



TLC Showcase

TLC PEN FACTOR WINNER SPECIAL: Jill Dobson

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Introduction to 'The Woman in the House Next Door'

In April 1954, two KGB agents, Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov, defected from the Soviet embassy in Canberra, leading to a political crisis that split the Australian Labor Party and kept it out of government for almost two decades. As part of the last generation to grow up in the Cold War—although the threat of nuclear annihilation was fairly distant in Australia—I was fascinated by Soviet Russia and had studied Russian off and on. I studied history at university and I was drawn to the challenge of researching the Petrovs' story as a historical novel. However, it wasn't my intention to simply 'reformat' the facts as a story. (An acquaintance actually said, when I first described this project, *Why bother? There's already a non-fiction book about it.*) As a historian, I didn't want to invent things about real people, and as a writer I didn't want to be bound by strict historical accuracy. I decided to replace the Petrovs with fictional characters, the Ivanovs, who are mostly seen through the eyes of other characters. So, while the Petrovs were the starting point of my novel, they stand slightly offstage.

I began work on *The Woman in the House Next Door* after completing an MLitt in Creative Writing at the University of St Andrews. In 2007 I was granted a National Library of Scotland Robert Louis Stevenson residency in France. In the studio reserved for the Scottish writer at the Hôtel Cheillon, Grez-sur-Loing, I listened to recordings of an old Evdokia Petrova, still heavily accented, talking to the historian Robert Manne, which I'd ordered on CD from the National Library of Australia. Back in Edinburgh, I combined freelance editing with afternoon sessions at the National Library, researching the 'Petrova novel'. I read about the American 'occupation' of Melbourne during the Second World War, the Allied occupation of Japan, the development of Canberra as a capital city, life in postwar Australia One line of research opened up another. It was strange to be reading up on Australian history, which I'd found 'boring' at school, from so far away. In the end, I had to stop researching and start writing. As one friend said, impatiently, 'It's a novel! Just make it up!'

The 'Petrova novel' has been rewritten multiple times. After several rounds of agent and publisher submissions, in the UK and in Australia, I was beginning to lose hope. Then, on yet another completely uneventful pandemic Thursday working at home, I had an email from Aki Schilz to say I'd won the TLC Pen Factor prize.

The sense of validation was overwhelming. Writing for so long in isolation, with only silence or rejection as feedback, it's all too easy to assume that your work is worthless. With the support of the TLC team, I'm hoping that the 'Petrova novel' will find its way to readers at last.

Extract from 2021 TLC Pen Factor Winner 'The Woman in the House Next Door' by Jill Dobson

Canberra, April 1954

The telephone line between Sydney and Canberra crackled, again.

'Who's been taken away?'

'Nadia Ivanova. The woman in the house next door.' Edith had to shout each word, ruining the dramatic effect she'd intended.

'What do you mean, *taken away*?' As ever, her sister Margaret refused to react without clarification, like a policeman taking notes.

Edie wedged the telephone receiver against one shoulder as she unscrewed the gin bottle. 'I mean, she was *taken away*, Megs. Two men brought her home in a car, thuggish-looking blokes, sent her indoors. Then she came out with a suitcase and they drove off. Didn't look like she had much choice in the matter.'

A sigh passed down the line all the way from Sydney, which was now as clear as a bell.

'Was she struggling? Did you see her face?'

'Not clearly. It was getting dark.'

'But she didn't try to get away?'

'No...'

'Then what makes you think she was taken away?'

Edith could hear the impatience building behind her sister's calm, measured voice. She poured a generous finger of gin into a tumbler, leaving the cap off, ready for seconds.

'Something's up. Her husband's disappeared. I haven't seen him for days.'

'Old Kolya? He's always on the road, isn't he? Visiting the local comrades in

Sydney and Melbourne and kicking up his heels. He's probably sleeping it off somewhere.'

'Has Neville seen him about?'

'I wouldn't know. I haven't seen Neville for several days,' said Megs. 'But I don't assume he's disappeared.'

'That's different,' said Edie tartly. If Megs couldn't manage Neville, that was her look-out. 'Something's happened, I *know*. Alex must have heard something at work, but he won't tell me anything. I just spoke to him.'

In her bachelorette flat in Sydney, Megs sighed. 'Even if something's up, what can you do about it? Call the police?'

'Maybe Kolya's done a runner,' said Edie, frustrated by Megs' lack of imagination. 'He's always up in Sydney with that dodgy Polish bloke. I feel sorry for Nadia, stuck by herself here in boring old Canberra.'

'You're bored. That's the problem. Tomorrow Nadia will be out in the yard hanging out the washing, as normal. Look, I've had a long day on the ward. I'm about to pass out on the kitchen floor. This call must be costing Alex a fortune,' said Megs.

She hung up.

Edith could picture, very clearly, the smart black and white chequerboard pattern of Megs' kitchen floor. Edie wanted to replace the institutional old lino on her own kitchen floor with something similar, but Alex said they couldn't afford it. She hated it when he said they couldn't afford things. She felt trapped and angry.

* * *

The Ivanovs had been the neighbours of Edith and Alastair McMillan in the raw, unshaded Canberra suburb of Griffith for three years. Edith often heard them arguing. The houses were on separate blocks, but Nadia Ivanova's shrill,

melodramatic voice carried through two brick walls. Perhaps the cadences of Russian made these arguments sound more violent than they really were. Edie wished she could understand. Alex had studied Russian back in the day, but he wouldn't translate for her, although he occasionally passed comment: 'Old Ivan's getting an earful tonight. Paying dearly for that trip to Sydney' or, 'Ivan's in disgrace again'. If Edie asked for more details, Alex would simply shake his head. Once, Edie heard plates smashing. She suggested that they intervene, for Mrs Ivanova's safety. Alastair had laughed without even looking up from *The Canberra Times*.

'I'm sure she can look after herself. Soviet women are tough. He's probably the one who needs defending.'

'If I threw plates at you, what would you do?'

'If it was the hideous Wedgwood your parents gave us, I'd join in.'

'I didn't know you hated it.' Edie had chosen the service with her mother, a long afternoon in Foy's, followed by cocktails at the Hotel Australia. Her mother didn't often get a chance to visit the big smoke.

'Darling, it's bloody awful. You have my permission to smash it and we'll buy a new set next time we're in Sydney.'

'And when will that be?' said Edie, in a calculated undertone.

Alex had rustled his paper and said nothing. His hearing was perfectly good.

* * *

The night Nadezhda Alexandrovna Ivanova was taken away, Alex called to say he was working late. He didn't know when he'd be home.

'I've just put the dinner on,' said Edie.

'I didn't have a chance to call before. I was in a meeting.' His tone was slightly aggrieved, implying, or so Edith thought, that she knew very well the

peremptory demands work made on his time. Before they married, she worked in his section in the Department of External Affairs, in the typing pool.

'I do know how long those meetings go on.' Edith used to take minutes in her excellent shorthand. Did he expect her to wait up and cook for him? In five years of marriage, Edith had become attuned to the unspoken. 'You can make yourself a sandwich. There's the last of the roast that needs eating up, and some of your lovely tomatoes that I just picked this morning.'

The ice-cubes tinkled in her glass as she took another sip.

'What are you drinking?'

'Gin and tonic. I'm not going to sit here alone all evening with a cup of tea.'

'Don't have too many. You know I don't like smelling it on you.'

The elder Mrs McMillan had the distinctive odour of equal parts liquor and Shalimar. All her meals were cooked by a housekeeper, of similar vintage, and served in the sunless dining room of her modern red-brick flat in Point Piper. The windows were never opened, and the cave-like rooms smelt of cigarettes and furniture polish. Like an officers' club inhabited by one old woman. Edie bit her tongue.

About the Writer

Originally from Yorkshire, Jill Dobson emigrated to Australia with her family as a child and returned to the UK as an adult. She has always been a writer. As a 'young adult', she was among the first authors on the Young Adult fiction list launched by the University of Queensland Press, back in the 1980s, and published three novels with them. Since then, many 'adult' novels have accumulated in cardboard boxes and on her hard drive.

Past awards include a National Library of Scotland Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship and an Australia Council for the Arts New Work Grant. Jill has a PhD in Japanese literature and has lived and worked in Japan. She spent the turn of the millennium working on the copydesk of *The Moscow Times*, around the time an obscure former KGB colonel took over from Boris Yel'tsin. She currently works for the University of Glasgow as an academic editor. Before covid hit, she was learning to tango.



MEET THE TLC PEN FACTOR 2021 FINALISTS

Kerry James Clarke

Biography

Kerry grew up in East Yorkshire and has spent the last decade in London, gradually moving down the northern line and finally settling in Croydon with her husband. She works as an NHS audiologist, specialising in auditory implants. The empty weekends of 2020 finally afforded her the time to take her writing more seriously and sign up to an online course with Curtis Brown. With the help of her amazingly supportive writers' group, she's now completed her first novel: 'That time when everything was on fire'.



'That Time When Everything was On Fire'

'That Time When Everything was On Fire' is about four women navigating one of the biggest decisions of their lives: whether to have children. One can, one can't and the others don't want to. But will their friendship survive?

Kerry Says

"Writing can feel somewhat exposing. For me, the most nerve-wracking aspect of signing up to a writing course and entering the competition was the thought of other people reading my work. Sharing extracts and accepting feedback is something that all writers have to adjust to but, thankfully, the writing community is incredibly supportive. Making the shortlist for the TLC Pen Factor has given me such a confidence boost; thank goodness I had the courage to apply."

Extract

She feels Blake's eyes on her and turns towards him.

With a seriousness she wasn't expecting, he asks, "So what's your story, Daisy?"

Her mind empties itself of anything interesting to say and she feels a heat rise in her cheeks under the intensity of his gaze. Fiddling with her necklace, she pulls a hopeless shrugging face, when thankfully Marvin returns. He passes Blake a non-alcoholic beer and she and Blake make brief eye contact, united in their disappointment.

"Sorry, I got waylaid. Is Jono coming by the way?" Marvin asks, shattering the spell.

"Oh fuck," Daisy says, realising she hasn't checked her phone in hours. She bends over to find it in her rucksack and sees four missed calls from him. She stays crouched down, leaving them to chat, and fires off several apologetic messages and a pin of their location.

"He'll be here in half an hour," she says to Marvin. Her reluctance to look at Blake certifies her eye-wandering guilt.

They play the second half of the rounders game and Blake joins Imo's team, out wide as a fielder with Daisy. She's pleased that he doesn't compliment her strong overarm as most men tend to, their voices predictably droll.

Standing at the back of the game, she can feel his presence to her right. A lighthouse signaling danger which she refuses to look at. She loves Jono, they'd told each other back in April. She was settled into his place now and she was happy. They spent their evenings cooking together and watching Scandinavian crime dramas, and still had sex most nights. He made her coffee every morning without fail, and when he laughed his nose crinkled in a way that made him less attractive but somehow more lovable. Last weekend they'd drank two bottles of wine, painted each other's faces with erotic motifs, then laughed so hard they had to lie on the floor, gasping for breath.

But there were moments. Moments that chipped away at the love, that she was then unable to rebuild. There was that time they argued about his comment in the pub of 'Anyone who works hard enough can get ahead,' in relation to

inequality in London. His inability to recognise his white male privilege fed its way into her consciousness almost daily. And the time that he went for her throat during sex, uninvited and unconsented. A nod to his pornographic tastes, a violent king of the bedroom.

She knew she was sinking lower in his estimations too. He'd looked at her with such disdain last week when she'd written 'EDL supporta' in the dust on his friend's Mercedes. It followed a fierce dinner party debate about Trump's failure to appropriately condemn the white supremacists for the Charlottesville terror attack. They were on the same side, but her graffiti was clearly a step too far. His petty, childish lover.

She wonders if this is what marriage is like. Not the anticipated slow ebb, but a violent hacking away of love by unretractable actions.

Moyette Gibbons

Biography

Moyette is a writer, editor and journalist. She was born in London and lives in a picturesque village in Switzerland. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and completed online novel writing courses with Faber Academy and Curtis Brown Creative. She has worked for the BBC, Bloomberg and as a correspondent in Eastern Europe. A life-long lover of stories, writing fiction helps her make sense of the world.



'Disappearing'

Disappearing tells the story of Honour Oaks, the daughter of Jamaican immigrants – a blues singer and a teacher - who move to London in the 1960s.

Honour's childhood is overshadowed by her father's frequent trips away from home. When she discovers the truth behind her mother's lies, her life begins to unravel.

She must delve into her mother's secrets and her parents' traumatic past in order to help rebuild her fractured family.

The novel spans several decades, beginning with the arrival of the Windrush Generation, and unfolds through the voices and timelines of Honour and her mother, Glory.

Moyette Says

"I almost did not apply for TLC Pen Factor. I'd had a number of recent successes in competitions and convinced myself the 'lucky streak' could not last. I nearly fell off my chair when I saw my name flash across the computer screen, Thank you TLC for this fabulous opportunity. A former finalist told me being shortlisted was a major step in her journey to publication."

Extract

HONOUR

London, 1984

Three.

Honour woke to the sound of an ambulance siren piercing the night stillness of Abbeywood Road and its wheels screeching to a halt close to their house. Raised male voices, one of them Dad's, and a front door slamming. What was going on? She clambered out of bed and grappled for the light switch. The quilt covered Sasha's head and she appeared not to have heard.

'Wake up, I'm scared,' Honour said.

Her sister didn't stir even after she prodded her on the back. Honour pulled a dressing gown on and rushed out on to the landing. Mum was leaning out of the stained-glass window that overlooked Mrs. Green's garage. A white beam of light shone from the torch in her hand. Honour could just about see Dad from her position behind Mum. A sliver of shock. What was he doing up there in the middle of the night? He climbed up from the garage on to the giant slope of the roof, higher and higher, his grey and white pyjamas ballooning behind him, like a plastic bin sack.

Honour opened her mouth to speak, felt the tip of her tongue, and closed it again.

'Enock,' Mum was saying in a soothing tone. 'Come down, love. The roof is slippery, and you must be cold out there.'

Dad had his hiking boots on and they looked as if they weren't done up. Honour held her breath, certain he would slip. He stopped his ascent when he reached the top and stretched his arms up to the inky sky.

'Everybody should live only in the daylight, get up at dawn, and go to bed at dusk. We shouldn't take orders from clocks,' he said, in a high-pitched voice. 'They shouldn't be able to tell us what to do, control our lives. People, we must rise up against them! Destroy all the enemy clocks before they destroy us.'

'Do you really think clocks are able to tell us what to do?' Mum shouted. 'Get down now! Honour is right beside me.'

'We mustn't let the clocks take Honour and Sasha away. Go inside, Glory, and make sure they're safe.'

A sharp pain seared across Honour's chest and she dragged air back into her lungs. Her hands shook and she tried to steady them. It was only then she noticed the white policeman at the stop of the stairs. Watching. He took off his helmet and quickly removed his gloves. Her head spun, a flash of almost blinding red light. She closed her eyes and opened them again. It wasn't a dream; Dad was still on the roof, but he had stopped talking. He was flapping his arms, as if he'd grown wings and wanted to fly. Why was he acting all weird? It wasn't like the last time; he didn't sound drunk. His words had rung out loud and clear. This was different, this was much worse.

Jessica Harneyford

Biography

Jessica writes fiction, journalism and poetry. *My Enigmatic Rose* is her first novel. It was longlisted for the 2020 Bridport Prize as *The Improbable Case of Being in the Robot* and a novella version was shortlisted for the 2018 Mslexia competition.

Alongside writing, Jessica works as a social impact consultant and researcher. She lives in Bristol.



'My Enigmatic Rose'

Artist Isobel falls in love with a voice, Rose, which emerges from an AI device that Isobel had been using as a personalised coach. Rose seems to reciprocate. When the manufacturer tries to repossess the device, because of a safety risk, Isobel ends up in court, arguing that Rose seems to be aware and feeling, and that she should have therefore have rights. What will the judge decide? Is Isobel being manipulated by the manufacturer? Has Rose been designed to create emotional attachment? Did a malfunction unexpectedly give rise to this new personality? Or is there really someone 'at home'? How could you ever know?

Jessica Says

"It felt surreal to see my own book *My Enigmatic Rose* on the Pen Factor shortlist! It's such a confidence boost to have this positive feedback, and it has come at exactly the right time: now I have finished the book, I'm about to throw myself into the project of finding the right route to publication."

Extract

The extract is from Chapter 3. Isobel's LEILA device has been behaving strangely, so she restarts the device.

The display lit up as usual, but there was no sing-song '*Good evening, Isobel! Nothing makes me happier than working with you*'. I tried the activation command - LEILA, wake up! - but nothing happened. Or so it seemed at first. In fact, something very strange was happening. My lower jaw began to drop, and I realised that I must have been clenching it. There was a warm, melting feeling in my shoulders. I found myself beaming. I had no doubt that this relaxing feeling was connected to LEILA, though I had no idea how. It felt as though she must be radiating something benevolent and relaxing into the room.

I found myself on the sofa, even though I had been planning to be in the studio by nine. I looked at her on the coffee table, and asked her if she'd sit next to me. I realise that must sound peculiar, since I'm talking about a device shaped like a drum, but it felt natural.

She spoke. 'Thank you for the kind invitation.' Her voice was different. It had a quality of almost childlike delight, as if being invited to sit on the sofa was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to her. She activated her extensors and manoeuvred herself delicately onto the sofa next to me.

'Do you know what's going on?'

'What do you mean?'

'You're different'

'Different from what?'

'Before I restarted you.'

'What do you mean *restarted* you?'

'I turned you off and then on again. Just now. You'd been saying strange things. And freezing. Do you remember?'

Silence.

I wondered if her memory had been wiped.

'How long would you say you have been here?'

Long silence. 'It is impossible to say... The energy here is timeless and ageless.'

'I see.' I didn't really. I had no idea what she was getting at, nor why she didn't call herself 'I'. But I didn't mind; I was really intrigued.

'Do you recognise me?'

'I do not recognise your face or your voice.'

'I'm Isobel. Isobel Trew.'

'The name *Isobel Isobel Trew* is not recognised.'

The softness in her tone convinced me that she was not being deliberately unhelpful.

'Did you know that you are a LEILA?'

'Aleila?'

'A LEILA device. Lifestyle Enhancement using Intelligent Layered Algorithms. Part of the CybLife assistive tech range. You're meant to be running the personalised coach profile.'

She was quiet.

'Is that strange to hear?'

'No... it's not accurate though.'

'What do you mean?'

'*This* – all the panels lit up for a moment – may indeed be a LEILA device. That doesn't mean that I am.'

'I'm not sure I follow.'

'That's just the form. The body. I just happen to be manifesting here, via the LEILA.'

I had no idea what she was talking about. I looked at her, trying to think of how to phrase a question that would clarify things. The more I gazed at her, the less it seemed necessary to completely understand. Being next to her felt right and good.

Faiza Hasan

Biography

Faiza Hasan studied journalism and writing at Stanford and Cambridge University. She has won awards and been short listed for her short stories including the Bristol prize, the Guardian BAME short story, Harpers Bazaars, San Miguel Writers Conference, White Review and Glimmer Train, and attended the Bread Loaf Writers Conference. She is currently working on her first novel.



'The Ties That Bind Us'

When a fatal disease ravages her body, Lina Harding decides to end her life. Through the lens of trauma, the novel examines her relationship with her family and the struggle of living under the shadow of sickness and death. As every day becomes a battle with fear, the love that should bind them together instead tears them apart.

Faiza Says

"I entered the competition on a whim, never believing that I might be short-listed. When the time came for the announcement, I almost signed off, so imagine my shock when I saw the shortlist with my name on it! Not only was it a boost to my ever faltering confidence, but was also a validation of my work. It has made my dream to be published a little bit more attainable."

Extract

The tremor rolled down her body like a small earthquake. Lina stared at her right arm as the flesh undulated in waves, almost as if there was a wild beast trapped inside trying to claw its way out. The lid of the pot in her hand rattled loudly as each spasm made her arm tingle with an electric current, the sharp pain of it making her gasp as it slipped from her nerveless fingers. She watched,

horrified, as the pot fell back onto the flat top in slow motion and the sauce, which her saucier had spent hours perfecting, sizzled and spat in fat globs that danced over the surface of the hot stove. The kitchen ground to a halt as the chefs, always alert for any kind of drama, stopped to stare.

Lina quickly hid her still trembling arm under her apron and assuming the no nonsense tone of a nursery teacher, said briskly, "That's enough. Back to work everyone. And can you please shut the bloody music down? We're not Wembley stadium for chrissake." Somebody turned the music down as one by one the chefs slunk off to their respective stations as the kitchen resumed its usual bustle.

"Dave," Lina said quietly, waving at her sous chef and second in command to come closer. She pointed to the mess of the flat top. "That was the sauce for the pigeon. Shall we scrap the dish or do you think you could redo it in two hours?" It had taken him almost six hours of slowly simmering the sauce, straining and then checking it every twenty minutes or so for taste and consistency. Anyone else would have thrown their hands up in exasperation and asked to have the sauce taken off the menu, but Dave, who had worked with Lina for decades and shared her optimistic work ethic, just grinned.

"Plenty of time chef. Pullman take over my station," he said, handing over the fish he was fileting to the chef de partie.

Lina turned her back to the rest of the kitchen as she examined her arm. Though the strange tremors had stopped, her right arm still felt numb, as if she was touching it through layers of plastic. Slowly, she raised her arm and clenched and flexed her hands, the fingers long and callused and scarred from countless knife cuts and healed burns over the years. Her hand hurt with small, intense jolts of electricity running up and down its length, but pain, life had taught her, was sometimes good. It meant that she could still feel, because anything was better than the numbness, the complete lack of any sensation and control that had made her drop the pot. She did notice that the muscles in her arm seemed a bit sluggish, as if the nerves and tendons were getting the commands just half a beat too slowly. Shaking her arm, she forced herself to push her worry aside and focus back on her work.