

LADY DENMAN CUP COMPETITION 2020



‘What I heard on the bus...’

Schedule

Using no more than 500 words, WI members were invited to submit a piece of writing, either comical, serious, fact or fiction, based on a conversation they have overheard, or imagined they had heard, on the bus.

The NFWI received 146 entries from 59 federations and the final results were...

First	Christine Greaves	Shropshire Federation
Second	Wendy Collyer	Hampshire Federation
Third	Cynthia Shaw	South Yorkshire Federation
Highly Commended	Clare Jordan	Cambridge Federation
Highly Commended	Ruth Butler	Devon Federation
Highly Commended	Anne Dupre	Jersey Federation

The Judges reported...

What a variety of styles and approaches this year’s writing prompt produced. Clearly, some of the entries were almost certainly based factually on genuine conversations overheard on public transport – amusing tales, dark implications of all sorts of treachery in the domestic sphere and so on. But much more commonly, entrants saw this year as a chance to explore the imaginative possibilities not of what they heard on the bus but rather what they might have heard on the bus. There were some favourite subjects – the pandemic, the nature of being cooped up with a mix of people for a journey, the meeting of old friends not seen for a while. But there were also some favourite generic modes. The most popular seemed to be the nearly-Agatha-Christie mystery, wherein the narrator overhears what she believes to be the planning of a crime. In most cases, these are exploded as misapprehensions, though not quite always... There was a fair smattering of similar pieces, usually to do with double-entendre style potentially risqué gossip, though there were some more dramatic pieces dealing with topics ranging from domestic abuse and infidelity, to the gradual renewal of faith in the rural environment and human nature more generally. Quite a spectrum. One consistent factor, however, was the generally perceived need for the narrator (almost always the ‘over-hearer’ in the story), though forced into a secondary role, not to remain entirely passive in that role. That is, whatever the nature of what was being overheard, almost all the narrators asked themselves, What does this mean to me? And What ought I to do about this? This is encouraging, and indicative of a certain outlook, which bodes very well for the times – an era demanding ever-increasing social alertness.

On behalf of both Dr Hitchman and myself, we wish to thank ALL those who entered the contest for allowing us to read their work, and also to thank the WI most warmly for inviting us to participate in the 2020 Lady Denman Cup.

Dr John Ballam and Dr Beatrice Hitchman

The NFWI would like to acknowledge and thank the Judges; Dr John Ballam, Director of the Undergraduate Diploma in Creative Writing, Oxford University and Dr Beatrice Hitchman, Lecturer and Author, for their on-going commitment to the competition, and enthusiasm to share their passion and skill to help WI members develop their creative writing skills.



Introducing the Judges...

Dr John Ballam (BA, PhD)

Director of the Undergraduate Diploma in Creative Writing, Kellogg College

Dr Ballam is the author of two collections of poetry, six stage plays, one novel and numerous academic works, including articles reviews and chapters. He is best-known for his critically-acclaimed memoir *The Road to Harmony* (1999; new edition 2009). He is a prolific reviewer and has also worked with the prestigious Italian consortium Fondazione IStud on a series of enterprise biographies. His main field of interest, however, remains drama and he is currently a script consultant and screenwriter for several major producers in London, Hollywood and Mumbai.



Dr Ballam specializes in teaching literature of the modern period as well as creative writing in most genres. Dr Ballam's principal research interests are in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and American literature.

Dr Beatrice Hitchman

Author, Lecturer

Beatrice Hitchman is an author and creative writing lecturer. Her first novel, *PETITE MORT*, was nominated for the Desmond Elliott Prize, the Polari Prize, the Author's Club Best First Novel Prize, the HWA Debut Dagger and adapted as a Radio 4 Woman's Hour Drama starring Honor Blackman. Her short fiction has appeared in literary journals and magazines. She recently co-judged (with Philip Hensher) the Bath Spa 25-Word Novel flash fiction competition, whose prize was awarded by Jeremy Irons at the London Library in 2017.



FIRST PLACE

Christine Greaves

Frankwell Little Boro' WI, Shropshire Federation

'What I heard on the bus...'

'£ 1000 a month for life and *she's* only 28!'

'*She's* got the one on the corner. 3 kids and a Ford Fiesta. *He's* got a job on the Council and wears a suit. Leaves her washing out in the rain. Never bottoms the line with the husband's raggy underpants before she 'angs 'em out. All artex ceilings, she is. Next doors got them lovely plastic Daz daffs in the front bay'.

I can see her. Bugs blood red lipstick, applied Clara bow fashion, is smeared over her spiteful, thoughtless lips. Who is today's victim? The 23 bus bounces through the pothole. The gossip lurches closer to the listening ear on the next seat.

'Scratch cards. Plays them all the time. Cars back seat side pocket's full. Gets 'em from 'Abdul 24hours' on the High Street. His wife says she uses the family allowance. Every week regular, 50 Silk Cut and 5 double dips'.

I can't believe my ears, what have I done to her?

'Won't be giving her Mam nowt – and she needs new teeth. Or her stuck up sister. They're being extended. It'll give 'em a better view of the Comp. Block my view into her kitchen more like. Next door's t'other sides husband's going to that Councillor bloke round West Brom. Serves her right. Pete at the Nags swore they've gone and ordered one of them cars with the sliding doors on tick. In silver if you please. Got 10 seats – plannin' more babbies. Typical do gooder.'

My head spins! She stops for breath and saliva dribbles with vicious excitement onto her King Edwards.

'Course, I've known *that* family for years. Best mates at the Secondary Mod was our 'Enry with'er Uncle's Brother's Cousin.'

Her Black Country accent rises and bifocals slip down her sweaty nose. The head in front strains closer. All ears tune in for today's gossip.

'Seen her in 'Sofas R Us' opposite 'Egor's Chippie'. Stroking the double seater in the window with the cut moquette. Speaking to the bloke in charge, all la-di-da. Thinks she's posh and too good for us Tipton locals. Kids a perfect with a tie and gave our Billy detention. Brought her kids new trainers, didn't even get the latest Adidas's like our Mark's – only went to Sainsbury's. Told our Alisha they 'wear well' – she's the number one checkout. Picks up us dinner when her Supervisor goes to the loo. Should have seen last week's Topside. Perfect fit in her best coat pocket'.

We get off. Together. We've never met but I smile and with effort say 'hello'. She sniffs back. We walk in silence and I struggle not to cry. I open the gate to my home. Her jaw drops, lost for words at last. Slowly I say to her who lives opposite.

'Actually it's £2000 pounds a month. Come in. Enjoy a cuppa and meet my sister. She's just finished her Supervisor's shift at Sainsburys.....'

What a voice! This is like reading Victoria Wood at her most well-observed. This was a strong competition contender. The level of detail is extraordinary, and extraordinarily satisfying; it rings unfortunately true of the worst kind of gossip's obsession with the little things. The dialogue is sharp, abbreviated and very well done indeed - 'All artex ceilings, she is,' made me laugh out loud, and the ending was well achieved, although I don't think we needed it foreshadowed that the narrator is actually the person being gossiped about - there is no other possible ending for this story. This showed real talent, and I hope we get to see more from this author, who clearly has a flair for dramatic writing!

SECOND PLACE

Wendy Collyer

Sway WI, Hampshire Federation

'What I heard on the bus...'

- 1st woman: "I 'eard Bristows Bakery is closing then"
- 2nd woman: "Ay, that'll be the new Patisserie that's opened up at the top end, Cracking baguettes!"
- Female student: "Ciao Mamma, Ti ringrazio e ti richiamaró prestocquando il paquete é arrivato. Ciao, ciao"*
- Loud boy: "Oy, gissit back. I need it.....*scuffling noises*
- 2nd loud boy: "Ouch, hey stoppit, stop.....
Scuffling continues.
- 2nd woman: "You tried those strawberry tarts with the jelly?"
- Mother voice: "Boys, the bus is not the place for fighting!"
- Girl: *begins to cry*..... "Maaam, they hit me....."
- Mother voice: "I'm so sorry, we're off at the next stop – is she all right?"
- Man: "Yes, environmental health involved I 'eard"
- 1st woman: "But Bristows was always the finest bakery in town."
- 2nd man: "Well, what can you expect when they don't check the state of the cellars?"
- 2nd women: "They'll never mek pastries like t'uther one, eclairs all different colours – ooh 'n croissants just like you were in France."
- 2nd man: "River got so high you see, water seeped in..."
- Young woman: "I 'eard your Matthew's doing well at football."
- 2nd young woman : "He got picked for Huddersfield youth squad, ay. It's a lot o' extra travelling around mind, but he luvves it.
(slightly older than the 1st)
- Mother voice: "Sorry again. Come on you two, quick now."
- 2nd man: "Mould like you've never seen – thick and black they say"
- 2nd woman: "That dark shoclote I then pan o' shoclote is so yummy."
- 1st woman: "All so sudden – can't work it out."
- 2nd woman: "When Bristow got on the Council, it all went to pot, they say."
- 1st woman: "Big shock for the family, and 'im being in the public eye so, eh?"
- New man: "Can you manage?"
- Pregnant woman carrying a large bah tries to get up the aisle*
- Pregnant woman: "It's too 'evvy."

New man: "Givit 'ere then."
2nd man: Terrible taste – Tainted, completely tainted..."
1st woman: "Come to think on it, we had some very funny-tasting bread from Bristows last week. Had to put it out for the birds, but even they didn't tekk it!"
1st man: "Doesn't bear thinking about."

Bus jolts throwing pregnant woman onto the Italian student

Pregnant woman: "Oh I'm very sorry"
Student: "Oh it eez okay. Can I 'elp you?"
Pregnant woman: "Thank you. I'm near my time you see."

(sit down)

2nd young woman: "Kevin's playin' centre forward on Saturday. Mark Bristow's his pal. We're tekkin' 'em both as his Dad is busy"
Student: "When does your baby come?"
Pregnant woman: "Next week – I thought I should get a few more blankets and covers for the cot – as it's getting' so cold like."
Student: Yes, my mutherr sends me a coat because I 'ave nussing warm 'ere."
Get's up to get off "I 'ave to work now – ze Patisserie in George St. Bye"

**Translation: See you Mum. Thanks – I'll ring you soon when the parcel arrives. Bye-bye.*

This one, given its size, has quite a range of characters and is arranged more or less as a play script. This shows a degree of boldness in itself, and the to and fro achieved amongst so many characters is deftly managed. I thought the sheer range of topics, the fact that no one is listening to anyone else unless they virtually have to, and the way all of them stick to their pet topics was ingenious. Very nicely done – plausible and entertaining.

THIRD PLACE

Cynthia Shaw

Wentworth WI, South Yorkshire Federation

'What I heard on the bus...'

It was early. A cold, rainy morning in February, standing, waiting for the 'pit bus' which transported coalminers to the local colliery. I had worked in the Wages Office for over 20 years and knew when I boarded the bus the normally expletive-peppered conversations would become more respectful.

Waiting looking around, in the half light, I saw the mountainous pit-spoil heap, crouching like a huge monster, towering over the village, constantly growling with the noise of the conveyors disgorging waste from the mine deep below.

I knew that in the rain the pit-yard became a quagmire - with deep ruts etched by heavy lorries, greasy puddles punctuating the soup-like grey surface. When I complained to the Colliery Manager, he had said, non-too kindly, "It's a bloody pit-yard not the Chelsea Flower Show." The bus came and I took a seat in front of four miners.

Sat alone, I unashamedly listened to their conversation.

Jock - the burley red-haired Scotsman who had relocated to Barnsley to work in the richer, longer-living collieries in South Yorkshire said, "I saw Jack Jones coming out of the Manager's office yesterday - och! - he would be asking for morn overtime - what a creep!"

Sat next to him was David, a slim but solid six-footer, athletic and dependable - he said, "Poor old Jack, he would do anything to get away from his nagging, demanding wife. He prefers to be at work."

Sat immediately to their left was Bill, a conscientious underground fitter, sturdy and reliable, he said, "Yes, I rang for an appointment to see the Manager, but was told he was with Jack Jones and couldn't be disturbed - they would be talking about nothing more important than last Saturday's football match."

The bus, now full to capacity pulled into the pit yard after having 'hoovered up' a motley collection of miners from the bus stops en route.

Making my way across the pit yard I thought of the overheard conversation and wondered how they would feel when the real truth behind Jack's visit to the Manager's office became public knowledge.

Yesterday, Jack had poked his head round my office door asking if "I had a minute." I invited him in. He sat down heavily, shoulders slumped and said, "I was summoned to the Manager's office this morning, when he told me that because of a necessary reduction in manpower -I am sorry - you will be made redundant at the end of March."

There are some fantastic lines here: I really admired the skilled description of the pit-spoil heap 'crouching like a huge monster', and the 'half-light'. The different miners were also well drawn, almost to the point of walking off the page. It's a vividly written and intriguing portrait of a community at work, and there's a poignant ending to the story which completes the sense of gloom. I did wonder whether the ending felt quite sealed off - I wanted a little bit more to close the loop of the story; but it was a bold choice to leave the ending open, and I respected it. This was a strong competition contender and full of interest; I do hope we get to see more from this author.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Clare Jordan

Blue Belles WI, Cambridge Federation

Jolt on the bus

As I flopped breathlessly onto my seat, wedged against a collection of large packages possibly concealing a barely breathing small man, I ran through today's checklist on my phone

Plan dinner.

Order music for Mimosa's piano lesson.

Book Mimosa's drama class.

Order swimming goggles.

My mind drifted to little Roxy next door in that messy sandpit, water everywhere, mud all over her clothes. Yawning, I told myself that structure and direction is what five year olds need. And a mother with a checklist.

Loud protests erupted from the seat behind, drowning my thoughts. 'But mum, why can't I have a sleepover with Maisie. She's gonna do pizza and ice cream. Please mum?' Back to my checklist - add chicken, salad and rice cakes to shopping list. Tick. What other groceries did I need? Before I could think, more voices intruded from two women across the aisle who were tapping distractedly onto their phones with long orange and pink nails. 'Did I tell you about Amber's visit to the speech therapy? They gave us singing games we have to do at home, and they said the best thing was to get her talking to more children. Simple, eh? She loves the park so that's easily sorted, there's always kids there.' 'Yeah, great' replied pink nails, still tapping away.

I felt slightly panicked at this. Mimosa has a slight lisp. Look up singing lessons for Mimosa. Tick. Panic over.

Still ten minutes from home, as I was lapsing into sleep, the bus jerked abruptly causing the woman in front to almost fall off her seat. As she settled again and grasped her handbag firmly, she turned to her seat-mate: 'No, it wasn't good news at the clinic. I could see it in the doctor's eyes before he said he was sorry. I know Stan's in his seventies but it's too young. Made me think though, when the doctor said "live for the moment", and "do whatever makes you happy". He's right isn't he? Should've been doing that all along'. 'We all should, not just when we get cancer' sighed her seat-mate sympathetically.

I felt another jolt. No-one shifted in their seat. It was me that had jolted, not the bus. Mimosa, Roxy, the girl with the pizza friend, Amber and the park, Stan living for the moment? I needed another checklist - urgently.

Order paints, brushes, play dough

Children's baking set.

Cancel drama, piano and singing.

Order paddling pool.

Invite Roxy over for tea.

Perhaps I should get still stain remover, waterproof aprons and kale crisps?

There is a nice free-for-all pacing about this, mimicked in part by the structure of the paragraphing. I liked the humour in the opening (although I got confused about the relevance of Roxy's whereabouts). The next longish section – crossing dialogues from either side – is amusing too, and puts me in mind of EM Delafield. There is a slightly confusing segment then (is this dialogue now real or dreamt?). And importantly, I felt (not least imaged by the tiny man under the parcels) that the key theme here is the busyness of women's lives 24/7, with umpteen pressures to Do The Right Thing. Just a slight consciousness of that, might have lifted the story another notch.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Ruth Butler

Barnstaple Bloomers WI, Devon Federation

'What I heard on the bus...'

I was pleased to see a seat available near the front of the bus behind those designated for the elderly and disabled. That seat was occupied by a well coiffured elderly lady smartly dressed in an emerald green suit with matching shoes and handbag. As I sat down behind her, I noticed her large dangly silver earrings which seemed as little at odds with the rest of the outfit. The younger woman who sat next to her had mousy highlighted hair that was showing a lot of tell tale grey strands at the roots. The bus was quiet except for the conversation between the pair of women in front of me, so it was difficult not to tune in to their chatter.

"Jane is it the hospital we're going to today?"

"Yes mum we're going to see if the doctor can find out why you keep having pain in your tummy."

"Oh yes, can we go to Debenhams after for coffee and cake?"

"Yes mum, I said we will, and do a bit of shopping if you like."

"Oh good."

There was a few minutes silence then the elderly lady stood up.

"Here's our stop Jane."

"No mum, sit down, we're not going to the hairdressers, we're going to the hospital."

The elderly lady sat down.

"What are we going to the hospital for?"

"We're going to see the doctor about the pain in your tummy."

"Oh yes, can we go for cake afterwards?"

"Yes we can, we can go to Debenhams if you like."

"Oh yes, we can look to see if there are any bargains left in the sale."

"Yes, I'd like a new top now Autumn's on it's way."

"Jane, if we're going to Debenhams, we need the next stop."

Ting Ting went the bell.

"No mum, we're going to the hospital first."

"Sorry false alarm, ignore the bell!" The younger woman shouted to the driver.

"Why are we going to the hospital Jane?"

"The doctors are going to x-ray your tummy mum."

"Oh I thought I had an x-ray last week."

"No mu, it's today that you're having the x-ray."

"I hope we don't have to wait too long Jane. With just a year old copy of The Peoples Friend to relieve the boredom. Still if we get our in time we can go somewhere for coffee and cake, my treat."

"Yes mum, how about Debenhams? You like the chocolate gateaux there."

"Yes, and we can look for something new for Autumn."

"Great idea mum, now get ready because our stop is next."

"Are you sure dear."

The bus stopped.

"Come on mum, stand up we need to get off now."

The elderly lady made her way to the front of the bus and the last I heard of their conversation was

“Why are we going to the hospital this time Jane?”

I couldn't help feeling admiration for the patience and kindness Jane showed her mum. She is an inspiration to us all.

The strategy at the beginning here is interesting, as it sets apart one character as plainly likely to be interesting / unusual before investigating to find out why. This creates just a little tension even before the talking begins. When the talking gets going there is a very nicely made series of near-repetitions illustrative of an individual apparently afflicted by dementia and the resilient patience of her daughter in dealing with this person's needs. It is gently handled in most respects, and really, the coda at the ending is not needed.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Anne Dupré

St. Martin WI, Jersey Federation

Stanley Postlethwaite – Undercover

Imagine me back then - a 10 year old, short-trousered, gabardine-mackintoshed, scabby-kneed schoolboy.

Favourite books - “Biggles.”

Favourite radio programme - “Rick Burton, Special Agent”.

I was late catching the bus because Mr Perkins, feared by all at Tilton Road School, had kept me in, assuming I was responsible for the air mysteriously escaping from his bicycle tyres. I *was* responsible but still objected to the fact that he accused me without evidence and wouldn't entertain the possibility of another culprit. Considering our brave troops were fighting for freedom, it was ironic that Mr Perkins' mantra was “Don't imagine this classroom is a democracy”.

“It's not fair” held no sway with Pinky Perkins so i copied out 200 times “I must not approach, touch or think about the property of Tilton Road School's teachers” while maintaining a wounded facial expression, prompting Mr Perkins to ask if I had wind.

It seemed strange to be on a nearly empty bus. (Usually I was embroiled, along with my scruffy partners in crime, in an ongoing conflict with the Catholic schoolboys, who truly believed God was on their side but often found he was on a tea break for the duration of the rowdy bus ride home.)

The driver braked suddenly at the bus stop before Trencham Avenue. My satchel flew off the seat, its contents scattering over the grimy floor. Never mind my homework, there was a barley sugar twist, won in a tense earwig race, that I was loathe to lose. Anyway, I was crouched down, scrabbling about, when I heard muffled voices two seats ahead. Some instinct made me stay put, listen carefully and be “alert” as the posters instructed.

“Good Evening, M.”

“Greetings, Charlie.”

“Is it safe to talk?”

“Well, there's only you and me here and who's imagine nefarious doings on the number 15 bus?”

My ears pricked up. I knew what “nefarious” meant. Mr Perkins often applied it to perfectly innocent actions of mine.

“Are the enemy suspicious?”

“Doubtful. They imagine we're short of supplies. Little do they know we have useful contacts who support our cause. Victory awaits.”

I peered under the seats. Polished shoes, dark coats, black leather bags. Disguises! Foreign infiltrators masquerading as British!

No doubt my over-active brain would have eventually queried why enemy agens were operating in a small, northern town with no industry and little political interest when someone clattered down from the upper deck and a red haired, freckled-faced head appeared in front of mine.

“Hey up, Stan. What're you doing down there?”

“Shh. They'll hear.”

“Who? Mrs Partrose and Miss Marlborough? Emily and Charlotte? My gran knows them. They’re the best cake bakers ever and they’re desperate to win next month’s competition against Snitterfield W.I. It’s hush hush but Miss Marlborough’s friendly with the quartermaster at Buxbridge barracks and he’s sneaking them out sugar and butter. Their strategy’s like a military campaign.”

I looked up at Sid, grinning. I could vouch for that!

What larks! I really enjoyed reading this story. You announce your authority from the first line, with some wonderful concrete detail, and follow up with a clever and funny description of Mr Perkins - this makes us root for our narrator, Stanley. I loved the conceit of the WI contestants behaving like spies and meeting on the bus because that is the only 'secure' location, and felt you could go even further with this (the clap of a secret handshake? Code-words and phrases?) to make things even funnier. It's very hard to write comedy but this more than pulls it off, assisted by a very droll authorial voice. This was a wonderful piece of writing, a vividly imagined response to the brief and a strong competition contender. I hope we get to see more from this author.