



The WiO Chair steps down

WE SAY FAREWELL TO ROBERT BULLARD, after several years as Chair of WiO.

Robert Bullard leaves the post of WiO Chair at the next AGM, to be held in May 2020. In our interview (page 4), Robert tells us how he first became involved with WiO, his achievements as Chair, his future plans, and more.

Publishing updates

- **Daunt Books** Opens a new shop on the Banbury Road.
- Coming soon are the **OxLitFest**, to be held 27 March-5 April, the **Indie Book Fair** 4 April, and **ChipLitFest** in Chipping Norton, 23-26 April.

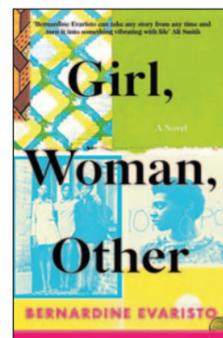
Highlights on other pages

2	Events diary	6	Lessons learned
4	Robert Bullard interview	7	Members' books
5	Cycle ride secret	8	The view from my desk
	Oxford Indie Book Fair		Poets' corner

'Not the Booker' night

Martin Stott reviews a prize-winner at the 2019 WiO 'Not the Booker' evening, held in the King's Arms pub, in Holywell Street.

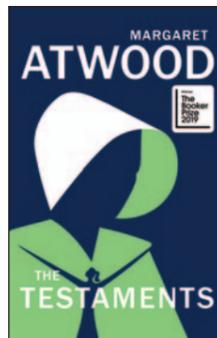
Every year, a panel of readers from WiO presents the Booker Prize shortlist for an audience vote, a few days before the real thing. In 2019, the Booker was won by Margaret Atwood for *The Testaments* and Bernardine Evaristo, for *Girl, Woman, Other*. I had the pleasure of reading the latter title, then presenting it to the WiO audience. Her book tells the interlinked stories of



twelve black women, including one trans and one who defines herself as white, and who revealed some fairly racist attitudes until she discovered her black roots.

Evaristo's characters

They range across the past 100 years and the whole of England: parents, children, lovers, teachers, school friends, theatre pals, and many more. The book raises timeless questions about feminism and race, and Evaristo doesn't shy away from tricky and largely unexplored subjects, such as abuse in lesbian relationships. A strikingly poetic prose style allows her intertwined stories to flow intuitively, enfolding readers in their embrace.



Top read in the US

Barack Obama nominated *Girl, Woman, Other* as one of his top 10 reads of 2019, and I can see why. This is a book and an author to read in order to gain a clear-eyed view of modern Britain.

The WiO 'Not the Booker' is a fun event for fiction fans, so keep your diaries open for October 2020.



'A busy day on the High, Oxford.' From an original print by Myles Birket Foster, 1825-1899.

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Editor: David Jefferis dmjefferis@me.com

Email me: Send information on your new project or title, with publishing details, and a hi-res photo. Article suggestions are welcome. 400 words fills a column.

Note: Views in this newsletter are those of the writers concerned, not of Writers in Oxford.



WiO members are welcome to join our Facebook group. You can visit the WiO page, which is open to anyone, and is a good way to promote your work.

Group: www.facebook.com/groups/writersinoxford

Page: www.facebook.com/writersinoxford

Events diary

BURNS NIGHT

Saturday 25 January, 6 pm
98 Corn Street, Witney, OX28 6BU
Jane Cammack hosts a traditional Burns Night again at her elegant townhouse in Witney. Includes a recital of Burns poetry by WiO member David Wilkinson.
Members and guests £10 on arrival. **Acceptance beforehand essential to: jane.cammack@libero.it**

PUB LUNCH

Saturday 8 February, from 12.30 pm
Holly Bush pub, Osney Island, OX2 0BD
This pub has just re-opened and offers comfy armchairs and good food.
Come and meet your fellow WiO members in a warm and informal setting! All welcome.

POETRY LAUNCH

Friday 21 February, 6.30 pm
Waterstones, Broad Street, OX1 3AF
The Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre's Ignition Press is launching three poetry pamphlets.
Booking not required.

QUICK QUESTION FAIR

Tuesday 25 February, 6-8 pm
Kellogg College, 60-62 Banbury Road, OX2 6PN
The last QQF was a great success, so come and ask the panel any question you like on writing or publishing.
To reserve a place, email: whelan.mariah@gmail.com

QUIZ NIGHT

Saturday 26 February, 7 pm for 7.30 pm
Wadham Room, King's Arms, Broad Street, OX1 3SP
Led by WiO member Philip Gooden, with questions on literary themes, so no sport or pop music!
Free to all, bring your friends or join a team
RSVP email: brendastones40@hotmail.com

LIZ WOOLLEY WALK: BREWING IN OXFORD

Saturday 7 March, 2 pm
Outside Said Business School, OX1 1HP
Brewing has been big business since medieval times, and on this walk, Liz Woolley tells how four families came to dominate the trade.
Members free, guests £6
RSVP email: brendastones40@hotmail.com

SOCIAL EVENING

Saturday 21 March, from 6 pm
65 Divinity Road, OX4 1LH
Martin Stott hosts an evening of wine, finger food and chat with friends old and new.
Members free, guests £5.
RSVP email: martin@martin-stott.com

AUTHOR TALK: JULIE SUMMERS ON HER BOOK

DRESSED FOR WAR
Saturday 28 March, 12 noon
Cohen Quad, Exeter College, Walton Street, OX1 2HE
WIO member Julie Summers is an authority on women's lives during World War II. In her new study, she recounts the story of *Vogue* magazine.
Tickets £12.50 from: oxfordliteraryfestival.org

THAMES OUTING

Saturday 11 April, from 12.30
We visit the scenes of Diane Setterfield's novel *Once Upon a River*, with lunch at Ye Olde Swan Inn, Radcot, to discuss the novel. When booking, please say if you need transport or can provide a lift.
RSVP email: brendastones40@hotmail.com

We are sad to report the deaths of two WiO members

Ann Spokes Symonds

Ann had a varied life which included politics and public service – as well as writing. Her education started at Wychwood School in North Oxford, and she returned to the city in 1944, to read PPE at St Anne's College. After working for various Conservative MPs, she became a Parliamentary candidate three times – standing in Leicester and Lincolnshire – and became a City of Oxford Councillor, and later a County Councillor. She was Lord Mayor of Oxford 1976-77. She also worked for Age Concern Oxford, and later chaired Age Concern England.

Her writing specialised in anthologies and local history. From 1997-2000 she wrote seven titles in the *Changing Faces* series, published by Robert Boyd. More recently, she wrote *Also-Rans*, which draws attention to some of the lesser-known people behind some famous inventions. Ann believed they really deserved the credit.

Maggie Black writes: "In the early days of Writers in Oxford, Ann and her husband Richard Symonds were keen members, and regularly came to meetings – notably AGMs. They were very interested in the work of small publishers, and were great champions of the minor press. Ann played tennis and golf into her 90s; the 2019 summer season (she was then aged 94) was the first

The Oxford Local History Association (OLHA) needs an editor for its annual journal. The post is unpaid but very worthwhile, as the OLHA is the umbrella for more than 80 local history groups in Oxfordshire.
For details visit: www.olha.org.uk

WYTHAM WOODS: BLUEBELL AND POETRY WALK

Saturday 18 April, 11 am
Wytham Woods, Sawmill Yard, Wytham, OX2 8Q
Writer in Residence, Sarah Watkinson leads an hour's ramble through the woods, followed by a picnic lunch, when Sarah will read from her poetry and discuss the inspiration of nature and science for poets.
Members free, guests £5
RSVP email: brendastones40@hotmail.com

TROPICAL SHELL ART WORKSHOPS

Led by WiO member Ingrid Thomas, full-day workshop to create collages of provided shells. Various course dates, from 22 January to 6 May.
For details and prices (lunch is included) contact:
ingrid.thomas.oxford@gmail.com

time we did not see her on the courts at regular University Club sessions. She was truly a contributor to many different branches of learning and life, and was always up for a chat and an exploration of some pressing topic."

Linora Lawrence

Linora Lawrence lived in Oxford for over 30 years, working at St Hilda's and Trinity colleges, the Bodleian Library, and Oxford University Press.

She wrote regularly for *The Oxford Times* and wrote features for its monthly magazine, *Oxfordshire Limited Edition*. Among her most notable articles was a bi-monthly series, *An A-Z of the Bodleian Library* which ran in 2014 and 2015. She also wrote for *The Lady* magazine.

Others add: "Linora was a warm and diplomatic Chairman of the Oxford Writers Group and a great support to its members, offering careful criticism and advice in a knowledgeable and encouraging way. *The Bodleian Murders and other Oxford Stories* came from Linora's life, reflecting her part-Polish ancestry and her work at the Bodleian.

"The story Sylvia Vetta liked best was set in the Jewish quarter of Medieval Oxford, which Linora researched meticulously, with several historical characters."

Robert Bullard interview

 **ROBERT BULLARD provides some secret stories about his WiO years.**

How did you hear about WiO?

When I moved to Oxford in 2010, I already knew the city from visiting my parents and sister over many years, but I didn't know anyone – or not beyond their own friends. So my sister introduced me to people whom she thought might be good connections for me, one of whom was the WiO member Cherry Mosteshar. We all had a meal together, and I think Cherry must have said, "Come to WiO's next AGM."

Years served on the WiO committee?

Under Denise Cullington's persuasion (the previous Chair), I joined the committee in about September 2011. First I was Membership Secretary – obviously the job that others least wanted to do! – and I took over from Denise in 2015. I was also Treasurer on a temporary basis, in 2016-17.

What was your proudest achievement?

One of my priorities was to attract younger members to WiO, and our 25th anniversary provided the ideal opportunity. We ran a competition for Young Oxfordshire Writers – giving two years of free WiO membership to 25 people under 25 years old, though they prefer 'Emerging Writers' rather than 'Young.'

We held several events particularly for them, including a Games Afternoon and two very popular 'advisory sessions', both of which were so popular that they were standing-room-only. One of the competition winners, Gabriel Schenk, has joined the committee – as has another new writer, Mariah Whelan, who used to run Oxford Writers' House (*see page 6*).

The best events you attended?

Lots to choose from. One recent talk that really sticks in my memory was by Bart van Es, author of *The Cut Out Girl*. He was so thoughtful, thorough and generous, sharing lots of details about how and why he wrote the book the way that he did. After his talk, reading the book was going to be a hard act to follow, but I enjoyed it as well. And of course our 25th Anniversary

Party, in Balliol... Nobody knows that I only just made it! I had to rush back from working that day in London, finalising my speech on the train.

Your worst moment?

As you can see from the dates above, at one time I was both Chair and acting Treasurer – and I think we didn't have a Minutes Secretary either, whose job the committee therefore shared around. There was quite a lot to do; I felt like an eighteenth century carriage driver, holding the reins of – and trying to control – several horses, all at once.

Who is your favourite author?

I don't tend to go for outright 'favourites' – whether authors, films, or whatever – but as a teenager I got addicted to Evelyn Waugh. These days I read more widely, and for the last few years I've been working my way through Robert McCrum's *The Best 100 Novels*. They're not exactly modern, but they are all classics, and I have enjoyed 80 percent of them. For those interested, he has a similar book covering non-fiction.

Favourite part of Oxford?

Too many places to choose from, though here are a few. The Rose and Crown pub, North Parade Avenue. Punting from Cherwell Boathouse. Swimming (during the summer) in Hinksey Pool and Port Meadow. Merton Street, St Giles' and Park Town. Thames cycle path. Horses, birds and buttercups on Port Meadow.

'Retirement' plans?

In addition to standing down from the committee in May, in around September this year I will send my thousandth invoice. To mark them in some way I am planning to reduce my working days, doing a university course or more voluntary work – or even writing another book. Watch this space.

Number of WiO files on your PC?

I had to count them for you! In all, there are nearly 250 – and I am not a hoarder, either!

The priorities for WiO's next Chair?

I'll keep quiet – that's for them to decide!

Cycle ride secret

 **IMOGEN MATTHEWS describes how a cycling holiday inspired a World War II novel.**

Eight years ago while on holiday in Holland, I was cycling through majestic beech woods when I came across a secret, so well concealed, that hardly anyone knew about it. Next to the path, a small information board described how a village of underground huts had been built during World War II to shelter as many as 80 people, mostly Jews, who were on the run from the Nazis.



I ventured into the nearby woods until I stumbled upon a hut, covered in foliage and branches, almost entirely hidden from view. Stooping to enter the gloomy little dwelling, I tried to imagine what it must have been like to live in such cramped conditions.

Who helped these people survive? And how did they stay hidden from the Germans for so long?

Documentary evidence

I knew I had to write about this extraordinary story, so I tracked down documentary evidence of a hidden village, the people who lived there, and those who help them survive. Together with my Dutch mother's survival stories during the Hunger Winter of 1944-45, I started to write my novel, *The Hidden Village*, which was published in 2017, and became an Amazon bestseller in the US and UK.

The sequel *Hidden in the Shadows* came to fruition late last year, and is now published. Throughout the first book, the two characters of Wouter and Laura had always been in the background, and I knew that in this second title I could tell their story.

Both titles from Imogen Matthews are available as ebooks and paperback at [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)

Oxford Indie Book Fair

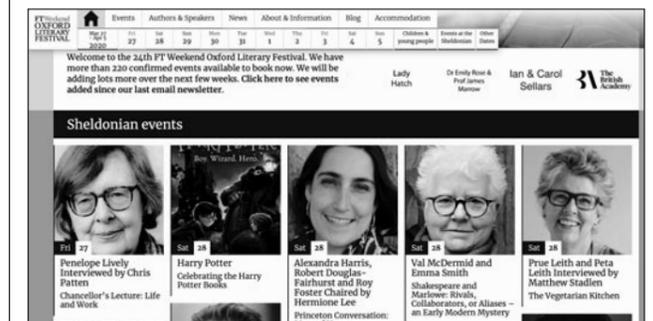
 **A NEW APRIL EVENT to be held in Oxford will provide a platform for independent publishers.**

The Oxford Indie Book Fair (OIBF) is proposed to be an 'engaging programme' of performances, taking place alongside the sale of published works. The organisers aim to attract people of all ages.

In today's publishing landscape, it is difficult for all but the most commercially-successful authors to receive recognition from the mainstream media, or reach a wider platform. The lineups for book fairs tend to be similar up and down the country, leaving little space for local or less well-known authors. In addition, ticket prices can be high, which dissuades visitors from supporting authors by buying their books.

Showcase for indies

And now, especially as Oxford is a major city of arts and letters, renowned for writing and publishing, it is time for the ever-growing indie sector to have a voice. In 2020 the OIBF offers an opportunity for new and established independent talent to showcase their work. Even better, the OIBF will run in parallel with the established Oxford Literary Festival (*below*). Perhaps best of all, admission is FREE to the general public.



The OIBF is being held on Saturday, 4 April 2020, at the Wesley Memorial Hall, New Inn Hall Street, OX1 2DH from 10.30 am to 5 pm. The organisers are Andy Severn, and WiO members James Harrison, Ray Foulk and Sylvia Vetta. You can exhibit at the OIBF by taking a sales table, prices in the range of £15-30.

For more information, call 01865 327272 or email: info@oxfordindiebookfair.co.uk
Website: www.oxfordindiebookfair.co.uk

Lessons learned

 **MARIAH WHELAN** discusses her work on Oxford Writers' House and the conclusions she drew.

It was with heavy hearts we announced the closure of Oxford Writers' House back in September 2019. Our goal had been to 'inspire, connect and give voice' to Oxford's emerging writers and over four years we hosted hundreds of authors, ran more than fifty writing workshops, and published almost a hundred articles on our website. So, why did we close? Well, it certainly had nothing to do with our popularity. By 2019, our online audience had grown to more than 4000 and our final events all sold out weeks in advance.

Structure and funding

Reflecting on my experiences as Director, I think we ultimately closed due to mistakes we made with our organisational structure and funding strategy. We began life as a project embedded within a new business 'incubator' competition at St Anne's College. Fighting off competition for funding from tech start-ups and app developers, we incorporated as a not-for-profit Community Interest Company. We hoped this structure would not only allow us to apply for external funding, but also carry out commercial activity to finance our activities. Ultimately, however, it placed an enormous administrative burden on our shoulders.

Admin overload

Running a Community Interest Company requires a huge amount of financial administration and reporting. As volunteers with PhDs to finish, children to look after and books to write, we found more of our time was spent keeping up with spreadsheets and filing paperwork. Unfortunately, this meant we had less time to diversify our funding sources and commercial enterprise. When a major funder fell through we knew we wouldn't be able to continue as we wanted.

Proud of what we achieved at Oxford Writers' House, we decided to close on a high, rather than decrease the quality of our events and publications. We knew we had learned a huge amount about meeting the needs of Oxford's writing communities. Since we closed, we've all continued to serve the community in some way.



Mariah providing inspiration to emerging writers.

The spirit lives on

Personally, without the administrative burden of a CIC, I've been free to use my skills helping out with WiO events focused on emerging writers. While Oxford Writers' House the company has closed, its spirit lives on in projects where I can continue to help connect, inspire and give voice to our city's writers.

Visit Mariah at: <https://mariahwhelan.com>

New WiO members

● **Steve Sheppard** specialises in humorous fiction. His first title is *A Very Important Teapot* (Claret Press, 2019). His interests include cricket, sport generally, theatre, politics, and geography.

Steve discovered WiO through Sylvia Vetta.

Website: www.stevesheppardauthor.com

● **Laura S. Jansson** writes on pregnancy/birth/parenting and on spirituality. Her debut title is *Fertile Ground: A Pilgrimage Through Pregnancy* (Ancient Faith Publishing, 2019). Her interests include gender in society, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, US-UK international relations, and anthropology.

Laura discovered WiO through her friend Roz Austin, who recommended she join.

Websites: www.godsib.net, www.laurajansson.com

Members' books

Members: email us your latest title to be included



MANSFIELD PARK REVISITED

Merryn Williams
Plas Gwyn Books

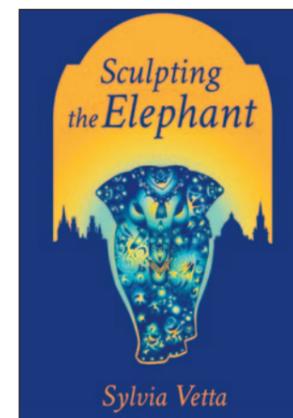
This book updates Jane Austen's characters into the twenty-first century, where Merryn shows how they might react in the modern world. Here is a short taster:

"About thirty years ago,

Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, had the good luck to meet Sir Thomas Bertram, the member for Mid-Northamptonshire, at a Young Conservative dance. They liked each other immediately and nine months later were married.

"Sir Thomas had inherited the seat from his late father and hoped, when the time came, to pass it on to his son. He owned a house in Park Lane, some farms in various parts of the Home Counties, and an estate in the rural heart of his constituency, Mansfield Park."

Read more at: www.mwilliams.webeden.co.uk



SCULPTING THE ELEPHANT

Sylvia Vetta
Claret Press

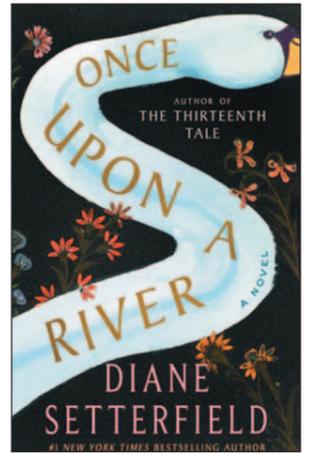
A page-turning love story, in which the two lead characters – artist and antiques dealer Harry King, and beautiful historian Ramma Gupta – have to overcome the twin barriers of upbringing and prejudice to be together.

WiO members may also have read Sylvia's articles in such publications as the OX Magazine, which defines itself as the 'cultural barometer' of Oxfordshire.

Read more at: www.sylviavetta.co.uk

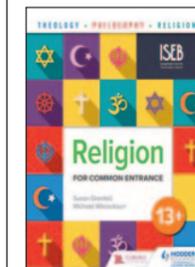
ONCE UPON A RIVER

Diane Setterfield
Black Swan



One (of many) tantalising reviews of this book reads: "An exquisitely crafted multi-layered mystery brimming with folklore, suspense and romance, as well as with the urgent scientific curiosity of the Darwinian age, *Once Upon a River* is as richly atmospheric as Setterfield's *The Thirteenth Tale*." And now it's available in paperback.

For more information, visit: www.dianesetterfield.com

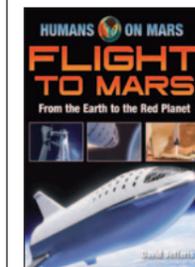
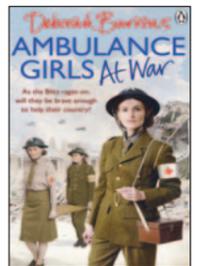


● **Susan Grenfell** and her co-author Michael Wilkcockson are experts in world religions. Their book (*left*) has guidance and coverage, to help build the skills and confidence of students preparing for exams.

Visit Amazon to see more.

● **Deborah Burrows** has another 'Ambulance Girls' title out, under the Penguin imprint. For anyone interested in World War II, the book makes an unmissable read. Find out more at her website:

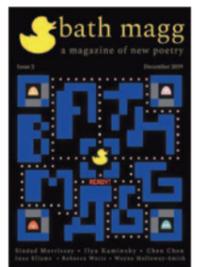
<https://deborahburrows.com.au>



● **David Jefferis** journeys into the future (*left*) to reveal how humans may travel to the 'red planet' one day, and perhaps even live there. To view a short book-trailer for the four-title set, visit:

www.davidjefferis.com

● **Mariah Whelan** (*see page 6*) has founded an online venture, the *bath magg*, with fellow-poet Joe Carrick-Varty. It's subtitled 'a magazine of new poetry' and looks like a poets' must-visit website. For the first two issues, visit: www.bathmagg.com



A field with a view

 **GABRIEL SCHENK** makes sure the outside world doesn't interfere when he writes.

I do all my creative writing in the fields near my house. I started doing this after finding that the best way to break writer's block was to go for a walk. The next sentences would form in my head somewhere among the fields, trees, and streams at the edge of my village. I then began taking my laptop with me, so I could capture words on the spot, and because I didn't have to rush home to transcribe them there was no reason not to keep walking and writing.

Off the grid

I pack a satchel containing my laptop, a honey sandwich, a packet of crisps, a flask of black coffee, and a mug. I am off the grid, with no access to distractions such as YouTube, and with no way to be contacted. If I get stuck for what to write next, I continue walking, or look out over open fields until the next idea comes. I sit down whenever I have something to type.

Rain doesn't stop me – I often sit hunched with an umbrella over my back, like a snail under a shell – and neither does flooding; the recent high waters created useful moats to isolate me further. The only hindrance is cold hands, when the weather makes typing painful, but even in the depths of winter that only happens after the sun has gone down. In warmer months I stay out in the dark.

Occasional interruptions

I don't get away from distractions entirely. Occasionally I am interrupted by a screeching pheasant, or the thunderous hooves of a muntjac deer, or the sigh of birds' wings as a flock flies overhead. The other day a fox stumbled across me writing in a thicket, then scampered away in alarm.

A need to say hello

I write away from paths, but dogs often find me, and bark excitedly at what they consider to be a grand discovery. I don't mind the dogs, but I'm afraid of the owners who follow, confused that their dog has run off into a bush for apparently no reason, and feel the need to say hello when they spot me.



A calming view that eases writer's block.

No return to a desk

But now that I've developed my outdoors routine, I'll never go back to writing fiction at a desk. I've also become better at hiding from dog owners. If only someone could create gloves you could wear whilst typing, my outside office would be perfect.

Poets' Corner

 **ARE YOU INTERESTED in being part of a WiO Poetry sub-group?**

If so, please contact Jenny Lewis to say whether you are interested in a reading and discussion group, a writers' workshop, posting poems on the WiO website, or something else you have in mind.

Clearly some activities require more work than others in order to happen, so what we do will depend on people's interest and availability.

Longer-serving members will remember there was once something similar: 'Poets in Oxford' organised occasional readings and events, and produced an annual supplement of members' poems.

More recently, there has been the interesting Biography sub-group, and an offshoot of WiO, Literarties, lives on as a group of writer-artists.

Email your interest to: jennyklewis@gmail.com

Next issue highlights

- > News about WiO members
- > Summer events diary
- > New books for relaxing on sunny days
- > And more...