



TLC Showcase

TLC PEN FACTOR SPECIAL

Introduction	2
TLC Pen Factor 2016 Winner Kerry Lawrence: The Cossack	3
About the Writer	8
Meet the TLC Pen Factor 2016 Finalists:	9
Nikheel Gorolay	9
Gill Haigh	13
Catriona Shine	18
Charlie Weaver Rolfe	22

Introduction to *The Cossack*

T*he Cossack* is a thriller set in London, North America and Kiev in 2014. Mikhail Petrov is a man in torment, desperate to escape his Moscow paymasters and start a new life in a new country where he can begin atoning for his many, many past misdeeds. Daniel Brooking holds the key to that longed-for future, having stumbled upon the truth behind a Ukrainian legend that reverberates across the centuries to find new relevance in the Euromaidan protests in Kiev. It is a truth that could spell disaster for the U.S. economy, and yet empower Ukraine to face down the bully on its eastern borders: deeply unedifying prospects for Washington and Moscow respectively.

To earn his new life, Mikhail must protect Daniel from pursuers intent on burying his discovery, and with it Daniel himself, and deliver them both to safe harbour. To stand a realistic prospect of success, Mikhail must win Daniel's trust and confidence. But there's a complication: the blood of Daniel's assistant, Ivan, is on Mikhail's hands, and what's more, Daniel knows it.

Mikhail's determination to live a better life is contrasted with the path chosen by his younger brother, Vladimir. Unlike Mikhail, Vladimir craves violence, and the escalating protests in Kiev offer abundant opportunity to indulge. His atrocities impact directly on Ivan's sister, Yana, and in the aftermath of the killings at the height of the Euromaidan, she sets out to identify Vladimir and bring him to account.

The TLC Pen Factor Competition was a fantastic opportunity to test the package I plan to send to agents and gauge the potential for *The Cossack* to achieve that holy grail of publication. To be shortlisted was a great boost to confidence in and of itself, albeit the call from Aki with the exciting news was followed somewhat hastily by a good few hours researching the required content of a live pitch. To win, and receive respected industry professionals' endorsement of the book's potential, was enormously gratifying, as were the very generous comments from other attendees at the event. Even if not entering the competition, I thoroughly recommend attending the TLC Writers' Day. I gained a wealth of valuable information and enjoyed exchanging notes and chatting with the other Pen Factor finalists and conference attendees. I'm now looking forward to working with Aki and her team in the coming months, utilising one of the generous prizes of professional editorial feedback from TLC, to ensure the manuscript is absolutely agent-ready.

The Cossack, by Kerry Lawrence

ONE

To Mikhail, the behaviour of the young man in the closing minutes of his life was both familiar and predictable. He had witnessed this transition, from presence to absence, many times before. He forced himself to share the moment with them. Often he imagined their thoughts. Sometimes he heard their confessions. But always, in the end, he watched them die.

Stage one: denial. When the knife first punctured his victim's body, Mikhail knew the man would have felt little more than a distinct, sharp punch. So ferocious had been the struggle, it was only when his legs buckled and he fell that his opponent would have even realized he'd been injured. Mikhail had watched him go down, had seen the expression of surprise when he'd noticed the blood, an ink-like blot spreading slowly from the tear in the shirt, across his torso and towards the floor. Nothing too serious: that was invariably their first response. The brain would get busy with reassuring explanations. He must have stumbled and lost his footing, that was all. The stab was just a surface wound; he'd be fine. The young man tried to get up, and it was then that the damaged nerves within and around the wound made the fact of their trauma known. Mikhail stood astride his victim, knife still in hand, panting from the exertion of the fight. He bent and pushed the shoulders of his adversary back onto the bleached-oak laminate. The man couldn't have resisted Mikhail's strength even if he'd wanted, but there was to be no resistance. Instead, like an obedient gun dog, he lay back down. Mikhail felt inside the man's jacket. He soon found what he was after and sliced at the lining to reveal a folded set of papers. As he did so, a puff of the man's exhaled breath found its way into Mikhail's nostrils and he noticed it bore the sweet scent of marshmallows. Mikhail stood upright and walked a few paces to a nearby chair where he proceeded to sit, arms on the armrests and the papers in his lap. His victim followed Mikhail with his eyes. They regarded one another for a few moments before pain seemingly drew the man's attention back into his body.

Stage two: anger. The man gazed at the ceiling and remonstrated with himself. 'Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid! You stupid, arrogant, fucking idiot!' Mikhail sat quietly, letting him vent. Now the voice was louder. 'You're twenty-eight.

Twenty-eight! What made you think you could get the better of them?' He began to laugh quietly, but when he spoke again his tone was contemptuous. 'Wanted to be the big hero didn't you? Wanted all the glory didn't you? Serves you bloody right.' He tried again to get up. This time the pain appeared more severe and he writhed on the floor in frustration. 'Fuck!' Mikhail could see how the pain fuelled the anger, gave the young man more energy, but still he couldn't raise himself from the floor. Forced instead to concede a supine attitude, only his chest moved as he gulped for air. Sweat beaded on his forehead and dampened his hair. Still Mikhail watched.

Stage three: bargaining. The effort to get up had made the bleeding worse. Mikhail knew what his victim did not; that the blood's vivid colour identified it as arterial. The attempt to stand had exacerbated the damage and the wound now bled freely, both into the body cavity and out onto the floor where it mingled with the existing blotches and smears. Mikhail observed how the blood now pulsed over the shirt in tiny red waves, the cotton thread through which at first it had only seeped having become saturated. Upon striking the floor it formed a pool. From there it began to spread via a delta of slow moving rivulets. They tracked the seams in the floor, inching their way around objects that had been knocked to the ground during the fight. Mikhail sensed an awareness dawn in the young man's mind of the reality of his situation. The cold hose of panic had doused the anger in his eyes and the voice that now pleaded with Mikhail bore no trace of defiance.

'Help me! Please help me! Get me to a hospital and I'll tell you what I know. I have more information. About other papers.' Mikhail tilted his head sideways and considered the wound before his eyes returned to his victim's face.

'Too late. I'm sorry. Lie still and it won't hurt.'

Stage four: despair. The man's gaze returned to the ceiling. There was no further conversation, at least none audible to Mikhail. Sometimes they would talk to him about now, but not this one. Maybe he would be thinking he'd been a coward? That he'd offered to sell out to save his own skin? That his short life had not yet amounted to very much? Mikhail had done his research, had read the files. Would the family grieve for him? Mikhail wasn't sure. The young man had been estranged from his parents for years. His death would allow them to draw a veil across the life of a son they had disowned. Their type was not uncommon in the post-Soviet era. Don't stand out from the crowd. Say

and do what's expected. Fit in with your neighbours. The fear-driven habits of the old order died hard it seemed, a truth not lost on the power-hungry zealots of the Orthodox Church who'd wasted no time filling the vacuum in ideology created by the passing of the Soviet Union. He did have a sister. Maybe she would mourn him?

Stage five: acceptance. The cold and numbness would be spreading. It would have started in his extremities, but by now his victim would be feeling a heavy chill in the very centre of his chest. Mikhail watched as, with what seemed an enormous effort, the boy, for he now seemed no more than a boy to Mikhail, drew his arms up from his sides and placed both hands under his head to form a makeshift pillow. He appeared to be staring, fascinated, at the blood on the floor. Perhaps he was having an out of body experience. Or was that just for his blood? Mikhail wondered how it felt about the change of scene. His head would be getting fuzzy now, his eyes starting to lose their ability to focus. Would he see pictures and patterns on the floor: a crimson octopus curving a tentacle around an upturned coffee cup perhaps? Or maybe a scarlet caterpillar heading towards the pot of basil that was lying on its side on the floor, soil half-spilled. Mikhail stared at the carmine beasts as they went about their business in the shadow of the now inert body.

He'd check for signs of life in a moment. For now though, he just sat. As the floodwaters of adrenalin subsided, the familiar sense of wretchedness was once again exposed. His pain had carved a neat parabola through time. At first he had recognised only a sense of disquiet after every job. As the months and years passed, so disquiet had steepened into self-loathing and despair. But the levels of anguish he experienced weren't sustainable, and as his subconscious took control and began to shut down his ability to feel, so the curve had flattened out and begun its descent. Soon he feared he would become nothing more than numb, dumb, flesh and bone, the unfeeling, unquestioning, efficient killer he had been recruited to be so long ago when he was too young and too stupid to know any better. His superiors interpreted his behaviour as no more than the professional detachment the job necessitated. It was not as if he'd ever been a jolly person; the role didn't attract the jolly type. The habitual security checks revealed nothing that prompted mistrust or merited further investigation. Yes, he kept himself to himself. No, he'd not exhibited the political acumen necessary to rise above a certain level. But he was clever, far cleverer than first impressions might indicate, and had always proven

dependable and solid. So they'd left him to his own devices and on what, over the years, became an increasingly long leash. They called him Mikhail Petrov, the plodding assassin. He received the odd promotion when no one else objected, and ultimately became only semi-visible, just part of the furniture of a small unit within the SVR. Officially the unit did not exist. Unofficially, its existence was denied even to the heads of the other five SVR directorates. Secrecy and paranoia also died hard in the post-Soviet era.

Though he was not sure how, throughout the worst periods of self-hatred and disgust, some part of Mikhail had managed to cling to the idea that it was not too late for him. He was still capable of living a better life, of making amends. It was this faintest wisp of a voice, a voice that spoke to him when his head was bowed, his jaw clenched, and his hands clasped tight around the butt of his gun, that kept him from shutting down completely; kept him feeling something, even if that something was pain, and stopped him putting the pistol in his mouth and leaving others to fill his shoes, others who might take rather too much pleasure in their work. It was not however possible simply to retire. In his near thirty years with the unit, he knew of only a handful that had made a successful transition into another career. They had been well connected and so able to wriggle their way into politics. It was preferable not to dwell on the fate of the rest. [Chapter continues].

FIVE

Kiev – some months ago.

Yana, Peter, and his younger brother Viktor, emerged from the exit of the metro at Independence Square in the centre of Kiev. Formerly called the Maidan, it had been given its new name when the Soviet Union fell apart.

'Jesus Christ, look at this!' exclaimed Viktor as he stood at the top of the stairs, his face lathered in excitement. 'Just look! Fantastic or what!' He turned to his friends as if seeking a response, but before one came, started skipping and spinning, dervish like, head thrown back, arms outstretched, singing one of the many the derogatory songs about the President that was going round.

'OK Viktor, OK, come on,' laughed his brother, grabbing at one of the hands as it whipped past, inches from his face. 'Let's go see if we can find the others. Though from the looks of things, I don't rate our chances.' He grabbed the

collar of his younger brother's jacket as one would an unruly toddler and propelled him forwards. 'Come on Yana, wakey, wakey.'

Yana's response to the scene that greeted them had been as quiet as Viktor's had been loud. While Viktor pranced, Yana remained inert, absorbing the spectacle. The people in the square had become the sea. The small flags and T-shirts they held aloft were the yellow and blue horses of the breaking waves. A scattering of tall masts rising proud of the surf from which billowed giant blue and yellow mainsails, marked the galleons. The Armada had assembled. It was a shame her brother was in London. Ivan would love this.

Peter's command roused Yana from her reverie and she trotted the few paces necessary to catch up with her friends. Together with tens of thousands of others, the three friends had come to the Square to voice their anger. The trigger for the protest had been the President's volte-face on closer links with the European Union. This was the catalyst, but a pervasive disenchantment with the government, and the eye watering levels of corruption that were its hallmark, was equally responsible for drawing Kievites onto the streets to give air to their grievances and frustrations.

Despite the serious matters that had spawned the protest, the atmosphere this early Sunday afternoon was more one of carnival than political demonstration. As the friends made their way through the crowds, they saw children, their faces daubed with stripes of blue and yellow face paint, perched atop their parents' shoulders. Grandmothers had commandeered the benches and sat gossiping with their friends, their charges' prams and pushchairs circled around in a faint suggestion of the barricades yet to come. **[Chapter continues]**

About the Writer

Kerry Lawrence studied zoology at Oxford University. After a stint in academic publishing, commissioning undergraduate texts in the sciences and healthcare, she returned to academia herself to become a barrister. There followed nearly twenty years as a court going advocate, in London and then Jersey, time generally spent extricating trustees from holes of varying depths. A photographer since her teens, she describes herself as a semi-professional, selling work through a website and gallery. Kerry now splits her life between London and Jersey, and in her spare time is a trustee of an international conservation charity. *The Cossack* is her first novel.



MEET THE TLC PEN FACTOR 2016 FINALISTS

Nikheel Gorolay, *Bricks and Mousa*

Synopsis

Two neighbours fall out when one starts building an extension without telling the other. The other retaliates by building one too. Competitive chaos ensues.

Biography

Nikheel Gorolay has had poetry and book reviews published in SABLE Lit Mag and is a member of the Inscribe writer development programme run by Peepal Tree Press. *Bricks and Mousa* is his first novel, inspired by his life as part of the East African Asian diaspora and growing up in a home that has been a regular building site over the years. He is a postgraduate student at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London and is currently researching the figure of the eunuch in Mughal India.



Quote

"The TLC Pen Factor competition was one of the most interesting competitions I have ever entered, and also the timeliest. Having recently completed the first draft of my manuscript, I was still very much in writing mode, and so the competition provided me with the perfect opportunity to learn about how to tackle the next steps in the publishing process, namely how to sell myself and my book to an agent and publisher.

And then came the news that I had been shortlisted. Naturally I was excited, but also anxious. Not only would I have to pitch to a panel of industry experts, but

a live audience too, which meant plenty of judging faces. As it turned out, I had nothing to worry about. From helpful tips on public speaking before the pitches to a receptive and respectful audience during the session, the experience really boosted my confidence. It was particularly encouraging to hear positive feedback from the judges, balanced with valid and constructive criticism, as well as from my fellow shortlisted writers, all of whom sounded great on stage! It was also really rewarding speaking to other writers afterwards and hearing their thoughts on my pitch, as well as learning about the different projects they were working on.

I must say a big thank you to Aki Schilz for all her help and the rest of the TLC team for organising the day and ensuring that everything ran so smoothly. Thanks also to the judges and congratulations once again to all the other shortlisted writers and the well-deserved winner. I am now redrafting my manuscript in light of what I learnt on the day and feel much more assured in my journey towards getting my novel published."

Extract

Lorso turned up in expected style, in a sky blue Rolls Royce and a cream suit. He wore sunglasses too, despite the overcast autumn sky. He didn't take them off when he came inside either, which unsettled Anisa as she couldn't tell where his eyes were roaming. She remembered him being taller, but he made up for it by wearing thick-heeled shoes and a cravat that hid his short neck. He looked a sight.

He hugged Rehan in true brotherly fashion and held out his hand to Anisa. 'Charmed, as always.'

She obliged him with her hand and, instead of shaking it, he tickled her palm and smiled at her. She pulled her hand away. Rehan hadn't noticed.

'A drink?' asked Rehan.

'That sounds wonderful,' said Lorso.

'And then we can catch up.'

Anisa was annoyed by this. 'Shouldn't we talk business first?'

Rehan shot her a look. 'I haven't seen him for years! How many years has it been?'

Lorso used his thumb to tap at the flesh of his other fingers, counting off the years. 'Thirty? Yes, thirty years. You should remember, Anisa. Rehan and I weren't the only ones back in Dar es Salaam. Remember how we all used to hang out at Vora's Snow Cream place? You, Rehan, myself and... I can never remember her name.'

'Dhanwanti,' said Anisa.

'How could you forget?' asked Rehan. 'You chased her for the first month after you joined our school. And I bet you're still chasing girls after all this time.' He playfully punched Lorso on the arm.

'No, I'm married now,' said Lorso, taking off his sunglasses and looking at Anisa.

As if she cared, but she had changed her mind about the sunglasses. He was better off keeping them on. Removing them had aged him by about ten years, bringing the time he and Rehan had spent apart down to twenty years.

'Married? Since when?' asked Rehan.

'Since I decided to settle down,' said Lorso, as he settled down on the sofa. 'You know me, Rehan, you know what I used to be like. Could you ever imagine me settling down? No, neither could I. But then you meet someone and it's suddenly like nothing else exists in the world. They are your world, and what do people want most in this world? That's right, to feel safe, to have stability. People complain about routine, but change scares them.'

'Wow, you really have changed,' said Rehan, handing Lorso a cold drink and sipping from one himself, not noticing that he hadn't brought one for Anisa.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, thirty years ago I would never have thought you'd be saying anything like this.'

'I didn't. My wife said all this to me. You know me, I like change. I like to live my life like I'm eating from a tapas menu. A bit of this, a bit of that, pick your way around the plate finding the bits you like and leave the rest for the waiter to throw away.'

Anisa always appreciated a verbal flourish, but that was a downright distasteful analogy.

'So why did you marry her if you didn't want to settle down?' she asked.

Lorso shrugged and took a sip from his drink. 'I wanted children, so did she, and she was happy to accept me despite my proclivities.'

'So you still see other women?' asked Anisa. She looked at Rehan, who himself looked slightly taken aback.

'When the time allows,' said Lorso, with another sip.

He drank with pure satisfaction, keeping his eyes on Rehan and Anisa, both of whom remained silent. He burst into laughter and stood up, handing his now empty glass to Rehan.

'I'm just joking. Do you think I have the bloody time? Being an architect is busy work. Now that the government have relaxed the rules, business is better than ever. Everyone wants to plunder what little space they have and build, build, build!'

'So you have changed,' said Rehan.

Lorso clapped a hand on Rehan's back. 'Enough, my friend, to help you.'

'But not enough, I hope, to not give me a discount?'

Lorso laughed and nodded. 'One thing at time. Let me see what I'm working with first, no?'

He looked at Anisa again. She rolled her eyes and then led him through the living room, kitchen and out the back door into the garden.

Gill Haigh, *Singing for Seals*

Synopsis

Having grown up in isolation, Mary lacks any sense of continuity and continues to seek stimulation through danger, unaware that there is any other way to live. In spite of constantly mis-interpreting situations and refusing ever to admit that there is a problem, she, like the cartoon character Mr Magoo, with whom she shares many characteristics, somehow survives, apparently unscathed. However, as her life progresses she begins to understand the complexity of human relationships and to see that life is not black and white after all.

Biography

Gill Haigh spent her early life on a farm in Wales. In 1960, aged eight, she moved with her family to Australia. Back then Perth was essentially a frontier town and her experiences there have informed much of her writing. Gill left school with no qualifications, worked in factories, shops, drove a van for a while, and sold photos for several summers, seldom settling into any job for longer than a few months. In her thirties she went to London University to study English Literature.



After graduating she worked as a teacher then accepted early retirement and took an MA in Creative Writing at Portsmouth University, for which she got a Distinction and that year's prize for the best final submission. In 2013, her first young-adult novel, *Out of Water*, won the Commonword Prize for Diversity in Children's Literature. She lives in Islington, North London.

Quote

"Being shortlisted for the TLC Pen Factor Competition was a fantastic experience for me. Like many writers I've spoken to, I lack confidence and it meant a lot to me to have my writing acknowledged by publishing industry

experts. On the day of the prize-giving, I was nervous but everyone at TLC was friendly and welcoming. The other short-listed writers were lovely and we all tried to help each other calm down before getting on stage. Aki spoke to us too, before we did our pitches, and her talk was very useful and informative. Her tips on how to pitch on stage were great, especially her suggestion that we remember to breathe, which may seem obvious but it's easy to forget when you are standing in front of an audience and a microphone. I was afraid that when I got on the stage I might freeze up and not be able to speak at all but in the end it went quite well and everyone was kind and encouraging afterwards. The four judges gave very good, honest feedback and I learnt a lot from their suggestions. One thing I took away from their comments was that it is not a good idea to over-think your pitch beforehand; you should just get up there and be yourself. All in all it was a great day and I enjoyed all the presentations. Being shortlisted for the TLC Pen Factor Competition has given me a real boost and I'm pleased to have had my work validated by professionals."

Extract

Veronica Lake's mum won't let her stay up to watch 77 Sunset Strip, which is my favourite programme. Also Veronica's mum expects her to keep her clothes clean, which is ridiculous. Veronica says her Mum would kill her if she got her clothes dirty.

My clothes are always dirty, from playing in the swamp or at the rubbish dump. I'd hate to have the sort of mother who kills you for being dirty. When I tell Mum what Veronica said, she laughs.

'You mean that skinny little girl with a squint? Is her name really Veronica Lake?' She says.

'Yes, why?'

Mum doesn't reply, she just carries on laughing.

It's my tenth birthday next week and I'm hoping for a bike. Getting older scares me though. It means I'm closer to dying.

I knew about eternity ages ago; Sister Angelica explained it to me when I was a

little kid. But I never really thought about it until I started watching Dr Kildare. Now that I realise how many ways you can die unexpectedly, it is even scarier than I first realised. I don't want to become deceased of an aneurism or skin cancer or a botched amputation then have to go to Heaven or Purgatory and live there forever being bored. Even if I'm lucky enough to go to Hell, I still don't want it to go on forever. The thought of it makes my head feel sick.

I have just come in from school and Mum and Dad are shouting in the kitchen. Dad is taking all the food and blankets and things and putting them in the car.

'Are we going camping?' I ask.

'Yes,' says Dad. 'There's a row going on in America between Kennedy and Kruschev.'

'Who's Kruschev?'

'He's the president of Russia,' says Dad.

'It's called the U.S.S.R.,' says Gabriel.

'Whatever you call the bloody place, they're threatening to start a nuclear war,' says Dad.

'Will there be a mushroom cloud?' I ask.

Nobody answers.

'Can we go and live in the bush?' I say.

'Well, we have to get out of the city,' says Dad.

Great, I love camping. I start helping him load the car.

'Can we get a dingo puppy?' I ask.

Mum is twisting her hands together. Her eyes are bulging. 'No,' she says.

'What about a koala bear?'

'I'm sure Kruschev wouldn't start a war,' Mum says. 'He seems like such a nice

little man. This is Americans' fault.'

'Why?' I ask.

'They were mean to Kruschef when he went to California. He wanted to go to Disneyland and they wouldn't let him.'

'I thought the Russians were the baddies?' I say.

'They are; they're communists,' says Gabriel.

'What's a communist?'

'They are very silly people who think nobody should be allowed to be rich,' says Mum.

'Why?' I ask.

'They think everyone should get the same amount of money, whether they are a doctor or a street sweeper.'

'That's a good idea,' I say.

Mum scowls at me. It makes me sad.

'Do you still like me?' I ask.

She doesn't answer for ages then says: 'I suppose so. Usually.'

'Don't say that to her,' says Dad.

'Why not, it's true? Why are you always attacking me?' Says Mum. She runs out of the room and starts crying in the bathroom.

'So can we get a dingo?' I say.

'Maybe,' says Dad.

Mum's back from the bathroom. Her eyes are red. 'And the Bolsheviks murdered all those poor little children,' she says, lighting a fag.

'Who killed some little children, Kruschev?' I ask.

'No, Stalin,' says Dad.

'I think it was Lenin actually,' says Gabriel.

'It seems unfair to blame Kruschev for something somebody else did,' I say.

Dad and Gabriel laugh. I'm getting sick of people laughing at me for no reason.

'We'll sleep on it and see how things stand in the morning,' says Dad. 'The car's all packed now, so if it looks like war, we'll just get in and drive.'

We're having breakfast. Dad just told me President Kennedy has won the argument so we won't have to run away into the bush after all. I suppose it's a good thing but I'm a bit disappointed because I'd have liked to have a pet dingo. Or a Koala Bear. I think I must be a very bad person to be sorry that there isn't going to be a war. Poor Mum. She was probably expecting a nice, well-behaved daughter and instead she got me.

Catriona Shine, *The Invasion of Silence*

Synopsis

Seventeen-year-old Chuck lives in a glass house on an isolated poultry farm in country that is flat and empty all the way to the horizon. His father has passed away, his mother is falling into silent dementia and it is up to him to either keep the farm afloat or let the place be swallowed up in dust. Help comes in the form of a chameleonic stranger who works his way over the threshold, favour by favour.

Biography

Catriona Shine is a well-travelled Irish writer, living in Norway. She also practices full-time as an architect so it is perhaps not surprising that a close analysis of place and belonging is central to her writing. The flat and empty terrain of her first novel, *The Invasion of Silence*, is influenced by her interests in architecture and existentialism, and inspired by her experiences of deserted gold-rush towns. The setting of the novel is a fictional location in post Dust Bowl territory.



The Invasion of Silence began on a Faber Academy Novel Writing course in 2013. Catriona's writing education has otherwise been a self-programmed medley of Iowa University MOOCS, Oxford University online courses, Guardian Masterclasses, as well as workshops and seminars in Ireland and Norway.

An emigrant by choice, Catriona is interested in testing the significance of ties to place. She cites Norwegian literature and Albert Camus as a cherished influences.

Quote

"Bolstered by childhood memories of poetry recitation, I said I'd go first. I stood

on a little platform in front of a hundred or so writers, publishers and editors, as a panel of judges looked down on me from a balcony, and I pitched and read from my novel in the space of three hasty minutes. I'm a firm believer in reading a text aloud to hear how it's working, so I had read my opening aloud, to myself, at my desk, with nobody listening, a number of times. It's quite a different experience on a microphone. You hear your words coming back at you. It gives you distance, takes the words out of your head. (I'm seriously considering sneaking into an empty community hall to test out the rest of the novel.)

It was thrilling to be chosen as a finalist. I have been working on this novel since 2013, so this affirmation of its worth cranked my heart a full inch higher up in my chest. I got positive and constructive feedback on my opening extract, voice, novel idea and setting from the judges and people I spoke to afterwards. Not everyone agreed on what I should change and I realised that the burden of the final cut lies with the writer. It was encouraging to hear that the short extract generated a response from the audience. I really did not know if this was the kind of thing people would want to read.

The rest of the day was filled with eye-opening talks on the publishing industry – pitching, marketing, self-publishing. Above all, there was plenty of time to mingle and meet other writers and publishing industry individuals. I will definitely be keeping in touch with the other finalists and with the extremely supportive crew at TLC."

Extract

Chuck dragged his gaze from his father's body and sent it out past the casket, out past the frail barrier of the glazed external wall. He dug chewed-off nails into a fistful of father-sleeve to hold him back from the pull of the horizon. His uncle Herbert's spaceship of a car glinted as it crept up the road, pulling after it a tail of dust two miles long. That was the last of them coming, he hoped. In ones and twos, and packed cars, he had watched them arrive since early morning – family and family friends and those that called themselves neighbours, though none could call this side of the flat horizon home. They had taken their time, rolling steadily over the straight line from the public road to the farm. A fence traced the gravel road through blown-away land. Now Herbert's coupé, despite all its efforts at slow churning, whipped up that dust

again. The fence disappeared, replaced by a thicker dust-line, all wispy at the edges. Chuck did not blink. He let the cloud settle back down, and saw the road appear again, as whole as ever.

Not long after the first light slid along the floor, dawning the day his father would be buried, two old ladies had arrived in a creak of a Beetle. They were the first to come. They came laden with bowls and trays and fat-stained cardboard boxes and made straight for the kitchen at the rear. He had watched their feet dart about. The house was built like that, with a glass slit between the walls and the floor, and between the walls and the flat roof. You could see straight through the house to the ring of horizon – if you stood on a stool or lay on your belly. So he watched their feet shuffle, and not once did they say who they were or who had asked them to come. They had never been here before. This was a place where no one called unnoticed.

They emerged now and then, into the filling living room, with napkins and plastic forks or a new plate of sandwiches. When Chuck opened his mouth to thank one of them she held up her hand in protest before he had drawn in enough breath for the phrase. She clenched her lips and looked away from him and he fingered his Adam's apple, a dry cage that could not have produced more than a croak anyway.

The other old lady murmured, Child.

Dull thuds and scraping continued to issue from the kitchen all morning and he decided he could do no better than to leave them to it. He had Jack to stand watch over – Don't call me Dad, Pa or Father, look me straight in the eye and call me Jack – and he had Aggie to comfort – no Mommy, no Maggie, just leave it at Aggie – and all those other people who kept coming: He had them to deal with. Still it addled him, why these old ladies had known to come. There was the gathering instinct of fellow Irish Americans, but these could not be family because they uttered the standard sorry-for-your-troubles to both he and Aggie, using no names. They could not have the means for this if it was pure generosity – just a look at their car. Maybe they owed his parents a favour. Maybe this was how they earned a living, keeping an ear open for news of a death and turning up, uninvited, to do the catering. He could hardly ask them.

Chuck looked out at Aggie to see if she had noticed her brother driving up. He spied her through the open bookcase which was all that separated him and

Jack from everyone else. She was choked between two skinny men on the sofa, men with raw red buzzard heads. Aggie was looking down at the stack of white envelopes in her hands. The buzzards were talking over her, trying to impress her by ignoring her, casting sideward smiles to move her, clawing absent-mindedly at her shoulders – as a joke, in good humour, to raise her spirits, but still openly attracted to her at this short distance to her dead husband. And they must have thought that she was playing along, that she was being pointedly silent. You could tell those who had heard from those who had not: Aggie had not spoken for the most part of a year. Her head tilted a fraction before she rose, unsettling the buzzards and dropping the envelopes.

Charlie Weaver Rolfe, *Catfood*

Synopsis

Now that his parents have gone away, Kossodo lives with his mother's cat, Milton – although since he is allergic to cats, this is in no way straightforward. Fortunately Anna, his girlfriend, is there: to help with logistics, explain television (what's wrong with it), and stop Kossodo from exploring his more eccentric intuitions regarding the best use of furniture...

But what if – for whatever reasons – Anna were also to leave?

Biography

Charlie Weaver Rolfe was born in London but lives in Brighton. He graduated in 2002 from the University of Sussex with a 1st in Intellectual History with Spanish, and later completed an MA in Modern European Literature. Since then he has worked in a respite service for adults with learning disabilities, first as a support worker and now as a manager. As well as two unpublished novels, *Catfood* and *The Crying Girl*, he is the writer-director-producer of the independent feature, *My Accomplice*, which premiered at the Edinburgh International Film Festival 2014 where it was nominated for Best British Film. He is now at work on his third novel, *What We Don't Know*.



Quote

It was fantastic to be part of the TLC Pen Factor and to pitch to the panel, in front of an audience. Beforehand, however, the event seemed to me a rare opportunity to decimate any faith I had in myself as a reader of my writing – and perhaps, it also crossed my mind, I might even read it badly enough to dent my faith in the writing, too? The anticipation was only heightened by my frantic search, at 8:15 on a Saturday morning, for a toilet in the Farringdon

area that was neither locked (as on the train from Brighton) or blocked (Costa). Public incontinence whilst live-pitching to a panel of agents and publishers: a chance like that to seize catastrophe from the jaws of triumph is a gift from the universe... Fortunately, there was a Pret-a-Manger (thanks universe!). Soon followed by: useful do's and don'ts from event organizer Aki (breathe! avoid facial and physical twitching! – things you should probably already know, but funnily it helps to be reminded); a nice sense of camaraderie with the other short-listed writers; an informative talk on how to write a good synopsis (i.e. not how I'd done it); and finally, suddenly, the pitches themselves...

Which went well! People laughed (when intended). Some came up after to say how much they'd liked it. And the panel – whilst failing at the crucial juncture to hurl contracts at us from the mezzanine – were overwhelmingly encouraging about all of our work. They just thought that our covering letters, by and large, were crap. So, that helps to make sense of why I'm still not published after all these years, and I'm thinking, you know, maybe next year, I'll be able to write, um, a better letter...

Extract

1: VALENTINE'S DAY

Today Anna comes round about half an hour after Kossodo gets back from work. She looks pretty and asks Kossodo if he has had a nice day. "Yes," says Kossodo. He and Bill moved three filing cabinets into an office on the ground floor and moved the large desk that was already in it into the room next door. "How was your day?" Kossodo asks.

"Shitty," says Anna. "And pointless."

Anna walks past him into the house and Kossodo looks out at the street. A young Asian man zooms past in a red convertible playing very loud music and looking pleased with himself. A black and white cat begins to make its way hesitantly up the front steps. He looks furtively at Kossodo and at the space between his legs and the door frame.

"Is Milton in?" the cat asks.

"No," says Kossodo. He shuts the door.

Anna hums while she makes the tea, a song that Kossodo doesn't know. He doesn't listen to music often. His parents had quite a lot of records and a turntable, but they didn't listen to them often either and Kossodo doesn't know where they are. Perhaps they took them with them when they left – although this doesn't seem likely – or else they must be in his mother's studio. Kossodo remembers that when he was younger Moira would sometimes put on a record and try and get him to dance with her. It was music with lots of instruments that really sounded like it was meant for dancing – but Kossodo found dancing difficult, and after pulling him around the living room for a while, Moira would give up and go back upstairs. Kossodo's father didn't dance, but he would put down his book and watch them if Mora and Kossodo were, half-smiling, and not pick it up again until they had finished. Frank had a great deal of chest hair that used to poke out of the top of his shirt, and he only shaved once or twice a week.

Now Kossodo has missed the context to what Anna has started taking about: "... even though she could barely walk. Terrible really, on Valentine's Day..."

Kossodo nods and tries to look solemn.

Anna, however, is upbeat. "What shall we do tonight?"

He thinks about it. "I don't mind."

"I've got practically no money."

"I can pay," Kossodo says.

Anna tilts her head, smiling. "Something expensive then..."

Kossodo tries to think of expensive things. "I'll rent a tuxedo and we can fly about in a helicopter eating prawns," he offers.

"Ooh, wow!" says Anna. "Can I wear a tuxedo too?"

Kossodo isn't sure if a tuxedo would look right on Anna, but she can wear one if she wants. Or she could have his. Kossodo had to wear a tuxedo that was too small for him at the wedding of a relative of his father's when he was about fifteen: it was uncomfortable and two younger boys kept following him about and laughing at him, even though they didn't look very good in their suits either. This continued for over an hour.

"Mean boys!" cries Anna. "Okay, well I'll wear the tuxedo then – you can wear something of mine. A nice skirt or something, you'll look lovely. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Brilliant! And can we throw money at needy people?"

Kossodo checks his wallet. "We'll have to get some change – the notes might just blow away. Or we can throw prawns at the needy people, if we buy extra."

Anna gives Kossodo a kiss on the cheek before taking her cup of tea to the sofa, and turning on the television. Kossodo sits down on the sofa beside her.

"You do not, under any circumstances, want to antagonize a hippopotamus – not even a baby one," an affable man in khaki shorts informs them. "Do not be fooled by the cuddly exterior: a baby hippo – weighing in at around twenty-five stone – is not a creature to be taken lightly. You do something she doesn't like, you better get out of her mudbath and scarper, because that hippo'll be coming after you – and it won't be to shake your hand. Okay, let's see if we can move in a bit closer..."

"I work with a guy who's a bit like that," says Anna. "Every day he gets himself into some sort of minor disaster, and there's nothing you can do to stop him. He's like a moth. The other day he killed the photocopier by spraying it with a fire extinguisher, because he thought it was overheating. There's never any witnesses, just a trail of destruction and these weird excuses. There's definitely something wrong with him." Anna tries to change the channel with the remote control, without success. "You wouldn't believe half the people I work with," she tells Kossodo. "Honestly."

Kossodo tries to think of things about the people Anna works with that he wouldn't believe, but now that she's told him about the man and the photocopier the bar has been set quite high. In fact Anna has told him lots of things about the people she works with that make it hard to establish a threshold for implausibility in this regard. He thinks about his own job, working with Bill, relocating furniture, which Anna also finds hard to believe, although for reasons she struggles to communicate. Kossodo, meanwhile, has never retained a proper understanding of what exactly it is Anna does, beyond it happening in an office with colleagues who are "mostly psychopaths"

and requiring her to speak on the phone to people who usually hang up straightaway.

On the television, the affable man in khaki shorts is crouching behind the hippopotamus poking it in the back with a pointed stick. "Gently... Gently..." the man is saying.

Anna tries to change the channel by holding the remote control out in front of her and pressing the buttons as hard as possible – but again the channel doesn't change. "Right, I'm going to feed Milton," says Anna, handing Kossodo the remote control in a way that suggests this is his responsibility. "And when I get back I want prawns and helicopters..."