

# *The* **Redbridge Newsletter**

*Edited, designed and produced by retired members in Redbridge to share with colleagues across London*

**SUMMER 2023**

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*NEU members at Ilford County High school formed just one of the many dozens of picket lines across the borough during strike action for better pay and proper funding for education last term. Our Newsletter welcomes comments, reports and pictures from working members. Contact details inside.*

# Meanderings

Your editors do like a challenge and in the articles we publish, controversial issues are never far from the surface.

Throughout our lives we all come up against the imponderables – who am I, what does it all mean, what's the point of life? And we can give ourselves answers that satisfy the moment and put our uncertainties on hold. There comes a time though when this isn't enough – for some sooner than for others. This quest for meaning, for understanding our own place in the general scale of things can be lifelong or sporadic, can begin when we are young or wait until advancing years make us impatient to know. We can seek the answers in philosophy, in literature, in religion; we can look for someone or some system of thought or belief to guide us. We can express our searching through the way we lead our lives, through creativity, our care for the natural world and our work with others. As educators and parents, how we nurture the next generation is shaped by both the search and the potential answers.

In Ken's article, you can read one man's very personal testimony to his own search for meaning in life.

In recent years we have all had to confront things that disrupt our lives. Many of the pillars of our existence have been knocked away. We have to reckon with a confused and often heartless political system, the crumbling of all the support services we grew up taking for granted, the fears and inequalities, the enduring damage to health (both physical and mental) resulting from the months of a mismanaged pandemic. The fractured relationship with Europe has for many of us

severed contact with family and friends; its repercussions in business and commercial interests have helped to produce the unsustainable cost-of-living damage to well-being. The appalling, vindictive response of supposedly civilised countries to the refugee crisis has turned local conflict and dislocation into a world-wide catastrophe. Our right – and ability – to protest may now be punitively curtailed, but we can still find ways to show we care. Jo writes movingly about Brian Haw's need to frame his anxieties and the convictions these gave rise to in a one-man long-term protest.

During our working lives, we all encountered challenges of varying natures. In pre-National Curriculum days these centred on the collaborative work involved in devising suitable activities to ensure a child's progression in the acquisition of skills and knowledge, based on a common understanding of what would help to form a mature and reflective person, able to contribute in a worthwhile way to society. This frequently led to an element of serendipity in the classroom, where teachers and pupils responded to different interests and stray comments, and shared favourite stories and objects that might seem tangential to the main purpose of a lesson, yet spurred children to challenge their own perceptions of their learning. Retirement seems to me to present an equally serendipitous approach to our activities and responses to the challenges thrown up by the world around us. This issue of the Newsletter is, we hope, evidence of our continuing interest in the variety of byways that are still to be explored.

**Liz Dolan**



***Redbridge NEU members staffed phone banks in a successful drive for a high local turn-out in the postal ballot for strike action over the plummeting value of teachers' salaries***



# Activities: 2022/23



*In July the extremely knowledgeable David Rosenberg guided a group of retired educators around the political battlefield of 1970s East London*

**September – January**, and now ongoing once again: retired members helped with the national ballots by taking on schools that did not have reps, phoning and emailing members to encourage them initially to participate in the indicative ballot and then to send off the all-important strike ballots.

That Redbridge achieved an 80% turnout in the indicative ballot, apparently the highest total nationally, followed by 70%+ in the postal ballot, reflected everyone's commitment, which complemented the amazing efforts of a group of young, extremely well-motivated school reps. As stated at the AGM, Redbridge has consistently set the bar high!

**In November** we held a tea party for retired teachers and those approaching retirement. This was the first time we had attempted to bring members together socially in this way and it will, hopefully, be repeated. To this end, we need to find ways of reaching members who are thinking about retirement, so that they are aware of our organisation.

**March and June:** Apart from our monthly meetings, the walks organised by Bob Archer, have been interesting, although the weather has not always been on our side. In March, we were in Wanstead Park finding out about the rise and fall of Wanstead House. Our next trip, in June, was led by the extremely knowledgeable David Rosenberg. This one was to Brick Lane – a battleground in the 1970s. Joined by retired colleagues from other

districts, hopefully links between retired members across London can be developed.

### **Retired teachers' work behind the scene**

Redbridge NEU is one of the largest districts in terms of membership and casework, which has put a great deal of pressure on officers who have been organising national ballots and supporting union action at several schools this year. This has led to several retired members, - Bob, Henry, Maureen and Nigel - taking on casework that involves going into schools to ensure members are supported. Nigel has also been carrying out the difficult task of processing members' requests for financial support due to strike action. Members have also been involved in picketing, leafleting outside schools (who else can be outside primary schools at 3.15pm?) and responding to requests to attend after-school meetings to discuss taking strike action. These are all key areas where we, as retired teachers, have been happy to support NEU educators.

**Newsflash:** In the last newsletter, it was mentioned that another Redbridge primary school was in danger of becoming an academy. The NEU members moved to a formal ballot in April to oppose the move and, just before half-term, the school announced it was withdrawing its plans to join a MAT (multi-academy trust). Good news indeed.

**Maureen McCarthy**

# Volunteering as a Redbridge NEU caseworker

A strong rumour abounds that, deep in the heart of the English countryside, hidden out of sight, there's a secret government-financed, Ofsted-led factory-cum-training-camp cloning oven-ready headteachers to a standard specification: complete devotion to, and acceptance of, whatever is the current Ofsted flavour of the month; an enthusiasm for hawkishness at all times; a strong belief in micro-management of staff to the nth degree; and a complete rejection of the need to trust staff, with a messianic zeal for endless evidence trails instead.

Unfortunately, a fair number of these clones seem to have found their way into our Redbridge schools with inevitable results – widespread demoralisation of staff, a large increase in workplace disputes and an increasingly beleaguered Redbridge NEU, snowed under with all sorts of casework.

## Retired teachers fighting for justice

So, what can Redbridge NEU, led by Venda Premkumar and Bill Stockwell, do about this? Simple. They can call in reinforcements, albeit rather aged ones, in the form of us old 'uns from the Redbridge Retired Teachers' group. Having served as a union officer myself, albeit in Further Education, and also having experi-

enced the firepower of management heavy artillery being turned upon me, I decided, along with four others (Bob Archer, Nigel May, Maureen McCarthy and Ben Morris) to meet the call for help – partly inspired by a desire to offer assistance to teachers in need of support but partly also, I suspect, by a repressed need to avenge the brutal treatment meted out to me while working in the FE sector, albeit with completely different managements involved. (If anyone's got an hour or two to spare, as well as a strong constitution, I could tell you all about it one day!)

One of our group of five volunteers, Maureen McCarthy, who, to her credit, takes on a large volume of cases, including ones of a more serious nature, wrote about her experiences as a volunteer caseworker in a previous edition of the newsletter.

## Starting to offer support

So, what does my work involve? Well, typically it will start by me receiving a phone call from either Venda or Bill asking me if I can take on a particular case that has come to them. Unless I've got a good excuse ready, which inevitably I haven't, I usually feel obliged to give a positive response. The details of the case are then forwarded to me and, as a matter of policy, remember-



*Striking staff at Churchfields Junior School show how to get the message across*





### ***There was also enthusiastic support for the national strike action at Little Heath School***

ing when I was under attack myself, the stress experienced and the importance of close union support and guidance, I always try to make telephone contact with the member as soon as possible. The initial contact is inevitably a lengthy one, with details of the case being discussed, an action plan being formulated and, very importantly, assurances being given that you're there to help and support and are available to talk about the case as it progresses.

This, as I discovered in my own case, usually helps to considerably lower stress and anxiety levels, which tend to be high in such circumstances.

With Maureen bravely taking on some of the more serious cases, often involving disciplinaries, I tend to be allocated the 'softer' ones, typically involving pay progression disputes and absence meetings, but I've also had to deal with allegations of bullying and discriminatory treatment. Typically, such cases would involve helping the member with the drafting of an appropriate letter to the management or representation at a live or virtual meeting.

#### **Heads` mixed responses**

So, how has all this worked out in practice? Well, despite my previous disparaging remarks about some Redbridge headteachers, I have to say that, in the main, I've been treated with considerable respect and courtesy by most of the heads that I've had to deal with.

There have been exceptions of course. The head who refused to have anything to do with me directly, as her member of staff's union rep, comes to mind. No doubt representing an affront to her absolute authority in the school, this induced her to go into attack mode by accusing me of disrupting her work/life balance.

Inevitably, she was not at all impressed either by my arguments for granting the member pay progression! But there certainly have been some successes, particularly several pay appeal cases in which proof that the school had not followed stipulated procedures resulted in the heads granting pay progression to avoid the embarrassment of being exposed in front of the governors at any subsequent appeal meeting. And there's also been the bizarre instance of two NEU members at the same school taking out a grievance procedure against each other, with me representing one member and Bob Archer representing the other at the same final resolution meeting!

#### **A great volunteering opportunity**

So, if any of you are looking for an exciting alternative to such retirement activities as looking after the grandkids, walking the dog or playing bowls, why not bring your past union experience and other skills into play by becoming a volunteer caseworker for Redbridge NEU? You'll have the opportunity to become an expert on such intriguing matters as the Redbridge whole-school pay and sickness policies and to enhance your communication, empathetic, supportive and persuasive skills. Most importantly, you'll earn the eternal gratitude of teachers who you've effectively represented. What better way to spend your well-earned retirement than this?

**Henry Tiller**

#### **Do you have any thoughts about this article?**

**Please send your comments, in whichever form you prefer, to the Editorial team at - [mike321peters@gmail.com](mailto:mike321peters@gmail.com). Letters or longer pieces, welcome. We would love to hear from you.**

# Being a retired grandparent

Many of us are grandparents long before we reach retirement-age and, if we are fortunate enough to have our grandchildren living close-by, we probably became involved in their day-to-day care to some extent, while we were still working. Perhaps it is collecting them from after-school club or nursery if one of their parents couldn't quite make it back from work in time.

With family finances making it almost essential for both parents to work full-time, especially with housing costs in London, willing grandparents are invaluable. However, with retirement, a whole different scenario can develop. Your time is much more flexible and therefore your ability to be even more useful in the child-rearing of your grandchildren becomes a real possibility.

## Past experiences

For many of us this is a positive benefit of retirement but for others not so much. How much choice do we really have? Obviously, it depends on a range of factors, including your own experience of being parented and your children's circumstances. Having spent many years as a working mother of two sons and a daughter, I am very used to time-juggling to keep all the balls in the air at once.

My mother worked full-time for as long as I can remember but she still managed to be a great support to me in my own children's early years until her death at only 54-years old. In turn, as a child, I spent many hours being looked after by my grandparents. My grandad, badly affected by the first world war, didn't go out much but taught me every card game he knew, and my grandmother bought me Tizer and Smith's crisps, and took me on bus journeys all over London.

## East End roots

I come from working-class, East-End roots, where it was normal for extended families to live very near each other and for the grandparents to care for their grandchildren while the mothers were working, usually long-hours in factories or other low-paid work. Cousins grew up more like siblings. It would seem very unnatural for me not to play a major role in my grandchildren's lives.

I retired 11 years ago, a few years earlier than I had planned, so that I could visit my son and expected new granddaughter in Australia for longer and make more frequent trips than would have been possible if I had continued to work. Besides my soon-to-be, Australian granddaughter, I also have three English grandchildren,



*Two grand-daughters on the Gold Coast of Queensland, Australia*

then aged 2, 6 and 7, who lived within a couple of miles of me.

## Long-distance grandparenting

Within a few years, both my two daughters-in-law had another baby each. A boy in Chingford and a girl on the Gold Coast, Queensland. I was able to visit my new English grandson the day after he was born in Whipps-Cross Hospital, but I had to wait until my second Australian granddaughter was five months old before I got to cuddle her. FaceTime every Sunday is just a different way of grandparenting - as I wake-up they are getting ready for bed, so we are usually all in our pyjamas. The pandemic stopped my annual trips to Australia for a few years but I plan to be there for six weeks next Christmas and New Year.

Like most of us who retire after a busy working life, I had visions of having lots of free time to myself and thought about starting some new hobbies, getting more involved in politics and maybe even taking on some academic study, just for fun. It hadn't really occurred to me that I would become so busy that I





***Harry turned out to be a child with high-functioning autism. At two he used lego bricks to discover triangular and cubic number series***

would wonder how I had ever managed to find time to go to work.

#### **Grandparents on call**

As they have got older, the need for a 'taxi service' to take the grandchildren to dancing class, swimming lessons, gymnastics, beavers and cubs or football has grown and I am usually happy to help. We practice spellings and times-tables, or simply have an interesting chat on the journey, which is a great way to keep in-touch with their young lives. I also became invaluable when one or other of them was ill and couldn't go to school. This didn't happen that often but I well-remembered the stress when my own children were ill and there was something on at school that just couldn't be missed. (I once had my daughter sleeping on the floor under my desk, wrapped in a quilt, when she was five - she had tonsillitis and a raging temperature on the day of the Physics 'A' level practical exam.) When your own children are growing up, the pressures of life are often immense and it's easy to miss some of the joy.

#### **Co-parenting**

However, the really-serious grandparenting began nine years ago when my daughter told me she was

pregnant with her second child and that she had also split up from her partner. She is a nurse, then working 12-hour day and night shifts in ITU in Harlow. Shift-work is not compatible with nursery hours and she asked me how I felt about co-parenting when she returned to work. I hadn't expected to go back to round-the-clock child-care but I knew that she needed me to say that I would love to do it. Part of me was excited at the prospect, yet I was also apprehensive about how much it would change my life. I had my left hip replacement three months before the new child was born but I was her birthing partner, which has meant that the three of us have a very special bond. My daughter returned to full-time work when her baby was 10-months old.

#### **No time to feel old**

The next five years of my life flew by, with Harry spending as much time in my home as his own. My house was once again filled with toys and my freezer with fishfingers. It still is. Thanks to my freedom pass, we went out nearly every day, travelled on lots of trains, which became his first major obsession, and explored all the free things to do in London. This kept me fit and there was no time to feel old. Most of my retirement





### ***The dyslectic dancer***

plans went on hold for a few years. Harry turned out to be a child with high-functioning autism - very hard-work, totally adorable and absolutely fascinating. A mathematical genius, at two, he used lego-bricks to discover triangular and cubic number series. He would build the same 3-d patterns again and again. Then he discovered space and can tell you how many light years it is between every star and planet, and that's just for starters.

### **Lockdown and after**

Harry started school and I started to have some time to myself again. Then the pandemic came and it had a profound effect on all of us in different ways. It has been particularly devastating for children and many grandparents have been invaluable in supporting their own children and grandchildren in both practical and emotional ways. I found myself becoming an academic teacher again, especially to the older ones, struggling to complete GCSE coursework at home through lockdown and uncertain times. I am particularly proud that I have managed to re-learn A-level maths to support my dyslexic 18-year-old granddaughter. Perhaps I'll resit the exam myself - this time I might get an A, if I can get to grips with the all-singing and dancing



***Above and below - the English grandchildren***



modern calculators! I was much more comfortable with my slide-rule.

All things considered, I've found it a privilege to have a second chance at child-rearing. With the benefit of hindsight, you can be that little bit more relaxed and make a real difference.

**Betty Hales, Redbridge Retired Educator.**

**Do you have any thoughts about this article?**  
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[\*\*mike321peters@gmail.com.\*\*](mailto:mike321peters@gmail.com)  
**Letters or longer pieces, welcome.**  
**We would love to hear from you.**



# Every teacher an actor!

## (Or a sound engineer or a costume designer)

We have all heard the saying that 99% of teaching is acting.

Many teachers are keen members of amateur dramatic societies across the country. Redbridge and surrounding boroughs have their fair share of community theatre groups performing plays, musical theatre and new writing.

Since 2005, I have been a member of the Woodhouse Players, based in the Welsh Church Hall in Leytonstone High Road (opposite O' Neil's pub). Initially, my friend and I popped along to watch a show to check out whether it looked like a group we might join ... and we haven't looked back!

The Woodhouse Players are celebrating their forty-year anniversary this year. It began at St Margaret's Church in Woodhouse Road in Leytonstone (hence the name) moving to their present home in the nineties.

Being a member of an am dram group isn't just for actors though. As well as treading the boards, I take on other roles in a show. These include Front of House Manager (organising hospitality for audiences) and Producer (the organisation and logistics of a show). Such skills are definitely transferable from teaching! I am also a member of the Players' Committee.

All groups need a range of members to put on a show - sound and light techies, poster designers, tea-makers, scene shifters, set builders and so on.

### Get Involved

If any aspect appeals to you, please don't hesitate to contact me on email find out more. We are a very friendly group with members of all ages. We put on up to six shows a year, including Pantomime, new writing and classic drama. You can find out more and see photos of productions on our website. We have social events, regular cafe and pub visits and play-readings.

Our next show is *Ring Round the Moon* by Jean Anouilh in July (July 7, 8, 14, 15), translated by Christopher Fry. Full details are on our website and our social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram).

**Jackie Withnall**

Jackie's email: [jcwithnall@btinternet.com](mailto:jcwithnall@btinternet.com)

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**Woodhouse Players in action**

# The power of fedupperry

One should never underestimate the power of fedupperry. An episode of fedupperry was the catalyst, which eventually led to the formation of the Wanstead Community Gardeners. We now look after over forty patches around Wanstead. Some are tree pits and others are actual gardens.

All of them are street patches, either on the street or visible from the street. Our time, passion and effort

are only worth expending on something that hundreds of people are going to see every day. Are we out of control? Definitely!

## **The seeds are planted**

The story starts in April 2003, twenty years ago. We should celebrate. I was walking past the Corner House, now the Allan Burgess Centre for the Age Concern Luncheon Club. It's right on the High Street, near the



*Marian at work as a Wanstead Community Gardener. Photo courtesy of Ilford Recorder*



Co-op, a handsome Victorian house with a front garden. It was going through a particularly bad patch at the time - full of waist high weeds and take-away food rubbish, right on the High Street and horrible to look at. Yeuk! It was in a prime spot in Wanstead and if I found it so unpleasant to walk past, then so would many others. The power of fedupperry kicked in. Not sure what the set up was there, I returned at 5.00am on the Sunday and dealt with the weeds before they could seed themselves. All cut down and black bagged. Now what?

### ***Auspices***

Under the auspices of the Wanstead Society, we applied to the Council to take over that garden as an honorary High St. flower bed. At first it was just me and my mates, digging, composting, taking out rubbish and getting rid of an endless number of Spanish Bluebells - attractive but thugs. The truth is, you can never get rid of them, only just keep them under control. A passer-by told me that they were a protected species. "Not here they aint", I said as I squelched another bulb under my heel. It's the woodland variety that is the protected species, not the Spanish thugs. Years later, 'me and my mates' morphed into the Wanstead Community Gardeners.

### **Cottage garden**

We wanted to fill the garden with as great a variety of old-fashioned cottage garden plants as possible. That way, there is an ever-changing procession of flowers. People are amazed at how the garden changes throughout the season - "I was only here two weeks ago. It's completely different now". Cottage garden plants are tough. The flowers don't need watering - they seed themselves or the clumps expand. Of course, the insects love 'em. It's so good to see an elderly lady staring at a flower in wonder. "I haven't seen that one for years. Used to be in my nan's garden." It very soon became the iconic High Street Garden. Now difficult to imagine Wanstead without it.

### **Spreading the seeds**

From then on, there was no stopping us. We adopted, mainly from the Council, SPPSs (Sad Patches of Public Soil). You know what I mean - a street bed where the Council has planted some shrubs and then forgotten about it. So ... dead shrubs, gobs of chewing gum, dog ends plastic bottles and other detritus - a future archaeologist's dream but not to be left there for dreaming archaeologists. First thing is to get the

rubbish out! Our best haul was 21 golf balls. Now there's a story! And then there were the bolt cutters hidden in the shrubs by the bicycle rack. We still use 'em as pruners.

### **Enjoy the variety!**

Each SPPS is different. It might be full sun, semi shade, dry shade etc. We know our onions and we know exactly what plants will thrive in which conditions. Mostly, the planting comes from garden donations and, for many years now, new patches have been created using plants from the Corner House Garden where the story first started.

We have patches all over Wanstead from the Green Man right down to Snaresbrook. Some individuals adopt a patch as their own. So, Ingrid created 'Ingrid's Isle', at the quirky traffic roundabout between Wanstead Station and The George car park. Tony created the Sky Bed on top of the long wall below Snaresbrook Station. Suddenly flowers appear where they never were before. It's us lot doing it all. There is a mischievous joy to be had out of creating garden patches in seemingly inaccessible places - thus, 'The Hanging Gardens of Snaresbrook'.

### **A community blossoms**

Unfortunately, there is very little left in the way of SPPSs in Wanstead. We've nabbed the lot! An unexpected joy I learned very early on in this process was that it's not just about growing plants. It's about growing a community. When you are working on a street bed and you are obviously not a council contractor, it's a hook for a conversation. People talk, say what their favourite patches are, ask for seeds or offer a plant. The seeds of a relationship are sown and next time round, it's a cheery 'hello'.

### **A future outing?**

Perhaps later in the year, we can have a guided walk around Wanstead for us retired teachers. Each patch has its story - interesting and entertaining. Maybe we could end up at the Belgique or the George? The world is our oyster. Yes of course, we do have oyster shells in one patch. Now that's another story.

**Marian Temple**

**Do you have any thoughts about this article? Please send your comments, in whichever form you prefer, to the Editorial team at - [mike321peters@gmail.com](mailto:mike321peters@gmail.com). Letters, or longer pieces, welcome. We would love to hear from you.**

**You can find out more about Wanstead Community Gardeners at:  
<https://wansteadcommunitygardeners.wordpress.com>**

## A neighbour's story

Our neighbour had very poor eyesight due to cataracts. His experience of healthcare is a good illustration of the difficulties and achievements of the NHS.

### Making progress

Unable to walk very far at all, he relied upon people coming to him. During Covid, he was able to have his vaccinations as someone came to his house. His biggest difficulty was seeing a doctor, which is when we became more involved. With his consent, we moved him to our doctors. It had parking nearby and there was a wheelchair that he could use when he had an appointment. Previously, he had been on a list and had not seen a doctor very much over the years. Now, we could take him to the doctors and his appointments became more regular.

This meant that his eyesight, which had become increasingly poor, was investigated.

### Transport issues

He received top notch care from the NHS. Despite being under pressure, staff were caring and took their time with him. They were amazing. However, there were big difficulties in accessing transport to Moorfields and help for him when he was at home. We spent hours on the phone trying to get these things. We managed to get transport to Moorfields once. We failed dismally with getting any help for him at home.

### A good result

Fortunately, our neighbour had us to advocate for him. We are retired and had the time to help him. Without us, I feel that he would not have had his cataracts treated. Our neighbour's eyesight has improved tremendously, which has made everything better for him. He is now much more positive and energetic about life.

**Tina Jacobs**

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## My NHS experience

I have been very lucky to have little experience of using NHS services until recently. I do a lot of sport and use a private physiotherapist regularly. However, I recently developed a very painful knee injury which she could not diagnose, and she advised me to go to my GP and request an MRI.

### Contacting the GP

The first hurdle was to get an appointment. I phoned that afternoon and had a fifteen minute wait to get through, only to be told that I needed to call at 8am the following morning to make an appointment for that day - no appointments are made in advance. I rang at 8am the following day and, after an hour on hold, got an appointment later that morning. I saw a locum doctor who was very thorough and who said she would refer me for an MRI but stressed it may be a six week wait.

I received a text less than a week later asking me to make an appointment for an MRI at a private clinic in Waterloo - appointments were available that week, which was much quicker than I had anticipated. I had the scan and was told my GP would have the results in around two weeks.

### Waiting for diagnosis

After the two weeks had passed I phoned and was told the results were in and that I would need to phone the next morning to make an appointment with my GP to discuss them. I saw another locum the next day who showed me the x rays and gave me a copy of the results. He explained I had a tear in the meniscus muscle at the

rear of my knee, which had caused a condition called osteochronosis - basically the blood supply has been cut to the bone and it has begun to crumble. He explained I would need to see a specialist and that he would write a letter requesting an appointment for me. He was not able to give a time scale. By this time, I was still in pain and really hoped I would not have a long wait for this appointment. I wanted to know what treatment was going to be required and when it would be safe to resume my sports. I got a call from the surgery that afternoon, saying my appointment letter was ready to collect. I had an appointment booked at the Spire Roding private hospital in two weeks' time. It seems that in Waltham Forest some services are being outsourced to private companies.

### Private consultation

I attended the consultation: it was very brief. The doctor explained that the condition basically needs time to stabilise, which will come by resting the knee. I was told I could swim and start physiotherapy to strengthen the muscles around the knee, which will support the bone and allow me to eventually resume my training. I was not offered physiotherapy on the NHS but have been working with my physiotherapist and am making very slow progress. I think I have had quite quick treatments compared to some people. The speed of getting a diagnosis and treatment seems to vary across health authorities. It may also depend on what the medical problem is, as mine was relatively easy to diagnose and treat.

**Rachel Brittle**



## A classic product of late-stage capitalism

# Collagen damages the environment

Collagen, in powdered form is one of the developed world's most popular health supplements – a business worth an estimated \$4.7 billion in 2022. Recommended by several leading lifestyle influencers a daily dose is claimed to work wonders for hair, skin, nails and joints. In addition, due to its 'excellent blending properties and 'smooth flowability' it is increasingly used as a component of what are known as 'processed food products'.

A major issue arises though as much of the supply of commercial collagen is produced from the hides of cattle raised on newly cleared land in Brazil. Investigators have shown it is inextricably linked to deforestation, biodiversity loss, land invasions and violence against indigenous peoples.

### Classic

Collagen seems to be a classic product of late-stage capitalism – so profitable it excites the greed of the biggest multinationals yet so damaging to the environment that details of its production have to be veiled in secrecy, as they involve unacceptable damage to both people and nature.

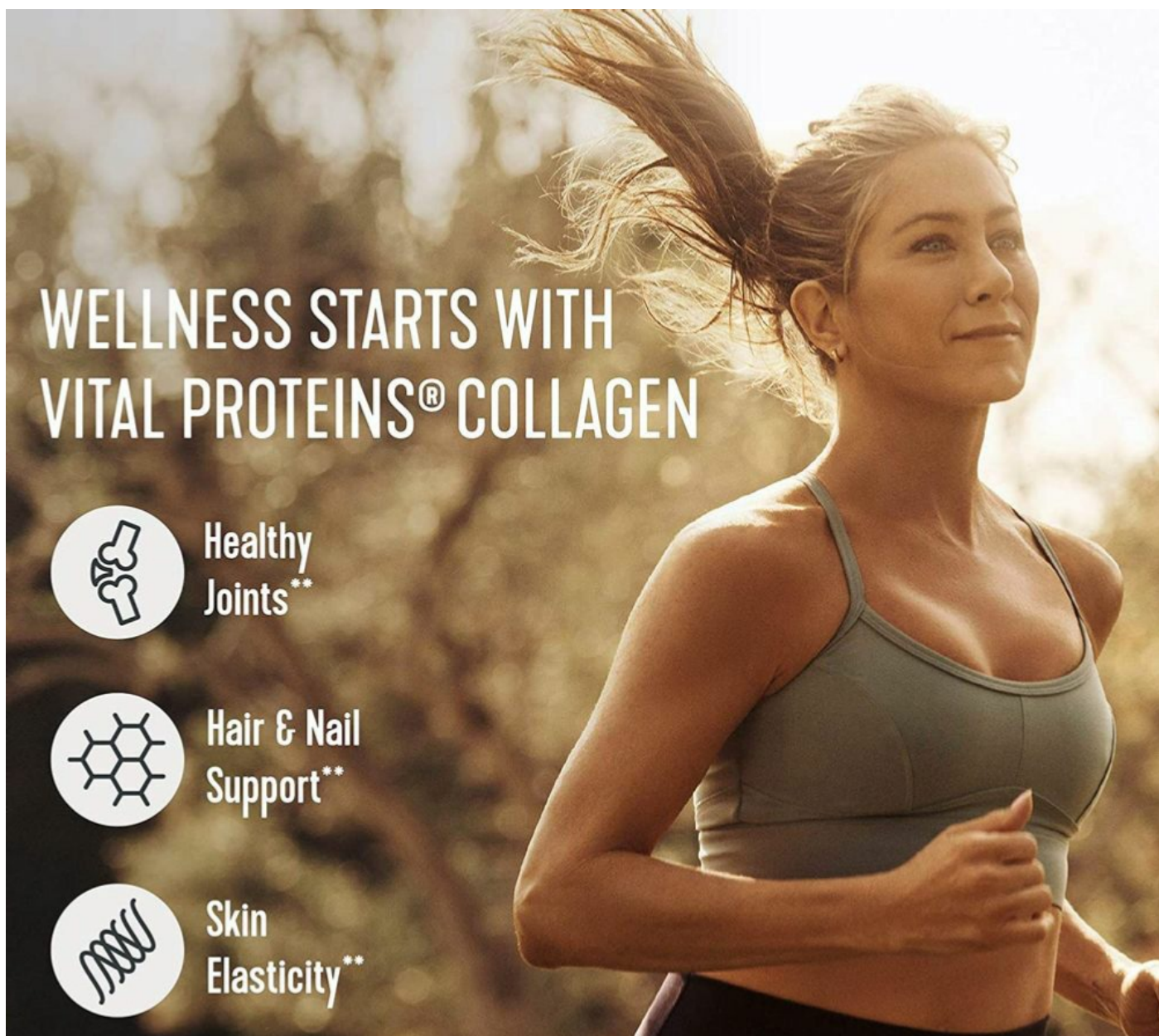
Too often all this is hidden under the catch-all 'commercially sensitive' label. Like palm oil (multiple uses) and coltan (raw material for mobile phones), collagen is a contradictory product providing for (Western) humanity's present desires at a planetary cost that is increasingly problematic.

One of the leading companies involved in the collagen trade is Vital Proteins Inc. a subsidiary of the giant Nestlé Corporation, one of the world's biggest food producers - and one of the most unprincipled multinational corporations on the planet. Nestlé has been involved in major scandals for decades involving misleading baby milk advertising and recycling claims, unethical food sources etc. According to analysts CBIn-sights Nestlé would like you to believe they have left all this disreputable behaviour behind as they now claim to be 'prioritising health and sustainability across their portfolio.' Look a bit closer and you see that this admirable objective is an aim in the context of their 'growth strategy'. In other words sustainability comes second to maximising profit, and as they admit on their own website 'preserving natural capital becomes increasingly crucial ...for the future of our business.' But meanwhile they continue to ignore this warning.

Vital Proteins also claims the moral high ground with a commitment to 'doing business in a way that respects people and the planet'. But not just yet, it would seem. Following the exposé of their Brazilian supply chain by the Bureau of Environmental Investigations they admit they won't be 'deforestation free' until 2025. Meanwhile forest clearance and attacks on indigenous people continue. This is about as cynical as greenwashing gets: it means 'we intend to behave properly but in



*Much of the supply of commercial collagen is produced from the hides of cattle raised on newly cleared land in Brazil ... it is inextricably linked to deforestation, biodiversity loss ... and violence against indigenous peoples.*



***The image vs the reality: “Why is it that big corporations can’t find reputable ways of doing business instead of being unscrupulous, destructive and dishonest, all kept secret and denied until revealed by activists and journalists?”***

the meantime, we are making too much money to be bothered’. Since presumably they were aware of their own supply chain before being exposed, their ‘way of doing business’ may be a form of words of fairly recent origin. Vital Proteins certainly seem like a perfect fit for Nestlé.

My question is, why is it that big corporations can’t find reputable ways of doing business instead of being unscrupulous, destructive and dishonest, all kept secret and denied until revealed by activists and journalists? And then, instead of changing policy they go on to try silencing the investigators or even question their motives. Greenwashing seems to be ingrained in the corporate mindset.

A major trend in recent years is the move towards ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) disclosure,

as a way of claiming compliance with growing international standards. Some of these standards, especially those to do with biodiversity are ill-defined, and while the basic morality underpinning a whole enterprise or its methods go unquestioned, the value of this exercise is unclear.

#### **First rate**

The ESG claims of companies like Purdue Pharma, Smith & Wesson, Johnson & Johnson are all first rate, yet all three have had to pay out billions due to what courts found were ‘irresponsible marketing’ strategies leading to tragedies great and small. As some of the ESG rating agencies admit, the disclosure process is aimed at reassuring investors, not at changing corporate behaviour. Whatever its value the whole ESG movement is gaining momentum internationally, not-



withstanding the ridicule of right-wing commentators such as the Wall St. Journal, who regard the whole process as a distraction from the main purpose of business – to maximise profit. But should profitability be the sole purpose of business, whatever the cost to others and the environment?

When management of the giant Swedish timber corporation STORA found out that clear-felling (their preferred harvesting method) was extremely damaging to the overall forest ecosystem, they decided that the entire company needed a changed mindset – even if it meant their profits were reduced. If their business was based on the forest, then the health of the forest was their responsibility – not a concept that big business seems too familiar with – and company policy should reflect that.

### **Fresh approach**

Basic classes in forest ecology were provided for all staff, and a fresh approach to their entire business was introduced; the enhancement of their extensive forest holdings was to be the primary objective. As a result, harvesting methods were changed, replanting schemes redesigned and detailed forest monitoring established – and all this was done not to satisfy some inspectorate, or to raise their ESG profile, but because it became part of the philosophy of the company. What they soon realised was that they could still produce timber and enhance the biodiversity of the forest at the same time; it wasn't difficult, but it just needed a new way of thinking, a new set of priorities. The company's standing improved and staff recruitment became competitive. Short-term profitability had been sacrificed for long term benefit. Quite a turnaround for a company regarded previously as operating primarily at the low value end of the timber business.

The natural state of the planet is deteriorating fast and scientists warn that critical tipping points are being rapidly approached. Deforestation of the Amazon is still accelerating – according to INPE, Brazil's satellite research agency. If big business is ever to take climate change and the conservation of biodiversity seriously it will only happen with a STORA-style upgrade in the prevailing philosophy, the corporate mission. It is not enough to claim good ESG results, or to increase overall profitability, if dubious practices in core activities and the supply chain persist.

Any company, and especially giant multinationals like Nestlé or their subsidiaries, should not feel free to make money at any cost. If respect for Earth and its people are not taken into account, public relations froth like Vital Proteins' canard 'our way of doing business'



***Despite criticisms, bodies like Forest Stewardship Council are helping define appropriate standards for various industries***

gains unquestioning acceptance and humanity sleep-walks towards disaster.

One way forward is the independent certification of actual performance; this has been pioneered by voluntary bodies such as the Forest Stewardship Council (wood products) and the Marine Stewardship Council (seafood), while the Soil Association certifies organic produce. All three have come in for some criticism; they tend to certify the products of big corporations and a means of certifying artisanal (small-scale) production is still in the planning stage largely due to cost.

### **Appropriate standards**

However, these bodies are helping define appropriate standards for different industries where care of the environment is a primary concern and not to be ignored in the pursuit of profit. Many large companies object to paying for independent certification, at the same time limiting their disclosure of ESG due to 'commercial sensitivity'. The sort of complete rethink that STORA achieved seems to be beyond the ambition of most large corporations, while the bottom line and today's share price occupy their overwhelming attention.

In the meantime, if you want to purchase collagen powder, I suggest you look carefully for a product which causes no deforestation, violence or corruption – now and not at some unlikely pledged date in the future. Such products are available – you just have to ask for them.

**Edward Milner**

# We need heroes!

**'To get us through this challenging experience called life' (Scott T. Alison)**

As children and young people, many of us were not beguiled by courageous princes or by knights in armour and as we grew older, we questioned their perfection: 'Where are their flaws, their human errors, the pettiness that affects us all?'

I was once fascinated by Joseph Campbell's *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*, the journey of the archetypal hero, the departure from home, the trials and challenges in a supernatural world, and finally the journey back to ordinary life. Perhaps this book helped us as we struggled to find some kind of identity.

## Heroes for all times

Heroes may be contemporary, historical or mythological figures. The word 'hero' is derived from the Greek and means protector, defender or demi-god. Some people affect us on a level which is not altogether rational; they resonate with something emotional, something deeper. They can make us rethink our view

of the world and what we are doing here, but I believe we should not feel separate from them or place them on a pedestal.

I asked some millennials about their heroes. One or two mentioned celebrities, but several referred to those who are fighting for a better world; for example Greta Thunberg, Jeremy Corbyn, Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion. Others named local people who make a significant contribution to the lives of others.

## Brian Haw

From 2001, for almost ten years, Parliament Square in London was home to Brian Haw. He lived in a tent and protested against UK and US foreign policy. He gathered large anti-war placards around him: 'Iraq 2,000,000 dead: 4,000,000 fled', then 'Genocide. Theft. Torture. Cholera. Starvation', and, next to photographs of maimed Iraqi children, 'Depleted Uranium Munitions. Our War Material. Our Shame! USA/UK Target



**For almost 10 years from 2001, Parliament Square was home to Brian Haw, who lived in a tent and protested against UK and US foreign policy.**



[and] Nuke Babies. War Crime!` Haw used a megaphone and hectored politicians going into Parliament. He made sacrifices. He lived on that Westminster traffic island for almost 10 years, exposed to all weathers, rain, wind, sleet and snow, the relentless noise and traffic fumes and anyone who wished to abuse him. He had given up family life and put his health at risk to take a stand for all of us. Haw was loved and admired by many members of the British public and became a recognisable local figure. He was often encouraged by passers-by and other peace campaigners. People gave him money and food. Mark Rylance often chatted to him and he has recently headed a successful crowd-funding campaign to erect a statue of Haw in London. The 72 cm statue is being designed by Amanda Ward and will be placed opposite the big guns of the Imperial War Museum.

Rylance considers Haw to be "one of the greatest Englishmen that I've met in my life - a person who listened to his conscience." Among other distinctions, in 2007, Channel 4 viewers voted him the Most Inspiring Political Figure of the Year. When he accepted the award, as usual he spoke out: `Stop killing our kids ... Stop committing this genocide, this slaughter... It's about the oil folks, it's about the arms industry... those Arab kids, what did they do wrong?... We want peace, we want love, we want justice for all. We want to stop this madness ... We've got to stop. We've got to be decent ... and it's down to us."

There were a number of attempts to remove Haw by Conservative and Labour politicians, by the then Mayor of London (Boris Johnson), by the Greater

London Authority and by Westminster City Council. Haw's placards and tent "*spoiled the look of the place*".

**`We can be heroes`, David Bowie**

He was not a polished, suave, sophisticated, charming character who didn't put a foot wrong. He was far more likely to put his foot in it. He could be touchy and argumentative and had disagreements with fellow peace campaigners. But he was authentic and plain speaking. He felt like one of us, not apart from us, someone we could chat to and aspire to emulate, even for a day. He made us think, "Well I could perhaps do even a little bit of that."

Would Haw approve of a statue in his memory? I think so. He did not shun the limelight. He would see it as a reminder that we need to strive to bring war and slaughter to an end. But was he a hero? I think we should dispense with labels. I prefer to read some of the individual tributes, including one by *Milan Rai*, editor of "*Peace News*":

"Brian Haw became a symbol for people in Britain who treasured him for speaking out against the lies that were told about the invasion of Iraq. He became a channel for people's anger. Brian ... felt so fiercely about the plight of the children in Iraq, he was going to stand up for those children as if they were his own. He was a man of uncompromising principles who touched a chord."

**Jo Buchanan**

**Do you have any thoughts about this article?**

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# A place to cry my tears

## 35 years with the Rosslyn Hill Unitarians

*Unitarianism is an open -minded and individualistic approach to religion that gives scope for a very wide range of beliefs and doubts. Religious freedom for every individual is at the heart of Unitarianism. Everyone is free to search for meaning in life in a responsible way and to reach their own conclusions. In line with their approach to religious truth, Unitarians see diversity and pluralism as valuable rather than threatening. They want religion to be broad, inclusive, and tolerant. Unitarianism can therefore include people of all faiths or none. There are significant, even crucial, moments in many people's lives. In this article, Ken Levy writes about some such moments and how they continue to reverberate through his life.*

Well, dear reader, if you've progressed to this point in the article, you've probably got some interest in matters of a theological nature. However, you may perhaps be a little wary about the possibility of being told by some religious zealot about the wonders of 'seeing the light' and experiencing 'revelation' or, worse still, why you should convert to this or that faith to save your soul. Well, if that's the case, please relax. There's none of that here, just a story about me, Unitarianism at Rosslyn Hill, and some significant events on the way.

### Start of a journey

My story starts in early 1970. I was in the Holy City and had just visited The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I was waiting for a bus on Mount Scopus. There was one other person at the bus stop. Obviously, an observant Jew as he was wearing a *kippa*, a skull cap. And he was certainly observing me. He was doing the wise-man-walk. Up and down. Up and down. With his hands clasped behind his back. We started talking. I told him I was living *b'Aretz* (in Israel). He asked me where I was from. "London", I replied. "Which part of London?" "Leyton."

He looks at me more intently as he continues his wise-man-walk. His thought process is very intense. I feel like a disciple in the presence of a master. At the age of 19, I'm about to receive wisdom. In the Holy City, on a Mount, a Wise Man, a *Chacham*, is going to set me up for life. He stopped talking, looked me straight in the face and spoke these words: "Does the 38 bus still run along Lea Bridge Road?" Twenty years later, I realised it was a *Maharishi* Moment. You think you're about to get the spiritual goods and you get nothing.

In 1968, The Beatles were at an *ashram* in Rishikesh with their guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. John Lennon pushed himself forward one day to accompany Maharishi on a helicopter ride. He thought this would be it. That a one-to-one in the sky with him, the wise man, would reveal *the word* - the mantra that would give

Lennon the answer to it all. Eternal happiness. Maharishi spoke barely a word to Lennon the whole ride. (Mind you, I'd say this: there's only one person whose enlightened knowledge is of any significance on such a journey -the pilot.).

### Finding unitarianism in East London

I moved to Hackney, where I was born, at the end of 1980. The Hackney Gazette used to have a little 'religious affairs' column. One week, I read something about Unitarianism. I doubt if I would have remembered exactly what the next day, although it was probably about Newington Green Church. But I made a mental note of the words, *Unitarian, Unitarianism*. I was in my early 30s and obviously felt this kind of place of worship could be of interest to me one day.



**Mount Scopus in Jerusalem, where Ken expected to 'get the spiritual goods' but 'got nothing'**





### ***The Maharishi Moment: Beatles with their guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi***

So, the year I came to Rosslyn Hill was 1988. I'm 37. I'm starting to think more deeply about life, including death. I remember asking the then-minister, David Usher about Unitarianism. He was truly a *Chacham*, a Wise Man. He once said words to this effect to me; *`When you go into most places of worship, you hang up your coat and your hat and you're expected to hang up your brain with them. But not in a Unitarian Church`*. It's a wonderful summing up of the Unitarian ethos.

#### **No Shangri-La**

In the 35 years that I've been attending Rosslyn Hill Chapel, a particular experience has occurred several times. I'm in conversation after a service with someone who's on their first, or one of their very early visits, to the chapel. *They've come home. It's what they've always been looking for. They ...they ... can't believe it. Unitarianism is their Shangri-La.* They think they've found, as John Lennon sang, 'Strawberry Fields Forever'. It isn't long, however, before they've stopped coming to the chapel. I've seen them once or twice more, or not at all. Mind you, they might have gone to another Unitarian church. In some instances, I might have got rid of them without realising it. A case of (to misquote Marx, Groucho, not Karl): "I wouldn't want to belong to a church that would have *him* as a member." Karl said

something along the lines of: "Don't go to church, you'll become an opium addict."

So, what has actually happened with these people? Very simple. If you think you've found Shangri-La, you can't have done. Because nobody can be in Shangri-La. It's a faraway place. A mental paradise only. "Everything that can be thought and expressed in words is *einseitig* (subjective/one-sided), only half the truth", says Siddhartha to Govinda in Hermann Hesse's wonderfully spiritual novel. I too *felt* that a Unitarian church might suit me. I too *discovered* that a Unitarian church did suit me. But there was one thing I knew for certain. Not thought. Not said but *knew* - one day I would need a place where I could cry my tears.

Thirty-five years after first walking into chapel, I'm still waiting at that bus stop on Mount Scopus. But now there is a whole crowd of people with me.

**Ken Levy**

**Do you have any thoughts about this article?  
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you prefer, to the Editorial team at -  
[mike321peters@gmail.com](mailto:mike321peters@gmail.com). Letters or longer  
pieces, welcome. We would love to hear from you.**



***At the Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel***

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# What are YOU reading?

## Bob Archer shares some of the books he has enjoyed this spring

**New old crime:** I do like good crime writing, and this time around there are two new offerings from familiar favourites, Peter May and Dennis Lehane.

**Peter May: *A Winter Grave*, Riverrun.**

Peter May is back in stunning form and back in the Scottish Highlands. His *A Winter Grave* is set in a near-future in which artificial Intelligence and 'fake news' have added further layers of complexity to the already complicated relationships between human beings as individuals, as family members and in the mass.

Dying detective, Cameron Brodie, volunteers to take on the case when a body is discovered as ice thaws in a remote part of the country. I won't spoil the readers' enjoyment any further but expect currently topical concerns to take on a stark significance as the origin and the cause of the crime is revealed.

**Dennis Lehane: *Small Mercies*, Abacus.**

A new work from Boston author Dennis Lehane is very welcome. Since the early 1990s, Lehane has been making his mark, logging the culture, temperament, and uneasy relationship with the law of the Boston Irish working class. His *Small Mercies* is set in the 1970s, a time of key economic and social change. Young men have gone to Vietnam and come back in body bags or addicted to a variety of substances. Old loyalties are subject to question. Poor whites in the housing projects look askance at black people in the nearby slums. The city is de-industrialising and good jobs are scarce.

Gangsters are the most prominent figures of these communities, with politicians and police on their payroll. Plans are afoot to confront the outrageous underfunding of the schools in black neighbourhoods by bussing black students into white areas - race riots threaten.

The unexplained death of a young black man sets off a vortex of events with a violent climax. The characters - bad and not so bad - in this fast-paced thriller are unforgettable. A great read.

**Michelle Min Sterling: *Camp Zero*, John Murray**

Canadian-born Michelle Min Sterling lives in Cambridge Massachusetts and teaches literature and writing. *Camp Zero* is her first novel, also set in the near future. Climate change has brought catastrophic social change, with the wealthy privileged class living in protected bubbles. The poor scabble around for whatever they can get on the outside, or - if they are lucky - are



allowed into the bubbles to service the rich. We meet the heroine as she starts a new job as the mistress of a manager of a project in an abandoned oilfield in Canada's formerly frozen wastes. But all is not what it seems. Michelle Min Sterling presents a dystopian world of hard-hearted plutocrats, dreaming young idealists and women who just do what it takes to stay alive. Meanwhile the internet has morphed into a kind of mass dream-in, accessed by implants in every-ones' heads. A very good read, but scary!

**Sebastian Barry: *Old God's Time*, Faber**

It's narrated by a retired Garda, and it's about an unsolved crime or two, and so I suppose it's a detective story. But Sebastian Barry's *Old God's Time* merely inhabits some trappings of the genre to portray the decline and mortality, the memories and regrets of his ageing protagonist. Think Dürrenmatt's *The Pledge*, but as interior monologue. And if this narrator is not always quite reliable, then that goes with the territory. The novel unravels the interplay of good and evil and the contradictory and messy attempts to rescue the good and the innocent from abuse and corruption. It's both captivating and sobering to sit with the old fellow as he - maybe? - loses his marbles, because it's written by a total master of the narrative form.

**If you have read any good or great books recently, please share by sending your thoughts to the Editorial team at - [mike321peters@gmail.com](mailto:mike321peters@gmail.com)**