



**May 2017**

**Sovereign Words**

**Neil Wilson**

I thought at first it was a scam email; not one of the “you’ve been left a zillion dollars by a Nigerian benefactor” sort but rather a “congratulations! You’ve won a prize - claim it by sending us your bank details” type. My suspicions were further aroused by the “possibly unsafe” alert that accompanied the message. Then I reread it and realised I had indeed won – a flash fiction writing competition organised by the Lancashire Authors Association. Entries for this could be on any subject but had to be exactly 100 words long (excluding title).

Encouraged by this unexpected win - and over 95 other entrants - I have since attempted to repeat the feat in another three flash fiction competitions (all of 500 word length as it happens) but got nowhere. Not even longlisted but *C'est la vie!*

Oddly enough this reminds me of golf. I haven’t played it for 40 years but I can still recall the triumph of finally hitting that pesky dimpled ball with the “sweet spot” of the club, sending it booming straight and far down the fairway. Problem was such a high was always followed by the lows of balls sent scudding into the rough or bunkers.

I’m still chuffed of course by this win, which came about through reading the *Writing Magazine* regularly. Many of you know I am a fan of this monthly guide, as it not only provides much advice on the craft of writing and articles about writers and publishing but also lists writing competitions. Although it can be bought in a newsagent’s (for £4.10) , subscribing to it being mailed to you for a year is cheaper (at £40) as well as more convenient!

The prize was a cheque for £100 – so £1 for every word. If only the 80 – 90,000 word-long book I’m (slowly) working on could attract a similar rate of pay!

Here are those 100 words:

### **“Life after Death”**

I pick up my scalpel and bone-saw, then hesitate. Usually my patients scream in agony as they struggle against the restraints of straps and burly assistants. Speed is vital: I can amputate a leg in four minutes.

Six weeks ago a tempest smashed our frigate into matchwood on coral reefs, marooning us on an atoll. Disease and starvation have claimed the lives of most of my shipmates. Those left have stoked a fire and pressed me to act.

Poor Sam, the cabin boy, dead from fever. In life he served us well. Now in death he will feed us again.

At our **March meeting** silence descended as we each wrote on for fifteen minutes following an initial supplied sentence. Chris Manners wrote about this for the *Keighley News* and as his piece was such an apt description of what then went on in his head it is worth repeating here for those who do not read the *Keighley News*.

### **Forwards in any direction**

**Chris Manners**

So. Start with a given sentence, actually one of the best known in twentieth century fiction: “It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen.”

It’s the opening line from George Orwell’s *1984*, but that’s not the important thing; wouldn’t have mattered if it was a line from George Osborne’s first autumn statement, or from *Not the Nine O’clock News*. The rules are simple: take those few words — whether or not you’re familiar with the book, and actually better if you don’t know it at all — and for twenty minutes of the most furious concentration you can muster, extend them into a new piece of work.

Go on, scribble. Put aside all thoughts of *Big Brother* (the sinister dictator in the book, not the ghastly TV programme. Actually, put aside all thoughts of that as well); put aside all thoughts of *Room 101* (the scary prison cell in the book, not the ghastly TV programme. Hmm, there I go again). Just . . . scribble.

The point of the exercise is to loosen everything up. Start with an unfamiliar idea, one that you’d never choose for your own. Run with it; don’t let yourself think it’s not good enough, or it’s not “You” enough, or somebody’s done it before.

Don’t get it right. Get it written. And tell the inner censor to shut up, well and truly. Get something on the page and you can always go back and fix it later: change it, rephrase it, improve it; throw it away and have another go. The important thing is, you’ve got something to work with; more — and better — than an empty page and a stewed forehead.

Twenty minutes isn’t long, whether you’re typing or writing longhand in your best illegible scrawl; my own effort didn’t reach 200 words and the last few lines

were a blur. But there was something there, something that existed, when twenty minutes earlier there was nothing. And because something exists, there's also a small feeling of triumph: I did it. I made something out of nothing.

We were a select group that Tuesday evening, and not perhaps as diverse as we might have been. But even though we started from exactly the same point, the same words . . . you'd be amazed at the difference in the responses.

*...and below are three of those responses:*

**Chris Manners:**

Against all the doomsayers' predictions, the decision to leave the European Union was a resounding success. The economy boomed and prosperity rose, especially after the nation forswore the metric system and returned to Imperial measures. Metres became yards, feet and inches once more; now again there were twelve pennies to the shilling and twenty shillings to the pound. Little plastic packs of five washers or brass-headed picture pins were back to holding a dozen. And still the investment rivers poured in and couldn't be stemmed.

In his emergency budget the Chancellor of the Exchequer went back to even older measures. Exchanging the sterling pound for the guinea helped to stop the raging inflation, if only for a minute or two, by cramming in the extra shilling. By swapping miles for leagues we could go nearly three times further. And the twenty four hour clock was broken into two bakers' dozens, thirteen hours to each half day. It left more time for shopping.

**Pat Farley:**

"Old Tom's gonna have a job t'day putting all those things right" said Jess, "You wouldn't be too surprised if one was wrong, but how the hell did they all get diarrhoea at once?"

Grandma said "I'm not surprised, it's all this food that's coming from the EU."

"Don't be daft, Mum" Rob chided affectionately, "It's more likely the thin oil."

"D'ya think it's because the clocks have jumped forward?" wondered Jess, "It properly upsets my sleep and digestion so what about the cows?"

Rob became impatient. "The cows don't know what time it is."

"Oh yes they do!" grandma was emphatic. "They're always waiting to come to the shed when it's milking time."

Jess had thought that too and had worked out that if the world had been hit by a big enough meteor it might have jolted all the clocks into doing this strange thing. Anyways, it didn't really matter that much, did it?

## **Neil Wilson:**

..and at two o'clock they struck 14, at three o'clock 15 and so on to 24 at midnight. Julius Caesario – self-styled Emperor of Basutoland – congratulated himself on his maddening reconstruction of Time, declaring to the figurine of Napoleon Bonaparte on his desk “Thanks to you, Boney, for showing me the way in changing everything. Now that I’m in charge I’m gonna alter absolutely everything and I wanted to make clocks chime according to the 24 hour clock not just to be different, and sort of modern, but as it will keep many folk awake till midnight it will boost productivity in the night shift in factories. That still means them lazy workers can nod off between midnight and morning so when folk are used to my system I’ll tweak it a little – well a lot – by introducing a 48 hour clock so that 1 am is marked by 25 chimes, 2 am by 26 etc on alternate nights.

Only problem is then clocks are gonna wear out a lot quicker but my mate Mugabe says his people will gladly help out with really cheap labour in all the clock-making factories I’ll need to keep my scheme going.”

## **Please don't go....**

...but if you have to please let us know. That's a sly way of avoiding using the heading *Subscription Reminder*, to ask those who don't intend to renew their annual subscription to let Chris Manners know... and those who haven't yet stumped up the required dosh to please bring a cheque or cash to the May meeting or post to Chris.

The Good News is that the charges remain unchanged, at £25 for those in work and £20 for those who are not.

Chris's address is unchanged – it's still “Wingfield”, Hollins Lane, Utley, Keighley BD20 6LU.

## **AWC Events:**

**June 13<sup>th</sup>:** Members' evening: format to be decided (and see below)

**July 11<sup>th</sup>:** Talk and poetry reading by Lola Haskins, a much published poet who lives most of the year in her native USA but spends every May to July in little old Skipton! She loves attending local writing groups, to the extent even of waiving her usual fee – though would love us to buy some of her books. This promises to be an unusual and intriguing meeting and so not one to miss!

## Drystone Radio visit:

David Adams – who set up this local radio some sixteen years ago – contacted me recently to offer us the chance to visit his station (in Cowling). In particular he suggested this be on a Tuesday evening (from 7 to 9pm) when writer David Driver comperes a live programme devoted to literary matters. Members can, if they wish, contribute with a reading of their short stories or poems either live there (yes, scary – but surely fun?!) or record their work in another studio for later transmission. (David assures me all the “ums” and “ers” we utter in such recordings are edited out!).

We’ll be split up into groups of fours and rotate in turn through these two studios and another room. You’ll infer correctly from this scheme that there’s a maximum number of 12 who can attend at any one time.

As to when, I suggest the following options:

1. June 13<sup>th</sup> – our members’ evening.
2. Any other Tuesday evening in June or July except for July 11<sup>th</sup> (see above in events) and depending on any other group bookings.
3. Our August meeting on the 8<sup>th</sup> – though David wondered if that would be too affected by absenteeism due to holidaying (by us and his staff).

Please indicate your choice, either to me or Chris. (I will be absent, alas, for both the May and June AWC meetings – but can always visit Drystone another time if the majority elect to go on June 13<sup>th</sup> as the minimum number for visiting there is only three.)

## Origins and derivations

**Flabbergasted:** from *flabby*, with its connotations of a mouth gaping wide in astonishment, and *gasten*, to frighten (hence aghast and ghost). That “h” crept in during the earliest days of printing when William Caxton hired printers from Flanders who added this letter to the Old English *gast*.

**A Hiding to nothing:** from a 19<sup>th</sup> century expression applied to a horse being thrashed but with no prospect of winning its race.

**Phoney:** from *fawney*, itself derived from the Irish *fáinne* – a finger ring. The “fawney rig” is a centuries old deception in which the fraudster drops a gilted brass ring before the person to be cheated, picks it up and, passing it off as a gold ring, sells it for many times its true value.

**Profanities:** from the Latin *pro fanum*, meaning “outside the temple” – that is, heathen.

**Magpie:** shortened from the original “maggoty pie”. *Maggoty* was a pet form of Margery and Margaret and *pie* comes from *pica* - the Latin name for this bird. The magpie’s habit of collecting all sorts of objects also led to “pie” being adopted as a name for a dish of assorted ingredients

## **And Finally....**

Dorothy Parker (1893 – 1967) was famed for her ascerbic reviews of books and plays, pithy repartee, and viciously humourous verse. Given Obama’s oratory and Trump’s twittering it may be a surprise to learn that a past President of the USA – Calvin Coolidge - was renowned for being markedly taciturn. Dorothy Parker’s response to news of his death in 1933 was “how could they tell?” but it is her scathing comment on a pre-war Broadway play that excels as distilled wit, with her review of “Yes!” consisting of just one word: “No!”

There are precedents for such brief responses. In 356 BC Philip the Second of Macedon, having invaded Southern Greece and compelled many of its city-states to submit to his rule, sent this message to Sparta: “If I invade you, all will be destroyed, never to rise again.” The Spartans enjoyed a reputation for verbal austerity. Indeed they regarded loquacity as a sign of frivolity. Their reply to the Macedonian message typified what would later be described as a “laconic” response (after the region of Laconia that included the city of Sparta), consisting as it did of just one word: “If.”