error, I've identified certain common factors or stages which are important for me, as I begin to write my third book. And I've identified my mistakes.

Stage One The Out-line

Unless a writer is hugely experienced and/or talented enough to write without one, an out-line is important. It helps refines one's thoughts about a book, its themes as well as its plot-lines. It also helps avoid running down culture de sacs later.

I didn't write an out-line for *'The Villa*ge', because I began with the central story *'The Summer Fete*' and decided, at that point, to write twelve tales representing twelve months in the life of a village. So I had a pre-defined structure. Nor did I out-line *'On the Frontier'* because I already had a story, a plot and characters to work on - my original serial story for my nephew. In both cases I had to do MAJOR re-writes later in the process because of not having a clear out-line at the start. This was a lot of extra work and hard to do, because by then I was committed to my characters and narrative.

Think of this as having to re-break a bone in order to set it properly. Much better to consider all ways of setting it at the outset and choosing the best one. Write an out-line. Don't skip it.

Stage Two The First Draft

I have had to learn to treat the first draft as just that. I was much too precious about it. Often many of the actual words of the first draft don't make it to publication. One writer of my acquaintance tells me that, for her, it's important to just get something down on paper, almost regardless of quality, all the clever stuff comes later. She's on to her 9th novel and has hit the NY Times Best-seller list so it works for her.

The first draft is important, but I now treat it with much less awe than formerly. It's only a first draft.

Stage Three The Re-write

Every writer re-writes. Some do it a lot. Hemingway, for example, was famous for re-writing and re-writing, sometimes up to a hundred versions of a short story. This isn't just to do with choice of words, although it is that too, but it's also to do with plot details, timing and character. I knew that writers wrote and re-wrote. I just didn't realise how much.

In *'The Village'* my early drafts had far too many characters (some readers tell me it still has). I had to expunge characters I knew and felt affection for. This, in turn, meant plot changes so as to cope with fewer characters. In *'On the Frontier'* my focus was too diffuse, my characters had difficulties to overcome but insufficient jeopardy. In order to improve it I had to import more danger, meaning significant plot changes. These issues arose because I hadn't thought out the whole story properly (see above).

Unless you're really a genius, there's no avoiding re-writing.

Stage Four The Developmental Edit

Some writers don't have this stage. New ones, like me, need it. It was at this stage that I picked up both the issues mentioned above. An experienced editor helps enormously to spot the problems with manuscripts which might, by now, be on the third or fourth re-write. In my own case I did know about the problems, one knows when something isn't right, but I still needed them pointing out to me and I needed the subsequent discussion about how to tackle them.

I have been very fortunate in my editors, who have been gentle but firm. I have appreciated their advice and, with one exception, I have followed it. There is no point in paying someone for their expertise and then ignoring them. The exception was my refusing to turn *'The Village'* into a novel. I wanted to use the short story for to build up a multi-faceted picture of village life.

Nevertheless one needs to find the right editor. Many use the Chicago Manual of Style and don't deviate from it. You want more flexibility and experience than that, some individual attention. Also, editing is probably the biggest expense in editing a book, so it needs

to be productive. You might not hit upon the right person straight away.

Stage Five The Copy and Line Edit

This is the detailed edit which almost all writers employ. It is, as the name suggests, the edit that picks up any spelling, punctuation and errors of grammar (and these still get through, even in the age of spell-checker). Someone has to do this. Don't skip it. If not a professional editor then a willing proof-reader. Errors in the finished book look unprofessional and put readers off.

It also picks up anomalies, inconsistencies or just authorial slips e.g. in point of view. This was important on *'The Village'* as those stories used so many points of view and, although I checked and checked again, it needed an outsider to spot things e.g. that a certain character mentions something which they were unlikely to know about. *'On the Frontier'* also has multiple narrators and, even though I'm getting more used to this and writing accordingly, I can still miss things.

My current editor did both developmental and copy/line edit on *'Reconquista'* which is useful, as she can see how the story has developed. Even at this stage there are changes to be made and re-writing done. With *'The Village'* I had different editors for the two edits (and *'The Summer Fete'* had an entirely different editor) which was interesting as they did not always agree. In fact I think this helped me, because it made me make my own judgement, something which I'd have been more reluctant to do if faced with only one, vastly more experienced view than my own. And it is down to the writer to make her/his own judgement. Don't duck the responsibility.

I have found working with editors enjoyable and productive. They have been both knowledgeable and authoritative and, even when sometimes I am inclined to disagree with them, I always give their suggestions a go. More often than not I have been very glad I did. Often writers themselves, editors bring their wider knowledge to your manuscript. Many of them, although freelance, have worked in the publishing industry for years. Use an editor if you can. They are,

however, costly. I provide an editors list, with current prices, on the web-site, but, if you know already that you can't afford to employ an editor then beta-readers are useful.

Beta-readers – these folk, sometimes called 'writing buddies' undertake to read (and re-read) your manuscript to spot anomalies and inconsistencies and act as a sounding board for its development. They can be your friends, but make sure the friendship is a strong one and can withstand their critical role. More commonly they are fellow writers, at roughly the same stage and skill level, who offer the service in return for your doing the same, or similar, for them and their work. A writer I know told me how, after he got his line manager's agreement to his taking leave from his day job (to attend a writing course), she followed him out to the photocopier some minutes later and told him that she, too, wrote. Following their conversation she had quickly checked him out as an author on-line and so felt able to tell him about her writing. They now regularly read and discuss each other's work.

Beta readers aren't a substitute for an editor, but they are the next best thing and good beta readers can help prepare a manuscript for publication They won't cut the subsequent cost of editing, by the way, as copy/line editors charge by the page/number of words, not their quality. If you don't want, or can't afford, an editor, don't try to do it all alone – get a beta-reader or two. Sites like Goodreads and Book Blogs have writers groups where you can find such a person.

Stage Six The Final Edit

If you have a publisher, they will do this, preparing the text for publication. If you self-publish it's down to you. I like to go through my copy/line editor's corrections and suggestions again, just to make sure that I haven't 'reverted' in re-writing and then I 'polish' the text, checking typographical considerations, titles and chapter headings, front matter, end matter, acknowledgements etc.. This is worth doing, errors here can let down a story. Don't forget this bit.

There's lots of advice on-line for the writer. Venerable sites like The Purdue Owl, more recent, entrepreneurial sites like The Creative

Penn (I visit that one regularly). But the best way of improving and getting better at the process is to write more. An experienced and acclaimed writer of my acquaintance told me that, with her fourteenth novel, she finally began to feel as if she really knew what she was doing - she had had no idea with the first few.

Publishing

One of the two aspects of publishing a book which I found so new (the other is the technical side) is publicity. I had some understanding of how a large advertising campaign works, having been involved with public sector versions, but had never had to solicit publicity for anything more than a charity event.

The availability of 'print on demand' and access to the on-line markets, for both 'e' and printed books has revolutionised the publishing process, enabling small, independent imprints, like The Story Bazaar, to spring up and even flourish. But there remains the issue of getting attention for a book. It's even less likely, at item three hundred and eighty-four on the Amazon, Fiction, Short Stories list, to grab the notice of a casual browser than it might as a physical book on a wooden shelf in a book shop (even a shelf at the back, in the less well-lit part of the shop).

Stats show that most Amazon, or other 'e' bookstore, browsers only ever look as far as the third screen or page before they either buy or go elsewhere. If your book isn't on those screens it isn't going to get in front of the eyes of a potential buyer. Amazon rank their books according to sales. So the more a book sells, the higher it climbs up the rankings on to the coveted top three pages. The books appearing on the first page of Amazon's 'Best seller' or even its 'Thriller' category will probably be selling over 10,000 copies a day - the Robert Ludlums and Dan Browns of this world. This is a global market. So what hope for the unknown author?

Well, first, Amazon and others segregate books into categories and sub-categories, so a book may have a better chance of getting into the coveted top three pages in a sub-category like 'Sea Stories' than it ever would in 'Literary Fiction'. And there is evidence that regular buy-

ers from on-line stores use these sub-categories - people like to know what they're buying. So getting your category right is important. Second, it really is all about sales, not how well-known an author is or who they know, so there is no snobbery and there are no preconceptions about a book. Good, sustained word of mouth can generate sales and drive a book up the rankings. This means a premium on quality, a deep understanding of one's market (usually niche) and an inversion of the traditional, one-off 'book launch' strategy, as Amazon calculates ranking based on the previous weeks sales and a book can go down as well as up the rankings (more on that later). Third, good on-line reviews will also get a book noticed. Amazon will occasionally highlight the best reviewed books in its 'Most Popular' promotions. So I hope that everyone who enjoys *'The Village'* will write a review on Amazon or other retailers, or on reader's sites like Goodreads. I'll be putting a link to review sites in the back of all of The Story Bazaar books, just to make it easy.

Encouraging sales and therefore increasing the likelihood of more sales, as a book climbs that list to a higher 'ranking' and wider exposure, doesn't happen (unless the gods really are smiling on you) without a great deal of planned activity. Traditionally books are 'launched' and the 'e' world is no exception to that. The accepted way of launching an on-line title is now to have a separate launch site - *'The Village'* has one, I'll be populating that as launch gets closer. But the surrounding publicity has to try to sustain sales over a longer period, the better to fit with how the Amazon algorithms work. Seven days great sales get you a high-ranking, but, if that isn't sustained, you drop back down again soon. Any publicity strategy has to take into account how to drive up sales long after the first 'buzz' has passed. Fortunately there are ways of doing that, which I'll talk about when I do it.

For now I'm busy organising features in both free and paid local press. I'm setting up 'Meet the Author' events in local venues and the features will, I hope, generate interest (it's much easier to get press engaged if they've got something to photograph). I'm exploiting my connections across the country too - in the Midlands, from whence I hail, friends and family are distributing promotional cards in local libraries and book shops (most are happy to take cards or fliers), likewise in the south-west where quite a lot of the rural detail in the stories comes from. Watch out for the ad in Public Service Magazine, those who get it.

But, in the end, it still comes down to word of mouth and that is dependent on quality and the willingness of readers to talk about books.

*

So, how to stimulate those discussions and get folk talking about your book? Well, on the local level, you can't beat a 'Meet the Author' event. I did two such to promote '*The Village*', on at a local café, the other at a local bookshop.

A warm evening sun shone on the evening get-together at Clapham Books and folk drank wine in the garden, listened to a story from *'The Village'* and talked about literature and books.

Ed, of the bookshop, was hospitality itself and there had been lots of pre-publicity, helped along by Radio Wandsworth. There were questions aplenty, about *'The Village'*, but also about writing and publish-

ing in general. And, given the presence of other writers, it wasn't just me answering them. Writers who were there yesterday were Elizabeth Buchan (chair of last year's Costa Prize panel, her fourteenth novel *'I Can't Begin to Tell You'* has just been published by Penguin), Stuart Wakefield (author of *The Orcadian Trilogy*, the first of which was short-listed for the Polari First Book prize and a No.1 Amazon bestseller), John Taylor (*'Departing Vienna'* by Forbitou Books) and Barbara Pidgeon (*'Shakti Manifest'* by Westland Books).

In preparation for my first 'reading', I had listened to Elizabeth Bergstone reading *'Not Even Waving'*, the story which I chose to read yesterday, which she had recorded for the audiobook version. So I was at least able to import some 'life' into the reading, and actively compete with the jet planes and, for a few minutes, a helicopter, which conspired, unsuccessfully, to de-rail me. People were kind enough afterwards to say that they had enjoyed the reading, so, I guess, it was fine. As was the evening, many folk said what a pleasant time they had had.

Thank you to Ed, Roy and Nikki of Clapham Books, who run this series of evening events, supporting local writers and the life of letters generally. I learned last night that the shop may feature in a forthcoming BBC production of Julian Barnes' 'The Sense of an Ending', if so, it will be just reward, by way of publicity and recognition, for all the good which they do as an independent, local book shop.

*

How else do you maximize sales? The champagne corks have popped. The book is launched and there is a flurry of sales, as everyone who knows and likes the author (and some who probably don't) buys the much-worked-on and treasured volume. A book signing here, a 'Meet the Author' there, creates more interest and subsequent sales. Then there is a lull. Visits to the author's sales reports show few sales or none and the weeks go by. She's worked hard on her author platform and her blog still gets plenty of visitors and hits. Her subscriber list is growing and she's gathering followers for her author page on Face-

book and her Twitter feed. Her book is being added to people's Goodreads lists, but - what's happening to sales?

This is something many writers and publishers recognise - I certainly do. Sales of '*The Village'* went from a stream to a trickle. Reams of advice are available, from professional associations like Alli (the Alliance of Independent Authors), from commercial associations like Author Marketing Club and from other authors. It's only two months since publications of '*The Village'* and word of mouth - that single most important element for an unknown writer - won't yet have got going. So it's early days. But there are threads which stretch for miles on Goodreads Author groups, all seeking the answer to the same question - how do I sell more books? And, as everyone says, there are no easy answers.

One oft-made suggestion is to write more books. Sales grow the more books you publish - that sounds a truism, but let me explain. If an author has two published books and 100 sales for each, totalling 200 (and most self-published books these days sell between 100 and 200 copies maximum over time), another publication will not gather just another 100 sales, but more, because not only will some folk who bought the first two buy the third, but some people who come across the third, having not known about the first two, will go and buy them too. This is one of the reasons why writing series of books is so popular. It also makes you more visible on Amazon.

Another is to make the Amazon algorithms work for you. Generating a sales spike, using a giveaway or a price reduction, which then bumps your book up the Amazon sales rankings in your chosen category, and gets it in front of more potential readers will generate more sales. There seems to be a whole sub-set of the publishing industry devoted to books about how to do this. '*The Village'* is, incidentally, currently at 525,918 on the Amazon.co.uk general books ranking. It has been as high as 7,000 and as low as 900,000.

But even the hardest working writer can only write so much (I heard of someone who wrote over 70 volumes in one year, they were mainly short stories, but still...) and, if you're writing you're not

blogging, or tweeting, or reading, or managing your position in the sales ranking. So what can you do?

The answer is - maximise your sales from the book or books you have already written. So this is what I am doing.

Go audio.

I am currently working with a California-based actress to produce an audio book of The Village.

Present your writing in various formats

Thus maximising its appeal e.g. in 'e' form and paperback, in a complete version and, if you write short stories like me, in shorter form. Amazon used to have a category called shorts, now defunct, because some readers only want a short (and cheaper) book. This was withdrawn, largely because of the number of free or discounted book sites out there, like Bookbub, which competed too well, but people still sort on the Amazon site by price. And if you don't write short stories? Well, Dickens wrote many of his novels in episodic form, why shouldn't you?

So, for those who prefer a shorter read, '*The Village'* is available in three 'e'-shorts - books of four stories each. These are 'e'-books only, designed to reach those readers who find their Kindle books on Amazon by sorting for shorter or cheaper volumes. The first volume, '*Winter to Spring'* includes *'A New Year', 'Sunday', 'The Volunteer', 'In Calley Wood*' and *'Not Even Waving'* and is the shortest of the three. '*Summer to Autumn'* includes *'Open Gardens', 'Mixed Doubles', 'The Summer Fete*' and '*The Lion*'. The final volume, '*Autumn to Winter'* includes *'Harvest', 'The Fourth Estate', 'In the Salon', 'Accident & Emergency*' and '*Coda*' and is the longest at 125 pages.

All are priced at 99p GBP or $1.49 and they are available on Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk now. My first 'e'-short sale was within five hours of these 'e'-shorts being made available on Amazon, so there is a market out there.

Maximise your markets

Make sure your book (if written in English) is listed on all the English language retail sites, OR go exclusive with Kindle Select and get access to markets not otherwise available. Full Kindle royalties from sales in Japan, Brazil, India and Mexico are available only via Select. My web-site stats tell me that this site regularly has visitors from Brazil, India and Mexico so this is probably worthwhile for me. Kindle Prime subscribers are also unlikely to be looking on ordinary Amazon for books. I am going to place '*The Village*' on Kindle Select. Chatting with other authors, it seems that sometimes this boosts sales, sometimes it doesn't, but sales from other retailers are a very small percentage of '*The Village'* sales, so Kindle Select it is. I'll report back on what I find.

Translation

Consider translation. Joint ventures between authors and translators are becoming more common, whereby a translator translates a work and promotes it in another non-English speaking country for a share of the profits. I'll be considering this for *The Village* too (there are one or two Spanish-English translators I happen to know, for example). Expect to hear more about this in future.

None of these tactics will be successful, however, if the quality isn't there and people don't want to read what you're writing. So I still spend most of my time doing what I enjoy - that means writing stories.

*

In June *'The Village'* and its three e-shorts were placed into Kindle Select to be sold exclusively on Kindle Select for 90 days. Within that time one is allowed to promote a book for five days, by discounting it or offering it free.

Time passes, the book sells, albeit slowly, and, suddenly, I realise that the 90 days is about to end. And I hadn't used my book promotion days. Oops! Must get moving.

Mistake number one – bad timing. *Promoting a book in August when it's the deadest month of the year for book sales*. Lesson - time your promotion with care.

Mistake number two – no time to plan
No time to gain exposure on the many promotion sites, many of which need notice in advance . Lesson - plan ahead and contact your promotion sites well in advance.

I decide to offer the first of the e-shorts, *'Winter to Spring'* for free for five days in the hope that people might try it, like it, then buy the longer version. So far, so logical.

In order to get some attention for the full-length version at the same time, I organise a 'giveaway' on Goodreads. For those who don't know, a Goodreads giveaway is when an author makes a certain number of copies of a book available for free if people request it. There are usually far more requests than books made available and, the hope is, that those who aren't lucky enough to be successful in the 'draw' for the free books, will go on to buy the book. It means exposure on Goodreads, which usually prompts others to list it on their Goodreads pages and mark it as 'To read' i.e. to buy at a later date. My thinking was that those people who entered the giveaway and didn't get the free book (there were only five available) would probably notice the free e-short and download that, thereby increasing the chance of their buying the longer version later. This too makes sense, as the people who have entered the giveaway are self-selectors, i.e. folk who like the sound of the book anyway.

Mistake number three –no advanced publicity
Giveaways are more successful if trailed beforehand. Lesson – advanced publicity generates maximum interest in your book

I also purchase a, relatively cheap, Goodreads advert to be run at the same time, showing my full-length version. I publicise the free book promotion on this site, on Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and LinkedIn.

Then I sit back and watch the real-time stats. People apply for the giveaway, my ad gets thousands of views. BUT people aren't downloading the free e-book. Why?

First, I realise that my ad leads folk to go straight to the giveaway of the longer book, they don't click on the Free Book element or check my book page, where the free e-book is shown!

Mistake number four – poor ad wording
The free item must be IN YOUR FACE - *'FREE E-book' is what should be up front.* Lesson – assume folk will click on whatever they see first.

Only hours in, I change my advert to show the free e-short at the top. Ah ha! More downloads accrue (though actually most of the downloads on the first day come because of my own publicity via social media).

Second, I realise that my ad is one among thousands on Goodreads and a 'view' of an ad is of a screen which shows lots of ads not just mine. So, how to get better, more specific exposure? Well, I could pay more on Goodreads, but I don't have an advertising budget. I think about other promotion sites, from the huge, like BookBub (pretty impossible to get on to, unless your book is already successful) to the smaller sites like AskDavid.com, which has about 47,000 followers. It's Day 2 in my 5 day window, so I hunt down some smaller sites and arrange for them to show my book.

Mistake number five – not enough exposure
A Goodreads ad just won't be enough on its own. Lesson - get on as many sites as is possible.

Then I come across the amazing 'Readers in the Know' site, thank you Simon, which provides a list of all likely book promotion sites and their requirements. Hooray! Of course I don't have the time to get on all of these sites now, but I know where I'll be looking and who I'll be contacting, in advance, next time I do a book promotion. And, in the

meanwhile, I get my book ad onto some of the sites. More downloads accrue. But there still aren't as many downloads as I had thought there would be - in the tens rather than the hundreds - after all the book's free, what's not to like, as they say?

Well, at any given time, I have discovered, there are approximately 85,000 free books available on Kindle. So, just offering something for nothing isn't enough. What is needed is as much exposure as possible. Oh yes, and another thing, it's August!

So, why didn't I research all this beforehand, you ask? Well, if you recall, this was all done hurriedly when I realised I had to use my 'free' days or lose them. I will do better next time. But, if any would-be book promoters are out there reading this, please learn from my experience - I intend to.

And the end result? The giveaway ran for forty-eight hours in the UK only and 109 people applied for the five free copies. Of the 104 who weren't lucky maybe 10% will buy the book, so 10 sales (though all now have it on their book pages so giving it publicity, to all their friends and contacts). At 10 sales this exercise would break even. There were fewer than 100 downloads of the free e-book and with, say, 5% going on to buy the full-length version, this barely covers the cost of the ad. The real value of this exercise, however, is in the learning. Not just about book promotion, but in coming across some really useful web-sites along the way and making new connections. I'll use them next time.

As it happened, only one day after the offer concluded there were sufficient sales to cover costs, so something went right, despite everything.

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Book promotions are useful, but the ongoing need for publicity and exposure never stops. If you, or your publisher, don't tell folk about your book they won't ever have the chance to buy it.

The interview with the famous author is all around us, on-line, in magazines or the Sunday supplements. It's a staple page filler, especially when the author in question has a new book to sell and the magazine editor wants copy. The more famous the author, the greater

the likely interest generated. Throw in a few artful photos and the mutually supportive media machine rolls on. They sell magazines, you get publicity which helps sell books.

But what about us minnows? The unknown authors. No-one would want to interview us, right? Or so I thought.... Since publishing *'The Village*' I have received unsolicited requests for interviews from two book bloggers and a local radio station (and the interviews which followed were very interesting experiences , though I'm not sure how many people listen to local radio). I have also been interviewed by a local 'glossy' magazine (in part at my suggestion) and will be being interviewed on Colombian radio in the New Year (yes, Colombia in South America). I didn't understand that either, perhaps they're confusing me with someone more famous, doubtless I'll find out. There could be a story in this (though maybe Graham Greene has already written it).

All this is, in part, a result of the freedoms offered by the reducing cost of broadcasting technology, the move to 'on-line' broadcasting and the ever-increasing readiness of people to engage on the internet. It is easier than ever to set up your own on-line talk-radio, or even TV station. Many web-sites carry video diaries, seminars and pod-casts of interviews, made using web-cams or Skype, it's not just YouTube. Just as old-style print editors needed copy, so new-style pod-casters need people to interview. Famous people charge and anyway, who's to say that a relative unknown can't be witty and interesting? (That's not me I'm talking about, obviously.)

Before I wrote a book this was an unknown world to me. Now I wonder if I ought to be doing some interviewing myself? Many little-known authors interview each other. The interview has become a standard item for Face-book fan pages and author blogs. Already a small industry has grown up around this. Media training is touted for authors (thankfully I did this while a Civil Servant, being a media spokesperson was fun and Radio 4's 'Moneybox' and 'You and Yours' kept asking me back, so I can't have been that bad). There are media subscription services which promise to promote the new author, for a consideration, and some, free, media listing services which circulate

interview requests (some of them bizarre and often of the 'shock-jock' variety, but not all). I have found one or two possibles on a site like Radio Guest List in the past, though I haven't followed them up.

When The Story Bazaar gets an Author page I will use some of the interview copy which I already have. Until then I'll just look forward to my Colombian experience. It's all grist to the author's self-publicising mill.

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This week I have been working hard to prepare the 2015 Story Bazaar Compendium for publication, designing and formatting the interior of the book and working with the cover designer. This is the painstaking, technical part of publishing. It is, of course, much easier today than formerly, with software to help with the interior design. I use a number of design templates as well as doing my own formatting. It is certainly no longer such a physical challenge as with manual moveable type (the origin of which was in China, but which was developed in Europe by Johannes Gutenberg and his eponymous printing press). I had a long conversation recently with a gentleman who used to work 'in the print', in his case, newspapers, during the days of hot metal.

He described to me how it was, labouring in the 'print shop', amid the constant noise and heat of the giant printing machines. His job was to go through the printed sheets to 'page set', checking the lay-out and the type-setting and changing it if it was incorrect or looked bad. He had no special printing qualifications, having started work in printing straight after National Service, and no design background, but was responsible for many years for the lay-out of one of Britain's national daily newspapers (and the 'Father of the Chapel'). He mourned the passing of the camaraderie of the print shop, but didn't mourn the, sometimes very hard, labour.

The production of books has, as we know, seen technological revolutions before, yet what is remarkable is how much has stayed the same. And how similar the issues I face are to those faced by printers of the earliest Oriental woodcuts or the type-setting and page-setting

of my 'hot metal' man. We don't have solid matrices any more, we have software generated ones, but the filling of those matrices, with wooden blocks or other reliefs, with metal plates incised by burins, with inked plains or with format code and text, is still what it's all about.

So you start with the basics, what size will the book be? What is it's 'trim'? A book can be any size, but there are certain things to bear in mind. Trade paperbacks are most common (aside from the real mass market 4" by 7" books). Text-based books are usually in the proportion of 2:3, while art books tend more towards square. Print on demand technology restricts you to between 5" X 8" and 8.5" X 11" and some POD printers restrict you even further. Createspace, the Amazon self-publishing arm, offers only three sizes with non-white paper and, even with white paper, they encourage users towards the 6" X 9" size, through pricing. As it happens, this was the size I chose for 'The Village' anyway and will probably do the same for the Compendium. It meets the 'golden canon of design' tests for good book design (as formulated by Jan Tschishold in 'The Form of the Book', my book interior bible, which is still winning plaudits today, see Eye). By the way, most book shop shelves will take only books no bigger than 7" X 10".

So you have the trim. Now, how will you paginate? (And this means more than putting page numbers on the bottom of pages.) Here we find the ongoing debate about what to do with 'widows and orphans'. When you get to the bottom of a page, there might only be room for one more line. If that line is the start of a paragraph it will be indented and look a little lonely. Also, all but the last line of a paragraph may fit on a page, but the next page will then hold the last few words of the last sentence in the paragraph. So you might have, say, only three words in that first line. These lonely words and those lingering at the bottom of a page are known as 'widows and orphans'.

It's easy to paginate out these lonely words, but, if you do, your page lay-out will be disturbed. Text is squared-off, into the print space or Salzspiegel, so there are the same number of lines on each page, but if you start eliminating the widows and orphans you are

tampering with the number of lines and creating a greater space at the bottom of the page (or at the top of the next page). Okay, this was a problem in the old days, you say, but can't software adjust the spacing to take account of this? Yes, it can, but then you get stretched lines, large spaces between letters, which stand out like a sore thumb and look, in my humble opinion, much worse than the widows and orphans did in the first place. More sophisticated software also adjusts for this stretching, but, somewhere along the line, there is a knock-on effect.

Is designing the interior of a non-fiction book different to designing the interior of a novel or collection of short stories? Well, yes it is. There are lots of new things to consider, like illustrations, printer's ornamentation, page organisation and indexes. And the front and back matter will be different too.

Finally, before you ask - which is a widow and which an orphan - I will say that there is not agreement. The Chicago Manual of Style says that an orphan is at the bottom and a widow at the top of a page, but some folk believe the opposite. When I asked my 'hot metal' man about widows and orphans and how he dealt with them, he said that he just changed the text to fit! I wonder how many journalists have read their own copy wearing a puzzled frown because they don't recognise some of it.

Question; When is a font not a font?
Answer; When it's a typeface.

The Compendium will be the first non-fiction Story Bazaar book, but it's as well that I am learning the intricacies of non-fiction formatting and software usage, as there are more non-fiction books planned for 2016. The first editions of these non-fiction books will be trade paperbacks, but we may also produce glossier, more expensive, versions as well. Either way, the learning, for me, has begun.

And it starts with typography. When I produced *'The Village'* I used a typeface already known to me (Times New Roman) and set it at a standard usage (in terms of spacing and print lay-out). I used The

Form of The Book as a guide, together with course notes. Incidentally, Jan Tschichold's book is brilliant, though expensive, folk who are really interested in the subject but might not want to part with quite so much cash could try The Elements of Typographic Style by Robert Bringhurst, it's more general and much cheaper. *'The Village'* had chapter headings and headers and footers, but my short stories had no need of internal headings, sub-headings and sub-sub-headings. There was no need to decide on how to treat regular quotations, or separate out text, import pictures and caption them, create an index or a bibliography. I now have to decide on all these things with a non-fiction book.

We are used to lots of choice when it comes to typography today. The earliest moveable-type printers used gothic blackletter, to mirror the scribed books then in circulation around them in Germany. Indeed Gutenberg's first typeface was designed by a scribe, then engraved by a goldsmith. The Roman typefaces, copying the letterforms used in Classical Rome, weren't developed until the printing press spread to Italy where a typeface akin to that of the inscriptions on ancient Roman monuments was preferred. mainly because this adhered to the principles of Euclidean geometry. The most oft-quoted example is on the base of Trajan's Column in Rome (or South Kensington). The Baroque and later periods saw a veritable explosion of typefaces, often named for their originators, like Monsieur Garamond.

But must a type face be different for non-fiction? No, there aren't rigid rules like that. The principles of typography are based on legibility and readability (not the same thing, though linked). Legibility refers to the extent to which characters are distinguishable from each other. In practice, there are known problems with some typefaces, like the confusing of an 'h' with a 'b', or a '3' with an '8' so you would want to avoid these if your text contained a lot of numbers. Readability refers to the text as a whole. This is largely managed through organisation, spacing, structure etc., though sans-seriffed fonts are considered to have low readability, so you would want to avoid these for long, uninterrupted passages of text, like novels. Type-face with

serifs - the added strokes at the end of the strokes which form a letter, are considered easier to read than typefaces without serifs, or sans serifs. Fonts can have both serif and sans-serif variations. By the way, this article is written in a sans-serif script.

A lot of research has been done into how people read, the physiognomy of the eye and the 'best' and 'worst' typefaces. There are, perhaps appropriately, a legion of books written about typography, from Marshall McLuhan to the Royal College of Art. The unit there on the Readability of Print found that we 'absorb' groups of words (up to three/four) when we read, not individual words, and the eye can only cope with three or four of these groupings per line. More than that and the eye is strained. So compressed typefaces are less readable.

Now, back to the original question - typeface is the correct term for a style of lettering, not 'font'. Historically 'fonts', originally, 'founts' in English, defined size and weight (thickness or blackness) of letter forms within a wider typeface or font family. So 'Times' is a font family and it has a consistent typeface, but Times Roman, Times New Roman, Times Bold are fonts. Some font families, like Helvetica, include many, many fonts, but all of them share the overall style or typeface.

Why do people confuse them? In part because this is the esoteric end of typography, in part because, when the first Apple word processors were introduced the top left of the screen showed a group of letterform styles, including typefaces and fonts and sizes, all together, lumped under the heading 'font'. Go and look at your Microsoft Word program - it's still there!

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So to the last stage of publishing The Story Bazaar Compendium 2015 - the galley proof. A 'galley proof' is a preliminary version of a publication, so called because in the days of letterpress printing a galley was the tray into which the individual pieces of type were placed. I am at the galley proof stage in the work on the Story Bazaar Compendium 2015 and have taken away with me the first printed proof copy for detailed review. I have already reviewed it electronically,

using Sigil. This is, in part, a proof reading exercise, to spot any misspellings or mistakes, but it is also about the design of the book and its pages. Unsurprisingly, I've already found some changes which need to be made.

Have I used complimentary typefaces (because, at present, I have used more than one)? Does this work or should I revert to having just one typeface? Are my fonts the right size? What about the ornamentation?

Printer's ornaments are commonly used in non-fiction books. They are used in fiction too, usually with chapter headings - a good modern example of this is the sailor's knot designs which were used in the first UK edition of *'The Shipping News'* by E. Annie Proulx . There were no printer's ornaments in *'The Village'*. Research has shown, however, that readers absorb factual writing in a different way to that in which they absorb fictional narrative. So, without the narrative 'sweep' of a gripping story line, but with a succession of sections, arguments, facts etc., spacing the text, breaking it into manageable chunks, is better for the reader. In modern text books, one sees the frequency with which textboxes are used is growing and publishers use different fonts and typefaces to break things up.

But, now, as always, printers also use 'ornaments'. These range from the standard asterisk to elaborate designs based on plants or other natural shapes. There are many different kinds - for example the 'vignette', a design or pattern without a border, originally an engraved design printed using a copper-plate press and often used, like a 'wood-cut', to separate sections or chapters. Wood-cuts and vignettes were much beloved of the Arts and Crafts movement, with elegant and complex patterns, often drawn from natural forms, filling large parts of the available space on the page - as you can see in any book published by Kelmscott Press. Borders are also printers ornaments. These were common in 19th century books, fiction and non-fiction, when there was border decoration around the central text, good examples are Victorian cookery books.

The oldest printer's ornament is probably the asterisk, in its various forms, which is said to have been in continuous use as a graphic

symbol for over 5,000 years and has been found in Sumerian pictograms (see Bringhurst 'The Elements of Typographic Style'). Printer's marks, such as the pilcrow and ampersand have Latin roots (the former was an evolution from the slashed through 'C' of 'capitolum' to denote chapter, the latter a merger or composite of the 'E' and the 't' of the Latin 'Et'), as do some printer's ornaments, like the Hedera, or ivy-leaf, though that has also been found in earlier Greek texts.

Somewhat more modern is the dingbat. This isn't a word from the computer age, as I had imagined, confusing 'Wingding's, which you can find in the top left-hand 'font' section of your Microsoft Word program, with 'dingbat'. In fact, 'dingbat' is a slang word. In the US it is used as a substitute for other words, which may, possibly, have been forgotten, so, in UK English, 'thingy' or 'do-dah'. (If US readers know otherwise, please correct me.) Printer's ornaments could indeed be described as 'thingies' or 'do-dahs'. In the Antipodes, however, 'the dingbats' are the delirium tremens, (brought on, doubtless, by over-indulgence after a hard day's type-setting).

Some dingbats are available in Microsoft programmes, as Wingdings, but there are far more available if you know where to look. Many are free - see sites like Dingbat Depot or 1001 Free Fonts. I haven't used many in the Compendium and those I have used are traditional and appear on title pages or with headings. I am very conservative in my printing, I have discovered, or perhaps I just realise that I'm not yet technically proficient enough to be adventurous successfully.

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FOUR

Travel

It is by no means deliberate that The Story Bazaar's two guest bloggers thus far write about travelling in foreign parts. The first, *Mr Beige*, a Tarantino fan and bird-watcher's mate, wrote dispatches from a Greek isle, back in March. The second, *suepsails*, perhaps a more intrepid voyager, writes about her preparation for and eventual competing in the Clipper Round the World Yacht race.

The Story Bazaar plans to bring more guests to the web-site next year.

Nautical adventures

How can it be only two months until the start of the 2015/16 Clipper Round the World Yacht Race? Since signing up in 2013 it has always been something crazy I was going to do in 2015, or 'next year', but now, with the Race starting on the 30th August, it's really nearly here.

Crew allocation day on the 25th April was the biggest day yet with over 600 crew all wearing our smart red jackets, gathering to find out who our skipper and crew mates would be. Who would we be sharing this amazing experience with?

It seemed so long since that day in 2013 when I drove down to Gosport to hear more about the Race, not too sure what to expect, knowing deep down that I really wanted to be brave enough to sign up and sail one of the world's oceans. And, if I was going to do it, then it would have to be an ocean that I would never sail in again. So for me it had to be the Southern Ocean. This vast expanse of ocean has no land to slow down the massive waves that circle the globe and it can be an inhospitable place. When you sail there it's like being on an incredible sleigh ride and I can't really believe that I am going to do it!! And that's not all. In addition to the excitement of the Southern Ocean I am also going to be part of the 2015 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, one of the most iconic yacht races in the world. We start from the beautiful Sydney harbour on Boxing Day 2015.

So - what can prepare you for this journey of a lifetime? Well Clipper provide four training weeks during which you gradually build up your sailing experience. I have sailed quite a bit over the years but not on a 70 foot yacht with sails that have to be manually hanked on and off (usually in the rain and at night).

Level One training was not a good experience. At the end of it I was physically and mentally exhausted and I really questioned why I had signed up. It was so tough. So much to learn, so much physical effort for hours on end and not much sleep. I'm not sure what I was expecting but I really felt that Clipper were asking me "Do you really really want to do this?".

But I do and so I dusted myself off and signed up for level two. And I was so glad that I did. This was simply brilliant. We had a fantastic skipper who built my confidence back up and I learned so much. We had some great night sailing and I really enjoyed myself. Level three was all about perfecting 'evolutions' and becoming much more race focused with spinnaker practice included. I loved trimming the spinnaker but didn't much enjoy packing the huge sail up after the 'drop'. Level four comes along in August. This will be even more about actual racing, so, practising racing starts and learning tactics.

Having met some of my crew mates in April a group of us, along with our skipper Ash, are off this weekend for a team building event in the New Forest. Sleeping under canvas and playing around in the woods sounds like fun and it will be good to spend more time with some of the people I will be sailing with. But I think that will also be the hardest part of all, getting on with a diverse group of people in an environment that is so challenging with stresses, strains and fatigue. There are bound to be tears. But that is just another part of the challenge and I can't wait!!

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A few years ago I had a really scary sailing experience. My partner, at the time, had a yacht. It was wonderful to be able to sail whenever the mood took us. We would do short weekend sails or longer, more adventurous journeys, depending on what time we had available, but also what the weather was like. The season was no barrier and I remember many winter sails, including one New Years Day trip into the Solent on a beautiful winter's morning.

We had always said that we would like to sail across the Channel and spend a few days in Cherbourg. So, one August, we decided to do it. We checked and the weather conditions looked okay, it would be a

force 3 - 4 wind, increasing to 5 - 7 later. In hindsight, we should probably have thought harder about the conditions later in the day, but we were excited to be off across the Channel to spend a few days in France, so we didn't. We were up very early and set off from Portsmouth at 5a.m. It was a bit choppy but the day was bright and sunny and we were enjoying the challenge of sailing further than our usual routes. Around early afternoon the weather deteriorated, with the wind picking up and the sea state increasing. We were not making the headway needed to get us to Cherbourg before dark, so my partner decided to turn around and head back to Portsmouth.

During the afternoon the sea became quite rough and we both suffered with sea sickness. Mine came and went, but his was more severe and he couldn't stand, so he lay down in the cockpit. This left me to sail the boat. The weather worsened. The boat was tossed around quite violently. I took all the sail down and decided to motor back. But the tide was against us, as was the wind, so we made slow progress. The storm developed and I could hear distress calls on Channel 16 from along the coast. My partner was very ill and couldn't assist in handling the boat so I was left alone to deal with conditions which I had never experienced before.

The sea was often above the boat all around me. I gripped the wheel hard, trying to keep us on the right course. I had to go down into the salon to look at the plotter, so as to check our course, but the weather was so violent that I could barely stand and really struggled to get back on deck. We hadn't prepared for these conditions. We had no life lines on deck and we weren't in the right clothing. I was terrified, but I had to keep going, I had no choice.

It was a long haul, but I finally got the boat through Portsmouth Harbour walls at 1a.m. I was totally exhausted. I knew we had actually been very lucky not to have got into real difficulty. I learned lessons that day.

One of the main lessons I learned was to always be prepared for anything when sailing. The weather can change in an instant and you need to always be ready for what it throws at you. I also wanted never to feel so helpless again. This was one of the reasons for my signing

up for Clipper - to learn how to be a good sailor and be able to handle and understand what to do in difficult conditions. The other big lesson was about trust. Trust is a big part of sailing. Trust in the boat, trust in your fellow sailors, trust in the safety equipment and trust in yourself, that you are prepared for any situation.

We recently had our team building event for Clipper Team Ash and we decided to go to an outdoor activity centre. Trust and building trust between us was a big part of the day. So, amongst other things, we had to climb up a high pole and stand on the tea-tray sized platform at the top to await a team-mate climbing up to join you. We had to stand together at the top, leaning out, holding each other, before assailing down.

There are going to be many occasions on our voyage when we will have to put our trust in each other. We are also going to have to trust Clipper to give us a boat that will weather all storms and equipment which will keep us safe. But I want to be able to trust in myself, that I have learned all that I need to know, to be the best crew member possible and to have the trust of my crew.

N.B. The following article appeared shortly after the untimely death of Andrew Ashman, crewman on Ichorcoal, one of the Clipper Race's twelve yachts.

I was planning my next blog to be all about the amazing race start that took place on 30th August at St. Katherine's Dock. For those of us who signed up, some - including me - over two years ago, it was the day we had been waiting for. The moment we could cheer our team down the Thames and off across the Atlantic to Rio. But somehow with the awful news about the fatal injury to one of our Clipper family (and it does feel like a family) just days into the race I couldn't write it.

The day was wonderful and it will stay with me always, especially being able to share it with my family and friends on board one of the spectator boats. Seeing my crew and friends, across the whole fleet, sailing under Tower Bridge and off down the Thames was very emo-

tional. the next time I see my boat it will be on the other side of the world.

I didn't know Andy, and hadn't trained with him, as many of my Garmin crew had, but I knew what an experienced sailor and lovely guy he was. It was so very shocking to hear about the accident. I was out for the day with my elderly Mum and just saw a post flash up on Facebook. I simply couldn't believe it. Sailing is a dangerous sport and crossing an ocean does of course have risks, but Clipper train us so well with a total focus on safety. As I read what had happened my heart went out to Andy, his family and the Ichorcoal crew who must have tried so hard to save him. The decision that the crew has taken to carry on with the race must have been difficult and they are all so brave, but maybe the only way some will be able to come to terms with what has happened and to keep their love of sailing is to complete what they started all those months ago when they joined for their first day of Level 1 training.

What has happened has made my family and friends worry more about what I am doing. But this is the first fatality in 20 years of Clipper and there are risks everywhere these days. Sometimes testing yourself and taking a greater risk feels like the right thing to do. We are all even more focused on the need to stay safe and sail as we have been taught, looking after ourselves and our crew mates. I have my Level 4 training to do in a few weeks time, as I missed the one I was due to be on because my Dad was very ill. I think I get what adventurous spirit I have from my Dad. He travelled the World as a News Cameraman and was often in dangerous places, but made it through mainly unscathed to reach 85. He is frail and quite poorly now but when I talk to him about my adventure I see a twinkle in his eye as he remembers all his trips to different parts of the planet. My next blog will follow my Level 4 training when there will be only be 5 weeks until I leave for Australia.

Andy will be in our thoughts throughout the race.

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I was quite upset when I missed the Level 4 mass training session in August, when all twelve yachts were out for a week, racing each other. It would have been a great chance to sail with my skipper, Ash, and meet more of my crew mates. But my Dad had been taken really ill a few days before the training was to begin and I wanted to be with him and my family at a difficult time. So it was with excitement, but some trepidation, that I headed to Gosport for my final days training with Clipper, some time after my fellow crew members.

It was a beautiful, mild sunny day when I arrived. I was early, so I decided to have a big breakfast before joining the boat. I had been scanning the weather and shipping forecasts over the preceding days to see what conditions would be like and it seemed very changeable, but this was a good start. Our skipper for the training was Matt, who had taken part in the 2013/14 race, so had lots of experience. Our crew was international, some people had travelled a long way and were doing all four sessions of training in one go.

There was Tom from the US, Andy from Canada and Harry from South Africa. When we set off, some of us wearing shorts, little did we know that our main topic of conversation was going to be vomit, and not just related to sea-sickness either.

It felt great to be back on a Clipper boat, but slightly odd that I was still training while my crewmates were out there in the Atlantic racing down to Rio. For the first couple of sunny days we reminded ourselves how to do all the various evolutions - Yankee 3 sail up, Yankee 3 sail down and Yankee 2 sail up, reef the Main sail and so on. It had been a few months, but I was pleased with how much was coming back to me.

By Day 3 we were on the watch system - six hours on and six hours off in the day and four

hours on and four off at night. The plan was to cross the Channel and then head back to Portland and Solent. As soon as we got into the Channel the weather turned interesting, winds force 5 to 7 and a bigger sea state. A few people felt sick. Sea sickness affects different people in different ways. Some are floored by it, while others carry on, but have to lean over the side and vomit occasionally. Helming the boat while the folk in front of you are winching... and vomiting..is interesting.

It was late in the evening when we got to France and the wind was blowing harder. We turned around for Portland and headed back across the Channel. By the 3 a.m. watch change the sea was rough and the wind was gusting up to force 8. It was my turn to provide food and I decided that everyone would welcome a bacon roll. With the boat moving around so much I knew that cooking was going to be a challenge, but I headed for the galley. Then I discovered that a bottle of olive oil had fallen and spilled all over the floor. I felt like Bambi on an ice rink as I slid round, desperately holding on with one hand as I grilled bacon and cut rolls with the other, the boat heeling over. Eventually I found a small tea towel to stand on, which didn't move....much.

I was exhausted and really needed to sleep, but I was determined to make those rolls. When you know how hard your crew mates are working and that they are looking forward to some hot food, you go the extra mile. I can't wait to do that on the race itself.

As we got into the Solent the wind died down, but it appeared that Matt, the skipper, was ill. He had a very nasty bug. As you can imagine, bugs go round a boat faster than you can say vomit, so we struck out for Gosport to off-load Matt. As we tied up, Vicky started to show symptoms, so we were all wondering when we would start to feel queasy. We were fortunate, however, only those two people were unlucky and the rest of the training passed without incident. Though we had lots of conversations about vomiting.

The final day we spent doing a deep clean, an essential few hours when everything is cleaned within an inch of its life. It's very im-

portant to keep the boat clean and, with fantastic organisation, we managed to do it in under three hours - a record for me.

So that was it. No more training. The Southern Ocean next. And ready? Well, I hope so.

Bird watching adventures

It is April, the Greek economy is in free fall and we are on the first charter flight of the season. Everyone on the flight is connected to bird-watching, indeed, this flight, and others like it, exist only because of demand from bird-watchers. Lesvos has fishing villages, sheep, goats and low-rise, with friendly, mainly non-English speaking, locals. In April it is also under the flight path of thousands of birds. I am one of the few here who can't tell a passerine from a pintail and I am in a minority in another way too, I am male. All the other 'neglected' are women.

Our hotel in Kalloni has just re-opened after a bitter winter, so the rooms are damp and chilly, the heater/aircon doesn't work and neither does the TV. Nonetheless, I tell myself, I have a sea view, a hired push bike, a map from Stanfords and there's a swimming pool, albeit unheated. Life will soon settle into a rhythm.

It does. J. abandons me as soon as we arrive.

The bird-watchers rise at about six thirty in the morning and are outside before breakfast. Some of them are part of informal groups, others in guided, organised parties. J.'s little group has a volunteer organiser, a man who, like Radar from MASH, seems to be able to hear and identify approaching birds before the others even know that they are there. He has encyclopaedic bird knowledge and drives the mini-bus - for there is equipment - tripods, telescopes, other photographic gear. The hotel is empty by nine thirty.

At least breakfast is good – fresh, creamy greek yoghurt and local honey. On my first day I decide to cycle. Lesvos is mountainous and I cycle along the coast, but still encounter some gradients which necessitate a stop for wine and other sustenance. I also encounter some bemused looks from the natives. The Middle-Aged-Man-In-Lycra is a species unknown on the island and my outfit, though cotton not lycra

and bought for me by J., is mauve, which may not help. Back at the hotel I encounter more Greek incredulity as I swim. Actually, the water feels okay after about five minutes, or is that my extremities numbing?

I befriend the barman, named Vangelis (yes, truly). He shares the general local view on wild life. If you can't shoot and eat it, what's the point of looking for it? I am cheered by this and by the unexpectedly early return of J. and her group. They have been chased back to the hotel by bees, producers of my breakfast perhaps, who took umbrage at the bird-watchers lurking near their hives. My private smirk disappears as I realise that, henceforward, all and any conversation will be about birds. I drink ouzo with Van.

He tells me that Kalloni plays football in the Greek Super League – the equivalent of, say, Jersey's fourth largest village playing in the English Premier League. Apparently, Kalloni is only there because they were bought by some rich bloke, whose source of wealth is shrouded in mystery and of suspect legality. Wouldn't happen in England, I assure him.

The following day I am out again on my bike, heading for a local museum. When I get there, it's closed. Well, I wasn't really that interested in the industrial uses of olive oil anyway. But the weather worsens, a storm brews and I race the rain back to the hotel. The rain wins. Cold and soaked, I am confined to barracks.

This becomes a recurring pattern over the next few days and I am sustained by reading the Times and listening to downloads, courtesy of free wi-fi in the hotel lobby. That afternoon's entertainment is provided by two local dogs, who have escaped their owners and come to play in the hotel's swimming pool amid the hailstones. But, what the heck, I have dinner and conversation to look forward to. And it's time, I've decided, to study my fellow residents.

As our visit continues I observe a ritualised behaviour pattern amongst my fellow residents, the bird-watchers, especially those in organised parties.

They assemble in the same place at about the same time each evening and produce their lists. They run through these identifying species seen by the group that day, ticking off birds seen, sometimes per individual, sometimes per group. There is much comparing of totals and jockeying for position. By about 10.30 most retire, stopping at reception on the way, to check that day's 'book'. This contains daily entries from watchers identifying particular sightings and, crucially, giving locations. Some watchers freely share information, others do not and there are some resentful glares as the week goes on. The top end of Kalloni Bay has many different habitats, there is open plain, a river and salt pans and a large marsh, while inland is mountainous. It also has bee hives.

J. frequently attempts to educate me. I recognise storks and herons, raptors and sparrows, but otherwise am clueless. Nonetheless, in a quiet moment, sheltering beneath a tree, I find myself totting up the number of birds I've seen and recognised. This is appalling!

There is other wild life on Lesvos, besides birds and bees. There are dogs, not just the lolloping kind who play in hail-filled swimming pools, but the large, ferocious, teeth baring kind who chase unwary cyclists on back roads. And there is the ubiquitous taverna cat. As I sit in glorious sunshine, awaiting grilled fresh sea bass and chilled wine, with the sea as flat as a mill pond, I feel eyes upon me. I am being stared at by a feline. It is stout, dim-looking and ginger round the edges, I christen it Danny Alexander. When, later, I hand it a fish head it swipes viciously and I re-name it Tebbit. A little dog wanders over expectantly, but an icy stare from Tebbit stops it in its tracks and it retreats. I christen the dog Clegg. The weather closes in again and I retreat too, back to the hotel.

The bird watching part of our trip is coming to an end and soon my bike will be replaced by a car. Costa, the hire car man, delivers a battered Fiat. Uninterested in my driving licence, he suggests that, at the end of the week I just leave the ignition key under the mat.

Thrown by the casualness of these arrangements, I don't discover until later that the aircon doesn't work and the knob on the gear stick comes off in my hand. I suspect I'm playing a bit part in a Brit-abroad sub-Ealing comedy film. Costa does return, however, with an alternative vehicle which we decline, having fixed the first and jammed the knob back on the gearstick. A bottle of fizz appears in our room from Costa, a nice gesture and typical of the friendliness of the islanders.

J. settles our bar bill, only momentarily distracted by news of a sighting of a desmoiselle crane (Radar abandons his half-eaten meal and the mini-bus is seen heading off into the sunset). Everything is cheap here, though what you pay and what is shown on your receipt sometimes differs. The country is desperately short of money, but so are many people. Van is in his twenties with a degree in computing, but can't get work other than tending bar. He will shortly be conscripted for a year, which at least comes with food and lodging. One of the girls on reception has an Archaeology degree.

Van says people go abroad to work. If Greece exits the EU and the drachma returns, the exodus will increase, as the value of foreign currency will be so much greater. The London 'Polish plumber' may be superseded by his Greek counterpart. But there is always someone less fortunate. There are illegal immigrants here, usually in the north-east of the island, begging for food. They cross from Turkey in boats, fleeing Syrian war and associated privations.

We return the bike to the village, on foot, and are trapped in a bar, where we watch Indian Twenty20 cricket (courtesy of Sky Sports) while the rain pounds heavily on the roof. The barman watches it and us with a mixture of incomprehension and bemused fascination. That night we eat in the hotel, where a whole new batch of enthusiastic bird-watchers has arrived. The question is, should we tell them about the bees?

N.B. This post pre-dates the UK general election on 7th May 2015.

F I V E

Art

One of the abiding pleasures of living in London, for me, is the access to a range of galleries and historic houses through-out the year. I am a serial exhibition goer and visit exhibitions large and small, many the subject of national newspaper coverage, but some barely making a ripple on the media's glossy surface. This section includes reviews of specific exhibitions, but also of permanent collections, many of them free to visit, such as the National Gallery and the Victoria & Albert Museum,

Galleries

Lord Leighton's House

Home and working space of the eminent Victorian artist and President of the Royal Academy, Frederic, Lord Leighton, the Leighton House Museum in Holland Park is worth a visit at any time, but especially now, as it currently hosts an exhibition called 'A Victorian Obsession', including paintings by Burne-Jones, Alma-Tadema, Millais, Perugini, Waterhouse and Leighton himself. I went there yesterday and was charmed. Both house and art reveal the influence of foreign travel on the intrepid, or sometimes just wealthy, Victorian travellers and artists, most particularly, though not exclusively, the near and Middle East. Leighton had his house constructed as a centre for the arts and the magnificent Arab Hall displays his collection of Damascene tiles from the 1500s and 1600s within an appropriate setting. Similar elaborately decorated interiors can be found across the Arab world, but the Leighton House has its own little slice of Andalucia in west London.

Water, as always in Arab culture, is a particular element, its sound can be heard from the encased viewing balcony on the first floor as well as throughout the reception rooms. The exhibition, from the Perez Simon collection, runs until 29th March, entrance to both exhibition and house is £10 (and concessions) and the Museum is open every day except Tuesday. Although the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea web-site urges folk to purchase tickets on-line in advance, the booking agent often indicates unavailability when tickets are available, so it's worth a phone call to the Leighton House itself instead. Tickets can be purchased at the door. The paintings, with one, particularly grand, exception, are small scale and show the influence of both the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movements. The 'obsession' referred to is with the idea of female beauty, so there are lots of languishing beauties, many with the strong jawline and cascading tresses of the Pre-Raphaelite girls, but plenty of Greco-Roman ladies as well.

Hertford House (The Wallace Collection)

Once the London home of the Marquises of Hertford, Hertford House stands in the peaceful Georgian Manchester Square, just north of the bustle of Oxford Street (the nearest tube station is Bond Street, Central and Jubilee lines). Built around 1776, at the behest of the 4th Duke of Manchester (because there was good duck shooting nearby), the building briefly housed both the Spanish and the French embassies, though not at the same time. Bought in 1797 by the Seymour family it remained in the family until the widow of Sir Richard Wallace, illegitimate son of the 4th Marquess, bequeathed it to the nation. The title Earl or Marquess Hertford goes back to the twelfth century, but perhaps its most illustrious period was during the sixteenth century when Edward Seymour's sister, Jane, married Henry VIII and Edward became Duke of Somerset and first Earl of Hertford, subsequently becoming Lord Protector of England during his nephew's minority.

Sir Richard Wallace was the greatest of a series of collectors and it is his name which is given to the Wallace Collection, a holding of fine and decorative art, ranging from furniture, porcelain, arms and armour to paintings, including old masters. The collection is a world famous and fine one, but the house itself is also very much worth seeing. It is a wonderful stage for the treasures, as Lady Wallace knew, for she specified in the bequest that the whole of the collection must remain on show in Hertford House, never leaving it.

Its rooms are decorated in period, with gilded ceiling mouldings and rich draperies, at the windows and on the walls. The first floor houses much of the art, especially in a purpose built Great Gallery, where you will find Hals' Cavalier, some Van Dyck, Rubens and Murillo. There are specialist rooms showing off paintings from France - Boucher, Poussin, Fragonard and Watteau in the Oval Drawing Room and a Flemish room which includes Rembrandt. My own favourite room of paintings was that containing Venetian views by Canaletto and Guardi (one of the East Galleries if memory serves), but I also particularly enjoyed the British painters, Gainsborough, Lawrence and Landseer shown off in their own salon. They are usually augmented by Reynolds, but the dozen Reynolds paintings in the collection form the core of the current exhibition devoted to Reynolds in the galleries beneath Hertford House. Unfortunately I did not have time to see the exhibition, which runs until 7th June and is free to enter. The Reynolds paintings will return to their customary home on the walls of the house at the end of the exhibition.

Downstairs are collections of fine porcelain and Italian majolica. Some of the serving dishes would quite put me off my food, containing, as they do, ceramic versions of the eels and rather ugly shellfish which the dishes were designed to hold. There is exquisite furniture (I rather fancied the Sun King's desk and chair, for myself, though one would need a Hertford sized study to put it in) and the cabinets are very fine. The marquetry too is beautiful, though some of the pieces are too rococo for my taste.

There are also three galleries displaying European arms and armour (as well as a gallery of Oriental armour), including that for horses.

Dulwich Picture Gallery

Tucked just behind Dulwich College and opposite Dulwich Park, Dulwich Picture Gallery is well worth a visit, for its exhibitions or just to view its standing collection. It is Britain's first purpose-built art gallery. Originally part of Dulwich College it became an independent

trust in 1994, although it had occupied a separate building, designed by Sir John Soane, since 1814.

The College was founded by Sir Edward Alleyn, a favourite actor of Queen Elizabeth I, who left to it his collection of art in 1626 This was augmented by the bequest of another actor, William Cartwright, sixty years later. It was in the early nineteenth century that the collection took a more recognizable shape, however, with the bequest of Sir Francis Bourgeois RA of artworks originally gathered, by him and his partner, Noel Desenfans, at the behest of the King of Poland. Unfortunately, Poland was partitioned and the King abdicated so the, by now, copious, collection was left homeless (the Tsar and the British government refusing it). Desenfans widow, Margaret, donated the whole of it to Dulwich College and commissioned Sir John Soane (a friend of Bourgeois) to design a building to house it. Two later bequests, that of William Linley and Charles Fairfax Murray, added many paintings by British artists, including Gainsborough. It was a stipulation in Bourgeois' will that the collection be made 'available for the inspection of the public'. Bourgeois, Desenfans and Margaret Desenfans are all commemorated in the Mausoleum within the Gallery.

There is no tube in Dulwich, though it is possible to get here by overground train (to Dulwich North station and walk south for ten minutes through the picturesque Dulwich Village, or to West Dulwich station then through Belair Park and along Gallery Road). By

tube and bus, take the Victoria line to Brixton and then the P4 bus (direction Honor Oak), which drops you in Dulwich Village. There is car parking in Dulwich Park.

The standing collection includes works by Rembrandt, Gainsborough, Poussin, Watteau, Canaletto, Rubens, Veronese and Murillo. The gardens allow an excellent view of Soane's building, especially the pendentive roof of the Mausoleum which directly influenced Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and his design of the classic red telephone box. One stands in the grounds.

The Cast Courts at the Victoria & Albert Museum

One of my favourite short stories is *'The Real Thing'* by Henry James, a tale about an artist and his models that is also about surface and depth, appearance and reality. Authenticity.

I thought about it recently when visiting one of the places I like to go when in SW7 - the Cast Courts in the Victoria & Albert Museum. The two huge, and hugely popular, double height galleries were built to contain plaster copies of masterworks of European post-classical sculpture and architecture. Given that they include a cast of the entire Portico of the 12th century Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela (which may have determined the width of Gallery 46a) and Trajan's Column, albeit cut in half (which is likely to have determined its height) these are very big indeed.

When I first happened across the Courts, some years ago, I was perplexed. Surely that was Trajan's Column, which I'd often seen in Rome. And Michelangelo's David, well, I'd seen that in Florence. So what were they doing in South Ken? A closer look and especially a look from the galleried landing above, revealed them to be copies or fakes. Glorious fakes, commissioned specifically by the V & A in the nineteenth century, for the purpose of bringing the best in European art and architecture to the public in London. You can see the wooden infilled floor of the cast of the stone pulpit by Giovanni Pisano formerly found in Pisa Cathedral and dated to the first decade of the fourteenth century. The cast was made in 1865, from the pieces of the

original, which had been dispersed through the Cathedral and some of it destroyed, when another pulpit replaced it.

Indeed, the plaster copies are often preserved rather better than those originals which have survived, battered as they have been by wind, weather and modern pollution. The *bas reliefs* on the plaster Trajan's column show him, clearly and cleanly, thumping seven bells out of the Dacians (in the first century C.E.) far more distinctly than the original in Trajan's Forum does now, which is near one of the biggest traffic junctions in Rome. (Given the confluence of the ancient Vias Sacra, Flaminia and Nomentana, plus the Clivus Argentarius it was probably just as busy when the Column was erected, just without fumes from the internal combustion engine.) The Column is not the only example of the copy surviving rather better than the original.

In 1873, when the Courts first opened, most people couldn't af ford European travel (until the advent of the railways, most folk didn't travel very far at all).

So the glories of the continental Middle Ages and the Renaissance were to be found only as illustrations and, if you were lucky, photographs, in books. In addition, students of art, sculpture and architecture needed not only to study such items for purposes of learning technique, but also to place the British traditions in a wider European context. So the Cast Courts were built. Today the Courts are one of the most visited areas of the V & A, in part because Londoners like me have their favourites and in part because students still come there

to draw and study as students have always done. There were a number present when I visited the other day.

The twentieth century saw the fashion for plaster casts wane, especially after the 1970s when foreign travel became cheaper and more usual. In the '80s many museums, in the UK and on the continent, closed their cast courts and many casts were destroyed, condemned as inauthentic or unreal, even though they preserved what had been lost. Fortunately the V & A, the museum which can lay claim to starting it all, retained theirs. And they have become authentic of themselves, they are genuine copies, aged by the patina of time. They may not have the essence of the thing they copy, the creative idea and its execution, but they too are beautiful and real.

Exhibiitions

May - John Singer Sergeant

I attended the Singer Sargent exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery on a blustery monday morning, amid tourists and pensioners, though the crowds weren't too pressing. Unlike the larger exhibition at the Tate in 1998, this doesn't attempt to cover such a long period of the artist's life, nor such a range of pictures and styles. Instead it concentrates on the artist's own circle and his drawings and paintings of the folk within it.

It is certainly a glittering circle, covering all the arts, the stage, music and the written word as well as painting. Sargent was a man with many friends, some of whom began as patrons, others proteges. Certain names are immediately familiar - Claude Monet, Auguste Rodin, Robert Louis Stevenson, Gabriel Faure, Ellen Terry, Henry James - others less so. There are people from Sargent's youth at the atelier of Carolus-Duran (whose portrait features) and those who clustered around Broadway in Worcestershire. There are fellow artists from Sargent's maturity, when he eschewed portraiture and toured europe in search of landscapes, like the De Glehns and Ambroglio Raffele. None so reknown as himself perhaps, but fellow professionals for whom Sargent seems to have had respect as well as affection. The

study of Raffele, conning the mountainous horizon in the Simplon Pass for a subject to paint, is full of both.

There are few uniforms of any kind in these portraits, the princes and generals are absent, As are many of the 'society' portraits done after he moved to Whistler's old studio in Tite Street in 1886. Asher Wertheimer and W. Graham Robertson are almost the only representatives of that prodigious period of painting aristocrats and the newly wealthy, although what stunning representatives these are. Wertheimer, a prominent bond street art dealer and entrepreneur, is shown as roguish and shrewd, holding a half-smoked cigar, with his hand hooked into his trouser pocket. His Jewishness isn't ignored, but he is painted as he is, successful and unique (Sargent seems to have been immune to the anti-semitic prejudice found across Europe at the time). The pale and etiolated figure of Robertson, a slender aesthete wrapped in a great coat that looks too large for him, captures the fin-de-siecle spirit of the 1890s. His eyes are slightly puffy and red, his mouth pinched and rosy against his white skin. This is a 'beautiful boy' indeed, although aged 28 at the time.

There are a group of American pictures, done in Boston and New York, especially the portraits of the Players Club, great American actors of their day. But the remarkable war pictures are absent as are the murals. The highlights for me are the two aforementioned portraits, the stunning study of the rehearsal of the Pasdeloup orchestra at the Cirque d'Hiver, which is all motion and sound (it makes me believe I can hear the tuning up) and two portraits of Louis Stevenson which I had not seen before. In the first the novelist is, seemingly, caught striding back and forth, in full flow. In the second he is seated in a wicker chair, but still radiates energy and hyper-activity. Did he rise from the chair to do the pacing, or has he flung himself into the chair at the end of his pane-gyric? But all the portraits are exceptional, even, perhaps especially, Dr Pozzi, painted as a mixture between a cardinal and a grand inquisitor and as if set upon the stage. The diabolic good looks and many love affairs of the leading gynaecologist scandalised and titillated Parisian society, never more so than when he founded 'The League of the Rose' a society dedicated to the

confession and acting out of sexual experiences. An overheard remark from a very elegant lady at the exhibition could have come straight from a nineteenth century haute bourgeois Parisienne. 'He's very handsome, but I wouldn't want him poking round in my bits.' is this Sargent being ironic, as well as playful, perhaps?

August - Eric Ravilious

....sometime 'Seurat of Sussex', has long been one of my favourite 'little known' artists. He wasn't unknown in his lifetime, his designs for wedgewood and his engravings and illustration work made certain of that, but his career as a first-rate painter was cut short by the second world war and his untimely death, aged only 39, in September 1942 on active service as an official war artist. A major retrospective in 2003 at the Imperial War Museum brought him to the attention of the general public. His popularity is still rising.

A student, and friend, of Paul Nash and his brother John, as well as John Piper, the Moores and Edward Bawden, Ravilious, apparently a boyish, light-hearted and charming figure, is part of that group of painters who captured a world about to change, just as the older Nash and his contemporaries had done before the first world war. Ravilious' water colours have the slightly self-effacing elegance of the inter-war English avant guard, stylised but not quite abstract. His works often have an air of gawky gentility, of bracing walks on the downs, steam trains and tea in the station buffet, although this atmospheric pigeon-holing belittles him, even as it explains, in part, his popular appeal. He is a better artist than privileged, if threadbare, Englishness might suggest.

The son of a servant and a salesman, it was his talent which gained him entrance to this milieu, his early drawing skills winning him a scholarship to Eastbourne School of Art and then the Royal College. And there is more to him than pretty country scenes. Some of his works, which he very rarely explained, have a disconcerting, even sinister edge to them, suggesting an interior depth of meaning. They are often 'off-centre' in some way and full of openings, doors and

windows and receding, or skewed, perspectives, which begin to recede and are solidly blocked.

The detailing in his paintings is remarkable and closely allied with his love of pattern, be it in upholstery (see Train Landscape, 1940), the soil and the water (see Cuckmere Haven, 1939) or through structural details such as the receding telegraph poles in Wiltshire Landscape, 1937. He also loved what would now be called 'found objects' and he often painted them, especially man-made objects in a pastoral landscape, like The Waterwheel, 1938, in Capel-y-ffin. He described this water colour as 'a bit chinese'.

Living first in Kensington and then in Sussex, he certainly wanted to travel further than Wales, although, until the war, he didn't do so. It was when he was assigned as an artist to the Royal Navy that he visited Norway, the Arctic Circle and France. Guns, propellers and aircraft displaced the junk-yard objects previously found in his works and he transferred his love of explosive light - fireworks, light houses - into paintings of gunfire (see HMS Ark Royal in Action, 1940). He also captured war-time interiors, the underground bunkers with strip lighting and wall maps, the preserve of uniformed clerks, often women. Any mere description does not do his restrained palette and minute detailing justice. Go and see the pictures for yourself.

The Victoria & Albert Museum standing collection

'All of this belongs to you' is the title of a new, free, exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, consisting of four new commissions from contemporary designers, artists and architects; works which explore the nature of the museum in the public realm. It is competing cur-

rently with the Alexander McQueen

exhibition (£16 entrance) at the same museum, which comes trailing clouds of glory from New York and for which there was a long queue yesterday morning and 'Shoes; Pleasure and Pain' which has only just opened and runs until January.

In addition there is a free photographic exhibition of early 20th century photographs of India by Linneaus Tripe (marvellous name) as part of the ongoing V & A India Festival and 'What is Luxury?' a free exhibition of exceptional examples of contemporary design. I popped into the latter yesterday and was wowed by some of the pieces, most particularly 'Bubble Bath' a wearable necklace of clouds by Nora Fok and the dandelion-clock chandelier.

I don't need the excuse of an exhibition to go along to the V & A, a museum sometimes overlooked by the visitor to London, but now coming into its own with a series of headline making exhibitions, like last Autumn's Constable and today's McQueen. The museum, with an estimated eight miles of walkway in seven buildings, is a home to a remarkable collection of treasures, from the tiny, like Shah Jahan's exquisite cameo, to the enormous - the great cast of Trajan's column in the newly re-opened Cast Courts.

Some of my favourites are less lovely, more jolly - the 'Dacre Beasts', wooden carvings made during the reign of Henry VIII for Thomas, Lord Dacre, of Cumbria. The heraldic beasts feature on the escutcheons of the Dacre family, or families associated with it.

Thomas' own beast was the bull whose ferocity is undermined, I am afraid to say, by his rather vacuous expression and his bright pink colour. Doubtless, in sixteenth century Cumbria it wouldn't have mattered, and who was going to argue with Lord homas anyway. I suspect the bull was once a deep red and has faded.

I love to roam the galleries here, a bit like Philip Warren, A.S.Byatt's boy-hero in *'The Children's Book'*, there is so much that is wonderful to see. But you have to really look at it - it is too easy to walk past just another exquisitely wrought golden Siamese statue, or cast a cursory glance at the intricate arab tilework or the amazing Persian carpet. The objects repay close consideration. this middle-aged woman with failing eyesight peered at a 16th century painting from the Hamzanama, a series commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Akbar, and was rewarded by finding tiny, precise and beautiful depictions of patterned tiles on the roof of a building which was simply the background to the wedding preparations which occupied the fore and middle ground of the painting.

One way of ensuring that you pay attention is to take a tour, as I did yesterday. Our guide, Vicky, was knowledgeable, erudite and charming and she enhanced my experience tremendously. Please note, these tours are free and do not have to be booked in advance. just turn up at the meeting point for 10.30 or 11.30 and wait for the guide to arrive.

This guiding tradition, replicated at the Science Museum just along Exhibition Road, is a fine one and everyone in my group was heartily grateful for Vicky's knowledge. Often the guides are retired people, from the professions associated with their museums. I was once conducted around the Flight Gallery of the Science Museum by an immensely knowledgeable former aeronautics engineer, who was able to explain to a lay person like me, not just which plane flew better or further, but why.

October - The Face of Britain

The current free exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery is 'Face of Britain', or, to be more accurate, 'Simon Schama's Face of Britain'. I

did not see the five part BBC series which accompanied it nor have I read the book or watched the DVD, so I came to this with no knowledge of Schama's commentary. The eminent historian has, with the NPG curators, chosen a selection of portraits to represent Britain and Britons, echoing the intentions of the founders of the NPG in 1856, who chose to inspire their fellow britons through the portrayal of the nation's heroes. It's worth a visit.

There are five rooms and an introductory area, each room having a theme - 'People', 'Fame', 'Power', 'Love' and 'Self'. The themes range wide, so the 'The Face of Love' room includes not only Annie Leibovitz' photographic portrait of a naked John Lennon with Yoko Ono, hours before he was killed, but also the work of an artist who provided some condolence to Victorians by painting their dead children. There are more conventional portraits of loved ones, men, women and Lewis Carroll's pictures ofAlice Liddell.

'The Face of Power' shows royalty and rulers, from the first Elizabeth to the second and includes oil and pencil sketches of Sutherland's famous portrait of Churchill, subsequently destroyed. The power here is not just the worldly power of those painted or photographed, but the balance of power in the relationship between artist and sitter. 'The Face of Self' is my favourite room, It showcases self-portraits, often of the artist in the act of painting, as in 'Dame Laura Knight with Model' and 'Sir Joshua Reynolds'. George Romney portrays himself in a strop, a grumpy mood - here's an artist saying 'bugger off' - I liked it. The self-portraits range from 1564 to 2006 and Marc Quinn's sculpted head made using his own blood.

'The Face of the People' is devoted to those less than great and good, photographs, etchings and silhouettes of ordinary people going about their daily lives. Here you also find the non-establishment heroes, the bare-knuckle prize fighters, Tom Molineaux and Bill Richmond, the dwarves and giants, including an etching of Patrick Cotter, the Irish giant also know as The Giant O'Brien and the subject of one of Hilary Mantel's saddest novels.

Then there is 'The Face of Fame' a collection of nationally re-known figures from Sir Francis Drake in the 1500s to Diana, Princess

of Wales in 1997, via Shakespeare, Nelson, Lady Hamilton and, because lasting fame sometimes begins with celebrity, the actors, David Garrick and Sarah Siddons. Cartoons are represented here, too, with three by 'Alick' Ritchie.

My favourite painting of the exhibition? Well, i've always liked the Laura Knight and I was charmed by others, but the one which sticks in my memory is the unfinished painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence of William Wilberforce, the anti-slavery campaigner (and campaigner for other good causes). Wilberforce declined a peerage, lost most of his money and his home, by paying off his son's business debts (despite there being other funding available), suffered ill-health for much of his middle and old age and yet was said to be full of 'warmth and kindness'. I like to think that one can see this truly good nature in the painting.

The exhibition is free and runs until 4th January 2016. If, like me, you haven't seen the series, read the book, etc. I would advise that you look at the NPG web-site before going to the exhibition, it will enrich your experience. And take a look at the remarkable sculpture of Sir Tim Berners-Lee just outside one of the exhibition rooms, it looks about to step down from its plinth.

October - Barbara Hepworth

At Tate Britain until 25th October this excellent exhibition of Dame Barbara Hepworth's smaller sculptures is definitely worth a visit. It has been described by various critics as 'ravishing', 'exhilarating' and 'exemplary' and it is, in my humble view, worthy of all those descriptions. Its six large rooms were sparsely populated when I visited late yesterday afternoon, giving me ample time and space to look properly at the wonderful pieces.

The first room is given over to carvings, some of her own, in wood and stone and some of her husband, John Skeaping, to whom she came runner-up for the Prix de Rome in 1924. Eric Gill also features. The pieces are small and perfectly formed - a dove, a feline, a figure seated. The second room features works by Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, when they lived together in Hampstead and shows just how

much cross-fertilization there was between them. Hepworth begins to use colour on her sculptures and her profile appears in numerous Nicholson works.

Room 3 show cases Hepworth's classic modernist pieces, forms mainly in marble or other stone. In 1937, she, with Nicholson (whom she married in 1938), Naum Gabo and Leslie Martin produced '*Circle; International Survey of Constructive Art*', what was intended to be the first in a series of books, though, in fact, no more were published. Contributors include Henry Moore, Brancusi, Le Corbusier, Piet Mondrian, Herbert Read and other famous names. In effect, '*Circle*' brought continental modernist artists to the attention of the british art-loving public. hepworth was one of the few women among them.

In the fourth room are some of my favourite small, wooden sculptures, using whites, greys and blues within the concave forms. The fifth room includes a film made of her working on large outdoor sculptures in Trewyn Studio and gardens, which subsequently became the Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden, now part of Tate St Ives. Given that I was pressed for time at this point (having spent too long gazing and scrutinising) I did not stop to watch it. Instead I went on to the other half of the room, which contains the wonderful sculptures in quarea wood, all named for places in Greece

which she visited in 1954 with a friend, in an attempt to militate her grief after her son's untimely death. These I love. the red-brown outer surfaces are smooth, warm and beautiful, the inner painted and, in one instance, strung across with copper wires. The light on the planes of the inner spaces changes as you walk around the piece, revealing different shapes and patterns. They are remarkable. I wanted to touch them.

The final, large room contains a replica of parts of the Rietfeld Pavilion in the Netherlands, for which Hepworth sculpted a number of large pieces in bronze, some of which are here. These are the public

sculptures which we are more familiar with. like the one on the side of the John Lewis department store building in Oxford Street.

The exhibition costs £18 for adults, £16.00 concessions (or £1.50 less, without donation). It closes on October 25th.

November - Frank Auerbach

Frank Auerbach (1931 -) has lived and worked in North London, painting the people and urban landscapes near his studio in Mornington Crescent since the fifties. Born in Berlin but shipped to the UK in 1939, aged seven, by his parents (who subsequently died in a concentration camp) Auerbach is one of the generation of British artists which includes Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon and, like them, he is a figurative painter. The current exhibition at Tate Britain (Pimlico station, Victoria line or number 88 bus from Trafalgar Square) is curated by one of his long-time subjects, Catherine Lampert, and paintings in the first six rooms have been selected by Auerbach himself. These are what this artist wants people to see.

Although he is famous for the intense relationships he forms with his sitters whom he paints again and again and with the places near his studios, which figure in his work over and over, his selections are, intentionally, very different from each other. So there is no immediately discernible chronological or narrative development between the paintings. Auerbach has said that he wants each work to be treated as absolute in itself. Nonetheless the rooms are arranged by decade, from 1950s to the present day and, given his concentration on a small(ish) number of subjects, making connections is almost unavoidable. Especially when, in the final two rooms, which house paintings chosen by the curator, there are canvases which resonate with others shown earlier in the exhibition.

Auerbach's technique is to draw with the brush, in oils or acrylic, or with charcoal. He regularly scrapes the day's paint off the canvas at the end of the day, before starting afresh on the morrow. In his search for perfection a painting may take months to complete, even if the final product looks as if it is dashed off, but it may have taken up to 200 separate versions, all judged insufficiently good, to produce

the final image. His canvases are sometimes thick with impasto, or a collection of squiggles and lines. In each case an image emerges, sometimes straight away, sometimes only after the viewer looks at the work for a period of time. On those occasions that the image didn't appear for me, I think the fault was my own, though it helped to be able to go back and look again in certain cases, especially at the cityscapes.

Auerbach once quoted Robert Frost on his own poetry *'i want the poem to be like ice on a stove - riding on its own melting.*' A great painting, he said, *'Is like ice on a stove. it is a shape riding on its own melting into matter and space; it never stops moving backwards and forwards.*' So a painting is more than a representation, figurative or otherwise, of a time and a place, or person, though it is that. what else it is? The captured feeling and sensations of high summer on the Hampstead Road, 2010 with its hot light and whizzing skateboarder and or of a Winter's night on Primrose Hill, with its distant lights through the trees crashing in the wind? And how that feeling as well as that image resonates through time and with other people. at least that's what it seems like to this unsophisticated viewer.

My personal favourites were the aforementioned 'Hampstead Road, High Summer', 'Winter evening, Primrose Hill', the wonderful charcoal and graphite heads and some of the studies of Julia (the artist's wife) and E.O.W..

The exhibition is well worth a visit. Entrance costs £14.50 (£16 with donation) and concessions are available. It runs until 13th March 2016. Check out the Tate Britain web-site for opening times and other information on Auerbach and the paintings on display

Turner & Constable - Two English Masters

People who happened to live in or visit London during Autumn 2014 were fortunate enough to be able to see exhibitions of three remarkable masters - Rembrandt, Constable and Turner - at the National, the V & A and the Tate galleries respectively. I went to all three and seeing them at the same time, especially the English contemporaries, Constable and Turner, gave me a deeper understanding of the work

of each of them. It was clear, for example, when one looked at the late paintings that neither was very interested any more in the representational painting which both had started out by producing. This was something I had always under-stood about Turner, but not Constable. In both cases, failing eyesight also played a part (as it did with Monet).

It's now a little more difficult to make the comparisons and juxtapositions, but it's still possible if the determined viewer is prepared to wear out some shoe leather, for the three galleries in question still hold paintings by both Turner and Constable. At the National there is the wonderful Turner and Claude Octagonal Room, displaying two amazing Turners next to two Claudes, his inspiration, but also a selection of Turner's canvases including 'Rain, Steam and Speed' (spot the hare) and 'The Fighting Temeraire' - the latter voted the nation's favourite painting in a BBC poll. The National also has 'The Cornfield' and 'The Hay wain', among a range of other Constables, the latter a former 'nation's favourite painting'. Given that both painters are British this is what you would expect in a National Gallery.

It's less well-known, however, that the V & A too has its Turners and Constables. The oil sketch for 'The Haywain' is in the V & A (they were hung together in the 2014 exhibition so one could see just how the painting developed) as is one of my favourite Constable paintings 'Boat building near Flatford Mill'. His 'Dedham Lock and Mill' and 'Salisbury Cathedral' can also be found here, in room 87, together with watercolours of Stonehenge and Old Sarum. Side by side with these are a collection of Turner sea-scapes, including 'Lifeboat and manby apparatus going off to a stranded vessel' in which one can see the blue distress lights be-

ing fired from the vessel in question. Constable and Turner, land and sea, old handcrafts and new, industrial age inventions, earth and water (and light, of course, for both painters).

There are more Constables than Turners in the V & A, but more Turners than Constables in the Tate, especially in the specially built (and recently extended) Clore Galleries in Tate Britain. Here are all Turner's sketchbooks, water colours and drawings, many left, by him, to the nation, with the proviso that they should all be kept together. There are over 32,000 of them and only a small proportion are on show at any one time. One of those on permanent display is 'The Blue Rigi' a sublime water-colour now owned by the Tate after a public appeal. But Tate Britain also has its Constables, especially 'Flatford Mill' one of his best loved canvases. So it's still possible, in Autumn 2015 to look at Turners and Constables side by side, though in three galleries rather than two.

Which painter do you prefer? Both came from humble beginnings, both were lionised during their life times, both fell out of fashion. Each was acutely conscious of the other. I can't decide, I love them both Access to all this is free. Check out the web-sites of each gallery - the National, the V & A and the Tate Britain - for opening times.

December - Artist and Empire

...is the title of a new exhibition at Tate Britain (Pimlico tube station, Victoria Line). It is well worth a visit, as the reviews suggest. I went yesterday and found it interesting and thought-provoking. It seeks to explore ways in which Empire shaped practices and themes in British, and other countries', art, from the early colonial period until the present day.

In part, the exhibition documents the artistic narrative in Britain. From the earliest British map-making of exploration across the globe, progressing through the scientific collecting of new species of plant and animal in drawings and paintings, to the collections of glamorous curiosities (and real engagement with new peoples and cultures). The eulogizing of empire and its representatives in classical 'history paintings' is shown, including attempts to show those colonised as 'happy'

(presumably as colonial actions and the very act of colonising was questioned), as is anti-imperial art in Britain. By the way, I don't see these phases as purely chronological, but rather strands which weave together in history, although some are stronger at certain times and some are almost impossible at other times. The difficulty of love or friendship between coloniser and colonised, when the balance of power in such a relationship is so unequal, has formed the subject matter of much literature from Forster to Rushdie.

The exhibition also seeks to document how the other side of the equation worked in artistic terms. How indigenous civilisations responded, first to the explorers and those of genuine curiosity, then to the trade and profit-driven imperial expansion, then, once empire receded, to its legacy. This second aim is, necessarily, less supported by works of art than the former, but some of the most interesting pieces in the whole exhibition were those from Indian, African, native American or Antipodean Aborigine artists.

I adored the wonderful early twentieth century Asafo (West African) banners hanging in Room 1, Mapping & Marking. The banners take the same form as regimental colours and each incorporates, somewhere within its design, a Union flag - the Asafo were allies of the British. But the main elements of the designs were of the Asafo's allies, as portrayed through the filter of Asafo artistic tradition, a tradition of design based upon depictions of the natural world. So, a pilot is shown in a vehicle which resembles a fish more than it resembles an early bi-plane and artillery is shown as a fire-breathing serpent.

In Room 2, Trophies of Empire, there are exquisite artefacts from the indian sub-continent (I covet the intricate ivory chess set) and fine, bold sculptures from Nigeria and Polynesia, so influential on twentieth century western art. A figure by Eric Gill sits next to that by an unknown Nigerian sculptor, just to demonstrate that influence.

The dates of some of the works surprised me. A seventeenth century British traveller depicted in silk pyjamas with an Indian boy attendant, for example and the exhibition includes Sir Francis Drake and his contemporaries, and Ireland as empire. These are earlier than I think of, when I think of 'empire', approximately from Woolf to Victoria, but that's wrong, it stretches back much further. A portrait of an Elizabethan gentlemen, in usual ruff and silk finery, but completely bare-legged, out of respect to his Irish foot-soldier troops, was a bit jolting. Room 4 - 'Power dressing' has its share of colonising grandees who adopted 'native' garb and indigenous great and good adopting western dress.

Room 3 - Imperial Heroics has a good collection of history paintings, some of which were famous from the day they were first exhibited, like 'The Death of Woolf'. (Incidentally, I recommend Simon Schama's little-known not quite history, not quite fiction, story about Benjamin West, its artist, called 'In Command'.) Others, like 'The Death of General Gordon' inspired Hollywood (no, Gordon does not look like Charlton Heston, though both 'pictures' show them standing atop some stone steps before the rampaging followers of the Mahdi). This exhibition encourages such lateral thinking.

The final rooms contain artworks by artists from former colonies who travelled to Britain post WWII to study and work. To bring us completely up to date, a 21st century version of the old 'Imperial

Federation' Map of the World (the British Empire in pink) and a wonderful Singh twins collage entitled 'EnTWINed'.

SIX

Reviews

When I began The Story Bazaar I didn't envisage writing reviews of plays or books. The former occurred naturally as part of commenting on the cultural life of London. . The National Theatre is but a few stops away from my home by tube and the West End, with its plethora of theatres, only little further. The latter occurred at the suggestion of a reader, who thought there should be more books in The Story Bazaar and, in the absence of more publications, which take time, book reviews might do. I duly obliged.

Theatre

Three Days in the Country

And so to the National Theatre to see Patrick Marber's new, much-lauded version of Turgenev's *'Month in the Country'* at the Lyttleton. Compressed into three hot summer days, this comedy of manners follows the denizens of a large Russian country house and estate, who learn all sorts of lessons in love when a handsome new young tutor comes to stay, to teach the withdrawn and lonely son of the house.

'It's very Russian,' said the man sitting behind me during the interval. Well, yes, it's by Turgenev, I wanted to respond. I didn't. In part because I'm English and it would be presumptuous (he might, after all, know much more than I do about Russian drama) but also because I think I know what he meant. This is familiar territory. There is the large Russian dacha, complete with serfs, its bored and semi-dissolute owners going slightly mad, the impending storm of Bolshevism already on the horizon and lots of tortured, unrequited passion. Pre-dating Chekov's later and best known plays, it's easy to see Turgenev's influence on the later dramatist in *'A Month*...'. The three Prozorova sisters belong in this milieu, as do the Ranevskayas, though this setting is prosperous not penurious. I found this version of the play insightful, witty and generous of spirit, intelligent as well as passionate and, at times, very funny indeed.

Mark Gatiss uses his physical angularity to great effect as the world-weary, cynical, but endearing Doctor Shpigelsky, whose straitened means and emotional isolation prompt him to make an unorthodox proposal of marriage. Or 'more of an arrangement' as he prefers to call it. Gatiss is excellent, one feels the character's perplexity and vulnerability when he is refused (quite rightly, by Lizaveta the most sensible character among them, who seems to me to be a slightly shop-soiled Austen heroine accidentally fallen among intense and self-loathing Slavs). But the Doctor is well-armoured.

He is matched by John Simm, as Rakitin. Long standing boyhood friend of Arkady, the wealthy owner of the estate and a besotted admirer of Natalya, Arkady's wife, he is a man who worships his own

enslavement by love at the same time as hating it. Rakitin is a man of the world, but one who loves his friend and who loves Natalya, as well as desiring her. His long-standing, dramatic passion is just as real as the other types of love on display, more so, even, in Simm's multi-layered performance. He manages to be languid, witty and acute and impassioned, bitter and tortured at the same time. And, strange to say about a character who desperately desires to seduce his best friend's wife, decent. This an acting tour de force.

Amanda Drew, as Natalya, is suitably alluring, intelligent and bored. In turn haughty and vulnerable she is easily prey to an unsuitable and unlooked-for first love. Natalya has sufficient self-knowledge to see her ludicrous situation, but cannot help herself, any more than can Rakitin, Vera or her older suitor, struck dumb by shyness, whom she agrees to marry in a fit of pique. Theirs will be another almost unbearable marriage.

The other performers are uniformly excellent, though a little overshadowed by Simm and Gatiss. The staging is atmospheric and minimal. 'Three Days in the Country' runs until 21st October. Go and see it if you can manage to get hold of a ticket.

In Another Part of the Forest

The National Theatre's current production of Shakespeare's *'As You Like It'* is packing them in on the South Bank. The Olivier theatre was almost full hen I attended (it looked like a large party had failed to show up, but otherwise all seats were taken). This production has garnered some excellent reviews, although some have been critical of its conception of Duke Frederick's court. I'm pleased to say that Shakespeare and the play's magic captured us all, but it did have to fight hard at the beginning. It was no fault of the performers.

I have seen some excellent versions of Shakespeare which benefit from a director's new concepts and ideas, teasing out different aspects of the play. Moving a play in era, either to the present day or to a time with a particular resonance for the piece, sometimes illuminates and enhances its central themes. Similarly, a new design of setting and costume can prompt insight and a better, or different,

understanding. At the National in the '90s, Richard III and Macbeth, both starring Sir Ian McKellern, were good examples of this..

I have also seen some sadly cut about and drowning Shakespeare in which the verse barely holds its head above water, so weighted down with 'concepts' is the play.

The current production is neither of these, in my view. There are superb aspects - this version of the Forest of Arden for example. It resembles a Vorticist painting and is shown to be a cold, sometimes inhospitable, place, the exiled Duke struggles vainly to bring out its virtues when he praises his present life and surroundings. It was easier than usual to believe that someone might lose their way and be close to starving. The winter wind doth truly blow here.

The natural inhabitants of this forest are good too. Audrey, William, Silvius and Pheobe are suitably amusing and unsophisticated in the purlieus of the forest, the tamed pastures. Corin the shepherd doubles very well as Hymen in the final scene of resolution and is wonderfully sonorous and slow with ponderous rustic 'wisdom'. The sheep are huge fun. The transplanted court is also good, especially the songs. I wasn't sure about Jaques because I didn't understand what Paul Chahidi's performance was about, which may be my fault. 'All the world's a stage' was well done, there was absolute stillness and attention in the audience when those words were uttered (in anticipation or recognition - didn't we all do that speech at school - I couldn't tell, but a palpable change in the audience occurred).

The principals were excellent. Rosalie Craig as Rosalind and Patsy Ferran as Celia were wonderful, the intimacy and long-standing nature of their friendship obvious. So was Joe Bannister as Orlando, a public-school male version of Celia's leggy grown-up school-girl (though this undercut Orlando's claim that his brother kept education from him). I found his brother Oliver (Phillip Arditti) more convincing in the forest than formerly, but I think that was to do with matters other than the performance.

The opening scenes in the court are set in a modern office, with desks, chairs, coloured lino and IT screens. Members of the company populate it before the play begins, typing at their keyboards and sign-

ing papers in triplicate. A nice touch is to have Orlando as an office cleaner, very much a 'mean employment' and the gesture towards the desk-top pot-plant shrub when referring to the Duke's orchard was fun. I understand completely the juxtaposition of the faceless, corporate world with the forest and it has its felicities - here everyone truly is in search of 'promotion'. But it has its problems too.

The set has a low 'ceiling' and strip-lighting like so many offices, but only someone unfamiliar with the height of the performing space in the Olivier (and remarkably incurious) could fail to wonder why all that potential wasn't being used. So there is some dissonance from the outset - we want to believe this has a purpose but can't think what it might be, or is this just how the play is going to be performed and, if so, what a waste? Perhaps this was the intention, but, even so, it goes on for too long and is too distracting.

The staging does fit with a juxtaposition of the claustrophobic interior and restrictions of corporate life with the wider, free outdoors, when we eventually move on. Unfortunately it also means that the wrestling scene, complete with dry ice, pounding disco music to accompany the entrance of the fighters and cuba libre costumes, is completely out-of-place. Saturday's audience certainly didn't 'get' it. Oddly, the actual wrestling between Orlando and Charles was more convincing a bout than I have seen before.

One massive plus with this staging is the transformation from office to forest. I won't spoil the surprise for anyone about to go and see this production but suffice to say that it is VERY dramatic. On Saturday, however, it went wrong, resulting in an embarrassed stage manager emerging from the shadows to ask the audience for patience while one element was fixed. Damp squib. 'By their special effects shall you know them' maybe. I have seen some amazing theatrical effects in this theatre, using the full height of the performance space. The angel descending , unexpectedly, in *'Coram Boy'* a few years ago brought gasps and cries of amazement and delight from the audience (including from me). The 'under sea' scene in the same production was similarly spell-binding and astonishing.

I guess this production was trying for something similar and, had it worked, maybe it would have achieved it. I'm afraid what sprang to my mind was the instruction from Vincent Crummles to Nicholas Nickelby in the eponomous novel. Nicholas is told that when he writes the publicity for the Crummles company's forthcoming performance of *'Romeo & Juliet'* he should be sure to include mention of their fully functioning water pump (though what part that machinery played in the production is not made clear).

Books

Novels Historical

I am an avid reader of novels historical, either novels set in the past, or which are informed by an historical event, or a novel in which history plays a part. I am, after all, trying to write one – '*Reconquista*' may be an adventure story but it's definitely set in the past. Following the suggestion that I include book reviews on The Story Bazaar I thought I would discuss three novels and their relationship with the past. All three of the books have garnered prizes and are by writers whom I admire.

The first is *'No Great Mischief'* by Alastair MacLeod

This is a wonderful, rich and enveloping novel by a Canadian of Scottish descent. I am a fan and, if you haven't come across MacLeod

before, I recommend that you try him. He writes short stories as well as novels. *'No Great Mischief'* charts the history of those Scots who migrated from Scotland after rebellion and clearances . Specifically, the history of the MacDonald clan from the Scottish Western Isles. Their journey, to Nova Scotia, from thence to the Heights of Abraham and Woolf's victory, through to modern day Toronto.

It is also a tragedy of the brave and full hearted, who find themselves living in an indifferent world. History, both recent and distant, is integral to the tragedy of the MacDonald family; and tradition, and traditions, old and new, weave through the narrative, creating a dense, multi-layered novel.

The language is modern and direct, but shot through with Gaelic phrases and phrasing. The title comes from Wolfe's remark that he would send in his fierce highland Scots troops, because it was 'no great mischief if they fall'. This is a vibrant, sad and beautiful story, the record of a whole migrant people through a single clan.

The second is '*Harvest*' by Jim Crace

I am a long time admirer of Jim Crace's work so I went out and bought this the moment it appeared in paperback. I wasn't disappointed. With economy and precision he depicts a pre-industrial world, before even the agrarian revolution, taking the reader to a place (medieval England?) where someone's future is only as assured as his body, or mind, is capable of assuring it and where chance misfortune can mean ruin or death. This is no pre-lapsarian society, though it has its fine moments, the harvest making and the celebration which follows for example. But there is always a worm in the apple.

The narrator is of the community, but is also separate from it, he has an escape route, while others do not. The language is taut and sinewy, like the people in the hamlet. Human desires, universal, are instantly recognised and empathised with, if not shared. The village villainy is unintentional, good folk doing bad things, the real threat comes from the outside, the representative of an unfeeling early capitalism. This is a cracking read, a historical curiosity and a parable for our times.

The third is *'The Song of Achilles'* by Madeline Miller

The Orange prize winner was and is a classicist who has spent much of her life studying how to bring the ancient tales to a modern audience. She certainly succeeds in creating the ancient world, with all its social systems and beliefs, in seemingly effortless manner, making it very easy to be completely emmersed in the narrative. The story is the Iliad and something else too. She turns the well-known narrative on its head, to a degree - it is the peace-loving Patroclus who tells the tale - and the focus is on heroism of a kind different to that of the great classic heroes. The story is all the stronger for it. I found this, quite literally, unputdownable - I read it pretty much without a break.

The world of this book is one in which gods and goddesses walk amongst humans, but, so well conceived and depicted is it that it seems eminently reasonable that a sea-nymph should visit her son, who is studying with a centaur. Yet Millar doesn't lose the sense of the numinous, the eerie otherness. The language is modern, often conversational, but it also captures the epic and the royal (Patroclus was a Prince after all). There are instances when it is wonderfully poetic, capturing a gesture, a sense or a feeling, which owes much, I suspect, to the original Greek.

So, three novels narrated, at least in part, in the first person. One presents the history of an immigrant people told through remembered stories and its impact upon the present day. One is set in a recognizable historical past, albeit it unnamed, which is a parable for today. And one re-energises and renews an ancient, almost prehistoric story for a new audience. I thoroughly enjoyed all of them. Happy reading.

Short Stories

I have always enjoyed reading short stories. I know that many people prefer to read a novel, wanting a longer, supposedly 'meatier' read and, I confess, I like a long, dense read too. I always feel somewhat bereft when I finish a thick book, or worse, a series of thick books. Yet there is a precision in writing short stories which I admire and a

sense of nothing wasted or additional, which I like. In part, that's why I write them. This week I review two contemporary short story collections by English writers.

The first is *'England and Other Stories'* by Graham Swift.

This is a relatively new collection (published 2015 by Scribner). Swift is a past master at capturing an individual, their thoughts and feelings at a certain point in their lives, in a few perfect brush strokes. He does this again and again in this collection of short stories. The folk within them are a disparate group, of different ages, types and class, living, or passing through, different places in England. Each story illuminates the society which we call English. Contemporary tales, with one exception, their settings vary - urban and rural, pastoral and coastal, but it is in the thoughts and, especially, the speech of these 'ordinary' people that we build a picture of where they come from and where they now belong. Together they form a sort of record of what England is today.

The prose is uncluttered, the speech demotic. The people are instantly recognisable, but they and their stories can still surprise. There are snapshots of a chance meeting, or a chance conversation, as well as stories covering a period of time, as a relationship develops, is remembered, or ends. I have my favourite stories and my favourite characters, but, I suspect, these may change when I re-read the collection in a few years time. A compassionate and intelligent portrait of contemporary England. Incidentally, the image used on the cover is from Beachy Head (1939) by Eric Ravilious.

The second is '*Pulse*' by Julian Barnes (Vintage, 2011).

I have re-read this collection a number of times since it was published and I gain different insights each time I do so. The tales are attuned to the rhythms and flows of the body, their subject matter is that which defines us as human - life and death, love and loneliness, sex and friendship, lies and truth. Some of the stories are gut-wrenchingly sad, some have a bitter-sweetness, especially where memory is involved and some are amusing, shot through with a sly wit. I have found myself recalling these tales months after reading them.

Many of the stories are immediate - snapshots of conversations at a recurring dinner party engagement at Phil and Joanna's, or two old friends and colleagues revisiting arguments which they have had many times before as they travel together. I recognised the quick-fire, cross-table, slightly drunken talk in the former, perfectly rendered. The latter was funny and poignant. Sometimes a protagonist is not always the most self-aware individual. Often the reader knows more than they do. Three stories, all in the second part of the book, are written in the first person. Two (and a half) are set in the past, again, in the second section.

I will read these again in future. In part because I expect to find more in them than last time and, in part, because they represent the act of being human - 'the pulse of the heart, the pulse of the blood' - as one character says. And because they are exquisitely written, not a word wasted, but creating rhythms running through passages and the mind, like the blood runs through the body.

Naval Novels

Adventure stories have always been one of my guilty pleasures as an adult. Not so as a child when I devoured them unashamedly (and I sometimes re-read *'The Three Musketeers'*, or *'The Riddle of the Sands'* even now, though usually when I'm 'on holiday'). But it was only as an adult that I encountered the Royal Navy stories set during the wars with Napoleon.

The Napoleonic wars provide the setting for what has been described as Britain's 'Wild West' of the imagination. Bernard Cornwell made a mint out of a rifle company officer's sometimes risqué adventures and Allan Mallinson began with Waterloo and his dragoon, Matthew Hervey. George Macdonald Fraser placed his anti-hero firmly, if antithetically, in this tradition. At sea, much earlier, there was C.S.Forrester and Hornblower. I was never drawn to any of these, seeing them as 'boy's own' with the emphasis on the 'boy's' (though I enjoyed the TV adaptation of Hornblower in the 90s). So, when I first read *'Master and Commander'* by Patrick O'Brien, on the recommendation of a friend, I didn't really know what to expect, but didn't ex-

pect much. Derring do, swashing and buckling, sexy encounters with beautiful femmes fatale and dastardly enemies-on-your-own-side?

Well, there is some of that, though less than one might think. It was much more subtle and true to the details of the period than I had envisaged and natural history and music play a role, the latter a very strong and binding role in the friendship which is at the heart of this and all the other books which followed. The series begins, with 'Master and Commander' in 1800 and concludes, twenty books later, with 'Blue at the Mizzen' after Waterloo, with the independence movements which sprang up in the former Spanish colonies in the wake of the fall of Napoleon.

In between, the ongoing Royal Naval career of Captain Jack Aubrey, brave and commanding at sea, but something less than clever ashore, forms the basis for the stories. He and his friend, the surgeon and intelligence agent, Stephen Maturin, encounter many aspects of early nineteenth century naval life - the corruption, political influence, the snobbery and prejudice reflective of society at the time and the downright hardship and violence. These are, of course, war stories and the depiction of the battles are very good and, wherever possible, based on accounts of actual engagements at sea.

On shore we meet all manner of events, a mini-social history of the time, with enclosure, elections, debtors prison and the scandalously unjust justice system featuring at different times. On a wider stage there is the cruel and vile convict colony of Botany Bay, the only recently independent U.S.A. (and its frighteningly efficient new volunteer Navy), all the shores of Europe (though with a preponderance of Mediterranean waters) and the newly established Freetown, Sierra Leone - the base from which to engage the now illegal slaver ships.

There's quite a lot about ships and sailing. I, like the Stephen Maturin character, engage with descriptions of rigging full of good intentions, but understand them little. But it doesn't matter, the descriptions add to the authenticity (I'm certain that they're accurate, mirroring Maturin's certainty too).

O'Brien captures perfectly the speech and language of the time and is as astute, in his own way, as Austen, at portraying class-ridden, early nineteenth century English manners (though, unsurprisingly, he cannot duplicate her exquisite language and does not try). Collectively the series creates a complete world. But it is the relationship between the two men at the centre of these stories which is what holds it all together. They encounter joy and disaster. They get rich, get poor again, fall in love, marry, have children, rise in their professions and live their lives, bound by affection each with the other. The characters are never less than fully rounded and their lifelong friendship sustains the spirit. Their disagreements, follies, joint successes and absurdities never fail to entertain and there is some stirring derring-do as well.

The series is an ongoing pleasure for me. I re-read it every decade or so and still find the books fresh and engaging. If you haven't come across them, I suggest that you give them a try.

PART TWO

Fiction

ONE

Mausoleum

Blood oozes through my fingers, gleaming black under the stuttering strip-light. It's been quiet for minutes now. The sirens have stopped, but the blue light still stabs through the shallow windows up at street level. When the thudding starts on the heavy metal door, it's no surprise.

'Come out! You can't escape.

They're right, I can't.

Pray God I'm dead before they break the door down. Don't let them take me. How did it come to this? I've made bad calls before and survived. My luck's deserted me. Too late to mend matters now.

The stone floor is cool and dry to the touch. The air is dank, despite the heat outside. It must be a while since anyone's been in here, everything's covered in dust. There are racks, some filled with bottles, others with fine cloth, robes and vestments. If I could just sit up better..... . Ohf.....

Breathe.

Savage, griping pain.

Breathe.

Think of something else.

Think of better times.

Think of her.

Beautiful.

Vain and controlling, shallow and selfish, but beautiful, even now. Her mood could change in an instant from summer to storms and back again. And there was always that mysterious part of her soul which she hid from me. Something I couldn't quite grasp.

I hadn't been expecting anything. Passion is for youngsters, the unsullied ones, not for people like her and me. Neither of us looked for what happened, but we were both grateful when it did.

I remember the first time I saw her. She was with the boss and off limits. She had eyes for no-one else and the boss, well, she enchanted him, in so far as that was possible. But she must have noticed me, because she looked for me, once he'd gone. She sought me out.

Technically, I was married at the time, but that counted for little. I got divorced.

Yet when I married again it wasn't to her. My second wife was married for policy, part of an alliance. She took that badly, she'd put me under the harrow for that, no matter how often I explained, how much I'd tried to make it up to her. I don't blame her for what's happened, though others do, I know.

What did my second wife look like? I can't remember her face any more. She was a decent woman, honest and capable, but easy to know. She didn't stand a chance. I felt sorry for her, even as I betrayed her. And she tried to help me, despite her humiliation. Well, her brother will look after her now.

Breathe.

Breathe.

My brother-in-law.

The kid.

The boss's nephew.

There was a time when, maybe, I could have taken him under my wing, to advise and mentor, but I could never fathom the boy. He was a sickly child, always too anxious to please his uncle. Yet he hunted

down his uncle's killers just as zealously as I did, so perhaps there was affection there?

I under-estimated him, that's the truth. Then, after, I had no choice. I had to accommodate him. He'd scrambled a legitimacy, made allies and got the reputation of a coming man.

It's not like I wouldn't have understood. I was young once, I know what it's like. You have to be hard, because if you aren't, there are plenty who'll trample over you without a second thought. Oh, I was a tough. Sure of myself and full of swagger. I remember the dark back-streets of my education, the rubbish, piss and blood. My men knew it. I was like them, they recognised it. I knew where they came from.

But the kid, he didn't fight at all. He had his cronies do it for him. This, it seemed, was acceptable now. No-one questioned it, not even the old families. To them the kid was a parvenu, a hanger-on to his uncle's coat-tails, but they'd been weak and complacent, easy to out-manoeuvre.

Yet I'd been neither, I'd held all the cards and still I lost. How did that happen?

The pain is lessening now. I can move my hand away. The wound is black and unctuous. The blade should have gone upwards, to the heart. Then death would have been quick and relatively painless. But it snapped and now I can feel the metal when I catch my breath. A lung punctured, probably, so death's on the way. Just not soon enough.

They're banging on the door again. There's movement in the slivers of light through the small grille and beneath the door at the top of the stairs. I can't see any weapons here. Just dusty storage shelves and huge old chests, I doubt I'd have the strength to open. Sheet covered crates, robes hanging from stands like shrouds, racks of books and bottles.

A broken bottle would be better than nothing. I might just be able to reach....

Pain. A twisting, warping tortion of agony.

Breathe, slowly, breathe.

The bottle is a Neapolitan red, far from the soil that produced it, like I am. I heft it in my hand and smash the neck against the stone stair. Glass splinters fly and wine gurgles out.

All has gone silent at the door. I know they're listening.

I look at the jagged stump of the bottle in my hand. It'll do.

Hah! I remember drinking a bottle of this very wine to seal a deal, one of the many, with the kid and the others. The bodged-up treaty didn't hold for long, of course, but it was the celebration that I recall most. We celebrated not having to fight one another. We told tall tales, maligned our enemies and drank a skin full; a gaudy night. There were sore heads the following morning. The kid barely touched a drop.

We made our peace and kept our promises, more often than not. The alliances held for a time, cemented with the blood of others. There was even honour, of a sort.

What's that?

It's at the window in the corner, a scrabbling noise. Someone's there.

The small casement opens.

'Tony? Are you there?'

I would know that voice anywhere, but I can't see her.

'What d'you think you're doing here?' She should be well away by now.

'We're finished, my love.'

'Don't be silly. You can bargain; they'll want your co-operation. Give it to them. You can trust old Bella, and Dom will remember he was our friend.'

'Dom's dead,' her voice trembled. 'Are you wounded?'

'I'm dying.'

A moan above, swiftly curtailed; no time for histrionics.

'Can you come to me? I can't see you. I want to touch you.'

'No, I'm done. Get out of here and go and talk to old Bella. It's not in the kid's interest to harm you, he'll want to talk.'

'He does.'

Something in her voice suggests that overtures have already been made.

She says: 'I'm to be humiliated and then... who knows?'

'It doesn't matter. Just do what he wants and you and the children will live.' There is silence.

'He's not threatened you?' I ask.

'Not me, no.'

'What then?'

'He wants my son.'

Of course. Her eldest son, the boss's child. He could easily be set up as a rival. The kid probably wants him dead. A good boy, although unexceptional, I could never see anything of his father in him. She will never give him up.

'Listen to me, love. You must get away, or at least buy some time until you can get to the off-shore funds.'

She growls. 'He's been told about those.'

'Who by?'

'Our accountant, who else?'

So. People are already lining up to do his pleasure, second-guessing his wishes. Maybe the gang outside aren't even his men. I might be dispatched by some lickspittle place-seeker. It's happened before and not so far away. I dreamed about that gory head drawn from the crude sacking, although I wasn't there when it happened. Another man of power who'd lost.

'Our bright days are done, my love. We're for the dark.'

'Stop it woman.' The icy misery in her voice scorches me. 'Listen. You must leave here now and start thinking. I know you'll find a way. You know better than to trust the kid, but he can't be seen to treat you badly. We still have some sympathy.'

'I trust nothing but my own hands and my own resolution.'

'Good. Now, go and ....'

'Yes?'

'We had a good run, we gave it a good shot. When you remember me, think of me as I was, then. Goodbye.'

The casement closes. After a few moments I exhale, carefully. There's no hue and cry, so she must have got safely away.

As the tension leaves, pain rushes in to fill its empty place. I can't see, everything's blurred.

Then.....I can see the sky. It's pale blue, clouds flow and form shapes, castles and mountains, horses, bears and lions. If only I could dissolve as they do.

The banging on the door is more insistent and louder. I'm back in the shadowy place again, praying that it holds until death steals me away. It's near now.

A pearly sun-tinged dragon rears in the heavens, but a wind rages, dispersing the white monster.

I would have liked to kiss her, just one more time.

TWO

Padua Road

At one-thirty in the morning, Kate's overwrought brain would not be still. Turning on to her back, she scrutinised her bedroom. The glare of the street light outside cast orange bars of light through the thin curtains. It was silent and cold, the heating was off and the sheets in the large bed were chilly.

Kate succumbed to the flow of thoughts and memories. Now that she had taken up her new existence, her old one seemed reluctant to let her go. Unlike her ex-husband. He already had a new woman, a 'friend' had told her. So now someone else had her life.

It was three months since Kate had moved house, into a between-the-wars semi at the end of Padua Road. An honest and solid house, it wasn't what she was used to, but it had plenty of space and a room for Celia when she wasn't at college. Over Christmas Celia had pronounced it suitable, so Padua Road had passed the first test and Celia had a place to come home to, whenever she needed one.

Providing a home was important to Kate. Since the separation, she had recalled, more often than she had for many years, the days before her marriage. Her memories of life in her father's house, her own first home, grew sharper as time passed, although her father was long dead and her sister long gone.

Kate's sister was a successful actress, whose face stared out from magazine stands and television screens. Bianca, the younger, prettier sibling, had always hogged the limelight. Kate remembered, with familiar bitterness, their father's indulgent pride when her sister had so many admirers, however badly she'd behaved to them. Their father was smitten by her sister as he had never been by Kate and both sisters knew it.

So Kate became the clever one and had gone to university, although her father grumbled and Bianca giggled behind her hand. Kate flushed as she pictured her younger self flying out at both of them in a rage. But she went up to college and there she met Pete, the man who was now her ex-husband.

Her glamorous sister hadn't yet visited Padua Road, though she had promised to do so. She would be an exotic in this suburban neighbourhood of young families and retirees. Next door, Mrs Shah was big-eyed and quiet, but she always smiled and nodded when pegging out her family's washing. Mr Shah, somewhat older, was neat and always polite. Assuming them happy, Kate had been shocked one day to hear raised voices. Harsh words were spoken in a different tongue followed by the sound of sobbing.

Asha, the school-girl daughter, had pegged out the washing the next day, though later Kate had seen Mrs Shah going shopping with her mother-in-law, apparently at ease. Couples quarrelled. At least, she told herself, her ex hadn't been physically violent. Then she remembered his more sophisticated cruelties. She pushed the memories away.

Kate shut her eyes, but sensed tears coming. No. She had had enough of weeping.

She felt a sudden weight on the foot of the bed and heard a satisfied purr.

So, a cat had got in, probably when she was putting the rubbish out. Lured by the prospect of food and warmth or love and affection. It would be unlucky then.

She relented and lifted her arm out from beneath the duvet. The pulsing rumble deepened and the weight shifted. As she opened her

eyes the orange bars of light seemed softened by the approaching dawn.

She snatched back her hand, her body rigid.

Kate ceased to breathe.

There was no cat on the duvet, just the spiralling pattern.

The vibration continued and the invisible creature stretched against Kate's legs. She drew the duvet up to her chin, afraid to move. What was happening? Was she going mad?

A parody of girlish modesty, Kate stared at the foot of the bed, at the blocks of orange light and black shadow, her eyes wide.

*

Kate forced her eyelids apart. Corners were indistinct in the mouse-grey morning light. Tentative movement of her feet reassured her that there was nothing lying on the bed. Had there ever been? How could there have been? She must have been dreaming.

Next door she heard the Shah boys bump and hurtle down the stairs as they got ready for school. She felt a mild irritation as she reached for her dressing gown. On first arriving in her new home, she'd found listening to the soundtrack of other peoples' lives quite disturbing, but now she usually didn't notice it. Drawing the fabric close around her, Kate walked to the bathroom.

The mirror above the basin reflected dark ringed eyes and a greyish tinge to her flesh, signs of sleeplessness that were well-known to her. She washed in tepid water, with a shiver, reaching, blindly, for a towel as soap got in her eyes. She applied moisturiser and slapped some colour into her cheeks. Her teeth were brushed with determined vigour. Returning to the bedroom she studied her flaccid, speckled skin as she pulled on her sensible trousers and shirt. Kate sighed. She went downstairs and picked up the post from the mat.

With a small shock she saw her sister's distinctive handwriting. Appearing like a genie once the lamp is polished, thought Kate, wondering if her own thoughts could conjure her sister. She had often tried the opposite. Many times during their childhood Kate had wished her sister away, with no discernible effect. She tore open the envelope.

Inside, the note read - 'Near you next week for rehearsals. I'll pop by Monday evening and see your new place, B.'.

So, she would arrive tonight. Shopping would be necessary.

Kate decided not to put it off and, within the hour, she had parked her car and was striding along the wide aisles at the nearest over-lit food hall. This was where she had come to shop when she and Pete, her husband, used to entertain, but she hadn't been here for about a year. Well-used now to the darts of pain an unlooked-for memory caused, Kate banished sentiment and got on with things. She walked the aisles with a powerful stride, scattering groups of pensioners, who fluttered and chuntered at her passing.

As she picked up sugar snaps Kate was seized by another vivid memory, of two girls sitting in the light of a stained glass window, shelling peas. The amber, blue and green light dappled their hands and faces, turned their darting movements into a nacreous under-sea dance. Kate was surprised at how deeply she was affected by the recollection of her childhood as she stood at the checkout, listening to the regular plashing of the fountain in the shopping centre beyond.

Twenty minutes later, when Kate turned into Padua Road, she saw Bianca's lipstick red convertible already parked at the kerb outside her house. Her sister had always been unreliable with dates and times.

Kate pulled on to her drive and sat, amazed yet again, at how easily her sister could throw her off-balance. After all these years, Bianca could still annoy her like nobody else could. Shaking her head, she climbed from the car. As she lifted carriers from the boot, she heard the sound of a door opening.

'Thank you so much,' Bianca came into view from next door's brick porch. 'Yes. No. She's home now.'

There was Mr Shah, at home for his lunch, simpering and giving a little wave to the celebrity, as Bianca stepped daintily down his gravel drive in her kitten heels.

She looked older. The white-gold hair, still worn long, was paler and less silky, the skin wrinkled around her eyes and mouth. Not tall, as Kate was, Bianca was small-boned and perfect, yet now her waist

had thickened. Kate was startled to feel an unexpected sadness at the change in her sister, but she had little time to consider it before Bianca was upon her, giving yelps of delight.

'Long time no see.' Bianca drew her into an expansive embrace and Kate visualised curtains twitching all along Padua Road. 'Just look at your lovely little house!'

Still playing to the gallery, Kate thought.

'Hello there, could you take these bags?' was what Kate said, handing over the carriers and groping for her door keys in her handbag. Laughing, Bianca took the bags. As Kate unlocked the door she propped herself up against the wall of the house with one hand.

'Have you been shopping on my account – killing the fatted calf?'

'Well, you're a guest,' said Kate and ushered her sister inside. 'I don't have many.'

'Dear me,' Bianca laughed, as they went through to the kitchen at the back of the house. 'Still scaring everyone away, sis? Oh, what a fine garden!'

Kate believed that she knew her sister well enough to detect genuine admiration and was absurdly pleased.

'It is good, isn't it,' she said, looking outside. The garden was a large one and she had worked hard on it, clearing out the old herbaceous borders to reveal the roses. 'I haven't seen it in spring yet, I don't know what will grow. It's quite exciting.'

Kate felt her sister's gaze upon her and turned. Bianca was looking at her, eyebrows raised and mouth slightly open.

'Let me help you unpack,' she said. She reached into the shopping bags. 'I was going to take you out, to Bella Roma. If it's still there? It seems so long since I was last here. Strange when you think we grew up so close by. Would you mind if I stayed for two nights? It'll be fun.'

Kate watched her sister put items away in all the right places. Was that family similarity or just logic? But Bianca was telling her about her latest role. Kate tuned in.

'So it's quite a coup really and, after all, I can't go on playing the ingenue forever. I'm almost forty!'

Kate's eyebrows rose.

'Oh, all right. But that's what it says in my publicity.'

Could someone flounce verbally, wondered Kate, as her sister continued? Then she realised that Bianca was putting a brave face on things. The part was a supporting role, the name above the title going to a soap star, a younger version of Bianca. The play was in the provinces to allow time for the young person to learn to act upon a stage. Or to act at all, Kate sniffed. Bianca could certainly do that.

'We aren't actually performing yet, we're just walking though,' Bianca sounded defensive. What was she expecting? 'So I thought I'd look you up.'

'And I'm glad you did,' Kate felt a wave of spontaneous affection and hugged her. 'We'll have a fine time,' she said.

It was Bianca's turn to raise an eyebrow, but she smiled and said nothing.

For the next hour Kate showed off her house and garden and let her enthusiasm get the better of her.

'You're so lucky, having a garden, especially like this.' Bianca said. 'My flat doesn't have so much as a window box.'

'I wouldn't be without it,' Kate replied. 'It gives me a focus for all my surplus energy, now that Celia has gone.'

'How is Celia? How's she taken it all?'

'She's well. She's happily settled at college now and will cope.'

Kate assumed that the details of her daughter would bore Bianca and make herself, Kate, seem provincial and dull. So she didn't mention the worry and the hours of work to get Celia through her exams, or the overwhelming relief when the results arrived and with them the news that Celia would be off to Oxford.

'How about lunch?' Kate asked as she reached for a corkscrew.

The sisters prepared a meal more suited to a Mediterranean summer than a cold January day in a post-industrial northern English town. They took trouble to make it good, laying the table in the garden window. Kate found a pitcher for chilled water, to accompany the wine. They sat and ate, watching the birds at the feeder in the garden.

'How are you, Katherina?'

It had been a long time since someone had called her by her given name. Even as a girl she had been Katherine, at home and to her friends. It was around the time she met her husband that she became Kate.

'All right,' Kate responded, after a pause. 'I keep busy. I'm teaching, which is satisfying, as well as keeping the wolf from the door.'

Kate suddenly didn't want to talk about her work. She felt unsettled, thrown out of joint. Perhaps it was alcohol at lunchtime, or having had so little sleep the night before? Kate told Bianca about her dream, for she had rationalized it as such, of the invisible cat.

'How interesting,' Bianca sipped her wine. 'You could feel and hear the cat, but you couldn't see it?'

'It wasn't there. In the dream I mean.'

'Just because you couldn't see it doesn't mean it wasn't there. Audiences often see things which aren't there, or don't see things that are.'

'In the theatre,' Kate looked down her nose.

'It's more than mechanics and a willingness to be fooled, you know,' Bianca put down her glass. 'Imagination is a powerful thing.' She studied her sister. 'Maybe your 'cat' comes with the house?'

'A ghost? Hmm, I don't know. If it was, wouldn't I have seen it before?'

'Perhaps you weren't ready for it,' Bianca replied. 'Or it wasn't ready for you. If it returns, try and speak to it?'

'I have yet to meet a cat that can talk,' Kate frowned.

'You'd be surprised what happens in dreams,' Bianca gave Kate a speculative look. 'It was a dream, wasn't it?'

'Finished?' Kate collected up their plates. Of course it was a dream.

Bianca poured more wine and the sisters watched daylight diminish and darkness gather beneath the rhododendrons. Kate lit the lamp and took things away, returning with coffee, as shapes merged in the garden beyond the glass. It was almost five when they rose.

'I'll get my bags,' Bianca went into the hall. 'They're still in the car.'

As she tidied and cleaned, Kate reflected on the pleasure of her afternoon. It was good to see her sister again. They would dine out that evening and Kate felt as if on holiday, her spirit lighter. Her benign mood triumphed even when she climbed the stairs to find her sister already in possession of the bathroom.

Kate closed her inadequate bedroom curtains and opened her wardrobe with a flourish, determined to dress well. She almost laughed out loud as she heard her sister singing in the shower.

*

Heels clicking on road and pavement Kate and Bianca walked through the town centre, deserted in the evening, to the restaurant. Kate's car was parked just five minutes away. Inside they were met by warmth and soft light. The place was divided into little booths by frosted glass screens, lending an air of intrigue which the sisters had always enjoyed. On a Monday night in early January more than half the booths were empty. They surrendered their coats and slid into the banquette seats, taking menus.

A young waiter hovered.

Bianca deployed her twinkling smile and soon champagne arrived, with the compliments of the house.

Not for the first time Kate wondered how her sister did it. How did she charm a stranger, a lover or a sister? Charm made life so much easier. Kate recalled Bianca using her magic even when they were children. To get her way, a new dress, a thing that Kate wanted. Yet Bianca had never manipulated their mother, Kate was certain. That came after mother was gone. Kate remembered their sad little family after their mother died, her own unhappiness and isolation.

Il Signor came to take their order and then returned to the kitchen. Bianca raised her glass.

'To us,' she said.

'To us,' Kate echoed.

Over steaming bowls of pasta the sisters talked, enjoying each other's company. They began, tentatively at first, to talk about their shared history, their childhood, each stepping carefully around remembered fault lines.

'Do you remember our old music teacher?' Bianca asked.

'I do, he was always bringing presents for you and you misbehaved, wickedly.'

'And I would always blame you,' Bianca gave a rueful smile.

'Father would always believe you. And I'd be punished.'

'I wasn't very nice to you was I? But then, you weren't very nice to me. It took ages for my hair to grow back where you pulled it out.' Bianca's hand rose to touch the side of her head.

Kate was nonplussed. She had only recently become re-acquainted with her old self - the self before she was married - and she didn't know how to react to that other being. What had happened to all that youthful promise and energy? How had it become so negative and enraged?

'I was always so angry, I don't know why,' Kate said.

'You weren't the only one. I felt so abandoned when mother died.'

'Yes and poor father. So broken and completely out of his depth.'

The sisters were silent for a while.

'You didn't stay for long after his funeral.' Bianca didn't accuse, but Kate bridled.

'I couldn't. It was Pete's book launch.' Kate flushed. She had gone to the launch party so as to reject or confirm her suspicions about Pete and a secretary - so banal. She was ashamed of having rushed away so soon, the coffin had barely been put into the ground. She was ashamed of her servitude to her ex-husband. 'I should have stayed,' Kate apologised.

'Your attachment to Pete frightened me,' Bianca said. 'It was so fierce.'

For a few moments neither could think of anything else to say.

'I've often asked myself.....'

'You mustn't seek to blame....'

Both sisters stopped.

'I was so frightened when mother died. And you were so frightening,' Bianca shook her head, struggling to express her thoughts. 'You were ferocious, all will and pain. I was so hurt, but no one could see me. You and your tantrums were in the way.'

Kate didn't know what to say, so she stirred her coffee. She hadn't really considered the period after her mother's death. And she wasn't at all sure she wanted to. But perhaps Bianca was right, perhaps that was when her rage had begun? In any case, she thought, wryly, Bianca wouldn't let her wriggle out of discussing it now. Her sister's tenacity was surprising. As was her own capacity to recollect, once she had begun, her reactions to the defining event of their childhood, the death of their mother.

She remembered that her life had seemed to stop and all the good things seemed to be gone. She'd been desperate for her mother not to be dead. For the first time Kate realised where her girlhood anger had come from. It was anger at that maternal desertion and at her own powerlessness to do anything about it.

'I think we should talk some more,' suggested Kate.

'I'd like that,' Bianca replied.

Kate signalled for the bill.

Amid exhortations for them to return more quickly next time, the sisters donned coats and gloves and stepped out into the night, both gasping at the cold. Bianca slipped her arm through her sister's as they crossed to the car park. Their long shadows preceded them in the blue-white glare of the street lamp, Kate's tall and angular and Bianca's soft and fuzzy. As she slipped into the driver's seat, Kate heard Bianca's gurgling laugh begin.

'It's like the old days,' she chortled, as Kate put the Fiat into gear. 'The Minola girls hit town.' They laughed as the car pulled away.

*

Almost a week later, Kate checked that the back door was locked and carried her cocoa upstairs. Her sister had left that afternoon and Kate felt strangely bereft. Bianca had stayed, driving to her 'read through' then returning to Padua Road with scurrilous stories about the cast, especially the soap star.

When term started Bianca had even accompanied Kate to the departmental drinks party, charming all who attended. Kate had watched her own stock rise with some of her colleagues because of her sister and she felt ridiculous, and proud.

The sisters had talked for hours, at times gentle, at others challenging, trampling on each other's sensitivities. For the first time in many years Kate felt close to her sister and, while she was exhausted and raw, she was also stronger for it. It seemed as if she had acquired another skin.

Now the house was silent again, there were no more impromptu bursts of song. Yet only an hour ago Celia had phoned and Kate told her all about her sister's visit. Celia seemed pleased, but withdrawn and Kate sensed that her daughter was perplexed. She would be coming home for Easter, only ten weeks away now. They could talk then. Kate was already planning and looking forward. Easter was early this year.

Kate placed her mug on the little bedside table, wound her clock and set the alarm. She twitched the curtains further over, reminding herself, yet again, to buy some thicker ones, or at least exchange them for others in the house. She heard the thump as the heating switched off. Quickly she supped her cocoa, turned off the lamp and drew the duvet up to her ears. Now she was tired and drowsy.

She was almost asleep when she felt the arrival of the visitor at the foot of the bed.

Kate opened her eyes, yet did not move. She kept her breathing even and soon it mingled with the deep purring of the cat. Her fear was still there, but she was also curious. She felt the pressure on the duvet as the creature moved, it didn't settle as it had done before, but stepped towards the pillows. The purr grew louder, as the creature drew near.

Kate swallowed hard. What had Bianca advised? She folded back the duvet, without raising her head. The purring ceased.

'Hello, cat,' she said quietly.

The purring re-commenced.

Her eyes grew accustomed to the shards of light and dark and she thought that she saw the pillow beside her own depress. There was a flash of an eye and the purr slowed and deepened.

'Welcome, cat. I'm Kate, known as Katherine, christened Katherina. This is my house now, as well as yours. I was born near

here and was happy. But my mother died and my life and my sister's life changed beyond anything we could imagine.' She stopped for a breath. 'For twenty years I loved a man who loved my father's money as much as he loved me, though he did love me, cat, at least at first.' She paused, her throat constricted. 'I have a daughter, Celia, who is reading English at Oxford and full of brightness. She will visit soon and you may meet her, if you will. I'm so proud of her, cat, and I love her deeply.'

The Shahs' front door slammed and feet crunched down the gravel drive.

'Someone's out late,' Kate said. 'I'm a teacher, of splendid stories and fine ideas, although not my own. I'm a gardener, too, but only now have a garden I can say is all mine. I wait to see what grows. All manner of things, I hope.'

In the bars of orange light Kate glimpsed a gleaming, white face with small, pointed ears above shaggy paws and tail. The cat was almost visible. She laughed silently.

'I think we shall get on well together, Cat.'

Kate turned over, smiling and content, the soft purr lulling her to sleep. She would get to know her visitor, just as she had got to know herself, she thought. Though maybe the cat thought of her as the visitor? Either way, they would watch the garden grow.

THREE

Seeds

Poised, immobile, Will stood on the pedals of his bike. Concentrating hard, his brow furrowed and mouth slightly agape, he inched it around in a slow, tight circle, never putting a foot to the floor. His tanned limbs were tense and the sunshine felt warm on his skin.

Only metres away Nirmal did the same. His antiquated bicycle had larger wheels and was more difficult to turn. But he circled, balancing, brown calves taut, on the pedals. His square hands gripped the handlebars, as he shifted his weight, carefully, from foot to foot. His black eyebrows met in a frown and a crescent of pink tongue protruded from his lips as he concentrated.

They were over by the long fence, where the allotments met the heath, on a patch of open ground, rutted and flat, where they could cycle and wheelie undisturbed. The sky was blue, with high, white scudding clouds, though it had rained that morning, so there were puddles to splash through.

'Come over on de boat, come over on de boat,' Nirmal chanted.

'Nah, you're saying it wrong,' Will interrupted his friend. 'Come o-a-ver on de bo-at. You've got to stretch out the vowel sounds for a real Jam-ay-ka accent.'

'Will.' Nirmal's voice was suddenly urgent.

Will stopped circling and looked at his friend.

'Your Granddad's looking.' Nirmal nodded his head in the direction of the allotments.

Will followed Nirmal's gaze.

Granddad was standing at the side of his shed, hands on hips, radiating disapproval. It was too far away to see his eyes beneath their bushy eyebrows, but Will knew him to be glaring. Beyond Granddad he could see Old Joe and Earl sitting on up-turned orange crates. It was Earl who had come over on the boat, when he was a young man, broad-shouldered in his best suit and hat, back in the 1950s. He'd told them about it, the Windrush, the boat which took him away from the sunshine to grey old Britain. The men were playing tug of war with Earl's dog, Blanche, a white-grey terrier type of no specific breed. She had gripped the end of an old cloth between her teeth and was challenging anyone to try and take it from her.

Will swallowed. There were certain things which Granddad insisted upon and politeness and respect were the two main ones. Will suspected that he wouldn't understand that they weren't being disrespectful at all, that their trying out the West Indian accent was more in the nature of scientific enquiry.

'Oh-oh, we'd better...'

'Keep out of his way for a bit.' Nirmal rang his bicycle bell.

'Come on...'

Will sped off along the muddy pathway, the breeze of their speed blowing his fair hair back from his forehead. He could hear Nirmal behind him, panting with the effort to catch up. Spattering freshly washed cabbages with dirty spray, he raced across the allotments. Soon Nirmal drew abreast of him.

Will veered sharp left his elbow clashing with Nirmal's. But Nirmal, who was heavier, stayed upright and leaned on Will in his turn. Laughing, they headed for the tiled underpass beneath the railway line. The rain would have made a small lake in the dip at the foot of the incline and it would be good to swish through it, legs raised.

The first days of the summer holidays had been great, with endless freedom stretching off into the future. But then it got boring. In their

little modern semi Will felt in his mother's way, under her feet when she was at home. He was shunted round to a neighbour's when she was at work. So he and Nirmal, who was eager to be out of a house containing two older brothers, had taken to riding up to the allotments, to visit Will's Granddad, William Senior, who was still producing fruit and vegetables, though he was nearly eighty years old.

They ran errands in the dusty sunshine, ate raspberries from the canes (and anything else they could get their hands on) and asked lots of questions. When it rained, a rain that was almost tropical in its intensity, everyone sheltered in Granddad's shed. Will liked its resinous, earthy smell and felt safe within the flaking wooden walls, peering out of the doorway at the deluge outside. It never lasted long.

At the top of the slope Will and Nirmal halted.

On the other side of the dip another cyclist waited. A girl.

Her dark hair was pulled back into a pony tail and she wore a T-shirt and faded jeans and carried a dirty pink mini-ruck-sack over one shoulder. She was thin and scrawny and her pointed face wore a look of hopeful defiance. What was she doing there?

'We're gonna ride down fast,' said Nirmal. His face assumed a fierce expression. 'You better keep out of our way if you don't want to get wet.' He crouched over his handle bars.

'I ride fast all the time,' the girl answered, eyes glinting. 'But I'm going to the allotments today.'

'Why?' Will asked. 'Who're you visiting?' He frowned. Hadn't he seen her somewhere before?

'The one who's invited me,' the girl shot back. 'You're Will.'

'Yeah...'

'Your Granddad asked me. He's our neighbour in Padua Road.'

That was it. This was Asha Shah. He'd seen her in the garden of the house next door to Granddad's, pegging out the washing.

'Why'd he ask you?' Nirmal sounded disgruntled.

'Dunno.' Asha scuffed the toe of her trainer on the ground. 'You oughta ask him.'

'All right. I will.' Will hauled his bike around and challenged Asha 'You comin' then?'

Asha pushed her bike off, bending low behind its handle bars and pedaling hard. At the very last moment before the front wheel entered the water, she sat back on the saddle and raised both feet into the air. Two creamy brown waves rose at her bike cut through the lake and she whooped with delight.

Nirmal and Will laughed.

'But you'll get the bottom of your jeans wet now,' Will said.

Asha touched only her toes to the pedals and, standing up, she drove the bicycle through the puddle and out the other side, drawing alongside the two boys.

'No I won't,' she said, grinning at them both.

'Race!' Nirmal was off back to the allotments, legs pumping. They raced until Old Joe's plot, where a wheelbarrow across the path forced a halt. All three dismounted and circled around.

'Do you come here every day?' Asha asked.

'Most days,' Will replied. 'It's good.'

'We get tons of fruit,' Nirmal added. 'And other stuff.'

'What kind of stuff?'

'Vegetables, carrots, onions, that kinda thing,' Nirmal waved a hand expansively. 'We give them to our Mums. They cook with them. My Mum made us all a big vegetable curry.'

'And mine did a trifle – fruit, custard and cream in a big tub,' Will said. 'We let Blanche lick out the tub.'

'Who's Blanche?' Asha asked.

'She's a dog.' Nirmal scanned the allotments. 'She's usually around. She was here a minute ago.'

'We have to work, though.' Will felt he ought to give a balanced picture.

'Doing what?'

'Weeding, digging, fetching and carrying.' Nirmal said. 'While we listen to Gr-, Mr Hathaway's radio.'

'You and Yours, the morning service, Songs from the Shows,' Will reeled off that morning's programmes. 'It's 'Oklahoma' this week.' He snapped his mouth shut, feeling that somehow he'd said too much.

Asha was new, after all and might not understand. Also, it didn't sound very cool when he said it out loud.

They were almost at the shed now.

'I can do that,' Asha said, firmly, chin jutting upwards.

'Can you make tea?' Granddad appeared around the corner of the shed, carrying a metal kettle. Asha hesitated, then copied Will and Nirmal as they propped their bikes against the shed, just beyond its door. Will took the kettle and Nirmal rootled around just inside the door to find four metal mugs.

'Come with me,' Nirmal instructed, as he led the way over to the tap. 'You have to clean them every time, because of insects and dirt.'

Asha nodded, po-faced, but Will sensed that she wasn't taking Nirmal seriously. He filled the kettle, then stood back to allow Nirmal to wash the mugs. Nirmal did so with a theatrical flourish, spraying Asha, accidentally on purpose, with droplets. She didn't shriek or cry, Will noted with approval. She just folded her arms and gave Nirmal a thin-lipped, squint-eyed smile. Maybe she would fit in?

They walked back to the shed.

Just inside the door, Granddad was pricking out seedlings. He was perched on the seat-edge of the battered old arm-chair, knees sticking up as he laid the seed trays on to the wooden floor between his feet. Will sidled past and picked up the matches to light the little gas ring, which stood on the work-bench. He placed the kettle on the ring of blue flames to boil the water. Nirmal sat, cross-legged, on a pile of sacking by the door, mugs lied up before him.

Asha entered the shed tentatively, her gaze travelling over the shelves piled high with old cocoa tins containing last year's seeds and the trowels, rills and other tools hung on the wall. Will watched her spot the tea tin on the work bench next to him. She looked at him, wary, then reached out and grabbed the tin. She opened the lid and drew out four tea bags which she dropped into the newly clean mugs.

'Is there milk?' She asked.

'In the bucket.' Granddad gestured towards a tin pail beside Nirmal, full with water. Asha frowned and gave Will a querulous glance, eyebrows raised. Before he could explain she had seen the

thick piece of string dangling over the side of the pail. Laughing, she pulled it, bringing a plastic carton of milk to the surface, its contents cool.

'You told your mother you where you were coming?' Granddad asked Asha and she nodded, her eyes wide. 'She's okay about you coming here?' Asha nodded again.

The kettle began to whistle and Will used a bit of folded sacking to lift it from the little stove and pour steaming water into the mugs. Soon they were all cradling hot mugs of tea.

'I told her,' Asha said. 'I'm a good daughter. I don't listen to what my brothers say.'

So that was why Granddad had invited her. Her brothers were being nasty to her.

Sometimes Will thought that he would like to have brothers and sisters. To have someone to be with, not be on his own. At other times they seemed to be more trouble than they were worth. They might be horrible. Nirmal's brothers could be right pains. The eldest was handsome and athletic, he played football for the school and half the girls in his year tripped over themselves to watch him. But he was arrogant and unpleasant. Then there was Nirmal's middle brother who spent all his time on the internet. Nirmal said he was a maths genius, so he didn't have much time for Nirmal, but Will sometimes wondered if that was true.

Nirmal was ordinary, like him.

Will poked his head out of the shed door and looked at their bikes. At least when he got things, he got them new. All of Nirmal's things were hand me downs.

'Well, you're welcome to help us, isn't she lads?' Granddad took a swig from his mug, looking over its rim.

'Yes, Mr Hathaway.' Nirmal said and rubbed at a scab on his knee.

'Yes, Granddad.' Will answered.

'Right, I've got to go and look at my brassicas.' Granddad put down his mug, slapped his hands on to his knees, then levered himself up from the chair. 'What are you three going to do?'

Will looked at Nirmal. 'We were going to the underpass. To ride through the big puddle.'

The old man chuckled. 'That sounds a fun thing to do,' he said. 'Though perhaps not the most productive...'

'We'll help this afternoon,' Will promised for all of them. Asha and Nirmal nodded.

'C'mon, race you then,' Asha challenged and took to her heels.

'Hey!'

Will fell backwards, as Nirmal shoved his way in front of him. He scrambled to his feet, ran for his bike and started off in pursuit.

As they approached the underpass, all three slowed, each looking at the other. Will could hear echo-distorted shouts and a voice roaring in a strangled patois, overset with a high pitched whining and yelping.

'It's Earl and Blanche,' he said. 'Something's wrong.' Will pushed forward, hurtling down the gradient and screeching to a watery halt at the mouth of the tiled tunnel. Nirmal and Asha joined him.

At the far end of the underpass Earl was almost on the ground, held by his neck against the white tiles of the wall by a young, fox-faced man. His arms and legs flailing, Earl clutched at his assailant's wrists as the man pinched Earl's throat in a double-handed grip. Another man held a struggling and frightened dog under his arm, twisting her head in his sinewy hand.

'I'll kill her! I'll kill her!' He shouted, his face contorted with rage.

At the sound of the bikes swishing into the water both men spun around to face the entrance. Earl slid slowly down the tiles to the floor.

Time stopped.

'Let them go!' Nirmal yelled, his crumpled face thrust forward.

Asha turned her bike and rode back up the gradient.

One part of Will's mind noticed her distant screaming and shouting, but his attention was wholly fixed on the men in the tunnel.

What if they charged at him and Nirmal?

Will held his breath.

But both men turned and ran, dropping a whimpering Blanche to the floor.

Will breathed again. He could hear the beating of his heart in his ears.

Nirmal was already riding forward. Will pushed off and pedaled to catch up, then he braked, letting his bike slide along the floor, as he leapt off. He rushed over to Earl, who knelt to comfort a distraught Blanche.

Nirmal was already there.

'Is she okay?' Will asked.

Behind them there were shouts and noise. Will looked back to see figures appearing at the tunnel entrance. There was Asha, Granddad, Joe and a man speaking into a mobile phone. Granddad strode through the underpass.

'Are you alright?' Granddad demanded of Will. He bent over, gripped him by the shoulders and looked into his face. Will nodded, his body limp. Granddad looked over at Nirmal.

'Nirmal?'

'Yes, Mr Hathaway,' Nirmal replied. 'They didn't hurt us.'

Earl had risen to his feet, with his dog in his arms. She was licking at his bloody face. His dark cheek was scratched pink where they had pushed his face into the wall and there was a cut above his eye. His skin was shiny with sweat and tears.

Will was distracted as a siren sounded and a police car appeared at the tunnel mouth. Car doors slammed and Will and Nirmal flattened themselves against the tiles as the tunnel filled with people. In no time, it seemed, the underpass was cordoned off and para-medics brought up a trolley, upon which, with great gentleness, Earl placed Blanche. They made their way to the ambulance.

A young constable, with an over-prominent adam's apple, crouched on his haunches before Will and Nirmal. The chequered band on his hat was level with Will's chest.

'So you're the heroic rescuers?' He said, opening his notebook.

'And me!' Asha arrived, braking hard, her face tear-stained and grimy.

'Three of you then,' the policeman said. 'Now, can you tell me what happened?'

'We heard them...' Asha began.

'There were two men and Earl was, like, half lying on the floor...,' Nirmal gestured at the tunnel wall.

'One held Earl against the wall and the other was hurting Blanche....' Will frowned, trying to remember what they had looked like. 'One was tall and thin, with reddish hair and a moustache...'

'The other one looked mean. He'd got Blanche...,' Asha interrupted. 'He wore a tatty blue polo shirt and his hair was a dirty yellow. His mouth was twisted.'

'That was just his expression,' Nirmal said.

'Yes, that's what I mean, that was how he looked,' Asha retorted.

The young man sighed. 'Okay, well, that'll do for now. We'll bring you some pictures to look at later.' He smiled at them. 'You were all very brave. You can be proud of yourselves.'

'Try explaining that to their mothers.' Granddad came over. 'I think they ought to go home now, if you're finished?'

'Yes sir, of course. We can give you all a lift, if that would be helpful?'

'It would. I'll just need to lock up before we go.'

The policeman accompanied them back to the shed. He talked with Granddad, while Will, Nirmal and Asha pushed their bikes along behind.

'Meet up tomorrow?' Will whispered.

'Yeah. Where?' Nirmal answered, sotto voce.

'On the Beacon,' Will suggested and Nirmal and Asha both nodded.

'Ten o'clock?' Asha said.

'Okay.'

'Okay.'

Nirmal and Asha continued on to the squad car, while Will waited for Granddad to close up and lock the shed. He watched the police car pull away, the triangle of Asha's pale face at the window. There was another car on its way.

Suddenly Will wanted to be at home with his Mum. He'd had enough excitement for one day. He blinked – it wouldn't do to cry like a baby. His mind whirred.

What if the men had come at them? What if they hadn't run off?

Will looked down at the earth beneath his feet, but saw his kneecaps rise as his legs began to buckle. Then he felt hands under his arms and legs. He was swept upwards against the hard metal buttons of the policeman's uniform. The uniform smelled of boiled sweets.

'Okay there, look's like he's had enough.'

Will heard the man's voice echo in his chest through the scratchy cloth. Then he was carried over to the police car. He was sat down in the back seat and Granddad made a huge mess of clicking him into his seatbelt.

He was glad when the car started off.

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From his vantage point on the hilltop Will could scan the Heath for miles. The railway and allotments were to the west and Will followed the London express with his eyes as it sped southwards, disappearing into the heat haze. To the north were the buildings of the encroaching town and there he saw Nirmal's stocky form, standing on the pedals of his bike as he threaded his way through the cornfield on to the Heath proper. Of Asha there was no sign.

He counted himself lucky to be there, for his mother had threatened to ban him from ever leaving the house again, unless accompanied by a responsible adult. She had glared at Grandad then and pronounced the allotments off limits. By that time Will had been too tired to argue and he allowed himself to be bathed like an infant and put to bed. The rumble of continued conversation in the kitchen below had lulled him into welcome sleep. When morning came, it was a surprise to him that he was allowed out at all.

Nirmal reached the base of the hill and dismounted. His bike wouldn't take him up the incline, its chain kept coming off. So Will started down to meet him.

'How are you?' he asked as they met.

'Okay.' Nirmal looked down at his scuffed trainers and rang his cycle bell with furious energy. 'I don't see how corn can be as high as an elephant's eye. I've just been through the cornfield and it only comes up to my crossbar.'

'Perhaps they have giant corn in Oklahoma?' Will shrugged. 'Have you seen Asha?'

'I'm here,' Asha appeared above them and skidded down. 'Poor Granddad really copped it from my mum last night,' she said. 'Is he okay?'

'He was. We could go and see him later?' Will waited for a response.

''Spose so,' Nirmal rang his bell again. 'What are we going to do now?'

'Up and down?' Will said. 'Race you to the bottom.'

Will never relinquished his head start, but the others won later, as they climbed, raced and re-climbed the hill until the sun had passed its zenith.

When Nirmal said, 'I'm hungry.' Will felt his empty stomach rumble.

'I might have something.' Asha reached inside her pink rucksack. After some feeling around she produced some strips of gum, unwrapped and covered in fluff.

'Er, no, ta.'

Without further discussion they began to wander in the direction of the allotments, where sustenance would be found.

They reached the tunnel, the scene of yesterday's incident and stopped. They would have to go through, the alternative, to cross the railway line, was strictly forbidden. The three of them lined up just outside the entrance, Will in the centre. He took a deep breath.

'Right,' he said. 'Are you ready?'

'Wait a mo,' Asha bent down to pull her trainer straight. 'Okay.'

'Three, two, one – go!'

Eyes fixed on the far side, Will pedalled like a maniac through the tunnel. He sensed Nirmal and Asha, on either side of him, doing the same.

The puddle at the far end was no longer there, the water having mostly drained away or evaporated, but there were still strips of fluttering day-glo police tape, hanging off the hand rails. Will didn't stop to look closely. He turned sharply and rode up the incline, halting at its top, panting. Nirmal screeched to a stop beside him, swiftly followed by Asha.

'Phew!'

They had made it.

'Hey, look,' Asha said, pointing.

To the right of the path at the top of the incline a figure rose from the parched grass where he had been sitting. It was a young man. His dread-locks fell about his face, which he turned away as Will looked across at him. Without a glance he strode down to the underpass.

'He looked like he'd been crying,' Nirmal said, looking puzzled.

'I think that was Earl's son' Will said, with a frown. 'But he and Earl don't speak to each other.'

'Why not?' Asha asked. 'Is he a bad son?'

'Dunno,' Will said. 'Family stuff, I suppose.'

'Ask Granddad.'

At the allotments they quickly became the centre of attention and didn't stay hungry for long. Joe gave them a whole trug of fresh strawberries and Oz, the hippy, cut huge slices of juicy Cantaloupe which they devoured, slurping.

On the way back from washing under the tap Will felt a sharp jab of pain in his ribs. Asha had poked him.

'Go on then,' she hissed.

'Granddad,' Will began, unsure. Grandad was seated on an upturned crate, bud grafting currants. He stopped and looked at Will over his spectacles, waiting.

Will felt uncomfortable, but he had to carry on now. If he didn't ask, Asha would. 'I think we saw Earl's son, down at the tunnel. Was he here?'

'Yes, he came by earlier.' Will could tell from Granddad's tone that this avenue of conversation wasn't going to find favour.

'Did he say how Earl was?' Asha asked.

That was clever. Granddad would have to answer and that might give an opening for more questions.

'Earl is well and out of hospital,' Granddad replied in a measured voice. 'It was thoughtful of you to ask.' Asha looked down at her trainers.

'We saw Earl's son crying down by the tunnel,' Nirmal came clean.

'So that's it....oh!; Granddad looked over Will's head.

'Hello, all.'

Before he could turn to look, Will heard the sound of Earl's distinctive tones.

'How's Blanche?' Asha asked.

'She fine. She over in me shed, restin,' Earl smiled. 'We both grateful that you three came along yesterday.'

Will and the others exchanged looks. Asha grimaced and waggled her elbow.

'What were they after?' Will asked. 'Money, I s'pose?'

'I suppose,' Earl replied.

Asha's glance slid from side to side and she bit her lip, but before she could speak Granddad stood.

'Well, I hope that's an end of it,' he said. 'Brew, Earl?'

'Go down nicely Billy.'

The two men strolled to the shed, Asha tagging along.

How she had become tea-maker-in-chief?

Will wasn't sure, but he was mollified when she brought steaming mugs over and joined them in blowing and sipping.

'We should've asked Earl if he was speaking to his son again,' Nirmal said.

'I don't think Granddad would've wanted us to do that," Asha said and Will felt a twinge of jealousy.

'I agree,' he said, vehemently. 'And I know him better.'

Will had had enough of talking about families. It was too complicated and uncomfortable and it put him in mind of his own mother and her forbidding him the allotments. 'Look, I'm not supposed to be here anyway.'

'My mum would belt me if she found out. I promised not to come here again and not to...' Asha didn't complete her sentence.

'What? Hang out with us?' Nirmal's instinct was unerring. 'You've broken your promise, then.'

'We ought to go,' Will said. He suspected that Nirmal had given a similar promise.

With a shout and a wave to Granddad and Earl, the trio cycled away. Their rush didn't stop until the traffic lights at the end of Castle Road. They dismounted and walked their bikes.

'What are we doing tomorrow?' Nirmal asked.

'School projects?' Asha suggested, dutifully.

'Boring,' said Nirmal.

'Do you know what you're going to do?' Will asked.

'I'm going to grow something. Granddad said I could have some seeds.'

'It'd have to grow pretty fast before school starts,' Nirmal was sceptical. 'I'm going to write the story of Earl's brave rescue and send it to the Mercury.' Asha and Will looked at him. 'Probably,' he said.

'I'm not sure what I'm going to do,' Will said.

'Are we going to write if it's sunny?' Nirmal asked, looking thoughtful.

'We could meet at the Beacon again,' Will suggested. 'And then decide.'

'Yeah, I want to check out the corn,' Nirmal agreed.

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There was no writing done the following day, or the day after, as the summer's heat did not abate. Life at the allotments settled back into its steady rhythm. Asha set some lettuce seed, in a rill by the shed and watered it every day, ignoring Nirmal's teasing. Overjoyed when tiny shoots broke the surface, unfurling soft, pale leaves, she clapped her hands hard with happiness, making them all smile.

The weekend of the Bank Holiday arrived and there were family things to do. Asha was washing her lettuces when Will announced that he was going to leave early. This was unheard of.

'Why?' Asha asked.

'I've to help my Mum. My Dad's coming home for the holiday.' He looked over towards the railway line. 'On the seven thirty train.'

'Oh.' Asha couldn't think of anything to say which wouldn't seem unkind.

So she and Nirmal watched him hurry away.

Nirmal turned to look at William. The old man was continuing with his chores, making no attempt to tidy up or prepare to leave.

'Will never talks about his Dad,' Asha began. 'Are his parents divorced?'

'No,' Nirmal snapped. 'He works in London, that's all.'

What was the matter with Nirmal? Everyone was acting strangely today.

'Do you think he knows famous people?'

'I should think so.'

'Will we get to meet him? Will's Dad I mean?'

'Dunno,' Nirmal was still looking at William, who was grubbing up potato plants. 'Don't think so. I don't think he comes here. I think Grandad and he don't get on.'

'Why? Granddad's brilliant.'

'I think, maybe, Granddad doesn't like him working in London leaving Will and his Mum on their own all the time.'

'More family crap,' Asha was dismissive.

'I love my family,' Nirmal looked startled at his own words.

'Yes, well, I do too. It's just....'

For the second time that afternoon AShs felt at sea. There was an uncomfortable silence, eventually broken by Nirmal.

'What say we have a brew?'

'Isn't it a bit late?'

'Granddad's still here isn't he?'

Nirmal was tense and Asha sensed something which she didn't fully understand. They wandered over, kicking up dust in the low, late afternoon sun.

'Brew, Mr Hathaway?'

'Yes, please Nirmal.' William replied.

Aren't you going with Will?' Asha asked, tilting her head to one side.

'I am not.'

William began banging his garden fork on the ground to dislodge clumps of earth. Then he rammed it upright into the ground. 'Here,' he pulled a plastic bag from his trouser pocket. 'Help me collect the spuds and we'll take them over and have our tea,'

Asha bent to pick the potatoes from the plants.

'Why.....?' She began.

'I'll go and fill the kettle.' With a glare Nirmal stomped off.

'Why are families so difficult?' she asked.

The old man's eyebrows rose. 'Families? Well, for one thing, they're all different, Asha. You can't generalise. And for another, it's not surprising, it's just people. They're all different, so when you put them together....'

'But parents bring up their children. So is it their fault?'

'No. That's to say...' William took a deep breath, hesitated, then said, 'It's more complicated than that, Asha. It isn't that clear cut. Parents just do their best and try to tackle any foreseeable problems. It's like growing plants, you keep the soil clean and fertile, provide shelter and protection, keep away the pests and diseases. Plants are complex living organisms, but they're simple compared with humans. Children don't just grow, their growth is influenced in all sorts of ways, there are lots of factors, within the family and outside it...' His voice trailed off.

'Okay,' Asha said.

Nirmal was returning with the kettle. He would spoil the conversation.

Asha contented herself with making the tea. She lit the gas ring and took the kettle from Nirmal to place upon it. She sniffed at the mugs and thrust them at Nirmal, who set out for the tap again with a sullen look.

William settled into the old armchair, using his hands to scuff the dirt from the potatoes, which he'd rolled out onto the floor.

Asha watched, then perched alongside him on one of the armchair arms.

They waved as Earl locked his shed, raised a hand and headed for the gate. His son followed, pushing a heavily-loaded wheel barrow with Blanche sitting on top. William put the potatoes back into the bag and reached into a bucket for an apple, which he peeled and began to slice.

They sat and munched. The apple was sweet and juicy. Asha wiped her hand across her mouth. She had an important question.

'Granddad,' Asha began again.

'You oughtn't to call me that, Asha,' he corrected her. 'I'm not your Granddad, you have grandfathers of your own.'

'I know.' Asha's face fell. She had done a wrong thing and felt hurt and ashamed. 'But I can't talk to them. They never really speak to me and they don't listen when I answer.' She stood up and fidgeted, wanting to run away. 'They don't think I'm worth listening to.'

William peeled another apple and handed a piece to Asha. 'But you know that you are – worth listening to. Here, Malus Silvestris,' he said. 'Worcester Permain.'

'Do you think that I'm a bad daughter, gr..., that I'm a bad daughter?'

'No, have your brothers been telling you that again?'

'Oh, no,' she lied. Her brothers were always criticizing her. 'Not exactly. Only they say I shouldn't do things like football and playing with boys. They say only bad girls do that.'

William growled in his throat.

'Is that what all these questions are about?' he asked. 'Because your brothers have been bullying you? I told you, you ought to talk with your mother about it?'

'No....she always takes their side.' That was how it felt. 'Boys are better than girls, they get all the attention.'

'I don't think that's true, Asha. And I don't think your Mum thinks so either.' William cleared his throat and seemed about to speak again, but instead he looked at Asha over his spectacles. He sighed. 'You should try and talk to her. She's a girl too, or was. She might like

to talk, but doesn't know how to go about it. My late wife always talked with my daughter – Will's Mum. I was never any good at answering her questions. Will you try?'

'Yeah, okay,' Asha promised. But she wanted an answer. 'I think what my brothers say isn't true. I should do what I think is right, not what they think.' She wasn't sure what she thought most of the time, but understood that she wanted to be able to choose.

'Yes, Asha, you make your own decisions,' William agreed, 'but you must speak with your Mum about this.'

Asha pressed her lips together, there would be difficulties with this approach, but, in honour of Granddad, she would try.

'Who's making this tea then?' Nirmal returned with the mugs. 'The kettle's been whistling for ages.'

Asha hadn't noticed.

'Have some apple,' she offered a half to Nirmal, who took it with a grateful look. For some reason he seemed happier now.

'What kind of corn grows to over eight foot high, Mr Hathaway?' he asked. 'Is it genetically modified?'

FOUR

Home

It's obscene, a bag like that. Our Moira showed me, in one of her magazines, thousands of pounds those handbags cost. Pink leather, punched shapes, tassels and gold – I bet the gold's real. The women who make them are all over the gossip columns, called Lulu or Anya, women who've had things cushy all their lives, making stupidly expensive things. To sell to other pampered women, with more money than sense.

Like that one, with the bag, going up the steps ahead of me, out of the tube. Hair down to her waist, nose in the air, flouncy skirt up to her arse. How does she walk in those heels? Six inches. Must be. Legs going right up, glossy. I bet you could see her knickers if you was right behind her.

Not that I wouldn't, mind. I mean, if I was asked....She looks like she could do with a good seeing to. And she's walked right past that homeless old girl by the railings, without so much as a glance.

'Here y'are love.'

The fifty pence coin clinked into the small pile of coppers in the knitted hat. Its owner looked up and smiled.

'Ta, love.'

Blimey, 'e looks in a rage. Agg-re-ssion. A builder, by the look of 'im, working round 'ere, I'd say. There's always lots of building going on round 'ere.

Another chink.

'Ta, love.'

A pound this time and it's not even rush hour, when all them city types come back to their newly built a-part-ments. At this rate I'll be able to go shopping, get some food and some tins for Jonjo.

They won't let him come 'ere now, after his accident. That young lad from London Underground helped me clean it up, he didn't mind. But it was when that kid started bawling fit to bust, as if he'd been savaged or something. And the nanny couldn't control 'im. My Jonjo wouldn't hurt a fly. But now, if I wants this pitch, Jonjo has to be somewhere else. Paddy's taken him on the Common. I'll have to get some tinnies for Paddy for that.

Chink.

Another pound.

'Ta, love.'

A smartly dressed woman. About forty, I'd say, lugging a bag. Oooh, I want a bag like that. An e-normous, check, plastic shopping bag, it's a foot wide. Rect-ang-u-lar. I could keep all my worldlies in that. And it'd be a pillow. For me and Jonjo, curled up under the blankets.

She'll have a job getting it down them stairs.

Bloody heavy.

I'm never going to manage this. I should have called a cab. It's much too full, but that's what she said she wanted, her things. Not that she would have thought I'd be carrying them on the tube. I didn't either. Why Gerald wouldn't drop me off there, I don't know. It's practically on his way. It's only Finsbury Park.

That's what she'd said.

'It's only Finsbury Park, Mum. Just up the Victoria Line.'

A basement flat, with Tim and damp, probably. That's why Gerald won't go there. He doesn't want to have to see it. His daughter living

in a basement flat in Finsbury Park with Tim. Well, there's nothing he can do about it, his dead body or not.

'Here. Allow me....' A be-suited young man, neat haircut, rimless glasses, leather satchel-briefcase slung on his shoulder. He's taking the bag.

'Oh, thank you. That's very kind of you.'

Hmm, it's heavier than he expected. But he looks fit. He looks like he can cope with it.

'Thanks, if you could just...?'

If he'll carry it through the luggage ticket barrier to the top of the escalator I'll be able to manage afterwards, maybe.

'There. Will you be all right now?'

'Yes, thank you. Thank you very much.'

What had she got in there?

It didn't seem like the sort of bag a woman like her would be carrying. Still, nothing to me. Sit-ups and power-weights three times a week. Tut. Why can't people stand on the right, the instruction's clear enough?

One minute to a Bank train. I'll drop these documents at the office, then go on to the gym. It's all signed and sealed. Old Mrs Callender wanted a quick sale and she got one, even if I had to go all over town to make it happen. Like the lackey that I am. But the fee'll be worth it – it fetched a tidy sum, even for SW4. Old Mrs C can retire to the coast, or Spain, or both if she wants. And I'll be able to pay my own mortgage instalments, at least for a while.

The metal doors open with a swish.

Good, it's almost empty. I'm going against the flow. I'll just check these over one more time, now I can sit down. Put my briefcase on my lap. The developers want everything tied up. And the best of luck to them, the neighbours aren't going to like it. They'll fight. There's a judge lives along there too. Lots of legals, more work for yours truly. What the f...?

Papers everywhere.

'Sorry mate.'

A tall guy, long, lined faced with a pony tail, wearing a giant rucksack and knocking it into everybody. One of those with tubular steel frames.

'Let me help you.'

He gathers my papers up from the carriage floor, swaying with the movement of the train.

It's luggage really, that rucksack, not suitable for wearing on the tube. He's taking it off now. Good. It's covered in stickers. I wonder if he's really been to all those places?

You'd have to be pretty fit to carry that around on your back, it'd pull on the shoulders, the deltoids. Wouldn't be a problem for me of course, but it's out of place here. Those small backpack things are better, though not better than a briefcase.

There's one in the corner – a backpack –with padded shoulder straps. Who does it belong to?

Who does it belong to? There's been no-one sitting there since I got on. Just the bag. Maybe someone forgot it, though I don't know how, it's not something you're likely to forget, a backpack, is it? With the weight of it on your shoulders.

Pony-tail guy is wondering too.

Maybe someone should report it?

Hang on, pony-tail's got up. He's going to look.

'Hey!'

He looks at me.

'I wouldn't mate....you never know...'

His eyes meet mine. He understands. He remembers too. That grainy, black and white CCTV footage of the young men going through the ticket barriers. They had a bag like that.....

If you enjoyed reading this book please write a review on The Kindle Store or on Amazon. Favorable reviews are one of the few ways in which to attract potential readers. Thank you.

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