

Creativity Now!

by Susan Green

Runner Up: Body in the Library category,
Scarlet Stiletto Awards 2021

Creativity Now!

The response to the Bessborough Writer's Circle Festival Outreach grant application was extremely pleasing.

No – boring. Marian pressed the backspace key and started again.

We were all extremely pleased that our Festival Outreach grant application was successful.

Still not right. Marian shook her head. Her writing, she knew, tended towards the bland and conventional, and lately she'd been trying to change. To make her language vivid, arresting and immediate, as advised in all the writerly websites and how-to books. This was just a short article for the newsletter, but she knew she could do better.

I'm so excited, she began, and then stopped to look up at the poster above her desk. In big bold type it read:

CREATIVITY NOW! WITH EILISH O'CONNOR

And below that was Eilish O'Connor herself, looking down with a pensive smile via the publicity shot Marian had sourced from her website. With tumbling auburn curls and proudly poised head, Marian thought it was not entirely fanciful to say Eilish resembled a Celtic queen.

A Masterclass with the internationally renowned Booker Prize longlisted author!

'Masterclass' was much better than workshop. So professional and dignified. The word had gravitas. Which contrasted with the liveliness of *Creativity Now!* She'd been so chuffed with that phrase. Vivid? Tick. Immediate? Tick! Though she had agonized over the exclamation marks; they were her particular weakness. But the Writer's Circle had let her have her way, especially as she'd offered to host Eilish O'Connor. Who was arriving at Marian's house soon. In – Marian checked her watch – ten minutes.

Eilish O'Connor, author of *The Stone Farm* and *The Rain in My Village*, was about to be offered tea, home-made shortbread and literary conversation before drinks in the library and an invitation-only Writer's Dinner at the Farmer's Arms.

Literary conversation. A second's disquiet pierced Marian's joy. The thing was – embarrassingly – she hadn't actually read either of Eilish's novels. She'd bought them online as soon as the Masterclass was confirmed but it seemed that every time

she sat down to read, something interrupted her and she had to start again. Or else she fell asleep. However, she'd read all the reviews on Goodreads and two or three interviews on the net and so she felt she could truthfully compliment Eilish on the 'raw' and 'gritty' quality of her writing.

What about her own writing though? Would there be compliments or criticism for *The Body in the Cricket Pavilion*? Some of the Circle members had protested that two thousand words was not nearly enough for Eilish to judge the plot, the characterization, the potential. Marian informed them that wasn't the point.

'It's simply that the organisers, on Miss O'Connor's behalf, have to insist that all the participants have a certain standard of proficiency. That's why they wanted her to look at our W.I.P.'s.'

'What is a W.I.P.?' That was Melissa Delbard, a sweet person but quite unworldly and still really struggling with that new laptop her nephew had given her to replace the electronic typewriter.

'Work in progress,' said Marian and held back on the 'of course' because some of them – most of them, really – were just babes in the woods when it came to the writing life.

She'd finished the first draft of *The Body in the Cricket Pavilion* earlier in the year but she was still polishing. It was her third attempt at a crime novel and by far her best. Her protagonist,

amateur sleuth Susan Soames, was like an old friend; so much so that at times Marian felt as if Susan was actually dictating her own adventures, exclamation marks and all. Would she seem real to Eilish O'Connor? Marian recognized that Susan was in the Miss Marple mould but, she hoped, with a twist. Susan was a widow, for a start. Marian was especially proud of Susan's witty one-sided conversations with her departed husband, which helped her sort the clues from red herrings.

There was the crunch of tyres on the gravel outside, and Marian sprang to her feet.

'I'm so excited!' she said to herself.

It was nearly midnight by the time Marian removed her reading glasses and turned off the bedside lamp. It was past two before she fell asleep. Ros from the Regional Arts Council had tried to warn her.

'She's a bit of a handful,' she'd whispered. At the time, Marian thought it was rather unprofessional of her. Now, she wished Ros had been more forthcoming.

At first, she'd thought Eilish was simply tired. She was certainly an attractive woman, though Marian hadn't expected her to be quite so short. She was less glamorous in the flesh than she appeared in her photograph and rather red in the face. She'd refused afternoon tea and gone straight to her room for a lie down. Though disappointed, Marian understood the artistic

temperament. Naturally, Eilish would have that exquisite sensitivity to mood and ambience that marked the writer out from ordinary mortals.

At five o'clock, she knocked on the bedroom door and invited Eilish to join her for a drink.

'In here,' she said, opening the door with an inner glow of pride.

'I call this,' she did the quotation marks thing with her hands because she didn't want Eilish to think she was being pretentious, '... the library.'

Floor to ceiling bookshelves, deep maroon velvet curtains drawn already against the chill spring night, a gas heater with pretend flames and two cosy armchairs. Marian loved this room; since Len's passing, she often just sat, quietly communing with him and plotting murder mysteries.

'Library?' Eilish looked around. 'So, actually your parlour, living room, lounge, drawing room, what have you?'

'Well yes, I suppose so. I mean, it isn't an actual library obviously, because the house is too small. That's why I did the quotation marks with my fingers. It's what Len and I called it – it was a bit of a joke between us.'

Eilish made no response and, feeling a bit desperate, Marian gestured towards the decanters, glasses and pre-dinner snacks which were placed on the side table.

'Sweet or dry sherry?' she asked?

But Eilish, a look of horror on her face, pointed like Lady MacBeth to Marian's carefully arranged platter.

'Nuts!' Her voice throbbed with emotion.

'Yes, they are nuts,' faltered Marian. Surely they had smoked almonds in Dublin?

'Didn't Ros tell you?'

'Tell me what?'

'For the love of Christ, woman, allergies! Nuts. Also, seafood, sesame seeds, fish.'

She should have been told! But Marian had only recently renewed her First Aid Certificate with CPR and she knew not to fool around. For some people, the facilitator had told them, just being in the same room with the allergen could trigger potentially fatal anaphylactic shock. Acting decisively, she picked up the platter, opened the window and threw the whole thing outside into the garden bed below.

'Do you have an Epi-pen?'

'No need.' And indeed, now the moment of drama had passed, Eilish did look remarkably calm. She patted her handbag.

'I have two, in case. Always in my bag. Always close by.'

'Very good,' said Marian. The first rule of Epi-pens, the first aid facilitator had told them, is you have to keep them with you! They're of no use in your bag or your jacket if you can't get to them in time. It could mean the difference between life and death.

Her guest showed no sign of distress, no swelling of the lips, laboured breathing or skin rash but she resolved to keep a close eye on her anyway.

'Ah, I'll be fine,' said the author, dabbing her mouth with one of Marian's hand-embroidered napkins and tucking a small silver flask back into her handbag. She must have taken it from her bag while Marian was getting rid of the allergy-laden platter. Was it brandy? Compassion flooded Marian as she considered the stress of living with the constant threat of death. Though as a first aider she knew that alcohol was in fact a depressant, she was a woman of the world and understood that, to one of the artistic persuasion, any brush with mortality must give rise to existential angst and an element of self-medication was only to be expected.

Eilish helped herself to a glass of sherry, and Marian did the same.

'Slainte.'

'Ditto,' said Marian, recognizing the famous Irish toast.

Eilish swigged her drink, poured another and launched into a long and no doubt fascinating discussion of – well, of something. The trouble was, though her Irish heritage gave Eilish a beguiling accent and soft lilting delivery, most of the meaning escaped Marian. She supposed it could be mutual. Was Eilish perhaps struggling with Marian's own pronunciation, her Australian accent, her vernacular?

So she spoke very clearly.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Are you deaf? Jesus, Joseph and Mary!'

Marian had been brought up not to discuss disability, sex or religion, so she was not sure what was expected of her. Conversation lapsed. They sat there together in silence until Marian could stand it no longer. Her precious chance of an in-depth one-on-one literary conversation was slipping away.

'Please,' she burst out. 'What's your essential advice to an emerging writer?'

Eilish responded immediately with a couple of words and a ripple of laughter like little tinkling bells.

Marian could feel her eyes almost cross with the effort of comprehension. She thought the famous writer had said 'apply arse'.

'You mean ...?'

Eilish also spoke slowly and with care, and Marian's internal translator kicked in with great clarity.

'I mean "apply arse". To the seat of your chair. I mean sit there. You have to turn up, woman, and sit there, and write.'

'Ah.'

Eilish poured yet another sherry. 'For feck's sake,' she said.

Nor was the dinner at the Farmer's Arms the success Marian had hoped it would be. For a start, the local footy club was holding its traditional cross-dressing fundraiser; raucous singing

filtered through to the bistro and the occasional lingerie-clad athlete staggered to the gents. It was not conducive to sparkling conversation. Or any conversation, really. It didn't help that the committee members were somewhat in awe of their famous guest.

Eilish had no doubt experienced this kind of tricky situation before and so she filled the awkwardness with a kind of monologue, which would have been fine had she not been, understandably, quite so tired and emotional.

'What the feck is a parma?' she lilted.

'Chicken and cheese? That's fecked.'

'Melbourne? It was feckin' awful.'

'This year's Booker? That was fecked.'

'And for feck's sake – who came up with 'Creativity Now!?' Of all the lame-arsed –'

Marian took a deep breath, preparing to confess but dear, unworldly Melissa got in first.

'I hope you don't mind me asking, Eilish, but what does fecked mean?'

'What?' She stabbed angrily at the potatoes that accompanied her steak.

'Well, these taties are, to start off with. What is it, instant feckin' mash?'

'But – fecked. What does it actually mean?'

Eilish stared at her as if she'd been asked a trick question.

‘It means – *fecked*.’

Ed Markov, the Secretary, spoke up, ‘I think it means fucked, Melissa.’

Silence, during which the team song, accompanied by animal noises, could be heard.

‘Goodness,’ said Melissa.

Eighty-eight year old Mrs Ivy Jamieson, Presbyterian stalwart and authoress of *By Pony, Bicycle and On Foot; A Postmistress’s Story*, stood up.

‘At offensive language, Miss O’Connor,’ she said, ‘I draw the line.’ She stalked out with her parma untouched.

‘Jigger me sideways,’ said Eilish with an impish smile. ‘What’s twisted her knickers?’

Hours later, it seemed, Marian managed to get Eilish home. The game of pool, the drinking competition in the public bar, the karaoke machine, the incident with the banana fritter ...

Usually, if Marian could not sleep, she got up and made herself a cup of cocoa. But tonight she did not want to disturb her visitor. Marian shivered, despite the winter-weight doona and wheat pack, as she thought about tomorrow’s Masterclass. Many of the participants were Bessborough locals, fellow members of the Writer’s Circle. She felt proud of them, all of them, for signing up, for exposing the vulnerable soft underbellies of their creativity. For two years now, they’d been coming together at the

Community Centre to workshop their ideas, to read and critique, to encourage, console and dream. She pictured each of them, with their precious W.I.P.’s.

Damien Jones, a dear sweet boy and, at nineteen, the youngest Circle member. He was also Bessborough’s only Goth. To write *The Four Ethereal Winds of Kronton* in verse was a bold and unconventional choice.

Linny Cohen, the shy, sweet Prep teacher at Bessborough PS, working on a YA novel called *Is He For Real?*

Amanda Cox, owner of Bessborough Floristry and local history buff, digging deep into research for her historical saga, *All the Creeks Cross*.

Ed Markov, retired engineer and mainstay of the Amateur Radio Club. He was already looking for a publisher for his work of auto fiction, *Specification*.

Silkie Ocean, reiki practitioner and driving instructor. *The Orb Within* was a truly unique combination of self-help, memoir and motoring hints.

Melissa Delbard, a dear friend, a keen knitter and fairytale enthusiast, who had written and illustrated a picture story book, *Cheeky the Kookaburra*.

And herself, of course. Marian Pine, widow, author of the *Susan Soames* mystery series (*The Body in the Pantry, The Body in the Vestry, The Body in the Cricket Pavilion*) and grant writer extraordinaire.

Was that the beginning of acid reflux? Marian reached for the Gaviscon and lay there, in the dark, pondering. Was the whole thing going to be a disaster?

It seemed the visions of shambolic failure that haunted Marion's dreams were about to come true. It was ten o'clock, the advertised starting time, and only four of the eight Bendigo writers had turned up. And Eilish was taking a very long time in the loo. Marian took a deep breath, determined to be upbeat. After all, she thought, she'd written the grant application; it was, in a way, her show and the old saying was, 'The show must go on'.

'Good morning everyone!' She smiled as widely as she could.

'Thank you for coming. Eilish will be here in just –'

'What the feck?'

'Here she is! How about a warm Bessborough greeting?'

The timid smattering of applause couldn't hide Eilish's furious brogue.

'Who. Did. *That?*'

'I did.' Damien raised his hand.

With a side reference to Our Lord that was sure to offend Amanda, who Marian knew for a fact to be a regular communicant at St Patrick's, Eilish unloaded at length on poor Damien when all he'd done was take coloured chalks, written WELCOME EILISH O'CONNOR and then drawn a border of shamrocks with a cheeky female leprechaun to one side.

Marian quickly moved the whiteboard in front of the blackboard.

'A very interesting discussion about national stereotypes and the concept of body shaming!' she said brightly. 'But let's not forget why we're here. Another big clap please for our wonderful guest!'

And she had to say this for her presenter – Eilish was a trouper. A thorough professional, with laser-like focus. After the little contretemps over the leprechaun, the morning went smoothly. Ed had all the tech ready and working, so there was an extensive Powerpoint presentation, with one of those little laser pointers for emphasis.

WRITE FROM WITHIN; FIND YOUR OWN VOICE;
PRIME THE PUMP

Eilish talked fluently and at length about each of these topics and snowed them with a blizzard of handouts and short writing exercises. Marian was almost overwhelmed by the abundance of inspiration.

But not all the participants felt the same. The Bendigo writers did not return after lunch; neither did they tender their apologies, which was rather rude. And the remaining participants grew increasingly restless and, Marian thought, unappreciative. It was most distressing.

'Ah, Eilish, when will we get the chance to discuss our projects?' asked Ed. A gaunt and serious man, his 1000-word work was

inspired by Karl Ove Knausgard, and based on his own years with the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works.

‘Is this it? I mean, I was hoping for a more targeted approach,’ said Silkie. ‘I mean, like how to find a publisher for *The Orb Within*. I mean, like, right now, memoir is supposed to be hot, self-help is supposed to be hot ...’

‘Darlin’, this workshop’

‘Masterclass,’ said Ed.

‘Masterclass then. It’s about writing fiction. Things you’ve made up.’

‘But you said write from within,’ said Silkie.

‘I keep a gratitude journal,’ said Linny.

‘Me too,’ said Damian with a shy smile.

‘Well, that’s grand,’ said Eilish. ‘That will make you a saint, but never a writer.’

Melissa chimed in. ‘Did you have time to look at *Cheeky the Kookaburra*? Did you like the pictures?’

Marian suspected Eilish of refreshing herself from her hip flask in the ladies over the break; she was flushed and swayed ever so slightly as she stood in front of the whiteboard.

‘I repeat; this workshop – masterclass, whatever – it’s about fiction writing. As in, writing *fiction*. Not gratitude fecking journals, not twee little kiddies’ books, not self-help, or any of that shite.’

‘But look.’ Ed held out his copy of *The Rain in My Village*. ‘On the back cover, here, it says, “informed by the author’s childhood”. Doesn’t that mean it’s to some extent autobiographical?’

‘To some extent, Ed, that is pure bollocks. I mean, fair enough, I grew up in Dublin and all, but for feck’s sake, I got the idea from a story in the *Irish Times*. If that was my personal experience, I’d be in custody.’ She laughed; more little tinkling bells.

‘I write *this*.’ And she grabbed a red marker and scrawled in large capitals on the whiteboard: FICTON

The class stared at the enigmatic word.

‘Ah, Eilish, I think you’ve left out the “I”,’ said Ed.

‘I what?’

‘The “i”. You’ve left out the “i” out of ‘fiction’.’

‘Are you trying to be funny with me?’

‘No, Eilish. You’ve made a spelling error.’

That was when Eilish lost her laser-like focus. In fact, she just lost it.

‘Well, you can take your spelling error and stick it up your arse! No-one’s going to give a toss about your feckin’ sewer, you gobshite! Or your orb, Sulky or whatever it is you call yourself –’

‘I don’t have to listen to this!’ said Silkie.

‘Then don’t!’

Ed and Silkie walked out. Amanda left after the tea break. Linny, Melissa, Damien and herself, the dispirited remainder of the Masterclass, laboured away on Eilish's increasingly random two-minute writing exercises – "Imagine you're a snail!" "Write from the perspective of your lunch" – until she broke into another monologue, this time about the group being creativity-sucking vampires, the town being a shithole and the venue being a joke. To top it off, with a dramatic gesture, she swung the whiteboard aside to reveal the leprechaun.

'And I've had to endure yet another feckin' Irish joke from a half-witted, illiterate, untalented undertaker. *Ethereal Winds of Kronton!*' she jeered. 'I'll give you wind.' The noise was deliberate, loud and unmistakable and if Marian could have fainted at will, she would have. Instead, she jumped to her feet.

'Time to call it a day! Thank you so much, Eilish, for... Well, for...'

It was hard to meet Damien's eyes as he packed up his notebook and pens.

It was six o'clock. Gentle snoring came from the slumped figure in the armchair. Eilish slept but Marian paced up and down in her library. She could have forgiven her. Would have forgiven her, even for the damning assessment of her Susan Soames mystery – 'Half-arsed, timid, derivative, badly written shite.' – and the unkind things she said to Amanda and Linny and the rest of the group. They were resilient. They would recover. One day,

and probably soon, the Writer's Circle would be able to laugh as they remembered the events of the Masterclass. They had spouses and families, friends and pets. They had achievements and pleasures apart from writing. And it was obvious by now that Eilish was seriously unhinged. A dipsomaniac and what the young might call a "hot mess". Marian had a handle on current slang, thanks to young Damien.

Dear Damien. Despite his black suit and piercings and platform boots and eyeliner, he was a kind, generous and sensitive soul, carer for his bipolar mum and fifteen-year-old sister. The fantasy world of Kronton was his escape, his refuge, a beautiful world where there were no meltdowns and no suicide attempts, there was food in the fridge and the phones at Centrelink were answered on the first ring.

So what if *The Four Ethereal Winds of Kronton* was lame? So what if Damien was borderline dyslexic? The sight of the poor boy, sitting in front of Eilish and trying not to cry, with soft trembling lips and tear-filled eyes, pierced Marian to the core.

'Who does she think she is?' thought Marian

Glimpsing Eilish's handbag on the floor beside the armchair, she picked it up and walked slowly down the passage to the kitchen. Ten minutes later, and Marian had prepared supper.

'Here you are, dear. A nice bowl of soup. You'll feel better if you eat something.'

Eilish sat up. Her eyes met Marian's.

'I think I might have got a bit out of hand back there with that Masterclass,' she said sheepishly.

'That you did,' said Marian. 'But it doesn't matter. We all understand.'

Eilish's eyes widened. 'You do? It's the pressure, you see.'

'Yes, dear. This is tomato soup.'

Tomato soup, with a few tablespoons of hummus and peanut butter, some cat food ('Tasty Tuna') and a good slurp of fish sauce.

'I'm making some toast, as well. I'll go and get it. Don't wait for me.'

Marian watched as Eilish dipped her soup spoon into the hot, red liquid and brought it to her lips, then turned and left the room, locking the door behind her. Back in the warmth of her kitchen, and ignoring the noise from the front room, she sat at the table and opened her laptop. New folder, new document. First page.

She had thought about calling her new story *Creativity Now!* It was certainly a vivid, immediate and arresting title. But no. She was old-school (another phrase she'd learned from Damien) and she knew it. She typed:

'A Susan Soames Mystery: THE BODY IN THE LIBRARY'

Susan Green

Susan lives in Castlemaine, Victoria. Her CV includes teacher, bookseller and aged care worker. She's had 13 books published, including the junior fiction *Verity Sparks* series. She decided to enter the Scarlet Stiletto awards over 25 years ago and finally got around to it this year.