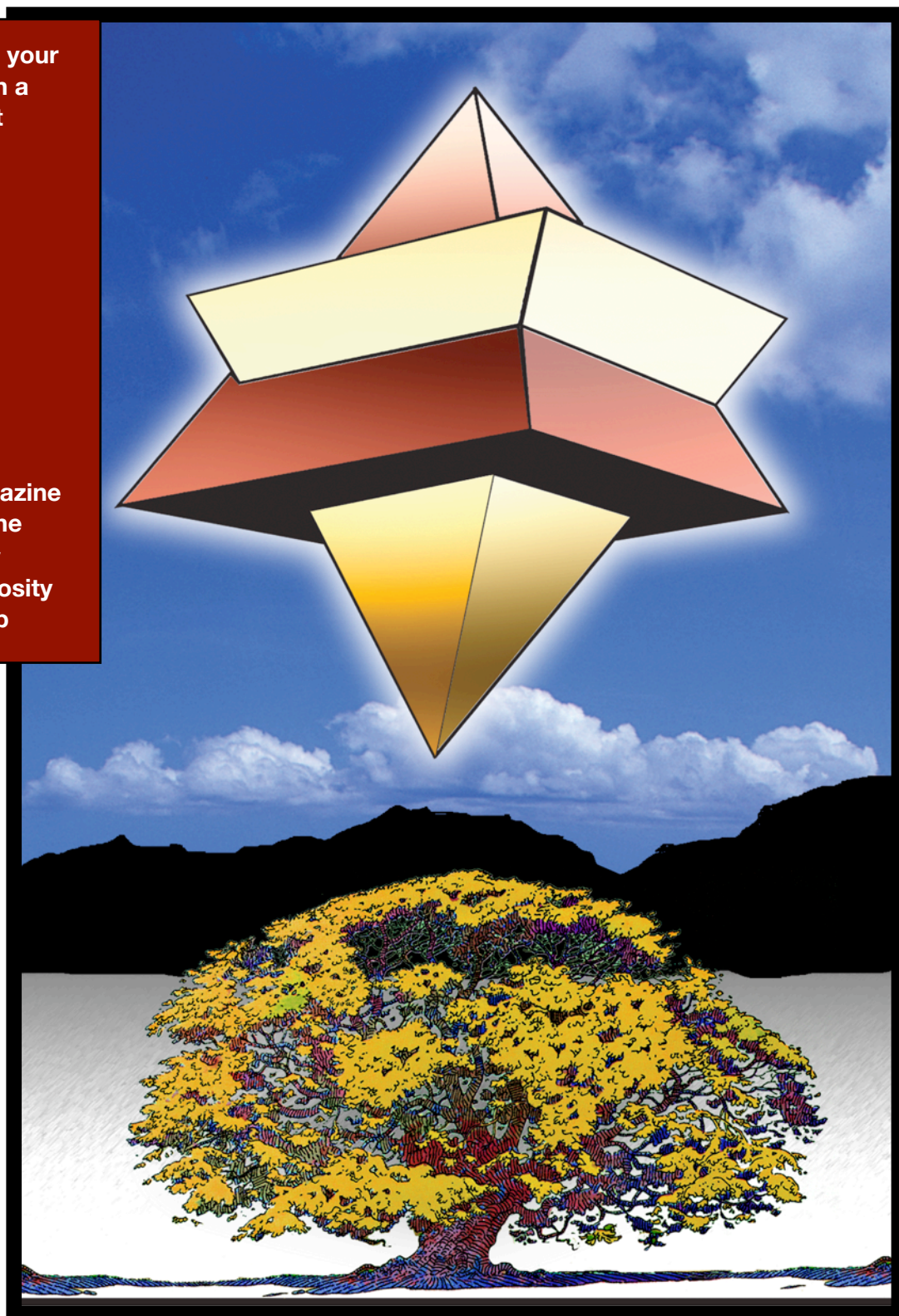


Issue 20 Spring 2008

CLOISTERS

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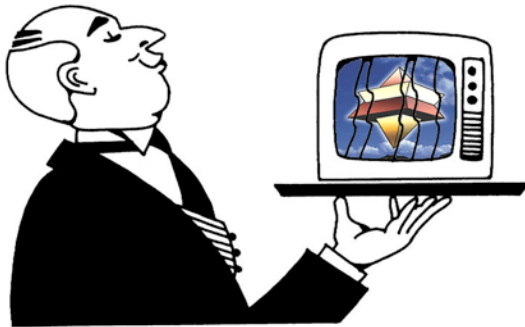
The
magazine
of The
New
Curiosity
Shop



Cloisters

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Issue 20 Spring 2008

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The Editor Speaks

**Mark Toner**

Well, here it is: our first edition of the new *Cloisters*, the magazine for the New Curiosity Shop (the first 19 were newsletters). So, what is it all about? Simply put, we want to stimulate your brain. In *Cloisters*, you will find articles on every subject imaginable, reviews of thought-provoking literature and the odd puzzle and lighter moment, all there to pique your curiosity and invite you to follow where your interest leads.

In this issue, we present three main articles. Jo Howard, who tutors in life changes with the New Curiosity Shop, discusses writing memoirs, a useful way to meet up with ourselves and come to terms with our lives' stories. Donna Lawer Jones allows us into the world of the adult learner. She relates her experiences in coming late to higher education and how her search for knowledge has transformed her life. Howard Middleton-Jones teaches archaeology in the New Curiosity Shop and we introduce him here as the Desert Archaeologist. Howard will be contributing more articles in this series as *Cloisters* grows and develops.

Supporting and enriching these main courses, Arthur Chapman takes us on a tour of informative web sites beginning with the Open Democracy pages. Journalism tutor Krys Wareing reviews *Flat Earth News*, Nick Davies' book that gives us a critical view of today's media. Noel Chidwick highlights some of the courses on offer at the New Curiosity Shop. If you are beginning to suffer from information overload, just skip to the inside back page where Paul Holmes will divert you with a puzzle and Olly, the online learner, will give you a lighter look at the quest for better information.

Cloisters - Magazine of the New Curiosity Shop

Published by the New Curiosity Shop.

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Skype: newcurioshop

Editor: Mark Toner, **Executive Editors:** Noel Chidwick and W Arthur Chapman.

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Making a whole from the fragments: thoughts about writing memoirs



Jo Howard

I find old photographs very moving. As I touch them I find myself wondering, “who took this?” - “What was going on at the time?” - “Why take this picture?” - yearning for the surrounding story. Apparently insignificant moments that stay in your mind with vividness, little vignettes, will often lead in to an important episode or theme in your life that’s worth writing about.

A few years ago I came across one of my mother’s old photo-albums, old photographs from the time when she and my father were married. With it was her rather stilted ‘My Baby’ diary. I began to piece things together, asking questions of relatives and dredging up my own early memories, and found that I was developing a memoir of those early days, illustrated by the photos and excerpts from her diary; I called it “Memories of a Hard Hearted Daughter.” As a teenager I had had no interest in her stories, rather the reverse. Because of this, the memoir was in part my attempt at posthumous reconciliation, an apology for being so unsympathetic. In writing Hard Hearted Daughter I found that there were several variations of my childhood story among members of my family - what was the “truth” of it, I

wondered, and according to whom? As I wrote I found my inner critic vetting what

I said and thought about myself and my mother: an echoing “that doesn’t sound very nice, dear,” haunted me much of the time as I wrote.

My father grew up as the gardener’s son on a big estate of a stately home in the Cotswolds. He used to tell us stories of the feudal ‘Upstairs Downstairs’ life they led. He had started writing down the stories that we most loved - the ones about Barbara the donkey - just before his last illness many years ago. We all wished that he had started sooner so that we could have known more about his parents and their struggles to give the children better opportunities than their own, and the world he had grown up in. All we had was brief anecdotes from relations, tiny fragments.

Writing about your own life is a strange and fascinating process. People have always done it, from letters and diaries to graffiti in toilets about Luv, and hearts with names carved on oak trees. Why do we do it? It may be from a wish to record something ephemeral that is of importance to us, or perhaps to justify ourselves to others or to our inner conscience. For some people it’s a way of trying to make sense of what was really going on and for others a way of purging some inner demons. Many people write for their children or

grandchildren as a gift, a lasting record of what happened before they were born.

“Life Writing” has become even more popular recently; it’s a subject of academic study, new



celebrity memoirs are published every month, and more and more people are finding it a personally absorbing occupation, side by side with genealogy and family history. It's a subject in adult education classes and is used with older people in care homes. A search on the Internet for writing memoirs, autobiography or "Life Writing" shows hundreds of sites. Some of these show you how to start, and include useful topics such as discovering your truth' and 'conquering your inner critic,' two of the challenges when starting on a memoir.



We each have at least one distinct and compelling story to tell, and that is the essence of memoir-writing, illuminating the past as we remember it. We could all write several different stories of our lives, depending on what we choose to emphasise or the truths we prefer to explore, so it's useful to choose one theme or focus and choose episodes or relationships that illuminate it. You may find that you learn more than you expected.

Steinbeck once advised a friend, "Don't start by trying to make the book chronological. Just take a period. Then try to remember it so clearly that you can see things: what colors and how warm or cold and how you got there. Then try to remember people... just tell what happened.... tell what people looked like, how they walked, what they wore, what they ate. Put it all in."

In *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate writes, "The personal essayist looks back at the choices that were made, the roads not taken, the limiting familial and historic circumstances, and what might be called the

catastrophe of personality." These are the kinds of things that may make your memoir fascinating to the reader, and may even get them to think about their own life journey and want to write about it too.

Useful links for memoir writing

<http://www.storyhelp.com/autotypes.html>

<http://www.preservememories.net/02%20Article.html>

<http://www.preservememories.net/01%20Article.html>

http://www.kporterfield.com/memoir/Memoir_Plotting.html

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writeit/memoir/brainstorm/>

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writeit/memoir/brainstorm/pdfs/firstperson.pdf>

<http://www.writing-world.com/creative/personal.shtml>

<http://www.writing-world.com/creative/uma.shtml>

<http://www.turningmemories.com/pscharacter.pdf> (writing the stories behind the photographs)

<http://www.inkspell.homestead.com/memoir.html> (good definition of memoirs)

<http://www.writing-life.com/nonfict/life.html> (excellent guidelines)

Jo is tutor of Coping with Change at The New Curiosity Shop. Her new course on writing your own memoirs will be available in May 2008.

Around the Interweb



W Arthur Chapman

Are you frustrated, annoyed, angry about much of the trivialisation of politics in today's media? Are you concerned about issues such as democracy, human rights, war and peace, climate change, or simply interested in trying to understand how 6 billion, and counting, people can live, work and play together on this increasingly frail planet of ours? If so, then take a look at Open Democracy.

As it says Open Democracy is "the leading independent website on global current affairs - free to

Sites for sore eyes

read, free to participate, free to the world..." and it offers "stimulating, critical analysis, promoting dialogue and debate on issues of global importance and linking citizens from around the world." Dialogue and debate, critical analysis and stimulating thinking are of crucial importance if real



openDemocracy
free thinking for the world

www.opendemocracy.net

progress is to be made in our ways of relating to one another and to the planet. Too often knee-jerk reactions are made to vitally important topics in the news and so it is very welcome to find somewhere where such issues can be discussed and debated openly

and constructively. Open Democracy offers one of the few places where this can take place.

As I write the home page offers informed opportunities for discussion on such topics as "the role of race in American society and politics" by Kanishk Tharoor, an article on the "likelihood of severe conflict over resources in the decades ahead" if we fail to take radical action on climate change, by Paul Rogers, important questions of "democracy and national identity in Taiwan" as their election takes place, by Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, and an article by Robert Springborg on the legacy of five years' occupation of Iraq by the US and coalition forces, to name but four. Every week there is the opportunity to read, think about and contribute to discussions on a wide variety of topics.

The site is well laid out and, in addition to regular articles, on a wide variety of themes, which include arts & culture, women & power, ecology & place and media & the net, you will find blogs, forums, slideshows and podcasts to extend participation and develop understanding.

Desert Archaeology

Egyptian Coptic Archaeology



***Howard
Middleton-Jones***

The Coptic era is one of the most fascinating and important periods of the Late Antique, 2nd – 7th Centuries AD – yet little work has been carried out in archaeological investigations, apart from a few isolated excavations by one or two European Institutes.

The heritage of the Coptic period still survives today, especially in the amazing artistic and architectural elements, language and liturgical services, yet the Coptic heritage is still considered to be very much under appreciated. In the late 1970's, while there was a surge or 'renaissance' in Coptic studies, it appeared to mainly concentrate on Coptic texts and textiles, leaving a large gap for the potential of archaeological work and excavations.

During the periods covering the 4th to 6th centuries AD, the Coptic community flourished in the Egyptian deserts, where many thousands of monks gathered in the hundreds of monasteries scattered all over Egypt. In one particular small area in the Western Desert, it is said that over 4000 monks lived and spent their lives devoted to the Coptic Christian way of life.

It was to this area that I visited in 2005, that of the Wadi el-Rayan, a desolate area in the Western Desert region of Egypt, said to be one of the driest on the globe. While in the 4th century it may have flourished, today there is only a cave

hermitage present, where approximately 20 monks live and meditate. I spent an interesting and worthwhile time with the monks living in a cave hewn by hand and sleeping on rock beds with mattresses – a luxury actually!

It is only by integrating oneself with such a community that one can start to appreciate the reasons why people such as these devoted monks (from the Greek, meaning alone, 'the ones who live alone') choose the solitary way of life. Peace and solitude does have a role to play and helps to clear the mind of the normal daily input living in a western world. The first monk in history was St Anthony of Thebes, circa 271 AD. St Anthony left the bustling towns to wander alone in the Egyptian desert and lead a solitary life, becoming the world's first Christian monk.

It was after my visit to the Western Desert I decided to extend and concentrate my archaeology experience onto the Coptic period, and thus began my journey, which in actual fact has opened many doors and potential research that otherwise may have been left hidden under the sands.

On returning home I had the good fortune to contact the only professional Coptologist now living, Dr Gawdat Gabra, a well-known Coptic historian, a prolific writer and chief editor of the St. Mark Foundation for Coptic History Studies in Cairo. We have been in constant touch since and I am grateful for his continual support and

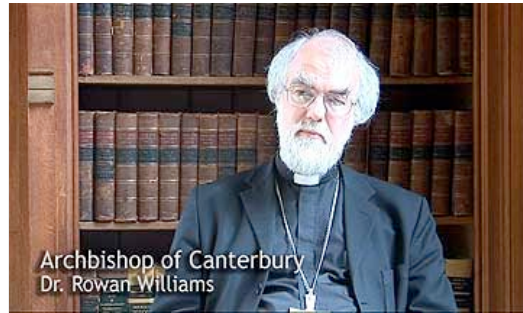


interest in my development of a Coptic monastery multi database.

Yet another 'lucky' opportunity came my way in the form of a filmed interview with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams at Lambeth Palace London. Dr Williams, not only hails from where I live near Swansea, but is extremely interested in the lives of the Coptic saints, 'The Desert Fathers', having not only written much on the subject but has visited many of the Coptic sites in Egypt. Thus, it was essential for me to organise such an interview and to gain a point of view from such an authority. To cut a long story short, he is a busy man! we eventually met up at Lambeth Palace (last survivor of the great London seats of the Bishops).

In the summer of 2007, a further opportunity presented itself, that of staying with Dr Gawdat Gabra in Muenster, Germany, who at the time was visiting Muenster, using the facilities of the Muenster Institute Library, the biggest collection of Egyptology and Coptology publications in the world. A friend and colleague from Switzerland, Peter Hossfeld, who runs a film production company, kindly met us at Muenster and filmed the interview with Gawdat and myself. To anyone who wishes to know more about the background of Coptic history, archaeology and architecture etc, the interview is an invaluable aid.

Both interviews and the information gained, provides us with a unique insight into this interesting and growing field of history and archaeology, and where better to gain this information but from the main players. We were indeed fortunate to obtain the time and interest from both Dr. Rowan Williams and Dr Gabra, for which I am truly grateful.



Desert Archaeologist Links

Wadi El-Rayan:

<http://www.ambilacuk.com/elrayan/>

Interviews: <http://www.ambilacuk.com/coptic/>

Muenster Institute Library:

<http://www.uni-muenster.de/Rektorat/Forschungsberichte-2003-2004/fo09ma04.htm>

Currently Howard is developing additional modules in archaeology for the New Curiosity Shop, including Coptic archaeology, where the intention is to provide not only a few basic introductory courses in each subject area, but to include a number of shorter and detailed courses within each field. For example, the *Introduction To North American Archaeology* will provide a good grounding in the archaeology and historical views of North America. With this grounding, students may have the opportunity to select further shorter courses within this general area, such as; *The Anasazi* and *The Archaeology Of The Four Corners* and *The Archaeology And History Of The Grand Canyon*.



Reality Check



Donna Lawwer Jones

Raised pulse, sweaty palms, shallow breathing – the indicators of fear are all working overtime. I look round the unfamiliar room at two dozen or so unknown faces. At this moment I wish with all my heart to be somewhere else, anywhere else. The tutor walks in, smiles and begins. Nothing too challenging, just instructions and course details. The fear recedes slightly. Someone smiles at me, I smile back. Somehow, I get through the next hour, the rest of the day, and emerge into late afternoon, out through the gates, back into the familiar city. I look back at the ancient buildings with their brand new extensions, brick and glass made to nurture a thousand dreams - including mine. I am 42 years old, and I have survived my first day at University.

I waited so long to fulfil this dream, I had almost given up on it. I left school at 16, and was married with two children at 24. As with so many women, my dreams were put on a back burner with the gas turned down. But I never lost the desire to learn. Mostly out of necessity, I picked up a lot of skills along the way. I learned to type through agency work, I learned to write copy while working as an accounts assistant in an advertising agency. I began putting skills together and started writing, letters for magazines, then articles and short stories. Layer upon layer, over the years I added skills and knowledge, a bit here, a bit there.

My husband was in the RAF, so we moved a lot, and there was never time to develop a career or to progress in any company. I learned to carry my skills with me, like a snail with a shell. In unfamiliar places and different houses all I needed was a typewriter and my contacts – I could send my stories from

anywhere. Over time, I fine-tuned a system. I created a dedicated space, usually a small table in the corner of the dining room for my typewriter, with a shelf for a few reference books, paper and pens. I learned that I could work out of a box – as long as I ruthlessly discarded bits of paper I didn't need, and kept everything meticulously tidy. This saved space and time – the less rubbish I accumulated, the less time it took me to find things, so my writing time (never more than a couple of hours) was more productive.

I developed the knack of 'switching on' by using mundane tasks as thinking time, so that I didn't waste precious writing time on wandering thoughts. And probably the most useful skill of all, when I picked up a pen, or sat at a keyboard, I wrote down what ever came into my head, without hesitation. It was usually rubbish to start with, but that didn't matter, it wasn't chiselled in stone. It was like creating a circuit between mind, hand and page. As long as the words flowed, I



could sort them all out later. And gradually I wrote less rubbish.

I began teaching creative writing and volunteered as a one-to-one literacy tutor—learning how to manage learning, how to get people to believe in themselves. I joined a writers' group, I soaked up information like a sponge.

Now I look back on a patchwork of learning, the colours and patterns of experience, some rich, some slightly threadbare, all stitched together with a passion for new experience. It was passion that carried me through the juggling act of three years of degree study and the jobs that paid for it. Over a decade later, it still shines as the most fantastic experience, truly life-changing. I could let my ideas take flight (as long as I supported every argument I made!)

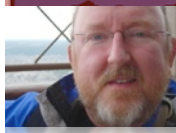
Sometimes I hold the patchwork up and see how it is constructed, how it all holds together year after year. When someone asks me if I ever 'use' my degree I always answer, 'every day.' It's

the same with writing. I still write, if not that often, but the processes I learned, the passion, the curiosity, and the courage to explore are as natural as breathing. That curiosity, the need to step outside my comfort zone, has taken me on a fantastic journey. From managing a computer bus providing facilities for disaffected young people, to taking a van full of donated school provisions overland to Prague after the terrible floods in Eastern Europe. From teaching Latvian farm workers in a draughty packing shed to helping my eldest granddaughter structure her essays and her ideas.

I run my own business now, selling vintage clothes and jewellery, and it is a good journey, full of surprises and hidden information, just waiting to be discovered. It is another piece of patchwork, firmly stitched to all the past experience, all the bits and pieces of learning, that inform my life and work and the way I engage with the world every day.

Around the NCS

A look at what's on offer at the NCS Online College



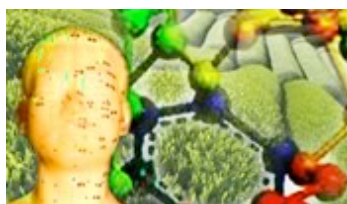
Noel Chidwick

When we established the New Curiosity Shop Online College we were keen to offer courses that were a little different from the norm; courses to whet the imagination, to stimulate the brain, get you thinking. And we think we are doing just that. We have a great team of tutors who have created some cracking courses that'll give your brain a treat.

Herbal Remedies: The Science behind the Old Wives' Tales is a course that looks at medicines and remedies that have been used for centuries and asks: 'are they more than Old Wives's Tales'? Along the way Alison Hennessy, your tutor, looks at how herbal remedies work and explores some of the science

behind the tales, and discusses the differences between modern and traditional medicine. Part of our philosophy at the NCS is to ensure that learning does not just involve sitting in front of the

computer. Herbal Remedies closes with a mini-project that takes you out to your community to find herbs in your own area and help to grow and tend them.



In a similar vein, *The Ecology of Your Garden*, also gets you out and about. Maggie Towse takes you by the hand and leads you through your very own garden. In these days of concern of climate change she looks at the effects on your garden, looking at climate and weather, habitats and food chains.

She also takes a look at the soil and its chemistry and at plant communities. Maggie's aim with this course is to help you, the gardener, to work with and not against nature, and to create a beautiful and productive garden. Another hands-on online course.



Find out more

Both of these courses and plenty more are available on our website at www.newcurioshop.com.

Like all of our courses you can book a place at any time, with courses starting (usually) on the first Wednesday of each month. You can take the course at your own speed for up to six months. *Herbal Remedies: The Science behind the Old Wives' Tales* costs £77 (around \$150) and *The Ecology of Your Garden* costs £99 (around \$180).

Come join Alison and Maggie!

Journalism makes the news



Krys Wareing

Shrinking budgets and staff levels, combined with the pressure of vested interests, have changed the face of journalism, asserts Nick Davies in his book, *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in Global Media*.

Davies, a reporter with Britain's daily newspaper, *The Guardian*, paints a picture of overworked and understaffed newsdesks at the mercy of the public relations industry and the interests of powerful figures. Journalism gives way to churnalism; facts give way to rumour and gossip.

All local and regional media outlets, both print and broadcast, are said to be swamped by a tide of churnalism. One national writer, says Davies, claimed working conditions prevented him from "going on the road to find stories, from conducting interviews and from going out to develop contacts". Another journalist, said to be a high-profile specialist, told how he had given up fighting the tide. "One day I just thought, 'OK, I'm not going to bother now. I'm just going to churn out everything that comes in'."

This is the heart of modern journalism, claims Davies: the rapid repackaging of largely unchecked second-hand material, much of it designed to service the political or

commercial interests of those who provide it.

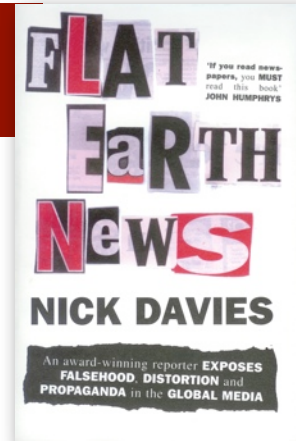
Objective

Despite Davies' assertion, there are media companies with capped journalist headcounts who uphold quality – and often it's the journalists themselves who do it.

Journalists are taught to not only verify the facts in a news release, but to independently produce a story that is objective and that 'stands up'. Checks and balances do exist in Britain: there is the Press Complaints Commission, and a law court, where the rules of defamation and contempt of court apply.

In some ways, Davies is not claiming anything new. Debate in journalism's academic circles has raged for many years over the marriage of the media to society. Bias, conscious and unconscious, may be inevitable, and while we ponder the impact of vested interests and cost-cutting on reporters' work practices, think of the effect reporters' ideological views may have on what they allow into the public domain. Is it ever acceptable for reporters to withhold sensitive facts on high-ranking officials, suspiciously because they hold the same political sympathies?

Fred Hirsch and David Gordon (*Newspaper Money*, 1975) asserted that the level and type of information available to newspaper readers coincides with their level of income because newspapers slice the market into socio-economic groups. Readerships



are maximised when the newspapers reflect the biases of the groups they serve. People will buy what they want from a market that caters to their needs and tastes.

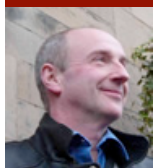
"I think the truth is that, in trying to expose the weakness of the media, I am taking a snapshot of a cancer," writes Davies. But perhaps we should infer then that in having access to higher education and market empowerment in our democratic society, it is we, the consumers, who should be the modern campaigners for 'right and wrong', and not the Fourth Estate.

Nick Davies' *Flat Earth News* is worth a read because it usefully reflects the values we knowingly or unknowingly accept. Humphrey McQueen asserted (*Australia's Media Monopolies*, 1977), "It is often said the media are on the side of big business. This is not so. The media are big business."

Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in Global Media.
Chatto & Windus £17.99

**Krys is tutor of
Understanding Journalism
at The New Curiosity Shop.**

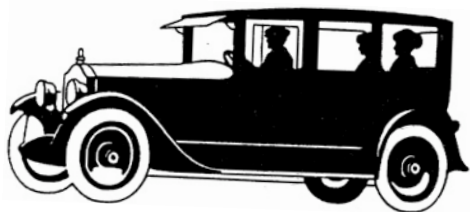
Paul's Puzzles



Sir Roger Hamster

Sir Roger Hamster has a personalised number-plate on his Rolls. All the number-plates have the same format: 3 letters followed by a 3-digit number. How many combinations are there? And how many letters of the alphabet need to be disallowed before there are less than half this number of combinations. Try it: it's not as easy as it looks.

Send all entries to cloisters@newcurioshop.com by 31st May 2008 and you could win a New Curiosity Shop course voucher.



Write for Cloisters

This issue of Cloisters is something of an experiment. The editorial line follows NCS philosophy in which we aim to encourage learning for its own sake and, although a computer is required to access our courses, we focus the learning experience on the real world beyond the computer screen. We are looking for articles on themes related to our courses: take a look at our site, www.newcurioshop.com, to find out more, but also we are looking for items that explore the world around us, raising questions, provoking our curiosity.

We are also keen for adult learners to come forward, and tell us about their experience of



returning to the classroom, online or otherwise.

In the first instance, contact Mark Toner, the editor, with your ideas at:

cloisters@newcurioshop.com

And we do pay for articles that we use. Our budget is not big, but we do believe in rewarding our contributors.

Be a Tutor

We already have a wonderful team of tutors, but we are always looking out for more to expand our catalogue of courses. We are looking for courses on a whole range of general interest subjects, but take a look at what we already have on offer before contacting us. And please, no computing courses! There are



more than enough Microsoft Word courses out there.

If you feel you have what it takes to be a tutor at the NCS, please visit our Tutors page on our website at: www.newcurioshop.com/teachOnline.htm.

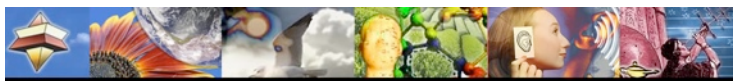
Join us on the NCS Blog - Tell us what you think about Cloisters

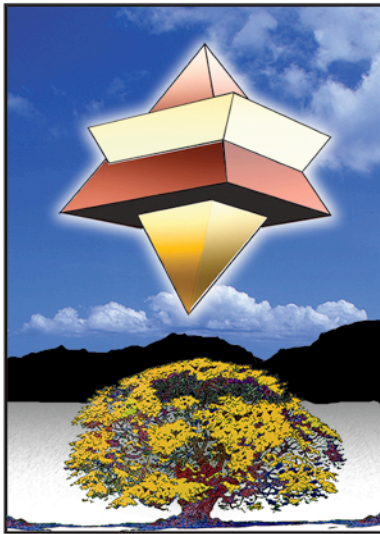
We have a blog at:

blog.newcurioshop.com

Come visit for regular news on learning related matters or other items that don't quite make it into Cloisters.

Talking of which, if you want to comment on this issue of Cloisters, or have any suggestions of what you would like to see in future issues of Cloisters, join us on the NCS Blog.





The New Curiosity Shop
Online Learning College

Give Your Brain a Treat with Online Distance Learning

At The New Curiosity Shop we provide distance learning courses over the web: all you need is access to a computer and a desire to learn something new. All our courses are fully supported by a tutor.

Subjects include:

**Family History
Forensic Psychology
Astronomy
Archaeology
Italian for the Tourist
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Journalism**

**HIV/AIDS
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Understanding Dreams
Ecology of your Garden
Coping with Change
–and more.**

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