

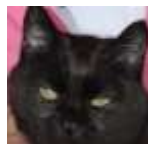
Morag Liffen
Working writer and author



Morag Liffen, October 2018

Felixstowe Book Festival usually hits town in June and has become a regular feature of local life since 2013. From 2016 onwards, a Short Story competition has been part of the activities. A recent email correspondence with Morag Liffen of Trimley St. Martin revealed she was this year's winner and when she offered to meet me to talk more about her literary life, we agreed to meet at the start of October.

I arrived at her home on a sunny afternoon and after being ushered into the bright living room. Morag began to explain her background and writing career. Her accent betrays her origins for she's a Geordie lass, born in 1956 in Newcastle. She went to University to study Geography but told me she left when she became engaged, as many young women did in the early 1970s. Her career started at The Department of Health and Social Security (D.H.S.S.) in Newcastle and when she moved to Ipswich in 1979, she was transferred to the Ipswich office. Working with needy people is demanding and difficult for all parties, with the main focus being all about the provision of money and benefits in challenging circumstances. Therefore, when she moved to the Job Centre in Felixstowe during the 1980s, she suddenly found she was comfortable with the work because the focus was on enabling people to find work which suited them. Contentious issues ceased to dominate daily life.

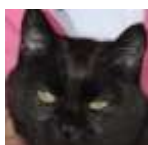


Morag has lived for nearly forty years in Trimley St. Martin. Having established her home here has created an accumulation of many village memories interwoven with her daily life. The Methodist Church has been a constant view over the years and possibly because we were very close to the thirty first anniversary of the Great Storm of 1987, she recalled finding the Church roof in her front garden the morning after. The chaos surrounding her house was part of the experience as well as fallen trees and local problems with the power supply. The Hand in Hand has played its part and she

recounted holding her wedding reception there. And like many others she uses Gosling's for just about everything green.

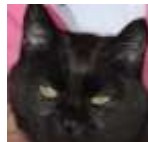
Life here is comfortable for her and she gives credit to the bus service for making access to other areas comparatively easy. However, in her early days here, walking the children to school was a daily necessity in the absence of a swift public transport route. Crossing the A14 bridge and trudging along the Kirton Road was a daily occupation. Later, horse riding became part of her favoured activities as well as walking. There was a time when she used to go riding out of Great Street Farm but the stables closed and so did the local opportunity for herself and others. For Morag, the rural aspect of Trimley is part of the charm of the village. A favourite walk has long been across the fields and down Gun Lane. Access the lane that has been temporarily curtailed while work on the railway takes place.

Children can often help to break down barriers and create friendships. Morag's early involvement in the village included working in the Sunday School and also doing voluntary work in Trimley St. Martin's School Library. This work helped to cement her understanding of how libraries are organised and arranged and was to prove helpful when sometime later she applied to work for Suffolk Library Service in the early 1990s. Her grasp of the Dewey classification system may have been the factor which led to her becoming a Library and Information Adviser. Twenty six years later she may be still be found working in Woodbridge Library on Saturdays and Sundays and told me she continues to relish the work. The other component of her ordinary working life is Whitworth Veterinary Practice, next to Trimley station. Morag started there in 2006 and is an enthusiastic animal lover as was evidenced by her elderly but beautiful cat Mai, who was swift to investigate what was going on whilst we talked, weaving her way between our legs and leaving her scent on my notebook in the curious manner known only to cats.



All of the above is part of Morag's daily bread and butter. But then we turned to Morag's writing, which belongs to her inner life and has outlasted all the jobs she has held. Morag has been writing since her early student days and hers is a career peppered with various prizes and accolades. Her launch pad was a variety of magazines where her stories were first published. *"True Romance"* and *"Women's Weekly"* were early adopters of Morag's writing. I believe *"True Romance"* no longer exists but *"Women's Weekly"* continues to flourish. Founded in 1911 it has always delivered knitting patterns, recipes and stories and Morag was fortunate enough to produce short stories suitable for publication. Morag explained there are strict criteria when writing for magazines, as there are for Mills and Boons publications. It requires real skill to adhere to these criteria and then produce satisfying and readable stories. Morag cut her teeth in this specialised writing medium. She continues to write for a magazines including *"The People's Friend"*, who also have demanding guide lines for their writers. If you purchase a copy, sooner or later you will come across one of Morag's stories.

Countless numbers of short stories have emerged from her pen and in 1990 her first novel was published by Robert Hale. This is the one which Morag says has been most successful particularly as it has made the most money for her. *"A love betrayed"* was published under the name of Morag Lewis and is still available nearly 30 years later. Although not in the Suffolk Libraries catalogue it's listed on Amazon. It received an accolade when it was published in Large Print format as this medium doesn't publish the wide range of books otherwise available standard format. Again, the selection criteria for large print books is quite demanding. However, once in print it is likely to be stocked by most libraries. Public Lending remunerates authors and illustrators annually, based on how many times a book has been issued and can provide something of a steady income stream. The sustained popularity of *"A love betrayed"* ensures the author continues to receive payments. The publisher Robert Hale no longer exists and all rights have reverted to Morag: this allows her to consider the future of her work on her terms alone.



Different forms of recognition have come from other sources. Sometime back in the 1980s there was a breakthrough moment when another competition win resulted in the receipt of an Amstrad 460 and a daisy wheel printer. Morag's writing life was transformed. Being a touch typist with access to this method of word processing allowed her writing to be easily edited and professionally reproduced for publishers and magazines. Most of her earlier writing now sits on large floppy disks. Further plaudits came when the B.B.C's *Look East* ran a short story competition in the 1990s. People were invited to add to it and Morag won the prize for completing the end. This resulted in her appearance on live T.V. and was later complemented by her appearance on The Lesley Dolphin Show... *"I have a good face for radio,"* Morag informed me with a laugh.

Other books followed on, two of which have a local connection and are drawn from Morag's knowledge of horses and riding...

"...readers of my two horse books "Green wellies and wax jackets", followed by the sequel "Muddy boots and mishaps", may recognise the locations in the novels as I include a ride down Cordy's Lane and along to the nature reserve and also down Thorpe Lane to Trimley foreshore. Eagle eyed readers will recognise the bridleways, and the annual Suffolk Show, the setting for one of the scenes in Green Wellies."

Both titles have themes drawn from the Cinderella fairy tale.

A fourth title, *"The Coach Trip"*, is a very recent publication. Filled with humour, it was drawn from real life experience. The overwhelming characteristics of Morag's novels are good humour and a light hearted approach to life. They might be defined as being the product of a kind and generous eye which finds humour in everyday observations.



Moving towards the end of the interview we discussed Morag's latest success, the prize winning entry in the Felixstowe Book Festival Short story competition, entitled *"A wing and a prayer"*. The brief was to commemorate the events of 100 years ago when the First World War ended. Using only a thousand words, Morag constructed the tale of a pigeon, a young boy and his grandfather. It centres around the true story of Cher Ami, a homing pigeon who was given to U.S. Army during the First World War. I won't say much more for fear of revealing too much of Morag's story but Cher Ami was a great source of inspiration to her. When the Winner of the Short Story competition was announced, the unsuspecting Morag was part of the audience at a Book Festival event at the Orwell Hotel. The announcement came as a complete and delightful shock. The story has just been published in the November edition of the *"Suffolk"* magazine where you can read Morag's interpretation of the legacy of one brave pigeon.



The shadows began to lengthen at this time in the interview, signalling it was time to pack up and go home. I had just one final question to ask which is germane to any writer or would-be writer. When does Morag find time for her writing? After all she has two other jobs and balancing these together with domestic demands must require a disciplined approach. Morag told me that over this summer, her writing schedule went completely out of the window. The sunny weather was a welcome distraction and truthfully, writing is more of a winter activity. When she returns to her digital pen, which is approximately now, her approach is to get up and just crack on until 1.00 p.m. when she stops, goes for a walk and carries on until 6.00 p.m. Her aim is to produce between two and three thousand words. After the story is completed, she leaves it to 'cook' for a week or so before making any adjustments. This disciplined approach results in maybe three or so sales per year, separate from her novels. Her writing is the result of structured hard work and years of honing her writing skills to perfection.

After a fascinating afternoon, I left Morag filled with admiration for her purposefulness, focus and creativity. Many people think they would like to write a novel, forgetting the swiftness of a Reader

outpaces the work of the writer to at least the power of twenty. Over the years, Morag's craft has produced stories to entertain readers and granted them the opportunity to be lifted out of their daily lives into a more imaginative and perhaps more peaceful place. Never an easy task to achieve but Morag makes it appear effortless even though it most certainly isn't. Her latest accolade is well deserved and I urge you to search out this story. Many, many congratulations Morag!

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If you would like to read something by Morag, you may be interested in the following information.

Why not contact: Stillwater Books, 36 Hamilton Road, Felixstowe. Telephone: 01394 548010.

Or, the following titles by Morag are available on Kindle:

The Coach Trip by Morag Clarke

Muddy Boats (and Mishaps) by Morag Clarke

Green Wellies and Wax Jackets by Morag Clarke

Currently available on Amazon you may find a limited number of copies available of:

"A love betrayed" by Morag Lewis (ISBN: 0709038860)

Two titles are available from Suffolk Libraries:

Muddy boats (and mishaps) by Morag Clarke

The Coach Trip by Morag Clarke

The winning short story, "On a wing and a prayer" is published in Issue 220 of the East Anglian Daily Times "Suffolk" magazine, November 2018, p. 78 - 79



The four books written by Morag

If you have any comments or would like to take part in the Village Recorder's Blogging Project, please to contact me at:

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26/10/2018