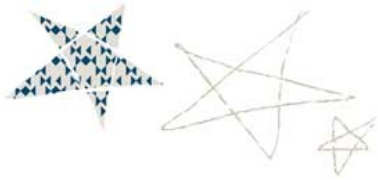


## TLC Showcase

# Julia Ross



Introduction	2
Extract : <i>Lessons in Perspective</i>	3
About the Writer	13

## Introduction to Lessons in Perspective Extract

My story, 'Lessons in Perspective' developed from an experience I had while spending a few days on holiday in a Normandy farmhouse. I hesitate to use the word supernatural, but something very odd happened in that house and I was glad not to be alone. I played with the memory for years taking it in different directions in stories until I finally decided to explore the line I finally took. What if the protagonist, who is consumed with grief, came to a place where there is a resonance of a past tragedy and by working through the clues to what happened there, came to terms with her own past and was finally able to move on?

## Experience of The Literary Consultancy

Without TLC this novel would have gone the way of all the other attempts. The Chapter and Verse Mentoring Scheme gave me deadlines to work to and thus a sense of responsibility to my mentor, my work and myself. My My story, 'Lessons in Perspective' developed from an experience I had while spending a few days on holiday in a Normandy farmhouse. I hesitate to use the word supernatural, but something very odd happened in that house and I was glad not to be alone. I played with the memory for years taking it in different directions in stories until I finally decided to explore the line I finally took. What if the protagonist, who is consumed with grief, came to a place where there is a resonance of a past tragedy and by working through the clues to what happened there, came to terms with her own past and was finally able to move on?

mentor was well chosen by TLC and proved invaluable in helping me to see, very early on in the process, that the structure I was trying to use was actually handicapping me. Once I had accepted her advice and freed myself from that structure, there was no stopping me. Everyone at TLC has been supportive, kind, professional and above all completely honest in their assessments. I owe them a great deal.

## Extract from “*Lessons in Perspective*”

Thursday, March 21st

I had quite a fright last night. This morning, with the rain-stained sunlight washing the grass and filtering through the apple trees, the quiet innocence of the scene laughs at my fear. I’m not used to being in a rural area, the suburbs are filled with light and I’ve forgotten, or perhaps I never knew, what it means to be in complete darkness. I’m re-discovering a fear of the dark that is fundamental to all of us.

What unnerves me too, is the quiet. When I switch off the radio or the music, I’m left with the silence. And when I switch off the light I have darkness and silence. Every little sound is strange and unnerving. I lie there in my sleeping bag on the inflatable mattress as the dim glow of the dying fire intensifies and exaggerates the depth of the shadows. I try to pinpoint, identify and neutralise every crack, squeak, scuffle and sigh, rendering them harmless. I’ll have to leave the radio on. Maybe I’ll have to leave the light on too. I like it best when it rains. All the interior sounds are cancelled out by the familiar and comforting hiss and rattle of rain on slate and stone. It’s a lullaby that blocks my ears to everything that might be going on around me and soothes me into sleep.

Last night was the first completely dry night since I arrived. The rain slowed in the early evening and then stopped altogether. I was sitting on the hearth, next to the fire. The temperature had dropped with the retreat of the rain clouds, and there was no breeze. The fire was burning sluggishly but gave enough heat to dispel the damp, and warm the musty air. I was listening to the World Service. Rather I had the radio on for company and was giving most of my attention to the book I’d bought, on the monastery. I read that it has a small Bellini and a Van Eyck and would open its doors to paying customers on Easter Monday.

Some one hammered furiously on the back door of the house. The door leads directly from the courtyard into the room in which I was sitting so, as my gaze leapt up from my book, I saw the door shake and judder under the force of some one knocking. It’s a solid, wooden-panelled door, not easy to displace. The volley brought

something urgent, unstoppable and I had an overwhelming feeling that it was terrible news. But who could it be? I know hardly anyone here. I'd heard no car, yet how could they arrive without one? A bicycle? And why would they knock like that and not just call my name?

It wasn't late, around ten o'clock, although, as I have learned, that is late in the country, and too late for visitors. It has taken me time to write these thoughts but they tumbled together into my mind in an instant. My brain cleared an emergency area for them. 'It's dark, I'm alone, what shall I do? This could be dangerous.' I don't think I screamed or shouted only leapt to my feet ready for flight. On an out breath, I managed to ask:

"Who's there? Who is it?" The voice was so unlike my own that I wondered if I had really asked the question. The fact that there was no reply only heightened my anxiety. Why didn't they answer? Surely they understood.

"Qui est là?" My own voice this time with a tinge of impatience. I strained to hear a whisper, a shuffling of feet, bicycle wheels splashing through the puddles of the courtyard, but there was nothing from outside. The interior noises continued, the hiss of sap in a log just caught by the flames, the play of voices in the discussion from London.

The silence from outside unnerved me. I didn't want to open the door, it was the barrier between light and inky murk, safety and the unknown. But, it became clear to me that I could not just stay inside imagining some one, even now, scouring the outside for another way to enter, waiting for the light to go out. I would have to open the door and take a look outside.

I glanced around for a weapon. There were knives in the kitchen but I could not leave that door unwatched, and besides, I didn't want to give my intruder something he might use against me. The only heavy object in the room was a torch, the kind designed to give a wide, intense beam. I picked it up. I could use it to dazzle, or swing it with force, or even throw it. Who knows what strength fear might give me?

I edged towards the door working up my anger to actually open it. There was

still no sound from outside. Consequently, I flung myself at the door, wrenched back the bolt, and in one movement hauled the door inwards and propelled myself outside.

“What the hell do you think you are doing, playing stupid games? Show yourself! Where are you?”

I spun in a semi-circle throwing an arc of light around me over the dairy, the barn and the gateway. I turned more slowly back from right to left this time, then again left to right, lingering over the walls, windows, doorways, the pediment above the entrance of the main house. I even examined under the eaves, half expecting to see a figure clinging by his fingertips to a piece of guttering, and finally onto the roof of the dairy and the barn. The scene reflected back was one of innocent, rain-sodden, tranquillity. There was no one.

\*

I asked Adrien to put a light over the courtyard door for me. He thought I meant in the future. I explained that I wanted it now. I had to tell him about the knocking to convince him it was important. He seemed concerned, asked ‘the boy’ which idiot kids in the village would knock on a door then run away. He would go and see their parents. ‘Boy’ was unable to come up with the name of anyone so stupid. Adrian then suggested a big dog, not that I should get one - although that wouldn’t be such a bad idea - but that one of the dogs from the neighbouring farms might have strayed and chosen my porch to lie in. After a little sleep, maybe he got a fit of scratching and that caused the hammering on the door. ‘Boy’ concurred that there were lots of big dogs around.

For a moment, it seemed a likely theory, and a much more reasonable explanation than the rabid axe-man my imagination had conjured. The dog would have sidled away oblivious to my fear and my shouted questions. If anything, my shouts would have convinced him to get out of there fast. How comforting it seemed in the weak daylight; my roving canine dexterously curling his huge body to manoeuvre giant paw behind giant ear and scratch enthusiastically, innocent of the quaking fear he had induced on the other side of the door.

Almost reassured, but not quite, I insisted that I needed a light there in any case, to be able to see to unlock the door when I returned after dark. Something about my manner persuaded Adrien. He muttered about an electrician, packed 'the boy' into the small truck he drives and set off to convince his pet electrician to abandon his other work and arrive before dusk.

By this afternoon, the light was there. It's bare, bright, and adds nothing aesthetically to the building, and will, in time, have to be replaced. I paid the electrician cash, even tipped him for his quick work, so relieved did I feel to have my light. Adrien and 'boy' hung about until well after the daylight had gone and there was nothing more they could do outside. They were reluctant to leave me alone, but I finally convinced them to go home to their suppers. I would be fine with my new light.

And now that I'm alone again and it's evening, does it help to know that I can switch on a light outside my door to reveal – what? That is the problem. The phantom dog with an itch, may or may not return. Perhaps, if he really was there, I have frightened him off for good. The playful, silent adolescents who didn't even giggle at the thought of their victim's terror, may have found some one else to tease this evening. The rabid murderer could be hiding even now waiting for his chance. Would it make me feel any better to meet him under the glare of a bare electric light? Worst of all is if there is nothing; a door that moves and reverberates by itself, something I see and hear, yet which cannot be there. Will clear, white light help me to confront the unravelling of my reason?

Friday, March 22<sup>nd</sup>

The woman from the bar, the one I saw the other night, suddenly appeared in the garden this morning. She was just there. I can't explain it. She gave me quite a shock. I didn't see her approach, didn't hear the creak of the garden gate. She just suddenly materialised.

I'd gone upstairs to get away from the noise of the drill. Adrien and 'boy' have to dig up a concrete floor in the milking parlour to make a hole big enough to

accommodate the huge septic tank we need to run our business. The noise of the drill shakes up every one of my brain cells. I don't know how anyone can stand there attached to it and judder up and down as the vibrations pass through his body. But I suppose it's an easier job than attacking the floor with a pick-axe and sledgehammer, which is how they started out.

I'd taken myself in hand to clean the upstairs bedrooms and light fires to air them, to take the house on and stop floating about. As I passed the windows on my sweep across the floor I looked out. It was raining again. A glimpse out on my second pass, and there she was. I gripped the brush handle, though it did little to steady me. I was relieved on looking again to see her still there. At least she wasn't my fanciful invention.

I recognised her at once – same pale cream raincoat, same felt hat, same dark-green umbrella sheltering her from the rain. Her one concession to the country mud and puddles was the pair of rubber boots she was wearing, but they still looked shiny, barely used. A town-dweller's attempt to be prepared for the country, they would never set foot in a rutted field or paddle in cow pats. She was looking at the house and not coming up what is left of the path to knock at the door. I couldn't see her expression through the rain and the distraction of umbrella and hat, but she seemed to be surveying the decay. I didn't think she had seen me and had an instinctive urge to duck away from the window and pretend not to be in, even if she did come to the door. I was in no state to receive visitors, and the way she had suddenly appeared unnerved me. What was she doing here watching my house? Why didn't she just come and knock on the door?

She must have felt my hostile stare, for at that moment her gaze came up to the upper storey and I know she saw me. A sudden stiffening of her pose betrayed her consciousness of me, but still she made no move to acknowledge me or to come towards the house. Instead she remained looking upward as if appraising her property.

\*

“I came in this house last time for the sale of the objects. No one came as a guest here. Old Vasseur was so savage.” She spoke English well but with heavy French intonation so that I had to listen carefully. I had let her into the living room of the annexe through the French windows, and she continued to look around her.

“I am Marguerite de Guerque. I am your near neighbour. Excuse me, I don’t know your name, only that you are English, a foreigner like me.”

“Hannah Byfield.” I gave her my right hand and she grasped it briefly, her eyes flicking to my face for a moment before continuing their perusal of the room.

“I don’t understand,” I said, “I thought you were French?”

“From Paris - foreign for the people here.”

“But you know my house?”

She looked puzzled for a moment.

“Yes, of course, it is your house now. Forgive me. For me it is the Vasseur house. We always called it that when I was a child. I came here every July and August with my family.”

“Would you like to see the rest of the house? I was just doing some cleaning upstairs. I need to make it more habitable. At the moment I’m camping out down here.”

Her gaze had hardly moved from the sleeping bag and my possessions, strewn about as if thrown by some vengeful poltergeist. What she saw seemed to fascinate her but I was acutely embarrassed by it. The last thing I had been expecting was a guest. I was, by this time, so used to the disorder that I too got a shock when I saw it through her eyes. Who lived here: bag lady, a drifter who’d broken in? Some one with no order or regularity in her life: a slovenly, unbalanced recluse? Partly to distract her pitying gaze from the evidence of my pathetic living arrangements, partly to reward her friendly impulse in visiting me, I showed her the other rooms of the annexe.



“I never went upstairs. The sale, if I remember well, was there, in the big house and in the courtyard.”

She followed me up the plain wooden stairs and into the bedroom overlooking the garden. I realised at once that there was nothing to see, but at least there was nothing of myself to invite the scrutiny of those fastidious brown eyes.

“You can’t see my house.” She was looking through the window at the way she had come in. “It’s behind that little wood. How is it possible to build a house where you see nothing?”

“Does your house have a lovely view?” I asked, bristling at the criticism of my short-sighted home.

“You will see. It was built by my grandfather, not a Norman peasant who only sees the point of his nose!”

We went into the bedroom opposite and she made straight for the window that looked out towards the barn and the noise and dust of the workmen.

“What do they do there?” She suddenly sounded very annoyed.

I explained about the installing of a new septic tank and our plans for the house. She continued to stare at the milking parlour, then looked at me. I thought she hadn't understood, but finally she asked:

“It must go there, in that place?” I started on the long story of why we couldn't dig up the courtyard or the orchard, but she clearly wasn't listening to my answer and so we went back downstairs to the kitchen.

“Berthe made this kitchen, I am sure,” she said. “She lived here for a time, with her family. She had three small children. She would need a bathroom and a proper kitchen, and she had a little culture. She wasn't such a peasant as her father.”

She laughed, but there was no joy in it, only perhaps, I thought, venom.

“Berthe was the daughter of the owner?” I asked.

“Yes, Old Vasseur had one daughter,” she confirmed.

“But she didn't choose to stay here?”

She didn't answer me at once but stayed staring at the gloomy green tiles in that sombre, freezing kitchen, which may already have been part of the answer.

“People from the city, like me, want the country. In the country, people want the city. Her husband was no farmer.”

I offered to make her a coffee. I had bought everything necessary in an effort to keep Adrien and Boy at work and out of the bar. But then I remembered there was nowhere to sit down and drink it.

“Oh no. I am on my walk. I have to walk every morning and I have not to drink so much coffee.”

She brushed aside my offer of a tour of the main house – another day, perhaps. She seemed anxious now to be on her way.

“How can you bear this insupportable noise?” she asked as I let her out into the courtyard. “You must come and stay with me!”

What an odd thing to say. Of course I declined, I had to supervise the builders. That was why I was here and not in England, I explained. I didn't tell her that I wouldn't dream of going to stay with some one I'd met half an hour ago. Was she mad?

“You can stay at my house at night and stay here in the day. I have four bedrooms and more than one bathroom, and a real kitchen.”

She set off towards the gateway and the continuation of her walk.

“Bring your things this evening. Adrien or Solange Croissy can show you the place. Everyone knows me.”

And then she disappeared behind the wall.

Saturday, March 23rd

Since that strange moment, the other night, I find myself anxious about going to bed, and am having difficulty getting to sleep. I haven't resorted to the pharmaceutical cocktail yet. I brought everything with me - just in case. I did try an alcoholic cocktail, or rather half a bottle of local rough white, but it didn't work, just gave me terrible indigestion and kept me awake. Alcohol doesn't work for me. I'm not really doing anything so I don't really need to sleep, but God, the nights seem like weeks as I lie there listening to all the sounds, and flipping through the snapshots of the past.

I think my sleeping problems started long ago, when I became a mother. I've never recovered from that sense of anxiety; the need to be completely alert because I was responsible for another being. Even today, when I know I failed in my duty to Rob and can do no more to help him, the tension won't leave me. When I first brought Rob home as a newborn, everyone told me to keep up my strength by sleeping when the baby slept. But I couldn't bear it when he was asleep. I felt I had to watch over him: keep a vigil in case something happened when he was sleeping. But, however hard I tried, I couldn't stay awake then. I would fall asleep, then he would wake up and then wake me with his crying. My mother called it crying, I knew he was screaming at me for falling asleep and leaving him vulnerable.

He needed twenty-four hour attention. As his mother I had made him that promise. I kept him in my bed. Everyone, from mother to health visitor, told me not to. They were right, I suppose. Graham moved to the sofa. He needed to sleep in order to work and keep us. He couldn't stand the noise, couldn't compete with Rob for my affection. No one seemed to understand that Rob was so fragile, anything might harm him: a chill in the air, too much milk, too little milk, vaccination - all those stories about cot death. I had to be vigilant and trust no one else. They couldn't bathe him, or pick him up when he screamed. For them he was just another crying baby. How could I trust them?

I remember tiny pin-points of calm when I looked into his eyes. There are moments of unendurable love amid all the blackness. My mother said I was exhausted. The health visitor said I had depression. Apparently I was crying all the time. He screamed and I cried. I knew even then that I was never meant to be a

mother. I just didn't have the strength to watch over him twenty-four hours a day.  
I'm only sorry that time has proved me right.

## About the Writer

I have a vivid memory of the excitement completing my first sentence gave me. It was 'This is a house' and I wrote it underneath my picture of a house in my first year at primary school. That thrill in creating something new has never left me over the years. I have written short stories, sketches and very short plays and



have begun longer stories on more than one occasion, but this is the first novel I've found the confidence and stamina to finish. The urge to tell stories and present the lives of others is also present in my love of acting and directing in amateur productions. I also love to travel to see how other people construct their lives, and as a teacher I have been fortunate to be able to combine travel with work spending time in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Holland Spain and Italy where I still live. I have recently retired but find myself busier than ever.