

the magazine for women who write

mslexia

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the novel
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Songwriting

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Morgan Lloyd
Malcolm
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Konnie Huq

*Styling it out:
writing about clothes
in poetry and prose*



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This issue is all about you and the stories you tell about your lives. As Pan Macmillan's Kris Doyle said on p52, these 'extraordinary ordinary' stories are taking the publishing world by storm. In the face of fake news and divisive politics, readers are reaching out for true narratives that offer insights into other lives, other minds.

We've been publishing glimpses into those other lives in our long-running *H is for...* slot on p71; our *For the love of it* series often features autobiographical writing – as with Helen Parker's postcards to her grandchildren (p13); our columnist Caroline Sanderson has been offering her take on non-fiction publishing for several years; and there's a series of events at Mslexicon where you can quiz agents looking for narrative non-fiction. Now we've expanded opportunities for this kind of writing in our new *Mslexia Moths* slot on p48, where we're inviting memoir pieces suitable for page and performance.

But *Mslexia* will be about you in another way from now on. Because – drum roll – *Mslexia* is now a charity. Which has some important implications for how we operate from now on. As you'll see in my Agenda article on p5, the watchword for cultural organisations these days is democracy. Which means we'll be getting in touch shortly to talk about where we go from here...



DEBBIE

TAYLOR is the founder and Editorial Director of *Mslexia*. She has written for Oxfam, UNICEF, Anti-Slavery, WHO and others about women and social issues. Her books include *My Children, My Gold* (Virago), a travelogue about single mothers, and *The Fourth Queen* (Penguin), a novel set in a harem in 18th Century Morocco. Her fourth novel, *Herring Girl* (Oneworld), a paranormal historical murder mystery, is out now.

FEATURES



I had put on a set of clothes I wouldn't normally wear, but the fit felt just right

JANE CORRY
P34



it's great that people are interested in reading a nurse's story rather than that of a reality TV star

ALISON FLOOD
P52



it was a stream of consciousness, with broken sentences, missing punctuation, breaking all the rules of style

SOPHIE VAN LLEWYN
P38



her fascination with the female body stems from a female-centred dance tradition in India

TISHANI DOSHI
P41

the arts act like potent multivitamin juice to foster health in every sector of society

DEBBIE TAYLOR, P5

AGENDA THE NEW CULTURAL REVOLUTION

If you thought the arts were all about diversity and inclusion, think again. **Debbie Taylor** reports that the new watchword is 'democracy' – and the effects could be revolutionary

There's a quiet revolution brewing at Arts Council England – not an organisation normally associated with grass-roots action. While other parts of the economy have been reeling from cut after cut, ACE has been using the brief breathing space afforded it by standstill funding to rethink its entire approach to arts and culture in England.

The past few years have seen a flurry of publications – issuing both officially from the hallowed portals of ACE's Fitzrovia office, self-published by ACE boss Darren Henley, and by research organisations funded by ACE – with titles like *Changing the World with Arts and Kindness* and *Cultural Democracy in Practice*.

So, if you thought current thinking in the arts was all about diversity and inclusion, think again. The new watchword, rumoured to be unveiled this autumn in ACE's new ten-year funding strategy for 2020-30, is 'democracy'. And this is no empty motherhood-and-apple-pie platitude. The new strategy (assuming it doesn't have its teeth pulled before publication) is based on some extraordinary and – yes – revolutionary research findings.

To explain what seems to be going on, I need to gallop through a bit of history. Public subsidy for the arts in the UK started over 80 years ago as part of the war effort, the thinking being that 'the encouragement of music and the arts' would cheer the populace and unite them around the culture they risked losing. After the war the arts baton was seized by none other than mighty macroeconomist John Maynard Keynes, who argued that the artist deserved support because he [sic] 'leads the rest of us into fresh pastures and teaches us to love and enjoy what we often begin by rejecting'.

Elite calling

The message was clear: artists were an elite whose lofty calling would encourage the rest of us to rise above our grubby beastliness and embody a more enlightened form of humanity. And indeed early subsidies were for the 'high arts' Keynes loved, such as ballet and opera, located mainly in London.

For decades this was the model: a highly-educated elite funnelled subsidies to those arts endeavours they admired and believed audiences

would benefit from encountering. This top-down policy created a two-tier system: an aspirational upper tier of subsidised art forms enjoyed by a privileged minority, and an unfunded lower tier of amateur hobby-arts enjoyed by everyone else.

The implicit hope underlying this model was that if only people were more educated, if only they could be encouraged, they would come to appreciate the subsidised arts. As a result audiences would grow, so the thinking went, and subsidy would no longer be needed. When this didn't happen, the Arts Council began to resemble the World Wildlife Fund, preserving exotic species that would otherwise be threatened with extinction.

Hence the annual shovelling of cash into coffers at the Royal Opera House and National Ballet. And when challenged 20 years ago about the massive imbalance in the Arts Council literature budget in favour of poetry, then Literature Director Gary McEwan admitted 'that's the genre that needs the most support'.

Audience development

But instead of rethinking the top-down model altogether, the name of the game in the nineties and noughties was 'audience development'. 'Bums on seats' became the mantra and 'arts marketing' a new career path for graduates. Still the mass market of audiences remained stubbornly 'undeveloped' and a question mark hovered over the idea of allocating communal cash for cultural amenities for an elite who could probably afford to pay for them anyway.

So what were all those 'undeveloped' audiences up to while theatre companies played to half-empty auditoria, poetry books were pulped, and arts galleries echoed to the sound of a scant few well-heeled footsteps? In his blistering 2012 analysis *Notes on the Death of Culture*, Nobel Prize for Literature winner Mario Vargas Llosa describes what he calls a 'traumatic change' in popular culture brought about by globalisation. Citing research by sociologists Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy in Spain, he argues that advances in digital technology have created a largely screen-based global mass culture that is shared by literally billions of people across five continents 'despite differences in languages, religions and customs'.

a question mark hovered over the idea of allocating communal cash for cultural amenities for the elite



Two parts

by JEAN RILEY

2/4 Time

I

It will be folded, of course, concertina'd
like a cut-out in a pop-up book, popped down,

and packed in a box. I'll sign for it, hold it,
not sure where to put it. Surprised

at its weight, or not. I'll open it, notice
the smell, different from what I'd thought,

or the same. I'll see its warm brown check,
darker than I remember. Or lighter.

I'll touch it, finger it and want it to pop up, to inflate with you
and whizz me round in a Polka.

In that suit you were going somewhere. Really going
somewhere.

II

You have sent for my suit? You are
having my suit, sent? (Pause for laughter.

Hysterical doubled-up laughter). Fanfare!
My suit is traveling from Yorkshire

to Gloucestershire. For what? You know
you won't know what to do with it. What will you

do with it? Do you think I'll feel bad
if you take it to the Sue Ryder? Honestly!

Mother! Just remember to detach
the little badge of the Lawn-Mowers' Society,

or was it CND? From the left lapel. And remember,
it doesn't matter. It really doesn't.

JEAN RILEY is retired and in 2018 moved from Gloucestershire to Pembrokeshire, where she is 'treading new landscape, finding seams of poetry and collaboration, and experimenting with film-poems'. She has been published in *Under the Radar* and *The Rialto*, and runs poetry workshops. She is currently collating her poems into a collection. Jean started writing seven years ago, following therapy after her 33-year-old son Tom's death in 2007. 'Two parts' was written about him.

Jeté

by FIONA DURANCE

Green leather frog, topaz eyes.
Spring released – fat grasshopper,
wild ballerina, my heart when I see you.
Sage supple jacket. Wide smile.

FIONA DURANCE has worked in dance, equalities training, as a BSL interpreter and as a poet coach. She draws inspiration from a wide range of sources such as the natural world, world events and her own experiences. She has been part of Borderstones writing group for 18 years, and her work has appeared in numerous Grey Hen Press anthologies, as well as other magazines and anthologies including *Grist* and *Citizen 32*. She once had a staring contest with an Arctic fox.

POETRY CHALLENGE

ODE

The ode has a long history in many cultures, answering a deep human need for celebration. Essentially a song of praise, it can address a public subject or, as is the case here, a more personal one (a negotiation it shares with the elegy). This poem moves across the distance of time to a remembered, longed-for closeness (again, like the elegy). A twist of nostalgia and intimacy is encapsulated in the title, inviting the reader across the threshold into the domestic world of this blessed daughter and her mother.

Any gesture of love and appreciation is made more intimate by the use of 'you'. We overhear the speaker, as if she were a child again, talking to her mother. The sense of a remote past is intensified by the retro details, evoking a time when a woman might be a 'wife and mother by day' and 'a rustling queen' by night. All the action takes place in the kitchen or the bedroom. One suggestion of elsewhere is hinted at in the 'tiny black veiled hat / you wore for the races'. The poem itself is a story, a memory cooked up without any suggestion of conflict, carefully presented in three rich eight-line stanzas. It is a love poem, a romance.

There is much power in its consistently credible tone, capturing the unconditional love and innocence of childhood, the nourishment of a devoted mother. Playful and imaginative sensory details are always from the child's point of view – 'the gas / will roar, its coronet blue as outer space, / boiling the milk in its cauldron'. One brief sentence brings salt to the sweetness: 'I know you cry' – perfectly understated, followed by the healing gesture of playing the mother's favourite tune. This might be it, vibrating on the airwaves, yearning to hold her safe, just as the child herself was held safe – a song of enduring love. □

When I breathed your air

An ode to my mother

Mum, let me climb on this chair next to you and make custard. Strike a match so the gas will roar, its coronet blue as outer space, boiling the milk in its cauldron. I want to dig the spoon, hear it screech in the cornflour silk. Watch me stir, see it shine, thick as tresses, yellow as suns in scribbled skies. I made it, just me, but you can pour. We'll say it's ours.

You're all mine. We mince up the joint on Mondays. While grey lamb worms through the holes, I make you feed me morsels. Warm and fat like a baby bird, I stuff my fear with flesh. For tea, we bake cake after cake. My sponge is heavy with work but we eat it, jollied with icing and silver balls. I know you cry. By valve light I peer inside the wireless, ask them to play your favourite tune.

Behind drawn curtains, thick and safe, I parade your green satin dress and a tiny black veiled hat you wore for the races. When I'm a lady I'll have lavender polish in large-size tins, and my end will be just like yours. A wife and mother by day, at night I'll be a rustling queen, swept off to dinner. Mum, be beautiful always, make me cling peach promises. Tell me another story.

SARAH WEDDERBURN's poems have appeared in *Oxford Poetry* and *Poems in Which*, and have been shortlisted for prizes including the Bridport. She studied English at Oxford and received a Poetry School MA in 2018. She works as a writer for arts projects and lives near Canterbury.

Ode: a lyrical poem that glorifies or praises an object, event or individual – intellectually and emotionally. Odes are sincere, imaginative, and often quite elaborate in form. We did not limit entries to the classic three-part structure.



LINDA FRANCE has published seven poetry collections with Bloodaxe, Smokestack and Arc, including *The Gentleness of the Very Tall* (a Poetry Book Society Recommendation). She also edited the ground-breaking anthology *Sixty Women Poets* (Bloodaxe, 1993) and won the 2013 National Poetry Competition. Her latest collection is *Reading the Flowers* (Arc). Visit her blog poeticbotanica.wordpress.com.

any gesture of love and appreciation is made more intimate by the use of 'you'

NEXT TIME

► **Aubade:** Traditionally a morning love song, or a poem about lovers separating at dawn, this form offers an opportunity for a fresh contemporary take (like Larkin's version a while ago). A loose definition might be 'a poem for the morning, a new day dawning'. We are open to interpretation and experimentation, and ask only that your aubade, on any subject, is no more than 40 lines long.

INTERVIEW

TISHANI DOSHI

The award-winning writer and dancer talks to **Sandeep Parmar** about fear, freedom and embodying female energy in her work

Tishani Doshi and I have only ever been in the same room a handful of times. But as a reader, I have followed her work closely since her 2006 Forward Prize winning début *Countries of the Body*. We met first at an Indian Poetry event over a decade ago at the National Portrait Gallery in London. I recall her mesmerizing delivery, the lyrical gravity of each word and the silence of the audience – and how the next reader regrettably broke the stillness with his jolly tomfoolery. Years later, when Doshi was invited to read from her second book *Everything Begins Elsewhere* at Liverpool University where I teach, I appreciated the embodiedness of her voice differently: as a way to speak about rootlessness, which relates to both of our itinerant experiences.

Once, many years ago, we stumbled over one another on the London Underground – briefly and unexpectedly – grateful for a familiar face amid the city's strangeness. I don't remember what we said during that quasi-epic-underworld encounter, but I do remember feeling that our displacements in that moment overlapped suddenly.

A sense of longing, and belonging, inhabit all three of Doshi's poetry collections, as do multiple geographical sites – South India, Wales, England, Italy, places both imaginary and real. So it seems

only fitting that my interview with her for *Mslexia* should take place in a virtual space between New York University's campus in Abu Dhabi, where she is teaching, and Los Angeles, where I've retreated for the Easter break.

It is 7pm in Abu Dhabi where she is; 8am in Santa Monica where I am. Skype thrums extraterrestrially. On my laptop on my sister's kitchen table, where the Californian sun is offsetting my long-haul bleariness, Doshi's face appears, framed by the soft furnishings of her faculty-housing living room at sunset. She rotates her laptop camera and a flash of high-rise towers comes into view. Even though she's just done a three-day whip-fast trip to India to launch her new novel (more on that later), she looks remarkably awake.

Doshi tells me that she hasn't taught creative writing this intensely for a while, but this assignment has come at a good time, because – blissfully, and unusually for her – she has nothing else to do. During the past year she's published a third poetry collection, *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods*, as well as a second novel, *Small Days and Nights*.

Girls... has received much critical attention and acclaim, as well as a shortlisting for the Ted Hughes Award – in part because Doshi toured an

Doshi stands on stage, legs apart and bent at the hips, slowly drawing energy up from the ground



PHOTO COURTESY OF BLOODAXE BOOKS

CAREER



WHAT'S NEW PUBLISHING

NOTES ON SONTAG With the Met Gala's theme riffing on her seminal essay 'Notes on "Camp"', Susan Sontag is firmly back in the public consciousness – just as a new biography reveals that she may be the true author of her ex-husband Philip Rieff's career-founding book *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*. Though it was rumoured that she was an unofficial co-author, in *Sontag: Her Life*, Benjamin Moser reveals textual and anecdotal evidence that Sontag wrote the book based on Rieff's notes and research – and then signed over her rights to it during their acrimonious divorce, in order to keep their child. Though she is credited

with 'special thanks' in the 1959 edition, by 1961 (post-divorce) her name had been dropped. Sontag's own career as an essayist finally took off in 1966 with the publication of her collection *Against Interpretation*.

INCOME GAP Last year consternation was expressed about the meagre and falling earnings of professional writers (less than £10,500 per year) announced by the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society. However, the full report has revealed that the mean earnings for a writer's household are over £81,000 per year. The figures come from more than 5,500 professional writers. The huge difference between writing income and household income 'highlight[s] the extent to which additional work is required in households to subsidise authors' incomes' says the Society of Authors, and 'may well be a factor in the lack of diversity

among professional writers, as people from less privileged backgrounds who want to write are less likely to have additional sources of household income'. The national mean average for household income is £34,200.

SELFIES This year's London Bookfair saw the announcement of the winner of the inaugural Selfies Award. The Selfies recognise the best works of fiction self-published in the UK. Author Jane Davis won the prize (£1,500, plus a self-publishing package, bespoke cover design and a publicity campaign worth £1,000) for *Smash All The Windows* – which she edited and produced herself. The judging panel was so impressed with the calibre of entries that they decided to award a runner-up certificate too: to Jane Steen for *Lady Jane Investigates*. The awards are run biennially. See theselfies.co.uk for updates on how to enter for 2020. ■



'household income may be a factor in the lack of diversity among professional writers'

CRYSTAL BALL TRUE STORIES

Truth is always the best basis for good fiction, adding a layer of authenticity to the storytelling. That is certainly the message I gleaned from the latest slew of rights deals to cross my desk.

In October, Holly Dawson tweeted about a man in her village who left three houses to the council, with the stipulation that they were for young families to rent for £300 a month, in an area where rent is normally £1,000 plus. On being challenged about the tweet, Dawson researched and wrote an article for BBC Online, clocked up two million page views and wrote a novel about it. *The Book of Keys*, agented by Jenny Hewson

(RCW), has been snapped up by HarperFiction. Solidly in the commercial fiction genre, it follows a careworn single mother who ends up in Cornwall thanks to an anonymous benefactor.

For Nell Pattison, authenticity of a different kind has propelled her debut novel *The Silent House* into the hands of Avon via Juliet Mushens (Caskie Mushens). Due out in 2020, it tells the story of a British Sign Language interpreter embroiled in a murder investigation in the deaf community. Pattison is a teacher who specialises in educating the hearing impaired. She began to go deaf in her 20s and is fluent in BSL. Avon Senior Commissioning Editor Rachel Faulkner-Willcocks said, 'Nell takes a brilliant classic trope and uses it to shine a light on a community many of us know very little about'.

Authenticity is a given in non-fiction, but unless bordering on scholarly, the storytelling is

expected to mirror the qualities of genre fiction, which is why Janice Hadlow's *The Duchess's Daughter*, due out in February 2021, is being presented as 'Georgette Heyer meets Jane Austen'. Acquired by Picador from Caroline Michel (PFD), it is a dark true love story of a Regency love triangle.

When it comes to *inauthenticity* nothing is as destructive as gaslighting, the name given to an aspect of coercive control that causes victims to doubt their own judgment. Understanding how coercive control works is important – which is why Karen Gregory's YA novel *I Hold Your Heart* is an important read. Published by Bloomsbury Children's, it examines the blurred lines between control and love through the love affair of 16-year old Gemma and Aaron. Claire Wilson (RCW) brokered the deal. □



non-fiction storytelling is expected to mirror the qualities of genre fiction

DANUTA KEAN's biography is on p65



THREE OF A KIND HISTORICAL FICTION

Sadly, many of the historical fiction-loving magazines and e-zines I had in mind when I picked this topic are now, ahem, history – including *Alt Hist* and *Circa*. And though there are plenty of publishers looking for historical fiction novels, where can those of us honing our craft on short stories submit them? Historical fiction often arguably fits under the umbrella ‘literary’, and of course the wonderfully flexible genres of sci-fi and horror are open to plots with historical settings – but overall there seem to be distressingly few historical fiction-focused magazines still running. They are out there, though.

FlashBack Fiction is a rare beast: an e-zine looking for historical flash fiction (and prose poetry and hybrid work). The editors are writers who found themselves having multiple conversations

about where to read and submit such work, and decided to take action. They aim ‘to collect and celebrate short-form work... that in some way engages with the historical’. The exact meaning of ‘historical’ is up to you. The editors also nominate their favourite pieces for the likes of the Pushcart Prize. Submissions are open twice a year (currently until 15 July) for work of up to 500 words.

The Copperfield Review is a paying publication (in dollars), and if your writing is over the wordcount for *FlashBack*, this is the place for you. They invite short fiction of 500–1,000 words and up to 3,000 words for stories, novel extracts and non-fiction. They also accept submissions of history-based poetry. Launched in 2000, touted as one of the top sites for new writers by *Reader’s Digest*, and named one of the Top 35 Historical Book Blogs in 2018, *The Copperfield Review* publishes new work throughout each month, but is very selective – a glance through the archives revealed as few as two new pieces per month. This scrupulousness

is perhaps one reason it has, as the site states, ‘a worldwide reputation as a leading market for short historical fiction and historical poetry’.

As you’ll guess from the name, *Frontier Tales* has its editorial eye focused firmly on the Old West. Managing Editor Duke Pennell (who also runs US indie press Pen-L Publishing) writes, ‘It’s been said that the publishing industry doesn’t do Westerns because the market won’t support them. That may be true but, it occurs to me, it’s awfully hard to sell many Westerns if nobody will publish them’. Challenge well and truly accepted, the site publishes stories of between 1,500 and 5,000 words, with some conflict in them, reminding writers, ‘It’s OK for a hero to lose once in a while’. Their guidelines are clear, so take a look.

As always, we urge you to read and support these publications. And if you’re inspired to create a space for the types of writing you see falling through the gaps, let us know. ■

FRANÇOISE HARVEY

FlashBack Fiction
(free to access:
www.flashbackfiction.com)
The Copperfield Review
(free to access:
www.copperfieldreview.com)
Frontier Tales
(free to access:
www.frontiertales.com)

Please read the submission guidelines on the websites

around the world. Accepts short stories, flash fiction, poetry and illustrations. See website for full submission details.
submit@popshotpopshot.com
www.popshotpopshot.com

Open Pen is published three times a year and is interested in providing a space for up-and-coming prose writers. Welcomes stories of 50–4,000 words on any theme, in any style. Open Pen ask that you familiarise yourself with them before submitting. See website for full guidelines.
submissions@openpen.co.uk
www.openpen.co.uk

Fairlight Books is an independent publishing house, focusing on literary and quality fiction. Accepts submissions for literary short and long fiction from agents or direct from authors. Send the first 10,000 words of your novel, plus a synopsis and cover letter by email or post. Fairlight Books, Summertown Pavilion, 18–24 Middle Way, Oxford OX2 7LG. www.fairlightbooks.co.uk

The North a magazine of poems, articles, reviews and features, accepts submissions of up to six poems for their upcoming issue. Postal submissions only. See website for full submission guidelines. Submissions Department, The Poetry Business, Campo House, 54 Campo Lane, Sheffield S1 2EG. www.poetrybusiness.co.uk

Areté Magazine is a triannual literary magazine of eclectic tastes. Accepts fiction, poetry, reportage and reviews. Submissions accepted in hard copy only. Unsolicited manuscripts should be accompanied by a SAE. Arete Ltd, 8 New College Lane, Oxford OX1 3BN. www.aretemagazine.co.uk

Neon Magazine prefer darker pieces, especially speculative fiction, but are open to reading anything and like to be surprised. Images, comics and graphic poems are also welcome, as are self-contained extracts. No word limit, but writers are encouraged to send several pieces if specialising in flash fiction or poetry. Submission guidelines and upcoming themes available on the website.
www.neonmagazine.co.uk

Novel London is a monthly literary event where novelists are invited to read out their opening chapter to an intimate audience. They welcome submissions of finished novels with gripping opening chapters that can captivate an audience for 15 minutes or less. To take part please send your opening chapter, a brief biography, a one-page synopsis and contact number. novellondon@gmail.com
www.novellondon.co.uk

Backlash Press is an independent publisher seeking submissions of poetry and prose (flash, short

stories, novellas, novels). Dedicated to releasing work that challenges convention. *Backlash* aims to pioneer and nurture innovative writers. Submission window is open to all, any genre: literary fiction, poetry, literary fantasy, literary science fiction, but please only send completed work and follow the submission guidelines on their website. Authors are paid generous royalties, PR, professional edit and free copies of their book.
www.backlashpress.com

Bust is a US women’s magazine with attitude that welcomes submissions with a strong story to tell. Accepts submissions in these categories: Broadcast (250–350 words); Real Life (cooking, cars, career, health etc., 250–350 words); Around the World in 80 Girls (1,000–1,500 words); Features (up to 2,500 words) are accepted following a successful pitch; Sex Files (250–350 words); Looks (250–350 words); One-Handed Read (approximately 900 words). submissions@bust.com
www.bust.com

Chróma is an online and annually printed independent magazine concerned with photography, art poetry, creative writing, and ideas. What makes it unique is the fact that each issue is based entirely on a colour. They’re looking for poets, fiction writers, and essay/article writers. Chosen short stories and articles will be awarded £30. Please

see website for further details.
editor@chromamagazine.com
www.chromamagazine.com

Peepal Tree Press is the world’s leading publisher of Caribbean and Black British writing. They accept, fiction (over 40,000 words), poetry collections (over 48 pages) and non-fiction. See website for full details on how to submit.
www.peepaltreepress.com

The Dublin Review is a quarterly magazine of fiction, reportage, essays, memoir and criticism, and is open to submissions of previously unpublished fiction and non-fiction. Please include an email address for a response. The Editor, *The Dublin Review*, PO Box 7948, Dublin 1, Republic of Ireland.
submissions@thedublinreview.com
www.thedublinreview.com

Flash Fiction Magazine accepts submissions all year round. Submit 300–1,000 words for possible inclusion in their anthologies. Stories can be on any theme, and payment is \$40 per story that is accepted for publication. Submission is free, but they do offer editorial feedback for \$30.
www.flashfictionmagazine.com/submissions

Acumen is a well-established poetry magazine that accepts original poetry submissions (up to four poems) and articles on poetry-



FICTION ISSUES FUTURE IMPERFECT

Dystopian fiction has been given a boost by the success of TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Black Mirror*, but as **Heather Child** explains, there are rules to obey when approaching it

HEATHER CHILD worked in digital marketing, which helped her imagine a future in which the internet knows *Everything About You* (Orbit, 2018). Her new book, *The Undoing of Arlo Knott* will be published in August.

Having reached peak dystopia with Suzanne Collins' chart-topping *The Hunger Games* and similar offerings, literary trends have taken a breather over the last few years, veering instead towards so-called 'uplit', or uplifting literature, the poster child being Gail Honeyman's award-winning *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*.

Yet there is still a place – even a vogue – for high-

worries you? Think about what you've observed in society that people aren't really noticing, that makes you feel powerless. What are we being encouraged to ignore?

'84K came from the logic of where we are now,' says Claire North (a pseudonym for Catherine Webb). 'What happens when you push the monetisation of our lives to its logical extreme? And what does it mean for human worth to be measured only by money?' In writing my own near-future novel *Everything About You*, I wanted to know what would happen if the internet really did know everything about you – how would it change a job interview or a date, or even a walk down the high street? Whatever your idea, get inside it and ask what it would mean for society, for education and everyday life.

To carry the weight of this world your plot and characterisation need to be especially strong. Think about how you can develop a compelling motivated protagonist. What role should they play in order to be most affected by the dystopia? How are they trapped, and what will they need to do to break free?

The sheer scale of *Station Eleven* sets it slightly apart from the other two novels, but its cast of characters are those who can best explore its overarching question: 'What if civilisation was erased?' They are actors, photographers and artists – perpetrators of culture. But in *84K*, the main character – Theo – is an official who calculates the price of crimes. He's a system insider, just like Lea in *Suicide Club* who, at the start of the book, is on track for eternal life.

There is an advantage to choosing insider protagonists,

because they have something to lose: they are invested in the system, until their world suddenly flips, and a cocoon becomes a cage.

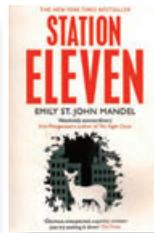
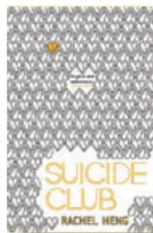
But it's not just a case of beat 'em or join 'em. Readers will see through any protagonist who is merely a tour guide for a fictional world. If there is a ruling system, it is better if beating or joining it has a price, something integral to that individual's identity.

If we look at what motivates the characters in these novels, it usually boils down to some sort of longing for lost family members or friends. This is not surprising: dystopias tend to be cold, grey, isolating places, so the story needs a counter melody of human warmth. This also helps readers identify with the characters.

And as for antagonists: in a near-future dystopia, the world itself may become part-character, creating the conflict.

That brings me to the final question: how do you furnish an ending? It would be implausible to suggest an easy fix, and overly optimistic to see the system crumble, so most of the triumphs in these novels take place on a personal level. While no harmonious utopia has risen from the ashes in *Station Eleven*, people are gathering together iPhones and CDs for the 'Museum of Civilisation'. If, as in *84K* and *Suicide Club*, you leave the big bad system intact, you can still satisfy readers by changing individual minds and destinies.

The danger with near-future dystopias (particularly if there is a lot of technology) is that they'll date. But this kind of speculative tale will always have a place, as it fulfils a core function of fiction: to look at what might be just around the corner. As Lisa Cron says in *Story Genius*, her excellent book on the neuroscience behind storytelling, 'Stories let us vicariously try out difficult situations we haven't yet experienced to see what it would really feel like, and what we'd need to learn in order to survive'. Reading dystopian fiction is a survival tactic, and survival never goes out of fashion. □



84K by Claire North (Orbit)

When Theo Miller's ex-lover is murdered, costing the killer only £84K, he finds himself on a quest to make the richest in society pay for their crimes.

Suicide Club by Rachel Heng (Sceptre)

Lea Kirino could live forever, but a chance sighting of her father, absent for 88 years, leads her into the heart of the ominous 'suicide club'.

Station Eleven by Emily St John Mandel (Picador)

A famous actor dies on stage, and the girl who witnesses it is still caught up in his story two decades later, when a pandemic has wiped out most of humankind.

Think about what people aren't really noticing. What are we being encouraged to ignore?

concept novels set in a near or recognisable future, located in cities still clinging to their given names. These are quieter, more thoughtful dystopias, with fewer epic battles and more individual subversion. They appeal to viewers of *Black Mirror* and to the new audiences reached by the screen adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. They are overtly rooted in current society and cultural trends

Recent releases of this type include Rachel Heng's *Suicide Club*, in which advancements in health technology have led to the possibility of eternal life, and Claire North's *84K*, in which democracy has been hacked by corporate 'dark money'. Crossing into post-apocalyptic fiction is *Station Eleven* by Emily St John Mandel, in which civilisation has been ended by a pandemic and is struggling to start up again.

A dystopian 'high-concept' begins with a tiny seed: What

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