Happy New Year!

Every week I hear from groups around the UK, some just beginning, some flourishing and some facing challenges. The News from the Groups section (page 4) gives an insight into how groups operate. For our three writing groups in Porthcawl, December is the annual highlight. We present a morning of readings to U3A members, followed by a buffet lunch. As ever, this year’s performance was a sell-out, even though we’d moved to a venue that could accommodate ninety people. Unfortunately, this means that coming back to meetings in January can seem a bit flat. If that’s true for your group, maybe start with some warm-up exercises to get things going again. I’ve set-out a simple one on page seven. See also the ideas from Rugby’s group on page four. I have two fun exercises available which I don’t have space to outline here, but I can send them to you on request.

In the last Newsletter, crime writer Pauline Rowson’s article contained an intriguing reference to a murder in her own family. I asked for more detail and she kindly produced the article you will find on page six.

Writing prompt: A pile of brightly coloured plastic coat hangers

Marcia

Change of contact details?

Please let me know if your postal, or e-mail address or group leader changes, or you no longer wish to receive Newsletters, I will alert U3A National Office, which sends them to you.

E-mails are the simplest way to collect Newsletter entries. Please find someone willing to copy your work and e-mail it to me if you have no access to a computer.

If you write a letter that needs a reply, please remember to enclose s.a.e.

Marcia
Digital Storytelling is the practice of using digital tools (e.g., cameras and voice recorders) to tell stories and share them via the Internet. It embodies core values at the heart of U3A. It combines collaborations that lead to shared knowledge, connections, experiences, and of course, learning. So what does it involve and why is it so different?

Let me say from the outset that it does not replace any form of narrative or written storytelling. Whilst there are bound to be overlaps, telling a story digitally involves the use of a combination of media. However, it’s not about tools but skills; not about using media to show how clever you are, but about creating meaning and developing inspiration.

One project Swansea U3A undertook involved research into Swansea Guildhall. We visited galleries, archives, and museums, photographed paintings and old brochures, talked with experts, and took video clips. This collaboration involved shared research and working out a framework to display results that brought out many unknown stories about our Guildhall. The format we decided upon resulted in creating electronic books that not only contained the history of Swansea Guildhall, but stories of artists, medieval knights, the Vikings, royalty, and a host of supporting trivia! Whilst the results were impressive and we’ve undertaken tours as a result, the more lasting achievements revolved around sharing skills, developing joint ideas, growing deep and lasting mutual respect—and experiencing sheer fun and enjoyment!

Of course, you don’t have to embark on anything quite as large—although we didn’t realise how big it was going to be at the outset! Two smaller ideas involved research on an 18th-century landscape, then plotting the findings onto the present-day city, whilst another took an individual from a family tree and placed her at an historic point of time of her life, working with Edith Cavell.

Various skills were brought to bear, depending on the nature of the initiative, the team at the time, and their particular interests and motivations. Perhaps the most critical skills involved encouraging curiosity, looking for connections, then putting them together; transforming isolated, static facts into shared experiences and perspectives.

Why not try? It’s a great way to promote co-operation between interest groups. Bring together creatives from the spheres of writing, craft, photography, iPads, art appreciation—and anyone else. But whatever you do, have fun and share the learning across not only your U3A but others—perhaps involve intergenerational bodies? I believe such sharing is at the heart of keeping our U3As alive and appealing not only to our, but to future generations of members.
Tutor Gilly Beckett writes about her Creative Writing courses at Summer School.

Before I start, I always visualise the journey for aspiring writers in my courses.

One enthusiastic group weeded out unnecessary ‘fluffy stuff’ from writing, employed prompts that stimulated imagination & laughed a lot along the way.

The following year, we took on crime & thriller writing, becoming immersed in detectives, villains & victims. Some characterisations & storylines remained with the group long after summer school, as they e-mailed each other with ongoing thoughts & ideas.

In 2017, it was writing for radio. The group wrote, directed & performed a convincing first episode of a radio thriller that was later transmitted on a local radio station.

Last September at Cirencester, we turned to soap opera. Often despised, soaps get higher viewing figures than anything else on TV. The course was about understanding what’s unique to soaps: sharp, compelling dialogue, clear multi-strand storytelling, tragedy & humour. Great team work produced characters, subjects & opportunities to work on dialogue skills.

This is what one of the course participants wrote about last year’s challenge.

What do the following have in common? A North Sea ferry, a Midlands motel, Chester College, a failing provincial theatre, and a bed and breakfast hotel tucked away in the Southern Lakes? The answer is they are all settings for soap operas or ‘continuing dramas’ as the BBC calls them.

The last two soaps may not be familiar—yet. They were created over the three days of the U3A national summer school, under the skilful direction of tutor Gilly Beckett.

Working in two groups we developed our characters, settings, plot twists, and back stories, imaginations running riot. Soap writers work under massive time restraints and so did we. We developed three scenarios: the first episode focused on introducing our main characters and settings, dropping hints about the storylines to come. The second saw the development of a sinister newcomer; just who was that woman lurking by the back door? Finally, no soap is complete without a touch of comedy, and we ended the course writing comic dialogue—not an easy task.

What did we get from the course? Give and take, and being open to ideas and influences from colleagues. We honed our writing skills, especially writing dialogue that was sharp, realistic, and compelling. It was fun, demanding & rewarding. Thanks to Gilly, and the creative bunch of people on the course who made it so.

Now, what was Silvester doing in the linen cupboard, I wonder...

Sandra Whitnell Tweeddale U3A
NEWS FROM THE GROUPS

Reigate and Redhill  
Mike Cockett
Narrative Writing group 1 has been concentrating on story writing skills. We felt we did not have difficulty getting story ideas. What we needed was to look at aspects of storytelling to extend those ideas. We have used exercises from the Newsletter particularly using action rather than description. We have tried dialogue exercises such as dialogue which includes a misunderstanding and dialogue with a subtext. The latest exercise was aimed at challenging our plotting. Each of us described a character and the challenge was to include those characters in one story. They ranged from an Eastern European gangster to a guitar playing nun. The stories featured in one of our evening events titled "Encounters". Our special thanks to Beeston U3A who reported on the setting up of their own creative writing website. We now have one of our own, randrwritersu3a.co.uk. There have been over 4,000 hits to date.

Flint together with Ruthin & District  
John House
Two years ago, Marcia Humphries & Jo Brooks led a Creative Writing workshop for N.Wales groups in Mold. That plus a piece by one of our members prompted us to compile an anthology. Across the 2 groups, 17 writers produced 47 pieces to form a 150-page A5 paperback, now published by FeedARead & called Reflections from a Third Age. This was a first for us, was challenging to fund & publish but fun to write. FeedARead provide a comprehensive service. Their website is a bit clunky, especially formatting, but we mastered it & would use it again. We were funded by Flintshire U3A & Writing group plus the contributors. After reimbursements, we plan to fund further books, workshops, events & collaborations with other creative groups.

Bude  
Lucille Opie
We’ve been working through ‘Steering the Craft’ by Ursula Le Guin, to refresh basic grammar. One session on Sound led to punctuation. As an exercise, we each brought a piece we had written, altered so that one paragraph had no punctuation. Copies were provided for everyone so they could put in the punctuation they thought appropriate. Amazing how commas & stops can alter the entire sense of a piece.

Rugby  
Eileen Edward
For our U3A’s 20th anniversary, we wrote on Rugby, U3A or Rugby U3A. We produced stories set in Rugby, a spoof conversation about starting a U3A pole dancing group & a song encouraging new retirees to participate in groups. Some of our work was read at our celebration day in October, & our Rugby U3A pieces were included in a booklet. Recently some of us challenged ourselves with trying to write a story (around 300 words) without using the letter ‘E’. Also we wrote 26 word stories where each word had the first letter listed alphabetically. Some people found this addictive & wrote more than one! It has been a very exciting year & we have started a 2nd group.

Ilkley  
Kath Luczyn
We write stories weekly & put them onto our blog site www.scribblers.com All U3A members throughout the country are welcome to read them & maybe comment.

HELP WANTED

Holt group is organising a North Norfolk meeting on self-publishing in March. They have speakers arranged, but would like to hear about members’ experience with the publishing process. Please contact Robert Herring  parkholm21@gmail.com
CHARACTER, DIALOGUE, SETTING 

Maggie Smith

Characterisation
How well do you know your characters; do they sound credible? Often the writer forgets to make them ‘real’. Description of physical features is not enough. We need to know about our characters’ lives outside the story, their flaws, their dreams. It may sound laborious, but novels, memoirs, plays, short stories all benefit from the invention of a detailed character sketch, even if most of the information never appears in the finished work. In any story (and definitely in autobiography) be aware of the laws of libel. People should not be recognisable, unless we have obtained their permission. Unfortunately friends and family usually insist they recognise themselves even when the characters are a total invention and bear no real resemblance! If you use real people, make them look different and act differently; set incidents in a new venue.

Dialogue
The less experienced writer often neglects the importance of dialogue. It offers greater insight into a character, a rhythm which breaks-up the prose and shows, rather than telling, to move the narrative along. BUT...the characters must sound natural. Read any of your dialogue aloud to someone else and ask if it sounds like words a living person would use. We often write stilted and formal language; real people interrupt, leave sentences unfinished, hesitate. Your characters must also sound different from each other when they speak. Try to avoid dialect. If you are writing about young people, research their currently popular jargon.

Setting
There are writers (eg Helen Dunmore) who can mesmerise the reader with description of settings and atmosphere, but too much detail can obscure the narrative. As a rule of thumb, limit yourself to half a dozen lines of description at a time, or you are at risk of boring the reader. Do remember to use all the senses; like dialogue, the scene can show rather than tell the mood and hint at the plot.

The full text of this article appears on the U3ACW forum.
The Martha Giles Mystery

Not every crime writer has experience of murder in their family, but this year is the 60th anniversary of the unsolved murder of my great aunt, Martha Giles. It is one mystery it appears I will never be able to solve.

Martha Giles was the mother of 5 children. The youngest was 5 at the time of her death. She was a nurse at New Cross Hospital, Wolverhampton. On the evening of 11th February 1959 she left home to go on night duty, but never showed up for work. No one questioned why, or where she was. Her body was discovered next morning on the bowling green in the hospital grounds. She had been battered with a rock & the post mortem revealed her death was caused by ‘internal haemorrhage due to stab wounds in the heart, also pneumo-thorax due to stab wounds in the lung.’ (Alfred Gordon Marshall, Registered Medical Practitioner & Consultant Pathologist.)

New Scotland Yard was called in to investigate, with D.S. Ernest Millen leading the case. He later became Deputy Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard & was Head of the Flying Squad at the time of the Great Train Robbery. The investigation caused considerable media frenzy locally & nationally. A doctor at New Cross Hospital was charged with her murder & sent for trial at Staffordshire Assizes before Justice Elwes on 13th to 16th July 1959. A Not Guilty verdict was brought in & he was discharged. No other person was sought in connection with the killing.

Through the National Archives I have gained access to witness statements, the pathologist’s statement & harrowing photographs. I have press cuttings from the time, but see many gaps in this case. Finally after several telephone calls to the Metropolitan Police & the Staffordshire Crown Court, I discovered that there existed ‘closed’ files in the National Archives, which included the trial notes & police case notes. I applied to see these under the Freedom of Information Act. At the same time I contacted the National Association of Retired Police Officers, asking for any information from former officers who might remember the case. NARPO put an announcement on their national web site & their Staffordshire branch advertised for information. The Wolverhampton press picked up the story & wrote an article. As a result several people contacted me, including a police officer & a journalist who were at the murder scene. I have fascinating anecdotal material from them about the case. For some time, my late uncle, Martha’s son, investigated with me. Then, he had a visit from someone who told him to stop asking questions.

Eventually, I was told by the National Archives that I could not have access to the ‘closed’ files & that it was unlikely anyone would see them until 2035 at the earliest. One reason they gave is the ‘possibility, however remote, that this case could be opened for re-investigation in the future & it is not in the public interest to jeopardise a prosecution for murder by releasing information that could be of later significance’.

It seems wrong to me that the police have never re-examined this case in the light of new forensic techniques. They claim all the evidence was destroyed in a fire, so there is nothing from which to take DNA. I am used to dealing with fictional murders, researching & constructing complex plots for my novels & it has been strange looking into the murder of a relative. Whilst my novels can have satisfactory endings, it seems this real life case cannot. Sadly I have no indication from the police that they are ever likely to re-open the case so here is one mystery I am unable to solve. And without all the facts it seems I cannot even tell Martha’s story.
POETRY EXERCISE

In the September Newsletter, Kathryn Bestwick gave news of the Torquay (Torbay) writing group. She said they had found a poetry exercise I’d sent to them useful as a warm-up. As we all need warming-up in January, I’m setting it out below.

I think this is a way of showing members that they can write a poem.

The leader gives to each person a slip of paper on which is written the name of an emotion—happiness, sadness, pity, envy and so on. They do not tell anyone else the emotion they have been given.

The leader then asks the group to complete the following sentences:

This word tastes like
It sounds like
The smell of this word is
It feels like
Its shape is

The sentences are given one at a time, giving the members time to deal with each. When they have completed the 5 sentences, they will have enough material to work on to polish a poem before reading it out. The others in the group then guess the emotion.

When I first tried this, my own poem was:

A cartoon bubble heavy with water
Soft stroke of sandpaper
Bitter as earwax drying the tongue
An acrid catch in the throat

Can you guess the emotion?
It was jealousy.

My group recently tried a simpler form of this with the writing prompt on the front page, which also worked well.

10% off Tŷ Newydd Writing Centre Courses for U3A Members

Tŷ Newydd is the National Writing Centre of Wales. Established in 1990, thousands of aspiring and emerging writers have since passed through its iconic teal front door.

We specialise in residential creative writing courses. Every week we welcome a new group of individuals from around the UK and beyond. They spend time together under the tutelage of professional writers, taking part in workshops and one-to-one tutorials, enjoying readings and basking in the inspirational setting of Tŷ Newydd. Participants also help in the kitchen, where home-made meals are prepared with local ingredients.

Our programme features retreats and residential courses which cover genres, forms and styles, including poetry, fiction, non-fiction, scriptwriting, nature writing, storytelling, illustrating and yoga.

We choose tutors and guest readers carefully, and welcome some of the best practitioners in their fields to Tŷ Newydd every year. Present and past tutors include Carol Ann Duffy, Gillian Clarke, Pascale Petit, Paula Meehan, Mark Cocker, Menna Elfyn, Patrick McGuinness, Kate O’Reilly, Imtiaz Dharker, Niall Griffiths, Daljit Nagra and Malachy Doyle.

Our historic house was the last home of Prime Minister David Lloyd George. It retains the recognisable touches implemented by architect Clough Williams-Ellis, famous for his quirky Italianate village Portmeirion. Nestled in a quiet spot between mountain and sea, we’re the perfect haven to retreat to and spend time being creative.

It is possible to hire Tŷ Newydd privately for a corporate course, holiday or special occasion. To browse our 2018 course programme, see our website www.tynewydd.wales, telephone us on 01766 522 711 or e-mail tynewydd@literaturewales.org for more information or to request a print version of our programme. Or write to Ty Newydd, Llanystumdwy, Cricieth, Gwynedd, LL52 OLW

We will happily offer U3A members a 10% discount on our courses with the code U3A10.
ARTICLES for Next Issue

Please send me items, however brief, as attachments to an e-mail unless there is no-one in your group who can do this and you have to send by post. Please include: group news, comments, ideas, useful websites, magazines, books, competitions, anything worth sharing. U3Awriting@hotmail.co.uk

DEADLINE FOR NEXT ISSUE
15th April

Marcia

ON-LINE FORUM U3ACW
If you are one of the 200+ members of the U3A Creative Writing on-line forum, U3ACW, please consider adding to the material there. We are not looking for examples of work but hints and tips on how to produce it. If you have material but are unsure how to upload it, send it to Paul Burns who will do it for you. Burns-paul@outlook.com

STUDY DAY SPEAKERS
Charles Whittaker has led Henley U3A Writing group for some years. He is available to speak at Study days and may be contacted at Xanadu212@gmail.com

Pauline Rowson (see page 6) is a regular speaker at U3A groups. You may confidently recommend her to your committee as a speaker at main meetings where she can talk about her life as a crime writer. She would be ideal as a speaker at Study Days and can be contacted about any of this via her website: www.rowmark.co.uk

COMPETITIONS
Free e-mail bulletin Chainlinks is a good way to keep abreast of what's on. Just e-mail Maria Owen & ask to be put on the mailing-list. maria.owen@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk

NEED HELP GETTING PUBLISHED?
Maghull & Lydiate member, Dr Alan Corkish, has experience as a senior editor & in typesetting & cover design. He is willing to advise U3A members or groups (including editing) free of charge. www.erbacce-press.com

HELP FOR PLAYWRIGHTS
Player Playwrights has provided space for writers to try out work since 1948. Professional actors read your work before an knowledgeable audience. This London-based group also holds regular play competitions & talks with agents, casting directors & other theatre professionals. www.playerplaywrights.co.uk

E-mail tonydiggle@cainct.co.uk

Useful information

Sources: An educational magazine on the U3A national website.

U3A Online Writing Courses: see U3A website

U3A Resource Centre: A collection of material (not books) to borrow free of charge, apart from return postage. email:resource.centre@u3a.org

Among its most requested items are the online courses in creative writing and poetry writing.

Handbook for U3A Creative Writing Groups £2.50 (inc p&p) from National Office (address page 1) Cheques to The Third Age Trust.

Monthly general U3A Newsletter: See the national website for how to subscribe.

ARTICLES for Next Issue

Please send me items, however brief, as attachments to an e-mail unless there is no-one in your group who can do this and you have to send by post. Please include: group news, comments, ideas, useful websites, magazines, books, competitions, anything worth sharing. U3Awriting@hotmail.co.uk

DEADLINE FOR NEXT ISSUE
15th April

Marcia