

TLC Showcase

TLC PEN FACTOR WINNER SPECIAL: Johnny Gaunt

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*Lucy preferred not to share an extract of writing to preserve her anonymity, but she does share message of thanks.

Introduction to *Offcumden*

The classic gothic horror narrative often looks back to a specific time and place, usually to examine a lingering trauma which still resonates in the modern day. It is underwritten by the *sublime*: a careful balance of beauty and decay; love and its bedfellow, hate. The backdrop commonly is one of disruption: war or great social change; relative to, but running behind, the protagonist's own story.

This said, the council estates of South Yorkshire might at first seem an unlikely source of inspiration for a gothic horror novel. But for me, growing up there in the 1970s and 80s, it seems as obvious a choice as the old, Victorian mansion house, crumbling on the hill.

Offcumden is set 42 years ago, in 1980, at the onset of neoliberalism and globalisation, a time when small communities like *Cattercliff* – the fictional council estate of the book – found themselves plunged into the trauma of deindustrialisation. And it's here, during this social unravelling, and on the visceral wastelands between collapsing industry and the ever-encroaching natural world, that a rich, liminal – and *gothic* – space can be found.

It's where 13-year-old Chrissy-boy goes searching for his missing dog, mainly to escape his council house home where something quite terrifying is happening to his sister, Sadie, locked in her bedroom for reasons he can't fully understand. The search, with the help of two unlikely friends – beautiful Kashmiri immigrant Aasha, and Mickey from the nearby gypsy site – becomes a journey which unearths a dark, secret history of his community and its people, and draws Chrissy-boy ever closer to the evil which grips his sister.

Before winning *TLC Pen Factor*, I often considered my own ideas and creative expressions to be somehow *unworthy*, undeserving of an audience. I'm not alone in this, I know, but it does seem to be more prevalent in those with a working-class upbringing. It probably explains the sense of catharsis I feel, using this most symbolic of working-class backdrops – the council estate – as the primary setting for *Offcumden*.

Winning the competition and hearing the emphatic feedback from the judges and audience, along with the incredible support *TLC* has shown me, has

done so much to help rid me of these lingering self-doubts. And although the work of writing, redrafting, and editing is bound to bring many challenging moments, I'm far more certain now that *Offcumden* will eventually find – and deserve to find – its audience.

Extract from 2022 TLC Pen Factor Winner

Offcumden by Johnny Gaunt

I

There was the saw-toothed *kronk* of the dawn raven, throaty enough to splinter dreams, send them skittering like silverfish.

Chrissy-boy stirred, but his eyes stayed shut.

Parched, he was. And the heat inside the shed on these hot mornings, it did something to the air. *Wrung* it out. Turned his mouth rank, tongue dry as a sunbaked frog.

He groaned. The fall away of dreams and the return of this, his real world, often brought about a vague radge within him: a stony weight in the stomach, and briefly he lay between both states—colourless, empty, unwritten space—before his first clear thought.

Sadie.

Always the same thought.

Turning onto a shoulder, his eyes still closed, he tried to bury thoughts of his sister with his fists, deep inside the sweltry sleeping bag. He was morning stiff, but he ignored it, hands clamped between sticky knees. He farted. Lay still.

Only moments before he had been a great bird, sailing and wheeling high above Cattercliff estate. He curled into his knees, clinging to the memory of serrated council house rooftops far below him. The tangled squares of back gardens and thready loops of lanes, snickets and jennels. There were kids from his year playing togger out by Black Carr Woods, and the grey purge of smelting smoke drifted from Hooper's Field over the cut. Swatches of wasteland, of scrubland, scumbled space between housing estates and the concrete edge of Parkgate factories. He could almost hear the colourless Rother gurgling down into the Don.

His land. His world. A place he thought he knew back to front. Inside out. Every dip and rise of road and field. Every cobbled garth and weed throdden walk.

The hours he'd spent in broken meadows and flytipped backwhacks. Crawling through hedgerow smeuse after leatherjackets and any other gubbins he could find. And yet, this land of his, kept secrets.

The raven cawed again, and his eyes flickered open.

Golden daylight pierced cracks in the shed walls. Motes flashed now on, now off, in the parched fug of timber. A filthy perspex window gloomed grey light, cobwebbed with the bloodless cases of fly and moth. Chrissy-boy felt his stillness gather in the heat. He watched a harvestman stilt-walk across the plyboard ceiling, turn down the wall and disappear behind one of the paintings tacked above the upturned crate he used as a desk. The pallet pushed flat and rough-sawn through the lilo beneath him, numbing one hip. Going down again, he thought; slow puncture – hardest to bloody fix. It would need more air in it before tonight.

He pulled a hand free of the sleeping bag and let it fall to the floor, tamping in the dust by his bed, searching for Merrin's shaggy coat. But Merrin wasn't there. Soft sod, course he weren't, and he suddenly remembered the papershop window.

It was Miss Holdsworth who had helped him with the posters. Took him to the teacher's office after last bell and showed him how to use the photocopier. Twenty copies of the only photo of Merrin he had: out of focus, too close to the camera, tongue lolling, and that canine look of insistent hope. Below the picture, Chrissy-boy's felt-tip scrawl:

*MISSING DOG. Brown with bits of white. Comes to
MERRIN. Last seen East Lane, Cattercliff, 28th April 1980.
If seen please call Christopher Foster on 66305*

The copies came out grainy-as. It could've been any old mutt, really. Miss Holdsworth had looked about to cry when she saw him trying to hide his disappointment. When grown-ups ruer... what you supposed to do?

He'd got out of there sharpish, walking one end of the estate to the other, a roll of sellotape in his back pocket, sticking posters to lampposts and bus stops, the

pelican crossing on Wharncliffe, and the side of the rusting, wheelless Bedford at the bottom of Wellgate. He'd felt like a bobby that day, or a sheriff putting up WANTED posters in those Sunday afternoon Westerns they all used to watch.

Chrissy-boy had still been sleeping in the house back then, kipping on the sofa where he couldn't hear Sadie whispering in her room at night. But *nothing*. Nobody had called. And when the first May rains came down, he'd retraced his steps and found the posters hanging sodden and torn, or on the ground in soggy piles like wet bogroll. Only those few in covered bus shelters on North Road and Donny Gate remained, and even they were looking more and more knackered each time he checked on them.

He stretched his legs until his knees popped, unzipped the side of the sleeping bag to let out the stink of himself. Last week, when the phone had been cut-off, he'd headed off again with his felt-tip pen:

*If seen please call Christopher Foster 66305
in at Far Lane papershop*

Fat Mr McCallister had been okay with it at first, even letting him put a poster up in his shop window for free, going on about the Jack Russell he used to take rabbiting when he was a lad. But as the weeks went by, the shopkeeper got less chatty on Chrissy-boy's daily – sometimes, twice daily – visits, and these days would already be shaking his heavy ginger jowls through the glass door, even before Chrissy-boy could step foot inside.

Then yesterday, on his way home from school, he'd passed the papershop and the poster was gone. Thursday was half-day closing and the shops on Far Lane had all been shut. He sniffed and poked something dry as a crisp out of his nose. He'd go back up there this morning before registration, find out what was going on. He needed new posters, too. Maybe Miss Holdsworth could print him some more?

It wasn't over yet... Not by a long stretch. He knew Merrin was out there somewhere, following sheep trods up over the fields, pulling at black bin bags dumped in laybys. He was just scared to come home, and Chrissy-boy could feel it like a splinter under his skin.

From above, where the low-slung boughs of the yew tree leaned like besoms over the shed roof, the raven's cough came a third time, and Chrissy-boy rubbed an eye.

"Alright, alright. Mornin', bloody hell fire."

The fret and flutter of heavy wings — something like magazines sliding off a high shelf. Then came a rattled percussion of caws.

Her—Her—Her—Her—Her

Chrissy-boy rolled onto his back, clenching his jaw, narked with himself. Birds don't talk. They can copy. Mime. Mock, even. But they can't *talk*.

"Bugger off..."

The bird made some deeper sounds. Sniggering; cruel, almost.

Hoo-er—Hoo-er—Hoo-er—Hoo-er— Hoo-er

"No, no, *no!* *Shuddup!* Shut yer *gob!*"

It fell silent, and Chrissy-boy stared up at the plyboard, blinking, letting the jags settle in his chest. He rested a forearm over his eyes. Everyday. Every-*bloody-*day it came and started with its chatter. Noise so insistent, so close to language that he couldn't help but... *No!* Birds *don't* talk.

The raven had appeared a few days after Merrin ran away, and to begin with had seemed like a welcome distraction: from his missing dog; from his house; from his sister's... *troubles*. Hearing its caw that first morning, he'd poked his head out the shed door and — *'kin'ell* — he'd never seen so big a bird! For a barmy moment, he'd thought it was his dad's black leather jacket strung up there in the tree. It took his breath. And a second later, the great thing had heaved its bulk into the April air and took off over the wet back gardens, wings broad as bull horns.

But the next morning. It was back.

About the Writer

Johnny Gaunt was born in Rotherham, a town full of good, honest people – despite what you might have heard. Always a lover of books, he nevertheless managed to leave school with no qualifications, failing to attend the final year. He worked as a roofer whilst studying GCSEs, then A levels at night college. Aged 23, he enrolled on the English Literature and Philosophy BA at the University of Sheffield, and between 1990-95 he created and edited small press magazine *Dreams from the Strangers' Café*, publishing stories of speculative fiction from writers such as Jeff VanderMeer and Paul Di Fillipo.



After graduating, he worked a number of different jobs, including British Telecom operator, call centre loan advisor, medical health insurance assessor, and member of a railway gang for all of two weeks. At the beginning of the noughties he moved to London, where he trained as a radiographer in the NHS. He stayed in the capital until 2010, and has since lived and worked in Wales, East Yorkshire, and the Channel Islands.

He was accepted on to the Creative Writing MA at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2020, studying under Monique Roffey, Nicholas Royle and Andrew Michael Hurley. He will graduate in September, he hopes, with a distinction.

Twitter: @GauntJohnny

MEET THE TLC PEN FACTOR 2022 FINALISTS

Muti'ah Badruddeen

Bio

Muti'ah is a reproductive health physician and homeschooling mum.

She writes contemporary fiction about Nigerian women at the intersection of faith, women's rights, and reproductive and mental health, from the framework of her cultural identity as a visibly-Muslim woman.

When she is not writing, reading, doctoring or mothering, Muti'ah can be found trying to catch up on her sleep.



Muti'ah Says

When I entered (the TLC Pen Factor competition), I never imagined being a finalist!

My ongoing battle with impostor syndrome is not helped by the fact that opportunities like these are usually closed to self-published authors, but seeing that previously self-published books were eligible seemed like a sign.

I am grateful for that decision. Everyone – the TLC team, the industry judges, the audience – made my first live pitch experience less harrowing, and armed me with a few weapons to stave off impostor syndrome, for a while at least.

Rekiya & Z

Imagine that Chimamanda's *Americanah* and Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (without the magical realism) were best friends...

When they met as teenagers, Rekiya was the unacknowledged daughter of one of Nigeria's richest men, while Zaynunah was the Ibadan-raised hijabi from a modest background.

Years later, a mutual loss forces them to revisit the memories of their frayed friendship, resurrecting old bones of buried issues, and the possibility of new beginnings.

Extract

'I'm sorry,' I say. Quietly. 'For what I said then.'

She raises herself, reclining on her elbows and peers into my face, her gaze steady. That gaze, the steady unwavering regard that stopped time while you fumble to put words to your heart's echo, was Mummy at her most.

'You called me. Told me about the problems you were having. That you were considering a divorce. Asked my opinion. And I said... what I said.'

I don't know you well enough anymore to give you advice on divorce.

'It was a crappy thing to say to a friend. To anyone.' I finally admit aloud what my heart has nagged about, incessantly.

Z burst out laughing. 'That's such an American thing to say! Who says "crappy"?''

I force a chuckle, equal parts glad and mortified that she did not make a fuss. Maybe she did not think it a big deal? *Could it really be this easy to put it behind us?*

'Yeah, it was pretty horrible to hear you say that, be so disinterested. I...' She looks away. 'It was the day I realized you did not consider yourself my friend anymore.'

Ok, so maybe a big deal after all.

'I didn't.' She turns back with a startled, hurt look and I rush to continue, 'I didn't consider myself worthy of being your friend anymore.'

'What...? Why...? Okay, you know what, I've been sensitive, and considerate, and haven't asked questions but... What on earth?! What happened to you? I mean

*yeah, you were always sort of very complex and hiding within your layers but...
You just shut me out! You shut*

*everyone out – even Mummy. You just disappeared from our lives, what
happened to you?’*

*She was a beautiful soul in righteous indignation. And she was so wrapped up
in everything good that had ever happened to me; my friendship with her, her
mother’s role in my life, her family’s acceptance of the lonely orphan with living
parents, the nugget of faith that saved me at my lowest ebb.*

I smile.

*It was an absurd reaction, as evidenced by Z’s expression, but I couldn’t help it. I
did not want to help it. Not this time.*

*I revel in the emotion that was slowly suffusing me, of love and a sense of worth,
warming the long-frozen parts of me that I had refused to thaw out for so long.*

*‘Quite a bit happened to me, Z,’ I tell her, wearing a lingering smile. ‘And I’m not
ready to go there. Maybe I will never go there again. But I am sorry I shut you
out, that I was a bad friend, that I was not there for you when you needed me.’*

*She narrows her eyes, pins me with that gaze of hers for several more heartbeats,
then nods once. ‘Okay.’*

Huh? ‘Okay?!’

*Her smile is at the same time radiant and mysterious. ‘Okay, I accept your
apology. Okay, because I know that you must have been going through a lot
then. Okay, you don’t want to talk about it, and I get that you may never want to
talk about it. And just... Okay!’*

*I am quiet again, enjoying this unfamiliar feeling. It had been an age, a lifetime
even, since I felt like this.*

Whole.

Stephanie Carty

Bio

Stephanie Carty is a consultant clinical psychologist and writer of different lengths. Her novella *Three Sisters of Stone* won a Saboteur Award. She has published a writers' workbook applying psychology to character called *Inside Fictional Minds*. Her debut novel *Shattered* will be published by Bloodhound in February 2023.



Stephanie Says:

"It was a joy to be shortlisted for the competition with my newly drafted literary suspense novel. Receiving the email felt like a reward for getting back to writing after a significant break from longer length work. The judges were kind and astute. I'm glad I took the leap to enter!"

Magnets & Mirrored Glass

What happens when a parent's love becomes a prison? Imogen spent her childhood travelling with her father, healing strangers by touch. To prevent her daughter Cate from experiencing the same, she's never let her leave the home estate. Now turning thirteen, Cate starts to question everything.

Extract

Cate

The sun is almost at its highest point in the sky which means it's the middle of the day. I like middles; not too much and not too little. I like to be middling. If things get too much, that's what my Safeties are for. But I haven't worked out what to do when things are not enough. I'm a grateful girl, that's very important. I have Mam and our village of Halham – the two best things. That means I don't need anybody or anywhere else. I pinch the skin on the back

of my hand to try to stop the next thought from coming again but it comes anyhow. Not exactly a thought with words in sentences that can be put in order. More like a tunnel. If I look through the long, long tunnel in my mind, I spy things that I haven't seen in real life yet. I spy with my little eye something beginning with O.

Outside the village.

I can't quite imagine what it looks like it because I don't know what there is past the woods and farmland. There must be other villages of course, and far bigger places like cities that are still in England. There's Rome and Greece, although they're not ancient any more. There is Notre Dame cathedral, the Pyramids, chocolate factories, soldier barracks, graveyards, the desert and ginormous boats that float on the surface of the sea because of physics. There are babies and girls the same age as me and fathers and millions of people who might be sitting in their villages right now wondering what other places look like or sound like or smell like, and whether it's true as Mam says that there's no place like home.

My thoughts are far too whizzy. They push hard against the side of my brain making my head thump. I need to slow everything back down to focus on one thing. I turn on the garden tap and let the water trickle over my hands, turning them frontways and then back. The water is cool and clear. I let my thoughts come out of the pores on my palms then wash away. The thoughts flow down the drain into pipes that take them into the centre of the Earth. There, the letters and sounds will disintegrate and become fresh soil full of ideas, ready to nourish our fruit and vegetables. That's why it's good to talk to things that grow. But not now. I need some quiet time. I switch the tap off and watch the drips for a little while longer. Drip, drop, drip.

The month is probably May. I figured it out by sneaking a look at the sowing instructions on the packets of runner beans while Mam fetched a trowel. She told me once that Mayday is a special word that ships and aeroplanes use if they're in trouble – *Mayday, Mayday!* It sounds fun rather than dangerous but words can play tricks like that.

Parin Patel

Bio

Parin is forty-two and works in finance. He only recently started to read and creatively wrote his first lines of prose in Jan-21. He has fully immersed into creative writing, connecting and attending several writing events including residential writing retreats, masterclasses and tutorials. He intends to publish his memoir.



Being Cornershopped

The extract selects a scene at the local hospice, where Parin's mum was admitted for four days before she passed away. All this within six days, from the return of her breast cancer, and three weeks after the birth of his first child. This leads to a spiritual awakening turning forty years old. He attempts to illustrate how through pain and suffering, grief and loss, wisdom can arise and entirely change ones perspective to life, even during the pain.

Parin Says

"To be runner-up has been a whirlwind and all the judge's feedback was very humbling. Most satisfying was receiving such positive comments from people that tuned into the Live Pitch, and how they could relate to my story. This competition has made me believe in myself. Crucially, it gave me a platform to share my story on vulnerability to many people I think it can help."

Extract

In the adjacent set of drawers we brought some of her favourite clothes – all from M&S. The two identical black bobbly woollen cardigans you could not differentiate, a black and white striped top that looked like a polo shirt and a vibrant orange top that blended in with her complexion. In hindsight, bringing more pairs of socks than other items of clothing illustrated our resignation her

time with us was limited. In fact, we were over optimistic she would even get to wear any of them in place of her hospice pyjamas, kindly donated by St Luke's.

We also only brought her most treasured possessions. Positioned on her bedside table at a reachable distance was her trusted lipstick; bottle of Olay moisturiser; her terracotta coloured handbag, upright and shaped like a padlock; her garishly yellow coloured hairbrush she'd seemed to own before I was born; a small tub of Vaseline; a bottle of Impulse body spray; a packet of round maroon bindi stickers; and her beloved wooden framed, palm-sized photo of Krishna Bhagwan.

My cousin once said, my mum was the only woman she'd ever known to accurately apply lipstick without a mirror, in a blink of an eye and not a smudge in sight. It's only when someone points it out to you that you notice something you thought was normal but was in fact quite funny all along. She would never leave the house without a quick touch-up. Going to buy milk, the weekly shop, a walk in the park, to get her weekly lottery tickets, an evening in a local restaurant or a visit to the local salon for her overpriced haircuts all triggered her dolled-up routine. It was nice seeing her with lipstick on whilst lying on the bed. The nurses probably found it strange but it meant her *will* to live was still with us.

One of the main concerns I had for mum was checking if she had been able to go to the toilet. She was a docile human but the few things that riled her were dad's incessant spoon clanking whilst eating anything from a bowl, the copious times she'd only get dad's attention after shouting Chitu! unnaturally above her endearing tone for the fifth or sixth time but also not going for a poo first thing in the morning. Not going before lunchtime destabilised her. Failing to go all day demoralised her.

The day before she was admitted to St Luke's, she rapidly deteriorated at home. She lay still on the box room bed with Krishna Bhagwan by her side, somnolent, left arm rested on her forehead and worryingly longer periods of not opening her eyes. There was a point where my sister and I thought she might not make it through the night. We didn't verbally exchange this notion but the look in our eyes revealed the fear. Panic briefly crept in but using my default behaviour, I denied my feelings and hoped for the best, whatever that was. Having to deal with your mum pass away on the bed you slept on growing up as a child is something a son should never have to face. I certainly wasn't going to believe I would be the first.

Lucy Lonsdale

Lucy says:

"Thanks TLC for the wonderful opportunity to pitch my book 'Great Exploitations'. It was great to have such positive feedback. To be told my writing is 'powerful' by three top agents was a huge boost to my confidence and a ringing endorsement to propel me towards publishing it!"