TLC Showcase

Shelley Harris

Extract from *Homicide (and other editorial necessities)*

By Shelley Harris

I'd been working on my novel for about a year when I sent it to The Literary Consultancy. I was excited about my concept – an iconic photograph, its public face a stark contrast to the secrets which lie behind it. I was pretty enamoured of my structure, too: a complex, multi-viewpoint narrative held together with the device of a reporter seeking out the photograph's subjects in later years. Think Citizen Kane, and you get the general idea.

When the report came back, I realised I was less Orson Welles, more Edward D. Wood. The feedback was detailed, perceptive and candid. Its writer was a former editor for a major publishing house; when I mentioned her name to an industry insider months later, she told me I'd lucked out. My reader expressed enthusiasm for the concept. She thought some of my writing was good, that the book had potential. But she had serious problems with my narrative.

'Your structure puts you in something of a strait jacket,' she wrote. 'It means you have half a dozen characters, none of whom has been fully realised nor their lives fully explored…you will find it extremely difficult to get an agent in the current climate.'

I think I can be forgiven for my reaction, which was to take to my bed, rail at the gods, and ingest a stiff Gin.

However, my reader had done me a kindness – two, in fact. She had pointed out a fatal flaw in the story – and better that after one year than after three. She also took one of those multiple characters waiting patiently in the crowd and gave him a firm shove in the small of the back. 'This one,' she said. 'He's your protagonist.' He hadn't been the easiest bloke to work with. I looked at him like a disappointed participant in a blind date and decided that, since we were here anyway, the restaurant table booked and no-one else likely to turn up, we'd better get on with it.

Years later, completing the novel and having to say goodbye to him – to Satish – I sat at my keyboard and cried like a baby. Thanks to that editorial report, I had a central character I cared passionately about. Maybe other readers would, too.

In the wake of the report I set to work, cutting great swathes of writing, some of my best stuff in fact, because it just didn't serve the story – the new story – I was creating. I experienced the sharp end of that oft-quoted dictum, that in writing we must 'murder our darlings'.

I think it's worth considering what it really means to 'murder our darlings'. The term was coined by Arthur Quiller-Couch in his 1914 lecture, 'The Art of Writing'. His wit

deserves fuller quotation:

‘Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it—whole-heartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings.’

It’s easy to get rid of the rubbish bits. We hate them anyway, or we hide from ourselves the knowledge that they are wrong (inelegant, imprecise), but feel relieved when they finally go. The challenge is to murder your darlings – the ones you love, knowing all the time that they represent some of the best writing of which you are capable. It’s an absolute bugger, and we all have to do it to make our books better.

In my case, the most loved of the darlings I murdered were the set-pieces which introduced those multiple characters. Satish’s survives intact, right at the start of the novel, but five others had to go. They were dearly-loved, the first pieces of prose which made me think: maybe I can do this thing.

Afterwards, I took the manuscript to a writing festival and read it out in a showcase for unpublished authors, a sort of literary X-Factor. Some agents in the audience expressed interest, and when I signed up with one – the lovely Jo Unwin of Conville and Walsh – she told me how very complete it felt, a proper book. I smiled sweetly, thought of all my murdered darlings, and made a mental note to buy a large drink for everyone at TLC.

And now I have an excuse to share some of that lost writing, so that one of my darlings has a stay of execution. I’m going to pretend that it illustrates my point in some way, or is the perfect coda to this (flimsy) argument of mine, but you know the truth; this is one of my best bits, and I’m proud of it.

Extract—One of the 'murdered darlings' from *Jubilee* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012)

Peter writes to his wife the old-fashioned way, with pen on paper; he is a relic. The lads tease him for it when they come in to make their breakfast, Mustafa tilting his chin towards the pages and smiling gently – 'Why you no email? Everyone email' – Jaček regarding the blue pad with curiosity. Under Peter's fingers, the sheets crackle softly. He thinks of medicated toilet paper in the bathrooms of his youth. He is comfortable with the boys' arrogant modernity. He is the elder statesman of the house, even a proxy father sometimes. It's his job to be past it.

The kitchen is a good place to write in the mornings. It faces east, and if he sits with his back to the window, the London dawn can reach over his shoulder and illuminate the page. When the words look fuzzy he can push the paper away from him across the table, keeping it within that wedge of light. For the first time in years – since the move to South Africa, in fact - he has to consider the weight of paper, and the cost of that weight. It recalls those first months in Durban, everything down to the bone, measured out with frugal precision. Once a week, Jan's letter to her Mum. The aerogramme filled with her cramped script, and the two lines left him for the P.S. There was sometimes a flash of colour on the front of the blue rectangle – drawings of a Protea or a Bee Eater or a Springbok.

Now he and Jan are separated by that same distance, and he weighs what he tells her. When he writes, he feels perilously close to some unnamed, uncontrollable emotion, something which could overwhelm him and disrupt his centre of gravity, something which could fell him. So he keeps things light and newsy, sharing stories of his working day, his colleagues and fellow-residents, the endless possibilities occasioned by his job. His accommodation, he tells her, is superb! Low-maintenance, just the ticket. At work, his own lack of family ties has become an advantage, as has his age – steady, trustworthy, reliable. Plenty of time to himself, he tells her, even on shift. Lots of opportunity for overtime, some administrative work if he wants it. He gives her estimates of the money he'll send home, knowing that she needs this measure of control.

As the sun moves round behind him, he writes about his recent meeting with their daughter, pre-empting Jan's imagined questions, providing the detail she craves. What their girl is wearing, who she's seeing. That spirit of hers, still gathering everything to her, still tasting it all greedily. He tells Jan about their lunch in a pub, scrubbed-pine tables and viscous lines of olive oil snaking over the food. She had shown off her knowledge to him, playfully lingering over the wine list, and settled the bill on her way back from the bathroom. He chooses not to share his brief flare of irritation at this shift in his status. It's the only thing about their meeting which he holds back. He writes in the comfortable knowledge of a shared fascination, knowing nothing is too much, too mundane. This cannot be over-written. He passes on some news of their

son, scraps dropped to him over the oily salad and Gewürztraminer.

Peter's uniform collar is starting to rub against his neck. He reaches up to rest his hand there, let it take some of the scratching for a while. On the way he checks his watch; twenty minutes until he leaves. By the time he gets back from work tonight that bloody collar will be all he can think about. Ten hours behind the security desk, nodding benevolently at PR agents, journalists and designers – ponces all - with just the right combination of authority and obsequiousness: a butler with a cosh. He'll post his letter on the way.

His wife's reply will come in about ten days, and will bring with it transparency. She seems not to struggle as he does. She will tell him about other people's marriages, the state of the garden, how their car is running. She will bemoan the local crime rate, and pass on stories of the recent horrors that have overcome their friends as they Sat In Their Own Living Room, Minding Their Own Business! or Just Waited In Their Car For The Lights To Change! She will sign off with brief affection.

Peter signs off too now, his pen lingering over the page as he considers his options. He cannot tell her, *I am desperate to come home, please let me, let's find a different way*. Nothing would be gained by *I see now I was wrong, I am hollowed out with missing you, have I done enough time yet?* And as for, *this will never happen again*, it has been emptied of all useful meaning. So he says, chin up, sweetheart. Love always, Peter.

About the Writer

Shelley Harris was born in South Africa and emigrated to Britain at the age of six. Romantically, she wrote her first novel in Paris, in a tiny bedsit near the Musée Beaubourg. Less romantically, she was too nervous to send the manuscript to agents, so she stuffed it in a drawer and did other jobs instead. She has been a local journalist, a secondary school teacher, a filler of envelopes, an assistant in a wine shop, and a bouncer at teenage discos. When she returned to writing she drew on fragments of her past to produce *Jubilee*. The novel is about an iconic photograph taken at a Silver Jubilee street party in 1977 – and about the boy at the centre of that photograph. She sits at her desk most days with a nice cup of tea, and tries her best to produce 1,000 words. When she's not writing, she volunteers at her local Oxfam bookshop, where she loves helping customers find just the right book. She's also shamelessly collecting material for her next novel. *Jubilee* will be published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in 2011.