# Writing Now!

Today's Magazine for Tomorrow's Authors

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Going Back in Time

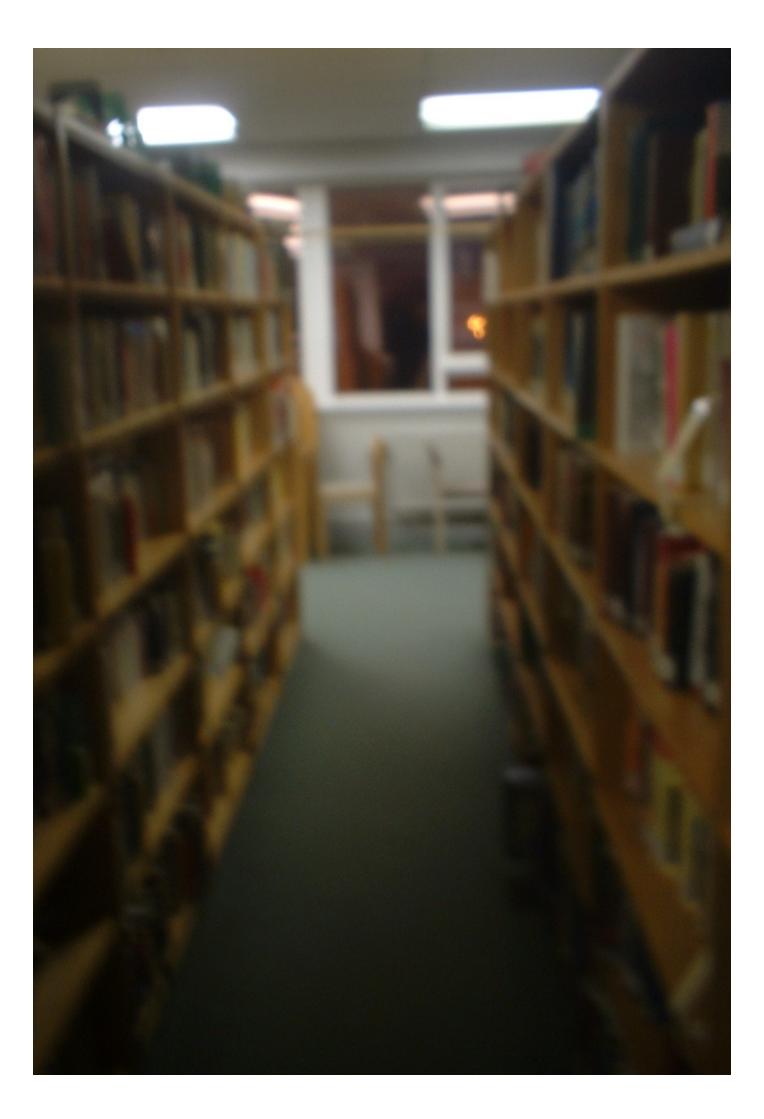
We take a look at the historical novel

Also: Is Lynne Truss a good example for writers? Alan Wall and Gilgamesh

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## TO BE CONTINUED?

A large yet overlooked subgenre of novel is the unofficial continuation of a public domain work. Is this a healthy practice?

## **Gareth Barsby**

You might have heard of Tim Burton's latest film Alice in Wonderland, which, despite some controversy revolving around DVD release dates, opened in cinemas this March. When it was first announced, we at first wondered if it might be a retelling of Lewis Carroll's classic using motion-capture and advanced special effects, similar to last year's *Christmas Carol*. As more and more details became uncovered, it turned out not to be an adaptation, but rather a sequel to the famous books.

"Since you've been gone," the Mad Hatter (played by Johnny Depp) tells Alice in one of the trailers' voiceovers, "the Red Queen has taken over all of Wonderland." The story of Burton's film involves Alice joining the Hatter and the White Oueen's crusade to reclaim the fabled land from the evil clutches of the Red Oueen of Hearts. There are huge battles with armoured card soldiers and chess pieces, flashback sequences where the Hatter sadly sees his home get burnt down by an attack from the Jabberwock, and Alice in armour wielding a vorpal sword.

This is quite different from what Carroll wrote back in 1865. Both Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass did include allusions to battles and royalty, the emphasis was not on war or triumphing over darkness, but rather on the young protagonist's travels and understanding the oddness



Tim Burton's latest makes us consider the literary sequel

of the characters she met (a third Alice book would likely feature the title character meeting a whole new set of surreal characters, a concept explored by works like Jeff Noon's *Automated Alice*).

Of course, Burton's newest outing is hardly the first sequel to a classic; while a cinematic sequel to a written story is somewhat rare, you can hardly throw a stone in a bookshop without hitting an unofficial sequel, or even a prequel, to a public domain work. This is not to condemn such a practice, as such derivative works can be interesting, even if they have a completely different tone and setting to the original story. Some of these can be completely inspired, like Tom Stoppard's famous Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, while others, most of them probably, are the uninspired work of the unimaginative, like Lisa Fielder's embarrassing Dating

Hamlet: Ophelia's Story.

It would also probably be safe to say that most aspiring writers will be tempted by this genre. They likely have been spurred into writing by a favourite novel, and if that novel has no sequel, they may be impulsed to write their own.

When reading that book, they wished the characters in it were their own and wanted to write like the author they admire. This line of thought is why there is so much fanfiction to be found on the internet, and while that subgenre of writing is considered by many to be pornographic waste, it shouldn't be condemned. Some reading this may want to write one of these works, and I have no opposition to them doing so, as long as they get it right.

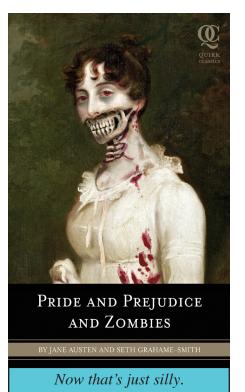
An unofficial sequel to a famous work shouldn't be a cash-in, it

"The aspiring writer has likely have novel be improved if Frankenstein metalians? While the setting and been spurred into writing by a favourite novel, and if that novel has no sequel, they may be impulsed to write their own."

should be a challenge. While you may not be up to the standard of the work you are continuing, you can make it a good tribute. The potential challenge and tribute lie within the characters and how you portray them, or in how the original author portrayed them. Don't try to make the characters stray too far away from their original personalities if you are writing their further adventures. That is not to say you shouldn't make them grow and develop them, but if a meek, shy character inexplicably becomes a muscle-bound sex god, then why not change the names and develop your own story? It probably won't do as well, but at least you're not shitting over an established property.

Another issue one must consider is if the work in question deserves a sequel, or if one is just being written because the greedy writer wants 'more'. Does the original have unresolved plot threads? Is the ending ambiguous? Not ambiguous enough? We've all heard the complaints of Hollywood sequels cheapening the original, and being unnecessary and being a grab for cash. So sequels to literary classics should not be written just for the sake of a sequel or the sake of money. Well, perhaps a little for the sake of money, but it should mainly be due to a genuine feeling that there is more story to tell, or maybe just experimentation.

Experimentation. What a lovely word that is. It's not for everyone, but some of the more interesting ideas for novels can come from it, and some of the more interesting ideas for this subgenre can come from experimenting with your favourite books. Pride and Prejudice is dull to some, but add zombies and there's a sudden surge of interest. It would be likely be boring if your sequel had the same old characters on the same old adventures, but it would be challenging for you and intriguing for your readers were you to put the same old characters in new situations. How would Winnie the Pooh deal with fighting in World War II? Would Mary Shelley's famous



met aliens? While the setting and plot may change, the characters have to stay the same, or at least be recognisable as who they are supposed to represent, or, as said before, you might as well change all the names right away.

As can be seen, in any sequel, official or not, it's the characters that matter, and the reason most readers would read a continuation of a classic is because they want to find out what the characters from the original do next, and how they develop. Characters are key to any fictional text, so in some ways writing the unofficial sequel isn't that different from the usual writing piece, with the main difference being that the characters have been formed for you. This difference may make the practice seem easier, but it's quite the opposite; one inconsistency and the fans of the original are at your throat. But we all like taking a good risk from time to time.

Writing a continuation of a classic isn't necessarily evil, and can actually be a good way to hone one's talents and provide a test. As with most writing-related things, characters are at the heart of it. Getting back to the new Alice in Wonderland for a moment, the characters in that, save for maybe Stephen Fry's Cheshire Cat, weren't really interesting. So, if anything, one should experiment with this genre to correct Burton's mistake.

**Images Courtesy of Google Im-**

## **UPCOMING BOOKS**

## **Gareth Barsby**

## The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner: An Eclipse Novella Stephanie Meyer 5th June

Another instalment of the abysmal series that stalks the earth as long as it keeps making money. This one is a short story about a vampire introduced in Eclipse and her life, which is sure to excite teenage girls looking for brainless thrills and frustrate everyone else. But Meyer probably is forced to keep writing her supernatural series just because it's so profitable. In that sense, she's like the RL Stine of her generation, only not as good.

## **Dead in the Family**Charlaine Harris 10th June

Speaking of vampires, we have another part of the series that inspired True Blood to look forward to. Apparently, Sookie will be dealing with a favour she offers Shreveport's werewolf pack, as well as problems with her relations. This writer had never really got into the TV series, but the books have had their interesting moments.

## Vampire Diaries: The Return: Shadow Souls LJ Smith

6th May

And guess what? Yes, another vampire-themed novel. One has to wonder if, in whatever afterlife he's ended up in, Bram Stoker regrets what he's started. This is

another instalment of the successful Vampire Diaries series, where Elena travels to the Dark Dimension.

## Dark Blood Stuart MacRri

Stuart MacBride

29th April

Despite what the title may imply, I am glad to say that this is not another vampire novel, but a Logan McRae thriller by the author of Cold Granite. Here, McRae finds himself helping a rapist who's served his time to make a new start and dealing with one DSI Danby.

## **The Lost Symbol** *Dan Brown*

22nd July

Like Meyer, Brown is another mediocre author who keeps writing novels because they make him money, but unlike Meyer, he attempts to link his works to reality when they couldn't be further. If early reviews are to be believed, this is really nothing we haven't already seen before from him.

## **Doctor Who Novels** Various 22nd April

So recently we've been given a new Doctor in the form of Matt Smith, and thus, some new novels, including Night of the Humans, Apollo 23 and The Forgotten Army. The books will be, of course, missing the enjoyable acting of Smith and Gillan that have made recent episodes so entertaining, but they should be nice methods of time-killing.

## **Private**James Patterson

James Patterso **27th May** 

Patterson's work is something of an acquired taste, and although this writer has never really been interested by him, he does have his admirers. The title of this work refers to a private investigation firm a man called Jack Morgan is taking over from his convict father, and struggles to keep it clean while investigating the murder of his best friend's wife.

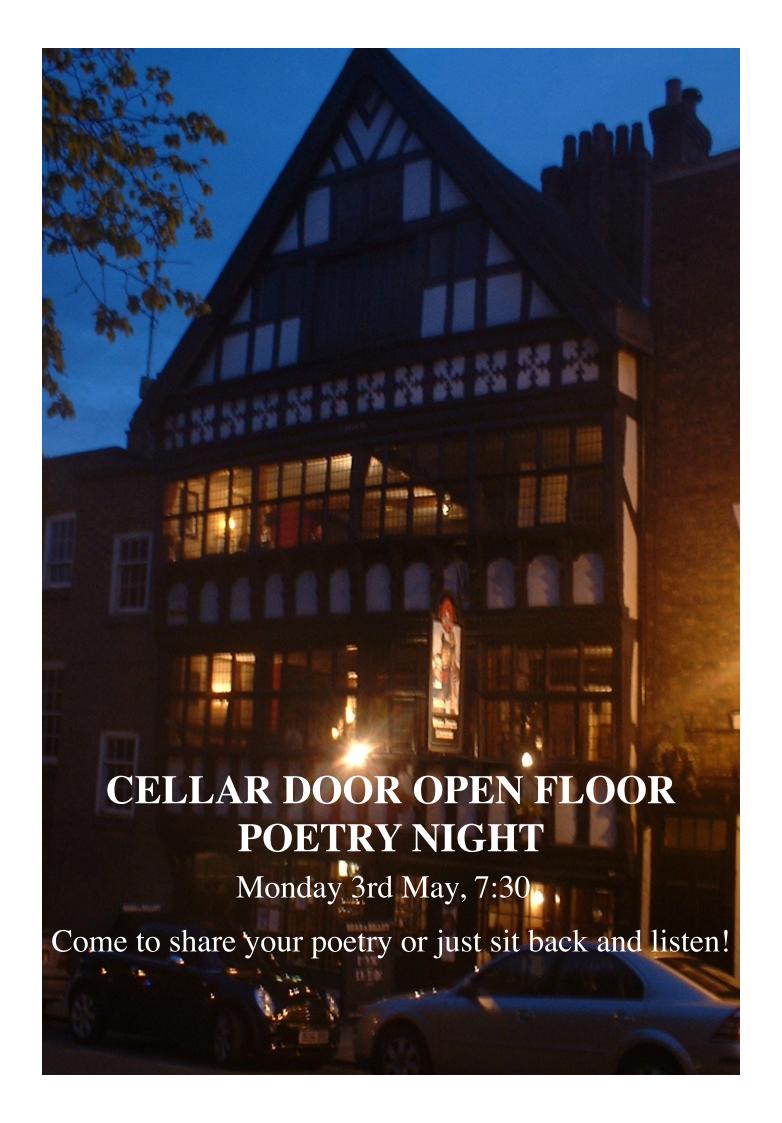
# Play to Kill PJ Tracy 29th April

Ooh! What a scary title! And look at the tagline: Want to play again? Certainly it must have given the reader mental images of an evil clown saying that line. Actually, the story revolves around a serial killer who is posting up videos of his kills online and Grace MacBride, computer analyst, gathering agents to find the identity of the culprit before it's too late.

#### The Prince of Mist

Carlos Ruiz Zafon **27th May** 

It may be somewhat distracting that on the cover, the author's name has more prominence than the book's actual title, but the idea behind it actually has promise. Max Carver's family moves to a strange house with a collection of statues in its overgrown garden, and Max can hear one of the statues beckoning him.



## **ALAN WALL**

An interview with the writer of Gilgamesh and Bless the Thief, and a professor of Creative Writing



This picture is courtesy of Shearsman Books. Wall did not wish to have his photograph taken; 'I'm a writer, not a model.'

### **Gareth Barsby**

Born in Bradford and educated in the University of Oxford, Alan Wall is quite a prominent writer, with works including Curved Light, Bless the Thief, Sylvie's Riddle, Gilgamesh, a modern take on the classic legend and even a book on creative writing itself, known simply as Writing Fiction. After working at jobs like a print manager, he currently works as a professor of Creative Writing, working in such universities as the University of Birmingham and, now works full-time at the University of Chester.

Having read his *Gilgamesh* and finding it quite an interesting read, I managed to catch up to Wall, and we had a brief interview concerning writing and his methods of doing it.

## So what led you to pursue creative writing?

Well, I became a writer. I spent years as a print manager, but then the print company I worked at closed down. Then I wrote some novels, and I made a living from it

## You currently teach creative writing. What's that like?

It's very interesting. It's challenging like any form of teaching, but it's an interesting subject to try to teach.

# I'm particularly interested in your *Gilgamesh* story. Where did you get the idea for that?

Well, I wrote the novel *Silent Conversations*, and *Gilgamesh* was part of what I explored. Gilgamesh is the oldest novel, the earliest epic and I was interested by this first attempt. I reviewed a version by Andrew Brown for Literary Review, then the idea lurked around my mind for a while until I wrote it.

# I also noticed you rewrote Gilgamesh by comparing the events of the story to more modern events...

That's one of the most appealing ways of reinventing a myth, adding a contemporary feel. Gilgamesh seems quite modern, he's frightened of death, he deals with secrets. So putting in contemporary references is one way to reinterpret myths. I'm not the only one who's done it.

## Are there any other contemporary versions of myths you like?

I'm fond of *Grendel* by John Gardner, which rewrites *Beowulf* from the point of view of the monster, and I think it's a very good book. I wrote about it in *Writing Fiction*.

## So, Writing Fiction, what was that like?

I was asked to write it. Harper Collins called me and I buckled down and wrote it. I wasn't a very happy experience.

## So how do you push yourself to complete a work?

Desperation, I think. Sometimes I don't feel like finishing a book,

but if I stop, all the work will be wasted and won't get published. I keep pressing on, even if I don't like it.

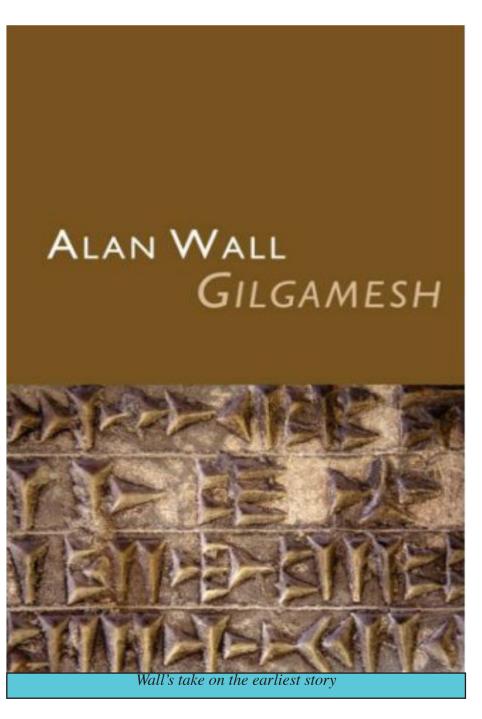
## Any works of yours you're not proud of?

There's a couple of books I've written that I don't encourage people to read. They're not as good as they should be.

## Any tips for aspiring writers?

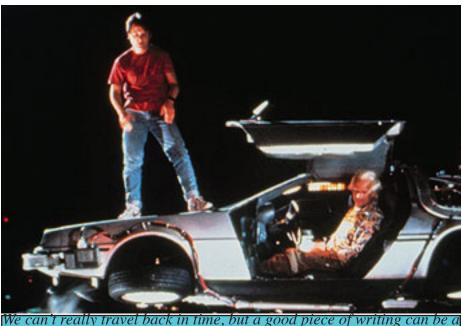
Be obsessive.

# "I keep pressing on..."



## **GOING BACK IN TIME**

Every writer wants to write about the past, but what do they need to know when embarking upon that task?



We can't really travel back in time, but a good piece of writing can be fine substitute

### **Gareth Barsby**

A good novel takes its readers on a fascinating journey, and there are few journeys more fantastic than journeys back to the past. Who doesn't like hearing tales of jousting knights and mighty castles, of western outlaws being brought to justice, of foggy Victorian streets where killers lurk? We can't ignore our history, so it's no surprise that many authors have been tempted to revisit the past for their stories.

But people back then were so different than us, weren't they? They were much less civilised, or much too civilised, back then. The past has been and gone, there's nothing there for people in the modern age in stories set back then. We need to stop focussing on the past, and focus on the present and the future!

On the contrary, there is still quite a lot to relate to when it comes to people back then. It's more than likely that the people of the past faced similar problems to what we face now. Well, probably not things like troubles with internet connections, but they had to deal with matters involving love, money, illness and mortality, like we all do. We have to deal with stressful matters, they had to deal with stressful matters.

And certainly you've heard the old saying that if you don't learn your history, you are doomed to repeat it? What better way to reflect that philosophy than with history facing things you don't want it to face again?

Since the historical novel is so widespread in the literary world, it stands to reason that most aspiring writers will want to tackle the genre at some point in their crea-

tive career. So what does make a good historical novel? Well, what makes a good general novel for one thing. Interesting characters, a developed plot, and an attention-grabbing style. But you know those things already. All novels need them. But what about a historical novel? Shouldn't there be a little something extra to writing one of those?

Well, of course there is. History. You can't write historical fiction without at least some knowledge of history. So, you'd have probably expected that in order to write about the past, you should try and research the past. Look up books about the historical period you want to write about, search for it on Google, have a chat with an expert, use whatever research methods you like, as long as you end up getting a general idea of what your chosen period would be like. It's necessary for getting the smaller details right as well; you want to know what the most commonly used swear words in a certain period are, you better look them up.

But research means nothing if you don't really engage with the period you're writing about. If you're writing about the Victorian period, how well can you imagine living in that period? Can you hear the clicking of the cobbled streets as you walk past the orphans in rags? Can you smell the oppressive black smoke and the rancid sewage? Can you feel the breezing chill in the air? No one's expecting you to be the reincarna

tion of Dickens, but if your story is set in Victorian London, you need to make the reader feel like they're in Victorian London.

Isn't that really the true appeal of historical novels? So the readers can be transported back in time without the need for a flux capacitor? So those that feel they were born in the wrong century can experience the century they should have been born in? Why do you think people like to visit castles or battlefields? Write your historical piece to give them that thrill of stepping back for a few hours in their dull modern lives.

That means when you choose your historical period, choose one because it fascinates you. Don't write a novel set in Elizabethan England because you think doing so will make your novel more sophisticated. Do it because you want to be in Elizabethan England, to share this wish with your reader and to get them to sympathise with this old world's inhabitants.

Building on a point made earlier, it is required that you make the reader relate to your historical characters, but not too much or too little. As in, don't make them



Just picture yourself here

act too much like a modern person that they seem out of place, or too much like a person from another time that they act completely alien to the reader. Though, with the right skill, you can make any historical figure relatable, even Jack the Ripper (if there is someone who truly relates to Jack the Ripper, this author would like to know about that person).

If you do write about a specific historical figure, don't be afraid to make that figure a character, as long as you don't contradict what history knows about them. Jeanette Winterson's The Passion makes note of Napoleon's love of chicken, and, while history doesn't say he had a love of

chicken, there is nothing to say he didn't, and it does make sense considering what we know of the diminituive dictator.

The past is an interesting place to visit and revisit, but the writer must take careful steps in his visits. In some ways, the writing of historical fiction is no different then most other fiction, but there is the extra challenge of not pissing off historians.

**Images Courtesy of Google Images** 

# "When you choose a historical period, choose one because it fascinates you."

## **SHORT STORIES**

## The Traveller

Gareth Barsby

It was raining.

She knew it as soon as he heard the torrent of water batter against the lid of her dumpster, and it was further confirmed after her elongated eyes peered through the lid. It was raining, and she hated rain. Rain was painful. The way it rapidly splattered all over her body, she was certain she would die last time she ventured out into such conditions. She couldn't die; she wanted to live, she needed to live. So, that night, she wouldn't travel like she usually did. She'd stay in the dumpster, where the strong lid would shield her from any dangers.

It was the third dumpster she had slept in that week. She had travelled so much, she slept somewhere new every day. It was usually trash containers where she slept, as they usually had things that kept her from being hungry, and seemed to offer the most protection. Protection from the painful rain, and protection from the painful sunlight. She didn't always sleep in a dumpster, no. Just a few days ago, she couldn't find a container, so she slept in an open field. She would normally feel vulnerable slumbering outside of the containers but since the grass in that field was the same colour as her skin, she felt as if she would be hidden. After seeing too many cities, viewing a place like that field was refreshing. The stars

were more visible in that field and the sounds, the hooting and the breeze, pleased her more than the roaring in the cities.

It wouldn't have protected her against the rain though. The sound of it lashing against her plastic roof may be unbearable, but better that than to have it lashing against her back and her eyeballs. Travelling would have to wait another day.

But didn't she need to travel? Wasn't that her purpose? Wasn't that her mission? When she saw the world laid out before her, her first instinct was to travel it, so didn't that mean she had to? If it wasn't for travelling, she wouldn't have learned. It was only yesterday that she found out the rapid machines that she had barely avoided were used for transport. 'Cars'. She had wanted them to go away, but now realised why they were here.

Everything has a reason to be here.

And wouldn't travelling help her find others? Others like her? The closest thing she had found resembling herself was the 'slugs', having the same basic shape as her and having her ability to crawl on walls, but they couldn't be like her. They were too small, they were too dark, and they felt so brainless. It was the humans, the large creatures that dominated the streets that she felt she was closer to. She knew they were the ones that constructed the city, who brought form to the dominating

shapes of brick, and she wondered if she could if she had the right resources.

She couldn't be a human though; she looked nothing like them, was too small and they all seemed to hate her. The earliest encounter with a human she could remember involved that human trying to destroy her by crushing her under the sole of his foot. Most other humans just ignored her, unwilling to give her any help. Yet she still observed them from afar, in hopes of learning something.

She wasn't human, but she was like them, she thought like them, and so would others of her kind. Others with green flesh and no legs and eyes on stalks. They'd have their own cities, their own means of travel, probably ones even better than the humans had. And those others would not hate her, they'd offer her safety and anything she could ever need. They'd tell her everything she needed to know.

And the more she travelled, the sooner she would find those others.

So would that be worth braving that horrid rain? Another peek from under the lid and she could see it was still as heavy as ever, but some humans were still out there. If the humans could bear the rain, why couldn't she? If she did go out, maybe she'd even find out why there is rain.

Everything has a reason to be

here.

How could the humans survive such an onslaught though? Well, they did have protection; thick coverings around their bodies. She had no such coverings, and when she noticed this, she suddenly thought that that may be the reason she couldn't find anyone like her. Maybe she had to have the coverings to be noticed and liked.

Crawling around her makeshift bed, she soon found a thin square that seemed large enough to cover her body, and wrapped it around herself. After lifting open the lid, she crawled down the side of the dumpster and into the wet world. The rain had died down somewhat, but the covering was still effective in making it more bearable. She had just made a discovery! That meant that night was going to be a good night. She needed to make discoveries if she was going to have reason.

Everything has a reason to be here.

#### **Flat Interior**

Anastasia Vartanyan

My dog whimpers loudly,

scratching the tiles,

banging the bowl.

Just like my husband

My cat curls reclusively,

biting my fingers,

strolling out dismissively.

Just like my mother

My plant stands sickly,

loosing leafy weight,

roots gripping the sand.

Just like my sister

And I, I distill in self-imposed harmony.

Buzzing computer existence,

ringing cellphone relations.

Share with me

my thirty years of

Loneliness

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Stories must be 1000 words or less.

## LYNNE TRUSS

# Aside from proper grammar, is there anything aspiring writers can learn from her observations?

## **Gareth Barsby**

If you're a writer, one must assume that you're also a reader. And if you're a reader, you've probably heard of Lynne Truss, the author of the famous Eats, Shoots & Leaves, as well as Talk to the Hand and Get Her Off the Pitch! If you are an aspiring writer, you probably know that grammar is important, and thus keep a copy of Eats, Shoots & Leaves close to you at all times to remind you of that importance. And why not? One certainly does not want to be bored by what they need to know, and Truss certainly knows how to make something as boring as grammar humorous and entertaining.

Yes, grammar is important for us writers, but it's a subject we rarely dwell on. When we're writing, our thoughts are more focussed on the plot, the characters and the emotion rather than general grammar, and, when we're not writing, our thoughts turn towards our work and our money and our relationships. If we see a grammatical error on a sign on the street, or in a piece of writing, or on a photo on FailBlog, we laugh for a little while, but spend the rest of the day not giving it much of a second thought. Whereas Truss, as we discover in an episode described in Eats, goes to pieces over the lack of an apostrophe in the title of Two Weeks Notice. Even Microsoft Word agrees with her on this, but such a thing does seem somewhat pedantic to the average person. Nonetheless, Truss encourages us to join her in letting loose their 'Inner Stickler' as she

calls it. 'When you next see a banner advertising "CD's, DVD's, Video's and Book's" [don't] just stay indoors getting all depressed about it', she implores, 'Engage in some direct action argy-bargy'.

A good writer can keep a reader interested through the use of an unusual character that, while strange, has some element about them that the reader can, in a way, relate to. Reading Eats, Shoots and Leaves, one gets the impression that Truss herself is that unusual yet relatable character. The reader is unlikely to start grabbing a paintbrush and adding commas and apostrophes to the signs that need it (as Truss wishes to do at one point in the book), they still likely would have felt a smidge of irritation of at least one improper use of grammar at some point in their lives. Still, they do generally take grammar for granted, treating it the same as they treat their car or their microwave, so Truss can come off as a little odd.

But shouldn't all authors though? The best authors are those that can take the mundane world, or a mundane facet of that mundane world, and make it worth reading. I mean, doesn't one of the most famous fantasy series of all time revolve around a piece of nifty jewellery? Lynne Truss may not be a fiction writer, but her example is one for aspiring writers to follow.

Take a look at another of her works: Talk to the Hand. This book is based on the rudeness of people, something else that annoys us, but we generally take for granted. Most of us hate rudeness, but accepted that just about everyone in Britain is rude, and have engaged in rudeness ourselves, so few of us would consider the idea of writing a book on the subject. So how does Truss make this unattractive subject interesting? By analysing it.

Truss makes it clear that she is one of us, and has shared some of our feelings. 'I am rather keen on keeping other people at arm's length', she confesses, and certainly we can understand why, and have had incidents where we wanted a germ-ridden nuisance out of our faces. And Truss explores why, making an analogy out of an episode of the Simpsons of all things and exploring, as she calls it, the 'notion of space'. She even has the need to categorize her analyses on unsocial behaviour, with the alternate title of the book being 'Six Good Reasons to Stay Home and Bolt the Door' (now there's a course of action we all want to do), and each of those reasons is given its own chapter. She sure is organised for a strange grammar nazi.

So there is a lesson to take from Truss' work for us aspiring writers, and that is to be a bit more analytical when it comes to our writing, and maybe even a bit more persnickety if that's what it needs. We don't want to read about the world as we see it, we want to read it as you see, live and think it.

**Images Courtesy of Google Images** 



