

writing in practice



# GUEST ARTICLE: Story Hunting

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# GUEST ARTICLE



## Story Hunting

Maggie Butt

### ABSTRACT

When a writer catches the scent of a story so alluring that they have to drop everything to track it down, they often don't know where it will lead or what genre or form it will shape-shift into.

Maggie Butt describes two stories which took over her life, which drew her to research she never expected to undertake and to outcomes she couldn't have predicted. In each case the story itself dictated the published form.

The first was a moving WW1 story. She expected this tale of civilian internees to become the basis for a few poems in her third collection, but it eventually resulted in the publication of a book which was a collage of photographs, paintings, extracts from memoirs and letters and her own poems. The structure was based on that of an historical documentary.

The other was a WW2 story, told to her in a lift. She thought she'd put it to rest by writing it as a long narrative poem, but it struggled to its feet and led her off through the Czech republic, Poland and Germany, and finally to an internationally published commercial novel.

## Story Hunting

Sometimes you catch the scent of a story so alluring that you have to drop everything to track it down, following it wherever it leads, even if it takes you into a snowdrift on a lonely hill-top in Poland.

This paper describes two stories which took over my life, which drew me to research I never expected to undertake and to writing outcomes I couldn't have predicted. One was a first world war story, which resulted in the publication of *Ally Pally Prison Camp* (2011), a book which is a collage of photographs, paintings, extracts from memoirs and letters and my own poems. The other was a Second World War story, told to me in a lift. I thought I'd put it to rest by writing it as a long narrative poem, *I Am The Sphinx* (2008), but it struggled to its feet and led me off through the Czech republic, Poland and Germany, and finally to a completed commercial novel, *The Prisoner's Wife*, which was published in the UK, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia in April 2020 and in the US and Canada in May 2020 by imprints of Penguin Random House.

I'll be asking why these particular stories got me in their grip and wouldn't let go. I'll also be raising questions about why we might settle on a particular genre or form to tell a certain story.

But first, more about the Second World War story, which eventually became *The Prisoner's Wife*. In 2007 I had just published my first collection of poetry, *Lipstick*, and was writing occasional poems towards the next, when one day I found myself in a lift at my mum's sheltered accommodation with an elderly gentlemen called Sidney Reed. We had been talking about war experiences and he said, "I bet I could tell you a story about prison camps which would make your hair stand on end."

The journalist in me was already hooked. He went on to say that for the last six months of the war they'd hidden a Czech woman in the camp where he was a prisoner of war. She was secretly married to a recaptured English soldier, and they'd been picked up together, on the run. The other prisoners decided to hide her in plain sight, posing as a British PoW. I got that fizzing feeling at the back of my head, and knew this was a great story. Perhaps it would be a couple of poems for my next collection.

A few days later, I went back and took detailed notes – everything he could remember. I wondered if it could possibly be true, but the details he gave me sounded so authentic – details about the way the men reacted when her presence was announced, how she

coped with her period, ways in which they protected her by causing diversions during the searches, and other ways they watched out for her. He also gave me details about the sleeping arrangements in the camp, the food, and the heavy physical work in a quarry.

But what was I going to write? I started to think about how it would feel for her, to have to keep totally silent for fear of discovery, and I began to hear her voice in my head. I thought this might work as a radio play, although her silence would make her an invisible character in dramatized scenes, and I wasn't sure I wanted it to just be a monologue. I began to plan out the plot and characters and story arcs as I would for prose fiction, but the voice remained stubbornly that of a poem, a rhythmic, though not metrical form, falling into the line breaks of free verse, heavy with metaphor, with meaning compressed, using repetition, assonance and alliteration.

I am re-virgined, chaste as moon,  
trapped in a cube of silence,  
bedded by loneliness, sleeping half a sleep.

And later,

We plod in silent-world where words  
have lost the will to flow,  
stone-tongued like cooling lava.

Between the thought-voice of the protagonist, I used the incidents which Sidney Reed had described to me, developing the setting of the quarry where they work:

The quarry is a bowl of noise  
shouts, trucks, explosions,  
chipping of pickaxes as great stones  
are released from cliff by sweat and muscle.

I created characters who support the Czech girl and her young husband, Bill. Ralph is in charge of their barrack-room, and the dialogue uses Sidney's memory of the event:

Ralph sets a bunkhouse sentry,  
says the words, "We have a woman  
in the camp." A cheer vibrates the roof,  
whistles, "Me first," stamping,  
"Will she do us all?" Ralph bangs  
his tin mug, "That's enough of that,  
she's our new inmate's wife,  
and under our protection."



Scotty is based on someone mentioned to me by Sidney Reed,

Ralph coughs, "We'll need some small pyjamas."  
A wiry Scot climbs down from the bunk  
where he's lain prone. Men mutter  
as he presents striped cotton. "They're none  
too clean," he says, "I was nae expecting  
visitors." He turns, "And bye-the-bye  
I'll kill the man who messes with the lassie;  
he wouldnae be my first." They nod,  
knowing about the Glasgow razor gang.  
I don't, but hug the smell-soaked, stiff  
pyjamas, rough cloak of invisibility  
and my trousseau.

I never intended to write a long narrative poem. The very words make my heart secretly sink. But bit by bit, the words grew and coalesced until there were 2,800 of them in a free verse, first person story, with a lyric voice. I had to admit I'd written a long narrative poem. It begins:

A doorway is a hopeless hiding place  
and the sweet smell of love  
like aniseed to tracker dogs  
who growl and snap our feet.  
Blacked-out tenements crowd  
this labyrinth of unfamiliar streets,  
too dark to see the scuffling rats.  
Night in this town of sounds:  
our two sets of running feet  
the panting of our breath.  
Barking dogs and hunters' yells  
echo off buildings, closing for the kill.  
Shivering listeners cower behind each window  
and their prayers fail to cloak us.

If I'd written a radio play, I would have sent it to the BBC, but what on earth to do with a long narrative poem, which I'd spent months honing? I approached George Simmers, who'd published a few short poems of mine on the Snakeskin e-zine, knowing he was up for experiment and challenge. He accepted it and published it in 2008 as a downloadable e-chapbook, called *I Am The Sphinx*. A friend of mine with a professional recording studio, very kindly took a whole day out of his schedule and recorded me reading it, so there was also a downloadable mp3. I presented a print-out and CD to Sidney Reed, who was very happy with it. I even had a positive review,

This work is the first narrative poem I have ever encountered that fulfils both its poetic and

its narrative drives with equal fluency, lack of pretentiousness and moving characterisation. In addition, her reading served her poem beautifully, unaffected but affecting. This is a work that deserves attention.

Becca Books 2009

I thought I was done with it. I had other projects to get on with. I wasn't interested in anything else to do with war.

Then I read a couple of sentences in a local history book, which said that during the First World War, Alexandra Palace, near my home in north London, had been an internment camp, what was then called a "concentration camp," for German, Hungarian and Austrian civilian men. I quickly discovered that many of these prisoners had English wives and children, and owned businesses in Britain. Most had either been born in England or left their native country as children, and spoke only English. I began to look into this story at the time when people were being held in Guantanamo Bay without trial, and I thought, the Ally Pally story had many contemporary resonances about racism and prejudice. I thought I might write a poem or two about Ally Pally for my next collection, so determined to find out more. In a past life I was a BBC Television documentary researcher and producer, specialising in historical documentaries, so I set off to the archives at the Imperial War museum, a rather magical place, up in a turrety reading room. They brought me out two cardboard boxes of pictures and letters and unpublished memoirs.

There were posed photographs, taken to show how well the British were treating enemy alien citizens. There was the notebook of a lady censor with thrilled notes like "the mention of fish could mean torpedoes," and a tiny bunch of violets, pressed between its pages. But most of all there were letters from the prisoners themselves.

There was a bundle of letters from a Hungarian tailor called Benny Cseh, who had an English wife called Mabel, and two small daughters. Benny's letters weren't eloquent, but they were so human. He wrote crossly to Mabel for including two pears in a parcel, which went squishy. A 2/6 postal order went astray, and he was almost beside himself with anxiety. As time went on, he became increasingly depressed. Benny pulled me in, and I wanted to share his story, in his own words, the story of an ordinary man, in

the wrong place at the wrong time, in this extract from one of his letters:

My dearest Mabel

It seems so long to not know anything about you for almost a week. You can write, but do not exceed two pages. I met several of my old acquaintances and friends, Mr Rosner is sleeping next to me.

I was very much disappointed with your visit. Not with you my dear, but with the time, as I did not know how to divide that 15 minutes between you and Ilona, poor little mite. I have been told she was crying for me when you left.

Goodbye my dearest with fondest love and lots of kisses to you and the babes.

*Benny*

The box also contained the unpublished biography of the colourful Kurt Engler by his son. Before the war Kurt had been a “master hairdresser”. In Ally Pally he became a wig maker, drug-dealer, painter of illicit German air victories. I knew I needed to compress his story into a poem, and eventually decided it had to be the form of a ballad:

He set up in the barber’s shop  
swept up beneath the chair  
and fashioned wigs for sale outside  
from other prisoners’ hair.

Like ancient barber-surgeon  
he pulled their teeth as well,  
filled dental requisition slips,  
discovered he could sell

for quite a tidy profit  
something to ease the pain,  
for boredom and for loneliness  
administered cocaine.

Another man whose letters are in the Imperial War Museum was the young R. H. Sauter, the nephew of John Galsworthy, and a Harrow-educated, aspiring artist and writer. He lived with the upper classes in one of the towers. His letters were lyrical and astute, and accompanied by sketches of the room he lived in. I will return to him later.

So, I left the museum with pages of copied down notes, a date to return, and a new project buzzing in my head. I already knew this was more than a few poems in my next collection, but I needed more

research. At Bruce Castle Museum in Tottenham I found paintings by George Kenner, who’d been a prisoner at Ally Pally. Within days, I was in touch with his daughter in America, and had permission to use her father’s wonderful paintings in any way I wanted.

Then I went to the British Library, where I found a number of published memoirs, which gave me new insights and new characters. I wanted to include the actual words of the forgotten men, and once I’d found George Kenner’s paintings I couldn’t bear to be without them.

I was faced with the problem Hilary Mantel describes as, “What to do when the evidence is missing, ambiguous or plain contradictory.” As a poet, the answer seemed obvious. All the time I was researching, I was also writing poems which used my own imagination to fill the gaps in the historical record. They included a pantoum about rumours, the ballad about Kurt Engler, and poems in the voices of the silent prisoners:

### **It’s Just**

It’s just a cold dear.  
We all have colds.  
the laundry flutters with our handkerchiefs  
flags of surrender.

It’s just a cough dear.  
We all have coughs.  
A thousand hacking men who bark  
all night, keeping sleep at bay.

Do I look thin dear?  
We all look thin.  
The fish is sometimes rotten  
and it twists within our guts.

It’s just a life dear.  
We all have lives.  
Some spill them in the trenches  
others in a cage.

It’s just a war dear.  
We all have war.

So there I was, with photographs, paintings, poems, letters and memoirs. I began to collate the material as I would have done for a documentary film, choosing

extracts from the memoirs and letters, arranging them chronologically with the poems, to tell the story from 1915 to 1919, from imprisonment to the armistice and beyond. I slipped the photographs and paintings into the body of the story, just as I would have done in a film.

On my first research trip to the Imperial War Museum, I read an extract of a letter by R. H. Sauter, written on Armistice day, November 11th 1918. As soon as I read it, in his immaculate handwriting, the hair stood up on the back of my neck, and I knew I had to give him the last words:

Peace at last darling.  
The thought of it is so big.

I have just read the armistice conditions  
and now I see the real ideals for which the money-grubbing lawyers of the 23 nations have been fighting.

Here one is living among the defeated ...  
it is upon their fathers, their mothers,  
their relatives and friends that these conditions  
of slavery have been imposed.  
The whole of Germany, one great internment camp.

I see the child of this very day,  
like a ghost, haunting the future,  
another war.

I decided that with voices as strong as those, I didn't want any commentary within the narrative itself, but instead wrote detailed historical end-notes:

**Violinist** p 17 The camp commandant was a music lover and encouraged the prisoners to form an orchestra, Konzert Vereni, which gave concerts on Sunday evenings and sometimes at visit times. Its conductor, Gustave Wanda had previously conducted at Berlin's Winter Gardens. He became ill and died at Alexandra Palace aged 40.

And then I had to try to find a publisher. I talked first to a small North London publisher who had produced a sumptuous illustrated book of poems, and she offered to publish it. I think it would have been a beautiful book, but I wasn't happy about the contractual arrangement, and I really wanted a publisher who was known in the poetry world, who might be able to get the book reviewed, and arrange some readings. So, I sent it to Oversteps Books,

guessing the publisher, Alwyn Marriage, might have anti-war and anti-discrimination sympathies. Sure enough, it passed the Oversteps publication panel, and we were in business.

However, the colour pictures were a problem for her, as they pushed up the cost of the book beyond what I thought people would pay. In the end we compromised on eight pictures over four pages, and an affordable price.

The book was published in 2011, and has sold well for a poetry book, although this is mostly because people think it's a history book. I've taken an illustrated, multi-voice presentation on the Women's Institute and other talks circuits, and since then it's been adapted into a documentary film and a locative media app, made with Heritage Lottery money. The app is available from the App Store under the title *Time Stands Still*. Once downloaded to a mobile device, you can listen as you walk around Alexandra Palace and hear particular recorded extracts from the memoirs, letters and poems, in particular geographical locations. It was very state of the art at the time. So, it's a story which took me over, told me how it should be presented, and then developed a life of its own beyond the book itself.

People asked me if I was going to go on to cover other camps, or the way that Ally Pally was used again in the Second World War. But I confidently said I was done with war stories. I had poems about imaginary Patron Saints knocking in my head to get written, and lots of other ideas. And I did write other things, and the patron saints came out as *Sancti Clandestini Undercover Saints* in 2012.

I thought I'd left the war stories far behind me, but as I was pulling together my fifth poetry collection *Degrees of Twilight* in 2014, that first story – the Czech girl in the 2<sup>nd</sup> war POW camp – started to nag at me again. I didn't know how many people had read my long narrative poem. Was it more than one? Didn't that great story deserve a bigger audience? I toyed with going back to my original idea of a radio play, based on a monologue, but instead, I decided it had to be fiction.

I knew a novel would require a lot more research so I returned to the notes I'd taken from Sidney Reed, and went to visit him again, but by this time he was unfortunately no longer able to give me any further coherent information. My original notes said

he – and the Czech woman – had been imprisoned at camp E166, which he called a Straflager, a punishment camp. But I couldn't find anything on the internet about Straflagers or camps with E numbers. I began to doubt the whole tale. His son told me he'd been at the notorious Lamsdorf prison camp in Poland. I began to look into their archive, and found that the English prisoners went out from Lamsdorf to Arbeitscommando – work camps with E numbers for the "English" camps. E 166 was – as Sidney had said – a quarry in the occupied land of Czechoslovakia, and now I had its name and location. Supikovice.

That tingle began in the back of my head again, and I was off, visiting the National Archive to read the reports of returned PoWs, finding books about PoW camps, re-reading Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man* (2013), knowing that anything I wrote would be a ghost of a book beside the power of that. I realized with a sickening jolt that if my protagonist been at Lamsdorf at the end of the war, she would have been force-marched out of the camp in the dead of winter, just ahead of liberation by the Red Army, in what became known as the Long March. Hundreds of thousands of Nazi prisoners were evacuated from the Eastern European camps and walked 500 miles on starvation rations, right across Germany. 20,000 of them came from Lamsdorf. I didn't think I could write anything so moving and appalling as the reports and books I'd been reading.

I decided the only way to find out was to go and visit the camp and follow one of the routes of the Long March. My husband agreed to drive, while I took photographs, made notes, and hunted for locations, both for the months of imprisonment, the march and the back-story I'd be creating. Would that be a possible church where they could have been secretly married? Might that be her house? Could they have slept overnight in that barn on the Long March? A patient curator showed us around the Lamsdorf camp site in appropriately snowy conditions, and I gleaned more material in the excellent museum. As well as facts, I began to gather sensations, impressions, tactile experiences. I walked out in a blizzard to find out what I could hear and see. I now had vivid pictures in my head to illuminate the facts I'd learned from my reading. We even followed the Sat Nav along a rapidly disappearing road, into a snow-drift in a lonely field. That's where stories can take you.

That research trip was in 2014. I returned to my long narrative poem and used it as the spine of my novel, interweaving imagined back-story which answered the questions everybody asked when I told them what I was doing, "How was a woman in the camp?" "But how did they meet?" "How did they marry?" I developed the characters from my poem, giving them lives and histories of their own. I invented new incidents, new sights of tension and conflict, based heavily on excellent books, including *The Last Escape* (2003) by John Nichol and Tony Rennell, and Robert McKee's *A Crowd Is Not Company* (1982). By complete serendipity, E166 was the camp where another prisoner, Horace Greasley had been held and which he wrote about in *Do The Birds Still Sing in Hell* which gave me further background. This book was first published in 2013, so it wouldn't have been available to me when I was writing *I Am The Sphinx*. If I'd begun by writing a novel, it would have been missing a lot of detail.

The six pages of notes I had from Sidney Reed could only give me a sketch outline, which had to be fleshed out with factual information and imagination. Mantel says, "The task of historical fiction is to take the past out of the archive and relocate it in a body." I had no doubt about whose body it needed to be located in – the one with the unique viewpoint of a woman in an exclusively male world. Sidney Reed couldn't remember the name of the Czech girl or her husband, and though he was sure he'd heard they'd made it back to England, possibly via Liverpool, he had no idea where they might have been living. So, the characters of Izzy and Bill are invented, as are their friends Ralph, Max and Scotty. The character of Scotty grew from a memory of Sidney's of a member of the notorious Glasgow razor gang at Supikovice, and Kurt was based on a sexually predatory guard recalled by Sidney. My aim, summarized by Mantel, was "to recreate the texture of a lived experience, to activate the senses and deepen the reader's engagement through feeling." This is a novel, not a documentary, but every researchable element is based on historical truth. Details of prison camp life have been drawn from a range of sources. I joined the Lamsdorf Association and attended information days, talking to the knowledgeable Polish curator of the Lamsdorf Museum.

My dad had been a prisoner of war – and though he never spoke about his experiences, I had access to the unpublished diaries of his best friend, documenting



daily life in PoW camps in Austria and Italy and was able to use many incidents and insights from these. It was a stroke of luck that Supikovice happened to be the work camp at which the prisoner Horace Greasley fell in love with the quarry owner's daughter Rosa Rauchbach, and that he wrote a book about his escapades, so I had that to draw on.

Every step of the terrible Long March in my novel comes from eye-witness accounts, particularly drawing on those so meticulously chronicled in *The Last Escape*. There were three principal march routes across Europe from the different PoW camps. I chose to send Izzy on the shortest. Many prisoners walked further, for longer, and suffered worse deprivation and cruelty, and many died before they could reach safety. Some incidents I've included actually happened after the timespan of this novel, for example, on April 19, 1945, at a village called Gresse, 30 Allied POWs died and 30 were seriously injured (possibly fatally) when strafed by a flight of RAF Typhoons. This is described in horrific detail in *The Last Escape*. In my novel, a similar incident happens around March 7<sup>th</sup>, when my characters are a few days march from Hartmannsdorf POW camp. Although this is a work of fiction, I have tried to be historically truthful throughout because it's the tale of what happens when fascism is allowed to flourish. So I tapped away and the story grew from a lyrical narrative poem into a novel. Then came the task of finding a publisher. My novel, then called *The Girl Made of Silence* was rejected by 20 agents before I found Millie Hoskins, who had me cut 30,000 words from the 150,000 word manuscript. and changed the title to *The Prisoner's Wife*. With those alterations made, she sold it almost overnight to imprints of Penguin Random House in the UK and USA in pre-emptive deals for advances which were astonishing to a minor poet who never expected to make money from writing. Apparently, I had written a commercial novel. Who knew?

Although contracts had been signed, the editing process was far from over. My UK editor, Selina Walker, asked me to do two things: to unpick my carefully interwoven, flashback structure, which followed the form of the long narrative poem, and tell the story chronologically, and also to rewrite some chapters from Bill's point of view. I balked at both these suggestions, but Selina had been Helen Dunmore's editor, and eventually I decided she knew best, and carried out the changes.

However, I did successfully argue for keeping a prologue which starts at the same point as my long narrative poem, quoted previously,

Everything was quiet and still, apart from the light crunch of our boots as we crept down the deserted street. The sliver of moon disappeared behind a cloud, and we slowed our pace, barely able to make out the way ahead.

That's when we first heard the dogs. Only one bark at first, carrying in the quiet of the night. We clutched each other's hands, and stood still for a moment.

Then another bark. And another. Not muffled by the walls of a building, but out in the night, like us, out in the streets.

Instinctively we moved away from the sound, and the buildings glowered at us, closing in. My heart was drumming, and my breath came fast. We walked more quickly. The dogs were barking, closer, echoing off the buildings, perhaps two of them, perhaps three. We turned to see if they were in sight, but the darkness was too absolute. We were acutely aware of the noise of our boots on the cobbled road.

And then there were shouts behind us, men's voices, excited to have something to do in the boredom of the night watch, egging on the dogs, eager for the hunt. Whichever way we turned, the dogs and the men grew closer and our boots clanged louder.

It became a town of sounds: our breath, the pounding of our own blood in our ears, the clatter of our boots on the road, the dogs barking, men running and calling, closer, closer.

Luckily the American editor didn't want any major changes.

*The Prisoner's Wife* was ready to be published under the name Maggie Brookes – another incarnation (or reincarnation, as it was my maiden name) of the writing self, as the name "Butt" would have seemed to funny to US readers. But shortly before publication, disaster struck. The publication dates were 16<sup>th</sup> April 2020 in the UK and 26<sup>th</sup> May 2020 in the USA and Canada, just when bookshops were closed down because of COVID 19. The book would have sunk without trace if the Penguin Random House marketing department hadn't managed to get it into Asda and Tesco in this country and similar supermarkets overseas. How glad I was to be "commercial" not "literary!"



It was also sold into many other territories and in some countries auctions were held between interested publishers. It has now come out in the Czech Republic, Poland, Mexico, Holland and Portugal, and translation rights have been sold for Hungarian, French, Italian, and Sri Lankan editions. The completion and publication of the novel leads me back to questions about form. *I Am The Sphinx* expanded as I wrote it, into a long narrative poem which I didn't intend to write. The book of *Ally Pally Prison Camp* wasn't what I set out to do, but the characters and the story, the memoir and letter extracts, the paintings and photographs drew me in to create a book that's been described as a collage or a *mélange*. I feel it's a documentary film on paper. With poems.

The story of *The Prisoner's Wife* could have remained a long poem, but I wanted it to reach a wider audience. The epic scale and episodic nature of the journey, spread it out for me into the shape of a novel.

This brings me to my last question – why have these stories particularly appealed to me? We all come across dozens of stories every week, so why were these the ones which embedded themselves in me? I never expected and never intended to write about war. War films, books, comics were never of interest to me. I skipped the battle scenes of *War and Peace*, to read on to the next love scene. So how has it happened that I've spent years of my life researching and writing war-time stories?

Partly it's to do with my age. My grandfathers both fought in the first world war, and one was gassed in the trenches. I can still hear the way he coughed in the mornings.

Then there's my parents' generation. My mum, Joan Brookes (nee Forsyth), was a nurse in the second war, and my dad was a soldier. Mum was a dyed-in the wool pacifist, who raised me with a strong concept of the waste and futility of war, and when I was at the BBC, I made a documentary for Forty Minutes called *Troublesome People*, about the pacifists and conscientious objectors who refused to take part in both wars. So, part of my life-mission seems to be to show the senselessness of war.

Also, my dad, Alfred Brookes, was a prisoner of war, captured in North Africa and held in Italy and then Austria from the age of 21 to 25. And he never, ever spoke about it. Was it his silence I was trying to uncover? Did I want to give a voice to the things he was forever unable to describe? I think the concept of a voice for the voiceless is a strong motive for me. Throughout the COVID lockdowns, I worked on another historical novel, *Acts of Love and War*, about humanitarian aid for refugees during the Spanish civil war, which is due to be published in August 2022 and is currently being sold overseas. Again, this was an epic tale with strong relevance to our modern world which clearly needed the form of long fiction. For me, writing about the past is a slant-wise way of writing about the present. The stories of the past resonate into the present, and the future.

In April 2021, while the novel was still in the edit process, my sixth poetry collection *everlove* was published by the London Magazine Editions. It features a sequence of ekphrastic poems about modern-day refugees and poems about other topics which make me angry or despairing, particularly the climate crisis, as well as lyrics about the delights and joys of being alive. Almost all the poems in this collection were written before the new novel, as I seem to find it hard to write poetry and fiction at the same time. All of them were unquestionably poems – glimpses, epiphanies, encapsulated orreries – rather than the expansive subjects of fiction. It was a pleasure to experiment within these compressed forms, using compound words and writing many poems which were one complete sentence. Making short film-poems for my website has allowed me to flirt with another mode of expression.

So, what next? I'd like to write an historical novel set further back in time though my publisher is keen to brand me as someone who writes about women and war. I don't know what the form of my next work will be but I hope another story will come and grab me and I'll just have to hunt it down.

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## About the Author

**Dr Maggie Butt** is an ex-journalist and TV documentary director, turned poet and novelist. Her sixth poetry collection, *everlove* was published in April 2021 by The London Magazine Editions and her novel *The Prisoner's Wife* was published by Penguin Random House imprints across the world in 2020, under her maiden name Maggie Brookes.

As well as her five previous poetry collections, including *Lipstick* and *Ally Pally Prison Camp*, her poems have escaped the page onto a mobile phone locative media app, choreography, Radio 4, festivals, have become film-poems and been set to music.

After her English degree at Cardiff University she became a newspaper reporter, moving to BBC TV as a documentary producer and director. She gained a PhD in Creative Writing at Cardiff University and taught aspiring writers at Middlesex University for 30 years. She was Chair of NAWF and founding editor of *Writing in Practice*. Maggie had four years as a Royal Literary Fund Fellow, and has judged a number of international poetry competitions.

Her next novel, *Acts of Love and War*, set in the Spanish Civil War, is due for publication in August 2022.