

Writing Group ~ February 2021



Editorial

Welcome to the second web-edition hosted by the Writing Group.

Covid-19 is taking its time to dissipate. Most people took advantage of the first lock-down period to tackle all those jobs that we did not make time for before. Now, nearly a year later many of us have completed our tasks and are becoming bored with being stuck indoors.

In this edition of the Writing Group webpage we showcase some more of our member's work: Laura Maynard and Nookie Middleton show what can be achieved when you have only a few minutes to write; Gordon Johnson introduces us to his writing muse, Chloe and Nancy Tietz shares her journal of her travels in China.

We also have our first submission from a non-member. John Stoddard shares his frustrating experience of relocating family portraits. Thank you, John. We encourage anyone feeling bored with their own company to try writing for fun. To help you, Noreen Burton shares tips from Stephen King that helped her get started.

SHOES

The shoes hanging on my wall were made from old tyres, left in strategic places in the bush, with instructions on how to turn them into sandals.
They protected my feet on night hikes to assignments.
The shoes in my cupboard are Gucci.
I was an Umkhonto we Sizwe cadre.

50-word story by Noreen Burton

Noreen Burton writes: I joined the Writing Group in order to learn how to write fiction. To help me, I searched a variety of sites on the internet. One of the most useful pages was by Stephen King. Here are his 14 tips on writing: <http://infographicfacts.com/>

In the Writing Group our long pieces are restricted to between 500 and 700 words. I start to write by letting the words pour out onto the page, until I run dry. I inevitably find that I have exceeded my quota and have to edit my work carefully.

While descriptions can add flavour to a situation I have to decide if they are really necessary. It is sometimes quite hard to let a great description go, but, as John Gould said to Stephen King: *“When you write a story, you’re telling yourself the story. When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are not the story”*.

So, I remove what appear to be superfluous words, and that means , for me, adjectives and adverbs, along with lengthy phrases. Sometimes turning a long section into dialogue not only shortens the story, but adds ‘flavour’ (taking note of King’s Tip 8). And, it has been fun to let characters use speech that I would not use in polite company!

I still have a lot to learn and that is where the group help with their constructive criticism. One day I may be tempted to see if I can publish my stories and hopefully, by then, I will have learned to create good prose. But, until then, I’m having fun and letting my grey cells explore worlds previously unknown. Won’t you come and join me on the adventure?

14 TIPS FROM STEPHEN KING'S ON WRITING

1. If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: **read a lot and write a lot** 
2. Stories consist of three parts:
Narration which moves the story from point A to point B
Description which creates a sensory reality for the reader
Dialogue which brings characters to life through their speech
3. **THE SITUATION COMES FIRST.**
THE CHARACTERS - ALWAYS FLAT AND UNFEATURED, TO BEGIN WITH - COME NEXT
4. Whether it's a vignette of a single page or an epic trilogy like *The Lord of the Rings*, the work is always accomplished one word at a time **1**
5. THE MOST INTERESTING SITUATIONS CAN USUALLY BE EXPRESSED AS A **WHAT-IF QUESTION** 
6. The best stories always end up being about the people rather than the event 
7. With a passive verb, something is being done to the subject of the sentence. The subject is just letting it happen. **You should avoid the passive tense.**
~~The meeting will be held.~~
The body was carried.
8. **Talk**, whether ugly or beautiful, is an index of character 
9. Description begins in the writer's imagination, but should finish in the reader's
10. **LOUDLY** **NASTILY**
The road to hell is paved with **adverbs**
slowly *kindly* *softly* 
11. **NEVER USE 'EMOLUMENT' WHEN YOU MEAN 'TIP'** 
12. **Set a daily writing goal.** As with physical exercise, it would be best to set this goal low at first. I suggest a thousand words a day 
13. Call that one person you write for **Ideal Reader.** He or she is going to be in your writing room all the time
14. If you can do it for joy, you can do it for ever 

Books are a uniquely portable magic

  /StephenKingBooks

A regular item on the agenda for meeting of the Writing Group is 5 minutes of off-the-cuff writing. This is unseen and unprepared writing when either a piece of paper is unfolded to reveal a topic you have to write about or a quotation is read out. We are often amazed at what we can produce in 5 minutes.

In the examples below the writers received a paper with a word on it.

Laura Maynard wrote:

AN UNUSUAL INCIDENT

It was a perfect day for flying. My husband and I were sitting in the front seat of a Piper Tri-pacer, with our two small daughters asleep in the back. We were on our way to Wonderboom Airport to visit friends in Pretoria.

We landed safely. As we touched down and were taxiing along the runway, our youngest girl groaned.

“Mommy, I want to be sick.”

Plastic bags were kept behind the front seats specifically for just such an incident. Turning around, I said,

“Quick, take out a bag.”

The one she found had a hole in it! [And, as ‘Time’s up’ sounded:]

I will leave the rest of the story to your imagination.

[112 words]

Nookie Middleton’s topic was

CLOWN

The man in the funny suit, face painted white, black eyes and big, red nose, sat on the log outside the caravan. His wide, red-painted mouth was turned down and his eyes streamed tears.

Chief clown at the circus and today he was the saddest clown on earth. His pet cat had died.

The sky was grey. It began to rain. The clown sat on. He was inconsolable.

The small, thin ragged child crept out from under the caravan. He stood gazing silently at the clown. He hesitantly crept up to the sad clown and put his hand up and stroked the clown’s face. The clown looked up, startled.

The rain stopped. The sun came out and the clown felt comforted. He picked up the child and they sat together. The clown’s wide, red mouth turned up into his usual smile and he hugged the tiny boy close to his heart.

[151 words]

Family Portraits- Destination Hastings

by John Stoddard

The Alexander name and clan has spread far and wide from its roots in the UK. In the South African context, there are English and Afrikaans speaking members, with one branch coming from St Helena.

In 2011, a family reunion was held in Trompsburg at which a book was released that contained the names of 1760 members of the family going back to the 17th Century. Generally recognised as an outstanding member was Richard Charles Alexander (1841-1907). He was affectionately known as “The Super” for his service as Superintendent of Police in Durban where he was well respected. His third wife Jane was quick witted when she put up her umbrella and saved Mahatma Gandhi from a drunken unruly mob of white labourers on the 13th January 1897. The Super took him into the police station, dressed him in the Durban Municipal police uniform and slipped him past the crowd. This incident warranted gold watches from the Durban Indian community. It is remembered by the Gandhi family to this day. Remaining in the family's possession were two very large portraits (800 x 600mm) painted in Gibraltar in 1874 of Richard in military uniform and of his first wife Sarah (who bore his 13 children). These had been in Windhoek for several years, but a clever box was made for them and they were returned to South Africa, in an airfreight plastic sleeve, close to 10 years ago and had remained in a hot galvanised storage unit in Pretoria since then. They had not been hung on a wall for close to 70 years.



We were emptying the storage unit in November last and here were these valuable family heirlooms. Fortunately, a member of the family in Hastings, UK, was interested in memorabilia from those times and had seen Ela Gandhi in Durban. His family jumped at the chance of having the portraits, so we set about flying them to England using a well-known courier company.

Exporting goods is not something we do every day and the exercise proved to be tedious, frustrating and nerve racking. After paying the (considerable) quote, it took a few days for the money to be acknowledged. Wrong reference numbers were provided.

A waybill was produced which had the wrong delivery address on it. This never got completely corrected even after three attempts.

Part way through the process, we were told that the box must be opened for inspection by the person who collected it. We had to strip off the wrapping and remove the pictures, put them back and reassemble the box. In the end, the collector never opened it.

When the person arrived to collect (two days late and the day before we were leaving), we were asked to produce a pro-forma invoice., fortunately we stumbled upon a sample on the website of the courier and were able to complete and print this.

We had asked for “FRAGILE” and “THIS WAY UP” stickers (the 150 year old canvas should be kept vertical in transit as it is hung, to minimise vibration damage). None were sent.

The exercise took five days from paying the money to the goods leaving. There were 25 emails involved, plus numerous frantic telephone calls. The portraits took a further week to reach their destination (via Bahrain and Leipzig).

However, they are now safely on a wall in Hastings with a family that appreciates them and no doubt they will last a further 150 years.

CHLOE'S CORNER

by Gordon Johnson.



Greetings and salutations, my dear friends and acquaintances. Yes, it is I, Chloe, the blue-blood Staffordshire terrier who was introduced to your most illustrious group a number of years ago.

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then. I am much older now, my back legs are wobbly, and my teeth are not what they used to be. Cracking open a bone to reach the marrow is quite a challenge for me.

We have also moved to a different abode where I made a number of new friends. Allow me to introduce you to them. There is Peter the Peacock and his harem of Peahens, and two ferule cats who both respond to the name "Kietsie Kats."

Getting to know them and above all gaining their trust was quite an endeavour. Mom, ag bless her heart, feeds them regularly. Dad, on the other hand, complains now and again, particularly because Peter and his entourage have developed a penchant for cat food. No more pieces of stale bread for them, thank you! When they see Mom coming to the front door with a piece of bread in her hand, they announce their displeasure with loud, piercing squawks. Believe me those peacocks can be loud!

Dad's gripe is the price of cat food. A bag of cat food does not go a long way when you have to feed two cats and a flock of peacocks. Mom, ag she is so sweet, serves me with bread crumbs saturated with milk every morning and I regularly have to admonish the cats who crowd around me when I am enjoying my breakfast. A threatening growl from me usually does the trick and they move away to drool and observe me from a distance.

Although I am in the evening of my life, I still enjoy being taken for walkies by Dad. However, given my limited physical capabilities, the walkies are short and I spend a lot of time resting in the shade of trees. Life is still good, thanks to the loving care I receive from Mom and Dad.

Cheers until next time.

CHINA 1990: China receives its first foreign visitors

Nancy Tietz writes:

In 1990, I travelled with a group of friends to China. Our tour of China as bewildering, exhausting, awe-inspiring and tantalising as we were bounced from Peoples' Republic of China into the Celestial Kingdom and back again. I have a nagging doubt I haven't begun to understand or appreciate the land or its people. A possible reason is the way tours are organised. In China a tourist is an Honoured Foreign Guest accommodated in exclusive and superlative luxury at People's hotels for Foreign Visitors. "At leisure" is not an item featured on the programme. There are no optional excursions and opting out is impossible.

"You do what you're told to do and do not ask why until die" said our Beijing guide, Du, who added: "Sometimes even we do not know why, we just do." The tour schedule allows no time for pause and reflection as each day is packed with attractions and distractions, all organised and over-seen by 2 guides; a national guide in charge of broad travel arrangements and a local guide who directs the day's programme. Both field awkward questions about history, politics, economy, labour, education, welfare and population planning. Regulations, restrictions, fences and walls (one guide said that Chinese liked building walls) are a way of life. Banners with Chinese slogans exhorting the people to *Obey the rules* can be seen everywhere. Banners in English read *Promote Friendship*.

Obligatory notices in hotels and restaurants said *Tips are not accepted* and in public they are not but in the privacy of bus or bedroom the rules are bent.

We were also restricted by the general speed limit of 50 kph, which meant a 30 minute journey could take anything up to 2 ½ hours and most time spent sitting on our air-conditioned 15-seater tourist bus viewing the passing show.

Nevertheless, our 'Happiness' was our guides' mandate and if we became disgruntled they would lose 'face'. Saving face is terribly important to the Chinese, an enduring and endearing trait.

In a supreme effort to please Honoured Foreign Guests much trouble had been taken to provide a scattering of museum labels in English. For me, the life-size terracotta army guarding the tomb of the first Qin Emperor, 210 BC, will forever be remembered as '*The Warriors*' while recoveries from excavation of the 6000 year-old Bampo Village site '*Deserve to be called one of the bright pearl in the treasure-house of human culture*'. Often we were tickled by the turn-of-phrase as we passed through *Automatical doors*, got caught in *Traffical jams* or were misled into thinking Xi'an was *an Economical centre*.



Terracotta Warriors



Bampo village
relics

We had set off with some sound advice: 'Beware of loos - equip yourselves with plenty of toilet paper' and 'Exercise patience at Airports!' These two were disaster areas. The former were among the most unspeakable I have encountered despite the fact that toilet paper is a Chinese invention. The latter were the cause of bitter disappointment and loss of face as China Airways changed schedules weekly and cancelled flights at the drop of a hat.

Our tour included Beijing, the capital (enshrining the heart of the people), Xi'an (ancient capital and home to the worriers), Shanghai (one of the largest cities on earth with more Western influences than anywhere else) and Suzhou the silk capital and 'Venice of the Orient' sited on the Grand Canal c. 600AD. We visited Guilin where Chinese landscape Art with its placid waters meandering between conical mountains swathed in mist and feathery bamboo is translated into a reality. This was followed by Guanzhou, formerly Canton. Finally we were transported on the renowned Canton/Kowloon Railway for two more days of frenzied unfettered sight-seeing and shopping in Hong Kong.

The Programme arranged for each day was daunting. Take one day: the floor mat in the hotel lift told us it was Saturday. It started with green tea and seaweed cereal and without orange juice. We drove past the Drum Tower and city walls of Xi'an, visited the Shaanxi provincial Museum, returned to the hotel for packed lunches then to the Airport for a re-scheduled flight to Shanghai. At Shanghai disembarking from planes was a re-enactment of history – 'a great leap forward' onto the gangway and a 'long march' across the tarmac (trundling one's hand luggage) to an Arrivals Shed where we were met by Shin, Driver and Shen, Local guide).

We were deposited at the Arts and Crafts Research Institute where tapestry, inlay, lacquer-work, block printing and lantern making were demonstrated. Then we were shepherded through the sights, smells and decibels of the Old City, taken to the Bund (Shanghai's harbour waterfront on the Yangtze River and marched up Nanjing Road (the Chinese equivalent of Regent Street) and into a Friendship Store. Dinner in the Overseas Chinese Hotel was followed by a stunning performance at the Acrobatic Theatre before checking in at our super luxury Yangtze New World Hotel where we collapsed, despite the intriguing views of the river with its boats, people, markets and frenzied activity.

Chinese cuisine is a tourist attraction in itself. We were sustained by 10–13 course lunches and dinners. The endless variety of dishes paraded before us however attractively presented, were approached with hesitation. We delighted in chop-suey, lotus root dumplings and Peking duck but shrank away from Bean curd and Bracket fungi.

Most memorable were the buildings and monuments that represented 'Old' China: the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, the Ming Tombs and the Temple of the Jade Buddha.



Temple of Heaven



Jade Buddha

Most perfect of all was the Summer Palace, the royal retreat during the Ming and Manchu Dynasties (c. 1600 -1911). The whole palace is a galaxy of gateways, arched bridges, Dragon Boats, halls, temples, pagodas and pavilions nestling in manicured shrubbery around a dreamy lake. I felt as if I had been cast adrift on a willow pattern plate.



The Great Wall of China was staggering mentally and physically as it snaked its way over the surrounding mountains into infinity. Plodding, scrambling, crawling (normal locomotion is denied) grabbing the hand-rail and gasping for breath along barely 1 km of its 2000 year old, great length of 6 000 kms was a gruelling feat.

As we approached the Ming Tombs the bus paused as we were asked if we *really* wanted to walk 2km in the heat up the Sacred Way – the Avenue of the Animals, and back again. Of course we wanted to see everything!



One of the most wonderful, unexpected surprises was the Chinese classical garden; a symphony in stone, water and shrubbery. They were so ingeniously contrived that each view; from a bridge, a pavilion, a gallery, or a stepping stone was its own exquisite cameo. I became conscious that the plant kingdom was held in high regard by The People. This was evidenced in acres of carefully tended crops and vegetables, the abundance of potted plants and bonsai on pavements, the leafy avenues in the cities, and well-groomed flower beds in parks as well as hedged areas *for cherishing flowers and trees*. The highway from Beijing Airport was lined with hedges garlanded in pink rambling roses, and Tiananmen Square was a burst of red salvia and yellow chrysanthemums. Red symbolises the spirit of the revolution and yellow the solidarity of The People.

On the other hand, respect for the Animal Kingdom stopped at stone carvings and effigies of turtles, fish, and other water creatures. I was astounded to see the most endangered animal on earth, the Giant Panda, perform antics at the acrobatic show.

A walk through the food market in Canton bore out our Guidebook's comment that *Chinese eat everything with four legs except a table*, as we gaped at turtles, frogs, fowls, ferrets as well as snakes, insects, worms, eels and every kind of fish including shellfish, jellyfish and cuttlefish, all destined for the 'inner-People' (a humorous reference to a person's tummy) My most abiding impression is of overwhelming masses of people: people working, people on bicycles, people selling, people queuing, people shopping, people eating, people gambling, people thronging! My first thought on my return home was 'There are so few people in South Africa!'

PHOTOS:

Terracotta Warriors: <https://th.bing.com/th/id/OIP.bkBEo6SCg4BtRLhe4CbI0AHaFS?w=231&h=180&c=7&o=5&pid=1.7>

Bampo Village site: <https://th.bing.com/th/id/OIP.PUvo-Gk4s7JNewyiMGC0gHaHk?w=161&h=180&c=7&o=5&pid=1.7>

Temple of Heaven: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0e/2_Temple_of_Heaven.jpg

Drum Tower: <https://th.bing.com/th/id/OIP.cd2TqBeu75kKweJdyqHC0gHaJ4?w=124&h=180&c=7&o=5&pid=1.7>

The Jade Buddha: <https://static.thousandwonders.net/Jade.Buddha.Temple.original.3770.jpg>

Great Wall of China:
<https://th.bing.com/th/id/R9c6622fcdf807d0e5e6fe3a878ab2be4?rik=R6MYkrIWF3ok8g&riu=http%3a%2f%2f2.bp.blogspot.com%2f-eMwiKblc06k%2fUcL5TtT7d5l%2fAAAAAAAABFY%2fBbUb6D0qEpY%2fs1600%2fChina-The-Great-Wall.jpg&ehk=M6FFPsGfwBzP7MxdJ61LWZ4BQ8vhSmkaTID7D4Uf90E%3d&risl=&pid=ImgRaw>

Chinese Classical Garden: <https://th.bing.com/th/id/OIP.INk5adDki3NxiFFodjvm9AHaFj?pid=ImgDet&rs=1>

If you would like to submit an article for this page, please send an electronic copy to Sobhna Poona at Sobhna.poona@gmail.com not later than the 12th of March 2021.

**WRITING IS EASY. ALL YOU HAVE TO DO
IS CROSS OUT THE WRONG WORDS.**

Mark Twain