

Basil and Bella in Booktown

A Festive Fable



Richard Beynon

“Free writing advice. Apply inside. What do you think of that?” Bella asked.

“I assume I’ll be the one dispensing it?” Basil asked. She made a face at him: obviously. “I’m not sure I’ll have much time to dispense advice,” he said. “I’ll be too busy writing.”

“You can’t write every minute we’re in the shop, for goodness sakes.”

“No, but.” He felt that too many of his responses to Bella consisted of those two little words. The start of a sentence, but not the end. A bit like his books. Good beginnings... Well, you couldn’t get anywhere without a good beginning.

Bella had the bottle of Windolene and a rag and was going at the glass panel of the front door hammer and tongs.

He thought about his story.

Truth to tell, he hadn’t yet decided quite what approach to take. Clearly, it had to reflect his preoccupation with the process of creation. What a poncy phrase. Rather, it had to spring from his interest in... writing. Bit like a snake swallowing its tail. Definition of post-modernism. Even poncier...

The intriguing fact of sitting in a bookshop in Wigtown is that he was surrounded – totally surrounded! – by stories. Each of the thousands of books in the shop was the product of endless labour, of writers scratching their heads to devise stories they believed would beguile and entertain their readers.

All he needed was a subject.

“Work on your childrens’ novel,” Bella suggested, hefting the vacuum cleaner out of its cupboard.

Well, perhaps he would. South Galloway was the perfect setting for tales of wizards and dragons, circus divas and straggly soothsayers.

The vacuum cleaner started buzzing. Basil opened his computer, bent double and squirmed beneath the counter to plug it in. Why plugs were always situated in the most awkward corners, he didn’t know. He tapped in his password.

He regarded the white screen. Mmm. Difficult to focus with the vacuum cleaner droning away. An idea popped into his head and he raised his right index finger as it took shape in his mind.

The door opened. A young couple entered. A little chorus of “good mornings” followed. They disappeared down the aisle towards the Astronomy and Geology shelves.

“Our first customers,” Bella whispered. She’d turned off the vacuum cleaner Basil noticed.

He fingered the cash box, hoping they had enough change.

“I’ve got to go out for some more chalk,” Bella said. “For the chalkboard.” Obviously. The door clicked behind her. The young woman, whose chin was furnished with a perfectly formed pink mole emerged from Astronomy – or had she wandered on, past History. Or Bird Watching?

“I have a question for you,” she said. He couldn’t keep his eye off the mole. It seemed to possess mesmerizing qualities.

“Yes?”

“Would you mind terribly if I left a package here for a friend to pick up?”

“A package?”

“This.” And she produced a box, the size of a small cigar box, meticulously wrapped in a heavy-duty brown paper with a sheen to it, a gloss, and neatly tied up with a length of twine, knotted economically on one side.

“Well,” said Bella later as they settled down in the flat immediately above the bookshop, “you needn’t have said yes.” Basil eyed the High Street from the sash window in the corner of the sitting room. The sun had set and already he could feel the cold of the Scottish winter seeping in.

“There’s no harm in it, surely?”

“What if the friend never comes?” This was a sensible question, he thought, although he’d never admit it.

“Well, then, we’ll open the parcel and find out what we’ve inherited.”

“Oh, Basil!”

He wandered across to the dining table and poured himself a wee dram of Jura. What could possibly be in the parcel that could further complicate our lives?

“So what’s it to be today?” The wind whistled eerily down Agnew Crescent, having taken an icy turn from High Street.

“Come in out of the cold and buy a book,” he suggested.

"It should have something to do with our South African display, don't you think?" Bella said, chalk in hand.

"Come in out of the cold and buy a South African book," he elaborated, distracted by thoughts of the story that he'd not yet settled on. He wished he could recall the flash of inspiration he'd had yesterday. Trouble with his children's story is that it was set under a different sky. He needed something darker. He'd *thought* of something darker, but that tendril of thought had withered.

Bella was scrawling the new invitation on the chalkboard when the door creaked open and a blast of Siberian air shot in off the street.

The man in the doorway was balanced precariously on two elbow crutches. He took some time to negotiate his way through before turning awkwardly to close the door behind him.

Basil clutched his fleece-lined bomber jacket more closely around himself as the temperature in The Open Book plummeted ten degrees.

But at last the door clicked shut and the customer approached the desk.

"I'm looking for anything you might have on a universal panacea," he said hoarsely. Join the club.

Basil sought out Bella's gaze, but realized she was going to give him scant help.

"A universal remedy, yes?" Basil managed.

The man shifted uneasily on his crutches. "Something that'll put me on my feet again?"

"Not sure if we can help there," he said. "Perhaps a book on nudist beaches of the UK?" Mmm. Nudist beaches. A trio of naked soothsayers muttering imprecations on a stony beach. That *could* work. The customer had been saying something.

"I beg your pardon," Basil said, wrenching his thoughts away from the startlingly powerful image. But he was too late. Muttering, the customer turned away and shuffled down the aisle.

"You were rude," Bella hissed.

"Just trying to lighten things up," Basil hissed back.

He settled down at his keyboard once again, and thought. And thought. The trouble with a bookshop was that it was an invitation to random strangers to invade your premises, interrupt your thought processes, and generally cause havoc with your imaginative ruminations. He said something to this effect to Bella.

“They’re customers, for goodness sakes,” she said. Bella seemed to be intent on increasing their turnover. To him, a two-week bookshop idyll was one in which customers hadn’t really figured.

Back to the story.

The bell on the door tinkled. Bloody hell. Another one.

This one was a man of indeterminate age. He was tallish, and darkish, and slightly cadaverish and he seemed to avoid Basil’s eye. Just as well, he thought, given that his eye was probably not entirely welcoming. The man disappeared down the aisle towards Religion and Theology. Of course, it could have been Science Fiction, in the adjacent shelves, or, indeed, Moths and Butterflies.

The door opened again as Bella went out to erect the chalkboard. Be lucky if the wind didn’t scoop it up and deposit it in the Bladnoch.

The cadaverish man returned with an armful of paperbacks. Strangely, customers felt less intrusive when they actually bestirred themselves to buy things.

“Let’s have a look at these,” he said, adopting what he hoped was a friendly, retail tone. Bella had impressed on him the imperative of writing down the title of each book sold. Colin Wilson’s *A Criminal History of Mankind*. John Lisners’ *House of Horrors: The full grisly story*, he noted, of *Dennis Andrew Nilsen, multiple murderer*. Colin Wilson again, *The Corpse Garden*. What was it with the guy? David Bell’s *Leicestershire and Rutland Murder Casebook*.

A certain pattern was becoming clear.

Stewart Evans and Paul Gainey: Jack the Ripper – First American Serial Killer. Well, that was a surprise. And another Ripper rip-off: *Jack the Ripper – The Final Chapter* by one Paul H Feldman. Another American, no doubt. Churchill never referred to himself as Winston L S Churchill. “Interesting choice,” Basil murmured. The cadaverous man made no reply. “That’ll be £10, please.”

The cadaverous man pushed forward one last book. “This one too?”

It was a book by one Phil Vallack and it featured a not very discreet picture of a number of women diving into, or climbing out of, the sea. It was the very volume that the becrutched man had disdained. All the swimmers on the front cover were naked. Basil diligently wrote down the descriptive subtitle: *Euroguide for over 1,000 inland sites for nude leisure. 216 pages, 200 photos and 560 maps. Even Britain,*” it added, “*has 360 recommended items.*”

None in or near Wigtown, Basil reckoned. He checked the penciled price. Ten quid.

“That’ll be £20,” he said. The man slipped a £20 note from his wallet and pushed it across the counter. He’d not uttered a word, Basil realized. “Like a packet?” he ventured. But again the man didn’t answer and, scooping the pile of books up, he left the shop.

“Weirdo,” he mouthed at Bella.

“Don’t criticize the customers,” she said.

He told her what the customer had just bought. “I suppose it takes all types,” she said. And then remembered something. “By the way, has someone popped in to pick up the package that woman left yesterday?”

“No.”

“Told you so.”

“She didn’t say it’d be collected today. In fact, she didn’t say when it would be collected.” Bella worried unnecessarily.

“What do you think’s in it?” Bella asked.

“I have no idea.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

“No.”

Bella raised her eyebrows. Of course he was curious. But it was probably just a book. What else would you leave in a bookshop to be picked up by a friend? Not a dover sole.

The wind had risen by the time the sun set later in the afternoon. He’d had no luck with his story, although he had to admit there hadn’t been many customers. But each of those who came in out of the cold seemed to enter at precisely the moment that some crisply original thought was coalescing in his mind. The tinkling bell caused these ideas to fly out of the single-glazed window.

Bella, who seemed able to keep herself busy through the day, paused at the window facing out onto High Street. “Well, look at that,” she said. “It’s your friend.”

He joined her at the window. On the other side of the street, the cadaverous man was standing, hunched against the gale. He wasn’t

looking at them, not directly, but his gaze seemed to encompass their entire corner.

“What do you think he’s up to?” Bella said.

“Why are you whispering?” he asked.

“We should change the wording on the chalkboard,” Bella said.

“Nothing wrong with what we’ve got there,” Basil said.

They stood outside the shop gazing at his rather wonky lettering.

“The thing is, though, nobody’s come in asking for writing advice, free or otherwise.”

Chilly sleet started angling down at them out of a chocolate-coloured sky. Basil regretted not putting on the long-johns that Bella had advised he wear. They entered the shop, deferring a decision about the chalkboard.

“No sign of the serial killer, then,” she said.

“Not yet, at any rate.”

“He’s probably heading for the nearest nudist beach to garrote some poor unsuspecting naked woman.”

“In November? In Scotland?”

“Well, perhaps not,” Bella conceded.

He took his place behind the counter, piled high now with books he had, with the help of abebooks.com, to price.

“Look at this.” Bella put a book down in front of him. It was a hardback copy of *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera*. “£14.53,” she said. “I’m going to mark it at £12.”

Basil remembered the night he went to the musical with his parents, in the Wits Great Hall in, what was it now? 1960?

He was thinking about that when the door pinged and a woman entered.

“I’m Melanie,” she said, “and I’ve been meaning to come round to see you ever since you arrived.” They introduced themselves to her. “It’s so lovely to have you here,” she said in a light Irish accent. “Now, I came to say something very particular to you, now what was it again?” She pursued her

lips. "It'll come to me, it'll come to me. It is odd how intentions can simply elude you at the most inopportune moments. I'm sure it was important..."

While she chattered, Basil's eye strayed to the window. Through the slashing rain he could see a lone figure huddled against the wall of the stone house across the road. Surely it couldn't be? He turned to Melanie, a finger raised. "Excuse me," he said, but Melanie was in full-flow now and would brook no interruption.

He looked back across the road. No sign of anyone. The apparition had evaporated in the rain and the sleet.

"I'll tell you what," Melanie was saying, "if I remember I'll come straight back to tell you."

And then she whirled out.

Basil decided not to mention the return of the serial killer to Bella.

"What a nice woman," Bella said. She tapped the King Kong volume. "Tell you what," she said, "I'll mention this on Facebook. There must be someone in South Africa who'd be happy to pay £12 for it. It's in good nick."

Basil tried to focus on his story. The textures were all there for the grasping: the blustery, icy winds that buffeted the streets of the town; the clouds scudding across the sky; the little haven of warmth in the bookshop where customers came for succour as much as for books.

What if one of them was indeed a...

The doorbell tinkled. A tall but stooped man, with a mighty backpack, a cap pulled down to his whiskery eyebrows, and a pair of trousers drawn up high and bunched around his waist with a belt cinched tight, staggered in out of the rain.

Now here was a man any worthwhile writer could conjure with.

He fixed his eye on Basil behind the counter. "Watch the rugby at the weekend?" he said.

Basil vaguely remembered that someone had beaten someone else. Ah, yes, Ireland. And... yes, the All Blacks. He ventured as much to their visitor, and then for twenty minutes listened to a detailed analysis of the match, prognostications of the likely outcome of the 2019 World Cup and a minutely recalled account of the "very violent" encounter between Canada and South Africa in Whistler in 1992.

At the end of it, Basil said: "You haven't come to pick up a parcel a friend left for you on Monday, have you?"

“What sort of parcel?” the rugby enthusiast asked, an acquisitive glint in his eye.

“Never mind,” Basil said. “I must have been mistaken.”

The rugby fan wandered off into the depths of the shop. Bella leaned over the counter and said, “I’m just off to buy that book I’ve had my eye on at The Book Shop.”

Basil settled down to his computer. Notions whirled in his brain.

A character, larger than life, who roamed the hills of south Galloway, stopping in at inns to hint at terrible tales of tragedy and sacrifice. Mmm. The sort of story, indeed, that would surely take more definite shape with the help of a dram or two. Better to have a bottle in the shop to help warm the bones and the blood than have to traipse upstairs to the Jura.

He hopped across to the Co-op, wallet in hand. There was a queue, of course, but that gave him the chance to examine the various malt whiskies behind the counter. No Talisker, more’s the pity – but a good Glenmorangie and a few less well-known brands.

“I’ll have the Glenmorangie,” he told the proprietor.

“Someone’s certainly making a racket out there,” she observed, as she slipped his card into her machine. “Banging and shouting. You’d think they’d been held up or something.”

“How was I supposed to know he was still in the shop,” Basil said. “He’d snuck around to the Prime Ministers and Other Poltroons section. It’s completely out of sight from the counter.”

“You need to keep track of customers,” Bella said sharply. “He could have damaged the front door, and God knows how much that would have cost to repair.”

“Or had a go at the cash box. We have no idea how much money there was in the cash box.”

“You should have a very precise idea of what’s in the cash box at any given moment.” When Bella was severe she could be very severe. She was casting an eye at Basil that could only be described as piercing.

“I’ll wash up,” he said. But before he rolled up his sleeves, he helped himself to a couple of fingers of Jura. “Oh,” he said, when he realized Bella had slipped in behind him, “would you like a little whisky?”

The blast from the Russian plains seemed to have diminished slightly, and when the sun rose at 8:03 the next morning, Basil felt unaccountably cheerful. It must be one of the side-effects of running a bookshop.

Bella inserted the key into The Open Book's outer door. "Any sign of the serial killer?"

Basil scanned the High Street. "Not that I can see." The lights shone brightly from the Co-op. There wasn't a person visible.

The rain the previous day had washed most of the words from the chalkboard. He spent the first few minutes composing a fresh invitation to anyone interested in writing advice to apply within.

Then he settled down behind the counter to think. "Here are some more books to price," Bella said, dumping a tottering pile of paperbacks on the desk. He sighed, opened the Apple, and called up Abe Books.

Funny. Every single one of the books was an account of one or more of the more sensational murder cases that seem to transfix Britain every few years. Christie. Brady. Sutcliffe. Fred and Rosemary West. My God. The serial killer would love to get his hands on this stuff to add to the library he was clearly assembling.

Someone cleared his throat just above Basil. He looked up and opened his mouth to yell for Bella. It *was* the serial killer. Standing right at the counter. Looking down at him.

"Those look interesting," he said, pointing at the array of books.

"Fascinating," Basil managed to stutter.
"How much for the lot?"

"I haven't managed to price them yet..."

"How about twenty quid?"

The serial killer laid a note on the counter and gave Basil a smile that, he later told Bella over a small Glenmorangie, was straight out of the Fred West (he of the Gloucester House of Horrors) playbook.

"I think that'll do."

He passed up the pile of books with hands that (as he also reported later) were scarcely trembling. In fact, he was pleased to be rid of them. Vile books on vile subjects. He popped the twenty pound note into the cash box and decided that even serial killers occasionally have their uses.

Later, he discovered that the packet awaiting delivery had gone.

“Bella,” he said, “what’s happened to the packet?”

“What packet?”

“*The* packet.”

“Nothing, as far as I know.”

“You sure no one called for it?”

They looked at each other. That’s when he suggested the small Glenmorangie.

“Auchentoshan,” he said again. “A very fine, inexpensive malt. One of my very favourites.” Their neighbour reached for his third Speckled Hen and drank deep. He pushed ineffectually at the shirttails that poked out from beneath a disheveled jumper.

“We’ll look out for it,” Basil said.

“Plus any of the Speyside malts,” he said, “all of them excellent whiskies.” When Bella confessed to a love of Laphroaig, he nodded, impressed. “A purist,” he muttered. Then he changed the subject slightly. “You people know what a rusty nail is?”

Basil and Bella exchanged a look and shook their heads.

“Ruthie,” said their companion, “give us a rusty nail, will you.”

The barmaid of The Steam Packet Inn looked at him a little doubtfully. “What sort of rusty nail do you mean, Bob?”

“Oh, come on, woman, there’s only one kind of rusty nail. One measure of Drambuie and one of The Grouse.”

They watched while Ruthie poured the cocktail. “This is for you,” Bob said, pushing the glass towards Basil. He took a cautious sip. It tasted good. And very alcoholic.

“Very spirituous,” he said, passing the glass on to Bella, who took an enthusiastic taste.

“Well, there you go,” Bob said. He leaned in close, his straggly locks swinging freely. “I’m sure your guides would approve.”

“My guides?” Basil asked cautiously.

“You do know that you’ve got two guides?”

Basil glanced uneasily behind him.

“Two guides?”

“One black and one white. Not surprising, really, given where you hail from.”

“You’re a spiritualist?” Bella asked.

“Of course.” He took a mighty swallow from his pint glass.

“And you can see them? My guides?” Basil said.

“Clear as day. Clear as day. One on your right, one on your left. Clear as day.” The spiritualist leaned back, nodding with satisfaction derived, Basil supposed, from his intimate acquaintance with the unseen world.

Outside the sea gurgled and sucked at the quay.

On the way home to Wigtown through the dark tunnel of the night, Bella said, “D’you think there’s a relationship between his spirituous intake and his belief in spiritualism?”

Basil thought that the countryside they were speeding through looked like ideal spiritual terrain. He wondered whether their Co-op carried any of the whiskies their spiritual advisor had recommended.

The next morning Bella set the chalkboard out on the pavement. It seemed slightly warmer today. “Slightly less cold,” Basil corrected her.

He had booted up his computer and was thinking about a story featuring acres of tidal mudflats and a dogged and inquiring sea, when the front doorbell tinged. It was Bob, their spiritual guide from The Steam Packet Inn. He seemed exhausted and settled quickly into a chair next to their creative writing table.

“I’ve had a look at your Co-op,” he said, when he’d caught his breath. “Won’t find better prices for The Glenlivet and Auchentoshan. Twenty two pounds a bottle. Not bad. Not bad at all.”

Later, Basil and Bella were drinking coffees procured across the road at the Rendezvous Café, when the ceiling above them shook and puffs of dust descended on them.

“My God,” Basil said. “That’s in our flat, isn’t it?”

On the floor of the living room lay a small parcel. Bella seemed confounded. "Isn't that the parcel that we were supposed to give to somebody?"

"What's it doing here?" said Basil.

He approached it apprehensively. "This can't be what caused that tremendous thump, surely?"

But there was something about Wigtown that suggested that anything was possible. As if all the fiction in all the bookshops up and down the main street stretched the bounds of possibility, as if the ordinary laws of physics didn't quite apply.

"I think you should have a look at it," Bella said. Basil noticed that she was hanging back in the small hallway just outside the living room. He crouched to pick up the packet, wondering whether it might somehow have gathered enormous mass (that, though inexplicable, would at least explain the thump), and be impossible to lift.

But, no – it weighed no more than it had when it had originally been handed to him.

"Can you explain any of this?" Bella asked, a note of hysteria evident in her voice.

"It's just Wigtown," Basil said.

"I don't know what you mean by that." Bella ventured into the living room and subsided onto one of the upright chairs at the dining table.

And nor, frankly, did he. But it seemed as good an explanation as any other.

The next morning they assumed their usual posts in the bookshop. Basil was about to start work on his story (he was full of determination, he felt like a bolt in a crossbow about to spring free and hasten toward its target) when Bella handed him a roll of Christmas wrapping paper, a pair of scissors, a cellotape dispenser, a ball of string, a pile of books and a list of very specific instructions.

For the next couple of hours he wrapped Christmas parcels at the counter. Each contained a book to which he attached an enigmatic little note alluding obliquely to its contents. Mysteries, he decided, were extraordinarily attractive. He wondered whether mysteries fathomed were more intriguing than mysteries unf'd.

Wigtown was full of unfathomed and, seemingly, unfathomable mysteries.

Three customers bought books whose titles and authors he and Bella had gone to pains to conceal. Perhaps the world, Basil hypothesized, was too clearly understood, and a little confusion and uncertainty a necessary antidote to predictability. Perhaps they could offer holidays to unspecified destinations. Restaurant meals where the menu didn't stipulate precisely what dishes were on offer...

The possibilities seemed endless.

"I trust," Bella said as they walked to the Wigtown parish church for a performance of music by four composers neither she nor Basil had ever heard of before - more mysteries, in short - "that you will take steps to *manage* that packet."

He wasn't sure he knew what Bella meant. He did know however that she wouldn't welcome another surprise upstairs.

They walked on. A hundred metres down the road, Bella leaned in towards him.

"Basil," Bella whispered.

"Yes, dear?"

"Who is that person following us?"

Basil spooned out porridge into two bowls, squeezed honey in decreasing circles onto each soft mound, and then called for Bella. "Porridge," he said.

They ate at the table. "That was really very surprising," Bella said, sprinkling cinnamon onto her porridge.

"Something wrong with your oats? The strange taste might be the tot of Jura I added to the pot."

"No. I'm thinking about last night." She added a few nuts to her oats. Basil thought nuts and porridge an unfortunate combination.

"It was the cloak and hood that confused us," he agreed. "I couldn't help thinking of *Don't Look Now* and the homicidal dwarf."

"Liked the music though," Bella said. "And her voice. Wow. She wasn't at all homicidal. Just fairly petite."

"And on her way to church." Basil added a little more cream to his bowl.

In the shop, they considered the parcel again.

“What I don’t understand,” Bella began, “is how it got up to the flat. I didn’t take it – and you say you didn’t take it...”

“I *didn’t* take it,” Basil said. But he was developing theories about Wigtown. A town with so many books possessed... some strange qualities. He was not surprised, for instance, to find that books that he’d carefully shelved in alphabetical order reappeared in haphazard order on the desk... That prices that he’d carefully marked on the frontispieces of books changed from £5 to £3... That books that he’d earmarked for one category – Prime Ministers and Other Poltroons, for instance - transmigrated mysteriously into another – Moths and Butterflies, for example.

But now here it sat, as mysterious as anything else in the Machars.

“No one’s picked it up yet,” Bella said accusingly.
“That’s true. So perhaps we should open it.”

“No!” Bella was, sometimes, a believer in rules. On occasion she would insist that Basil get back in the car and adjust its position because one wheel – one wheel! – fell on and not inside the lines demarcating the parking bay. “We can’t possibly open the packet. What if whoever intends to pick it up came in then? It would be too embarrassing for words.”

They argued all the way to lunch at The Pheasant. There were admittedly many reasons for not opening the parcel. Basil basically only had one argument for opening it, but he thought it was a killer. It went more or less like this: Why the hell not?

“You are just so irresponsible,” Bella said, then added, “That wasn’t anything to write home about.” For a moment this confused him, until he realized she was talking about her gnocci. He’d thought that his chicken with pesto sauce was not at all bad. And the wine had been good.

“If you open the package,” she went on, “you risk trashing our reputation. They’ll probably complain to the festival committee and then where would we be?”

“We probably wouldn’t be able to return for three years,” he said.

“The waiting list’s three years long, Basil, so we wouldn’t be able to return for three years anyway,” she said. Then, a moment later, added: “Oh. That was one of your jokes, I suppose. Ha ha.”

He’d had hardly any time to consider his story – which in his head was rather tending towards the spectral. The full moon shining through bare branches outside the church last night had been tinglingly spooky. And then the mysterious events in the bookshop and the flat above had convinced him that if nothing else, Wigtown contained more than its fair

share of the enigmatic. It constituted a body of rich narrative ore than he could happily exploit.

Now there was the conundrum of the book. He felt like tossing it into the discards box but he knew Bella would find that an unacceptable solution. And then the answer occurred to him. He reached for the parcel and in a single movement ripped the paper from it.

“Basil!” Bella shrieked. But it was done.

They looked in astonishment at what he’d revealed.

“Well I never,” Basil said.

“But how did they *know*?” Bella breathed.

“It is quite extraordinary,” Basil agreed.

“This place really is a little spooky – unless they were, I don’t know,” she cast a glance over her shoulder, “*spying* on us.”

“Who would do that? I mean, what possible interest could anyone have in us?”

But then, what else could explain the unambiguous message on this inner wrapping – because the irritating truth was that inside the parcel was another one. And this had two words inscribed on it in neat capitals: FOR BELLA.

Here we go again, Basil thought. “You’d better open it,” he said.

“No! What if it’s...” Her voice trailed off.

“What if it’s a what?”

“I don’t know.”

He thought of the possibilities. It could be a curse. An invocation. An invitation. A birthday card. “Remind me what your birthday is?”

Bella was indignant. “How long have we been married?”

He had to think about that, too.

“Really, you are annoying,” she said. “We’ve been married for sixteen years. And my birthday’s...”

Suddenly he remembered.

“So it can’t be a birthday card,” he said, interrupting her. “Open it.”

She tucked the parcel into her handbag. "I'll open it when I'm good and ready."

They didn't intend to spend long in the shop today. They were planning a trip around the Machars – and perhaps even further afield – in search of the perfect fish and chips which they planned to eat on a pebbly beach looking out over a wine-dark loch...

He hadn't managed to write a single sentence of his story, Basil lamented silently. Oh, well, there was always tomorrow.

"I've got the key," he said, just as the door tinkled. An enormous man bowed his head to avoid the lintel and entered. He headed for the counter and brought his hands up to rest on it. They were like hams. He gazed down at Basil and announced in a voice that set the coins in the donations bottle rattling: "You're interested in books, I assume?"

Conscious of cowering slightly, Basil agreed that he was. He was grateful when Bella glided to his side.

"Weel," said the giant, "I have a wee book that you might like to buy."

"We *sell* books," Basil stuttered. But the giant paid no attention to him.

"This is a wee book that I made meself," he said. He dipped one of his massive paws into the pocket of his coat and brought out something that glittered and gleamed in a rare beam of sunlight reflected off a distant window.

"Oh," said Bella. "It's beautiful."

"Have a look," said the giant. "Although perhaps at first it would be wise not to look too closely... Books can be dangerous things. They can change your life, if you're not careful."

Bella took the little book – it was not much bigger than a box of matches - and opened it. Basil stood up and looked over her shoulder. She opened it. It was dazzling. Basil blinked.

The giant seemed to understand. "It's the gold leaf," he said.

Basil couldn't seem to focus on any given page.

'What's it say, Bell?'

"I actually... It's difficult to... I can't quite..."

"What sort of book is this?" Basil addressed the giant, who seemed to take pleasure in his question.

“It’s a wee book o’ spells,” he said with some slight sign of satisfaction.

“Spells?”

“Exactly what I said. Spells to conjure up your heart’s desire, spells to keep your worst fears at bay, spells to...”

“Spells?” Basil repeated. “This is 2018, you can’t seriously be asking us to believe that you have a book of spells...”

“A wee book of *powerful* spells. This, don’t forget,” said the giant putting a fingertip to the side of one flaring nostril, “is the Machars.”

Basil rolled his eyes. He hated rolling his eyes. He felt like a cliché in motion when he rolled his eyes. But roll his eyes he did.

“The thing to remember, my friend, this twenty first century of ours has as many spells as any other, which is just as well, because, more than any other, we need the occasional magical assist. And here, in South Galloway, as you should have learned by now, anything is possible.”

Basil turned to Bella for support. “Spells, Bell. Can you credit this guy?” He turned back to the giant... but he had disappeared.

And he’d left behind, cupped in Bella’s hands, his wee book of spells though, which seemed, in the thin morning light, to be exuding an almost invisible tendril of vapour.

“It can’t possibly be a book of spells, Bella,” Basil said. “This is the twenty first century. We live in an age of reason and logic.” Bella raised her eyebrows. “Well, all right, I concede,” he said, “that’s perhaps going a step too far. But equally we don’t live in an age of magic.”

On the table between them lay the little book of spells. Every other table of the Rendezvous Café was crowded with early morning breakfasteers. Basil raised his cappuccino and took a sip. Bella’s eyes were fixed on the book.

“But what if...” she began. He sighed. What if indeed. He decided to be gentle.

“Supposing for a moment that there’s something to it,” he said, “what would you wish for?”

Her reply was instant and emphatic. “Turnover,” she said.

“Turnover?” He put his cup down before he spilt any coffee on the pristine tablecloth.

“Well, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the bookshop hasn’t been doing very well. If we could entice more customers through the door, and get them each to buy a book or more, we would increase our turnover.”

“You wouldn’t wish for, I don’t know, happiness maybe?”

“Increased turnover,” Bella said with absolute conviction, “would make me happy.”

Back in the shop Basil huddled over the radiator. Outside, a tin can tumbled over itself in an endless circle driven by a vicious little whirlwind that couldn’t make up its mind whether to advance down Main Street, or back up along Agnew. He chewed reflectively on a thumbnail.

Story ideas tumbled through his mind.

“I think I’ve found one,” Bella crowed from the counter.

“Found what?”

“A spell – an appropriate spell.”

He knew that when Bella set her mind to something, however outrageous, nothing would deter her from seeing it through. It was one of the things he found so... endearing about her. He tried to block out the sound of her muttering. A sentence started forming in his mind. At last.

The doorbell tinkled. The door opened. A wild blast of cold swirled in. The sentence disappeared like so much early morning mist.

The browsers appeared to be Spanish. They chatted away, greeted Bella, and worked their way down the aisle towards Prime Ministers and other Poltroons. Frowning, Basil turned back to his Apple. The door pinged again. Three people blew in on the skirts of the gale, one of them a florid-faced man with a silver-headed walking stick.

“Have you a Scottish section?” he asked Bella. She directed him down another aisle. His companions branched off to other sections of the shop.

And then the door flew open again. Basil rose to secure it – but it was the rugby enthusiast with his bumbag and his beanie and his wagging beard and his glittering eyes and his endless chat about the remarkable Irish team.

The shop seemed to be full of people. Basil abandoned his laptop and attended to the rugby enthusiast who was talking now about his dream to return to Chile, and to complete the ninety mile trek around the Torres del Paine National Park at the tip of the country that he’d begun in 1978...

What he needed, Basil thought but did not say out loud lest Bella overheard – she had an uncommonly acute sense of hearing—was a book of spells. He would wish for a little peace to try to recapture that initial sentence that had, for a brief moment, promised so much narrative treasure.

When at last the door closed, Bella hastened across to him.

“It worked,” she said, in tones of awe.

“Turnover?”

“Lots of it.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to stop at turnover,” he said. “Perhaps you should start wishing now for, I don’t know, profits, perhaps? Bigger margins? Lower interest rates?”

“Don’t mock,” she said severely.

“Well, what you need to do now,” he said, “is test your hypothesis by...” But he realized she wasn’t listening. Her nose was buried in the little book. He sighed, not for the first time that afternoon. He opened his laptop once more and tried to reassemble the train of thought that he’d heard whistling past earlier.

And then he heard an odd sound. It felt as if something small had imploded in his immediate vicinity. As if the air had fallen in on itself.

“Bella?”

There was no response.

“Bella? Where are you?”

At the counter the pages of the little of book of spells fluttered gently. But of Bella there was no sign at all.

Basil found it difficult to sleep that night. He boiled up enough water for both hot water bottles, as usual, but felt guilty when at last he slipped into bed with them. He tucked one against his tummy, and pushed the other to the end of the bed to rest his feet on, and thought about Bella.

He’d looked everywhere he could think of. He examined every aisle of the bookshop. He flung open the door to the kitchenette and the toilet. He went so far as to interrogate the space beneath the counter, where he struggled every day to locate the plug for his Apple. He knew, though, even as he squinted into the dusky recess, that Bella would never do anything undignified.

Then Basil staggered against the wind over to the Rendezvous, full of anxious Scots discussing the foul weather. No sign of Bella there. She must have decided to seek sanctuary elsewhere, he decided at last. Bella was, after all, if nothing else, a survivor. He made his way back to the shop, locked up, and slowly climbed the stairs to the flat.

He had a lonely supper, filled the hotties, and went to bed.

He had a troubled night. He was plagued by dreams of nineteen standing stones. In the centre, wrapped in tartan, stood Bella, facing a low sun that seemed about to plunge into the Irish Sea. She turned slowly towards him and raised an arm, an index finger pointing squarely at him.

“Me?” he mouthed. “What have I done?”

And then he shook himself awake. The grey light of dawn crept into the room. The hot water bottles were tepid. Basil felt a scratch in his throat, a void in his belly. Oh, where could Bella possibly be?

He reeled down the stairs without bothering to make himself breakfast. Wind and sleet battered at him as he fought to insert the key into the lock of the door to the shop. But even before he opened the inner doors he could already hear a familiar sound noise. A vacuum cleaner? But who...

He closed the outer door against the winter blast, pushed open the inner doors and stepped into the shop.

“Morning, Basil.”

It was Bella, wielding the vacuum cleaner with vigour.

“Mind your feet,” she said, pushing the nozzle of vacuum cleaner at the carpet in his immediate vicinity.

“But where... what...”

And then he noticed there was something different about the shop. The counter was spotless. The piles of books that had accumulated on it had been cleared. He surveyed the nearest shelves. Every book was in its ordained alphabetical position.

Behind him, the vacuum cleaner clicked off. He spun around.

“But Bella, I don’t...” understand, he was going to say. But Bella appeared to be paying no attention to him and his confusion. She’d set the vacuum cleaner down and was now whisking at the window display with a feather duster.

“Bella, you have to tell me,” he persisted, “where were you last night?”

“Where do you think, Basil?” I was cleaning the shop. Something you should have been attending to, I fancy.”

“All night?”

“I did what had to be done, no more and no less. And now, as you can see if you used your eyes, it’s all as it should be.”

She propped the feather duster in the corner, wheeled the vacuum cleaner into its nook in the kitchen, and then, arms akimbo, surveyed the shop. Basil followed her eye as it scanned the room. Everything that could gleam, was gleaming. The books in every shelf stood shoulder to shoulder like so many Coldstream Guards. Of dust, there was not a smidgen. Even the chalkboard appeared to have been scrubbed and the invitation to inquire within renewed in vibrant colours.

“Oh, Bella,” Basil said, wondering whether he’d ever be rid of the cottonwool in his head, “I did miss you.”

“Nothing you’ve said this morning,” she said, “makes much sense, Basil. Shall we go to the Rendezvous and have a cappuccino?”

Basil did not manage to squirrel the truth – if, indeed, there was a “truth” – out of Bella over two cups of cappuccino each. She simply dismissed his questions with an airy wave of the hand. In the end he decided that answers were not as important as the fact that she was indeed back.

It was only when, back in the shop, he closed the door behind him that he remembered the book of spells.

“Bell,” he said, “where is the spell book?”

“The what?” she said, looking up from the cashbook which, he noticed en passant, had been brought thoroughly up to date.

“The spell book?”

“You didn’t find a spell in it that... I mean... A sort of Sorcerer’s Apprentice-type of spell? Whisk whisk whisk, scrub scrub scrub?”

“Goodness, Basil, you do have an over-active imagination.”

“But yesterday you cast a spell that attracted all those people into the shop, so I was just wondering whether...”

She interrupted him with her sweetest smile: “Basil, you are so utterly gullible. It’s one of the things I love most about you.”

The door pinged. He looked around and found himself gazing up into the inscrutable face of the giant.

“You’re back,” Basil said unnecessarily.

“So it would appear. Come to collect what’s mine. My wee book.” The giant gave Basil an inquiring look.

“Bella?” She seemed to have disappeared again. Basil felt panic surge through him.

“I trust,” said the giant, “that you’ve put it to good use. Health, wealth and happiness, it was all there for the asking.”

“Bella?”

Bella emerged from the kitchenette, drying her hands. Surely she’d cleaned everything there was to clean?

“The gentleman would like his wee book of spells,” Basil said.

“Of course.” She opened the cash box – the change, Basis noticed, was all in its correct compartments: 1p, 2p, 5p, 10p and so on, each denomination arranged neatly in a horizontal cylinder – and withdrew the little book.

“Here we are,” she said and held it up for the giant. The book disappeared into his hands, and thence, Basil supposed, into one of his compendious pockets.

“Everyone,” said the giant, “deserves his stab at glory.”
And then he was gone.

“I think we missed our stab at glory, Bella,” Basil said.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” she said. “There’s always tomorrow.”

Tomorrow was their last day. Basil supposed that things would be different tomorrow. That the high hopes he’d nurtured for their stay in Wigtown would all be realized. Or, at least, that there’d be no further disasters.

“It’s our last day,” Basil said unnecessarily as he and Bella devoured their Scotch oats. “And the sun’s struggling to make an appearance.”

Outside the kitchen window, the houses along North Main Street had sprung into sharp relief as the slanting rays of the sun struck the façade.

“It’s not raining,” Bella said. She glanced at her phone and stood up briskly. “It’s time, Basil.”

He couldn't see the point. For three days in a row, as rain and sleet had lashed the bookshop, they'd not had a single customer. Surely a little weak sunlight wouldn't bring the shoppers out? He suspected that they'd all gone to ground like so many dormice for the winter.

"Do dormice hibernate?" he asked.

"Don't waste our time, Basil. Put on your fleece and come down to the shop."

Basil huddled at his computer at the table next to the heater. Bella stood outside, frowning at the books on display in the window. Basil knew this meant trouble. He opened the folder he'd called Story Ideas and feigned deep concentration as she stepped back into the shop.

"Please close the door, Bella."

"Come on, it's not so cold. The sun's shining... What are you doing?"

"I'm working on my story." The fact was, though, that Page 1 remained lamentably blank. Bella craned for a look at his screen.

"You haven't written anything," she said. He noted a peevish tone in her voice. He sighed.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Well, to begin with, you can find me a selection of the brightest books in the shop. The window display's shockingly dull. We need to zhuzz it up a little." She was (again) in one of her Action Man moods, he could see.

By noon, no one had crossed the threshold.

Basil wondered whether they mightn't pop down to Craft.

"No," said Bella. She handed him a stick of yellow chalk. "Here. We need to rechalk the chalkboard."

Pity. Craft's Wigtown Bitter was really very good indeed. And besides, he had grown weary of books. Their presence in the shop weighed on him, as if all the authors of all those volumes, whether they were long dead or very much alive, were disappointed with the volume of sales that he and Bella had managed to make during their ten-day stewardship of The Open Book.

He'd had enough of pricing books, he'd had more than enough of shelving them and sorting them and categorizing them. He was tired of the mute Prime Ministers and the voiceless Poltroons. The shelves of old collections of Punch cartoons bored him. The volumes of natural history seemed to be devoted to animals and plants that he had no interest in.

And then the door pinged.

“You see,” Bella hissed at him, before turning her brightest smile on the first customers of the day.

The young couple who entered had been here before, he thought. A man creaked in behind them on a couple of elbow crutches. Basil definitely remembered him.

“Any luck with your panacea?” he asked him.

“No,” said the customer, “but I live in hope.” He swung his way down to the Health and Vitality section.

He was hardly the last in what was turning into a procession. Ohmigod, it was the...

“Any more of those excellent true crime books,” whispered the serial killer hoarsely. Well, as a matter of fact, Bella had discovered another box of hair-raising accounts of mass murderers, beginning with a lurid record of John Christie’s houseful of bodies. The serial killer settled down over them like a vampire on a buxom blonde.

More and more browsers crowded in. Basil saw a beanie featuring a Canadian rugby team bobbing past. Melanie came in for a word with Bella. A man who introduced himself as a poet who’d recently taken up residence in the nearby village of Whithorn was interested in the volumes of South African verse they’d brought with them. He spotted their spiritual advisor hovering at the door.

It was a deluge.

Basil watched the throngs surging up and down the aisles in awe. Bella’s deepest wish – for *turnover* – seemed to be coming true here, on their last afternoon in Wigtown. But what of his own? For ten days he’d made sporadic attempts to find the story he wished to write – but to no avail.

Then, as the muted hubbub rose around him, a series of images coalesced in his mind: the Standing Stones of Torhouse, the ruined castle in which the desolate heroine of Lammermoor had died, the little harbour at Garlieston, the roofless Sorbie Tower, the mysterious woods that dotted the landscape, the abandoned harbour at Wigtown itself with the retreating tide sucking voraciously at the voluptuous banks of mud...

All this came to him in a flash... And as he looked out over the crowded shop, he realized that each of these people – the serial killer, the rugby enthusiast, the poetry-loving settler from London – were figures in that landscape, with their own dreams and desires, their own secret hungers...

Everything came together with a thump.

He opened his laptop. Someone cleared his throat opposite him.

“Yes?”

“I see from your sign outside that you offer free writing advice.” It was a young man who hardly looked old enough to have cultivated the luxurious beard that adorned the lower half of his face.

“Yes,” Basil said. “But if you don’t mind waiting a minute, I just have to jot down something before I forget it.”

His fingers danced over the keyboard. He wrote:

A stout woman in tweed, her blonde thatch squeezed haphazardly beneath a tartan beanie and with an aging Labrador straining on a leash, pushed through the door of the Open Book. Basil was busy at his laptop, so she turned to Bella who was occupied with her cashbook behind the counter.

“Excuse me,” she said in a pronounced Scottish burr, “but I believe you have something for me.”

Bella looked up from her cashbook.

“Yes?”

“I’m Bella,” said the woman.

The End

This story was written while Richard and Trish were spending two weeks in [Wigtown](#), Scotland’s book town, as the stewards of the book shop, The Open Book. The shop and the flat above it are available on [Airbnb](#), but competition to secure it is so fierce that it is booked up for the next three years.

Richard Beynon is a story consultant and an award-winning film and television scriptwriter with a long and accomplished career in the industry. He has written for – or headed the storytelling teams of – many of South Africa’s most popular soaps, dramas and comedies. These include *S’gudi snaysi*, *Going Up*, *Soul City*, *Isidingo*, *Scandal*, *Rhythm City* and *Isibaya*. A former journalist for the *Rand Daily Mail*, he has conceived, shaped and written scores of documentaries. He has lectured on writing for film and television at Wits. He, together with Jo-Anne Richards and Trish Urquhart, founded the creative writing training company All About Writing in 2007.

Operating from Johannesburg and Simonstown in South Africa and from Narrowboat Patience on the canals and rivers in the United Kingdom, All About Writing offers courses, both online and face-to-face, that promote good writing. They include [creative writing](#) and [scriptwriting courses](#), intensive [online coaching](#) and [mentoring](#) programmes as well as [workshops](#) and [writing retreats](#) including our annual retreat in Venice, Italy.