**Newsletter of the Thurrock Writers’ Circle December ‘13**

**Thurrock Writers’**

**The Evolution of Christmas**

By Shona Mawby

It all starts with Mary, Joseph, Jesus and a manger. Let me take you to the beginning of this Nativity. Mary and Joseph are blessed to be expecting the new King Jesus; Son of God to be born on Christmas Day. He is to be the saviour for mankind. He is born in a barn surrounded by animals and his parents. The Three Kings bring gifts for Jesus; Frankincense, Myrrh and Gold. The story tells us that an Angel told these men that a king will be born. Not everyone is happy and bears gifts to the child however, King Herod isn’t happy at all. In fact he hunts down every baby to kill the future king. Fortunately he never finds Jesus and he grows up to be a kind and caring person. That is until he is wrongly killed. Sadly Jesus was crucified and therefore mankind wasn’t saved even though he tried so hard to make us see.

Jesus is only the beginning for stories of Christmas. Even if we have a different belief or aren’t religious we all know about Charles Dickens’ Ebenezer Scrooge. The story of an old bachelor who has lost his Christmas spirit. That is until he is made to see the error of his miserable ways by the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come. They show him how he is behaving and the errors he is making. We all know a few Scrooges who need to be visited by the Ghosts!

 As well as classic stories there are also movies, such as It’s a Wonderful Life and White Christmas right down to our modern favourites of Home Alone and Christmas with the Kranks. It’s a Wonderful Life shows the life of a giving man who tried to commit suicide on Christmas Eve. He is shown how different the community would have been if he hadn’t have been born. His guardian Angel helps our hero, George Bailey to find enjoyment in life and find love. This story seems very similar to Ebenezer Scrooge but instead of a ghost it is an angel who visits our character. Although they are very different people, Scrooge is a cantankerous old man where George Bailey is kind and charitable, both in the end realise that life is worth living, especially at Christmas Time!

The 1990 movie Home Alone is the comical film of a boy accidently left at home while his family go on their Christmas Vacation to France. Kevin, our young hero sets traps all over his house to stop two robbers stealing all his parent’s possessions. He cleverly outsmarts them every time and manages to have them arrested and sent to prison all before his mother comes back to get him in the nick of time. She has no idea that just the previous day all hell had broken loose and her house was a mess.

Not only our favourites, that we watch almost every Christmas, but there are also new films to be watched every year on the Christmas 24 channel. If you are a fan



of romance and Christmas. This is the channel for you. The movie presentations are really cheesy movies normally taking the form of ‘Chick Flicks’; where boy meets girl, girl meets boy, they fall in love, some hiccup stops them from being together, girl and boy are unhappy until the end where they make up and live happily ever after. All this happens just before Christmas Day. Christmas Day is the day when everything is put right and it is portrayed in most of these short films to be Christmas Magic that brings our couples together in the end.

If you are a classic lover or a modern cheese kind of person there is always something for you to read or watch at Christmas! We all have our favourites.

**Christmas Facts**

*Not meticulously researched so don’t quote these.*

According to a 1995 survey, 7 out of 10 British dogs get Christmas gifts from their doting owners.

Before settling on the name of Tiny Tim for his character in "A Christmas Carol," three other alliterative names were considered by Charles Dickens. They were Little Larry, Puny Pete, and Small Sam.

In Britain, the Holy Days and Fasting Days Act of 1551, which was not repealed until 1969, stated that every citizen must attend a Christian church service on Christmas Day, and must not use any kind of vehicle to get to the service.

When Robert Louis Stevenson, author of Treasure Island, died on December 4, 1894, he willed his November 13 birthday to a friend who disliked her own Christmas birthday

It is not until Twelfth Night that the figures of the Three Kings are supposed to be added to the Christmas crib.

**Christmas Shopping**

By Terry Brown

Sam and Jean were at home after a long day doing their final Christmas shopping,

 It had been a nightmare, the shops were packed, it had been raining most of the day and it was so cold you could see your breath, and your fingers- even with gloves on- tingled. And to make it worse, when they got to the final shop, Sam found that his wallet was missing and so they had to come home without some of the food they wanted. Sam was in a filthy temper.



That night was just as bad and now it had started to snow, when suddenly there was a knock at the door.

Sam said “It’s those carol singers I suppose- Ignore them.” But Jean went to the door anyway and found a store detective standing there.

” May I come in please” he asked, and Jean thought that they must have forgotten to pay for something and now he had come for payment. Thoughts of going to court, seeing their names in the paper and what would her club say ran through her mind.

She invited him in, and when he asked to see proof of their identity, that really frightened Sam, but he brought out his driving licence and showed him.

He checked the details and then went to his inside coat pocket. Could it be a court order as he knew that that store dealt harshly with shoplifters? To their surprise he brought out Sam’s wallet, and explained that after paying for their shopping, instead of putting the wallet away in his pocket, he missed it and it dropped to the floor. Fortunately the store detective was looking that way and saw it drop, but by the time he had picked it up, Sam and Jean had moved on, and as he could not leave his post, notified his security office and it was collected by them, and put in the store safe for safe-keeping until the store had closed.

Jean was so relieved that the wallet had been returned, but rather annoyed at Sam for checking the wallet to see if anything had been taken, before being asked to check it by the store detective, however everything seemed to be there.

Sam offered him a £20 note, as a thank you; the officer said he was not allowed to take anything, but would gladly accept a hot drink to warm him up, and they started talking about Christmas. He explained that he could not stay long as he had to see his daughter who was in hospital, but had offered to come around in his own time to deliver the wallet as it was on his way.

The daughter had been one of a group of carol singers, and had been holding the collection bucket, when someone had pushed her into the road and grabbed the bucket, luckily there were no cars coming at that time, but she was in a great deal of pain and so was taken to hospital to be checked over, where fortunately the only physical damage was a twisted ankle and a torn skirt, but the thief had gotten away, leaving some of the money spilt on the pavement, but keeping the bucket and most of its contents.

The next day Sam and Jean returned to the store to thank them properly and learned the store detective was not at work, because the hospital had kept his daughter in for observation, and he was with her.

When they visited the hospital, they learned that the money being raised was for the local children’s Hospice where her mother was a nurse and they were raising funds to give the children a small present for Christmas, but now could not do as much as they hoped.

Sam and Jean had no children at home and were financially comfortable, and did not need to work anymore; so they made a donation to the hospice of £100- linked to Gift aid, so the hospice could make more of it, and went home.

It was in Sam’s nature to always look after Number One, and as for those in poorer circumstances: that was their own fault and they would just have to try harder.

That night Sam and Jean were not in the mood for going out as they had planned, and they talked about the day’s events and how they seemed to have so much and the children, some whom were very ill, had so little.

The next day Sam went back to the Hospice and asked if he could help in any way, and was told that as he was not medically trained, he was not allowed to help in the Hospice, but what they needed were more people to raise funds. This was right up Sam’s street, as he had some very influential friends from his days working for the banking sector and managed to hire a hall where the carol singers could sing and a great deal of money was donated for good causes, which included the Hospice and the Hospital.

On the stage was Sam and the store detective’s daughter; that incident with the wallet had proved to be a blessing in disguise and greatly improved Sam and Jean’s lives.

Merry Christmas, and remember however poor you think you are, there is always someone who is worse off than you, sometimes through no fault of their own.

**Christmas Concert**

By Joy Ridgewell

The Thurrock Lions Club presented an Evening of Song and Melody featuring ‘MOSAIC’, held at Chadwell Village Hall on Saturday 30th November.

What a lovely evening: Conductor Daryl Barber gave an excellent performance guiding the choir singing in their first Christmas concert for this year. It was entertainment at its highest. There was audience participation when Daryl began his Christmas introduction and led into the first song.

Beginning with ‘It’s a Wonderful Time of the Year’ following with a variety of excellent Christmas songs and others from a medley from the films of M.G.M. Daryl gave a hand out of bells to ring for the audience to join in. This was done with much enthusiasm by the participants.

The music for the MOSAIC performance was accompanied by pianist Stuart Rush who also played a solo piece ‘Slow Coach’ that set every one’s toes tapping.

A short break for refreshments, served by members of the EROS club, followed and after the draw for the Raffle came the second half of the evening’s entertainment.

Beginning with The Disney song ‘Bear Necessities’ and followed by Moon River and others from Disney films that young and old have all enjoyed.

The evening ended with a hearty rendering of ‘The Holly and the Ivy’ to give everyone a start to enter the spirit of Christmas.

Dominic Cox MC for the evening gave a vote of thanks to everyone and announced that the Thurrock Lions Club raised £500 for charity from this night’s performance.

**A Writer’s Progress**

**Joy Ridgewell** has turned her hand to journalism and recently had published on the Your Thurrock website her excellent review of the Thurrock Lions Club Christmas concert. The review has been reproduced, in full in this newsletter. Joy has also completed a flash fiction story for the Brentwood Gazette Short Story competition.

Renaissance woman, **Danielle Chinnon**, continues her fantastically industrious output. Not only has she found time to perform in the Royal Opera House Thurrock Community Chorus opera, Ebb and Flow, as a soloist no less, but she has also entered numerous competitions, including: Brentwood Writers' Circle, Nancy Meggs Non-Fiction Competition, theme: 'Essex Musician', *best* Christmas Story Competition.  Theme:  'A Christmas Carol', the 500 word 'Alice in Sunderland' Writers Online Flash Fiction Competition and finally the Brentwood Gazette’s Short Story competition.

Danielle is an inspiration to us all. We wish her luck and we should all strive to emulate her amazing output.

**Waterstones’ Book of the Year**

Drum roll please. The Waterstones’ Book of the Year 2013 is… rustle of paper as I open the envelope… is a novel written 48 years ago? That’s older than me!

Yes, that’s right, ‘Stoner’ by John L Williams is this year’s winner. Some would tell you it’s a forgotten masterpiece, others, would claim it’s the literary equivalent to the Emperor’s new clothes. There’s only one way to know for sure. Sadly the author passed away back in 1994, he would have been 91 this year. But where ever he is, I’m sure he’s as surprised as anyone at the late success of his novel.

**Christmas Quotes**

*“Christmas is a time when you get homesick - even when you're home.”*  ~Carol Nelson

*“I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round, as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.”*  ~Charles Dickens

*“I do like Christmas on the whole.... In its clumsy way, it does approach Peace and Goodwill.  But it is clumsier every year.”*  ~E.M. Forster

*“I love the Christmas-tide, and yet,
I notice this, each year I live;
I always like the gifts I get,
But how I love the gifts I give!”*
~Carolyn Wells

*"My first copies of Treasure Island and Huckleberry Finn still have some blue-spruce needles scattered in the pages. They smell of Christmas still."*
Charlton Heston

**Christmas Cards**

Some ‘inventions’ become a curse, and many might argue that this is true in the case of the Christmas card.

Life must have been simpler before 1843, because it was in that year that Sir Henry Cole commissioned the first commercial cards illustrated by John Callcott Horsley. We consider today that preparation for Christmas starts too early, but Cole actually ordered the cards on the 1st May… I guess things took longer back then. Cole, who had helped to develop the Penny Post three years earlier had made a shrewd bet, printing 2,050 cards that year and selling them for a shilling each. In 2008, apparently almost 670 million Christmas cards were sold in the UK.

I suggested that life was simpler before Sir Henry’s intervention, but alas it was not so, as the fashion then was for hand-made cards… we should count ourselves lucky. Thanks, Sir Henry.

**Christmas Countdown**

If you’re wondering what present to get for that ‘special someone’ in your life, then maybe these book awards lists will give you some ideas:

**The William Hill Sports Book of the year Short list.**

The Boys in the Boat – Daniel James Brown

The Sports Gene – David Epstein

Bookie Gambler Fixer Spy – Ed Hawkins

I am Zlatan Ibrahimovic – Zlatan Ibrahimovic, David Lagercrantz, Ruth Urbom

The Seven Deadly Sins – David Walsh

**Winner:** Doped – Jamie Reid – exposé of a 1960s racing scandal.

**Costa Book Awards 2013**

There are five different categories, the winner of each being announced on January 7th 2014. They will then be judged head-to-head with the overall Costa Book of the Year being announced on January 28th 2014.

**Novel Award Shortlist**

Life After Death – Kate Atkinson

Unexpected Lessons in Love – Bernadine Bishop

Instructions for a Heatwave – Maggie O’Farrell

All the Birds, Singing – Evie Wyld

**First Novel Award Shortlist**

Idiopathy – Sam Byers

Meeting the English – Kate Clanchy

The Shock of the Fall – Nathan Filer

Marriage Material – Sathnam Sanghera

**Biography Award Shortlist**

Empire Antarctica – Gavin Francis

Hanns and Rudolf – Thomas Harding

The Pike – Lucy Hughes-Hallett

The Trip to Echo Spring – Olivia Laing

**Poetry Award**

The Divine Comedy – Clive James

Division Street – Helen Mort

Hill of Doors – Robin Robertson

Drysalter – Michael Symmons Roberts

**Children’s Book Award**

Alex, the Dog, and the Unopenable Door – Ross Montgomery

The Hanged Man Rises – Sarah Naughton

Goth Girl and the Ghost of a Mouse – Chris Riddell

Rose Under Fire – Elizabeth Wein

**Always Remember Those Who Serve by Hilda Waller**

In the days when an ice cream sundae cost much less, a ten-year-old boy entered a hotel coffee shop and sat at a table. A waitress put a glass of water in front of him.

“How much is an ice cream sundae?” he asked.

“Fifty cents.” Replied the waitress.

The little boy pulled his hand out of his pocket and studied the coins in it.

“Well, how much is a plain dish of ice cream?” he inquired.

By now more people were waiting for a table and the waitress was growing impatient.

“Thirty-five cents.” she brusquely replied.

The little boy again counted his coins.

“I’ll have the plain ice cream.” He said.

The waitress brought the ice cream, put the bill on the table and walked away. The boy finished the ice cream, paid the cashier and left. When the waitress came back, she began to cry, as she wiped down the table. There, placed neatly beside the empty dish, were two nickels and five pennies…

You see, he couldn’t have the sundae, because he had to have enough left to leave her a tip.

Submitted by Terry Brown



**Tom Smith**

As we sit around the table eating our turkey on Christmas day, we should spare a thought for Tom Smith: inventor of the Christmas Cracker.

Tradition has it that Smith invented the cracker in 1847, though we may not have recognized his ‘Cosaque’ as a cracker at the time.

As sales of his bon-bon sweets, sold wrapped in a twist of paper, slumped, Smith experimented with different promotional ideas: first he inserted ‘love messages’ into the wrappers similar to fortune cookies today. Allegedly reminiscent to the crackle of a log on a fire, a banger mechanism was added. This increased the size of the wrapping and eventually the sweet was dropped in favour of a trinket. Other elements of the modern cracker, paper hats, for example, were added by Tom’s son Walter to differentiate his product from its rivals. And it was thanks to these rivals that the onomatopoeic name ‘cracker’ became commonly used. Tom Smith’s legacy lives on in the UK and many Commonwealth countries every Christmas.

**Carpe Diem**

As the year draws to an end we should not rest on our laurels but renew our efforts to seek literary fame!

**The Cardiff International Poetry Competition**

1st prize £5000. A poem in English of no more than 50 lines in length. Entry fee £7. Closing date March 14th 2014. For more information:

[www.literaturewales.org/cipc/](http://www.literaturewales.org/cipc/)

**Valentine’s Day Ideas Romantic Story Contest**

To celebrate Valentine’s Day, ValentinsDayIdeas.com wants to hear your love story. They’ll pick the ten best stories or pictures. First prize $1000. Nine authors will get one of nine $100 Amazon Gift Cards.

The contest started on 14th February 2013 and continues until 14th February 2014. To be eligible, all entries should be received during the said entry period.

Please send your romantic story via email to contest@valentinsdayideas.com using Valentine’s Day Ideas Romantic Story Contest as the subject line.

**Choc-lit Competition**

Try your luck at winning a *Write a Romantic Novel in a Day workshop* with Sue Moorcroft in central London on Saturday 29 March, 2014 courtesy of [WriteStars](http://writestars.co.uk/)!

Simply answer: **What is the name of the heroine in Sue Moorcroft’s new novel*Is This Love?*And state why you’d like to win this prize**(in no more than 150 words). Email your replies to: info@choc-lit.com with ‘Sue Moorcroft Competition’ in the Subject heading.

The competition closes at midday on 24 December 2013.  The winner will be notified by email on 2 January 2014 and announced on Facebook and Twitter. That’ll be a happy New Year for one lucky winner!

**Grace Dieu Writers' Circle Tenth Anniversary Writing Competition 2014**

Closing date: 28th February, 2014.
**Grace Dieu Writers’ Circle 2014 Poetry Competition
Prizes:** 1st Prize £500, 2nd Prize £200, 3rd Prize £100, 4th Prize £75, 5th Prize £50.
**Entry Fees:** £5 for your first story and then £3 for each additional story.
**Grace Dieu Writers’ Circle 2014 Short Story Competition
Prizes:** 1st Prize £500, 2nd Prize £200, 3rd Prize £100, 4th Prize £75, 5th Prize £50.
**Entry Fees:** £4 for one poem or £12 for four. £3 for each additional entry over four.
<http://www.gracedieuwriterscircle.co.uk>

**Writers' & Artists' Yearbook 2014 Short Story Competition**

For the chance to win £500, plus a place on an Arvon writing course of your choice! All you have to do is enter a short story (for adults) of no more than 2,000 words, on the theme of '**the visit**' and email it to **competition@bloomsbury.com** with "**WAYB14 competition**" as the subject line.

The closing date is **midnight on Saturday 15th February** . The winners of the competition will be announced on this site in March 2014.



**ESSEX WRITERS – POETRY & PROSE COMPETITION 2014**

Deadline : 28th February 2014. Three titles to choose from:

**I’ll Always Remember - Moving On - My Favourite Month**.

The diversity and scope of subjects covered by the 2013 entries was outstanding. You can read some examples of the pieces which gained 3rd prize on our website [www.ageukessex.org.uk](http://www.ageukessex.org.uk/)

1. You need to be aged 50 or over and have once or now live in Essex. 2. Entries must truly reflect your own experiences and may not have been published elsewhere or submitted to Age UK Essex previously 3. Entries must be received by 28 February 2014. 4. One piece of prose OR poetry will be accepted from you in each category. 5. Prose should be no more than 1,500 words, hand-written or typed in Word on single-sided A4 paper. Poetry on only one side of A4 paper. 6. Each entry to be clearly marked with the title, your name and date of birth. (You may dictate your entry to someone else; however they must confirm the use of your words). 7. Each entry to be accompanied by an application form which can be downloaded from [www.ageukessex.org.uk](http://www.ageukessex.org.uk/)

8. We would prefer, if possible, to receive your entry, attached to an e-mail, from you to me at: lysbeth.boomer-hawkins@ageukessex.org.uk 9.

**World City Stories Short Story Competition**

Write a story set in one of the world’s cities. Maximum 3500 words. Closes February 2014. First Prize 100 Euros. Go to:

<http://worldcitystories.com/>

**2013: By the Book**

Here’s a month by month look back at 2013 and some of the books we may have missed:

January **'The Death of Bees'** by Lisa O’Donnell

This darkly funny though sometimes obscene novel tells the story of two girls with bad parents who decide not to tell anyone when those parents die.

February **'Vampires in the Lemon Grove'** by Karen Russell

A collection of eight stories including one about vampires whose marriage is strained when one of them develops a fear of flying.

March **'Dark Tide'** by Elizabeth Haynes

The story of a woman who saves up to buy a houseboat and start a new life. Things are looking up when she gets the boat, but then a dead body floats into the harbor…

April **'All That Is'** by James Salter

The story of a World War II veteran who becomes a book editor after the war. It is an inside glimpse in an intimate and very different publishing industry, but it is also a story about the ins and outs of love.

May **'Inferno'** by Dan Brown

Robert Langdon returned in probably the most hyped book of the year.

June **'The Ocean at the End of the Lane'** by Neil Gaiman

*The Ocean at the End of the Lane* mixes Gaiman's penchant for fantasy with horror.

July **'Amy Falls Down'** by Jincy Willett

Amy Gallup, a teacher and book reviewer, literally falls down into a bird bath in her backyard. After her fall, she gives a rambling interview that is taken for genius rather than recovering head injury.

August **'Archangel**' by Andrea Barrett

Five fact-filled short stories about science and characters involved in the passion and politics surrounding progress.

September **'Help for the Haunted'** by John Searles

Sylvie Mason's parents go to an abandoned church at night to rescue her runaway older sister, Rose. Sylvie, who is asleep in the car, is awakened by gun shots…

October **'Bellman & Black'** by Diane Setterfield

A dark tale of a man haunted by one cruel act he committed as a boy.

November **'The First Phone Call from Heaven'** by Mitch Albom

Considers what happens when the natural world is bridged with the afterlife and people have a chance to consider their lives from a bigger perspective.

December **‘What We Lost in the Dark’** by Jacquelyn Mitchard

Allie Kim's fatal allergy to sunlight, XP, still confines her to the night. Now that she's lost her best friend Juliet to an apparent suicide, the night has never felt darker.



**Mistletoe**

Mistletoe has, stretching back into pagan times, had a long connection with fertility and virility. After the 3rd century AD, when Christianity became widespread in Europe, the new religion integrated some of the religious and mystical aspects of the plant. There is reported, in fact, a Cornish legend that mistletoe was an ancient tree, the wood from which was used to make the Cross and since that time it was condemned to live as a parasite. Mostly we know mistletoe for the custom of kissing underneath it during the Christmas season. The earliest documentary evidence for this comes from 16th century England where it was apparently as popular then as it is today.

**The Christmas Quiz**

See if you can follow the tenuous connections in our Christmas quiz. The answers are at the bottom of the page.

1. The classic American musical film, White Christmas, directed by Michael Curtiz and starring Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, Vera-Ellen and Rosemary Clooney, was made in which year?
2. A parody of Micheal Curtiz’s 1938 movie, Angels with Dirty Faces, was used in which other, more modern, Christmas Classic from 1990 directed by Chris Columbus?
3. Incidentally Chris Columbus also wrote Gremlins, but for which recent mega-franchise did he direct the first two movies in 2001 and 2002?
4. Speaking of Gremlins: which iconic animated movie did the Gremlins enjoy at the local movie theatre? Coincidentally it was also Adolf Hitler’s favourite movie.
5. Hitler’s Austria, with the help of Father Joseph Mohr gave us which iconic carol on December 24th 1818, when the church organ broke down?
6. Famously Oliver Cromwell banned Christmas carols between 1647 and 1660 in England, but which actor connects the 1970 movie Cromwell and the first two movies of the Harry Potter franchise?
7. Once Cromwell had gone the people went back to singing at Christmas. However. Carols are traditionally only sung between December 21st and the morning of Christmas Day, but December 21st is attributed to which saint?
8. St. Stephen’s Day is on December 26th. St Stephen was the first martyr of Christianity, but how did he die?
9. Death is not one of the things we like to think about, least of all at Christmas, but which famous actor died on Christmas Day 1977 at the age of 88?
10. Seventy-two days earlier on October 14th 1977 another famous actor/singer died aged 74. This man recorded one of the all-time favourite Christmas songs. Who was he and what is the song?



Answers: 1.) 1954, 2.) Home Alone, 3.) Harry Potter, 4.) Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, 5.) Silent Night, 6.) Richard Harris played Cromwell and Dumbledore, 7.) St. Thomas, 8.) He was stoned to death for blasphemy, 9.) Charles Chaplin, 10.) Bing Crosby and ‘White Christmas’

**Noli Timere Messorem**

To remember some of those writers from whom we will hear no more, but whose work we would each try, in our own small way, to match. Starting with a lady whose own life story was more eventful than the novels she wrote:

**Ida Pollock (105)**

Illegitimate daughter of a Russian Duke, allegedly almost smothered at birth: life was always going to provide inspiration for her work.

**Richard Matheson (87)**

American author who gave us ‘I am Legend’ among others and also provided Steven Spielberg with the short story and screenplay for ‘Duel’ which launched the young directors career.

**Elmore Leonard (87)**

American novelist and screenwriter whose early works were mostly Westerns, but went on to write crime fiction and thrillers. Best known works include ‘Get Shorty’ and ‘3:10 to Yuma’.

**Tom Sharpe (85)**

English satirical novelist, best known for his ‘Wilt’ series. His writing was sometimes described as vulgar, crude and offensive, but he was also known as one of Britain’s funniest writers – vintage stuff!

**Seamus Heaney (74)**

Irish poet and playwright and the recipient of the 1995 Nobel Prize for Literature. Who doesn’t have a Seamus Heaney book on their shelf?

**James Herbert (69)**

Best-selling English horror writer, whose books have sold over 54 million copies! A master of putting the ‘horror’ into horrific.

**Sylvia Smith (67)**

Autobiographical author whose first book was published at the age of 56… so there’s hope for all of us.

**Tom Clancy (66)**

Tom Clancy’s technically detailed espionage and military novels became a brand in their own right, seventeen of which became bestsellers.

**Margaret Frazer (66)**

American historical novelist who wrote two series of books based in 15th century England, set just prior to and during The Wars of the Roses.

**Iain Banks (59)**

Acclaimed Scottish author of mainstream and science fiction. The Times named Banks in their list of “The Greatest British Writers since 1945”.

Gone form this world, but still on our bookshelves…

**Shona’s Christmas Word Search**

**A Christmas gift from Shona Mawby.**

**30 WORDS TO FIND:**

CHRISTMAS TREE SCROOGE

SANTA CLAUS ROBIN

DECORATIONS SNOWMAN

BAUBLES CARDS

JESUS YULE

RUDOLPH ELVES

MISTLETOE TINSEL

STOCKING CRACKER

ANGEL STAR

MANGER NUTCRACKER

PRESENTS LOG

CHRISTMAS PUDDING CAROLS

WRAPPING PAPER RIBBON

MULLED WINE SLEIGH

ICICLES REINDEER

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| K | R | D | H | P | E | S | O | B | E | A | N | K | W | V | R | T | I | U | E | C |
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| G | T | A | E | S | U | A | R | C | E | A | F | J | L | E | Q | S | S | D | D | T |
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| W | R | A | P | P | I | N | G | P | A | P | E | R | Y | S | T | E | C | H | G | H |
| P | E | D | A | R | T | T | Y | U | E | W | R | T | E | Y | U | P | L | O | N | F |
| M | U | L | L | E | D | W | I | N | E | Q | X | Y | U | I | S | L | E | I | G | H |

**A Christmas Carol Word search**

Hidden in the grid are ten words/names connected to Dickens’ Yuletide masterpiece, ‘A Christmas Carol’. Nine of the words are listed below the word search square: find them and the missing character’s name. Once you’ve done that see how many members of the Thurrock Writers’ Circle are hidden in there as well. (Words can be forwards or backwards, horizontal, vertical or diagonal.)

**The Words**

Ebenezer Scrooge,

Jacob Marley,

Bob Cratchit,

Old Joe,

Mrs Dilber,

Tiny Tim,

Fred,

Turkey,

Humbug,

+ the missing character.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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| E | C | H | A | R | L | O | T | T | E | J | E | L | L | Y | E | V | A | H |
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| N | A | M | P | E | H | S | E | R | S | G | H | O | J | T | O | N | T | I |
| I | C | E | F | T | B | A | R | B | A | R | A | B | A | L | L | T | O | E |
| C | K | M | A | I | R | E | N | E | P | E | G | H | C | I | W | P | F | T |
| K | E | B | E | N | E | Z | E | R | S | C | R | O | O | G | E | E | C | H |
| T | R | S | H | Y | L | E | C | K | A | L | C | W | B | A | T | S | H | R |
| E | I | E | Y | T | Z | R | H | U | M | B | U | G | M | A | R | Y | R | E |
| R | F | H | Z | I | R | N | Y | D | T | I | M | T | A | M | S | M | I | E |
| R | Y | A | C | M | C | O | D | G | S | H | S | O | R | S | T | R | S | K |
| Y | R | G | I | T | X | G | O | O | I | I | H | M | L | B | W | S | T | I |
| D | I | N | N | E | A | T | I | M | R | W | F | R | E | D | I | D | M | N |
| R | V | I | D | J | N | R | S | H | H | L | A | Z | Y | C | S | I | A | G |
| I | N | D | Y | T | D | U | C | A | C | U | Q | E | H | W | H | L | S | D |
| Z | E | D | R | E | Y | F | I | B | F | W | O | N | S | O | A | B | P | E |
| Z | B | U | N | S | O | O | G | J | O | Y | O | E | T | N | T | E | A | A |
| L | U | P | E | T | E | R | M | I | T | B | N | I | T | S | N | R | S | N |
| E | N | T | A | E | K | C | E | T | S | C | S | N | O | W | A | S | T | N |
| G | R | O | O | V | C | A | R | G | O | L | D | J | O | E | S | H | A | A |
| O | G | R | E | E | N | I | R | S | H | O | N | A | D | Y | E | R | G | O |
| D | A | N | I | E | L | L | E | A | G | A | T | B | R | E | V | R | E | S |

**Child’s Play**

Christmas is a time for children more than anyone else and so it seems an opportune moment to have a look at what it takes to write children’s fiction.

We are always advised to research our market so here are some lists of what’s been selling in 2013:

**Top ten Most interesting books.** (As rated by 300.000 child respondents in the UK between years 1 and 11)

1. Glass Houses by Rachel Caine
2. Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban by JK Rowling
3. Twilight by Stephanie Meyer
4. Alex Rider – Crocodile Tears by Anthony Horowitz
5. The Dead Girls Dance by Rachel Caine
6. Diary of a Wimpy Kid – The Ugly Truth by Jeff Kinney
7. Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire by JK Rowling
8. Mates, Dates and Sole Survivors by Cathy Hopkins
9. Survival by Chris Ryan
10. Percy Jackson – Battle of the Labyrinth by Rick Riordan

**Waterstones Lists (End of November 2013)**

1. Diary of a Wimpy Kid – Hard Luck by Jeff Kinney
2. Allegiant by Veronica Roth
3. Demon Dentist by David Walliams
4. Asterix and the Picts by Jean-Yves Ferri
5. Daylighters by Rachel Caine
6. House of Hades by Rick Riordan
7. The Slightly Annoying Elephant by David Walliams and Tony Ross
8. Superworm by Julia Donaldson and Axel Schiffer
9. Extra Special Treats by Tom Gates
10. Gangsta Granny by David Walliams

**Barnes and Noble Lists (December 2013)**

1. [Hard Luck (Diary of a Wimpy Kid Series #8)](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/hard-luck-jeff-kinney/1116360147?ean=9781419711329) by [Jeff Kinney](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/results.asp?ATH=Kinney+Jeff)
2. [Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/rush-revere-and-the-brave-pilgrims-rush-limbaugh/1116840170?ean=9781476755861) by [Rush Limbaugh](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/results.asp?ATH=Limbaugh+Rush)
3. [The Elf on the Shelf (Light Skinned - Boy)](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-elf-on-the-shelf-aebersold-carol-v/1113795044?ean=9780976990703) by [Carol V. Aebersold](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/results.asp?ATH=Aebersold+Carol+V.)
4. [The House of Hades (Heroes of Olympus Series #4)](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-house-of-hades-rick-riordan/1114974701?ean=9781423146728) by [Rick Riordan](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/results.asp?ATH=Riordan+Rick)
5. [If You Give a Mouse a Cookie](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/if-you-give-a-mouse-a-cookie-laura-joffe-numeroff/1115292644?ean=9780062305947) by [Laura Numeroff](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/results.asp?ATH=Numeroff+Laura)
6. [Percy Jackson and the Olympians 5-Book Boxed Set](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/percy-jackson-and-the-olympians-5-book-boxed-set-rick-riordan/1117047526?ean=9781423136804) by [Rick Riordan](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/results.asp?ATH=Riordan+Rick)
7. [Magic Tree House Boxed Set](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/magic-tree-house-boxed-set-osborne-mary-pope/1113013015?ean=9780375813658) by [Mary Pope Osborne](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/results.asp?ATH=Osborne+Mary+Pope)
8. [The LEGO Ideas Book](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/lego-ideas-book-dorling-kindersley-publishing-staff/1100059986?ean=9780756686062) by [Dorling Kindersley Publishing Staff](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/results.asp?ATH=Dorling+Kindersley+Publishing+Staff+)
9. [The Elf on the Shelf (Light Skinned - Girl)](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-elf-on-the-shelf-aebersold-carol-v/1113795048?ean=9780984365173) by [Carol V. Aebersold](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/results.asp?ATH=Aebersold+Carol+V.)
10. [The Day the Crayons Quit](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-day-the-crayons-quit-drew-daywalt/1113054468?ean=9780399255373) by [Drew Daywalt](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/results.asp?ATH=Daywalt+Drew)

There is only a small correlation between what kids rate as interesting and what books are sold. This probably has something to do with the fact that the kids aren’t the ones doing the buying. And before you begin to panic, the same survey discovered that classic children’s literature is still widely read, just not highly rated by the readers. As for a comparison between the US and UK book markets: well, one clear winner emerges: Jeff Kinney. His hugely successful ‘Diary of a Wimpy Kid’ series continues to crush all before it. The latest title in the series sold over 300.000 copies in its first week in the US alone!

What lessons can the aspiring children’s author learn from all this?

Fantasy is big. Whether it’s vampires, witches or visions of a dystopian future, kids love it. But most importantly, a series of books seems to have a marketing punch that a standalone novel can’t match. If the series is successful, later instalments help to fuel sales of earlier books and a wonderful positive feedback loop can launch the books to the top of the Bestsellers chart. The other important factor for selling your book is to have it made into a TV series or a movie, but for this to happen, it helps if it was successful in the first place.



**So what am I supposed to do?**

**Tell the Truth**

In any type of fiction writing, finding the right voice for a character is crucial, however in children’s fiction we have the added challenge of finding a voice that your child-readers will relate and respond to. Some would argue that this ‘authenticity’ of voice is more important in children’s stories than in any other genre: making the audience believe the author knows what it’s like to be eight years old, or twelve, or fifteen. We have, of course, all been there, but how well do we remember our own childhoods? And how relevant are those memories to the modern youth?

In many respects it seems like we’re shooting at a moving target, but when it comes down to the emotional truths of growing up, then these are unchanging, and the dilemmas and frustrations faced by a child in ancient Rome are, at their core, no different to those faced by children today.

**Go Fast Round the Corners**

The world has sped up over the last fifty years. Everything we do, we do faster. We just don’t have time to wait for things to develop. We want action and we want it NOW! Twenty first century media culture has built the beast that we try to feed and we’d better be quick about it.

Puffin Editor, Kaye Webb, has been quoted as saying that the most frequent advice that she gives to authors is: ‘Begin at chapter 2.’

So grab their attention and never let go.

**Speak Easy**

The need for speed means that the story has to be streamlined, and this is most easily achieved by allowing dialogue to drive the narrative. The modern reader doesn’t want a great deal of detail: they are impatient and don’t have time for tedious back story. Using dialogue, you can inform the reader of essential facts whilst simultaneously booting the story along at the breakneck pace that has come to be expected.

But on the subject of dialogue care has to be taken with slang. The general advice is to steer clear of any language that is fashionable today, as tomorrow it may, at best, leave readers cringing, or at worst, leave them baffled. Writing in the modern vernacular can make a story feel dated very quickly.

A good pop-culture reference is, however, not completely off the table. A conversation about ‘One Direction’ is as dangerous as having a character mutter ‘Yolo’ as they leave a room. But mentioning an iconic TV program like ‘Britain’s got Talent’ threatens no harm. The title is self-explanatory and will be understood in context this year, next year or in a hundred years.

**Animal Farm**

Children are unaware of the fact, but psychologists will happily explain why children can relate or empathise with animals more than adults can. Children have a similarly low status, are always taking orders, are never consulted, shouted at and scolded unfairly and often take the brunt of the stress and frustrations that adults fail to contain.

It’s no surprise therefore that children can identify so well with animals, nor is it a surprise that animals occur so often in children’s literature. Animals are important.

**The Dark Side**

The age of the target audience is crucial when calculating just how dark you can go, but children’s stories have always been about fear. The monster under the bed or in the wardrobe, the troll under the bridge, the wolf disguised as your grandmother. Adults like scaring children and children like being scared… a bit.

Fear is a strong, base emotion and is a powerful weapon in the writer’s arsenal. Definitely not to be avoided, but to be handled with care.

Humour can be a great aid to the writer when confronting frightening situations in literature: a safety valve that lets us laugh in the face of danger and convince ourselves that we aren’t really scared at all… not really.

However, no matter how dark we choose to go, we should always leave our readers with a kernel of hope. Few children will find a depressing story of certain failure entertaining, and whilst our heroes might even, in rare instances, die in the end, it might be better that they die winning, rather than losing.

**Know Your Reader**

The final piece of advice would be to stay in touch with your audience. Follow their reading habits; read what they read; if you have the chance, speak with them, the better to understand their own language, their hopes and dreams, and if at all possible get feedback from children on your work as you write: their advice will probably be more useful than the advice you will receive from many adults.

**Inspired?**

Every year The Times joins up with the publisher Chicken House and runs a Children’s Fiction Competition. Last year the prize was a £10,000 publishing contract with Chicken House. They’ll want a maximum 80,000 word manuscript aimed at children between the ages of 7 and 18. Usually the competition opens in April with entries received until the end of October. For information go to:

[www.thetimes.co.uk/competitions](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/competitions) or [www.doublecluck.com](http://www.doublecluck.com)



**Gold, Frankincense & Mirth**

How do you make an idiot laugh on Boxing Day? – Tell him a joke on Christmas Eve.

What do you get if you cross a snowman with a vampire? – Frostbite

What did one snowman say to the other snowman? – Do you smell carrot?

Who steals all your secrets at Christmas? – The Mince Spies.

Little Johnny unwraps his present and looks at the contents bemused.

“Gran, what the hell’s this?” He asks.

“But it’s what you said you wanted,” says Gran, “an egg box.”

**Little Johnny and the Curse of the Celebrity Author**

Writers have it hard enough as it is without a bunch of amateurs coming along and stealing their cheese, but that’s what seems to be happening more and more these days. That’s not to say that this is a new phenomenon: Shirley Temple had a successful series of books in the 1930s, Elizabeth Taylor wrote ‘Nibbles and Me’ in her teens and ‘Eloise’, by Broadway star, Kay Thompson, is still, apparently very popular in America.

However, over the last ten to fifteen years the trend for publishers to print any rubbish, so long as a house-hold name is attached, has developed at a worrying pace.

To make my point, here is a short list of just some celebrity children’s authors: Lenny Henry, Sting, Madonna, Jamie Lee Curtis, Gloria Estefan, Paul McCartney, Julie Andrews, Kylie Minogue, Whoopi Goldberg, Ricky Gervais, David Walliams, John Travolta, Jimmy Carter, John Lithgow, Dolly Parton, Mario Cuomo, Ed Koch, Sarah Ferguson, Prince Charles, Cal Ripken Jr., Billy Crystal, Barack Obama, Al Yankovich, Carly Simon, Steve Martin, Jay Leno, Judy Collins, Will Smith, Olivia Newton John, Jerry Garcia, Bill Cosby, Bob Dylan… Bob Dylan!! You’ve got to be kidding me! And the list goes on…

Now some of these people might have genuinely good, well told stories to share with their audience, however. If this were the case surely their books would become famous beyond the market from which the ‘authors’ fame originally stems. How many of you have read Cal Ripken Jr.’s ‘Hothead’ I wonder? How many of you know who Cal Ripken Jr. is? Well he’s popular in the States… less so here, I suppose. To put you out of your misery he was a Major League Baseball player. It would be about the same as John Terry writing a children’s story… well, maybe not exactly the same.

**Christmas – A Time for Writing**

In order to inspire our members here is a gauntlet, thrown down, and waiting to be picked up by you all. Much of this newsletter has been given over to the theme of children’s literature so for entry in the January edition please write a short children’s story (maximum 500 words) on the subject of ‘New Year’s Resolution’. Please send your submissions to twcnewsletter@yahoo.co.uk by January 3rd 2014, and have a

Madonna on the other hand, is world famous and it comes as no surprise to discover that her children’s books, no matter how much the critics hate them, sell well in many countries – a publisher’s dream.

If you look at any book chart in the UK at the moment you’ll realise that the flavour of the month in Children’s literature is David Walliams. Here is a celebrity who can actually write, or so we are lead to believe. But if that’s true surely his books will sell in markets where his fame has not yet reached. Check out the children’s book charts in the USA and there is no sign of Mr Walliams and while his latest book ‘Demon Dentist’ has almost 300 reviews on Amazon UK, it has only three on the US Amazon site (and zero in Japan, France and Brazil\*). Maybe the American’s didn’t like Roald Dahl the first time around, and an unknown impersonator isn’t going to win their hearts this time… especially one, whose writing is so UK-specific… who knows?

Publishers will argue that this trend is in fact good for authors, as the low risk profits that celebrity authors bring in allows them to take chances on less well known writers. But if it is true, as some agents and editors have confessed, that most of the work by celebrity authors would never make it past the slush pile then surely every book sold by a celebrity author is one less book-sale for all the other professional writers, and a poor introduction to literature for our children.

\*Demon Dentist is apparently not yet available in China, even though the publishers brag that Walliam’s books have been translated into 25 different languages, whilst ‘Monsieur Kipu’, as Amazon France customers know Mr Stink, has only 3 reviews in France and none in China as compared to 385 on Amazon in the UK.



**Merry**

**Christmas**

**The Gift of Receiving**

“I want an X-Box One, and ‘Call of Duty – Ghosts’ and ‘Battlefield 4’ and ‘Fifa 14’.”

*‘So do I kid, so do I*.’

This wasn’t the first time ‘Santa’ had made mental note of the overlap of what children wanted for Christmas and what adults wanted: the difference was that the kids were more likely to see their dreams come true.

But this was a familiar wish list; ‘Santa’ had heard similar requests for the past three weeks. He glanced at the mother, who stood with a mixture of pride and embarrassment as her one true love bared the heart of his consumer soul to the white bearded idol of the unnecessary.

He knew what signs to look for: a subtle wince here, a nervous half-smile there: the clear indicators that little Andrew here should think about scaling back his dreams.

“Oh, and Forza 5!” And yet their horizons were limitless.

“And have you been good this year?”

“Yes.” Firm conviction. But the mother’s narrowed eyes, ignored by little Andrew, told another story.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

The mother’s eyes opened in sad resignation and wandered away from her pride and joy as a silent sigh escaped her.

The boy was certain of his truthfulness and oblivious to his mother’s disappointment. He fidgeted in his seat next to Santa, looking this way and that. He was of an age that knew what to expect.

“Well then Andrew, you’ve certainly asked for a lot.” ‘Santa’ made sure that he had the boy’s attention. “We’ll just have to see what we can do.”

*‘How about a lump of coal? Something for you to think on this Christmas. But it wouldn’t do any good; you wouldn’t understand’* Thought Santa, ‘*My God! When did I get so old?’*  He turned his attention to the mother

“Are you having the photo?”

“Oh, no… just the…” She paused, apparently holding her breath as she glanced back and forth between ‘Santa’ and his female ‘Elf’ assistant, who quickly produced a small package wrapped in bright red paper adorned with a golden bow.

‘Santa’ knew the drill, as did Andrew to judge by his sharp focus on the gift.

The assistant stepped forward handing the present to ‘Santa’. The boys gaze followed it’s every movement and his mother smiled.

“This is for you.”

To the boy’s consternation actions did not match words, as the desired box remained firmly un-proffered. Mustering the closest approximation to ‘patient’ that he could manage, the boy waited for a few confounded seconds before looking up, his eyes questioning why he had not received what was clearly his. ‘Santa’, having the boy’s attention once more, could see the poor lad would never get it on his own.

“Now, what’s the magic word?”

A moment of fear flashed across the boy’s face and ‘Santa’ in response smiled broadly and snorted a small laugh.

*‘This kid seriously thinks there’s some code word and he doesn’t know it?’*

“Say, ‘Thank you’, Andy” The boy’s mother came to the rescue.

In a moment the boy had relaxed, finally aware of what was required.

“Thank you.” Uttered so matter-of-factly so as to deny the words any meaning at all.

Against his better judgement ‘Santa’ handed over the box, which, rapaciously grasped, was immediately assessed for weight and the sound its contents might make when shaken vigorously. Within seconds, satisfied that no more useful information could be learned, Andrew looked to his mother.

“Can I open it now?”

*‘At last. A chance to teach the boy a lesson.’*

Before the mother could get a word out, ‘Santa’ intervened.

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no.”

The boy swung back towards the bearded man, mouth open, eyes uncomprehending.

“No, no. That’s a Christmas Present, my boy. You can’t open that until Christmas Day.”

Had the child shown any self-control over his unbridled desires, or the slightest inkling of gratitude at the present he had just received ‘Santa’ would have left the decision to the parent. But a child such as this, would do well to wait. The sad thing was that it was four in the afternoon on Christmas Eve and the boy’s wait wouldn’t be anywhere near as long as ‘Santa’ would have liked.

The child’s well practiced face of appeal turned towards the one judge he knew would view his case kindly.

“There’re rules about these things, you know. Not even your mother can alter that.” ‘Santa’ wanted to quash the appeals process before it even started.

The decision taken out of her hands, the mother acquiesced.

“You ‘eard Santa, Andy. You’ll just have to wait.” She extended her hand to her son, who rose from his seat, his expression scrunched in concentration, ardently inspecting the box for any more clues.

“Be sure to put some carrots out for my reindeer tonight, won’t you.”

A half nod, and a grunt of acknowledgment was all the answer ‘Santa’ got.

“Thank you so much. Say ‘thank you’ to Santa Claus, Andy”

A slight shake of his hand finally elicited a response.

“Thank you.” But all attention was now on the gift.

“Merry Christmas.” ‘Santa’s’ well practiced sincerity echoed around the grotto as mother and son made to exit.

As the boy passed out of range ‘Santa’s’ right hand instinctively twitched; the only outward sign of the kindly Father Christmas’s desire to administer a quick clip round the ear.

“Yes, Merry Christmas to you, too.” The mother guided her distracted charge to the door, his finger now prying into the open fold of paper at the end of the box. A very slight ‘rip’ accompanied them out.

The door closed, but the voice still carried.

“Can I open it now?”