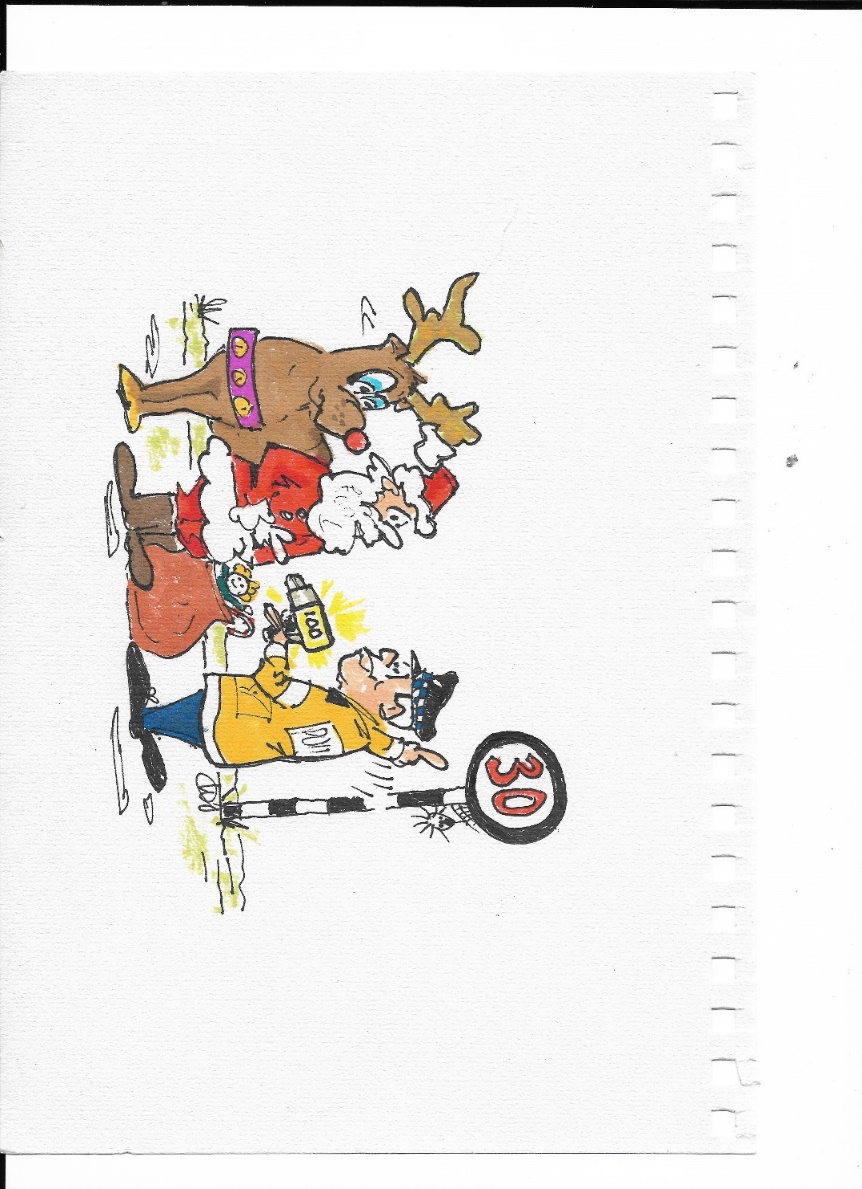
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Stay Strong, Stay Sane, Stay Writing!

‘WRITES’

*The visible hand of friendship*



IPA Section UK Writers Special Interest Group and Global Writers Forum Magazine

No. 15

***‘The Bumper Festive Edition’***

**December 2020**

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***This is ‘Writes No.15: The Festive Edition’***

***A Happy Christmas to all our lovely writers and readers!***

***The Editor:*** [***davidlewis@brynstowe.co.uk***](mailto:davidlewis@brynstowe.co.uk)

***Editorial Chair David Lewis writes:***

*Dear writers all,*

**Review of the Year**

It is hard to believe the most dramatic year in modern history is finally coming to an end. It is also the end of our second full year as a SIG since our foundation at Gimborn in September 2018. As a group of friends, some old, some new, we have shown resilience, fortitude, courage, sacrifice, care for each other, and just as importantly perhaps, amazing creativity in the face of adversity. As shown in this final Christmas-themed bumper edition of the year. The writing skill of our members has shone out as a beacon of hope and joy, keeping us together, motivated us and committed us to our own morale and well-being. I commend these values to us all. With gusto!

And what a year we have had writing wise! We reached a membership of 50 in the summer, of whom 40 are active writers and regular contributors. We produced 12 monthly magazines containing over 500 pages of brilliant poems, short stories, anecdotes, book reviews, biographies, reminiscences, histories, insights and much, much, more: over 250 separate published pieces, all engagingly readable. We also met together via Zoom weekly, and then fortnightly, on over 30 occasions, we delivered a fantastically well-received ‘Gimborn’ seminar series via Webinar and a truly memorable Writer’s Weekend. Our members delivered evening talks, shared knowledge, honed their writing skills, learnt from each other. We have individually published books, blogs, articles, stories. We have had no less than fifteen major articles published in *Police World* alone. It is a thrill to see such success, a joy and a real privilege to be the chair of such an energetic and lovely bunch of dynamic people. Your friendship is priceless.

But did we achieve our aims this year? Were we true to our purpose? We founded on three tenets; to encourage, develop and support each other’s writing ambitions; to provide a marketplace for our member’s work; to leave behind a canon of writing as a legacy for our families and future generations. I feel we have been hugely successful in the first of these and to an extent (*de facto*) in the third. I feel we need to do much more in the second area: the marketplace, and I feel we should focus on this in the coming year whilst continuing to develop in the other fields. I have long held the desire that we should properly constitute ‘The Bookshop’ and this will be a prime aim for 2021. With everyone’s help we should be able to achieve this – a website, a library, a platform, however it materializes, but some way through which we can maximise the marketing and sales of our member’s publications. If anyone can lend their skills to this project please do let me know, I could do with some help on this one as it has proved trickier than I had first imagined!

The new year is ahead of us: exciting plans, new members, new works from existing members, Gimborn hopefully in April, but a seminar in any event, more evening events, more Writers’ Weekends, 12 more magazines, a hard copy anthology of the ‘best of’ our work is planned, regular Zoom meetings with a range of topics, and some innovations: Fizz and Bill are working on an exciting mime project for youth groups to roll out in the spring. And who knows how much more? The world is our oyster and pearls will surely grow.

In the meantime, from Sean, Neil and myself, we wish you a quiet, safe and peaceful Christmas and an even safer New Year. ***Love David xx***

***In this packed bumper 60-page festive edition:***

* ‘Virgin Snow’ *by Helena Hutt*
* ‘A Covid Christmas’ *by Mike Masson*
* ‘Christmas Haikus’ *by Janet Fizz Curtis*
* ‘Festive Seasons’ *by D. Osbourne Hughes*
* ‘The Writer’s Weekend’ *by Will Henry P.*
* ‘New Year’s Resolution***’*** *by Andy Gregory*
* ‘Our Sebastian’ *by Will Henry P.*
* ‘Twas the Night Before Christmas’ *by Andy Gregory*
* ‘Once Upon A Time’ *by Geoff Jackson*
* ‘The Dove’ *by D. Osbourne Hughes*
* ‘A Year with a Difference’ *by Ann Cumberland*
* ‘When Sean got Stuck up the Chimney’ *by Rudolf*
* ‘A Cape Town Christmas’ *by D.B. Lewis*
* ‘Helping Hands’ *by Geoff Jackson*
* ‘Stan Saves the Santa Special’ *by D.B. Lewis*
* ‘Christmas Sprouting’  *by Udo Lauterborn*
* ‘Christmas Hoarder ’ *by D. Osbourne Hughes*
* ‘My Best Christmas Gift’ *by Steve Cherne & Rebecca Ellenson*
* ‘Bertha, the Swiss Trader’s Daughter’ *by Eleni Cotton*
* ‘The Way to the Stable’ *by Eleni Cotton*
* ‘The Ghost Rider’ *by Tony Granger*
* ‘Christmas Songs and Number Ones’ *by Andy Gregory*
* Christmas Humour  *by ‘Willie’*
* ‘The Last Stocking’ *by Helena Hutt*
* ‘Santa. A True Christmas Story’  *by J.A. Kay*
* ‘Tales with Tony’ *by Andy Gregory*
* ‘The Amazing Writers’ Weekend’ *by The Editor*
* ‘The Hunter’ *by Ian McNeish*
* ‘The Miracle at Christmas’ *by Will Henry P.*

***Our regular features will return in 2021***

**Virgin Snow**

***by Helena Hutt***

The feathery crystals of its snow-white flakes

falls in untainted purity upon the very earth

of the first Christmas, long past.

The same pure white of virtue cast

from an ethereal birth

that bore witness to its destinate.

**A Covid Christmas**

***by Mike Masson***

The year to date’s been full of woe

No kissing under the mistletoe

Forget the usual Christmas cheer

It’s wear your mask and watch your Tier

Rather than a present from Santa’s grotto

A Covid jab would feel like winning the Lotto

Before the turkey and mince pies

Make sure your hands are sanitised

But what’s the point in feeling bitter

Deck out the halls and spread the glitter

Before the New Year has arrived

Give thanks to God we have survived

***Merry Christmas all! Mike.***

**Christmas Haikus**

***by Janet Fizz Curtis***

Veil of stars.  Sleigh bells.  
Crunch of boots on snowy roof  
Children sleep deeply.

Reindeer fly, snow falls,  
Red suit down the chimney pot  
Gingerbread and milk.

Star night, velvet sky.

Santa with his reindeers bright,  
Wishes will come true

Rudolph. Jingle bells,  
Crunch of boots on snowy roof,  
Carrots by the fire.

Veil of stars.  Sleigh bells  
Crunch of boots on snowy roof,  
Children sleep deeply

Flakes of snow. Sleigh rides.

Red Velvet cloak (end of day),  
He is on his way.

**Festive Seasons**

***by D. Osbourne Hughes***

So we think we are ready for Christmas

All the presents bought

The turkeys in the oven

With a bit of belly pork

The children are all excited,

A tree stands grand in the hall.

Presents beneath its branches,

With lots of cards strung on the wall

Christmas with the family!

Dad’s fast asleep in his chair.

He’s had a hard day, just like Santa,

And he rests without a care.

The day is passed and over,

And now it’s Auld Lang Syne.

We sing it with each other,

Another year’s lost to time.

Easter will soon be upon us,

With scrummy chocolate eggs.

But for all our festive seasons,

Do we think of the man that begs?

Their forgotten children,

Stand in need as all.

With hands cupped towards us

But our ears can’t hear their call.

Did Jesus really show the way?

And do I really care?

Or am I content on Christmas day,

Just to fall asleep in my chair?

**The Writers Weekend**

***by Will Henry P (Bill Petherick)***

The writers’ weekend commenced with a welcome from our Sean

As he introduced the speakers and participants one by one,

David the chairman along with our Fizz

Started off by telling us how research could end in bliss.

They told us of their enjoyment as they dug deep for a clue

That would make their books interesting for me and for you.

David found he came from a family who boasted a millionaire,

but also those who died in mines for their future to secure.

Janet found Irene a woman of enterprise

From mime to the spoken word her prowess was inspired

A lady of yesteryear who loved the spoken word

and to meeting those who knew her and the stories of her work.

It was obvious that both of them enjoyed their research

In finding all the background for their written word

Irene Mayer or Holcroft and the corrugated tin

Their books now swell with stories so let the books begin.

Then it was our David or Doz to you and I

He told us of his fight that made the others cry.

Dyslexia was the subject and what an inspiring chat

We sat transfixed and listened as Doz made a great impact.

He did not see dyslexia as a disease or a damn

but more of a challenge to his life from child to man

He dispelled the myths, told us the facts

That it opened up some doors that has allowed for great impact.

Be it as a Black Op sniper or a painter sat at home

He told us of the challenges; how he feels blessed he’s not alone

I am sure that we will all agree this as his story did unfold

That here we had a man who tuned dyslexia into gold.

Then we had our Big Bill and he took us on a different slant

As cartoons and caricatures illustrations was HIS rant

Showing us that even the written word could be enhanced

By using two simple things a pencil and his hand.

A photo, sketch or cartoon could make your little story

Go from being really good to something of great glory

The other thing he reminded us was a thing that we all have

And that is Imagination, the best tool in the land.

Then there followed Ian…McNeish is his name and

He added to a wonderful day by telling us of his fame

He told us of his exploits from Mount Blanc to the police and

How a wayward collie nearly chewed his veg and meat

A wonderful presentation highlighting to how to add.

The props that take a story from being simple to slightly mad.

Finally, at the end of the day the professor came on board

Relating his short stories of which we all applaud.

He related of the times when tea leaves were all the rage

Especially if mixed with anther leaf and then how it made wage

The anger of a wife scorned finally caused it to then fail

As her hubbies flaunt with cannabis ended up with him in jail.

So, Sunday opened well with Helena introducing

A topic that causes us hell and offered us solutions

Concern of what to do you if memory decides to flail

And although your brain is working it is just the cogs that fail.

The gear has slipped and not connecting which mean the writer fretting.

But her simple rules of what to do was a welcome introduction

Step aside and take a breath and start once again

The writer’s block will erode and give your writing, meaning.

Ann was last but not the least as she told us of her story

Telling us how poetry is her way to write in glory

She told us of the pitfalls and of course the pleasure

Of writing words in poetic form that brings us so much treasure.

She amplified and signified the things we should consider

And added a few of her chosen words for us all to treasure

So there you are, the weekend has concluded

The speakers and participants have enjoyed the whole illusion.

Will there be another one? I do sincerely hope so

As two or three of these a year will be enjoyed with a ho ho ho.

So, thank you Sean and David for giving us the chance

To enjoy a lovely weekend and make our writing skills advance.

To all the members of the group I am now looking forwards,

to your next book be it poetry, fiction or even short stories

I am sure it will be worth the look, be it about the Holcrofts or Irene Mawer

A mystery or just some words which allows you to tell a story I thank you all…Now… I wonder what is my next story?

**Irene Mawer**



**Sir Charles Holcroft**

**A picture containing text, person, standing, suit

Description automatically generated**

**New Year’s Resolution 2021**

***by Andy Gregory***

Time stood still for me today,   
The world went by. Work and play.

The bills are in, they’re up again,

I could cry, but I must refrain,  
The past few months and what they meant,   
Mortgage bills, paying the rent,   
My future life, what will it be   
Perhaps like this for eternity?   
What will I change or keep the same,   
What’s gone wrong, who shall I blame?   
  
Family and friends, is my world right,   
Could I change it? I will tonight!   
So there I have it, the first small thing,   
That leap of faith, could be everything,   
I’ve ever wanted or needed so,   
Time to change, time to grow,   
Where do I start, what shall I ‘bin’?   
Perhaps I’ll leave it and just stay in

The same old rut, forever moan,   
About my lot, groan, groan, groan,   
The internet, no, that’s not for me,   
Barbeque, beer and even TV,   
Are my vices, I’d never show,   
My face on the net, or stoop so low?   
You must be kidding, it’ll never work   
I couldn’t do it, I’d feel a berk.   
  
It’s for desperate people, lonely, sad,   
That’s not me, do you think I’m mad?   
Browse a paper, anything, read a book,   
Oh go on then, I’ll sneak a look,   
That was easy, that first bit,   
Another page, mmmn, perhaps I’ll wait a bit,   
Before logging out, or closing down,   
She looks smart, nice ball-gown!

A party frock, goodness me,   
A real wild child, with no TV,   
Walking, talking, disco lights,   
Painting, singing, romantic nights,   
Another one, she’s lovely too,   
All these things that they can do,   
A whole new world, friends galore,   
Another page, and more, and more,   
  
Inbox full, it never ends,   
So how do I cope with all these friends?   
Just one message is all it needs,   
To get one thinking and plant those seeds,   
My life now is on a different path,   
Perhaps I’ll soak in the bath,   
It’s overflowed, the water’s deep,   
What as that? Another beep?

Another message, she’s nice too?   
What a mess, what shall I do?   
Can’t offend her, must reply,   
Don’t be nasty, please don’t cry,   
If I don’t respond straight away,   
I’ll try soon, tomorrow’s another day,   
I hoped you liked it, my little tome,   
As I welcomed you into my precious home,   
  
Please forgive me, but this line is lame,   
But my life will never be the same,   
With all these messages, I know I must try,   
To find the time for a nice reply,   
Another late night, three hours sleep,   
Still, my old life – you can keep,   
No more will I be ‘Billy-No-Mates’   
And I’m even hoping for a few nice dates!

*(First written in 2004 under different circumstances but just as appropriate for today. Ed.)*

**Our Sebastian**

***by Will Henry P***

Hurrying, scurrying, running here and there

My friend Sebastian looked up at the stair.

How do I get up, he looked forlorn and puzzled?

I know how to do it and in the clothes basket he nuzzled.

No sooner had he done this when Dad grabbed a hold

And up the stairs he took it with Sebastian out cold.

Once at the top he threw it down, with a thud

My friend thought this is the end - no don’t be absurd.

So out he got and to Lucy’s room he scampered

Full of clothes on the floor as the wardrobe was hampered

Christmas decorations scattered around everywhere,

Then he saw the signs to the wonderland fair.

Lucy’s Mum, a baker had made several treats

From Xmas cake, mince pies and shortbreads to eat

Sebastian was now in heaven as he climbed on the chair

It is only a large leap to get from here to there.

He took a gulp of perfumed air and decided to take the leap

And through the air he flew, like a bird with a squeak

He landed on the dresser and slid along the top

Grabbing a set of sparkling beads helping him to stop.

Now he was at the plate, the plate full of treasure

And soon he could tuck right in and enjoy all the pleasure

But at that point he felt a tug - Lucy had him by the tail

What are you doing up here? she said but to no avail.

Who let you out of your box and how did you get here?

And to my horror she left and headed back down the stair.

My plan had been thwarted, no Xmas pud for me

It would be back to crumbs and water and sadness not glee.

As I got closer to home my heart skipped free

My wooden palace had been moved to the Christmas tree.

Right my dear Sebastian, a treat I have for you

After all it is Christmas and to have nothing won’t do.

My little wooden home had been wrapped in Christmas paper

And outside a plastic tree and some sweets for me to savour,

Inside sitting on a golden plate were many gifts for all to see

My heart was really racing; I could not believe they were for me.

A piece of cheese, a biscuit, there was half a rich mince pie.

Some Christmas cake, some salted nuts and what else did I spy?

A little red collar adorned with a golden bell and

Words that when I read them made my chest begin to swell.

Well, I could not help myself as I read the words inscribed

To Sebastian my dearest friendliest mouse the words they made me cry.

Then I tucked in to all my treats, Lucy had even left some milk

And watched my belly grow and swell and when rubbed it felt like silk.

So, to you all this Christmas I hope like me you find

Those special gifts and words from people who are oh so kind,

With your family and your friends, be kind to all the others,

Who says so? Me, Sebastian the Mouse, Lucy’s adopted wee brother.

**‘Twas the Night Before Christmas**

***by Andy Gregory***

‘Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house,

Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse,

Merry Christmas to you, in a town or a City,

I hope you are prepared for this IPA ditty,

Forget Prancer and Dancer, this IPA Santa,

Hopes he doesn’t offend with his yuletide banter,

So before we look ahead, it’s good to look back,

At the fun, entertainment and IPA Craic,

There’s our Chair named David, and his rugged good looks,

A talented man, who’s written some books,

He’s always so focussed, headphones on his head,

You can always find him, in his *Plotting Shed*,

“What’s he doing?” we ask; he’s up to his knees,

In books and poems, and his Bonsai trees,

He’s our *Dumbledore* Wizard, a real clever man,

He visits the schools, with a panda called *Stan*,

He’s now fast asleep, he’s put up his lights,

And taking a rest, from editing W*rites*,

Vice-President Hannigan, I’m standing to attention,

I’ve submitted a poem, so don’t give me detention,

I’m trying to locate him, better check *Google Maps*,

Sean’s somewhere near Frankfurt, drinking his Schnapps,

Maybe he isn’t, ‘cos he’s a clean-living chap,

A teetotal vegetarian, let’s give him a clap,

He’s saving the planet, day after day,

No meat or fish supper, passes his way

He sorts out our *Zoom* calls, foot on the pedal,

He keeps us in check, let’s give him a medal,

Our *Gimborn Champion’s* writing is more than fine,

His policing plot is describing *Department K9,*

And what about Neil, he edits *Police World*,

And a Traffic magazine, about *Roads* straight or curled,

He’s our Sheriff of Nottingham, he writes more and more,

About vehicles and Barbara, *Policewoman Number Four*,

He’s the studious type, and a literary lover,

We admired his picture on *Police World* front cover,

Talking of pictures, what about our dearest pal Bill,

He’s a talented man, who sketches at will,

A former IPA leader, whose cartoons are so good,

In just a few minutes, he’d sketched President Clive Wood,

He shows us great drawings, whenever we’re on *Zoom*,

And we’d really love to visit his upstairs games room,

We shouldn’t forget Janet, our dear friend Fizz,

A traveller and writer, she’s in the Blogging biz,

She’s interested in stars, and our Cosmic-girl,

Is researching mime artists, and dancers that twirl,

She’s somewhere in Europe, let’s hope reindeers above,

Can find her and hubby Andy, in their *Caravan of Love*,

After retirement, they took time out to roam,

All across Bavaria, in their big motorhome,

And what about Ann, with her poems-a-plenty,

She’s developed, nay flourished, in twenty-twenty,

In *Poetry Beginnings and Ends,* she was hugging a tree,

Is that what they do, across the Irish Sea?

She’s always prepared, she practices and rehearses,

We love to hear her, reading her verses,

Her Writers’ Weekend input, was really enthralling,

In poetry we know, she’s found her true calling,

Then there’s Helena from Devon, with her calligraphy pen,

Who Talks about Goldberg, a teacher of Zen,

She gave lots of tips, about writing each day,

“It helps us to keep the writing blocks away”

Get in the practice, “It shouldn’t be a chore”,

With Helena’s tips, we’ll write more and more,

And then there was Andy, our Brummie Peaky Blinder,

Forwarding his films with his camera winder,

He can take fast images or even a time-lapse,

And you can be sure of top-quality snaps,

Now he’s gone digital, his gear’s up to date,

Impressing us all with his photos so great,

He’s won competitions with elephants and comets,

Now he’s submitting, his poems and sonnets,

And another called David, who takes pictures as well,

His landscapes and seascapes are good enough to sell,

To his friends he says “Just call me Doz”,

His writing’s exciting, like the Wizard of Oz,

His tales of dyslexia, had us all in tears,

We’ll remember his story, for years and years,

And what about Ian, that Police boss McNeish,

Who writes so quickly, like a dog off a leash,

His autobiography and comedy-writing’s a win,

Especially the *Aliens* and his little dog *Finn*,

He’s a clever man though, using strange Gaelic words,

From strangers in kilts, in those Scots Clans and Herds,

They speak like that, to keep the English from spying,

Whatever that maybe, his books I’ll be buying,

And Tommo, Mark Thompson, you can’t see him for *Dust*,

He’s always so busy, another Money Laundering bust,

He has a great publisher, those folk at *Red Door,*

And his wonderful book, left us asking for more,

He is here and there, working all over the land,

Playing guitar in his favourite rock band,

And then there’s the Granger, he didn’t let us down,

His ‘Tales from Tony’ and his life in Cape Town,

The short stories described his time so carefree,

Of his days spent serving in the BSAP,

One of the Tales was so great, maybe even a corker,

The Witch Doctor’s spell, they called it *Rinyorker*,

He’s always so cheerful and never looks glum,

He’s a Guinness Record Breaker, in the World’s largest scrum,

And Peter has had the job we all wanted,

The Boss on the telly, Channel Four’s *Hunted*,

He’s a talented writer, he has lots of fun,

Writing his books, chasing those *On The Run*,

So we have poets and painters and photographers too,

Bloggers, cartoonists and writers anew,

A talented bunch, this IPA Writers SIG,

It started off small, now it’s getting quite big,

Little acorns were planted, along with some seeds,

And what has developed? Some amazingly good reads,

What gift can Santa leave you, as you sleep in your beds,

You’re all looking peaceful, as you knock out your Zeds (Zzzzzzzz),

When you wake, you’ll be wondering “What’s in the box?”,

Could be a kitten, or a puppy, or even a fox,

Or maybe some drinks, a big bottle of wine,

Or stuff for the garden, a huge roll of twine,

A skateboard, or scooter, something to ride,

Maybe it’s just a box, for the cats to hide inside,

An iPad, or dictionary, or a notepad and pen,

Let us meet up next year and do it all again,

Whatever it is, you mustn’t take a peek,

But be sure to wait until the end of Christmas week,

If it’s opened before the morning of Christmas Day,

Then Santa may come and take it away,

So please be patient, it’ll soon be here,

As we wish you all good health and good cheer,

It’s been a difficult start, to this promising new decade,

Let us be thankful for family, and new friends we have made,

And if you haven’t been mentioned, I hope you’re not too upset,

It just means that, I haven’t got to know you just yet,

At the end of this year, it’s time for reflections,

After months of Brexit and American elections,

And too much on telly about Miley Cyrus,

And please no more of this damned awful virus,

Again “What’s in the box”, we hear you ask,

Maybe it’s just a big anti-Covid mask?

It’s been chosen for you and packed with love,

And delivered for Christmas, by reindeers above,

Whatever it is, the message is loud and clear,

As we wish you a Merry Christmas and a wonderful New Year!

*Amongst the sackful of gifted offerings, glistening like the sparkles of snowflakes on the world of literature this Christmas, the heart-warming epic rhyme of Andy’s is the Editor’s ‘Choice of the Month’. Thank you, Andy for such a lovely tribute to the Writers SIG and its members. And a very Happy Christmas to one and all!*

**Once Upon a Time there was a Pen called Paragraph**

***by Geoff Jackson***

Once upon a time there was a pen called Paragraph, who quietly called his team.

Now listen all, I’ve had the call, we’ve got to write a ream.

 Pencil, you will sketch it out, I will pen it in.

A line just here, paragraph there, a full stop, and a comma too,

When we’re ready I’ll let you know,

I think he’s writing a comedy show.

 Author picked up Pencil Pete, and began to write his story,

It started out about a witch, then a lion he called Rory.

He got so far, near on a page, and then put pencil down.

Reading through what he had written, he smiled and laid it flat,

Then said ‘Right’ to Paragraph Pen let’s get to inking that.

‘New paragraph’ said Pen…

***With sincere apologies to Geoff ...this is the correct version of the poem from Writes 13: I inadvertently left off the last verse and promised him the corrected version in this edition. (Ed.)***

**The Dove**

***by D. Osbourne Hughes***

As the night falls towards you

I am once more at your side

Your tears, I implore you,

Let them, please, subside:

I once again, hear you,

And push with all my might

Desperate to reach you,

Your face, just out of sight

Fuel that wants to drown you,

Pools in the wreckage of your love.

Fools that cannot hear

The silent tears of the dove.

**A Year with a Difference.**

***by Ann Cumberland***

The nights have drawn in,

its Christmas again.

The season of peace

and good will to all men.

A year filled with trials

of those there’s been plenty.

Moving forward with hope,

bid Farewell to 2020.

Enter in to the new,

making resolutions galore,

living life to the fullest

like never before.

Happy new year to all,

celebrate and have fun,

raise your glass filled with cheer,

welcome 2021.

**When Sean got Stuck up the Chimney**

***by Rudolf Rain-Deer***

When Sean got stuck up the chimney  
We all began to laugh,  
His legs dangled down  
And his head poked out,  
He looked like a giraffe.  
  
When Sean got stuck up the chimney  
his friends began to pout,  
Who will bring  
the choccie and crisps,  
If we don’t pull him out?  
  
When Sean got stuck up the chimney  
He couldn’t move or think,  
We pulled on his feet and  
Sat on his head,  
And gave him some milk to drink.

**A Cape Town Christmas**

***by D. B. Lewis***

Deep roars the thundering storm.

Angry lightning cracks like live lines flailing,

severed from their once proud poles

whilst winds, with phantom fingers wreck

our Christmas symmetry.

A rumbling, vaguely felt at crack of dawn,

grows louder, beasts abroad

echoing distant drum drowned hearts

that beat as one, consoling loss

amidst the toil and sweat of servitude.

And so it is with us, a Christmas far away

from homes divided by a thousand miles of sea

but still, a kindred soulfulness lies here within,

untouched by winter rains or summer’s sea blown sun

to be enjoined in New Year’s hopeful joy.

**Helping Hands**

***by Geoff Jackson***

The time had come thought mum, to teach the kids to cook.

So into the kitchen she did go, to get a cooking book.

So many different recipes, loads of things to make.

Mmmm, I think we’ll do an easy one, a plain Madeira cake.

I’ll want to make it tasty, so I might include some jam.

I have ingredients stored away as clever as I am.

I’ll get them out, the ones that I need,

And then start preparing for our feed.

So now I’ll call the children in and get them off the telly.

I need to teach them how to cook and how to feed their belly.

In run the kids and look in awe,

They’ve never baked a cake before.

Aprons on and sleeves rolled up, hot tea steaming in mum’s blue cup.

All the bowls and pans are out, ready just for mixing up.

Ingredients are sitting steady; Mum’s got all the favourite brands.

All that’s left before we start is for the kids to wash their hands.

Mum and both her **“Helping Hands”** went on and baked their cake.

And all through cooking, the kids kept asking how long the bake would take.

Later on, when dad got home, the cake was nice and cooling.

So mum sliced it up and shared it out…there wasn’t any fooling!

**Stan Saves the Santa Special***!*

*A children’s Christmas story*

***by D.B. Lewis***

**M**r Burntwhistle loved Christmas. For eleven months of the year, he worked in his hardware shop in Victoria Road selling brushes, nails and just about anything you could possibly think of from light bulbs to sugared mice. Mr Burntwhistle was a quiet sort of gentleman who usually said very little.

But Mr Burntwhistle lived for one thing and one thing only. He lived for the last month of the year, the twelfth month, the month of December. And you might be wondering why?

It was because in December every year, as soon as the shop closed on Friday afternoon, Mr Burntwhistle’s life exploded into full and brilliant colour. It was like seeing a rainbow in the sky just after the rain stops. All this was because on that day, Mr Burntwhistle, smelling strongly of paraffin and cleaning fluid from his shop, put on a shiny black suit with a dark red waistcoat. He put on a black cap with a shiny peak which had a bright brass badge, he picked up two sparklingly clean flags from his shop counter, one red and one green, and he fixed a shiny silver whistle on a sparkly silver chain to his waistcoat and off he proudly went, his head held high and a smile on his glowing face. And where was he going? To the local miniature railway, where every weekend he became the guard on the ‘Santa Special’ train from Peasholm Park to Scalby Mills station. *And* back again.

Mr Burntwhistle loved his job as a train guard on the Santa Special, hearing the chugity chug, chugity chug of the train on the rails, the smell of the steam and most of all helping all the young children and their parents and guardians travel safely to see Santa Claus in his grotto near the Open-Air Theatre.

Then one day, suddenly, disaster struck! On Christmas eve it started to snow in Scarborough. Snow fell slowly at first and then fell more and more heavily until everything was covered in a white twinkling blanket that softened every sound to a whisper. The snow fell so much that it settled on the ground, it settled on the road, it settled on the theatre and worst of all, it settled on the railway track. The snow was so thick, and it fell so quickly that the ‘Santa Special’ became stuck in the tunnel just by the water chute which had frozen solid.

The children on the train began to feel the cold and started crying, their parents wrapped them up to keep warm and they all looked at Mr Burntwhistle. ‘He is the man in charge.’ ‘It’s his fault the train isn’t going to see Santa’ people shouted. Everyone stared at Mr Burntwhistle. They were very unhappy. Mr Burntwhistle tried to calm them down. He waved his flags, he blew his whistle, he let the children wear his cap, he even handed out his tin full of mints for as long as they lasted. But it was no good. The parents were still unhappy, the children were still crying. And Santa was sitting patiently in his grotto with lots of lovely presents waiting to be opened in his big brown sacks. But the train stayed stuck in the tunnel blocked at both ends by walls of snow.

Suddenly, Mr Burntwhistle had an idea. He had heard of a local superhero called Stan. Stan was an old blue and white retired police car, a Morris Minor, driven by a retired police officer called Jo. Stan had magical powers and it was said he could solve any problem in the whole wide world. Mr Burntwhistle rang for Stan on his mobile phone. ‘The railway line is blocked by all the snow, the train is stuck in the tunnel, it’s the Santa Special, help, please help’, pleaded Mr Burntwhistle. And no sooner had Mr Burntwhistle asked for help then Stan arrived, bright and cheerful at Peasholm Park station.

Using his mobile phone from inside the train, Mr Burntwhistle told Stan where they were all stuck in the tunnel. ‘Leave it to Stan’ said Jo, ‘He will have you out of that tunnel before you can say “snowflakes”’.

Stan flew into action. Using his magical snow clearing super-hot turbo air blaster fitted to the front bumper, Stan drove along the railway lines blasting the snow away with a jet of hot supercharged air which blew all the snow to the side of the track. In just five minutes Stan had cleared all the snow from both sides of the tunnel. The way to Santa’s grotto was clear. The train started off with a flurry of steam and a loud ‘toot toot’ and everyone cheered, ‘Hooray!’ They cheered Stan, they cheered Jo, they cheered Mr Burntwhistle most of all as he waved his flags and blew on his whistle. He even let the children wear his cap with the bright brass badge.

As the train pulled into Scalby Mills station, all the elves all ran out and cheered the train, they cheered Mr Burntwhistle, and they cheered like mad at Stan driving in front of the train to make sure no more snow would hold up the Santa Special.

It was just another successful mission for Stan the Superhero. Mr Burntwhistle was so pleased with Stan he gave him a small round shiny medal on a ribbon; the ‘North Bay Star’, only given for the most daring and brave feats on the railway. Stan deserved the medal for saving the Santa Special don’t you think? I think so too. Good old Stan, the superhero who saved the Santa Special.

Happy Christmas everyone.

***This is a children’s story being featured in the ‘Coastival’ Christmas Festival in Scarborough this year and being read by local actors. Stan is a local Superhero who appeared in the last ‘Police World’ magazine.***

**A Christmas Gift**

***by Sean Hannigan***

What a problem, what a problem! I had worked hard for it. I could not count the number of night shifts, days going into nights and returning to days again and still at work. Sorting out the unending problems created and in most cases by folk themselves.

My last few weeks at work flew and I wanted to slow each day up, to savour each moment because I knew I would not be returning. I knew the day and hour I would leave “The Job” and hesitated…was I doing the right thing. I loved and lived for the Police but a commute between Leicestershire and Frankfurt was beginning to tell me, time to retire.

On the 1st of December I hung up my Custodian helmet which had somehow morphed into a reinforced baseball cap with Police on it. No chance of hiding fish and chips under that bad boy. Not long after my bank received a nice injection of funds after of course the tax man had dipped into it.

Family are the most important sustaining factor in my life. So, with joy I could finally deliver a good piece of Christmas cheer to my brothers and Sister and their kids. I am now going to give a simple bit of advice. Never do your online banking at 4am just because you can, or just because you cannot sleep, or just because you have a daft idea that you will wake up and some dirty beast of a con man has shifted it into their account.

I have an older brother, a twin brother, and a younger sister, well youngish anyway. I had not discussed with my siblings any cash injections and they were in for a nice surprise or a bit of a shock. Fresh piping hot chocolate and I am all set. They do not know what is coming, and to be

fair, nor do I. Banking app opened and transfer amount set for each family unit £2500 each sibling and £1250 for each of their children.

Matty transfer complete for him and £1250 for my niece Shauna James transfer complete and £1250 each of my two nieces and nephew sent to James’s account. He was always in need and struggled financially as he was a musician who relied on performances for income. COVID had put a stop to that so I was so glad to help him and his family out. It gave me joy to do it.

Jenny and her husband were very comfortably off so £1250 for another two nieces only. In her early days Jenny struggled financially and I had always been glad to help out, as I had more than sufficient for my needs. Occasionally I would get a quick message that rent was due or a bank loan was needing paying. I really did not mind because Jenny always told me she would give me a slice of her lottery win!

Confirmation received when I checked my Banking App and then I am off to bed. About 5 hours later my phone is pinging away. It is Jen.

Message after message.

‘Guess what, I have just discovered I have a rich relative from one of those stupid e mails I keep getting. Well, he has just deposited a squillion quid into my account. Wow’

I thought to myself that sounds like a glass or two from last night coming in to play. What is she on about?

The messages continued with the last one saying “I cannot thank you enough. We just had a massive bill come in and not a *scubby do* how we were going to pay it. I should say that Jen does live her life right up the wire. I was never expecting £2500 to land into my account”

I suddenly thought, nor was I Kid. You know the kind of feeling you get when you have sent a critical e mail about someone having been asked by a supervisor to make comment and you copy the individual in. That pit of the stomach moment.

Still with sleep in my eyes, probably the same sleep from making all of those early transfers, I logged back into my phone banking app. No, No, No. Can I have been that stupid. Yes, Yes, Yes was the resounding answer.

In my app James who is in there as Jimmy and Jenny are side by side having been recipients of birthday money and what I call Phoenix money just to help. Well just as I thought things cannot get any worse, I checked my e mail for James because I always send an e mail confirmation, so the Canadian tax man knows the money is a gift.

Jenny and Jimmy had a recent falling out over a Facebook post so were not really communicating well. I looked at the e mail and that pit of the stomach feeling came back with a vengeance. I had a lovely clear screen shot of the transaction Sent to Jenny £2500 at 4.13 a.m.

When the whole room stopped spinning, I looked out the window and thought. (I think I will keep the thought words and actions to myself for now!!!)

With clear head clear eyes and clear sense of purpose I sent Jimmy £2500 and just as I pressed the complete transaction button, Jenny telephoned. She was nearly in tears. *She was nearly in tears, She was nearly in tears!!*

Well, I just burst out into hysterical laughter. She wondered what the heck I was laughing at, so I told her the whole story and she then went

into hysterical laughter too thinking about poor Jimmy receiving a confirmation note showing money going into her account and not his.

Jenny offered the cash back and I said I was going to send a few quid to you today so please keep it. It is a gift!!! I spoke to Jimmy nearly 7 hours later and explained all that had happened. I am very pleased to say both are now chatting away, chuckling away and spending wisely The Christmas Gift.



**Christmas Sprouting to be a Good One**

***by Udo Lauterborn***

It was a grey and rainy day. Cold. Misty. Damp. Unpleasant. Not even a cat would go out into this weather. Cats stay at their favourite place anyway. That little four pawed furry girl is lying on her armchair until he comes back home, he knows very well. Sure, she is. Don‘t even think that that little cat will give up this place when you come home. Not a notion.

His steps are short to avoid the rain. His trouser legs soaked right through, not to mention his squelching shoes. As for the sieve for a brain? How could he forget the main ingredient for the Christmas dinner? That‘s why he went to the supermarket last night, to get all the stuff for a good Christmas dinner in advance. He wanted to be well prepared. At last, he just wanted to relax on the festive day. Slow cooking. And slow cooking in the meaning of having no stress, no time pressure. A happy tantalising kitchen. Yep, that´s all he wanted.

Forgotten? Not in the shopping bag nor in the fridge, nowhere. Left at the counter? Forgotten to ask for them? Not handed over? Oh, for God‘s sake. Why does this happen to him? It really must be him. Feeling totally miserable, he looks around the kitchen. Can he leave everything as it is?

Cooker is switched off, leave the light on. But close the kitchen door or the cat will inspect everything. Her only reason to get up from the best seat in the house.

So, here he is, on his way to the supermarket once again. A miserable day and in a miserable mood. It can‘t get worse. A ten-minute walk which feels like a very wet hour. The sliding doors open, he steps inside. Aaah, out of the rain. He shakes himself like a dog would do.

Two very high-pitched voices are close to him. Two ladies. They say goodbye to each other.

‘Greetings to all your family’,

‘Same to you’,

‘See ya’.

Jesus, are they in a good mood or what? His right ear catches the murmuring of talk on the right-hand side of the bakery stand. So his head turns right, to see a woman fumbling around in her wallet.

‘No. no. That‘s fine. All that change. It only fills my wallet. Let‘s stick it in this donation box. They need it anyway’.

Coins fall into the donation box with a metallic clang. Thank you, he‘s tempted to say. The barrier at the supermarket opens automatically, like it´s pushed by invisible hands, like an open invitation. Straight to the vegetables his feet lead the way. A young man, dressed in the supermarket´s own t-shirt, swings a brush to clean the floor.

‘Sorry, no more brussels sprouts?’

He is close to a heart attack, speechless, breathless. He‘s not able to bring out a full sentence.

‘I had to rearrange the display’, the brush answers. ‘There was only a few of the sprouts left. You might be lucky. Have a look at the other end of the shelves’.

Faster than the rain had fallen, he jumped, ran, flew past, passing by all the other lovely, delectable produce. One single net bag with brussels sprouts, lonely, unwanted, waiting to be picked up. Yippee. Hooray. What a lucky moment. Christmas dinner and Christmas itself is saved in this very moment. Yes. Yes. Yes. A Christmas dinner with no brussels sprouts? Don‘t even try to think about it. Super. All went well at last.

He bumps into a man, a bit taller than himself, wet coat like himself.

‘I think, you love them too’. The wet coat speaks.

Did he see him? Did he notice the way he grabbed the loving sprouts in a rush? He feels the flush of embarrassment in his face. But the friendly voice kindly transfers a bit of reassurance.

‘Well, I absolutely love brussels sprouts and I can‘t imagine a festive dinner without them’ the wet coat confirms. A summit of sprout lovers. Somebody who thinks like him. Positive waves.

‘Yes, I love them too. Do you crosscut the stem before cooking?’

‘Absolutely, you have to. Cooking the Christmas dinner under no time pressure at all. Plenty of time for these little extras like the crosscut’.

‘Ah, yes. And a glass of wine that goes along with it. I love to cook with wine. Sometimes I even pour some wine into the dinner”.

Loud laughs, two happy men. People turn around. Laughing is contagious.

The sprouts in his left hand, swinging, he feels a pep in his step. A little boy is just overtaking him, running, passing him by, turning into the next aisle on the right.

‘Chocolates’ the boy screams. His mother, a bit breathless, arrives on the scene. For a moment he stops, watching them. The boy is very

excited about that big choice of chocolate sweets. ‘Ah, ya, I love them too’ pops into his mind, ‘I love them too’.

Supermarkets sometimes are designed as a labyrinth. You have to pass by every single section. Food and non-food, frozen or canned, plastic containers or glass bottles, but he doesn‘t mind. He is in a good mood. Another peep at the vast range of wines and beers. What a wonderful selection. Mouth-watering. The next hurdle is the shelves with papers and magazines. Happy faces on the telly programmes, travel magazines displaying sunshine, baking magazines with lovely cakes on the front page. Life is good. The music from the supermarket‘s sound system stops playing. He didn‘t notice the music at all. A powerful voice on the microphone says,

‘Wishing all our customers a happy Christmas’.

‘Thank you very much’, he is tempted to say out loud. The music is back. Does he really listen to this song ‘Love is in the air, everywhere I look around, love is in the air, every sight and every sound’? He doesn‘t mind standing in the queue at the cash point. Time to listen to this uplifting song. Looking around, people are happy, smiles on their faces.

‘Would you like to go ahead, love? You´ve only that one little bag ‘ a woman in front of him asks.

‘Oh yes, thank you very much. You‘re very kind’.

End of the spoken conversation but the body language and especially the eyes, they continue exchanging positive information.

‘Hello Sir’ is the cheerful greeting at the cash point.

He does a good job, this cashier. How long has he been on duty he wonders? Still friendly, still pushing goods across the scanner, a beep every second. Not an easy job.

‘Have a good day and a very good Christmas, sir’.

He steps outside the supermarket and the sun is beaming straight into his face. Wonderful. The rain is gone, the bad mood is gone, he feels very happy now. Life is good. And he is at home in a few minutes. The cat is waiting for him impatiently on the doormat.

‘Hello’, a cheerful greeting fills the hall.

‘I‘m home. Work went well. We could go home earlier’.

Happy news spread by a happy wife. Fantastic. Christmas is here.

**A Christmas Hoarder**

***by D. Osbourne Hughes***

Janet, the head of the resident’s association, had visited the housing office, something that had not happened for as far back as anyone could remember. Ellie, the head of the housing office was concerned. Louise, the housing officer, for St Lawrence Road, had dealt with Smella before, so Louise called the office and I was summonsed. Apparently, the last time a housing officer had visited Smella’s flat, they had been forced to hire a skip to empty her flat amidst floods of tears. I learned later ‘Housing’ had been forced to hire skips on much more than one occasion. Everyone agreed it was becoming a public health hazard again and apparently, a rat had been seen leaving through the broken rear door. I had listened as long as I could before interrupting. I knew most of the older residents on the estate, having worked there as a young bobby, but could not picture who they were talking about.

‘Who’s Smella?’ I asked,

‘Smella!’ Her name was launched back at me in unison, as if, somehow, I was being deliberately dense or even obstructive. All eyes were very much fixed on me as Liz Hurley entered the office. No not Liz Hurley the actress and model, although, my Liz Hurley, had been a Bunny Girl before she joined the job. I had seen photos and Liz Hurley, eat your heart out, but that is a whole other story.

‘Have you told him yet?’ Liz asked the waiting office.

Smella had been recorded as missing, officially, and I was the one nominated to see if she was home, dead or alive. No one had seen her at her flat for some time. The rear door into the back room, apparently the only room she used, was insecure. PC Hurley had shouted in with no reply, but she was the one who had seen the rat leaving and besides

which, there was a mountain of stuff blocking any further exploration. Then I tripped over the paradigm in my head, a light seemed to go on and the idea gathered in my mind, that Smella was a hoarder.

So, like John Waye, I led a small posse of Police officers, Housing officers and a maintenance man, to Smella’s ground floor maisonette, which was only a hundred yards from the Housing Office. Ellie had obviously phoned Janet, because she was waiting for us. But she was not her usual reproachful self and seemed genuinely concerned, but as I approached Smella’s front door, she gave me a warning.

‘Don’t you disturb any of Stella’s stuff now; you hear me, Sergeant Hughes?’

And with that, she huffed, turned around and went back to her office. Everyone on the estate called me Sergeant Doz; the girls that stood out at night and even the kids at the school, but Janet would not lower herself to be familiar with me.

It was a glorious summers’ day, but I could sense the day was not going to be so glorious for me, as I caught a loathsome aroma sidling out of the letterbox. With no reply at the front, Liz Hurley and I made our way to the back and the broken window of the veranda door. Getting on my hands and knees, I was able to crawl through the broken window, but found myself barely able to move on the other side. I was used to mountaineering, but the mountain of trinkets piled up in front of me climbed up to the ceiling. It looked like Stella had emptied several skips of her own, full of charity shop waste into her living room and I could not see a way around it and certainly could not go through it. It all seemed

like rubbish to me; useless bric-a-brac, but as I looked closer, I could see numerous Christmas decorations interspersed amongst the rubbish.

It was impossible to tell if Stella’s body was in there, so I exited as I had entered and as doing so, I called up crew I knew were in the area and then joined the others at the front, with a set of ladders on route.

With a sturdy set of ladders under me, I peered into the first floor bedroom window and imagined a route into Stella’s cluttered home. Doing a forward roll through a window, I had managed to prise open, I heard the debris of a thousand charity shops crunching and breaking beneath me.

The bedroom was not as cluttered as the living room, but if I could have stood up on the floor, the jumble of trinkets would have come to my waist. Half wading, half crawling, I managed to stand and make my way to the bedroom door where the junk seemed to peter out slightly, but once out on the landing the situation became pretty dyer. I could barely see into the bathroom. Scrambling up a pile of rubbish, I gained a vantage point where I could see her toilet peering out from the flotsam, like a lake with mountains rising on every side.

From the summit, I peered down into the valley on the other side, which should have been the stairs, but I could not see a single step. The stairs like the toilet were blocked. There was nothing else I could do other than crawl, but half way down the flotsam gave way and I tumbled into the box canyon that seemingly had no way out other than to climb back up.

From where I lay on top of the rubbish, I could see various Christmas decorations, including a Santa Hat. Peering through a narrow gap between the ceiling in the hall and the top of the rubbish, I could not

squeeze into the hallway. I began to burrow and eventually managed to get my head down into the hallway. I could see enough of the kitchen to know it was as full as the rest of the house. The kitchen light was on and dangling about two inches from the top of the mound of debris gathered there, like a sunrise over a mountain peak. I looked towards where I knew the living room should be. I could see the thin pane of glass above the door but the door itself was buried.

It felt strange, perched on top of a mountain of fragile bric-a-brac, my back pushed firmly against the ceiling. Like a potholer searching for the next annex in the rock that led to the main cave; a cave that I knew was the only place that could contain Stella’s last remains.

Pushing an arm full of trinkets towards the top of the kitchen door, I managed to make a gap large enough to fit my head into the back room, but the rubbish in front of me prevented my seeing where she lay. Pushing with my legs and pulling with my arms like a turtle desperate to reach the sea, I kept my gaze towards the room, which was just out of sight.

My body armour had become caught on the lintel of the door and I began to thrash about, so much so that I failed to see Stella’s potty perched on a small shelf above my left shoulder. Getting slightly out of breath with all my exertions, I took in a large gasp of air and managed to wriggle free, but so did the potty. Suddenly a cold wet sensation was seeping into the back of my head and inside, both the front and back of my body armour. It was then the smell overwhelmed me along with the taste in my mouth. The large clumps of Stella’s bits and pieces were all over me and I spat no small serving from my mouth. It took some time to compose myself and as my nose became accustomed to the sweetly fragranced aroma of Stella’s chanty, I knew, Smella had come home to roost. In the turmoil,

all my exertions had paid off, except for me, the room was clear. Stella was not at home.

I have said it many times before, but as a police officer death, in all its forms, seems to be waiting around every corner; ripe smells, maggots and seepage are just part of what police officer has to deal with. So, it puzzled me slightly, as I exited Stella’s, that only one of the six-strong posse waiting outside did not throw up. I had to turn myself away for a few moments to compose myself further, because the sight of everyone throwing up was making me feel a little queasy.

A few months later, just before Christmas, I attended the Church House, where a Christmas meal and party was in full swing. I could hear the laughter and frivolities from no short distance away. On my arrival, I was ushered into a back room where I was quickly clad in a red suit, handed a sack of presents and when the patrons had sung ‘Rudolf the Red Nose Reindeer’, loud enough, I was ushered into the room and led to a chair as though I was newly blind. Reaching into the sack, I pulled out the first present, and in my best Father Christmas voice, I called out to all the OAP’s from the estate,

‘Is there a young Lady here by the name of Stella?’

I do not know what I was expecting in that moment, but it was obvious from various responses, that most people in the room had heard of my foray into the depths of Stella’s flat and as she got to her feet, someone called out.

‘Stella’s been a naughty girl Santa!’ To a rapturous applause of laughter.

Her eyes were fixed on me and she called back,

‘No I haven’t; Santa’s been a bad boy!’

Stella was no small girl and smelt much the same as her flat. Bounding up to me, she flopped down on my unsuspecting knee as gripping her forearm around the back of my neck. Next, it was my unsuspecting lips that were heavily abused. Still with her arm gripped firmly around the back of my neck she made a pretence of whispering in my ear and speaking in rather less than a whisper, she shouted out.

‘Janet told me what you did to all my valuables…you broke them all and housing had to throw them into the skip. You owe me, Sergeant Doz!’

As she walked back to her seat, having forgotten her present, I called after her,

‘Merry Christmas Stella!’

Walking back to the office, I imagined her placing her new gift from Santa on a pile of growing gifts in her flat.

**My Best Christmas Gift!**

***by Steve Cherne and Rebecca Ellenson***

A few years ago Rebecca and I attended a Christmas party for the children who live in an orphanage that we help support in Mazatlan, Mexico. The kids were dancing in anticipation, their faces bright, their eyes sparkling, positively beaming with excitement in anticipation of the one gift they would receive this year. Soon Santa arrived, roaring up to the front of the palapa restaurant on a gleaming black and chrome Harley-Davidson motorcycle, resplendent in his crimson suit, satin black motorcycle boots, and flowing white beard. Santa lifted a bulging pack out of the trailer he was towing, slung it on his back, and strode into the palapa, waving and distributing Ho, Ho, Ho's and Merry Christmases to everyone he encountered. The kids rushed Santa unable to contain their excitement, hugging his legs and babbling in adoration. When order was restored, Santa began calling out their names and one by one they received their gift. The smiles and delight were palpable. It was wonderful to see how our gifts had enthralled them. But now, it was time in true Mexican

fashion to conclude the party and so the gaily colored piñata with its seven points was hung. We formed a circle around the floor and the blindfolded children took turns whacking away until at last a tremendous blow split it wide open and the candy treasure poured out. A mad scramble ensued to gather up the rare sugary treats. Every child managed to capture a few pieces of candy, clutching their bounty with delight. A young boy, about 10 years old I would guess approached me. He opened his hands to show me his three pieces of candy. He held out one of those precious pieces towards me, "Feliz Navidad," he said. Tears formed in my eyes, this small boy who had so little, chose to share with me who had so much. I wanted to refuse it but it would have defiled the moment. This was a Holy moment. What a lesson he taught me, what true Holiness he showed me. Sometimes we are transformed by the Holy, sometimes we can be the Holy. The Holy exists in, around, and through us. This Christmas season let us find a way to be the Holy.



**Christmas Book Offer:**

**‘Bertha the Swiss Trader’s Daughter’**

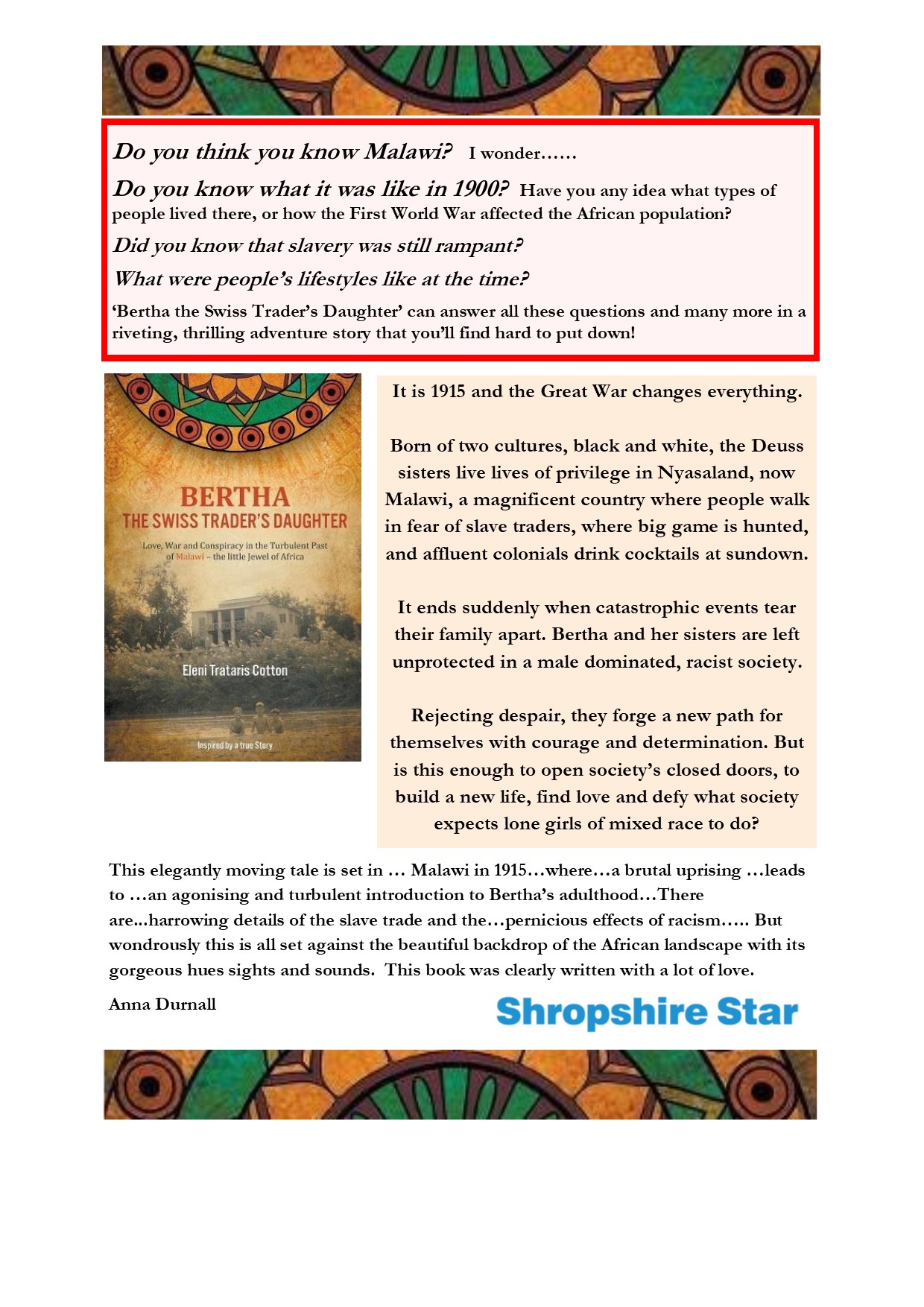
***by Eleni Trataris Cotton***

Available from Amazon and all book shops

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Should the book be wanted as a Christmas present with a dedication written in it, I have a limited supply of books for this purpose. In this case, please would you write to me at [elenicotton@outlook.com](mailto:elenicotton@outlook.com) letting me know how many books you want and what dedication you would like to be written. The price is as above and please include £2.00 towards the postage (U.K.only). Thank you and warm wishes for Christmas and the New Year to everyone.



**The Way to The Stable**

***by Eleni Cotton***

It was one of those magical nights. The sky was a deep indigo scattered with stars that winked and glittered like diamonds, the only sound the occasional plaintive bleat of a baby lamb as it nestled closer to its mother in the winter chill.

Ezra wrapped his cloak more tightly around him, settled on the coarse grass on the side of the hill and leaned back against a boulder. He called out to his fellow shepherd. “Joshua, don’t forget to wake me up at the second watch. Remember to keep an eye on the big ram!”

Joshua moaned comically. ‘I know, I know, Ezra. Go to sleep!’

Ezra grunted, adjusted his headdress so that it gave him some softness against the unyielding stone and went to sleep.

It seemed that he had only been asleep for seconds when he awoke with a start. He looked around him, rubbing his eyes and wondering what had awoken him then leapt to his feet shouting an expletive at Joshua who was crouched on his haunches looking up the sky, seemingly oblivious of Ezra’s ranting.

‘What do you think you’re doing, Josh?” he raged. “Dawn is coming, and you didn’t wake me up! What is wrong with you?’

Without turning, Joshua pointed at the sky in the east and Ezra, peering with sleep fogged eyes, saw what appeared to be the start of a magnificent dawn. As he watched, the light gathered in momentum, seemingly flowing towards them until half the sky was a golden, pulsating glow. Suddenly afraid, Ezra sidled to where Joshua squatted and knelt beside him. He couldn’t take his eyes off the light which now seemed to be forming into fluid shapes, shapes of people, people beyond number, people dressed in blazing golden robes of light and love.

There was a rustling sound and four other shepherds crept beside them, afraid, so afraid of a beauty and power they could never have even imagined.

And then the singing began, a sound that was to the boys’ ears beyond earth’s knowledge, a sound so crystal clear yet so haunting they felt their hearts reach out and become one with it.

‘A king is born, you will find him in a manger down there, under that huge bright star’ and uncountable arms lifted in unison to point to the foot of the hill far below them where only a cattle stall by the innkeeper’s house could be seen, a cattle stall now ringed with a golden glow and with a huge, bright star in the sky directly above it’.

The shepherds could now hear that their names were being sung, ‘Ezra, Joshua go, go, go, the baby king awaits you. Run David, run Saul, quickly on your little legs Daniel, hurry Jacob, run to meet your new-born king.’

And then a tinkle of caressing laughter and a triumphant surge of music ‘Glory be to God on high and peace to His people on earth. Run, run, run darling boys run! Say hello to your little king!’

Still singing, the heavenly throng waved and blew kisses to the shepherds as they drew back, back to the east. The night sky became a velvety indigo vault once again and the singing became a whisper and a sigh on the breeze. Then all was still.

The children were quiet, eyes raking the sky for signs of what they had just seen and heard. But all was quiet, even the sheep wrapped in calm. There was total euphoria. They looked at one another, first hesitantly, tentatively. Then excitement rushed out in a torrent.

‘Did you see the angels?’

‘Who says they’re angels?’

‘Only angels can float in the sky like that, you idiot!’

‘Did you hear the singing?’

‘I heard them sing my name! Did you hear yours? ‘

‘They sang mine first!’

‘No, they didn’t!’

‘Actually they didn’t sing either of yours. Mine was definitely first.’

‘They didn’t. They didn’t. They didn’t. So there…’

Ezra stepped in. ‘The next one to say a word will feel my fist across his ears. Keep quiet!’

‘You don’t always have to be so cross and bossy, Ezra! You’re only fourteen years old.’ That was Daniel, the youngest at age nine, who had been allowed to watch the sheep as a special favour by his parents to celebrate Hanukkah, the Hebrew Festival of lights.

Jacob, the peacemaker intervened. ‘I’ve had an idea. How about we go and find the baby king and each one of us take a lamb for him?’ The bickering stopped. A huge ‘Yes!’ soared into the sky and there was a scramble for the lambs. Ezra started as though to silence the children, but Jacob put a hand on his arm. ‘Let them be,’ he whispered and moved towards the children to help them choose their lambs.

But then arose the question of whether they should leave the sheep alone on the hillside or whether one or more of them should stay and guard them from wolves and robbers. A rumble of protest began. ‘Not I, not I, definitely not I. I’m not staying behind …’ Then David, the quiet one, unexpectedly took the lead, speaking loudly and firmly.

‘The angels told us all to go to see the king and I’m very sure that they wouldn’t have done that if they hadn’t arranged for the sheep to be safe until we got back!’

There was a cheer. ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’

The arguments over, the initial excitement and euphoria returned and the children, each clutching a lamb to his chest, started their walk over the rough

terrain sliding into dark gashes in the ground where prickly shrubs grew and grazed their knees, and climbing slippery grassy mounds interspersed with boulders.

The only sounds for the next half hour were ‘Ow!’ ‘Ouch!’ ‘Hey watch where you’re going!’ ‘You slide into me once more and I swear I’ll kick you!” until Joshua distracted the young shepherds by pointing out to them the moon which was riding high, shedding a light that was bright enough to cause shadows. Quite close now was the stable and high above it in the dark sky was a star that bathed it in a steady, pearly glow.

At last, the shepherds were outside the stable, tired and sore all over and, at last, lost for words, turning to Ezra for guidance. He looked at them, robes dirty, faces covered in grime, scratches everywhere, head coverings askew and each grimly clutching his baby lamb. Not one lamb had been allowed to fall. He started to frown then began to shake with silent laughter.

‘What a sight you are!” he managed to say between his chuckles. ‘They’ll probably take one look at us and tell us to leave.’ The young shepherds lowered their heads in embarrassment and wiped their noses on their sleeves.

Ezra continued. ‘We’ll go in now but remember your manners. Greet whoever is in there with ”Shalom”.’

He knocked on the stable door. Silence.

He knocked again. There was a quiet murmur of voices and a baby’s whimper then footsteps came slowly to the door. It was opened cautiously, and a tall, bearded man stood there, looking out. He looked huge and menacing with the light from a candle behind him.

The shepherds nervously sidled across to form a tight semi-circle around Ezra who moved forward.

‘Shalom, sir’,he said. He paused for a moment; where to start?

‘What can I do for you, children?’vasked the tall man.

Surprisingly, little Daniel spoke up. ‘The angels on the hill told us to come and see our new baby king’.

David found his voice. ‘And we’ve brought lambs for him!’

A voice came from inside the stable, a young girl’s sweet voice. “Who is it, Joseph?”

There was a brief silence and then the man’s lips stretched into a smile as he called over his shoulder, “Our baby has his first visitors, Mary!” And turning back to the shepherds he held open the stable door.

‘Come on in, lads’ he said. ‘Baby Jesus has been waiting for you’.

**Christmas Humour by *‘Wilpee’***



**The Ghost Rider**

***by Tony Granger***

It was set to be a wintry Christmas – we knew that. Flurries of snow were eddying across the valley, swirling amongst the crags above us and beginning to settle on the rocky ground and tufted grass around the cottage. It was cold and wet-weather clothing with scarves and a turned down cap was all I had for comfort. This was unusual weather as it was supposed to be summer – but one could have all four seasons in one day in that part of the world.

This was going to be my first Christmas on Balcraig farm, situated on the south-facing lee of the first little hill as you came down the winding gravel road described as Woest Hill on the road between Grahamstown and Kenton, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. The farm itself was developed in the 1820s following the arrival of the first settlors from England and Scotland to that area, after their small ships docked at Algoa Bay and disgorged their human cargos into the hinterland. It was only about six miles from Grahamstown, where I was a student, but far enough away from the City to provide tranquility if that was your wont.

I had rented out the main farmhouse to students to provide me with extra income and converted the dairy into a cottage, which was some distance from the main house. Around three sides of the cottage were paddocks with fences leading up to the sides of the cottage like spokes on a wheel. My solitary cow was inherited with the farm. She had one broken horn and had a pleasant disposition and provided us with daily milk which was lovely and creamy. Occasionally sheep grazed the pasture but over winter were kept at my neighbour’s who owned them.

I lived in the cottage with my girlfriend Vyv who was also a student. It was fairly primitive – there was no toilet in the cottage but a nearby privy or ‘long drop’ as it was known in those days, complete with spiders and other creepie crawlies and no electricity. Quite an experience for the unwary!

Christmas Eve was upon us, and the excitement of Christmas day was looming – a time to remember and a time to put any past bad experiences behind us. A log fire burned in the hearth and Vyv played on her guitar, the Christmas tree was up and I was feeling content. Christmas day would be spent in the traditional festive manner with friends. We went to bed and were soon asleep.

I woke up with a start. I could hear a horse’s hoofbeats running around the cottage. I nudged Vyv who immediately woke up and said ‘Can you hear that? It sounds like a horse running around the cottage’. We both lay there and listened to it for a full minute – ‘Impossible’ I remarked, ‘there are fences up to the cottage, it must be jumping over them’. Then the sound of hoofbeats faded away and we both thought it must have been the wind or some other phenomenon and went back to sleep.

Early the next morning we woke up and went outside – a cold shiver ran down my spine as I saw clear impressions of a horse’s hooves in the snow running through our fences as if they were not there. We couldn’t believe it, but there they were clearly outlined in the snow. We knew then that we had not been dreaming.

On the first day after the Christmas period that the local records office and museum was open, I went in to do some research. Some time ago, way back in the 1820s, a rider had appeared at the farm begging accommodation and assistance on Christmas Eve from the farmer who lived there. He was turned away with nothing and died on the farm, alone and hungry, without friends or the comfort of a friendly fire. Legend had it that the spirit of the rider and his steed were often manifest at that time of year, having perished on that farm.

Christmas is a time to be kind and welcoming to others and to bring joy to their hearts, as I do to you.

**Christmas Songs & *Number Ones***

***by Andy Gregory***

Driving home from dropping off my father’s shopping a couple of weeks ago, Chris Rea’s *Driving Home for Christmas* started playing on Radio Two. Each year I try and make a mental note of when I hear the first Christmas song and in recent years have been staggered to hear songs by Slade, Wizzard, Wham and even The Pogues belting out in supermarkets in November. Last year, my wife and I were in a Midlands garden centre in October half-term as they were clearing away the Halloween displays. We both rolled our eyes as we noticed the staff were scurrying around with Santa hats, unwrapping the copious amounts of Christmas decorations, accompanied by Band Aid’s *Do They Know it’s Christmas* playing in the background.

Now, I’m no Ebenezer Scrooge and there’s definitely no “Bah! Humbug!” from my lips at Christmas. I have even inherited my father’s Santa outfit my Mum made for him many years ago, if ever I feel the urge to dress up in festive attire. I love Christmas as much as anyone I know, but the festive season seems to start earlier and earlier as I grow older.

As I continued my journey home along the A45 I started thinking about what makes a great Christmas song? Certain tracks resonate with me; I could write my whole life story by linking different songs and bands to different stages and moments in my life. Does that happen for all music-lovers and if so, why? Is it the words, the music or the whole package? Or is it the fact that something particular happened at that moment in time when the song was in the charts? Many people will tell you where they were when President Kennedy was shot, or when England won the World Cup. I remember vividly hearing the news that Mark Chapman had shot John Lennon and the days that followed, when Lennon’s brilliant solo material and Beatles tracks were played back-to-back on the radio. Are our favourite songs due to our memories, our relationships, or just simpler times in our lives? Maybe the Christmas tracks that resonate with us portray those halcyon days as we wish to remember them, rather than the arguments over the remote control and which board-game to play next?

Every year (apart from 2020) we attend the BPSO’s (British Police Symphony Orchestra) *Last Night of the Proms* in Birmingham in early December. At the end of the show, they always finish with a fabulous rendition of *Sleigh Bells* and as the balloons fall from the ceiling and party poppers explode in a cacophony of noise, I start to feel some Christmas spirit. It is normally around that time of the year when we start to hear Slade’s immortal lines *“Are you hanging up a stocking on your wall, It’s the time that every Santa h*as a ball?”

There are other great Christmas songs, for example the classics by Nat King Cole, Perry Como and Bing Crosby; or the more religious themed songs by Johnny Mathis, Boney M and Cliff Richard. There have also been some wonderful recent Christmas songs by Kodaline, Embrace and Hudson Taylor, but sadly they seem to receive little or no airplay. In the sixties, seventies and eighties it was so difficult to break into the charts. A singer or band needed to be signed by a big record label who had *buyers* and *pluggers* working around the clock to try and secure a slot on Top of the Pops or Radio One. In those days you wouldn’t even get a mention if your song didn’t guarantee selling over 100,000 copies, and to achieve a Number One single it was likely that over half a million copies would need to be sold.

It seems so confusing nowadays how the charts are organised and far less emphasis is placed upon them. As well as counting a handful of ‘vinyl sales’, there’s also ‘streaming’ figures used within the calculations. What is meant by *uploading*, *downloading*, *file sharing* and *streaming*? When I think of *streaming*, I imagine they mean standing on a bridge over the water and throwing your seven-inch singles into the current, then running quickly to the other side and seeing which one wins in a different version of ‘Pooh-sticks’? Did you know that in 2006 there was a Number One single that sold/streamed less than 18,000 copies?

Musicians and bands have far more opportunities to share their music with a wider audience these days, with so many platforms such as You Tube, Facebook, Instagram and more specialist music sites such as Spotify. The big record companies have less control over the industry and smaller independent labels have more of a say about an artist’s career. However, it is still disappointing when the mainstream radio stations still have playlists that stick to the conventional tracks, especially when it comes to the Christmas choices.

In the 1970s, the music industry was so tightly controlled there were very few compilation albums around until 1983 when Jon Webster took on the mighty record labels and created the first ‘Now that’s What I Call Music’ album. It was so difficult before then to convince band managers to release their rights over tracks and the few that did exist were seen as cheap and nasty compilation albums by ‘as seen on TV’ companies such as K-Tel. The alternatives were the ‘Top of the Pops’ compilation albums, with songs recorded by session musicians and somewhere on the cover it would say in small writing *Not the Original Artists*. The sound wasn’t too bad and the versions of the tracks were like listening to a Tribute Act. The big selling feature to try and make the package more attractive to the consumer was the album cover normally featuring an attractive twenty-something lady wearing a rugby shirt and long socks. Most would be played a few times and then placed at the back of the record collection, never seeing the light of day until it was time to visit the local charity shop.

And then there is X Factor and Britain’s Got Talent! What can I say about a multi-million or multi-billion dollar industry that plucks people from obscurity and makes them into household stars within a few weeks? The XF/BGT/SyCo machine has been responsible for a great many of the Christmas Number Ones since it started in 2004. For a few years, the winner was guaranteed to be in the Number One spot within a week of the Final due to the pre-ordered copies of a song that hadn’t yet been recorded. In recent years we have seen a backlash against the *Christmas Number One* due to the XFactor issue. In 2009, American rockers Rage Against the Machine released *Killing in the Name* and the last two years the UK blogger Lad Baby released *We Built This City on Sausage Rolls* and *I Love Sausage Rolls.* All three of those songs were catapulted to the Christmas number one spot with internet campaigns to stop that year’s X Factor winner being immortalised.

To me, all of those songs are forgettable, and it shows the Christmas Number One has less meaning these days. They are on a par with Mr Blobby’s *Mr Blobby* (1993) and Bob the Builder’s *Can We Fix It?* (2000). At least there have been a few more good Christmas Number Ones over the years, such as Human League’s rather un-Christmassy *Don’t You Want Me?* (1981) and Queen’s *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the only song to have made number one on two occasions (1975 & 1991). Different versions of *Do They Know It’s Christmas*? have held the Christmas Number One slot on three separate occasions (1984, 1989 and 2004) by three different line-ups (Band Aid, Band Aid II and Band Aid 20).

I find it hard to believe that in various polls over the last twenty years Fairytale in New York by the Pogues and Kirsty MacColl has been voted the ‘Best Christmas Record of the Century’ and ‘Best Christmas Record of All Time’. With lines such as “You're a bum, You're a punk, You're an old slut on junk” and “You scumbag, you maggot, You cheap lousy faggot, Happy Christmas your arse, I pray God it's our last”, I struggle to find anything cheerful or Christmassy about it. The buzzword these days is ‘woke’, but I don’t think I’m being woke when I feel that song shouldn’t be played on the radio anymore. The writer, Shane MacGowan of the Pogues has been interviewed recently and commented “It was of its time” and he refuses to change the words. For me, and I am sure many police officers that have attended domestic disputes over the years, I have seen no end of families ripped apart by such language and their festivities ruined by drunken partners, who end up spending their

Christmas in a police cell. Maybe there is some “Bah! Humbug!” in me after all!

For a music-lover like myself, it has been great to see a ‘Vinyl’ recovery in recent years. I still buy the monthly magazine ‘Record Collector’, so they will always be ‘records’ and not ‘vinyl’ to me. It is wonderful to see more artists releasing records, in addition to CDs and downloads, as well as more shops having them available to purchase. As a teenager, I loved going into Birmingham on the bus on a Saturday with my best pals and spending our pocket-money on a new Subbuteo team, or 7” single at ‘Reddingtons’, or one of the many other record shops in Birmingham. Nowadays, I still love spending time flicking through the piles of albums at Head Records (Leamington Spa), The Diskery (Birmingham), or HMV (Coventry) and it’s something magical opening a new vinyl album and taking time to study the sleeve notes and inserts while placing the needle on the record for the first time. I was the last person I knew to reluctantly convert to buying CDs when bands had stopped releasing records for many years and still don’t download music. I am often seen on my hands and knees in a second-hand or charity shop scouring their bargain box of records, and would much rather buy a cast-off 1970s *Top of the Pops* ‘Not by the Original Artist’ album for fifty pence, than download something I can’t touch or hold.

My favourite? For me, there is no better Christmas song than Slade’s *Merry Christmas Everybody* and I genuinely believe that the *Christmas Number One* peaked in 1973 when Noddy Holder screamed out *“It’s Christmassssss!”.*

As I pulled up on the drive, my mind still working overtime about Christmas Number Ones, my phone beeped. I turned off the engine and looked at a text message from a pal who said: “Forget Covid 19, you now know 2020 has been a really bad year – Chris Rea’s car has failed its MOT!” I smiled, went into the house, and turned on my 1981 record-player.



**The Last Stocking**

***by Helena Hutt***

Christmas 1964 was cold. The type of weather that froze gloves to your fingers, and you woke to ice on the insides of the windows. Every time you took a deep breath outside your lungs burnt and the scarf wound around your face became sodden. I was wrapped up like the Michelin Man. Even the two thick pairs of socks on my feet that were forced into outgrown Wellington boots with my trusty hand knitted navy-blue balaclava were not keeping my toes and ears warm. Did I care? I was a seven-year-old child, and it was Christmas Eve.

On an errand for my mother, I walked with my head bowed against the wind, thinking of the treats that would be awaiting me the next morning. All the boys I knew were hoping to get a ‘Johnny Seven’ gun, ‘GI Joe’ or ‘Hot Wheels’. ‘Tiny Tears’ dolls, and ‘The Easy Bake Oven’ were the girl’s preferences. A young budding housewife ‘Could bake real food’ with the ‘heat source of two ordinary incandescent light bulbs’, a revolutionary piece of equipment for its time. But none of these items were on my Christmas list. The present my heart most desired was a box of colouring pencils. Not your standard children’s colouring pencils but the wonderful colourful tins of pencils I craved high up on the art shelf in W.H. Smith. I had always loved to draw and in my mind I was going to create wonderful works of art and those pencils were to be the tools of my craft. I desperately wanted one of those shiny tins of twelve wooden enrobed colours so much that my fingers itched to hold them, but perhaps, just perhaps, Father Christmas might leave me some?

I had been good that year. I knew I had. This was the ‘Swinging Sixties’. Children watched Blue Peter and Fireball Xl5. The Beetles were on the radio and my parents had presented me with a new baby brother. However, this all paled into insignificance as far as I was concerned. The most momentous thing to happen to me that year was my induction into the St. Barnabas and St. Phillip’s Church Brownie Pack. Wednesday nights I would go along to the church hall to bond and skip around the toadstool with my six; ‘The Gnomes’. We would chant ‘Here we are the little gnomes, helping mothers in our homes,’ and learn worthy pursuits befitting young girls such as darning, knitting and sewing. I took the responsibility of being a Gnome very seriously. I had tried really hard to be good and help my mother, especially with my new noisy, demanding baby brother. I could only hope that my hard work had paid off and Father Christmas knew all about my efforts.

As I climbed into bed that night, snuggling under the warm winceyette sheets, candy striped, I was wishing hard that I would find the object of my dreams in my Christmas stocking. My mother tucked me up in my satin edged blankets, and I pulled the pink candlewick bedspread up tight under my chin. The diamond pattern of the wicks tickling my nose, with my Paisley eiderdown completing my cocoon of warmth as I closed my eyes tightly.

Christmas morning came. It was so cold. I shared a room with my parents and the new baby, and although my mother had drawn up a fire it had yet to take hold. My breath was visible as my head emerged from the warm comfort of my bedding cocoon. On my bedpost, with its lumps and bumps indicating the contents inside was my red gingham Christmas stocking. Pouncing on it, I felt the pattern of the weave between my fingers whilst gently exploring the contents. A little net of gold chocolate coins, with their shiny paper glistening in the firelight now lighting up my bed. They would be kept for when my friend Tanya and I played shops after Christmas. A new hanky with my initial lovingly embroidered in the corner. An orange. Not a satsuma but my favourite, a blood orange which was a treat due to the expense. To me they were the best tasting oranges that even now evoke memories of a childhood Christmas. I loved cutting them in half and seeing the flecks of red, whilst inhaling the sweet aroma. There was a pair of navy mittens with a cable pattern along the front, hand knitted with warmth in mind, and a bright sixpence in the toe of the stocking. If I was lucky, I might find the one wrapped in silver paper in the Christmas pudding and finish the day a shilling richer. Big money for a child in those days. The last item was a small brown plastic diary. In the spine a tiny pencil with a rubber on the end. As I opened it carefully turning over the thin paper being careful not to rip it, were the words of the Brownie Promise staring me at me, mockingly.

“I promise to do my best. To do my duty to God, and the Queen.

To help other people. And to keep the Brownie Law.

I had done all of those to the best of my ability, and although I was not sure what I had specifically done for the Queen, I had certainly helped other people. Shopping for old Mrs O’Hara and posting letters for Mr Reece. I went to church on Sundays and completed tasks around the house, yet no coloured pencils I so desired were to be mine. The crushing feeling of disappointment only highlighted how unfair life seemed to be. And then I saw the package.

Propped against the end of bed was a flat oblong parcel. The bright blue snowman paper tempting my hands to reach down and retrieve it. Could it be? The shape was too big for twelve pencils, and yet…. Ripping open the paper I stared in wonderment at the contents. I was holding a tin with a beautiful picture of a mountain and lake on the front with the words ‘Lakeland Pencils Set No. 22’ emblazoned across the bottom. Holding my breath, I carefully prised the lid open to discover that set No. 22 held twenty-four pencils. I remember running my hands over them several times, almost wary of touching them in case they disappeared, and I was dreaming. This was the best tin of pencils I had ever seen, far outshining the coveted stock in W.H Smith. The names of exotic sounding shades such as vermillion. magenta, turquoise, and sienna dancing in front of my very eyes. The biggest smile of happiness belonging in equal measure to both my parents and myself.

Looking back, I wonder if the children of this generation will remember their stockings in such detail, or will they be consigned to the dustbin of childhood debris? In an ever-increasing society of wants and plastic I hope they hold dear in their hearts some small memories. Mine is of that simple tin of pencils that bought me great happiness. The memory of parents who worked hard and tried to provide the best they could with the limited means at their disposal. It is a memory also tinged with sadness, the memory of parents who worked hard and tried to provide the best they could with the limited means at their disposal to create the magic of Christmas. Although I suspect that Father Christmas probably does not really exist, I think this year I will hang a stocking on the bedpost......perhaps, just perhaps ..........

 **It’s coming…!**

**International Writers Seminar**



**26th - 30th April 2021**

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| |  | | --- | | Dear friends of the IBZ,  We are very pleased to be able to present to you the annual program  2021 of the IBZ Schloss Gimborn today.  The ongoing pandemic and the associated imponderables have  prompted the IBZ team to design a seminar program for 2021  that allows maximum flexibility in every situation. Especially for the  international seminars in 2021, we offer three options for participation:  face-to-face, hybrid and online seminars, depending on the  respective situation.  You can download the new program here: [IBZ seminar program 2021](http://mailing.ibz-gimborn.de/c/41183140/b988bdc41bbd-ql0j3x)  Secure your participation today at  [www.ibz-gimborn.de/seminaronlinebuchen.html](http://www.ibz-gimborn.de/seminaronlinebuchen.html)  or by email at [info@ibz-gimborn.de](mailto:info@ibz-gimborn.de) .  For further information, please do not hesitate to contact us by phone.  With best regards,  René Kauffmann  ================================================== | |

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| |  | | --- | | **Information and Education Center Schloss Gimborn eV | Schlossstrasse 10 | D-51709 Marienheide** Telephone: 02264 40433-0 | Fax: 02264 40433-69 | Email: [info@ibz-gimborn.de](mailto:info@ibz-gimborn.de)   It is strongly suggested that we all book early to secure a place at our wonderful spiritual home, the castle where we first came together to found the group in 2018. Please book directly with IBZ Gimborn. We will keep you posted on Brexit and Covid developments but securing the place is the essential first step. *The excitement mounts! (Ed.)* | |

**Santa (A True Christmas Story)**

***by J A Kay***

The joy had been drained from the world and Santa and the Elves were very worried. Without joy the magical elf dust could not be made. Without it the reindeer could not fly, and Santa could not deliver the presents. For years the joy in the world had been reducing and the globe size ominoritor showing the level of joy on the planet flashed blue barely registering any joy. It required to be full of joy to produce the dust. Santa knew who was responsible, he had been fighting the cold blue enemy of T.O.R.I.E (Terror Organisation Responsible for Instigating Elves) all his life as it slowly turned them from nice to naughty.

Only the magical dust could turn them back from naughty to nice, but it seemed that almost every child now had a house elf. They had been given to them by gullible parents thinking that if the told their child that the elf was watching them and reporting back to Santa then their child would be good and behave.

They were wrong!

These Elves had been corrupted by T.O.R.I.E and were thoroughly naughty. As soon as the child was asleep, they began their tricks to get the boys and girls into trouble. Items were moved and misplaced and their mothers bar of chocolate she had carefully hidden would be found with a big bite sized piece missing from it. The secret stash of selection boxes would be found open with one of the chocolate treats gone and its wrapper discovered below the innocent sleeping child’s pillow. As a result, the letters from the children this year had arrived with a note from their parents saying, “Don’t send any presents this year, my child has been very naughty”.

Something had to be done or no child would get a present!

Santa consulted the D. E. C. (Department of Elves Creativity) to see if they could help him solve this problem. They were very forward-thinking elves and sought solutions to all of the world’s elf problems. It was decided that Santa would have to go under cover and visit the humans before Christmas. He would have to find enough joy in the world to make enough magical dust to restore all the naughty elves. One sprinkle of this potent dust would transform them back to nice in an elftastic moment.



A vast amount of joy would be needed to make a large enough supply of magic dust to power the reindeer to take Santa in his sleigh with enough left over to sprinkle on the children’s letters to allow them to reach Santa. The D.E.C had been very busy and had come up with a new means of transport for Santa that did not rely on the magical dust. They had constructed a red sleigh convertible powered by six Elf Horse Power that was 100% environmentally elf friendly.

Have you ever seen an Elf Horse? No, I am not surprised, because they move with incredible speed. And the six shy tiny horses were very happy below the hood of Santa’s sleigh. A big red button was on the dashboard of the sleigh and when pushed it converted it into a normal looking red convertible that could be driven on a road. When it was pushed again the roof went down and it transformed back into a sleigh to fly to the North Pole. Santa was impressed, but would the humans not recognise him?

The D.E.C. had a solution, they gave Santa a pair of Elf made, perception filter, black framed glasses. Santa removed his small golden naughty and nice detection glasses that were resting on the bottom of his nose. We have all seen Santa looking you up and down, that is him checking if you are naughty or nice. Santa put on the perception glasses and was transformed into an old man dressed in dark casual clothes with a black woollen hat on his head. Only the true believer or a very young child would recognise him.

But where would he go?

Almost the whole world was blue from the lack of Joy. Santa studied the ominoritor and saw a tiny yellow spark of joy flashing in the historical village of Kilmaurs situated in the west coast of Scotland. He zoomed in to see what was happening and the ancient stone monument next to the jailhouse called the Jugs came into focus. It was being decorated with Christmas lights stretching out from the Weston Tavern which sat next to it. Santa looked closer and saw that this was the village pub and restaurant and it was the hub of a charity fund raising event to help all the residents. The building emanated great peace as it was situated on holy ground being the former home of the village minister. He saw a poster in the window advertising Santa in his sleigh touring the village on the first of December.

This is where he would go and mix with the locals, he would be that ‘Santa’ and fill up on all the joy.

Santa put his naughty and nice glasses back on and just like Clark Kent turning into superman when he removed his glasses he instantly converted back into his red suit. He checked his magic key was securely fastened to his wide black leather belt with its silver carved buckle showing the head of his favourite reindeer Donner. If it was not for this key, he would not be able to pause time and travel the whole world on Christmas Eve or gain entry to any house without a chimney to deliver the presents.

Santa donned his red hat and waved goodbye to Mrs Claus and the elves as he climbed into his new red convertible car and pressed the red button. The roof folded into the boot and with a jingle of sleigh bells as it converted into a two-seater red sleigh. He was pleased with his new transport and saw another button on the dashboard in black with a big ‘I’ on it. Santa loves buttons and pressed it. Instantaneously he and the sleigh vanished. It was an invisibility button, no one would see him now!

With a loud, “Ho, Ho, Ho,” Santa soared into the air as he programmed the onboard fully automated ‘Elf Sat Nav’ for Scotland. He wanted to find out how fast his new sleigh could travel as he hit the accelerator, the sleigh surged forwards and jumped to Fairy Light Speed that was fairly faster than the speed of light. Within seconds he was over the beautiful historic village of Kilmaurs and saw a space in the car park at the rear of the Weston Tavern and Restaurant. Santa was used to landing his sleigh and eight reindeer onto the roofs of houses on Christmas Eve and easily guided the still invisible sleigh into the parking space. He pressed the red button transforming the sleigh back into a red convertible car. He did not want anyone to bump his new car as he pressed the ‘I’’ button restoring it to visibility.

The red car instantly appeared parked perfectly in the car park. Santa looked at himself in the interior mirror and replaced his naughty and nice glasses with his new ones transforming once again into an old grey full bearded man with black framed glasses and a woolly hat. He checked his trouser pockets and found they were full of packets of his magical dust and his Elf Credit Card. A rumble from his belly told him it was time to eat and he was nowhere better to get acquainted with the locals and get information. He walked into the public bar to find his face staring back at him from the first real ale pump. Santa’s Sleigh was the name of the ale and strong at 5.6% abv and it filled him with his first boost of joy.

Santa was soon speaking to everyone with a few adult believers commenting on how much he looked like Santa Claus. He just smiled and said he got that a lot. It turned out that the local Santa had taken ill and could not man the sleigh ride around the village the next night. He quickly volunteered his services and received all the details of the trip and another pint of joy from the landlord John.

He arrived early the next night in his red car at the local Primary School where the village sleigh was leaving from. He removed his black glasses and put on his naughty and nice specs. He transformed just in time before all the school children arrived with their sleigh secured on the back of a flatbed truck. Santa was soon swamped and frantically dishing out his satchels of magical dust to all of the children. He took the time to speak to each one and it became apparent they all had the same story. They all had a naughty elf who was getting them into trouble!

Santa feared this was the case, T.O.R.I.E had been busy and it was time to take action. All the children were told to write their letter to Santa and sprinkle the Elf Dust on both it and their Elf. This would soon stop them from being naughty and he took note of all the house elves names.

It was minus 4 and threatening to snow as Santa climbed into the sleigh to set off around the frozen streets with the children dancing and singing Jingle Bells behind him. Unbelievably no one slipped, even the parents as they travelled around Kilmaurs with Santa ringing his magic bell wishing all a Merry Christmas. (Google search Kilmaurs Christmas Video on You Tube.) The old, the young, the infirm and those in their jammies all came to their front doors and windows to wave at Santa as they remembered all the good times filled with Christmas cheer. The sleigh slowly moved on and the children fuelled with joy continued to sing and dance not feeling tired in the slightest. The sleigh travelled down the Main Street towards the centre of the village, where the historic Tolbooth, Jailhouse and the ancient stone Mercat Cross stood, pointing to the sky, capped with its stone globe in the shape of the Earth.

There was not a square inch of space as a collective cheer rang out from the waiting crowd as they saw Santa and the dancing children approaching. With a mighty ring of his bell Santa illuminated the Christmas lights in the centre of the village. Everyone was out to see Santa and all were bathed in the brightness shining down on them. A red sack appeared in Santa’s hands full of a never-ending supply of sweets as he climbed down from the sleigh to join the buzzing children. The crowd parted like the red sea as he walked to the stone monument where a familiar looking sleigh full of presents stood next to it.

Santa’s naughty and nice glasses shimmered in a pink glow as he saw the two twins five-year-old girls both with the fairest of blonde hair whispering to each other next to the stone pillar. He signalled them to come to him as he bent over to speak to Isa who had brown/green coloured eyes and Bella who had startling blue eyes. Santa gave each of them a satchel of his magic dust which shimmered to sparkling life as they took it copying the glow in their eyes. That was unusual Santa thought as Isa whispered to him asking if he was the real Santa. He replied, “What do you think”? Bella stretched out her right hand and gave his beard a tug as she nodded to her sister. Isa’s face lit up with excitement as she shouted, “YES”!

A beam of light shot from the globe at the top of the monument as it began to snow with all the children screaming in delight as the World was filled with Hope, Joy and Peace!

Santa saw Isa and Bella clasping their sparking bags of magical dust that they greatly prized. They had been looking for the real Santa for a very long time and needed the dust to free the Unicorn from its chains. This ground was not only holy, it sat on a major lay line and Santa watch in disbelief as the twins shimmered and vanished in front of his eyes.

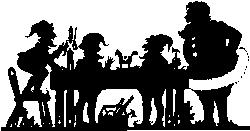
Santa looked at the dashboard in his sleigh and found its Joy Monitor was full and overflowing as Joy from all points in time flowed through the lay line time portal into the ominoritor.

The cold blue enemy of T.O.R.I.E had been defeated, there was more than enough magical dust to make every elf and child behave and be good.



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**Tales with Tony**

It has often been said that ‘Everyone has a book in them’. Some people write one, some a few and some publish lots. Our very own Tony Granger, a seasoned member of the IPA, has written eighteen books so far. On the evening of Tuesday 17th November IPA Birmingham, West Midlands Branch members were treated to an online ‘Zoom’ event where Tony read some of his new short-stories from his latest book, entitled ‘Blondie Requited’.

Since March this year, all the branch meetings (like all other branches and regions) have been held online and at the last meeting in October a discussion took place to think of ways that we could offer something different to branch members.

Branch Vice-Chair Simon Hensley said “*The power of story-telling is part of Policing culture; those tales spun over a hastily eaten meal or during a long night on a cold Watch unites different Policing generations.  We believe, now more than ever, the need to connect with our younger members and capturing our ‘tales’ for future generations should be one of the priorities for the IPA”.*

Vice-President Sean Hannigan organised the Zoom facility for us and we decided to throw open the invitation to other IPA members. Although some of the invitations went out in the 24hours prior to the event, the audience was swelled somewhat; ‘Tales with Tony’ was fantastic and attracted 56 members from across the globe.

**Tony Granger** joined the IPA in 1974 while serving with the British South African Police in Rhodesia. He joined the UK section of the IPA in 2014 and has become an active member of the Birmingham, West Midlands branch as well as a regular contributor to the IPA Writers Special Interest Group (SIG). In 2018/19 he was instrumental in leading the campaign to allow former BSAP officers and staff that served in South Africa/Rhodesia to join IPA Section UK.

The ‘Tales with Tony’ evening included a number of his short stories from his books *Blondie’s Revenge* and *Blondie Requited*; including a particularly funny tale of when he was summonsed to see his commanding officer when he was due to marry his sweetheart. His ‘Application to Marry’ form had been doctored by some of his colleagues and his future wife’s name had been replaced by a notorious member of the infamous Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Group! If you want to know what happened, you’ll have to order his books. At the end of the Zoom session the guests were able to ask Tony questions about his service with the BSAP and how he gathered the ideas together for his books.

As well as over a dozen of our own branch members, some of the online guests included Christopher Mannino (Chief of Park Forest Police, Chicago) who Andy first met at Gimborn in 2006, Justin Timm (Chief of Williams Bay Police, Wisconsin) a friend of Simon’s, Steven Boers (Cape Town), June Pettitt (Birmingham Branch but now living in Cape Town), Angie Pare (Durban, South Africa), Fran Stiff (Johannesburg), Eleni Cotton (Malawi & Greece), Dr Marelize Swart (Cape Town), Henryk Ellert (Portugal), Judy Kerswell (Zimbabwe), Laura from France, Sean from Frankfurt and members from across the length and breadth of the UK.

The youngest participant Alex Bidolak, an officer with Greater Manchester Police has been an IPA member for 5 years (3 Region, Rochdale & District Branch). Alex gave some feedback saying *“I think this is a fantastic concept where a guest speaker shares their policing experiences and could be taken forward in the future, where different Regions can tune in and listen to members stories from far and wide. What a great evening and idea, all from the comfort of your own home!”*

Branch Chair Tom Chisholm said *“We are extremely grateful to Tony for sharing some of his fantastic stories from his time with the BSAP and look forward to inviting you all to our next events”.*

Following the success of ‘Tales With Tony’ we are now planning two events:

* **‘Christmas Tales’,** which will be on Tuesday 22nd December 2020 at 19:00 hours GMT.

There will be 8x10 minute slots available and we welcome people to email us to book a spot to share their experiences of policing at Christmas. Please contact Simon Hensley via [bhamipaweekend@gmail.com](mailto:bhamipaweekend@gmail.com) if you have a suitable story to share. We are particularly looking at funny anecdotes or tales that will warm the soul prior to Christmas.

The following session will be:

* Tuesday 19th January 2021 at 19:00 hours GMT and will be **‘Tales of the Unexplained’**. This could be a tale or story of something within your service you could not explain, or a ghostly event etc …..

Further details and Zoom links will be circulated a few days beforehand …… But we welcome contributions from across the UK and not just from our own branch. You do not have to be a member of the Writers SIG to contribute, we are just looking for tales that will make people laugh or stories that people will enjoy hearing about.

**Andy Gregory – Secretary**

**IPA Birmingham, West Midlands Branch**

If anybody would like details of how to order Tony’s fabulous books, he will be setting up a special landing page in the near future for book sales. In the meantime, please contact him directly via his email address [tonygranger@hotmail.com](mailto:tonygranger@hotmail.com)

The books that can be ordered:

Blondie's Revenge (Short Stories) £10 + £1.50 P & P

Blondie Requited (Short Stories) £10 + £1.50 P & P

**Zoom Links:-**

1 – Christmas Tales WMB AG; Time: Dec 22, 2020 07:00 PM London

Join Zoom Meeting   
[https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82645947849?pwd=aTMvQm1UTHJQZnhmS2htMEM5dU12QT09](https://nam01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fus02web.zoom.us%2Fj%2F82645947849%3Fpwd%3DaTMvQm1UTHJQZnhmS2htMEM5dU12QT09&data=04%7C01%7C%7C5eeec159e4e342a90d7408d88cd48bc0%7C84df9e7fe9f640afb435aaaaaaaaaaaa%7C1%7C0%7C637414191784245461%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=YigCTZxIntYByXsiurFZVb4%2BTn5hZQ8qZfRGkuKQnt0%3D&reserved=0)

Meeting ID: 826 4594 7849   
Passcode: 906051

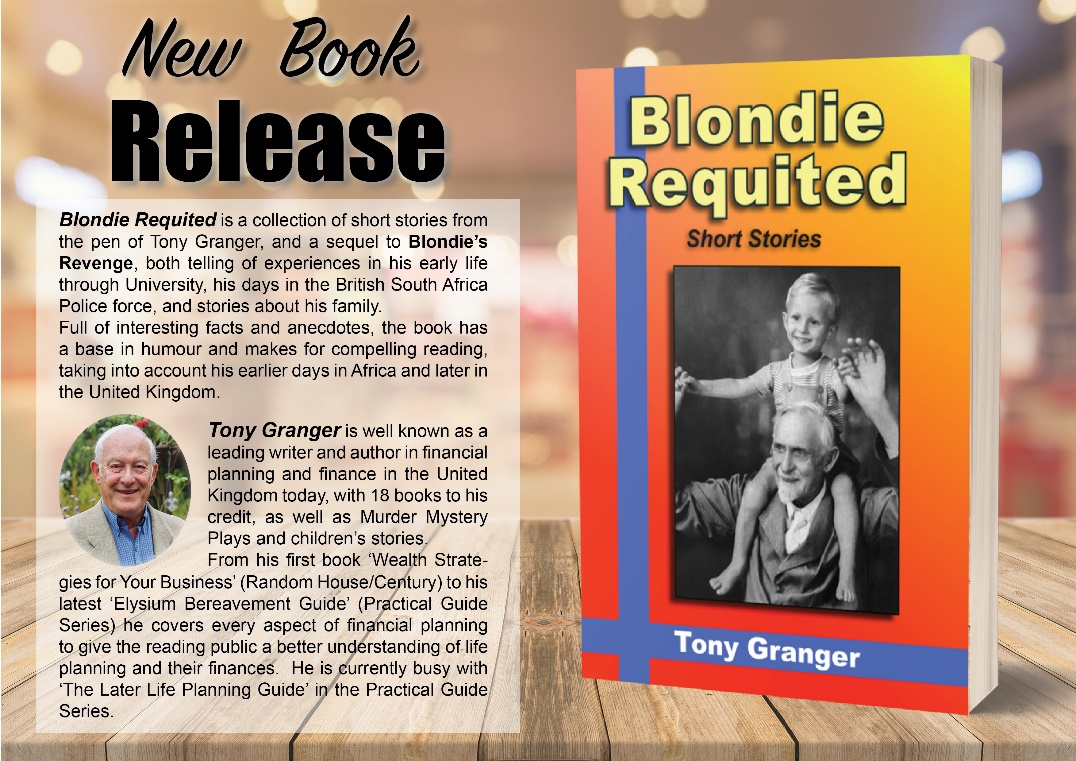
2 - Tales of the unexpected WMB AG; Time: Jan 19, 2021 07:00 PM London

Join Zoom Meeting   
[https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85172653698?pwd=SEQwYTZYaHBCbjJpbHoxVVdRd01QUT09](https://nam01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fus02web.zoom.us%2Fj%2F85172653698%3Fpwd%3DSEQwYTZYaHBCbjJpbHoxVVdRd01QUT09&data=04%7C01%7C%7C5eeec159e4e342a90d7408d88cd48bc0%7C84df9e7fe9f640afb435aaaaaaaaaaaa%7C1%7C0%7C637414191784255456%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=xRThsjv6Mstijerg1hYDdlg6d%2FaTuqGuAXfLKZLje38%3D&reserved=0)

Meeting ID: 851 7265 3698   
Passcode: 303047







**The Amazing Writer’s Weekend**

**The SIG writers’ weekend in November was a stunning display of our collective talents and the below comments reflect the diversity, pathos, power and energy of the group as creative writers; a thousand thanks to everyone who helped to make it such a resounding success both as presenters and delegates.**

What an incredible couple of days.  I managed to catch the best parts of Ann’s and Helena’s presentations today and almost everything yesterday.  Such inspiration, such knowledge and talent.  Thank you for all the organising that must have gone into the event.  It was a resounding success.

Thank you

It was my honour to be part of such a wonderful weekend.  So much to learn, so much of interest.  It was funny, tearful and factful.

if ever there was a memorable presentation it was most certainly yours … A very moving hour of my life.

it was a stunning weekend.

A true collective effort proving the old adage that the sum of the whole was greater than the individual parts...but the individual parts were damn good in the first place!!

Fantastic weekend

An absolutely superb weekend all round. Such amazing, amazing people…

…what a wonderful weekend we’ve just had.  Some brilliant speakers and I was reduced to tears on at least two occasions (by Doz yesterday and Ann today).  Truly fabulous people with such hidden talents!

What a weekend. What a fantastic weekend…

Great stuff from Doz - brilliant!

***Ed: A huge thank you to everyone who attended and***

***especially to the wonderful presenters:***

**Janet ‘Fizz’ Curtiss/David Lewis**:   'Elements of Biography'

**David ‘Doz’ Hughes:  '**The Dyslexic Writer '

**Bill Petherick**: 'The Caricature'

**Ian McNeish:**  'Writing Comedy'

**Tony Granger:**  'Short Story Writing’

**Helena Hutt:**  'Ideas, Prompts and Writers Block'

**Ann Cumberland:**   'Poetry beginnings and ends '

**Sean Hannigan**: ‘Writer’s Aids’

**The Hunter**

***by Ian McNeish***

It was late on 24 December 2011. He had been sitting by a warming fire for a few hours. His wet clothing spread around, drying, perhaps. He couldn’t care less. The date was insignificant. He had other things on his mind and solitude was his only companion. He wanted it like that. He had no space for twinkling lights, endless adverts designed to create a need for meaningless objects, adverts designed to squeeze the last penny from anxious parents, already in the bank’s debt to a tune that would still be playing when the bells started ringing again. It was as endless as it was hopeless. But how do you let your wee ones down, how do you sit in the dark with nothing to wrap in colourful paper, then look at the crumpled faces, the tear-filled eyes. You are responsible. You can hardly put food on the table on an ordinary day. Warmth is achieved by staying in bed. Then you break and like Captain Oates, you leave the tent and walk off into the unknown. No plan to return. It will be better like that. And you walk and walk till your feet are sore and you beg for food and you walk again, until your feet are sore and the prospect of a night under a hedge, or if you are lucky a barn, beckons. But you keep on and tears fill your eyes. But going back is not an option. With you, the father figure, the

breadwinner, out of the picture, food will get to your children, someone will fill the void and manage where you failed.

Then you are in far away and aimless. The snow is deep and still arriving from a leaden sky. You wished you had a tether to be at the end of, but even that is beyond you. Then out of the white framed gloaming a dark shape emerges, an old building. The snow had been scoured from the roof by the wind, exposing a tin roof that had been green at one time, now a camouflage mixture of green and rust. Small square windows. On the lee side, a door. He had no expectations it would broach as he shoved against its resistance. Then in a rattling kind of way, scraping the floor, it unenthusiastically creaked open. Old fashioned, thick stone walls, cold, dry, and out of the weather. He was not its first visitant, evidenced by a few partially burned candles and two empty spirit bottles.

And that is how he came sitting alone by a warming fire, on the eve of Christmas, possessed by a deep melancholy and without hope. Time passed and he eventually drifted off into an unsettled slumber. He awoke with a start and opened my eyes; it was pitch black. He held his breath. Silence. A bird in the rafters? He drifts off again. Then a scraping sound, louder. The door? The fire is out and he stares into the pitch blackness, nothing. But it was not nothing. He is now wide awake, his senses acute. He keeps staring. Still nothing, then the faintest shuffling sound. He stares towards the noise. A patch blacker than pitch black. What is that? The clouds part for an instant to let a shaft of moonlight eerily illuminate the scene through the small window. A dark shape. His heart nearly stopped. Then the moonlight is gone. He scrabbles about feeling for his vesta box. A splutter and an area of feeble light. A few feet away, staring directly at him, unspeaking, a sinister glint in his eyes, sits a figure, bedecked in a black, cloak like, plaid, a black floppy hat concealing ears and forehead. Projecting from one side of his mouth, a short pipe. A ghost like and menacing figure. A steely stare held our man for what seemed an eternity. He coughed nervously and weakly said, 'hello.' No response. His mind raced. Then a deep, calm, careful voice, as though not speaking a first language, asked, 'where are you bound?' He stuttered, too quickly, ‘nowhere really.’ The steely voice responded, ‘On this night of nights? Follow me. '

In a mesmerised state, he dared not resist. The figure in black swept out into the freezing night. He followed. The storm had passed, and the clouds had rolled away to reveal the light of a full moon. With arm raised, finger extended, pointing skyward, an almost disembodied voice disgorged from the plaided figure, ‘look up, yon creamy smear across the sky is the Milky Way, our galaxy. More than a billion stars. Gaze on them and wonder.’ The raised arm moved a little, ‘do you see that distorted W shaped group of stars, that is Cassiopeia and straight out from the largest, sharpest point, Andromeda, our nearest neighbouring Galaxy.’ He gazed in wonder, and mused, ‘have I never looked up before?’ The indicating finger moved on and the voice continued, ‘that flashing light, see it, moving across from the right, that is the Space Lab, a sign of hope. Do you remember Christa McAuliffe, who died when the craft she was heading to space in, the space shuttle ‘Challenger,’ exploded in front of her own children. She was a civilian, a schoolteacher and she was carrying the dreams of millions of children that day when she launched. Those dreams did not die with her and hope continues. And over there, that is Orion, the Hunter. The constellation can be traced back to the Sumerians, founders of ancient Mesopotamia, one of the oldest civilizations and perhaps the founders of modern society. The Sumerian name for Orion was URU AN-NA, meaning light of heaven. The Hunter has gazed down on earth for millions of years and has watched over us since we appeared on this planet. Trust him’ Lift your head, lift your eyes, look beyond yourself, there is so much out there. There is always hope.

He gazed at Orion in wonder. He had never heard any of this before and was filled with a new perspective, a new hope. He turned and the plaided figure had vanished. There was not a footprint in the snow. The smell of tobacco lingered. The plaided one’s last words echoed round his head, ‘Follow the Hunter.’ He hurried back inside, donned his dried clothes, hefted his knapsack over his shoulder and set out into the moonlit night to follow the Hunter. He was a long way from home, but his step was light. He had to get there before morning. He continued to trust Orion, his guiding light. After many hours he saw his cottage, the moon was nearly gone and Orion had moved away to his right but was still watching over him. It was in the early hours of Christmas morning as he got near. In the window, silhouetted against the flickering candlelight, were two small heads, staring out into the dark. Their faces filled with hope. He opened the door and stepped inside to be met by a huge embrace from my tearful, grinning wife. Then he was overwhelmed by a flurry of cuddles and kisses, ‘Daddy, you’ve come back. This is the best Christmas ever, we love you.’

At that point I realized, it is not about presents, it is not about tantalizing adverts or Disney films or even brightly coloured Santa Claus, no it is about something else, something we have forgotten and in many ways been indoctrinated into forgetting. It is about family, the love of your family, your loved ones, whoever they are. It is about hopefulness, it is about love, it is about belief in good.

I opened my Knapsack and inside I found four chicken legs, some sausage rolls, and a Christmas pudding. I laid them out on the table and stared at them, where did they come from? There was something else stuffed at the bottom. I pulled out two cuddly teddy bears, one with a red ribbon and one with a purple ribbon.

My wife asked from where had I got them?

‘The Hunter’, I replied.



**The Miracle at Christmas: ‘A Life for a Life’**

***A fictional story for Christmas by Will Henry P***

I trudged up the garden path leading to the front door of my house thinking my wife will be really upset with me as I was getting home really late after what was a hellish shift at work. I am a police officer and had offered to work a couple of hours extra on Christmas Eve, but I was told by my shift sergeant that I would be home before midnight. Of course, all the best laid plans never ever run smooth and Christmas eve was no different. I had teamed up with John, a long serving officer in one of the patrol cars and the day had gone well with few calls of any great concern. But as life does, at 10.30 pm, we received a call to attend a road crash involving two vehicles.

We were quickly on the scene and set the police car up so as it could be clearly seen and with hazard and blue lights in operation. John grabbed the road accident signs from the back of the car and ran up the road to set them up at a safe distance which of course would then warn approaching motorists that there was a road accident head.

I went over to the two vehicle one was a small family car which was badly damaged at the back. The two elderly occupants were still in the car and wearing their seat belts. The air bags had activated so it must have been quite a heavy shunt. I opened the driver’s door slowly and started talking to the occupants who assured me they were alright. A bit shaken but alright.

As I turned towards the small van, I heard John shouting

`Look out Willie. `

I looked past the small van to see a heavy lorry bearing down on us and quickly pushed the driver of the van onto the grass banking. The driver of the lorry was trying to control his vehicle, but it caught me a glancing blow knocking me into the back of the small van and unconscious.

The next thing I can really remember was going into my house. As I walked round the living room, I recalled how tidy it looked; all the presents were under the Christmas tree and the girl’s stockings were hanging on the fireplace. The reindeer’s snacks were sitting on the hearth which was a large cake of chocolate and a can of juice. Somehow, we had persuaded the girl that the reindeers needed a sweet to boost their energy and rather than them having milk and carrots, chocolate and juice was far better for them.

I walked through to the kitchen and on passing the mirror stopped to look at myself but there was no me in the mirror. Initially I thought it was just a play of light and ignored it. In the kitchen my wife had left a plate with some sandwiches but lying beside the plate was her pad and pen with lots of numbers written on it. Again, I did not bother much as the writing was a scrawl and looked more as if the kids had been using it. I wandered upstairs and looked into the girl’s room, but they were not there. Ah, I said to myself they have persuaded their mum to let them sleep with her seeing I was at work.

On entering my bedroom, I was shocked to see empty bed and clothes scattered around the floor but no one in the room. I began to panic, where were my family what has happened to them? As I turned to walk back out, I stood in front of the large wardrobe mirror. Again, I was not there. There was no image of me, no man standing in uniform no Willie looking forward to Christmas. There was nothing.

It was then that I looked at myself, my uniform, if you can call it that. It was just my trousers and shirt. No cap, jacket, tie just trousers and a shirt. The shirt was open from the neck to the navel and what looked like blood saturated on the shirt and my trousers. As I walked out of the room I turned round and realised I had walked apparently through the bedroom door as the door was still closed. The next thing I remember was being back in the kitchen but could not recall walking down the stairs. I looked at the note pad on the table it read, ‘11.25 pm car crash serious now in emergency unit at local hospital’. There were a couple of telephone numbers both of which I recognised, one being the hospital, the other my mother in laws.

What was this? I kept asking myself, what is happening?

At that I heard a noise coming from the living room and thought ‘Thank god everyone is back’ and as I went through to the room, I was confronted by non-other than Father Christmas. He was holding what looked like a withered stick in his right hand and to my amazement he extended his left-hand gesturing for me to take hold. I was hesitant at first, but his eyes seemed to say, ‘Take my hand,’ which I did. I asked him what was happening, but I could not hear any words coming out of my mouth.

He then touched me on the shoulder with the stick and said, ‘A life for a life.’ The next thing I knew I was lying on a hospital bed in what was one of the operating rooms of the hospital. I could hear voices but could not make out what they were saying at first. Then the voices became clearer, much louder. I heard someone say, ‘That’s it; there is no pulse’. I heard another say, ‘A brave man apparently, he saved the life of one of the drivers by pushing him out of the way of the articulated lorry’.

Who was this brave man they were talking about? Was it me? Was I dead? My mind, having raised the questions I asked, were now getting answers. No image in the mirror, walking through the door of the bedroom, not remembering walking down the stairs, the notes on the kitchen table. It was me they were talking about and . . . and I was dead.

Then I heard another female voice saying, ‘Who will tell his wife and two little girls?’

Then another person in a quiet but startled voice said,

‘How did that idiot dressed as Santa Claus get into the theatre?’ All eyes were now fixed on the figure I had seen in my house. Again, he lifted his knurled stick and held it above his head and said, “A Life for a life.” And then he disappeared out into the corridor.

Then I heard a voice shout, ’Doctor, doctor the monitor! Is it showing signs of life?’ Well, I do not remember too much after that except waking up in a bed in the emergency ward where my wife and two daughters were sitting around the bed. ‘Hi’, I said, which was met by a flood of tears and the girls shouting,

‘Daddy, Daddy.’

A couple of days later I was in bed in the hospital recovering from my ordeal when John my colleague, along with the Inspector, had come in and told me all about how I had saved the van driver’s life. Apparently just before the lorry hit me, I had grabbed hold of the van driver who was standing in front of me and somehow lifted him up and threw him against the banking, saving him from serious injury or even worse. By the time the artic’ had come to a halt I was pinned against the van by a long piece of metal rod that had somehow worked its way

loose from the back of the lorry and it had entered my body just below my chest and was sticking out of my back.

John said, ‘By the time the ambulance arrived we all knew you were a goner, but we had you carted off to the A&E anyway fearing the worst.’

It was good to hear what had happened but to be honest all I could remember was Father Christmas. I just could not get my head around what had happened at my home and this encounter with Father Christmas, Santa, Saint Nicolas or whatever name he came under.

I eventually relayed the story to my wife who looked at me through unbelieving eyes. But then my daughters told me that they had seen Santa at the hospital, and he had asked them what they wanted for Christmas. They replied, “For my Daddy to get better,” and it was Santa who had helped the doctors and nurses at the hospital. My wife looked at the girls and then me. I saw no one, especially Santa, and I was with the girls all the time,’ she said.

Well, whatever happened I assured her he was in our house and in the hospital theatre. ‘Well, if that is what you believe then so be it,’ she replied. We sat and chatted for ages planning to celebrate Christmas when I eventually was allowed home.

Then one of the girls went over to my bedside cabinet, picked up a small but prettily wrapped box. ‘Look Mum, Daddy has got you a Christmas present.” And she handed it to my wife. ‘Oh, thank you,” she said, ‘What a nice surprise,’ and began to open the gift. I kept trying to tell her it was not from me, but the words would not come out my mouth. On opening the box there was a golden locket on a gold chain. “Oh darling,” she said “It is lovely and what is this? You have had something written on the back.’

She held it closer to read the words and said nothing. I could see the tears well up in her eyes as she started to sob. She handed the locket to me. I looked at it disbelieving what had been written. The inscription on the back read `A Life for a life’. On the front was a relief of Saint Nicolas and underneath the saying ‘Patron Saint of Travellers’.

The girls could not really understand what was happening and had found themselves looking out the window of the ward. ‘Oh look Mummy, there is Santa Claus on the grass’. Even I managed to get to the window and sure enough there he was, Santa Claus, dressed in red. I opened the window and shouted to him ‘THANK YOU!’ He lifted his left hand and waved and the same time he waved his knurled sick above his head and said, ‘A Life for a life.` Then he was gone.

That happened five years ago, and I am still a serving police officer, well a sergeant to be honest. Every Christmas my wife hangs her pendant on the front of our Christmas tree and along with my two daughters we recall the Christmas where a ghost walked around in our house and that ghost was me. There is still chocolate and juice for the reindeers in the hearth and the girls’ stockings hang from the mantle and every year just before we go to be bed, we hear the whisper of his voice saying, ‘Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.’

**New Year Supplement: A Gift from the Writers SIG**

‘At a special webinar of the IPA Section UK Writers SIG, we learnt about the importance of listening to real life dialogue, to help build our writing skills. Helena reported overhearing a conversation including, ‘I haven’t laughed so hard since you left your knickers on the railway line.’ Chairman David threw down the gauntlet for short story submissions relating to knickers on the railway line.

All credit to Helena for the theme’. **(Ian Drummond-Smith)**

**In the January issue we shall be having a supplement to the main magazine showing these hilarious stories! It would have been with this one but we just ran out of time!**

***Thank you all, wonderful writers; please stay safe and well and have a quiet and peaceful Christmas!***

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