

# Anna Wharton's Working Class Anthology

Mentees 2021 - 2022

An anthology featuring working class writers as part of Anna Wharton's mentorship programme.

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# Introduction

One thing struck me when reading through the works in this anthology – the number of these writers whose words concern home and family.

People of working class backgrounds can sometimes feel that our home life, our family life, isn't much to write home about. In fact, some of us even write different stories simply to escape it. My stepdad was usually drunk on a Friday when I came home from school. I'd walk into my street on the council estate where I lived and I'd hear eighties' music blasting out of the open kitchen windows: Eddy Grant; UB40; The Police.

I'd say goodbye to my schoolfriend and feel shame that it was that house – of all the houses – I needed to go into. Why not one of those posh ones on the other side of the lake? The ones with the garages attached and the shiny cars parked in front of them?

My mum wasn't a writer, she worked for a double glazing firm, but she rewrote our history, she bought our council house, she moved us off the council estate we had loved for sixteen years, we 'bettered' ourselves yet by doing so we lost the community that shaped my childhood.

Three decades later, I'm proud of my working class background, and the fact that many of the writers you will read here have chosen to write about home, returning home, family, old stories, and even old wounds, makes me think that they are proud too.

And so we should be.

Perhaps we realise now that we don't have to rewrite our stories, we don't have to edit them into something a little more socially acceptable, we simply need to tell them.

So much good art comes out of those little estates. Back in the eighties, working class heroes inspired a disaffected youth with their art, their words, their music. We grew up thinking we could do anything, be anyone. What will young people be inspired by today? A few angry tweets?

I have felt honoured to work with these working class writers, their determination, work ethic and passion is borne out of similar humble beginnings to the ones I have described. Please enjoy their work, champion them as I hope I have done, and if you are a published writer, consider supporting others who might not ordinarily gain entrance into, what seems like, the closed publishing world – just one person if you're pushed for time. Demystify it for them, share the secrets, introduce them to the people you know – it will be one of the most rewarding things you ever do.

It has been for me.

- Anna Wharton



# The Writers

# Nicola Fieldsend

*The Bachelor of Beaumont*

Fiction • Historical • 115k

## Biography

I am a marketing and copywriting professional with a passion for fiction. As a writer, I love exploring emotionally complex characters in settings that whisk readers away to another world. I have been mentored and tutored by authors Sunny Singh, Okechukwu Nzelu, and Nik Perring. In 2022, I was shortlisted for the Darley Anderson Summer Reads and longlisted for The Book Edit Writers' Prize.



October 2021 Mentee

## Synopsis

On the eve of choosing a wife, a gay Regency aristocrat accidentally transports to the present day where he meets a historian who tries to uncover a past he'd rather forget. Upon his return to 1811, scandalous secrets threaten his family's legacy, and he must decide his own future: marry the woman history remembers, or defy everything to be with the man he truly loves.

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# Nicola Fieldsend

Extract from *The Bachelor of Beaumont*

“Edward Harrington. The Viscount Harrington.”

A sea of finely coiffured heads turned as one. Whispers started as a ripple, before they gained speed, rushing towards Edward like a tidal wave. It swept over him and down his shirt, which was already sticking to his back.

The music resumed, and Edward could do nothing but surrender himself to the crowd. They greeted, nodded and curtsied, but Edward could feel their eyes all over him, in his hair and clothes, desperate to get at the layers he kept hidden. Society whispered his name in short, eager breaths, but all Edward heard was the hiss of venomous snakes. In a world of obscene wealth, gossip was the chosen currency, a method in which one could bargain, blackmail and bribe their way to the top.

Despite the dark pressing against the windows, the vast hall was as bright as a summer's day, with hundreds of candles laden upon chandeliers. Alabaster columns, as wide as five men stood together, towered above their heads, swagged with opulent green velvet. Fragrant flowers frothed from enormous vases, while tureens of punch soaked the air with liquor. Its magnificence could not be denied, and Edward felt a hook of guilt snag in his stomach. This was all for him. His celebration. His moment. His engagement.

Fighting through the swarm of society, Edward reached the outskirts and ducked behind a column. He swiped a glass of wine from a footman and drank until it numbed his panic, sedating him for what was to come.

Then, his name fired, as sudden as a bullet. “Edward!”

His mother strode towards him like a general across a battlefield, her armour diamonds and silk. She glistened from wig to heel, dragging heavy mauve skirts that dominated the space around her. She forced the revellers to part, if not by the width of

of her petticoats, then by the way she carried herself, steps that would walk over rather than around another.

Edward straightened. Shoulders tense, heels together. He snapped into a bow.

“You are late,” sniffed Lady Beaumont.

“Forgive me,” he replied. “I lost track of time.”

Lady Beaumont’s lips pursed, as if she was debating admonishment, when she surrendered the opportunity. Instead, she lifted her chin to observe the ballroom with quiet pride, looking upon it like it was her own private collection.

“Is this not a fine gathering? I dare say I have excelled myself.”

“Your reputation precedes you, Mama.”

“Our reputation, Edward.” Her eyes grazed over a red-faced marquess, who sloppily poured another glass of punch. “They most eagerly await your news. Indeed, a match of such renown is a celebration for us all.”

Edward sighed. “You know I did not ask for this, Mama. Why make this such a public affair?”

“Because society is not conducted in private.” Her voice hardened, a subtle edge, like a blade hidden in petticoats. “Do you think I host these balls for mere enjoyment? No. In these rooms, we create history. It is what separates us from the trade. They will be forgotten, we shall not.”

Edward studied the dregs in his glass. It had already depleted more than he would like, for it was not the first time he had endured his mother’s zealous speeches. He knew full well what they expected, not just of him, but of this family. Their ancestors had gained status, a position of power, and now he had a responsibility to maintain it.

The country dance came to a rousing climax, and the long lines of couples clapped and cheered as if they had not a care in the world. But Edward knew the truth of it. They were as false as the door in his study. For a ballroom was no more than a theatre, each of them actors committed to their parts. Every word considered, each glance rehearsed, even the exact motion of a fan, followed a script penned by people like his mother.

It was a performance Edward had known his entire life.

“What news of my father?” he asked. “Is he still abed?”

“His health ails him, but he insisted tonight’s ball went ahead. You should take heed of his wishes, Edward. You wasted enough years traversing the continent on your Grand Tour. It is high time you were married, to give this family some security. A son will do just that.”

He didn’t look at her. “You have made me well aware of my duty. What would you have me do?”

Lady Beaumont fluttered her fan, smothering him with dense perfume. “The duke’s daughter has waited patiently for your arrival. You will grant her two dances before declaring your proposal.”

Edward took another drink, this one draining it. He hardened his jaw and nodded. “Very well,” he declared, setting down the empty glass. “Let us settle the matter. Where is she?”

“I do believe she was speaking to that poet friend of yours.”

Panic seared up Edward’s spine like a spark on a fuse. He showed no reaction but a flare of his nostrils. Without another word, he strode across the ballroom, pushing through the clustering crowd and ignoring their greetings. He searched, asking for the whereabouts of his would-be wife. Their answers led him out of the ballroom, deeper into the house, and past the study he had left only moments before.

The door was ajar.

Edward frowned. Had some drunken fool dared to venture into his quarters? Though the house was open to exploration, his private rooms were always out of bounds.

Jaw tightening, Edward gripped the doorknob and burst inside. The door flew open to reveal the study left much as it was; the enormous hearth ablaze, his winged armchair positioned just so — and upon his desk, an amorous couple.

His future was in the arms of another.



# Alex Neve

*Cherry*

Fiction • Romance • 87k

## Biography

I began writing short films and sketches alongside columns for Funny Women online. My short Little Blue Envelopes was shortlisted for the Nespresso Talents Short Film Contest 2018. In October 2021 I was selected to be mentored by Anna Wharton as part of her Working Class Writers Group and began to write *Cherry*. The extract was long-listed for The 2022 Book Edit Prize.



October 2021 Mentee

## Synopsis

Kate Simmonds is looking for good sex. Or is it love? She's not quite sure. Wildly unsuccessful, poor and with a constant trail of disappointing men lagging behind her, she's lost. When asked to return home and deliver a eulogy at school friend Amber's funeral, she delves back into her diary for inspiration, revisiting her first sexual experience, and unearthing years of guilt and shame.

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# Alex Neve

Extract from *Cherry*

There is a picture, if you care to scroll deep enough through my camera roll of all of us together. Everyone is present. Even her, even him. It far predates the smartphone and is a scanned copy of a developed photograph, matte in finish so therefore grainy and blurred but it's my favourite photo. A moment captured well before selfie's and ring lights were the mode of everyday photography. Its subjects, all blissfully lack self consciousness, no idea how this image will turn out. There will be no retaking it, no practised angles. It is a moment of pure joy captured forever and I love it.

I wanted to tell the two young girls who got off the train at Woking (after spending fifteen minutes snapping away at their own contoured faces) that the best photo that will ever be taken of them will be the one taken by someone else. The one where they are laughing, unaware of the lens focusing in on them. But they were young and if someone tried to dispense that sort of vacuous wisdom to me as a nineteen year old I'd tell them to Fuck Off. Well, truthfully, I would more than likely apologise and then wrongfully assume they were an angel or my future self, reading far more into their words than I probably should have. She would have told them to Fuck Off though. She would have made them cry.

I've always found it hard to shake her and the tangle of emotions that formed the basis of our friendship but, over recent years, distance has made it increasingly easier to waft him from my thoughts. Sometimes, weeks can pass and I'll have forgotten about him entirely then, there he'll be, as if from nowhere, memories flashing before me as the Central Line hammers into Mile End.

Thrumming with hate filled desire, what tends to follow is forty minutes of fantasising about him on the tube, before I hop off into my day and try to concern myself with work.

The event of her passing however, has brought it all crashing back and choosing to browse through my old diary entries for inspiration for a eulogy I probably shouldn't be giving has selfishly, only worsened it.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see it. The spiral spine wedged between my make-up bag and a muddle of the next few days underwear I'd hastily packed. The make-up bag is by far the prettier side of the diary sandwich when compared to the greying knickers. Navy and embossed with gold bumblebees, it's one of the fancier things I own, owing to it being a gift from Lucy. Anything I've purchased myself is, like my underwear, dull and cheap.

I toy with the idea of plucking it out and browsing through my teenage scrawl but, the wimp within me wins, and I decide to stare out the window instead, hitting play again on the "Stevie Nicks Performs Never-Before-Seen Version of Gypsy" video I've been listening to on repeat since we left the station.

We are rolling past some lovely little homes. My heart dips slightly as I peer into long terraced gardens bursting with evidence of fully formed lives: Swing sets and large paddling pools, patio furniture and pizza ovens. A lifestyle leagues away from my current living situation.

I neck the dregs of my coffee as we flash past Winchester. I'd gotten the 10:43 to Weymouth from Waterloo Station which should have arrived at Southampton Central for midday but due to a young man having a panic attack and yanking on the emergency cord as we reached Basingstoke, we are running late. The fellow in question was sporting a neck scarf in the fashion of Pete Doherty during the mid noughties. In fairness, I'd be beside myself too if I realised I was stuck in 2006.

Opposite me, an old lady is dozing against the window. She looks calm, contented and completely unconcerned by the fact her tote bag is splayed wide open, proudly displaying its contents. With just a cursory glance I spy a twenty pound note, an iPad (presumably with the latest episode of *Call The Midwife* queued up and ready to roll if she ever bothers to wake up) and an address book which more than likely contains passwords

and pin numbers noted neatly among its pages.

*It's really rather trusting of her to be snoozing like this, for all she knows I could be a skilled pickpocket like the Artful Dodger or Awkwafina in that Oceans remake... I think, surveying her face.*

Noticing a wiry silver hair sprouting from a mole on her chin, I manage to resist the urge to reach over and ping it free. Instead, I find myself wishing I could be so relaxed in public spaces, that the daily thoughts and worries that patter through my brain could just be silenced. I've already scanned the carriage for any potential threats (muggers/sexual predators/screaming children and or/terrorists) and have planned an appropriate escape route (hide in the toilet and cry).

*This old lady was probably born mid air raid, growing up on powdered eggs and still managed to be a normal functioning human being...That's why she can sleep soundly unlike you...What must she think of you...?*

I look down at the six scratch cards my nicotine stained fingers had been frantically scrubbing a two pence piece against when she'd taken her seat opposite me. Normally, I'd only treat myself to three but on account of my losing two days wages because I don't benefit from annual leave, I'd splashed out on double in the hope that in a strange turn of events, the universe would toss me some luck for once. Rolling next to the discarded scratchers is an empty bottle of Coke Zero that I'd stuffed a piece of chewing gum inside and a Starbucks cup that I've gnawed the rim of.

*So from first impressions Kate, I'd say she thinks: Addiction issues both gambling and caffeine... Lucky she didn't spy the family sized bar of Galaxy you made your way through before Clapham Junction...You really are a fat, useless cow...It's the weight that's the real issue here*

*Kate...FAT!* My unkind mind on a roll now and clearly choosing to ignore the body positivity messages pumping through my social media.

I'm the sort of shape that naturally thin women and bulimics feign jealousy of. Their mealy mouths crowing on about my voluptuousness: "Oh but you're so curvy, I'd love an arse" or, "But men love curves! Something to grab onto!". Maybe they're being honest? Perhaps just polite but, the facts remain the same, there would be tears before teatime if they had to spend just one afternoon trying to stuff this "arse" into any item of clothing from Zara.

The bulimics are right about one thing though: Men have always had a rather ravenous desire to fuck me. In fact, I suppose he was the only one who didn't.

# Anita Butler

*'Vagina Town'*

Fiction • Women's/Book Club • TBC

## Biography

I was an English teacher for 15 years before becoming a freelance proofreader working with, among others, the team behind Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Centre. I have written for the Huffington Post and local media in Devon, and also blog about arts, animal rights, mental health, and women's issues. In December 2021 I was selected to be mentored by Anna Wharton as part of her Working Class Writers Group. I am currently writing my first novel, *Vagina Town*.



December 2021 Mentee

## Synopsis

After moving to Starhavern, Iris Nightingale becomes obsessed with a black cat and is pursued by the mysterious Barbara. As Iris creates a new life, she also has to deal with her sleazy boss and help prevent a coffee chain takeover. Along the way she uncovers the secrets behind the town's surreal goings-on. Will the cat be hers? Who is Barbara? Can Starhavern be saved from corporate disaster?

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# Anita Butler

Extract from *Vagina Town*

The rat gasped, a pile of fluffy greyish-brown fur and gleaming crimson. Iris thought to rescue the poor animal but it was too late. Whether it was aware she was there or not, the cat was focussed on its expert filleting. Crouched over its prey, ears splayed and eyes wide, it seemed huge—like a panther—but with a daintiness, its movements tidy and precise. Possessed of an innocence and purity of action, it seemed to affirm all was right with the world. Iris felt it almost a privilege to be a witness to this private, sacred moment of simple nature... of catness.

Afraid to move and cause the bare floorboards to creak, Iris stood transfixed. Then something, a sensation, made her look down. She quickly pulled up her dress.

Oh, for fuck's sake!

A sticky trickle of blood ran down the inside of her leg. Iris walked as quietly as she could into the bathroom, sat down and looked at her knickers, which were stained red-brown, and sighed—as if there wasn't enough blood being shed in this place already. The insides of her thighs looked as though they'd been brushed with rust-coloured paint and the water in the toilet bowl billowed with crimson clouds, puffs and spirals. There was no toilet paper and all Iris had was an old tissue in her pocket. She mopped up the blood on her leg, screwed the tissue up and shoved it inside her, packing it in tightly with her finger, before pulling her knickers up again. Everything she owned was in boxes and bin liners in the back of the rented van she'd driven down to Starhaven overnight. She'd been too tired to bring anything in to the flat when she arrived, other than her rucksack, which contained her wallet, phone, laptop, and a bottle of water. She would have to pop back out and see if she could find some sanitary towels, which were packed away.

But not before checking in on the butchery in the bedroom. To Iris' surprise the cat had disappeared, leaving its mutilated housewarming gift at the end of the bed. The rat's perfect internal organs spilled out of its body, glistening like wet pebbles, while blood

seeped into the gaps between the floorboards, upon which Iris could also see several sets of large bloody paw prints leading to the French doors, which she'd opened before going to bed.

It was still early, only about eight, and already hot. Out in the car park, Iris blinked in the bright sunlight, seagulls screaming and spiralling above her as she climbed in the back of the van. "May as well have slept in here," she thought. Her first night's sleep in her new flat had been fitful, although the mattress was comfortable enough. She found the bag she wanted and a bucket and, although feeling tired and weak, heaved her accordion on to her back (like dogs, accordions die in hot vehicles as the wax between the bellows will melt). It was heavy, and all Iris could carry: Rob's ashes would have to stay in the passenger footwell for now. Dragging herself back up the stairs, Iris knew the tissue would already be soaking. As she pulled it out, it was hot and heavy, a long red oval shape crowned with a blackberry-coloured clot. She wrapped it in a bag and reached for two squares of white cotton towelling, which she folded into long thick strips and placed between her legs.

Iris then placed another plastic bag over her hand and walked back into the bedroom, where the rat was lying on its broken back, its neck stretched and the eyes on its little toothy face bulging. Iris knelt down, her emotions swinging between sadness and repulsion. The rat had a long tear down its stomach and was soft and difficult to grip through the plastic. As Iris stretched out her arm and grasped at it, more innards and blood spilled out onto the wooden floor, as slippery as soap. Iris scooped up what she could and pulled the bag over, tying the handles in a loose knot. This rat had been unlucky but perhaps its murder had sent a signal to other rats and mice, who might now keep away.

The next step was to get rid of it.



# Laura McDonagh

*Commonplace*

Non-Fiction • Memoir • 80k

## Biography

I write about memory, the 90s, grief, what we mean by 'home' and the experience of the Irish in Britain. My memoir *Commonplace* was listed for Penguin WriteNow in 2020, the Life Writing Prize in 2021 and a Northern Writers' Award in 2022. My writing has been published in *Severine* and *MIROnline*. I am a former teacher and expat and run a copywriting business. @LauraMcWrites.



January 2022 Mentee

## Synopsis

Growing up in Washington, Tyne and Wear - a North East no-man's-land her Irish parents ended up in 'by accident' - Laura McDonagh learnt that aspiration meant many things. But most importantly, it meant being somewhere else. A coming-of-age story meets grief memoir for readers of Sinéad Gleeson and Jessica Andrews.

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# Laura McDonagh

Extract from *Commonplace*

Sunderland General Hospital, December 2019

The doctor on duty the night Mam dies is called Laura.

“Me too!” I say, suddenly and absurdly cheerful. “That’ll be easy to remember!”

She’s wearing sensible glasses, dark hair scraped back into a ponytail, papery blue scrubs. Her mouth is a tight line.

We were in bed when the phone calls came, mobiles switched to silent mode. We slept on, unaware that, as we tossed and dreamt, paramedics in Dr Marten boots were leaving a trail of dirty footprints up Mam and Dad’s immaculate staircase. We didn’t know that Dad had FaceTimed my older sister and, disorientated, flipped the camera round to reveal the chaotic scene: sticky pads, scissors, breasts exposed. Clare, a GP six hours’ drive away in Cardiff, knew things were serious. Having tried and failed to reach me, she managed to speak to my father-in-law, who had the idea of ringing the village pub. We were eventually woken by Sally, the landlady, banging on our front door. Why does bad news always arrive in the dark? We flung things into a bag – a phone charger, a make-up bag, no pyjamas or hairbrush – raised a friend from her sleep to come over and mind the boys while we drove up the A19 from York, dread growing as we drove further North and rolling fields gave way to industrial estates and cooling towers. At one point I could hear howling; then I realised it was coming from me.

Now we’re in a critical care side room, squashed onto a vinyl sofa. I know that we are on a threshold, almost destroyed but not yet, not quite – not if I can keep things in the realm of inane coincidence. But it’s impossible. Like Wile E Coyote over a ravine with a fridge strapped to his back and legs circling wildly, no amount of flailing can help us now. We plunge headlong into the after.

“There’s nothing more we can do,” the doctor says. My ears fill with roaring and

my scalp prickles cold as she keeps talking, and her voice gets thick and gluey like I'm listening to her underwater or I've been shot with a tranquiliser. She tells us that the bleed was "massive and catastrophic" (when is a brain haemorrhage not catastrophic, I want to ask?), that even if they could revive you, you'd no longer be the person we knew. She adds that you'd hardly have known what was happening; that when Dad found you wide-eyed on the lino, hair wet, the bath tap still running, you were probably already gone.

A Biblical crack of lightning.

A watermelon falling into two halves.

BC and AD.

Fucking Jesus, I think.

Dad looks like he's been taken hostage. Then he starts to tremble and there are tears rolling down his face and I am embarrassed in front of this doctor, my namesake. Feeling embarrassed is the wrong emotion, but it rises up regardless; shame at our disfigurement, the limb suddenly hacked off. Abruptly, my thoughts segue into another place: a memory of giving birth in a Brussels hospital, the pain deadened by the epidural and feeling like a bad actress in a daytime soap with midwives telling me "Poussez!". It didn't feel real, and frankly neither does this. My mind is a cold, white slice of nothing.

"Can we see her?" I ask, because that's what people say.

She says of course, that they'll just remove some of the machines and make things look a little more normal. Except that when we're ushered into the room it isn't normal, not at all. Mam's hair is pushed back from her face in a way she'd never wear it and the skin around her mouth has turned purpley-grey. I think of Homer Simpson's five o'clock shadow, then immediately berate myself for thinking of Homer Simpson's five o'clock shadow. A decompression mattress massages her body and it looks like she's stirring in her sleep. I rub her shoulders, her arms, her hands. Her unlined cheek is as cool as leaves.

When an auxiliary goes to find the chaplain and we're left alone, Dad clears his throat.

"Will we, ah, say a decade of the Rosary? We will."

We will. We do. Pronoun followed by verb; the ancient speech pattern of Gaelic, a language with no word for 'yes', mirrored in English. Rural Ireland is summoned in the low-lit hospital room as we mumble our prayers. I am oddly calm, even when a slimy black trickle escapes from the side of Mam's slack mouth. Shock playing its tricks, I realise later when the horror really kicks in.

Hours slip by. Clare arrives at around 5am, having driven much of the way from Wales through blizzarding snow without working headlights. When I meet her at A&E, her hands are red and her eyes are glassy. We hug. Over her shoulder I can see the silhouettes of cranes, dark against the lightening sky; not much further, over the brick terraces and the grey high-rises, the North Sea foams and froths. If I close my eyes, I can almost hear it, as familiar as the flat vowels and glottal stops Mam unashamedly coached us out of. I think of how wild it must be now on this December morning, imagining the dog-walkers dodging the wintry spray from Hokusai-esque waves thrown up high over the promenade. Auden was right, I realise: dogs do indeed go on with their doggy life, whatever suffering is happening elsewhere.

Back in Critical Care, we sit by Mam's bed and talk a little, the mattress clicking and hissing. Adam, my husband, steps in and out of the room to call James, my brother, frantically trying to get on a flight at Philadelphia International Airport, and my uncle Paul, Mam's only surviving brother, in Tipperary, Ireland. I overhear snippets of their desperate conversations – flight arrival times and taxi companies – at odds with the stillness of the white hospital room and Mam's unresponsive body. Once the phone calls peter out, Adam goes off to find cups of coffee, slices of flapjack, a phone number for the undertaker. Time somehow passes, made warped and strange.

Eventually, some alien hours later, the lights on the corridor outside go up. Somewhere nearby, a water boiler starts up and then clicks off. Mugs clink, gentle chatter: the engine of things beginning again as the day shift clocks on. It nudges us back onto the circuit of real time: our vigil is over. I gather up coats and disposable cups and a leaflet titled 'When Someone Dies...' It's not clear where the ellipsis leads.

When we leave, a nurse hands me a long white plastic bag, the kind you'd use to line a kitchen bin. Inside is your dress with one long slit of a cut up the front, your slippers, your knickers, folded twice.

Mam. Oh, Mam. I try to say 'thank you' but nothing comes out.

# Electra Rhodes

*Recipes for Dreams, Weather & Revolutions*

Non-Fiction • Memoir • 80k

## Biography

I write CNF, NNF and Fiction. Since April 2020, I've won 15 competitions, placed in 80 more, and been widely anthologised. In 2021 my nature memoir, 'My Family & Other Folklore' was longlisted for the Nan Shepherd prize. In 2022 my novella, 'Sextet' won the Louise Walters Books P.100 competition, and my non-fiction ms, 'Countrycide' won me a place on the London Library's Emerging Writers programme.



March 2022 Mentee

## Synopsis

How do you help someone to die well? In my father's 95th year I tell him 12 true stories. To remember that we can choose, no matter our circumstances, how we live or die. Each person we meet is living a life of magical resistance to structural oppression or mainstream conventions. This unique memoir frames these stories in a narrative that tracks the journey we took...so that he could go.

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# Electra Rhodes

Extract from *Recipes for Dreams, Weather & Revolutions*

The bus stops beside a shelter made of the local slate. At first glance the village squats, brittle with stone, dotted with slate fenced yards and occasional reluctant trees. At second glance too. It's a place of wet greys in various shades, mortared with green. Even the surrounding hills are a mix of abandoned slate tips, worked-out slate mines, slate quarries and dense woods of bristling Forestry Commission conifers.

The driver toots a farewell and I wave goodbye. A hand-drawn map directs me between stern-fronted houses, then round a bend and along past a terrace of cottages all with doors opening straight into the street. The one I want sits in the middle.

The building is sound, but the owner dropped hints I should expect a mess. Nevertheless, free lodgings in exchange for clearing it feels like a good deal. All the more so since my seven year relationship is faltering and the tension of months of arguments still thrums through my skin. I struggle with the key, frustrated tears close to the surface. I start over and manage to let myself in.

Inside it's both better and worse than I'd feared. The electricity is off but there is running water, recently cleared chimneys, and several cords of wood for the kitchen range. Forewarned, I've brought camping gear, everything I need for my day-to-day work, a roll of heavy-duty bin-bags, and a dustpan and brush. I stow my rucksack, check each room and start to clean at the top of the house, hoping the dust will settle downwards, and I'll have somewhere half-decent to sleep.

Late that evening I reach the kitchen. Satisfied, I clear the table, set up my camping stove, and cook stew, with extra carrots, out of a tin. I sit in front of the range in a rocking chair, tired and filthy, and eat my meal. Something shiny catches my eye. Turns out there are newts living under the boxes in the darkest corner.

The next day, I risk standing on a chair to clean the dresser's top shelf. It's peppered with an assortment of junk: a biscuit tin, a stoneware jar complete with utensils, a

jam-jar full of screws, washers and nails, another jar, taller and rounder, three-quarters full of buttons.

The tin is stuffed: clippings, empty seed packets, Christmas cracker jokes. At the bottom there's a notebook. I think the handwritten label says 'Recipes for Dreams, Weather and Revolutions'. My English/Welsh dictionary seems to agree. The ink gets darker the farther through the pages I read, the writing, all in Welsh, gets smaller and smaller. Bronwen Preece, the woman who once lived here, spoke Welsh first and English a reluctant second.

Tucked into the back is a paper-wrapped package of seven envelopes, all with a name on the front, a different recipe clipped tidily to each one. I spread everything out on the newly salt-scrubbed kitchen table.

The wrapping paper is a letter, in English, which exhorts the reader to deliver the envelopes, together with the dish on the card. It's signed shakily, 'BP' though the letter itself is in different handwriting. The message is confused about why, but the last line brings me up short.

Please help me, I'm running out of time.

I read it again, several times. Feeling its pull.

I recognise two of the people named: Bronwen's brother, Geraint and nephew, Thomas who live in adjacent streets in a neighbouring village. They've both already dropped by to say hello. The next two are easy, as the envelopes detail their jobs as well as their names: one is the district nurse, the other, the postie. The final three are harder to parse, A Stranger, An Unexpected Guest and The Goddess In The Trees. I don't know what this means and there are no further clues. The envelopes are sealed and I hesitate, reluctant to open them.

The recipes are traditional, and seem conventional enough, even if the request is not. I wonder if this is to do with the custom of sin eating, but I've never heard of it in mid Wales. The back of The Goddess' recipe card has a delivery date seven weeks away. St Dwynwen's Day is in January, a week after I'm due to leave. None of the others are dated,



and, habitually optimistic, I convince myself there's time to deliver everything to the first four and work out the other three.

Geraint doesn't have a phone. So I write a note asking for help, slog up the hill to the next slate-slide village, pop it through his door, splash home through the puddles, and wait.

I spend the evening with my dictionary, the notebook, and a pad of paper, trying to make sense of it all. The house settles, bats in the eaves, mice in the wainscoting, newts still hiding in the gloomiest reaches of the kitchen. I make tea on the range and light a third candle lantern. The board has promised the electricity will be on soon, even though Christmas is imminent. At least the phone socket keeps the rotary handset connected. When I add a new log to the fire it feels several steps up from camping.

Bronwen died six months ago but spent her last year in supported housing, before moving to a hospice for end-of-life care. She didn't come home at any point. I get ready for bed - heat water on the range, brush my teeth, feel grateful the toilet is still working - wondering how the tin made it back. I fall asleep under a quilt she made, watching the moonstruck sky through the window, thinking that for years our stars were unknowingly the same.

# Caroline Stocks

*The Estate*

Fiction • Literary • 80k

## Biography

I am an award-winning journalist based in Derby, writing mainly about agriculture and environmental issues for specialist media. Outside of my day job, my writing mostly focuses on people and places, specifically how places can define people's characters and contribute to their choices. *The Estate* (working title) is my first attempt at fiction writing.

## Synopsis

Set in a housing estate in Derby, the book explores the lives of six women, the strands connecting them, and what happens when they stop trying to please everyone around them. Among the characters is Anna, who has returned home after a divorce, Kerry, who's harbouring a secret to protect her family, and Esther, an elderly immigrant whose husband recently died.



April 2022 Mentee

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# Caroline Stocks

Extract from *The Estate*

“Hello?” Her mum answered shrilly, picking up after just two rings. “Darling, I can’t talk now, I’m at the checkout at Morrison’s.”

“It’s okay,” Anna said, wishing for the thousandth time that her mum didn’t feel the need to answer her phone every time it rang, regardless of what she was doing. It was bad enough when she did it when she was in the toilet, but she’d once answered the phone at a wake (“It’s been a surprisingly good turnout. Looking at the buffet I’m not sure they were expecting so many people either; I’ve only had a few crackers and a Babybel. Your dad’s starving — you know he hates cheese.”)

“You called me four times,” Anna said. “I thought you perhaps wanted something.”

“Did I? Oh, that was earlier,” her mother said. “I’ve been at Nanna’s all day. Can you believe? Auntie Di called this morning to say she’d ordered flowers for Nanna’s birthday and they were arriving today between ten and three. Well, there’s no way Nanna would answer the door to anyone, is there?” she carried on, barely drawing breath. “So I had to rush breakfast and get over there before ten in case the delivery man came. And you know what my luck’s like — he turned up at five-to three. Still, it was an M&S bouquet so I s’pose it was worth waiting in for.”

“Oh well, at least that’s nice for Nanna,” Anna said. “If you speak to her later tell her I’ll drop her birthday card around tomorrow.”

Hearing the beeping of the checkout in the background getting louder, Anna added: “Do you want to call me once you’ve finished?”

“What?” Her mum asked distractedly. “Oh, no, I’m fine for another minute; I’m not quite at the front of the queue. I’m just looking at the headlines in Hello. They put them by the checkout to tempt you to buy them, don’t they? Anyway, I just stopped off on the way home to get some bits for Alan,” she carried on. “He keeps asking for hot-cross buns and

there aren't many places you can get them in November. I told him, 'I'll get you some if I go to Morrison's, but I'm not making a special journey. You'll have whatever Aldi has'."

Despite being a newly retired pensioner herself, Anna's mum had become an unofficial helper for elderly neighbours on her street, collecting prescriptions and doing supermarket shopping for those who didn't have a car or were no longer steady on their feet.

While it was undoubtedly a kind thing to do, she clearly relished the opportunity the role gave her to snoop into the lives of the people around her. Each time a pharmacy note or shopping list was posted through the letter box she'd pore over the spidery handwriting like a detective.

"Richard next door's ordered a bottle of sherry again," she'd called Anna to tell her the other week. "It's just a small one, but I only bought him one a fortnight ago. I know Margaret's not drinking it because she's on blood pressure tablets and they don't mix with alcohol. He must be having a glass most nights. And he's only asked me to buy him four carrots and two chicken breasts. That won't enough to get them both through the week," she'd continued. "Smart Price apple pies, as well. They could afford Mr Kipling's, I don't know why they have to be so tight."

"You know, you could just show them how to do an online shop; you said Richard has an iPad," Anna had said when her mother complained, once again, that he'd quibbled over a 79-pence can of mandarin segments she'd bought rather than the own-brand ones he'd asked for.

"I'm fine as I am," her mother had snapped. "You know when you buy online they just pick the things they're trying to get rid of. And it's not like it's hard for me to do a bit of extra shopping. It's just a devil that he's so tight — especially when he's on his second bottle of sherry in as many weeks."

Spotting a McDonald's burger wrapper in the hedgerow, Suki, Anna's black Labrador, made a sudden lunge across the pavement, almost yanking the lead from Anna's hand.

"No, Suki," Anna said crossly, pulling her back.

“Out walking, are you?” her mum asked.

“Yes,” Anna said. “I’ve been working all day so needed a break. Did I tell you I was making end-of-term essays today? I can’t believe how bad some of them have been...”

“I thought the point of leaving London was to work less,” her mum interjected. “All you seem to do is work.”

“I don’t just work — I walk the dog, too,” Anna said, trying to make a joke. “Anyway, I do get out. I went to Ester’s the other day and she showed me how to make cheese curd.”

“Cheese curd?” her mum repeated. “Why do you want to know how to make cheese curd?”

“Well, I don’t, really,” Anna said. “But it was nice. I think Ester’s lonely; it doesn’t sound like she sees her son very often, and she’s in her flat by herself...”

“And that’s why you don’t want to end up that way,” her mum said. “Teaching your neighbours how to make cheese curd. Do you know Audrey’s son is still single? He’s back up here most weeks now.”

“Rob?” Anna asked. “As in, the guy I went to school with who became a Tory MP?”

“Yes,” her mum said. “Apparently he’s doing really well — Audrey says he’s on a committee that does something with fish. He had tea with the Prime Minister the other week, she says. Shall I ask her if he might be interested?”

“In what?” Anna asked.

“In you, of course,” her mother said. “You could meet up. Go for a coffee. Talk about London life.”

“I don’t have a London life, mum,” Anna said. “I don’t want to talk about London with someone I last saw when I was seven. I especially don’t want to talk about it with a Tory.”

“Well, I just think you need to be open to different things, darling,” her mother said. “A thirty-year-old divorcee isn’t going to appeal to everyone. Anyway, I’m at the front of the queue now,” she said. “Yes, I think it’s strange to eat them in November, too, but they aren’t for me.”

“What?”

“Oh, not you darling, I’m talking to Lesley on the checkout. I’ll speak to you later, okay? Bye, bye, bye. Sorry, it was my daughter. No, my eldest is the teacher, this was my youngest. She’s back from London. Left her husband... Yes, yes, I know, but things are different down there....”

“Mum, you haven’t put the phone down,” Anna sighed, but her mum wasn’t listening. She ended the call herself and slid her phone back in her pocket.

# Nina Cresswell

*Beneath The Horseshoe*

Fiction • Mystery • 70k

## Biography

I'm Nina and I'm working on my first novel, if I don't count my 'self-published' alien fiction at age nine. My journalism lecturer once told me no one made a living writing. But since graduating with a First in 2011, I've done food guides for The Guardian, feminist articles for Restless Network, and neverending music reviews. I've earned a total of £370 and one pint, so who's laughing now, Alan?



April 2022 Mentee

## Synopsis

Trainspotting meets Bridget Jones's Diary in this dark mystery set in north-eastern England. Follow the chaotic yet anxious-to-please Lori as she moves back to her childhood council estate, trying to get her life (and alcoholism) under control. When a mysterious new friend offers mushrooms to help heal her past traumas, she joins him on a trip that unveils far more than she ever could've imagined...

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# Nina Cresswell

Extract from *Beneath The Horseshoe*

I took one look in the social club's toilet mirror and decided not to top up my make-up. Even with my face weightily set in powder, I was profoundly drunk. No amount of mascara could hide my bloodshot eyes, and my smudged lipstick would only look worse if I attempted to reapply it. I wasn't returning to the party graceful or collected this time - I had to accept the trainwreck.

In the casualness of my drunken state, I'd entirely forgotten I was at my Dad's wake. Although I was fairly certain I'd watched his casket descend into dry spring soil just hours earlier, my mind helped me accustom to this state of affairs in its usual manner - by telling me to drink more high-strength cider. There'd been something else bothering me, something that wouldn't go away, was as obvious as a gun to the head, and only served to make me drink more. It was a feeling, nondescript and restless and so entrenched I'd forgotten who I was before it, and it filled up every atom of my body like rush-hour traffic.

Gazing blankly at my reflection, I vaguely heard my uncle singing Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life in the function room next door, and wondered what would happen if I just left. No one had mentioned my name at the funeral. Most of these people didn't even know me. I could strut right out of Hetton Working Men's Club's faded pine toilets and jazz-hand my way through its flakey front doors. I could hop on the 65 and meet my housemate Lee in Durham's cobbled centre, where he was no doubt drinking rosé and gyrating to Chaka Khan. It was comforting to know my presence at the wake made no difference to most of its attendees. Apart from Aunt Kel, who'd made a right show of me not openly praying at the funeral. Every two minutes she'd be glaring from her pew, hissing 'WHO ART IN HEAVEN' in my direction. Her Catholic virtues soon buckled at the buffet though - she never could resist slipping cutlery into her fake Louis Vuitton handbag. I decided I could happily deal with her missed calls and berating texts if it meant



escaping another second at this get-together.

Then I wondered - in a state of resentful duty that often afflicts those who dislike their family but aren't sure how to escape them either - whether simply drinking more would help. In theory it would, though in practical terms I knew it would likely make me want to leave even more. And it wasn't unlike me to wander off alone, probably near a body of water with headphones on, singing 'your milk turns to cry' before narrowly avoiding some kind of sexual assault from a 'helpful' male passerby. My stomach lurched at the inevitable prospect of losing control to more alcohol. And that was when the club toilet door swung open.

I grabbed my shabby tote bag from the sink and turned to leave, eager to avoid any bathroom small talk that might keep me in this sepia-stained club for longer than necessary. But it wasn't to be. Two bodies had toppled through the door, and my cousin Moggy was one of them. He was slamming punches into what appeared to be Hetton club's young barman, whose shoulders were covered in potpourri after clambering up the sinks to evade Moggy's clutches. Meanwhile, my cousin's haunted-looking mate Peter had propped the women's toilet door open with his one arm (the other had been scrambled in a factory accident), so a gathering crowd could watch the action.

I could usually foresee the exact moment Moggy was about to start a fight. His edginess was palpable - his small mouth twitched, knees bounced, and his blue eyes scanned the room like a shobill stalking its prey. All I normally had to do was leave the moment he started talking about special forces and shoelaces. From that point, I'd have a healthy six to seven minutes to make a swift exit and avoid the chaos. But I was off my game today. And now I was stuck between an impromptu wrestling match and a hand dryer, forced to watch the spectacle from inside the ring.

It appeared, as usual, that Moggy's opponent wasn't interested in fighting. The barman's looming stature - he had to be about six foot - suggested he was more than capable of taking Moggy on. But my cousin was built to bully. He was bare-knuckle boxing before he even transitioned from boob to bottle, and had the scars to prove it. No one

intimidated him - not even the murderers and psychopaths he'd been in jail with. What he lacked in brains, he made up for in handiness. He had biceps like ale tankards, steroid-fuelled mania, and a chronic sense of self-importance that made him unbearable to be around. And worse than all of that, he was bored.

Amid the chaos, I could only catch a glimpse of the barman's long black ponytail, which was now speckled with stale rose flowers and juniper shavings. But I could hear him trying to reason with my cousin.

"Mate, I was literally just seeing if you were all right," he said, palms outstretched towards Moggy's tracksuited chest.

Moggy laughed, fists clenched to show off his gold sovereigns.

"Oh aye is that what you call it, coming to me uncle's funeral and touchin' uz up —"

I shifted my weight and set off the hand dryer, which whirred over the rest of Moggy's fighting talk and clearly disorientated the barman, who was standing shaking his head.

"I work here mate, I was just saying I was sorry for your loss and trying to comfort you."

At the entrance to the toilets, I saw a hairy hand reach up and over Peter's head. It was grasping a mobile phone, recording the violent scenes that would later be lapped up by the rest of the estate. A rough voice with a thick Geordie accent (I assumed was coming from the hairy-hand-owner) bellowed -

"Knock him oot Moggy son!"

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- Alex Neve

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