

TLC Showcase

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Introduction to Under Gaslight

Under *Gaslight* is done; it is out there. Yes, I'm exhausted, even though I wrote it last autumn/winter, but the little story of the working poor after WW1 is there to be read by the world, and I couldn't have done it without the help of The Literacy Consultancy.

It started last year. Last year I was tired of all the romance and love stories on television with the predetermined happy ending, which saw the damsel marrying into money. As the World War One Centenary approached, I watched the BBC with the compassion and sympathy all viewers have when learning of the war, but I noticed that all the mini-series about WW1 lacked any experiences my own ancestors had in England at that time.

The story of the Industrial North was excluded. It was like the only heroes of WW1 were from "money." I felt the story of the working poor had to be told and that I could do it. My 90-year-old grandmother's stories were fresh in my mind.

So I "cocooned" – I didn't see or contact any friends for a year and did nothing but think about the story as it would appear on the page, chapter by chapter, sentence by sentence, word by word – so when I came to actually write it (very slowly within the confines of my illness: I have MS) I did so two times a week (Tuesdays and Wednesdays) and only for two hours in the morning at that. Two hours with continuous distractions, of course, but I felt it **MUST** be written. I didn't give up.

I didn't expect it to be professionally published. I was going to pay a company to proofread/design the cover cover/upload it to Kindle Direct Publishing etc., but first I contacted TLC – to make sure it was worthy of self-publishing – and maybe, due to its short length, if I pulled it off, it could be a Kindle Single!

Once I was happy enough with it, I sent it to TLC for professional feedback. It's common sense to send it to someone in the business who knows how to improve it! And Anna South did give me invaluable feedback to alter the story, and lo and behold, she advised me to make the changes and then send it to TLC's Director, Rebecca Swift, because Anna considered it to be a Quality Manuscript!

It was a great relief to me. Rebecca liked *Under Gaslight*, contacted Kindle Singles, and it was chosen for their curated list! Amazon took care of the proofing, and between them and TLC (my new 'agents'), the story is now available as a Kindle Single!

And I'm happy to say, when it's all said and done, it is doing rather well. I am glad a story about the working poor after WW1 is out there to be read.

Under Gaslight is available to download as a Kindle Single [here](#).

Under Gaslight, by Michelle Wareham

Extract

Mary is one of the lucky ones, her mother says, but she is too busy to think that way. Mary is one of the many ladies spending the Great War in harvest. Today they hunch over the potato crop to reap it from its food supply. Each bulbous vegetable trapped in the soil demands a twist and pull to be freed from its underground home. Above their heads is a sky latticed with grey clouds. The breeze is a gentle reminder that the earth they toil is shared between them all: the workers, the soldiers, Mary and her husband.

He wrote: *Try as I might, any reason why we have to die is nowhere near me. In kind, I could speak of these atrocities, but to feel it deep in myself, all I know is my heart, its pulse, my love for you.*

Eli wrote every week from the Western Front, until his letters stopped arriving two months ago. His letters dry. His strong handwriting reminds her of his warm presence. Mary's letters, however, are dotted with tears. Mary nurtures his memory in her heart but his memory lives in her tears. Birds fly overhead. Mary wonders if Eli will see those birds. Mary holds the hope Eli is alive, despite the lack of letters.

Everyone thought this war would be over after a couple of months. The boys have been gone to war these past three years.

In his last letter he wrote: *I see the stars overhead and I know you see them. See what I see, but when you see those stars like I do, know their lack of colour. When I think of you, it is your eyes that have the sweetest colour in this black and white world.*

Mary looks at the weary sky. Her gaze drops across to the tired women pulling potatoes from the earth. She sees her friends. Her sisters in the Women's Land Army. Now the plants start to turn yellow, the vegetables are plump and edible, and the farmer calls in the girls to harvest them. Potatoes are silly vegetables. They make it difficult to imagine the enormous task ahead of him and all the boys in France. Killing people. Not being killed themselves. She is nowhere close to understanding the catastrophe. All that is demanded of her and everyone else

sharing the sky in the town, is to do their bit.

The soil on her brow is a sign of the entire day spent in the harvest. At home is her mother who will never speak his name, and a child who barely knows it. All that is real for Mary is the sight of plants for a quarter of a mile squared.

The beginning of dusk is the mortal reminder of the end of days. Globes of cloud part just enough to see the first twinkle of a star. Absent shadows tell of home time. The other women on their knees, bobbing in and out of the yellowy, green sea of foliage, drop the last potatoes in their baskets. They share their sorrow, festering in solitude and repetitive work, through their lost looks.

If Mary was paid half a farthing for every pound of potatoes picked, she'd do little better than she does now. But at least she wasn't working at the mill anymore. Since she was ten, she had been at the shed. Now free from the charcoaled roof of the factory, she is under the open sky. Clouds are her ceiling. She is happier here. Cheap happiness. And the open sky means she is closer to Eli. Maybe they will share the same cloud. The breeze blows east.

Mary, my girl, when this horrible war is over, and it's sure to be soon, we will be together again. Together forever.

She stands with the basket on her hip. She sighs tearfully. Back pain pays a visit again. Mary doesn't complain. No woman there complains. A lone hobbled farmer stands at a trestle table at the end of the field by the barns. His farm was bought by the government but they kept the old farmer on. Mary and her sisters with their vegetables, stomp through the muddy pathway and queue obediently. Some remove their hair cloths to wipe their sodden brows. When the queue moves along, Mary wrenches the basket from her hip; the basket shakes the rickety table as her collection of potatoes thumps on it. 'A'right Mary?' says the farmer, 'at'll do.'

He drops a grubby two shillings in her outstretched hand. The farmer gives her a small bag of vegetables too. The farmer is crumbling in his age, and is too old to march into that Great War, and with a vegetable farm, he is entrusted to feed the village. People still have to eat so women earn the money. For the rent to pay. Coal to buy. Gas to light.

About the Writer

I have wanted to be a writer since I was eight years old when I received my first A+ in Creative Writing. Ever since then I've striven to maintain that grade and was sorely disappointed when there were no Creative Writing subjects at my high school (Perth)!

There was no provision for writing, but there was reading to be discovered there. I fell in love with the stories by Hilton, Salinger, Plath, Fitzgerald, Austen, Brontë, Lee – to name a few, and was so

captivated by those little novels, I didn't choose subjects in science and maths when in Upper School but in as many English subjects as I could fit onto the timetable – a choice that was to bite me in the bum later when I studied for the maths-heavy Bachelor of Multimedia.

After high school I worked as a music journalist and was published in Perth and Sydney, and when I moved to London, I was published a music journalist here. Ultimately, I became a full-time science writer in London (bitten in the bum again) and wrote *Leatherback*, a novella about a woman who witnesses a leatherback turtle make a nest (uncharacteristically) on a beach in Wales.

Since my illness (MS) has seen my health deteriorate, I still have the dream of writing. And it's this passion that led me to write the story of *Under Gaslight*. A story I would have enjoyed reading in high school.

