

ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

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Historical fiction by the winners of  
the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021



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First published in Great Britain in 2022 by the Young Walter Scott Prize,  
Bowhill, Selkirk, Scotland TD7 5ET

[www.ywsp.co.uk](http://www.ywsp.co.uk)

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## About the Young Walter Scott Prize

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Honouring the achievements of the founding father of the historical novel, the **Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction** is one of the most prestigious literary awards in the world and boasts a stellar list of winners. Our parallel award for young writers, the **Young Walter Scott Prize**, is now in its seventh year, and it too goes from strength to strength.

Our 2019 winners had to be patient. They had been invited to attend the Borders Book Festival in Melrose in June 2020, but the global pandemic led to its cancellation. The 2021 programme was delayed until November 2021, and winter gales almost led to the cancellation of the prize-giving at Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott. Almost, but not quite, and the winners of both the 2019 and 2020 Young Walter Scott Prizes were presented with their prizes by the winner of the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction 2020 – **Hilary Mantel** – in a memorable event.

Whittling down the 2021 entries to a shortlist, and then deciding on the winners was a huge task. The judges – **the Duchess of Buccleuch**, novelist **Elizabeth Laird**, the Director of the Young Walter Scott Prize and Imagining History Programme UK **Alan Caig Wilson**, poet, dramatist and Edinburgh Makar **Hannah Lavery** and Literary Agent **Kathryn Ross** – debated long and hard before deciding on the final list. We are sure that once you've read the stories in this anthology you will consider that they chose well.

And if your story didn't make it to this year's anthology, there's always the next one. It's never too soon to start planning your entry for the Young Walter Scott Prize 2022.

The Imagining History Programme UK run by YWSP Director Alan Caig Wilson is now arranging 'in person' events, and we're delighted that so many young writers are taking up the opportunity. More information about that Programme and how to become involved can be found on its website – [www.imagininghistory.org](http://www.imagininghistory.org)

Both the Walter Scott Prize and the Young Walter Scott Prize are generously supported by the **Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch** and the **Buccleuch Living Heritage Trust**.

*Past Young Walter Scott Prize winners*

- 2015 Joe Bradley and Rosi Byard-Jones
- 2016 Demelza Mason and Alice Sargent
- 2017 Leonard Belderson and Miranda Barrett
- 2018 Jenny O’Gorman and Joseph Burton
- 2019 Ide Crawford and Charlotte Lee
- 2020 Atlas Weyland Eden and Madeleine Friedlein

*Past Walter Scott Prize winners*

- 2010 *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel
- 2011 *The Long Song* by Andrea Levy
- 2012 *On Canaan’s Side* by Sebastian Barry
- 2013 *The Garden of Evening Mists* by Tan Twan Eng
- 2014 *An Officer and a Spy* by Robert Harris
- 2015 *The Ten Thousand Things* by John Spurling
- 2016 *Tightrope* by Simon Mawer
- 2017 *Days Without End* by Sebastian Barry
- 2018 *The Gallows Pole* by Benjamin Myers
- 2019 *The Long Take* by Robin Robertson
- 2020 *The Narrow Land* by Christine Dwyer Hickey
- 2021 *The Mirror and the Light* by Hilary Mantel



## **For the Love of the Sun**

Leo Wilson  
Oxfordshire

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Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021  
11 to 15 category

### Author's introduction:

*While trying to find a historical time period, I talked to my grandmother about her experience in communist China. The stories of my great-great grandpa being beaten for hiding some pottery and my grandma being sent away to a remote village resonated with me.*

*In the Great Leap Forward of the People's Republic of China a new path was forged. With the luxury of hindsight, we know this to have been a failure, but the citizens of China accepted their rulers' ideology with great optimism. The result was a dark patch in China's history including one of the greatest famines ever recorded.*

## FOR THE LOVE OF THE SUN

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We will set fire to our yesterdays to light up our tomorrows. The concept of selfishness is examined right here, as we donate our belongings to the commune. Every citizen must contribute and do their part for the Great Leap Forward. If every person does their part, we will be besting Britain's iron production in a heartbeat.

"Mama, the Party Secretary is coming. You need to get your pottery out now!"

"But I don't want to."

The pottery is beautiful, I must admit. A nimble dragon is unleashed into a land of flower blossoms and magnificent trees that spiral out of control. A peach meets the dragon's eyelid and its greedy tongue slowly engulfs it in a curtain of blue. All this is encapsulated on a piece of round, silvery pottery, a beacon of pure magic.

"Remember the Chairman's words, Mama, 'At no time and in no circumstance should a Communist place their personal interests first.' You seem to be forgetting our values."

"Wang Ge-Ming. Do you really think I'd forget our values? I'll put it in the pile."

"Good."

Our house is dark. A shaft of light illuminates the low stools, beaten earth, and a portrait of the Chairman.

Guohua collects me and makes me of use in the town yard. I am glad to be of service. Without a second glance I quickly obliterate the ceramics of old and sentimental into smithereens. I smile the smile of every child singled with godly powers, the power of destroying worlds. The phoenixes do not rise from the ashes, the kings lay slain, and the dragons are dismembered beyond recognition. All these fantasy lands are for children. Now is simply not the time nor place for child's play. We have a revolution on our hands.

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“Guohua, hurry up or we will be late for school!”

“Sorry, I was late for the queue at the soup kitchen.”

“Well, a bit of queueing doesn’t hurt, with the amount of food we are getting.”

“Damned right! I haven’t been this well fed since... well... as far as I can remember.”

The regime is working, and the fact I have supported it since it began puts a proud set of white teeth in my mouth. This bright new commune, with all united for the common good, is a thing to behold. But an old man ruins the moment by choosing to speak.

“Young boys, I saw you using your chopsticks wrongly. Don’t use them like a spoon. It is impractical and there is no elegance in that.”

“Excuse me, Comrade! Please don’t talk to us like that, like we are somehow inferior to you. Times are changing, Comrade. We are all equal now. Capitalists boss people around, Communists don’t.”

“In my day children respected the advice of elders. These shenanigans have made you barbarous.”

Guohua and I gasp. We have weeded out a counter-revolutionary and his reign of terror will be short-lived. The old man tried making his views our own and disguised it as ‘advice’. I am disgusted by him. People like him are the catalyst of catastrophe and we will end him.

---

The crowd has gathered in wait for its prey. The old man is dragged towards the centre with a sign revealing his true character:

“Capitalist!”

The old man looks terrified. His eyes claim many lives with their seething resentment. His bony fingers are held back and, with him in this most vulnerable state, they beat him and beat him. I flinch at first, but I become accustomed to it, and I know he deserves it.

“Guohua, we did the right thing didn’t we?”

“Yes. Without us, his ideas might have spread. We managed to contain it, and I’m glad we did.”

Guohua and I are newfound heroes, and we are ready to let the capitalists burn.

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“Why are you home so late? I had to fetch the food myself.” Mama puts down a plate of dumplings.

“After school, we watched a counter-revolutionary get beaten. Oh, you should have seen his face! That was a very guilty man.”

“Well... Friday is the only time the whole family can all be together without interference. So, I don’t like the fact you ditched us to watch an old man get caned on the bottom!”

“What I do is not under your authority...”

“I am your Mama! It’s my duty to look after you.”

“You repressive old people and your traditional old ways make me sick. This is not the past, this is now. This is the time of freedom and fairness. The world has moved on from your ideas.”

“I’m sorry if I am a bit bossy, son, but I just wanted all of us to be together, for just an afternoon at least. We hardly see each other.”

I go to bed.

Morning comes. The public speaker system crackles into life. ‘Stand up those who would not be slaves!’ - the familiar music. The piercing sun stabs deep inside me. The prolonged exposure gradually makes my skin tougher. I need tough skin.

“Mama, where’s my tunic?”

We all wear the same dusty blue outfits. Unable to find mine, I search my mother’s stack. A hard object reveals itself to me. I’m worried about what it might be. The object is the same shape as...

My heart sinks.

A traitor in my own kin!

A mother tainted by incorrect ideas, selfishness, and deceit.

I don't know what to do...

---

Liwei waits for me for on the walk back from school. The sun is bright. The streets are musty.

“Was that just the most boring lesson ever? I thought I was going to fall asleep.”

“What?” I'm preoccupied.

“Are you going to ping pong tonight?”

“No, not tonight.”

“Ge-Ming! Why are you so low-spirited? Like you just witnessed Mao die or something.”

“Liwei, I'm just tired that is all.”

“Is it because Yulan rejected you?”

“No... And she's a capitalist anyway.”

“Heavens, Ge-Ming, why are you so serious now? We used to have fun. We all know these things are happening, but you can just let them happen. Why do you always want to be in the forefront?”

“This is the revolution.”

“I've seen the way you look at her in political science class. That's not very revolutionary, I'd say.”

“Do you really want to go back to the old ways? We all saw what the rich got up to. They never cared anything for us.”

“I don't think you care for anyone anymore.”

“Oh, shut up you cap-...”

“Capitalist? Were you seriously going to call me a capitalist? What are you going to do, report me? Report me like you did to your own mother? This is madness. Everybody accusing everybody. Where does it end?”

I run.

I run along Zhongshan Road, past the Mao statue, the communal kitchen, take the corner by Old Doctor Wu's, the house now deserted. I hear chanting. It's getting louder and louder on my approach. The familiar group of phrases:

“Down with the landlords,  
Down with the capitalists,  
Down with the counter-revolutionaries!”

When I arrive, the crowd parts and in the centre there she is, my mother, on her knees and slumped, as if she has discarded her own body like a rag doll. Her hair is straggled in blood. A placard around her neck says ‘counter-revolutionary’. Stunned, I drop my homework book. As I kneel to pick it up, she sees me and her body stiffens and becomes her own again, filled with purpose.

“Son.”

“Mama.”

She stretches out her arm, and her trembling hand reaches up. I think she is about to touch my face. But at the same moment, I feel many hands prodding me forwards.

“He's one of them!” someone shouts.

“He should join her!” shouts another.

I force them back as I stand up. I reach out a hand to my mother. Open palmed to start with, it closes leaving one accusing finger.

“She's a capitalist!” I shout.

The crowd cheers and surges around me. My mother's grief-stricken face disappears behind a veil of blue uniforms.

“Down with the landlords,  
Down with the capitalists,  
Down with the counter-revolutionaries!”

I feel a sharp pang in my eyes and put my head down briefly to catch my breath. When I stand straight again, all I can see is a field of raised

arms and a single rock lifted high above the crowd like an offering. The rhythmic chanting continues and the rock falls with a dull thud like a dropped pumpkin.

I push through the crowd again and I see her body splayed out, pulled by two men, intensifying her pain, as they drag her away. Her bare feet rake the gravel and paint it in red. Her head is slumped and broken; her eyes tightly shut. They drag her to the public rice warehouse. They say she spent several hours there alone, wailing and mumbling indecipherably until she died.

That was all some time ago now. The revolution has moved on. One bad harvest is not going to stop us. I sometimes still think about my mother, but I cannot cry for her. I will not cry for her. Revolutionaries cannot be dragged back by the sentimentalities of yesterday. We have a destiny to fulfil, as we work, we strive, and we march to a better tomorrow.



## A LOST GENERATION

Oliver Dhir

Glasgow

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Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021

16 to 19 category

### Author's introduction:

*Two things inspired me to write about this period. The first was an article in the news a few months back describing my generation as a 'lost generation'. Part of me understood it. We have come of age in a pandemic, stuck inside. I have never sat an official exam and this is my first full year of in-person schooling since I was 14. Yet part of me was infuriated by that statement. We are still here. Most of us have made it through, and we can begin to heal. We're not 'lost'.*

*And that leads me to the second thing that inspired me. A photo of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus in 1993. It does the rounds on social media every so often but if you've not seen it, it features just over 100 men, lined up as a choir would be. Everyone is dressed in black except the survivors of the original group who wear white. There are seven. The caption is: "Remember this when people say the gay community survived the epidemic. We had to start over because we lost a whole generation."*

*That's why the phrase "A lost generation" infuriated me. We are not lost, we are alive, we are present and we will recover. With the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the community was decimated and no one seemed to care, no one seemed to realise the magnitude of the loss. The community had to rebuild from the ground up. Survivors mourn the loss of an entire generation of friends and were expected to continue their lives as if they had not experienced more profound loss in a few years than most do in a lifetime.*

*As a young queer person, I mourn the loss of the lessons I could have learned, the family I could have found and the progress that could have been made if they were alive. The apathy from governments and authority figures was uncomfortably familiar – some of the parallels between then and now were almost painful to read. History is always relevant in some way or another and this particular chapter felt especially so. I can in no way do justice to the lives of the victims of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but I hope my story will make at least a small difference somewhere.*

## A LOST GENERATION

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I feel as though I'm drowning in sand. No air left in my lungs and an acid bitterness at the back of my throat. The flaking, putrid yellow paint of the doctor's office is searing into my retinas. The tremor in my left leg seems more violent than before.

"Mr Hernandez?"

The cold metal of the chair against my bare arm snaps me out of my stupor. I swallow air to try and get rid of the arid dryness in my throat. "Sorry. Can you repeat that?" My voice is small, too small for how big my tongue feels in my mouth.

"You have AIDS. There is currently no approved treatment in the United States and I cannot give you a prognosis, there is not enough data. I will prescribe you some supplements and refer you to a lung specialist. In the meantime, you must be more responsible than you clearly have been so far- "

Tightening my jaw, I cut him off sharply. "I know the spiel. You don't have to recite it for me." I fix my gaze firmly on the scummy grey of the linoleum floor. I can feel the bland brown eyes blinking at me from behind the square wire-rimmed glasses. I don't know if I'd prefer to see pity or disgust, I don't care to find out.

He sighs. My nails dig deep into my palm. "Here are your prescriptions, I'll fax them over to the pharmacy, you should be able to pick them up tomorrow." I reach for the grimly orange piece of paper and he pulls his hand back sharply and avoids my gaze. Disgust then. I breathe out the ghost of a laugh, snatching the prescription and stuffing it into my pocket. It's not like I'll be able to afford it.

Letting the door slam behind me, I tiptoe into the corridor, wrapping my jacket tighter around myself. It's bigger than it used to be. The floor wobbles beneath me and my knees give out, bony fingers scrabbling for the chipped hardwood bannister before I hit the ground with an unceremonious thump for the third time this week. I knew it before the words came out of that scumbag's mouth. I've sat through the diagnosis of three friends, I know the symptoms and "treatments" like the back of my hand. I've watched ten of them waste away in front of me. Guess I get to watch it happen to me too.

Gritting my teeth, I heave myself up and shakily take the steps required to leave the office, dodging the scrutinising stares of the receptionists. Fresh air fills my rattling lungs and exits as a weak puff of steam. Leaving footprints in the early frost, my eyes glaze over hoping that whatever is left of my legs takes me somewhere safe and warm. The past three months of my life run on an oversaturated technicolour tape in my head, analysing and overanalysing every slide for an answer. Some frames are fuzzy, with black spots covering faces. Others are clear as day, the sharp edges of protest signs, holding Mitch's hand as he shrank slowly on that pull-out bed in Stevie's apartment. I was safe, I swear I don't know how it happened. I didn't take any risks, I didn't, I couldn't.

The wheezy honk of a battered Ford Pinto burns through the film, battered Docs skidding to a stop outside a bookshop. The bookshop. A brazen pink triangle on the white sign above my head and a plethora of posters and flyers stuck to the window. Timings for the GLF meetings, memorial pictures, the joyous smile of Harvey Milk and a defiant pride flag hanging centre stage. A weighty rock in my stomach, I shuffle up to the door, remarking that plywood instead of glass is stuck to the bottom panel. Another brick for the collection then. The bell rings cheerfully as I slip through the door, the smell of stale coffee and old books hitting my nose and making me dizzy. Well, dizzier. Twinkling brown eyes topped by a mop of curly black hair pop up from behind a worn, dog-eared copy of *Maurice*. "Jackie-boy! How did your appointment go?"

Stevie's always so happy.

I bite the soft flesh of my inner cheek, drawing a sharp breath through my nose, not trusting myself to open my mouth. But he knows. I don't know how he does it but he always knows. Angular features soften and he unfolds his limbs from the floral-patterned armchair, standing up, staring down at me as I fix my gaze on the ugliest rug I've ever seen. "Oh, Jackie. Sweetheart." My lips are trembling, offbeat to the tremor creeping up my body. The silence gets thicker the longer I don't speak. I try "I'm sorry" but it comes out as a strangled sob, thorny vocal cords catching on each other. I screw my face up tightly, trying to contain the tears that are threatening to come out but it just hurts more as they fight their way out, cracking open the dam of my eyelids. I grab a bin and start dry heaving, the sound of my retching faded and distant. I can feel Stevie's callouses scratching the back of my neck and the low buzzing feedback of the record player spilling out Judy Garland in the corner. The space heater is blasting

warmth but I'm still chilled to my core. He lowers my body down onto the loveseat on my left and flips the Open sign Closed. Sinking down next to me, he takes my hand in his, thumb pressing down gently on protruding veins. "It's gonna be okay. Jack, we'll get through this." I let that sentence hang in the air like cigarette smoke, the bitter aftertaste left unspoken.

I won't.

Mitch didn't.

Lori didn't.

Ken didn't.

Ronnie didn't.

Charlie didn't.

Neither did Hugo or Tom or Bekka or Josh or Tino or CJ or Queenie or Angie or Michel or Vito.

David is still lying in that hospital bed hooked up to wires and tubes, fighting and shrinking and shrinking and shrinking. He's just a kid. 17. Just a kid.

And they didn't even let Ryan go to Charlie's funeral. His parents buried him in a dress with his old name and banned Ryan from the funeral. They were married for God's sake. Charlie's parents didn't even know him. Threw him out at 16, didn't visit him once as he was lying in that ward, bird bones for limbs, red round lesions crawling up his neck, the death rattle in his chest and petrified eyes bulging out of concave cheeks. The nurses wouldn't even touch him, grimacing when Ry got near them. The look of resignation on Ryan's face when the nurse spat in his face when he asked for directions to the bathroom haunts me. We found Ryan curled up next to the gravestone 2 weeks later, with purple lips and red-rimmed eyes. He'd been there all night, frozen tears watering the pot of red carnations he brought. We had to write "Longtime companion" to get his obituary in the NY Herald. One name in tiny print blurred amongst the throng. What a joke.

Ryan's name appeared a week later.

Judy Garland's voice repeating "Why, O why can't I?" drags me slowly back to reality where the warmth has finally permeated my bones, a

pleasant change from the impertinent cold that's followed me around for weeks now. "Your record has a crack in it." My voice crackles more than a scratched record. He scoffs, "That damn brick landed on the box, we're lucky it only has a crack."

"I should go." I push myself up tentatively, hoping that my legs decide to cooperate. "I have work tomorrow." He nods and pulls me in for one last hug. For a fraction of a second, I catch the brief look of exhausted sorrow that's replaced the usual joie-de-vivre. The sinking sensation of *'not another one, I can't take another one'*. My eyes peer over his shoulder to the wall above the till. You can barely see the once green wallpaper behind the Polaroids and carefully cut out obituaries. I can still picture the day when we stuck the first one up 3 years ago. Back when it was GRID or 4H. Back when it was less important because it was "killing the right people". It's not like they care now any more than they did 3 years ago.

The bell twinkles mutely on my way out, and I take a left down an alley lined with vandalised posters of Reagan. Mine is half torn off but you can still see it. Mr and Mrs Death. The flicker of pride fades as my mind starts to wander far, far away from this living hell. Maybe impending mortality makes you more introspective. Who'll be left? After I'm gone. In 10 years. In 20. Will they have found a cure by then? Will they ever? Every week there are fewer and fewer people at meetings. Then their picture appears on the wall and we hold hands and light a candle, hoping it won't get knocked over and burn out the bookstore.

What picture will they choose for me?



## **BORDERS DRAWN IN 80 DAYS**

Rafi Ahmad  
Woodford Green, Essex

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Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021  
11 to 15 category

Author's introduction:

*My story is an attempt to convey the trauma that my grandmother, Nano Asgheri, experienced. During her childhood, she had to flee Kashmir, crossing the border of Pakistan, eventually settling in England.*

## BORDERS DRAWN IN 80 DAYS

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The sun had already set, but its afterglow still painted the sky with warm hues of crimson and vermilion, illuminating the mountainous landscape of Kashmir. The soft, drooping, purple blossoms of Jacaranda trees were just beginning to fall, the unfortunate ones trampled into a beautiful, brown-tinted slurry. Hangul grazed wild in numerous herds roaming many a field; their long twisting antlers and scarlet coats were seen for miles. Similarly, on the mountains themselves, hundreds of decorative and delicate kites of every colour and variety, a show of great pomp, soared high above in flocks of their very own, dancing in the strong gusts.

Asgheri walked through a rising field with her younger brother, Hakim, giggling at his funny antics and his absolute excitement and innocent wonder as they made their way to the Chand Raat kite festival with a kite in hand. They continued their trek up the hillside. In the far distance, Asgheri could make out a small figure. She immediately realised what it was. She dashed to the nearest tree, pulling her brother along, instructing him. “Come on, Bhai, just climb the tree.” Her brother was going to question this but thought it was best to just go along with it. “Jaldi Bhai, there is a surprise at the top.”

By the time her brother had managed to get to the top, losing his footing many times, it was clear what the figure was: a hangul. It was rare to find one by itself and even rarer to get so close to observing one. It had a certain grace and a golden sheen to its coat. Its antlers were like a crown adorning its head, rendering the animal regal with an enrapturing beauty. It decided to settle in front of the pair’s view, quietly grazing. Asgheri was at a loss for words, taking in the enchanting sight of the animal. If an onlooker had seen them, they would have seen the surreal image of two children dangling from a branch, awestruck by an animal larger than both of them.

Within the quaint peace, the hangul was startled by a foreign noise, as if something threatening was hidden in the landscape. The previously calm creature became agitated and frightened. Its muscles tensed, and its eyes surveyed the surrounding area for a threat. In the blink of an eye, Asgheri saw it run off towards the western border of Jammu Tawi. Wondering what could have startled the creature, she tugged Hakim down the tree. His kite was crushed, the delicate paper frame ripped in two. His eyes welled up as he cried out to his sister, but Asgheri paid no regard to his tears. A shrill scream of a child in the distance echoed through the mountainous landscape. An overwhelming feeling of terror crept up Asgheri's spine as she grabbed Hakim's sleeve and pulled him alongside her, transfixed on keeping her little Chhoti Bhai safe.

As they ran breathlessly down the rocky terrain, Asgheri finally caught a glimpse of safety as she saw smoke wafting above, and her lungs filled with the familiar spiced scent of her mother's daal. Asgheri called out, her voice quivering. "Ami Jan, get inside!" She finally had a chance to look back, seeing the outline of a mob consisting of hundreds of people descending the mountain and the fires that had broken out in neighbouring villages.

She let go of Hakim from her close embrace the moment they got inside. Without saying a word, both she and her mother knew if they did not flee, they would be killed by the approaching mob or suffer a fate much worse. They grabbed everything they could in the few minutes they had left. Asgheri did not have time to say goodbye to the house or even goodbye to this part of her life. Her brother was still in tears over his kite, oblivious to the massacres that had just happened and the danger their lives were in at the hands of reckless men. They all ran out the door, Asgheri's mother holding Hakim, his hands clinging onto the back of her kameez. They ran. There was a train station at the base of the mountain. It was the only way they could flee.

When they arrived, dozens were brutally shoving each other to try to get on board. There was no attempt to control the crowd. The tickets-people themselves were pushing others out the way to get on the train. Others piled on the train's roof, inhaling the fine coal dust and the train's repulsive and sickening exhaust. They pushed their way through, eventually being forced to jump down onto the platform. Without a moment to lose, they, with desperate hands, grabbed the very edge of the train.

The train screeched and began to move forward. One or two poor souls were left behind on the station's platform. Asgheri's life beyond this point was uncertain. She would be safe in Pakistan, but for how long? Her thoughts were entirely muddled. The train sped forwards, the landscape of Kashmir disappearing into the horizon. Her memories of the old forest where she and Hakim used to walk together and the tall hills where he took his first steps. Asgheri's Kashmir was all gone. All that was left now were her fleeting memories. The last thing she saw of her old home was a singular gliding kite flying above the mountaintops.

Asgheri knew she could never return to her old life, but it would always be a part of her.





# LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, FRATERNITÉ?

Hana Benlalam  
Banbury, Oxfordshire

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Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021  
11 to 15 category

## Author's introduction:

*I was inspired to write this story due to my love of the time period. The 18th century was an era of immense change not only in political events but in ideas; be it the idealistic dreams of the young revolutionary in my story or the cynical Madame Dupont who I imagine following Descartes' philosophy of radical doubt. My story is about the storming of the Bastille in 1789 but the characters are fictional. However Madame Dupont is based on one of many colourful characters who had to guard the seven rowdy prisoners the day the fortress was stormed.*

## LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, FRATERNITÉ?

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### Paris, 1789

The Bastille. Political prison, guarded fortress, symbol of order and authority. Completely impenetrable. The storming of the Bastille. Heroic, barbarous, shambolic. Before Marat was stabbed and David whipped his paints out, before Louis and Marie's rather sticky end, before the bloody massacres of The Terror and before Robespierre himself there was Madame Dupont and she happens to be three minutes late.

Now, dear reader, this may seem a trivial point to make but believe me, if Copernicus' earth rotates around the sun, Madame Dupont's rotates around the clock. In particular, a green Thuret pendulum swinging dubiously on the wall with a crack running up the centre from where a prisoner hurled a croquet ball at it. She forgets which prisoner it was but she would bet a Louis D'or or two that it was the Comte de Malville. It is *always* the Comte de Malville. Albeit rather tardy, she makes her rounds of the prison and doles out soup to the criminals who clutch wooden bowls in their hands and inhale it as though they haven't eaten in weeks. That was the starter; the main and dessert would be around shortly on embossed dishes for the two counts and on a plank of wood for the four forgers. *Only distinguished criminals deserve to eat from fine chinaware*, Madame Dupont thinks. *Serves the lower classes right for being so repulsive. The rich, bless them, tumbled into the lion's pit of sin through ennui whereas the poor – well, they're poor due to laziness.* She herself belonged to the middling sort of Parisians. Jealousy at not being of noble birth meant she cursed the rich yet was so embarrassed at her own lowly status that she was hell-bent on obsequious submission to them.

Her rounds are almost complete when the sudden blast of a gun sounds outside followed by the overwhelming stench of saltpetre that seeps into her throat. "What on earth?" She turns as a cannonball smashes into the window before shattering into tiny fragments and scattering like grapeshot. A shard of glass the size of a fingernail flies across the room and falls straight into the Comte de Malville's bowl with a deliberate splosh.

"Ah, a crouton," he cries with admiration and stirs his soup.

A bag of a jacket with a small man inside it wearing striped breeches and a cravat strewn around his neck storms into the fortress with two

pistols at his hips. He has a bonnet crudely knitted by a pair of desperate hands and an air of arrogance one could smell from the Rue de Sevres.

“Where is the Governor?” he demands.

“Upstairs. I’m serving the prisoners their luncheon now. Pray, have some soup, Monsieur?”

“I’m not hungry. I shall only be sated once the cinders of the bourgeoisie have been well and truly snuffed out and the only food to pass my lips will be the wine of liberty.”

He spits on the ground; she rolls her eyes and wipes it with the pointed toe of her mules.

“We have wine, if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t want your wine, you saddle goose.”

“What *do* you want, horrid little man?”

“Freedom, citizen, for me, you, the whole of France,” he proclaims, eyes sparkling, hand thrust in the lapels of his jacket. “For if the world is to be free we must first liberate our great nation.” He coughs after finishing his spiel.

“The cinders of the bourgeoisie, I know, always clogging up my throat.”

“Don’t take that tone with me, citizen,” he snaps with the authority of a newly promoted leader eager to showcase his dominance. The striped breeches clamber onto the dining table where the Comte de Malville is stirring his soup with the watery gaze of a man too tired for such antics. His words are punctuated by the mob’s hands banging on the fortress walls in rage as he cries, “We liberate the prisoners! How many are held captive here, 100? 500? 1000?”

“Seven.”

“We liberate them all! Wait, did you say seven?” he asks, bewildered, his face the same shade of red as the Phrygian cap on his head, but the crowds have already entered. Armed with pitchforks and makeshift weaponry they ransack the prison. Paintings are ripped from the walls and thrown into the blazing fireplace. The flames lick higher around Maria Therese’s neck until there is nothing left – the portrait is completely engulfed by fire.

“Quickly, hide.” He pulls her onto the floor behind the table whilst

dozens flood through the building waving muskets, pitchforks, flags and bits of rag.

“If ammunition’s what they are looking for, they won’t find any here,” she says in a forced whisper. “It was taken weeks ago; this fortress is empty now.”

“Fear not, citizen, what starts here doesn’t end here. We’ll take to the streets of Paris and soon every man, woman and child will never know the feeling of hunger again.”

He gets to his feet as the seven prisoners are being ushered out by a league of rebels. Their eyes are wide and inquisitive, curious as to their sudden release. More like a field trip than a jailbreak.

“Welcome to the revolution, citizen.” He tosses a red bonnet to her and flees out of the open gate into the skirmish outside.

“Aww, much obliged.” Madame Dupont catches sight of the old clock on the wall, smiles as she dons the cap, and raises her newly acquired pistol to the ceiling. “Right,” she fires it, “everybody out, there’s work we have to do.”

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Outside the Bastille stands Madame Dupont wandering aimlessly along the façade and haggling with the townsmen. One stroller seems to be a man of means. She walks over to him and watches as the July sun makes the gold buckles of his shoes gleam.

“Monsieur,” she addresses him. “You look to be a man of the world, surely you care about learning the history behind the tumultuous times we’re living in?”

“I suppose so.” He examines her with suspicion, noting the flamboyant feather on one side of her wig and the tricolour cockade on the other. *Clever*, he thinks. *Hedging her bets on whether to appear an aristocrat or an alley cat.*

“Why then, follow me and I can lead you through the events of last week, after all this is living history, good sir. You too can walk on the very same stones our brave countrymen walked upon and share the same sense of zeal and patriotic fervour, all for the bargain price of *1 ecu*.”

He hands over the money and follows her through the demolished gate leading to the Bastille. Cannonball after cannonball meant that the wood is covered in indentations and every wall looked close to crumbling. They enter the sanctuary of the prison, now prisoner-less. The walls once adorned with artwork have been stripped bare, the regimental tapestries have been torn from the pediments and dumped in a mass on the floor, covering a lump of something in the corner.

“Step this way monsieur, tread carefully though, the blood of the vainquers still runs down these halls.” With a flick of her wrist, she pours a glass of wine onto the floor and watches as it spills down into the stone cracks of the floor.

“Oh my, I can see it,” the tourist says, his voice a whisper as if he’s frightened the ghosts of the fallen revolutions are laughing at his agitation. Madame Dupont promptly recoils and covers her face with her hands in mock distress.

“Monsieur, if your constitution is weak do not go any closer to that machine.” She rushes over to the ramshackle printing press in the corner of the room and leans against it.

“It seems to be a ramshackle printing press, no?”

“Oh, but appearances can be very deceptive. What seems to resemble a printing press was once a torture device, used in the battle for Bastille only three days ago.”

“My God!”

She discreetly hurries over to the Thuret clock and picks at a piece of rotten wood sticking out from the crack running along it. “Here, we have a piece of shrapnel from the great gate outside the fortress,” she says holding up the wood against the light of the shattered window like a jeweller demonstrating the authenticity of his diamonds. In the corner of the room sits a pile of bones. Human bones, cleaned by the other enterprising salesmen and women who realised there was money to be found in the rubble of the Bastille. Madame Dupont didn’t need to grind chalk like the bakers who artificially whiten their bread and create fake artefacts, the remains spoke for themselves and they told of the human cost that came with rebellion.

The man slowly lifts a regimental banner off the floor only to find the body of a young man in a jacket too big for him, curled up beneath the

protection of the tapestry which serves as a duvet for him. He bows his head and mutters a prayer to himself. Madame Dupont shudders slightly. She forgets for a moment what she is doing by showing this man such macabre curiosities but then the coins clink in her purse and she remembers. The man nods respectfully at her, then exits in silence. Laughing, Madame Dupont counts the money from her endeavours. *12 ecus*. She glances once more at the body of the man in the striped breeches.

“Thank you, *citizen*, for your... sacrifice.”

She throws the cap onto his lifeless body and leaves.





## THE DIARY OF A WHITE FEATHER GIRL

Beatrix Anne Heath-Hassell

London

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Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021

11 to 15 category

### Author's introduction:

*I've always been fascinated by large events in history like the world wars, not just what was happening in the world at that time, but the effect it must have had on the people who lived through them. History books usually only seem to remember the things that happened, such as battles and revolutions and government acts, but not the way people responded: not world leaders or politicians, but ordinary people. Experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic got me thinking about the way it might be portrayed in history books in the future, and if they would include all of the normal, day-to-day things that were affected, or just focus on what the government was doing. I decided to set my story in another time of universal struggle and uncertainty - World War One -and explore how it affected regular citizens. I also knew I didn't want to write about it from a usual perspective. Most books about WWI written in first-person are narrated by soldiers (with the exception of Michael Morpurgo's War Horse), but essentially, the narrators are normally 'the good guys.' I wanted to write from the perspective of someone doing something considered 'bad' and 'shocking' and to think about the reasons behind their actions. I also wanted them to gradually come to understand others' motivations and maybe begin to question their own.*

## THE DIARY OF A WHITE FEATHER GIRL

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**23rd October 1917**

Mother has taken ill. I had to nurse her all day, she was in a shocking state. Elderly Dr Potts looked very grave when he first came to see her, but by evening he said she was doing well. "She's very strong," he told me, smiling.

"Oh yes," I replied. "Even when she heard the news about Father and Richard, she didn't collapse or faint or anything like that. She just went very still and sat down, and that was all."

The smile on Dr Potts' face vanished. Like so many others, he thinks the best way to deal with the war is to pretend that it isn't happening. As if all of the men in England have simply popped down to the pub, and will be back late at night, drunk and staggering. Father used to go to the pub sometimes. The Earl and Elephant. When he returned and came up to say goodnight, he'd ruffle my hair and slurrily tell me that I was his special darling and he loved me and sweet dreams and chuckle, chuckle, don't let the bedbugs bite. Richard and I used to giggle and imitate Father when he was drunk to each other, in those brother-and-sister moments we'll never have again. It all seems so long ago now.

It's a pity I had to look after Mother today. I know Clara Wilkins and a few other girls were planning to go out around London this afternoon, giving out feathers, and make an evening of it. I was going to go too. I've collected twenty-seven feathers in the last few days - it's really surprising how many there are if you only look for them.

I got into handing out feathers almost a year ago, after John was killed. That was the last straw for me. My father, my brother, my fiancé. They all died bravely, fighting for their country, and yet there are so many cowards among us who can't even face the trenches. It's ridiculous. How do they expect to win this war if they're too afraid to fight?

## 24th October 1917

Mother has recovered quite a bit today - enough to lie on the sofa and bark at Sarah to make her a cup of tea - *no, not like that, foolish girl, my way, with extra milk and sugar*. Then she starts complaining about rationing when Sarah patiently explains that if she makes it Mother's way, we'll have no milk and sugar left for the rest of the week.

I didn't get out much today. I just went to pay a brief call on Mrs Byrd, our neighbour, whose youngest son Billy was killed at the Front a couple of days ago. I gave her my own and Mother's condolences. She looked utterly pitiful. There were shadows under her eyes, black against her pallid skin, and she looked as if she hadn't eaten a thing since she got the news. She didn't say anything when I tried to speak to her, just stared, motionless, at the worn-out carpet. The lighting was dim, reflecting the mood. Her daughter Mary told me, with tears in her eyes, that the funeral is in a week's time. I promised I wouldn't miss it for the world, and that Mother would come too if she was able. Mary just nodded, unable to speak. She and I haven't always been on the best terms - she doesn't approve of my handing out white feathers, she says it should be a man's choice if he wants to risk his life - but I knew exactly how she was feeling. She called on us when Richard and Father were killed, so I had to return the favour, however unpleasant it was to stand in that dark house, haunted by grief, the clock ticking away, nobody saying anything. A very unpleasant favour indeed.

## 25th October 1917

Mother is almost better, so I went out a bit more today. I gave away two feathers while walking through the park - one to a red-haired young man who couldn't have looked more shocked if I'd slapped him, and one to a slightly older man smoking a pipe, who told me, in a most offended voice, that he was Army, just out of uniform. I don't know if he was telling the truth or if he was lying to save embarrassment.

I saw Clara Wilkins and told her why I couldn't come to her outing the other night.

"It's alright," she said. "I understand."

"Did I hear your sister Margaret has volunteered for nursing work?" I asked.

Clara nodded, eyes bright. "I'm thinking of doing the same." She paused and scanned the crowd for any army-eligible young men who might be deserving of a feather. There were none. Maybe our efforts were working. "So I'll leave you, Martha, to teach those cowards a lesson. I'll be too busy to go around handing out feathers if I do become a nurse. I've quite a few gathered in my bag right now, as a matter of fact. Would you like some?"

I said yes, and went home with ten extra feathers. Clara had almost a hundred stuffed into her bag!

"However did you get all of these?" I marvelled.

She winked at me. "I pulled some out of my bolster."

"That explains why they're so soft!" I laughed.

"Just like the chicken-hearts we give them to!"

I went home and listened to Mother going on and on for a quarter of an hour about what a useless maid Sarah was, and how simply dreadful she felt, and would I fetch her snuff box, dear, until I was nearly driven demented. It maddens me to think of the cowards who won't fight, for I would enlist for two pins. I would kill the people who killed my family and end this bloody war at last.

## **26th October 1917**

Today I gave away five feathers, not counting one I accidentally gave to a man who then showed me the stump of his right arm and handed the feather straight back. I felt sick. I hate it when that happens. One feels so dreadfully guilty.

There was quite a commotion down the road at around noon, so I went to see what it was. It turned out that Alfred Jones, who is the younger brother of Alice, a dear friend of mine and fellow feather-giver, who since the war has started teaching at the nearby school - anyway, her brother Alfred was being sent off to war. He turned nineteen just last week and insisted on enlisting straight away. I was glad when I heard this, for otherwise I might have had occasion to give him a feather, and that would never do.

All of the Joneses' neighbours had gathered round and were saying

things such as: “Goodbye, Alfie darling!” “Good luck at the Front!” “Give Jerry a good beating for me, won’t you?” It was quite an affecting sight. I watched for a while and then bid him goodbye myself. Alfred’s a nice lad. I do hope he makes it through the war unharmed.

Sadly, the chances of that happening are slim.

### **27th October 1917**

Oh God. What a fool I am.

Today I was out, running errands, when I noticed a young man standing next to a lamppost. Well, not so much standing as trembling next to a lamppost. He was very pale and his eyes were dark and haunted. I marched up to him and tried to give him one of Clara’s feathers. He turned away and sobbed.

“You’re a coward if you don’t fight,” I said coolly. At the word fight the man keeled onto the floor and started shaking. It was extraordinary. “I... can’t!” he cried. “I’m sorry! I know I’m a coward but I...just...can’t!” A crowd was starting to gather. I shooed them away with a gloved hand and turned back to the crying man.

When he recovered a little, he met my eyes, panting. “It’s worse than you can possibly imagine,” he said slowly. “The sky a muddy grey. The ground is so wet the earth sucks you in and you can barely walk. The lice, they crawl into your blood and agonise you. It’s hell. The shouts, the... the screams. The dead. They are everywhere. They lie, rotting corpses no one has the strength to remove. The bombs...They blast all day and night and you feel like you’re already dead. The blinding light, the deafening explosions. A woman who lives on this pretty little street, with flowers outside every house, handing out feathers, could...n-never understand!”

The last words were cried with such vehemence that I took a step backwards. I tried to get away from this man, who was clearly shell-shocked and out of his mind, but he pulled me back. I gasped. How dare he lay hands on me! He continued.

“No, stay here. I need to make someone understand. Anyone...even a white feather girl like you!” He uttered the words ‘white feather girl’ with such desperate disgust. This clearly wasn’t his first encounter with someone like me.

“A white feather girl!” he moaned again, eyes rolling back into his head. “A white feather girl!”

I felt myself bristle and my temper flared. “I’m not a girl!” I hissed. “I am twenty-three years old and I do what I do so that Britain wins this war!”

“WHO BLOODY CARES IF BRITAIN WINS THE WAR!” he shrieked. People were staring, muttering. I glimpsed Clara Wilkins on the street. She was watching me, still clutching her white feather and attempting to placate the crazy shell-shocked man.

“Who cares who wins the war as long as it ends?”

I widened my eyes, astonished. The man slumped sideways down onto the pavement and croaked softly, “You...don’t...understand.” I believe he fainted.

Clara Wilkins elbowed her way through the crowd and came up to me. She glanced briefly at the man on the floor.

“Shell-shock.”

I nodded.

“You’ve got to ignore those ones who rave on about the burning battlefield and whatnot.”

I nodded.

“Are you alright, Martha?”

I nodded.

## 28th October 1917

I'm not alright. I had nightmares last night about the 'burning battlefield' of the soldier's description. I woke up gasping, drowning in my heavy bedsheets, imagining the sound of gunfire, crying out desperately for Richard and for Father and for John.

I remember when Richard came home on his first leave. He had gone off to war a proud, upright man in uniform, and came back a pale, shrunken boy with death in his eyes. I've tried to ignore the image all I can, but I can't stop thinking about it today.

They're not cowards. They know the truth and we mock them for it.

Oh God. Who have I turned into in the last few months?

I'm restless. I walk about the house, wondering why I ever wanted to be a soldier. Mother scolds me concernedly and tells me to get out of the house for a bit. She is in perfect health now, ready to go out herself. She'll certainly be coming with me for Billy's funeral. Billy was too young to die.

They all were.

At around four o'clock I start walking away, away, far away from home, further and further, until I reach a large park. There's a fountain in the centre and that's what I aim for. I'm carrying all of my feathers in a big bundle. This is the only thing I can think of to do.

I drop the bundle into the clear water. The lighter feathers float at the top, the others flutter slowly to the bottom of the stone basin.

"Goodbye," I say aloud.



## THE FIRST EMPEROR'S SONS

Ellie Karlin

Bristol

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Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021

11 to 15 category

### Author's introduction:

*The first Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, was a ruler with a momentous effect on all of China. He proclaimed himself Emperor in 221 BC at the age of 38 after the Qin had conquered the Warring States and unified all China under his rule. His self-invented title of 'Emperor' would be used for the next two millennia. The Chinese state greatly expanded under his rule and he standardised many of the practices in the different states. Some of his greatest and best-known achievements are the unification of state walls into The Great Wall of China that still exists to this day, and his own tomb, the city-sized mausoleum located at the foot of Mount Li and guarded by the mysterious Terracotta Army. However, despite his power, he was unable to secure the succession of his eldest son to the throne. Instead, following his death in 210 BC, a bloody power struggle ensued in which, through the manipulation of the minister Zhao Gao, one of his many sons, Hu Hai, rose to power and became second Emperor, Qin Er Shi. To ensure his shaky claim to the throne as a very junior prince, he is now believed to have brutally killed his numerous other brothers. While several different executions took place at different places, archaeologists think that some of the brothers' skeletons still lie in a tomb opposite the mausoleum where their father, the first Emperor, lies. This story is how I imagine what it must have been like for them to await execution by their power-hungry sibling.*

*I was inspired to write my story set in Ancient China after reading a book on world history and realising how little I knew of Chinese history and how culturally fascinating it is. I was particularly enthralled by the story of the sons of the first emperor because of how the notoriety of the First Emperor's gigantic tomb compares to the almost forgotten story of his sons' deaths, and the religious significance in Ancient China of dying without a tomb or any objects to take into the afterlife.*

## THE FIRST EMPEROR'S SONS

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Darkness. Waiting in darkness.

The clammy arms of a dozen young men, some only just out of boyhood, pressed against each other through the short sleeves of once-fine tunics, sitting side-by-side within the confined space of the grimy chamber. The ragged breathing of the remaining sons of Qin Shi Huang, first Emperor of unified China. The brothers of Huhai, Qin Er Shi, the second emperor, the usurper.

We can hear the pitter-patter of many light footsteps that ring on the floor, coming towards us. We stiffen as one. Perhaps this will be the time. Perhaps it will happen now. Perhaps now they will take us away. The footsteps are getting closer... nearly here. We can hear murmured voices, then the grating of the key in the wooden lock. The door seems as though it will never open; its creaking and groaning is a discordant sound in the silence.

The flickering light of lanterns illuminates several blank-faced servants and I let out the breath I hadn't realised I was holding in. It isn't time... not yet. The servants don't look at us as they file in, placing the trays of food and drink they carry on the floor in front of us. The guards outside close the door as they leave and lock it.

Scrambling eagerly forward, we consume the food in minutes, eating like starved wild animals. It feels like a week since we last ate, but it could just as easily have been a day. Each time is the same and so far each time has only ended in waiting. Waiting for them to come and take us away, as we know they will, eventually. Being given food or drink, or being led outside to relieve ourselves and get a breath of fresh air, then going back in and waiting, waiting in case the next footsteps aren't trivial, in case the next footsteps mean they've finally come. I have become afraid of the waiting, but I know I will be more afraid when it stops.

The food is good, warming my belly. Leaning back against the wall, I look around at the numb faces I know must mirror my own. In the early days of our imprisonment, we would talk and cry together, hoping and praying for rescue. Now we have no more we can say, and merely let the grief smother us in its hard embrace, leaving the empty vessels of our bodies behind to wait... and wait. Always to wait.

Me and my brothers. Brothers most of whom I hardly knew before. The sons of some of the first Emperor's many concubines. Living quietly with our mothers away from the palace, with our own estates, our own servants, our own lives. Harmless, most of us.

But not to him. To him we're all a threat. Because of the father we share. Because we're eligible for the throne as much as he is. Because free, someday we might come and take it from him by force.

I didn't even know my father was dead until they came to take me away. I can still see my mother's face when they pulled us apart, her hair billowing around her as she struggled hopelessly before going limp and faint in her captor's grip. Her constricted breathing when they read out the charges. The tears she shed when we realised what Huhai had done.

'I'm a prince!' I yelled at them, again and again. It took me a long time to understand that that didn't help me anymore. That it only made things worse.

The second emperor cannot let us live. We are a danger to him while we breathe in this realm. He was touring the states with the first emperor when he died, he and Zhao Gao, the chief eunuch. They had time to make their move, to bring about Crown Prince Fusu's death and proclaim Huhai second Emperor. And then to come for us and take us so that none may threaten his claim. There are many more of our brothers and sisters across the state from all the different concubines. I wonder how many have died yet. I wonder how they died.

Suddenly, I find myself thinking of my mother's eyes, as I last saw them, wide, hopeless. In that moment, all I have ever known rushes through every fibre of my being and an involuntary cry escapes my lips, out into the silence, shivering and trembling.

My brothers look at me with empty eyes.

Next to me, one of my brothers suddenly speaks in a slow, toneless voice, enunciating each syllable as if trying to remember exactly how each word should sound. His voice is hoarse and rough from disuse but has an almost childlike expression to it.

'He had thirty-six years to build his tomb, just in case his elixir of life failed him, as it did. Thirty-six years to ensure that he can continue in the afterlife as he did here. He has his concubines, servants and countless others buried there with him, and every worldly possession he might

need. The terracotta warriors will guard him eternally. Our tomb will lie opposite. But we will have nothing – no army to protect us, no possessions to help us. We are lost. How can we continue in the afterlife?’

The effects of his speech reverberate through the chamber. I cling to the last and only comfort that remains.

‘We will have each other,’ I say, trying to sound more certain than I feel. ‘Almost strangers though we may be, we are brothers and we will have each other.’

I draw my knees up to my chest, steadying myself against the wall, and study my hands. They look dirty and worn and my nails are long. They are the hands of a prisoner, not a prince.

I fall asleep just like that, with my head resting on my drawn up knees, thinking about what will be there for me in the afterlife.

The instant I awake I know something is different. There are many footsteps sounding outside, a heavy, booted tread. The voice that speaks with the guard is clear and crisp.. A jarringly familiar note rings through my mind and I am flooded with terror.

‘It’s time, isn’t it?’ someone says quietly. I don’t know who. I keep my eyes fixed on the blank grey wall in front of me.

‘The afterlife - I hope it’s nice,’ says another. ‘Maybe then... maybe then all this won’t matter anymore.’

The man outside with the clear, crisp voice comes in and starts speaking to us in a formal voice, listing the petty crimes he claims we committed and ordering... our execution.

The wait is over.

I only half hear what he says. Glory has changed him much since we last met but now I recognise the man who brought this upon us in the first place.

‘Zhao Gao,’ I hiss, tears stinging my eyes. My brothers start violently as they catch on.

He acts like he doesn’t hear me and keeps talking in that clear, crisp voice but as he turns towards the door to lead us out he smiles vindictively at me over his shoulder.

And so we walk, our footsteps echoing on the stone floor, guided by many guards. I am walking like a drunk man, staggering and stumbling with every step, seeing nothing of what is around me except my brothers and their closed up trembling faces. We are isolated from the living world, destined to leave this fickle existence early.

‘The afterlife,’ I think desperately, pleading with myself. ‘It will be better there, I will be free of this existence, I will have peace.’

I feel feverish and unclear, but this thought sustains me.

‘I know it will be better, I know it will. I will have my reward for my suffering, this is for good.’

And I smile despite myself, I smile because I know that I will go to the land of the dead with my brothers and we will be free from this world.

‘In here,’ says the man with the crisp, clear voice leading the procession and I look around. We have come out of a side door of the palace and are in a small, out of the way courtyard I vaguely remember from my brief visits in my childhood. A small crowd is already assembled, waiting for us. They stare at us as we come in, boring into us with sharp, pitiless eyes. And then I see my brother.

He is dressed as grandly as our father used to dress, in luxurious dragon robes. It has been a long time since we met as children, but I recognise the little boy he used to be at once and I realise he hasn’t changed one bit. At the sight of him, hot red anger bubbles up inside of me and my brothers and I watch the usurper who has ordered our death.

Standing a few paces behind him is Zhao Gao. His sharp eyes catch mine and his lip curls into a smile. Stepping forwards, he murmurs in Huhai’s ear for a long time and Huhai listens as attentively as a pupil to his master.

There are other eunuchs further behind them, my brother’s imperial servants. They aren’t looking at us anymore: they are watching my brother and Zhao Gao with narrowed eyes.

We are told to form a row. Opposite us stands a man holding a heavy crossbow staring into the distance. All of a sudden, cold hard fear grips me, fear like I have never felt before, fear that tries to pull me away from all rationality, to return to the most basic primal urge to one in mortal danger...

... to run...

... to run away from it all and for it all to be over...

I shake violently as the impulses shudder through me, heels raised as though to do it, to run, no matter what would happen.

‘The afterlife,’ I say to myself. ‘The afterlife, think of the afterlife, think of freedom, of being with your brothers in the afterlife, think of your mother!’

I look at my brothers and they look at me. Our hands clenched into fists, we who had once been princes stand straight and tall.

Zhao Gao comes and walks slowly past each one of us, leering with victory, at last coming to me at the end of the row.

‘This was you,’ I whisper to him in fury. ‘You manipulated Huhai to be your puppet. This is all so that I and my brothers can’t claim the throne you stole when you killed the rightful heir, Crown Prince Fusu!’

‘Oh really?’ he hisses back. ‘Why don’t you prove it?’

And he walks away before I can say another word. There is a chilling silence.

The crossbow goes off once and a body crumples on the floor. It goes off a second time -- then a third, then a fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth and finally, eleventh time. The man readies himself for the twelfth shot.

Fighting back tears of pain and fright, I look once at my brother the usurper and at Zhao Gao, and I know in my heart of hearts that they will only win in this world.

‘I’m going to the afterlife,’ I say to myself, squaring my jaw. ‘I don’t have an army to protect me but I have my brothers, we will be together in the afterlife!’

I repeat this thought to myself over and over as I watch the executioner pull back the string of the crossbow. and release the heavy metal bolt.





## THE LOST GIRLS

Eve Naden  
Crewe, Cheshire

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Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021  
16 to 19 category

### Author's introduction:

*I have French heritage, so I was fascinated when I read about this amazing group of women who were part of the French Resistance during the second world war. They were taken from all over Europe, but I was particularly interested in the story of Andrée Raymonde Borrel. She fought tooth and nail and I wanted to try and bring that strength to my story. I'd never heard of any of these women before, despite studying history for several years, which shocked and disappointed me. I wrote this story to try and somewhat resurrect these amazing people, or at least their bravery and the harrowing manner in which they died. I wanted to pay tribute in some way, not just to Borrel, who was only 24 when she died, but to all the women whose stories remain buried.*

## THE LOST GIRLS

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*July 6th 1944, Natzweiler-Struthof, France*

*8 minutes*

I promised myself I wouldn't think of them. But my hands trace the shadows of that old room, where the four of us would curl up on Papa's bed, telling ghost stories. I draw his eyes – but they blur with the eyes of the soldiers in front of me. So young – each one of them. Younger than I am.

They tie rope around my wrists – because rope burns, and shackles don't.

I find myself seeing Papa's boots instead of theirs. Those boots, peppered with holes, which I helped to glue after a long day. The potatoes boiling on the stove. Maman darning stockings though my sister, Leone, refused to wear them. Maman scolding us when we came to dinner with our smocks caked in mud.

Instead of their open mouths, barking orders, I see those rounded wheels, the chain on my first bike, which I rode until the brakes split.

I close my eyes, hoping for a gunshot.

Instead, my hands are untied.

*7 minutes*

We take a walk – all four of us. Each sunken face trudging through the mud. I force myself to look at them – us girls. We've been sharing a room for the past few months, watching each other wither. Passing cigarettes back and forth and hiding them when the guards come to say good night – it's the only fun we get. Giggling as we blow smoke rings behind their backs.

We take a walk and beneath me, the mud bleeds into Canet-plage blue. My toes curl in the sand. He's here, kicking up salt. Dufour, hiding rations in his jacket. Dufour – he must be forty now. We swapped kisses for corn on that beach. That villa we rented; it filled up quicker than a cloud in a storm. People crawl over the tiles – I can see them as they cry. Pure relief.

They're free.

We take a walk across the yard, but I'm still in that villa, checking rooms, laughing as I swap stories about my first job.

"A dress maker's assistant!" they shriek. "You? A dress maker's assistant?" I laugh.

"I'm surprise you lasted a week," says Dufour.

"I'm surprised I wasn't strangled with a stocking." All laughing.

And the back of my head is white-hot. Pain flashes. I turn to find the butt of a gun being raised to hit me again. The guard doesn't look at me. He only snaps, "This is important. Be quiet".

We reach a small building – the four of us – and for a moment, I can pretend we're entering a boarding house to rent or going to the movies, or to a ball.

But the building is grey and shaped like a scalp.

*6 minutes*

They call him a doctor. He has a white coat. He has a calm smile. He has a stethoscope. But he's no doctor to us.

"Quiet down," one guard says. His left eye is twitching. Blue eyes, like Dufour. I wonder if he's still alive.

The doctor is short, with a rotund belly. Spectacles frame his bald head. He cracks a few jokes – for the guards, not for us. No one laughs.

"Strip," says Dr Straub. "If you don't want typhus, you'll do as I say." Shaking hands. Those hands reach for my uniform. A white smock and rags to stop the blood each month. These hands can't be mine. They look as small as they did back then – when we crossed the Pat Line to flee Hitler's men, and my fingers almost froze to stumps. All of us, dressed in week-old sweat, stumbling across the rocky paths. Our feet swelling, bursting out of our boots as we reached the copse of trees. The excitement – getting on a plane. Dufour staying behind. He kisses my hand, saying we'll meet again. He was always more of a romantic. Our hands slip away. I grab the handle, pull myself up, up and into the plane. Sitting with boxes of rations and guns, I shiver my way to England.

As I'm shivering now, stripped bare. I follow the others. We lay our clothes on benches. We line up naked, form a queue.

"Got to get your vaccinations," says Dr Straub. "There's a harsh winter ahead."

*5 minutes*

The needle looks longer than it is. I go last. The other girls don't look afraid, but I know bile is rising. My throat is filled with moths and my stomach is growling.

Dr Straub hums to himself. I want to tell him to cork it. The man can't carry a tune. But then I catch the shadow of a guard.

"I had typhus last year," said Dr Straub. "Believe me, you don't want it."

I've had typhus twice, but I say nothing.

As the needle slips in, I slip from a plane onto English soil. Landing at Plymouth, right in a field. Hands covered in dirt. But I'm laughing because the sky is so blue, and I can wear the sun like a crown. I'm laughing because there's nothing else to do.

To London. We are picked up in dark green trucks. I cling to the benches as we jolt over country roads. To London – where it's even uglier than I imagined. Where the black smoke waltzes with jaundiced light from the windows. Where everyone dresses like the sky – grey – as if they hope to achieve some medal from Mother Nature.

That school – we were brought there. Barely twenty-one. Grand stone, and grander faces – that MI5 recruitment form. I wish I could say it was a mistake to sign on.

The plunger depresses, and something floods my veins.

*4 minutes*

Something enters my bloodstream. We risk glances at each other – for a half-second. We know these injections aren't for typhus; the people here want us dead. But we didn't think it would feel like this.

Like hanging over the ocean, wrapped in thorns. Like the parachute I was wrapped in once, tangling as I fell to earth. We jumped from a plane, you know. Back home, on Father's lap, never would have I thought of jumping from a plane. I remember wanting to scream, like I want to scream now.

Landing on the freshly cut grass. The girls around me: Lise de Baissac and Vera Leigh. Crowding me, wide-eyed faces looking on.

“Did you break anything?”

“Holy Mary – are you well?” And I look up. Grin.

“Can we do it again?”

Their faces blur and I'm lying on a cold bench, hand outstretched.

*3 minutes*

I see the other girls go down – the four of us, dropping like flies. We look like one giant painting, lying together, pale flesh riddled with goosebumps. To tell you the truth, I'd rather be here than in a gallery, smothered by oils, showing myself to the world.

Someone lifts me up. Their hands are calloused. For a moment, I think my father is here.

*2 minutes*

He thinks we are dead. But I can feel the flames licking at my feet. It should burn but it doesn't. And his hands on my shoulders – Dr Straub. I reach up, clawing. He swears as my nails rake across his face. I hope it scars.

It's so warm here.

I lie back.

Satisfied.

1 minute

I can taste the hyacinths in our neighbour's garden, where I fell and scraped my knees. Where I got up and limped home. Where Maman

smearred butter on the open wound and father held me to his chest.

And now, I see my sister. She is smiling.

“Andree?” she laughs, dressed in Papa’s over-sized jumper. “Where have you been?”

I stand to greet her.

**Andrée Raymonde Borrel**

18 November 1919 – 6 July 1944





## THE BEST PEACH JAM IN THE STATE

Mia Scattergood  
Warrington, Cheshire

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Runner-up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021  
16 to 19 category

Author's introduction:

*I was first inspired to write The Best Peach Jam in the State after a wonderful trip to the Tate Modern Art Gallery in London, where I saw Eye in The Sky by Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vanguard, an artwork where seemingly unrelated, chaotic ink was drawn over a beautiful black and white photo of a man looking off into a scenic rural landscape. I was enamoured with this idea of the contrast between a dark inner mind, and natural beauty. This led me to the setting and the time period – a stunning farming landscape in the deep south US at the turn of the century. I found this time period and place deeply intriguing. This led me to a question:*

*What went on in those deeply traditional, isolated US southern states, with few methods of communication?*

*I landed on – inspired by that original artwork – the character of a man in rural isolation, going slowly insane and having hallucinations – with the reason unknown. This character in turn dictated my use of language – both through nods to linguistics of Southern dialect and the idea of the story being told by the natural villain of the piece – as well as his perceptions of the world around him typical to the time and location – a world entrenched in custom, seclusion and prejudice.*

*This to me felt like a moment of history that is untapped – that any mystery could be lurking – left untold – inside it.*

## THE BEST PEACH JAM IN THE STATE

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*Jenkins County, Georgia, USA, 1902.*

After, the first thing I noticed was the flies. There were flies anyway, around our parts - creeping across the peaches on the turn, the ones that rotted on the tree, wrinkled, and stinking up a sweet curdle. But as I rocked on my chair, every day on the veranda – so many flies, too many, that crawled over my eyes and down my throat and behind my brain, clouding up the sky in great swarms, blocking out our blistering Georgia sun. If it were down to the flies the entire country would know where to find Hyde's Peach Farm.

I don't rightly know whether that would be good or bad.

Hyde's Peach Farm - before the flies – home to acres of trees of the sweetest peaches, a bright red farmhouse, and thirteen consecutive wins of the jam competition at the State Fair.

The wins were earned by my wife Ada Hyde for her peach jam, and begrudgingly affixed above the mantle by yours truly – the good husband Jackson Hyde.

I can see that mantelpiece now, from my rocking chair, through the cracked windowpane – the wood melts before my eyes, lamp oil drips, shining from each framed certificate. I turn, the flies are gone, replaced by swirls in the sky, large swathes of newspaper ink black.

I can see her in black and white on that newspaper, holding the blue ribboned jar, the Governor's hand on her waist, her bright red hair and cornflower eyes bleached and burned by the photograph. She grins from ear to ear.

I see her everywhere, just like the flies and the melting and the oil and the ink.

Maybe none of it's real, and I'm mad as my Ada made me.

She always grinned like that as she made her jam, stirring and stirring like she was a damn spinning top, whistling in time. She hadn't grinned like that at me since the first certificate went up.

I saw that silvery, sharp grin, on the day of that thirteenth win at the fair, smiling at the governor. His hands on her hips.

A white-hot ball of fire in my throat.

Now, I don't consider myself a violent man. But all I could hear was the voice of my old Pa.

*"You want to make a woman mind, boy? Make a woman be loyal? You have to be a man about it, understand? Like me."*

I didn't quite understand what he meant until I did ... what I did. But I bided my time.

Now, I stand up, move inside. Stare at the vat in the corner, its heavy wooden lid.

It's never changed since that night, even as I struggle and limp to my seat at the head of the table, the room warping and twisting around me. I look to the crucifix on the wall – I am a God-fearing man, even as Satan weaves my world.

I didn't know I was going to do it, until it happened.

We were sat in the low lamplight, two weeks before our fourteenth State Fair. Me polishing my axe after a day cutting dead trees, her with her back to me in the corner, stirring and whistling, whistling and stirring.

*The governor's hands. Her smile.*

"Ada?"

She hummed something that sounded like 'yes'?

"Stop that damned noise, will you?"

She did. "Sorry, darlin'."

It wasn't for long though, it started up again, ringing in my ears.

My body moved before my mind could ask what the hell I thought I was doing, till I was stood behind her.

"I said. *Stop.*"

She turned, her hair shifting to expose the nape of her neck, her eyes filled with concern.

The blade of my axe flashed as I brought it down on the base of her skull.

Since then, I don't trust my own senses, what I see, what I hear.

Sometimes I think I can hear whistling, even though I did everything right. Laid her to rest where she would have wanted, granted her wishes.

I lean my head back.

All I can hear is the sound of bone breaking in two.

The 23rd Georgia State Fair was a few days ago.

I – we won again.

Everyone loved it – as they extended their thoughts and prayers to my wife, who was too sick to attend – and asked why it tasted so damned good. Housewives clutching pearls badgered me for my secret ingredient – was it the peaches? Was it a spice? Was it the sugar?

“No,” I said, “not any of that.”

I told them the truth.

I told them that it was a little something that had been added to the vat.

I spoke, shrugging nonchalantly – “It’s just my wife. A little piece of her in every jar.”





## THE SCATTERED ASHES

Fran Tartaglia  
Otley, North Yorkshire

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Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021  
11 to 15 category

### Author's introduction:

*I wanted to write my story about the destruction of Pompeii because I've always found it a fascinating moment in history. The Roman city was covered in layers of ash following the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius, preserving everything until its rediscovery in the 18th century. Despite many citizens escaping the explosion, the idea that a whole civilisation can be destroyed in less than a day is morbid, but very intriguing. It can be easy to forget the city was once alive, and that real people lived there. Those killed in the eruption were similar to us today in regard to their love, their hate and the shared human condition. I wanted to write about those people and about just being human. The characters in my story are not based on any historical figures living at that time; they represent how the majority of people lived and died in Pompeii, although it is known that several dogs were caught up in the eruption, and that inspired me to include a dog in my story. This historical cataclysm teaches us today that in times of disaster, the link binding us all together is being human.*

## THE SCATTERED ASHES

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### 79 AD, Pompeii, Italy

The day the world ended began as if it were just another ordinary day. The merchant felt the familiar guilt grow with each clink of a coin into his hand. Thirteen real gold coins. Real! All for a worthless lump of metal he had flippantly called a gold necklace. He could almost feel the burning, cold gaze of his customer branding curses on his forehead: thief, liar, fraud! The words squeezed at his throat. As the customer dropped the last coin into his palm and snatched the necklace away, the merchant choked on the acid rising into his mouth, before turning it into a disguised cough, causing the thirteen coins to tumble to the dusty earth. Scrabbling like a rat, he fell to his knees and desperately clawed the gold back into his arms, cradling it and carefully depositing it all in his pocket. He thanked his customer with a forced smile and vanished into the building that lurked behind his market stall. Once he was inside, he reached for the bucket of murky water by the entranceway and rinsed his hands, face and hair, scrubbing with his tunic in an attempt to make himself clean again. How he hated lying, deceiving people! Each forgery he sold hung mockingly over him until he felt so weighed down, he might as well be made of stone. That was about to change, though. Delving into his pocket and gripping a coin, the merchant brought it up to his face and smelt it, smelt the pure metallic beauty of it. This was his opportunity to leave Pompeii and the meagre life he had made for himself. Thirteen gold coins could easily buy him passage on a boat, far away. No more guilt. No more blame. All he had to do was wait for sunset, when the boats left the harbour, and then he would be free.

The day the sky fell began with the promise of a good day. She rocked her baby brother in her arms, glancing down into those innocent, vulnerable eyes. Those crying eyes. The citizens of Pompeii passed by, avoiding the imploring stares of the homeless girl, as if not looking would make her nonexistent. Or perhaps they just didn't care. Sighing, the girl swaddled her brother with a ragged cloth, clutching him to her chest like she was the one he needed. But he needed a mother, a father, and a home. She had none of those things, unless the entrance to an abandoned brothel counted as a home. Still the hacking sobs sliced through the air

and caused the blood to throb in her head; closing her eyes, she wished it all away. Then, she felt the burden of her brother disappear from her lap, lifted up into the heavens, and felt near silence press down on her ears, only broken by an odd whimper and the scuffle of people as they walked past. Eyes snapping open, she squinted up at the towering figure of a man, haloed by the sun and his features in shadow. All she could see was the still bundle of her brother in the man's sure arms. He spoke to her, told her of large houses that echoed with footsteps; fires flickering in fireplaces; lavish banquets eaten in the moonlight; clothing laced with pearls and trimmed with gold; water that didn't require an arduous trek to the public fountain to sip; peace for her and a home for her brother, if she agreed to one small thing: to work for the man and serve him for as long as he wanted her to. Seeing her brother sleeping and hearing this story of a home where he would be happy, where he wouldn't depend on her, where he would not have to need anything ever again... The girl stood up slowly and followed the man as he started to stride away with the baby, scared that one slight tremble in the air around her would send this perfect future crashing back into her dreams.

The day fire melted the rain inevitably began like a bad day would. The magistrate's wife had predicted this yesterday; it was always the same pattern. A couple of good days where the world seemed close by and her mind was quiet, but then several days' worth of bad followed, when it was just her, the walls and the space in between, when she felt lost and begged the world to find her. Her mind was loud on those days, a tumult of voices battering her skull like she battered the door when they yelled at her. Now, on this very, very bad day, she was curled in the corner, knees shielding her face, trying to fight the darkness in her head. But no matter what she screamed at them, and despite her efforts to block out their savage snarls, the solidifying shadows would not stop, would not stop. There's something wrong with you, they hissed, or the magistrate wouldn't lock you up with just the servants and the walls to talk to! You'll never be enough, never enough for the world outside to face you! There's something wrong with you! The magistrate's wife wanted to tear the taunts out and shred them. What was wrong with her? Why was there something wrong with her? And then, someone whispered to her, so quickly and urgently she could only manage to clutch the vague idea of what they told her and hold it to her heart. The magistrate. Her husband. He imprisoned her in this hell and kept the key, he was the one who forced

up the walls between her and the world. He was her salvation. With a glint in her hazy eyes, the woman grasped the handle of the knife on the top shelf of the bookcase, kept there for emergencies, and waited patiently for her husband to come home.

The day death was the judge began. That was the most important thing for the man; that he had this final day to live. He knew he was dying as he lay rigid on the low table that served as his deathbed. His breath rattled and splintered beneath the musty animal-skin blanket, which was swathed around him to keep the cold from penetrating his bones. Too late. The man's neighbours shuffled outside his room, muttering in hushed voices that sounded like a swarm of mosquitoes; he knew they were anxious to intrude in his private business. However, he had only allowed one visitor today who was now sat silently beside him, eyes solemn, snout bowed and tail still. This dog knew the man better than he knew himself, and had been his solace when his sister, his only living relative, had passed away. The least the man could do was speak with him one last time. Too exhausted to talk, he used the light in his dying eyes to express his gratitude and to wish the dog the best as could possibly be for such a kind soul in such a harsh world. The dog blinked back that he would miss the man, dipping his head and scoring his claws across the floor to show how sorry he was, for the man's sake, that he must die. The man exhaled abruptly through his worn nose in a half-laugh. Yes, he would miss some of the world: the golden glow cast on the Pompeiian streets as the sun rose; the delightfully dark fingers reaching out to claim the night at sunset; the songs the birds trilled as he harvested crops; the way light slunk through a summer-rich leaf to surprise him on the other side. And the dog who had been there for the man more than any human ever had. But a guarantee of life is also a guarantee of death; he knew he had to die. The dog placed a consoling paw on the blue-ribboned hand that lay on the stuttering chest, and the firelight eyes fluttered shut.

The day nature proved it could destroy the human rash that plagues it ended with ashes. While the citizens of Pompeii resumed their normal lives, the volcano that watched them was plotting their desolation. It was time. With a violent outburst, Mount Vesuvius exploded, spewing snow-coloured, smouldering rocks into the shattered blue of the sky, the boulders bursting clouds and magma seeping into the earth below. The

city suffocating in ash, stone rained down, while the volcano vomited hot, lethal gases peppered with specks of pulverized cinder, and sent its desecration surging into the streets beneath it. People shrieking, moaning, strangling, howling, swamped the air as it burned, those who still believed praying to the gods to stop this or to make it quick. The merchant, packing his few possessions for his journey, realising he was going somewhere else as he retched. The girl, shackled and chained, unable to escape the falling rocks. The magistrate's wife, not even given time to think as the heat melded her to the walls she never escaped. And finally, the man and the dog, by each other's sides while the ashes gushed into their bodies. Ash, ash, ash, layer after layer, smearing cobblestone roads and sanded buildings, covering corpses with its grey glory.

And it was done. Humanity destroyed. All that was left were frozen statues, dead to the scattered ashes dancing over their bones.



## A HUNDRED HISTORIES

Atlas Weyland Eden  
Okehampton, Devon

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Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021  
16 to 19 category

Author's introduction:

*In 1819, in his home of Abbotsford in the Scottish Borders, Walter Scott began writing his novel Ivanhoe. Of all his work, Ivanhoe was the first to turn away from the recent history of Scotland, taking place in medieval England: a distant, untrodden time.*

*Even today, with easy access to information, writing historical fiction can be challenging — it's an act of time travel. What was it like for Scott, father of historical fiction, holed up in his study trying to imagine a world six hundred years in his past?*

*Ivanhoe became one of Scott's best-known works. It sparked interest in medieval England and has influenced our view of the Middle Ages ever since, from the motley jester to the legend of Robin Hood, and that act of imagination has inspired this story, two hundred years on.*

## A HUNDRED HISTORIES

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In a merry green wood of England fair, beneath the mossy-eyed oaks who witnessed the beginning and end of countless tales, who stood longer than the Celts and Romans, who heard the creaking of Norman ships nearing the coast, who hid the fleeing Saxons and watched them die upon the arrow-stricken earth, those oaks, who spoke their secrets to the insects, and the insects told the birds and the birds told the squirrels and the squirrels whispered them to the acorns they planted — the secrets passing on to future trees — it was beneath those trees that, in this moment, several pigs scrounged for nuts.

A swineherd shouted. The pigs ignored him. A jester sat upon a stone and mused upon the age they lived in. A writer stood by a beech tree, paying close attention to everything. The swineherd and the jester ignored the writer as he wandered to and fro, muttering to himself, watching the sunset, contemplating a falling leaf. He listened as the jester spoke wise nonsense to his companion, though in an accent the writer struggled to understand.

The swineherd's hound lurched through the bushes. The writer puzzled over the dog (a greyhound, perhaps?) as it snapped and confused its charges, when the dog turned away from the pigs and ran straight for the writer. Except the dog sprinting towards him through the swine-haunted trees was not, in fact, the swineherd's dog. No bedraggled mongrel this, but a breed half deerhound, half wolfhound, well-kept fur all brown and white. The dog leapt forward, paws planted on his chest, claws sinking through fabric, and licked the writer's face.

"Maida!" he said. "Could you kindly not impersonate my characters?" Maida sat on the floor, tail wagging in the hopeful way of someone who has committed a crime, but knows they will get off lightly. Scott ran a hand through his hair. He looked about, but he was far from the 12th century English wood, and it would take a long while to return.

He limped to the window, clutching his stomach. Dawn glowed heather-pink upon the hills, awakening the pines from slumber and rousing the younger trees Scott himself planted.

"Dawn," he mused, "a moment's winter within summer, yet shedding such tenderness upon the frosted bones of Scotland." He sighed. "For

God's sake. When I mean to write about Scottish history, my mind travels to all manner of places, yet when I write about England, all I can conjure is Scotland."

A knock at the door.

"Aye. Come in, William."

In a swirl of wet wool and ink, his steward strode into the study. "Morning, sir. Morning, Maida." His gaze passed over the pile of notes and the open copy of Chaucer. "Made a start, I see?"

Scott waved a hand. "Just trying to get a sense of the story. Haven't thought of a single sentence. All I have is a handful of nameless characters, a forest I fail to find on any maps, and too many dates."

William picked up a scrawled-upon parchment. "We still have the opening you wrote yesterday. England in the wake of William the Conqueror, the divide between Saxons and Normans. All a good start."

"Only the story hasn't started."

William laid a log on the fire and sat at Scott's desk. He slit open a letter. "It's about your last poem."

"Aye?" said Scott.

"The publisher says it needs punctuation."

Scott rolled his eyes to Maida. "Poetry and punctuation should never be used in the same sentence." He exhaled. "But so be it. Tell them to add whatever commas they require."

The fire mumbled. William's pen flickered a reply. Wood spat, paper folded.

"Ready to begin?" said William.

Scott shrugged. "Might as well try. Before the masons fill the morning with their hammering, and the poor noble chips away at the tower." He paced back and forth, Maida following like a shadow. He cleared his throat. "After me. The sun had just begun to set..."

William's pen danced across paper.

"...upon the grand emerald gaiety of—" Scott stopped. "Cross out *grand*."

"Right away."

“And *emerald* is too dark. Try *gold-green*.”

The pen fluttered.

“Now, *the gold-green gaiety of the*— No, cross it all out. From the top.”

“From the top.”

“*It was a burnished sunset, and in the quiet of the...*” Scott drifted off. “*In the quiet of the day-weary...*”

The pen paused. William turned in the chair. “What’s the problem, sir?”

“It’s... It’s all so far away. Everything is misted.”

“Hardly surprising, sir. You’ve never written about England, let alone England six hundred years ago. *Waverley* was only sixty years since.”

Scott cringed. “Pray don’t mention *Waverley*. I put it together with so little care, took next to none of it seriously, and it went into the world and reached such a magnitude I thought myself dreaming. By the same logic, this book, over which I agonise, will be forgotten and overlooked the moment of publication.”

“Well, one cannae argue with logic,” said William, and he got up to go. Scott started, but William smiled and said, “Just jesting. Though if you’re not ready, I can come back tomorrow.”

“Will it help? Tomorrow, it will all have sunk one day deeper into history.”

William returned to the desk. “I’m writing that down.”

“Pardon?”

“You’ll thank me later.”

Scott scratched Maida’s chin, tail thumping. William set down his pen and said, “If this book is giving you such trouble, why not write about Scotland?”

Out the window, the pines swayed. Scott closed his eyes and pondered. “This land is a well I have drunk from so many times, I fear to dry it up. It has given me so much in this life that I hoped to give something back, and perhaps I have. My heart will always stay here, but my mind wishes to test new horizons. I seek to write Scotland’s history, but one cannot untangle

our history from England's, and so it is there I must travel." He opened his eyes. "In my youth, I loved the chivalry, the swordplay, the dragons and knights of old England, and my imagination would run away in great flights of fancy.

"The myths of Scotland are the myths of my bones, but England's fairy tales are as allusive as they are alluring. I don't know if I can write about that age in a way grounded and true." His voice grew low. "Maybe I'm not ready. Maybe I don't know enough. Maybe I'll never know enough."

William rose to his feet, laid a hand on Scott's shoulder. "You're Walter Scott, you'll figure this out. They call you the Wizard of the North for a reason. When you're ready to write, you know where to find me." The door opened and closed, and Scott stood alone, with Maida at his heels and crossed-out words on his desk.

"Well, what do you suppose I do?"

Maida yawned.

"That's all very well for you to say."

Maida lay down by the desk, front legs stretched out, head raised.

"You make it look easy. What I'd give to sit down without these blasted pains." He squatted and stroked Maida between the ears. "Don't tell the others," he whispered, "but you're my favourite."

*I know*, wagged Maida's tail.

Scott straightened and turned to his desk: papers speckled with William's handwriting, piles of bookmarked references ranging from English history, to collections of ballads, to accounts of black magic. "Some days," he said, "I suspect the battlefield would be kinder. Less time to agonise, glory coming swifter, though most likely passing sooner."

His gaze rested upon a white riverstone serving as a paperweight, pocketed on a walk along the Tweed. He picked it up, considered its coolness.

"You know, Maida, a stone such as this could have seen any number of things. Impossible to know how it came to be, how old it is, where it was before the wheels of time placed it in my hand. For all I know, it could have come from England hundreds of years ago. Perhaps it was a chip off the very stone where Arthur's sword lay planted."

Maida's nose twitched, as if pondering the prospect.

"I suppose my imagination has run away again. But still, you never know, do you? You never know all the stories something so small has lived through." He slipped the stone into his pocket, took a steadying breath, and closed his eyes.

Sunset edged into dusk, hints of twilight seeping through the branches. The swineherd and the jester spoke at length; the swineherd's dog rested, matted fur grey as bark, while the pigs rooted for acorns.

Oaks danced in the wind, and the writer gazed into the canopy. The swineherd, remembering his charges, hurried away. The writer felt for the stone, steeled himself, and approached the jester.

"Pardon me?" he said. The jester drummed his fingers along one leg, humming a forgotten tune. The writer cleared his throat. "Pardon me, but may I ask your name?"

The jester turned, and — for the first time — gave a reply. "Thou mayst know me as Wamba, son of Witless, thrall to Cedric of Rotherwood."

"Wamba, son of Witless?" The writer smiled. "Aye, that sounds right. Also, I wished to ask — and I hope this isn't too forward — is this what jesters really looked like?" He waved a hand at the purple-and-crimson costume, the bells atop the jester's cap. "I thought I'd got carried away."

The jester nodded with a jangle. "Indeed, it is, or else my reflection has been lying to me all these years."

The writer chuckled. "You're humorous, at least. Though I have doubts about the voice."

"How I speaketh? Be there a problem upon my tongue?"

"No, I mean — well, I don't know. I don't know how anyone talked in this age. There are precious few written accounts, and who's to say people spoke the way they wrote? Who's to say anything we imagine about the past is true?"

"Well, regardless," said the jester, "this be how Wamba sounds, even if Wamba speaketh this way alone." The writer frowned. The jester tilted his head. "What vexes thee, friend bard?"

“All this feels real, when I am here,” the writer gestured to the wood, “but how can I know if anything lines up with history?” He sighed. “I fear it’s all too long ago.”

“Each moment is history to the moment that succeeds it,” said the jester.

The writer paused. “May I use that?”

“I dare say you mayst, though you use a fool’s words at your own peril. And while I speaketh such perilous things, I thinkest that if thou cannot know for sure the truth of this age, then none other alive wouldst know much better. So doth it matter if what thou creates is true, when no man can say otherwise? After all, what is history but so many stories, gloriously misremembered through the centuries?”

The writer said nothing. A robin hopped across the grass in a flourish of red. The swineherd’s hound lay upon a bed of moss, twitching his nose as a fox whispered through the trees. The tang of oak leaves hung in the air.

“Perhaps,” whispered the writer. “Perhaps...”

The trampling of horses echoed through the trees. The swineherd gathered his grunting herd, readying to leave; the jester jumped to his feet. “Friend bard?” quoth the jester. “Wilt thou join us?”

The writer breathed the ancient air. “I will stay here, friend jester, for the tale is quickening. I feel it in the leaves and in the soil, and in the beating of the hoofs. All I must do is watch, and write.”

The riders came closer, the story spun into shape. The jester lingered, laughing. “William will have his work cut out, next time we meet,” said the writer, with a smile, while a hundred histories went marching past, and the words began to flow.



## HIS FINEST HOUR

Shaun Whittaker  
Galgate, Lancashire

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Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021  
11 to 15 category

### Author's introduction:

*Throughout modern history Churchill has been lauded immensely in light of his leadership during World War II, with some even labelling him the greatest Briton ever. However, as the man himself once said, "History is written by the victors" and, as can be revealed by a little research, there was a dark side to the patriotic war-hero we know of today. As well as his impressive oratory, resilience and tact, he was remarkable for his misogyny, racism and domineering behaviour. With all that in mind, I decided to put a darker twist on the lead-up to the much-loved "fight them on the beaches" speech and, with the help of the freedom of fiction, I attempted to illustrate the aforementioned behaviours as seen through the eyes of those closest to him. Now, although, there is no doubt that Churchill contributed greatly to the war effort and was instrumental in Britain's victory against fascism, I hope that His Finest Hour helps to shed light on who he truly was, victory or no.*

## HIS FINEST HOUR

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June 3, 1940 - 06:30

Rasping and gasping for breath, Hastings Ismay raced down the clammy, impassive corridors of the War Rooms, on the tail of an impatient and irate Winston Churchill. Hastings wanted to ask Churchill what the matter was, but he feared he knew the response and, also, preferred to avert a fountain of spittle where feasible. In spite of himself, Hastings frantically called after Churchill, like an avaricious vendor chasing a thief through the Berwick Street market. Eventually, Churchill gave in to Hastings' distressed shrieks and, when he did, Hastings regretted saying a word.

Churchill turned on his heel, the crimson-coated podge of his face wobbling like jelly as he did so, imperiously staring his inferior down. The man's elegant, crisp frock coat looked incongruous with the dismal underground tunnel the pair stood in. Churchill's frame was more than corpulent. It was domineering, demeaning and disturbing all at once; this was a man changed by the horrors of war. He wore a livid expression, his face the colour the automotive artisans describe as "Rosso Corsa", with hideous blotches of deathly white. The indecorous combination of colours came from a mixture of an excess of whisky and tobacco and the Prime Minister's perpetual rage. Said rage was presently piqued by the protestable presence of a person perceived as an irritating insect.

"They're bloody useless, the lot of them!" bellowed Churchill, spittle fountains audibly accompanying his 'L' sounds. "First, the Belgians surrender on us like the spineless phlegms that they are and now, we have to send bloody rag-baggers and trawlermen to Dunkirk. Roosevelt's sat on his bloody arse doing nothing and the plebs are starving to death. The whole bloody war effort's crumbling!"

"What of the Dunkirk Spirit? That's what you say when you've got the *public's* ear?" enquired Hastings, bracing himself for the tirade that would surely come of taking such a risk.

Surprisingly, Churchill spoke quietly when he did. "To hell with the Dunkirk Spirit! I don't have the public's ear now, do I? I just have the ear of my simpleton military advisor, who doesn't even have the wherewithal to differentiate between how one wins a war and how one tells one's

followers one is winning the war.” Although the monologue was clearly a taunt and, probably an intended provocation, there was a chilling tone of genuine exasperation and weariness.

*Perhaps Churchill does consider me an inadequate dullard,* Hastings pondered.

As the flustered Prime Minister turned on his heel and stalked away, Hastings privately chuckled and muttered spitefully, “Of course he bloody does. There isn’t a man or a woman under the Sun, God bless them all – except the Axis Alliance – who Winston Churchill does not find inadequate.”

June 3, 1940 – 09:40

Maria Alcock stared out of the right-hand front window of the Churchills’ dwelling, No. 10 Downing Street, the corners of her mouth inclined imperceptibly downwards as her mind filled with dismay at the arrival of her master. The hundred or so press agents swarming him would only darken his mood. Maria called after her co-worker, Margot, who was leaving the room in a way which showed how accustomed she was to the demand, “Pour him a whisky, now. Make it a double.” Margot nodded knowingly before hastily leaving the room to run the crucial errand.

Maria thought she heard the sound of the heavy front door creaking on its hinges downstairs. The familiarity of the sound was one she had learnt to grow accustomed to. To her horror, she caught sight of a newspaper shutterbug angling his camera up, towards her. She sidestepped out of the way and only hoped she had done so in time. If Churchill found out that a blurred picture of Maria was in *The Daily Mirror*, there would be hell to pay.

“Bloody pestering me again, are you?” Churchill moaned at whoever it was that had been unfortunate enough to greet him, “I saw you a few hours ago. You’re an ugly slag and I wish I’d never married you.”

Maria grimaced. *Clementine*. Even though her own lot was hard enough with the belligerent tyrant that was Winston Churchill, Maria genuinely pitied poor old Clementine, his wife. The woman, when one got to know her, was a real gem among pebbles and, as a benevolent human being like herself, there was only so much the woman could bear.

“I’m not pestering you, love,” replied Clementine, meekly, “it’s just that

the telephone's been ringing like nobody's business."

"I don't care if it rings and rings like a leper's bell," snapped Churchill, his booming voice getting louder as he and his wife progressed up the staircase. "The servants had better have fixed me a drink."

"Oh, Margot," muttered Maria beneath her breath, "may God have mercy on your soul," she added, reciting the old execution day blessing.

"Mary, Margaret!" shouted Churchill, now standing on the landing at the top of the stairs, "If you haven't made me a whisky, I'll strap you both to the next bomb we send those German swine."

Maria contemplated for a moment who Mary and Margaret were, but then she recalled: they were Churchill's crude corruptions of Maria and Margot's names. As the realisation dawned on her, she heard the reassuring sound of a glass being set down on a table and wiped the perspiration from her brow. The brute had been appeased.

June 3, 1940 – 12:00

Churchill wore the sullen, dejected face of a toddler acceding to the announcement from its mother that it was time to go to bed. In many ways, Clementine mused, that was probably also how the man felt. After a good couple of hours claiming that he was too busy a man and in too high demand to answer the phone, he gave in to Clementine's gingerly applied pressure and answered; cursing the racket made by the house-staff preparing his lunch.

Clementine tried her best to give a reassuring smile but it probably came across as weak and insincere, at least by the scowl her husband gave her in return. She watched hesitantly as he lifted the receiver and dialled the number to return the call. *1169*.

Almost immediately, she heard the distant but imploring voice of Mr Ismay who picked up and saw the rising ire of Churchill as he listened. Clementine guessed that he had wanted Hastings missing the call to use as leverage so he wouldn't have to deal with whatever was at hand.

"What in the bloody blazes?" Churchill exclaimed, "This is more embarrassing than the French surrender but, unlike the feeble frogs, I'll be damned if this doesn't have a good outcome."

Clementine Churchill sensed the reluctance in what her husband said next.

“Hmph,” he mumbled gruffly, “I’ll be there as soon as I’ve had lunch.”

In true Winston fashion, he slammed the receiver into its socket without waiting for a response from Ismay.

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June 3, 1940 – 17:00

This time, as Winston Churchill approached No. 10 Downing Street, the press agents and photographers had disbanded their swarm. It was almost as though they sensed the paramount importance of the news the Prime Minister bore. Maria noticed that Churchill was about twenty stacks of paper heavier than when he had left the house, a few hours earlier, something which was probably not helping his mood.

“I’ve already made him a drink,” Margot said absently, as she joined Maria at the window.

They heard the familiar sound of the front door opening and closing as Winston Churchill entered the hallway on the ground floor. Like a fly being swatted, Margot rushed away from the window and almost ran down the winding staircase, with all its portraits of Prime Ministers along the side, sending Robert Gascoyne-Cecil for an unwanted ride as she brushed past him. Maria peered over the banister and saw Margot give Churchill his much-needed whisky.

For once genuinely interested in what her master had to say, Maria strained her ears to get a better listen to snippets of the Churchills’ conversation.

“...successful. So, I must...rally the public. Bloody hell if I’m not good at...in the country will be...big one for sure.”

Maria was hardly a military genius or a political one, but she knew that something big was happening the next day... A speech, perhaps.

June 4, 1940 – 11:00

“Skivvy,” barked Churchill, “Light me a cigar! Or is that too much to ask of a lazy buck like you?” he added derisively.

Elijah Densmore, the Churchills' veteran butler, a man hardened to racial slurs and scornful remarks, lit the Prime Minister the largest cigar he could muster, a process that was muscle memory by that point. Churchill reluctantly grumbled his gratefulness as he took a puff of the cigar before announcing that he was ready to depart for Parliament. As Elijah managed to subtly extract some details about the trip and realised that he would be there until quite late on, he made a mental note to have an absolute banquet ready for the Prime Minister's return. Whether the Prime Minister would eat it or stay in his War Rooms until silly o'clock, the butler knew not. However, with Churchill, trying to please never went amiss, mostly...

June 4, 1940 – 16:00

“The Prime Minister.”

At the sound of the Speaker, Edward FitzRoy's voice, Churchill rose to his feet, the simple effort of the movement making him breathless. The sound of his feet impacting with the wooden floor beneath him echoed ominously throughout the House. He cleared his throat, ready to make the speech he had prepared since his arrival back home from the War Rooms at teatime the previous day.

“I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary, alone.”

Clementine Churchill, who was spectating and listening to the speech from outside the House of Commons, privately chuckled at the irony of Churchill's supposed campaign against tyranny.

“At any rate, that is what we are going to try to do. That is the resolve of His Majesty's Government – every man of them. That is the will of Parliament and the nation.

“The British Empire and the French Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength.

“Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States

have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail.

“We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills.

“We shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God’s good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old one.”

As he seated himself, Churchill whispered to an adjacent colleague, “And we’ll fight them with the butt ends of broken beer bottles because that’s bloody well all we’ve got.”

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The Young Walter Scott Prize programme is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch and the Buccleuch Living Heritage Trust.

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