

Our Class

The writers' magazine



Inside:

- *Interview with author Colin Holmes*
- *Adventures in Senegal*

Contents

Summer 2011, Vol. 2

Interview with an Aspiring Writer

By Vanessa Holmes

Editor

Louisa Dang

The Pink Lake

By Sarah Zakeri

Contributing Editors

Vanessa Holmes

Sarah Zakeri

Petrina Tedeschi

Our Lives in His Hands

By Vanessa Holmes

Interview: Caring for the Elderly

By Sarah Zakeri

Eco-friendly Food Shopping

By Petrina Tedeschi

Our Class is published by the students of the Introduction to Magazine Writing course, www.writingclasses.co.uk. Writers retain all copyrights to their own articles.

Interview with an Aspiring Writer

By Vanessa Holmes

I remember when my grandmother talked about retiring – she was really looking forward to spending more time with the grandchildren, gardening and maybe even doing a bit of voluntary work. Colin Holmes, an aspiring local writer, celebrated his 64th birthday this week, but for him retirement is a long way off. In fact he doesn't think he will ever retire! From the time he left school he has always been employed, having inherited his strong work ethic from his father.

But Colin has no doubt as to what his father would have said if he told him that he was a writer. "Get a proper job son, you can't make money out of that!" And some days Colin is inclined to agree with him! Having just submitted his first children's novel to an agency, he sees writing as a job, not at all

glamorous but hard, hard work. A daily battle to write a compelling novel that makes readers discover something about themselves, after they have finished the novel, that they didn't know before.

I caught up with him to find whether we can look forward the male equivalent of J.K. Rowling.

What made you decide to write when most people are thinking retiring?

Quite simply I needed the money!

I know that for a lot of people approaching retirement age the projected figures for their pension has left them somewhat disappointed, was this case with you?

No, I just made some bad judgments in my life, and I know I needed to provide an inheritance for my children.

What were your bad judgments?

I had no concept of the value of money and I never understood just how quickly it could disappear. I just never thought through the consequences of my investments; it wasn't even investments in the stock market, so I couldn't blame the stock market. In fact I would say I have no financial acumen whatever. This was simply looking at the proposition presented to me and then doing the maths without actually fully understanding the proposition.



maths that would have raised approximately £30,000. As I had £18,000 to invest I thought that would be a worthwhile investment; the question I didn't ask myself is would people pay £10 to see a play and how was it going to be marketed. As I said, I didn't do my homework and the tickets were eventually sold for £12.50, due to the theatre's added administration costs. And I soon discovered that no-one wanted to pay £12.50 for an amateur production. So I lost all my money.

Was there any one specific investment that you felt contributed to your now present lack of finance?

There was more than one, but as you only want one... I was presented with a play that needed to be produced and I was told that it would be shown for four days in a theatre with 800 seats and the tickets would be £10 per each. So doing the

So why write? Wasn't there anything else you could have done?

That's a very good question. For a start, my early training had become outdated due to technology and I don't have the physical strength to do manual labour. But I have a very inquiring and active mind which would not cope with a sedentary job.

But you sit a lot when you are writing so how does this work with your idea of a not doing a sedentary job?

OK, I may have misled you; when I meant sedentary I meant as a job as perhaps in an office where whilst you may have a workload you are still in a way dependent on your manager giving you work. Or like a doorman where you are waiting for someone to ask you something. As a writer I am sitting down all the time but my mind is forever active; it is a daily struggle against myself to be able to put down on paper a compelling story that someone would be able to read and I remember so vividly how important it is for someone to buy into what you have done.

So, what makes your novel so compelling in this day and age when there are so many authors or wannabe authors?

Of course, I haven't sold a book yet so I can't really answer that but then again, what would have happened to David Beckham if

someone had said there are so many good footballers out there so why bother?

Good point – so without telling the whole plot, because I know if you told me you would have to shoot me, what is your novel about?

I am actually not going to tell you the plot because the plot is irrelevant; why I am writing this particular book is to get across an idea. In my youth when I thought of people, I categorised them in certain ways. Almost like in the Victorian times where everyone knew their place. It was a three-way thing, people who were far, far better than me and people who were, I thought below me. In the last ten years or so it has become quite a revelation to me that people all over the world think the same.

I am not saying that we are all robots and that we all think identically yet if you were to take the entire population of the world as separate people they would all share certain common thoughts, so it is quite likely that

someone across the world could share the same thought that I have. In other words, I don't think that the way people think has anything to do with the way they are brought up.

I am not taking about behaviour, what they do, because that certainly has to do with way they were brought up. It is the way they think. In other words they might feel self conscious, they might be arrogant, they might have certain characteristics and that has nothing to do with where they live in this world or who their parents are. So I believe that if this is the case so my characters can think them.

So you saying no matter where we live, our environment, culture, ethnicity, and upbringing has nothing to do with our thoughts? That's interesting. What age is your novel directed at?

It is an adventure story aimed at the 8 -14 year old market.

I know earlier you said that the plot wasn't important, but what would make an eight year old pick up your novel?

Very good question. Of course the setting and the plot is important to get someone interested in the book, that's what marketing is all about. That is what makes them pick up the book in the first place. The first sentence has got to make them want to keep reading to find out what happens to the hero, and that is what the skill of the writer is all about.

And I think that answers your question about why I write and if I am too old. You see my battle is whether I can make this a compelling novel that makes the reader discover something about themselves after they have finished the novel that they didn't know before.

So at the end of your novel what do you want the young people to come away with?

At the end of the novel I would have liked them to learn

something about themselves. I think this will be an individual thing and I think each individual would learn something relevant to them.

That's fantastic! I look forward to reading your novel. What is going to be called?

That's not down to me; that is for the publishers to decide, after all they have to sell it.

What would you say to anyone, young or old, considering taking up writing?

It is one of the hardest, if not the hardest, job I have ever done. There are other mornings when I feel like giving up. Then there are some mornings when I can't wait to see what my characters are going to do. You see it is my characters who are dictating the direction of the book. I think I would say if you want to write, write; don't let anyone put you off. Not even yourself!

The Pink Lake

By Sarah Zakeri

The others left for the lake early, leaving me behind to fill my day, how, I wasn't quite sure. All I knew was I hadn't planned on being a convalescing volunteer in Senegal.

I lay quite envious in bed, imagining them floating in the phenomenon of the pink, salty lake. I had become like Coleridge, stuck in his bower (how that poem bored me in my last year at school): 'Well, they are gone, and here must I remain....' But I was curious. I hadn't yet spent a whole day with my Senegalese 'family' - what did they do all day?

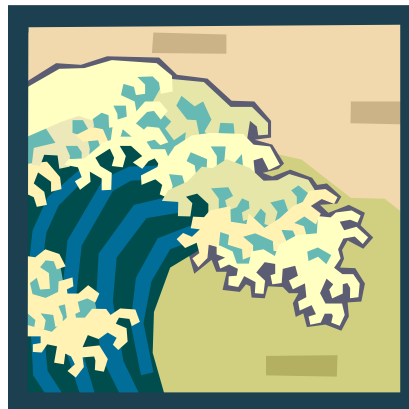
The morning passed quite unremarkably. We had breakfast -- the usual dense baguette with the surprising chocolate spread, one of the many lasting overflows from French colonization -- and then came the visit to market and the preparation for the evening meal. I welcomed a trip to the beach with my 'brothers' and

their friend, even if it reminded me that the others were at the spectacular lake that I wouldn't see.

The beach was almost empty, apart from a few runners, and the Atlantic was an immense, gushing force that day, sending peaked, frothy waves high into the air before they came crashing very near the shore (it was advised never to swim very far out in those parts). I felt better already, whipped by the fresh wind. We waded in, but I stayed closer to the sand, letting the still-powerful water cool my legs while the boys went a bit farther, welcoming the waves like a challenge, with hoots and whoops.

As I watched them I was struck by a sense of camaraderie. Here were three young men, unable to find steady work (unemployment is rife in Senegal) and living in relative poverty when compared to my lifestyle at home, but yet finding complete joy in their

everyday. Back on the sand, we laughed at my vari-toned limbs. 'Why is it the white people love to get tans?' Hadim had asked me. This was the first day he had spoken to me, and in English, until then shy, and perhaps avoiding the revelation of his stutter.



As the rest of the day unfolded, I felt like a privileged onlooker, given private access to how these people's lives were when we weren't there. When a heavy rain came I

watched as my 'sister' flapped about with glee, pulling everything into the dry and arranging a mattress for us to sit on and view the show.

Playing cards with the neighbours, I couldn't understand their incessant chatter, but somehow appreciated their jokes and lively humour nonetheless. And when the time came for the others' return I had completely forgotten about the lake. Perhaps Coleridge had something to say after all...

Our Lives in His Hands

By Vanessa Holmes

I had stopped crying days ago. I had run out of tears. We had been told to be at the court at 9 a.m. and when the train had stopped in a tunnel, I actually felt physically sick. I couldn't be late – not today! I felt as if everyone knew my secret and whilst some of them would feel sympathy for me, others would have hated me. My life up until that moment had been so predictable, after all I had mapped out. But life has a way of surprising you. Was the great man upstairs punishing me for wanting to control my life so much?

Approaching High Holborn County Court, situated right in the centre of London, I felt as if I was in a trance; life in the city was as fast as I remembered it. People rushing to work and to the sandwich bar, rushing, rushing, rushing. I could feel them brushing against me; they

didn't mean to it was just an accident – I was in their way. It felt as if I was drowning in the smell of different aftershaves and perfumes.

People were totally oblivious to how I was feeling. Almost like the day my mother died of bowel cancer. Wanting to get away from the crowd, I had taken a walk down the high street. I was amazed! People were laughing, lovers holding hands. Didn't they know how I felt! Didn't they care! But thinking back to that day now, all I could think was at least I knew where my mother was. If the judgment went against us we would never know what had happened to our little girl.

Well, not quite our little girl. Five months after we were approved to become Foster Carers, we were asked one Friday afternoon if we were able to accommodate a seven-week-old baby girl. Two hours later a screaming bundle was placed in my arms.

Right from the start I knew that the plan was for her to go to relatives of her birth family. I

accepted that, my husband and son accepted that. As did my extended family. A lot of people that I spoke to agreed that this was right, after all that was my job as a foster carer. Look after the child until a forever family could be found; she wasn't mine.

Some people were even angry that Social Services hadn't done more to help her family keep her. But before she was old enough to be told that she was going to a forever family, we became her family.

Now nearly five years later we were outside the court waiting to see if judgment would be in our favour or not. Would she be sent to her father's homeland or would she remain as part of our family. This little baby who grown into a wonderful strong, spirited and beautiful little girl. Her life, her future rested in the hands of a man we had never met and would probably never see again. The judge.



Our solicitor walked in, slightly more agitated that I had ever known him to be. 'I think it's best if you both stay in this room.' We had heard the girl's mother swearing. She swore at her solicitor, she swore at her partner. We heard our names

mentioned several times; each time a threat of what she wanted to do to us was attached. My solicitor's advice hung in the air, the air that had been turned blue by the girl's mother. We decided to stay put!

For three hours my husband and I sat. We prayed, but mostly sat in silence. I felt as if the room was closing in on me. I closed my eyes and slowed down my beating heart. The soft opening of the door told me that my solicitor had entered the room.

I didn't hear the words, I saw the smile and I knew we had won. For the first time in days I cried; hot silent tears. She was going to stay.

Interview: Caring for the Elderly

By Sarah Zakeri

Dementia is a disease that is quickly becoming a higher priority due to our ageing population, and awareness of it continues to be raised in the general public. For many it is a specter of the future, far away in their lives; however, statistics show that it is definitely in the here and now.

According to the Alzheimer's Society, there are approximately 750,000 people with dementia in the UK, and numbers are predicated to rise to 1 million by 2021. In care homes, more than 60% of residents over 65 have some form of dementia. Here, Laila, a care worker talks about the rewards and challenges of her job and gives us a better understanding of dementia care.

Laila, could you tell me a bit about the type of clients you care for and what sort of

problems they may have when they are admitted to you?

Well, it's primarily dementia patients and they usually come to us with varying stages of dementia. Sometimes they can have certain behavioural problems; a lot of their problems are attention-seeking, for example – continually shouting out, shouting obscene words in public places for a reaction, throwing themselves on the floor, making repetitive noises, grabbing on to people, hitting other residents.

And in what ways do you care for these patients?

It's their overall care, so their mental stimulation, food and drink, clothing, personal care and other things like going to the hair dressers or going for outings with relatives, just what you or me would do in our day-to-day lives, but it's in a secure setting.

Much of the general population have probably never been inside a care home, but they may have

a preconception of what it is like. Could you describe a typical day in the life of a care worker?

A typical day, well, our 12-hour shift starts at 7.15 a.m. when we get a hand over -- a little story about how the patients got on at night and anything that needs to be mentioned. We tend to get a few people up by 8.30 a.m. After breakfast, you are still getting people up. We are not institutionalised so not everyone has to be up by say 9 o' clock. So if someone has a bad night and they don't feel like getting up or they want a long lie, they can have it.



A lot of residents will need assistance with their meals -- you have to feed them and also ensure the people who are able to wander about have got their meals promptly. You will find with people with dementia, if they are sitting down and having their main meal and then they finish it, they will get up and walk away because they get

bored. Their attention span is not that long. You have to keep on top of everything.

You usually get a lot of visitors in the afternoon. They get various entertainments. We have an activities coordinator called the Cats Pyjamas, a lady who sings; she comes in quite a lot. At Christmas you get school children singing, and people get taken out shopping by the activities lady -- it depends on

the season. If its Christmas, they are making Christmas cards, Easter, Easter cards and displays of flowers or baking.

That sounds more homely than I

expected. It's clear you would have to be quite dedicated to your patients to be there for them for 12 hours a day. What do you enjoy most about it and conversely, what is the most challenging aspect of your job?

The most rewarding aspect is probably getting to know the residents because we have

people for long periods of time. You get to know their little quirks, and they all have different personalities. Also knowing that you have helped someone during the day – helped make their day a little bit better.

The most challenging aspect of my job, and I think a lot of carers would agree, are the relatives. A lot of people coming are in denial about their relatives having dementia or else don't understand the disease or have expectations of their relatives doing things that they obviously can't do any more, so I would say a lot of the challenges come from not working with the service user but working with their family.

Some people just don't want to accept the fact that their relative's got dementia so it's trying to make them come to terms with what they can do now.

Obviously your work can be quite emotionally demanding, both due to the service users

and their relatives. Do you ever get sad or stressed?

Yes, I suppose you do but it's a professional environment; we try to be professional, and you are not dealing with your relatives so obviously you may get sad for a certain service user but you still have that degree of separation -- you can step back from it because you are not emotionally attached to that person. You do see some sad things but you have to just think what you are doing for them; you are making their day as best as you can, so you can't do much more than that.

What type of person would you say do you need to be to do your job?

You need to be caring of course, you have to have LOTS of patience – elderly people can't go at the speed we go at, so when you come into a care home everything gets slowed down and goes to the pace of the service-users, not the pace that you want to go to. So you

have to be able to prioritise and be quite organised and see what, out of all the jobs that are to be done, has to be done first. You might have something that has to be done immediately, so you have to be able to drop what you are doing [...]. In a care home, although there is a certain routine to a degree, although the skeleton work of your day is the same, there are going to be things that happen and you have to do it. You can't say, 'Oh I'll just wait till after lunch'. You have to be flexible.

The care system has had a lot of bad press in the past, but it is becoming an increasingly important provision for the ageing population. What is your view of the care system -- do you think, for example, that people should look after their own?

Not really. I think there is a place for care at home, but there is also a place for care homes. Often we say to the relatives, 'How have you managed for so long at home?' We have shift

patterns; we are only there for 12 hours and then we can go home, whereas a person in a home setting looking after their relatives doesn't get any breaks. I think the people that are in care homes, more or less, are people who do need to be there because they are not able to manage at home for a variety of reasons.

Yes, that's a very clear way of looking at it. Another weighty question: Is there anything that your job teaches you?

It definitely teaches you to be more appreciative of things and because you are dealing with life and death, it does change your outlook on things, and maybe things that you might have deemed important before aren't really. I really think that it would benefit everybody in society to go into a care home and it might change their attitudes on a lot of things.

Lastly, for those suffering from dementia, or have someone close to them who has the

disease, do you think there's no hope, or can you still have a reasonable quality of life?

I think if you've got the support of carers and your family then, although dementia is a very sad disease, probably when people first get it is the most traumatic for them whereas in the latter stages of dementia a lot of service users seem to be quite happy in their own little world.

A lot of them revert back to their childhood where they may have been very happy with their memories of their childhood with their mother and father.

Obviously it can be quite scary and confusing for them at the beginning, but I think as it progresses, in a way, the fact that you don't remember certain things is actually a blessing -- if you did remember you might get yourself more upset.

Eco-friendly Food Shopping

By Petrina Tedeschi

The delight of living in a small place is the joy being able to walk daily to the markets to buy fresh produce. Even for our supermarket shopping, I don't need a car, just my shopping trolley which in London would not be seen as terribly chic, but here it is a fashionable shopping accessory.

Food shopping for me has become a daily adventure; I love being able to feel the fruit and vegetables before I buy them. I have become an expert at searching through the container for the fattest pea pods and take pride when I am podding them to see the fruits of my labour popping into the bowl. By using more seasonable produce, we can cut down on the carbon footprint. I only put in my basket what is driven, rather than is flown, to their destination. It isn't necessary to eat strawberries in December, so we

don't; we only eat what has been grown in France or Italy. In the fishmonger I only purchase regional fish; if it hasn't been caught in the Mediterranean or from a river in France, I don't buy it.

In the supermarket I buy the least I can in packets. Cheese and cold meats are from the delicatessen counter, as they are wrapped in greaseproof paper that is not so damaging to the environment and easier to dispose of. I choose glass jars rather than in plastic containers or tins, as they are easier to recycle. It is difficult to buy all household goods in environmentally sympathetic packaging, but I do my best. I believe that if I think seriously about what I am buying it will help, if even in a small way. Our recycling is minimal one small bag per week; when we lived in London I often filled a large bin bag in the same time!

Herbs we grow in tubs on the terrace and it is such fun to choose what goes with a particular dish or even to



experiment. Fish cooked with Rosemary is delicious.

I admit that being a full time housewife is a privilege, and I do have the time to walk to the market, visit the fishmonger and the butcher individually and to queue at the delicatessen counter. City dwellers and working mothers with a school run don't always have the time or the inclination to make food shopping an event, rather than a necessity. I was like that too when we lived in a city. Living in France has taught me to be more thoughtful about what I eat and where it comes from. Because for me, the way I now do my food shopping has been transformed. Cooking has become fun rather than a chore, we waste less food, and every meal has become a dinner party.