

# DEBORAH COOPER

I began studying Creative Writing BA(Hons) with the OCA in 2014 and graduated in 2020 with a first class degree.

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BA Hons Creative  
Writing

## About

Deborah wrote her first published short story (it appeared in the local newspaper) when she was 18. After subsequently writing and submitting 5 Young Adult novels and 4 Adult novels, she's amassed enough rejection letters from agents to wallpaper a downstairs toilet.

She began her BA(Hons) Creative Writing journey with the OCA in 2014, graduating with First Class Honours in 2020 at the age of 58.

Currently in the final trimester of her Creative Writing Masters at Bath Spa University, Deborah will graduate in the autumn and continue her search for the elusive agent and publishing deal she had at the top of her wish list forty years ago.

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The poem 'Daisies for the Teacher' was written during the OCA Level 1 course 'The Art of Poetry'. Whilst the first half has its roots (pun intended) based in fact, the remainder is pure fabrication.

—Or is it?

'A Safe Distance' is the novel I began writing at Level 3a and continued in 3b. My stories and novels are generally more character-led than plot-driven, and I enjoy discovering how people's personalities alter and adapt when faced with situations they're not used to or prepared for.

This currently stands at 30,000 words and is sitting on the legendary back-burner while I complete the novel I'm writing for the Bath Spa University Creative Writing MA.

## Daisies for the Teacher

The daisies were left on the sill, in the sun,  
pinky-white petals fatigued, every one.

Miss Price had said *thank you*, but then left them there  
to take the class register. She didn't care  
that the daisies were scattered, forgotten and bleak  
and looked like they'd been lying there for a week.

Names were called out, and the room rang with "*Here*",  
while the girl by the window held back stinging tears.  
She *had* thought by picking these daisies for Miss,  
that her teacher would smile - she didn't want *this* -!

- this sadness, this murderous, long, drawn-out death;  
the sight of the daisies made lead of her breath.  
And then solemnly silent, her eyes on each bloom,  
she sent them a prayer in Miss Price's classroom.

She prayed that the daisies would all find their way  
to a flower-filled Heaven, and there they could stay,  
quickly forgetting their sun-scorched demise  
at the hands of Miss Price who had dark in her eyes.

She prayed that one day perhaps her teacher, too,  
might sense some of the pain they were now going through;  
that one day Miss Price might feel desperate and dry  
like these daisies she'd left in the window to die.

And the very next day at the school, after bell,  
the headmaster said there was dire news to tell:  
Miss Price had been struck on the road by some cars,  
where she'd tripped coming back from the shops with a vase.

The daisies were left on the grave, in some shade  
by a girl, very pleased with the prayers she had made.

## A Safe Distance

Tess

The woman standing on Tess's front doorstep is opening and shutting, opening and shutting a bright red umbrella like a fierce set of bellows, to remove the rain. It takes Tess's breath away. Both that there is someone she doesn't know standing directly in front of her, and that this stranger seems to believe it normal behaviour to leak all over somebody else's clean porch tiles.

'Theresa Miller?' the woman says breathlessly. Her nose is ruddy in the chilled morning air.

'Yes?' Tess uses the half-closed door as a kind of shield. Only one eye shows.

'Signed For.' The woman sniffs, holding out a box at arm's length.

One of the corners of the brown wrapping on the parcel has disintegrated in the vile weather and Tess can see a sharp edge of whatever is concealed inside. It's nothing she's ordered, because she never orders anything but clay, paint and varnish and those deliveries are scheduled. This is most definitely an unscheduled, unwanted—delivery. She makes her face form something resembling pleasant and folds an arm around her middle protectively as the woman continues proffering the parcel.

'So, if you could just—?' The woman tilts her head.

'But I'm not expecting anything.' Tess shakes her head. She tries not to look anywhere around the woman's figure because although it's overcast, any amount of daylight can still pierce her eyeballs—*eyeball*—and induce excruciating pain.

'Nice surprise then.' The woman smiles briskly. 'So, if you could just grab a hold and give me your autograph...' She indicates a small black unit with a screen, her body readying itself to depart.

'Oh. Well, no.' Tess removes her wrapped-around arm so it can begin to push the door back into its frame. 'But thank you anyway.'

'What d'you mean?' The woman looks incredulous. She stills. 'It's for you. I can't take it back 'cause you're here... I'm not... I mean I can't... I've never had to—.'

'Sorry. I am sorry. Really.' Tess manages before shutting the door firmly and silently on the open-mouthed delivery woman.

And she is. Really, truly sorry. Now she'll spend the next few hours, perhaps the rest of the day, berating herself for having acted... no "acted" is the wrong word for this; "acted" implies she meant—rehearsed—for the way she spoke to and treated this poor unsuspecting delivery person. She will feel anger and disappointment; mainly towards

herself and for reasons she still doesn't fully understand. Because she never feels she does anything *normally*. The way *normal, sane people* do.

So, the second she is safe inside the dim hallway and not having to face the stranger on the doorstep, Tess needs to rewind or delete the whole unprepared-for moment. She curls herself into the corner on the bottom stair and takes deep, slow breaths in a bid to control her racing heart.

The letterbox squeaks open and Tess's head snaps in its direction. Both hands fly to her throat and she watches wide-eyed as a red and white scribbled-on card falls to the mat below. To blacken out the past two minutes, she finally lets her head rest back on the wall, feeling that she's just—and *only just*—escaped something terrible and predatory. Which, in a way, she has.

## Michael

He checks his reflection in the hallway mirror and flattens wayward tufts of hair which his glasses have fluffed-up around both ears.

Michael Greening's head hurts, but the two paracetamol he took earlier should be kicking in soon, ensuring the journey won't be quite the thunderous task he's been dreading it might be for the past few weeks. He can hear soft thuds coming from Emily's bedroom upstairs and tries to hold on to the sounds of these, his beautiful first-born's idiosyncratic noises, which he already knows he will miss more than life itself.

'Ready yet?' he makes himself call up, the ever-efficient father that he is. 'We've missed the school run mayhem and if we get going now we'll avoid the midday traffic round Oxford. Em? Did you hear m—.'

A girl appears at the top of the stairs, propping a bright pink plastic suitcase at her side. Even from this distance Michael knows that the squares dotted about it are the Teletubby stickers Emily collected ten years ago. He can still see the concentration on her six year old face as she peeled off the back of the pictures and stuck them—to his organised mind, haphazardly—around her very first *grown-up* case, and the memory makes him feel sick, causes his eyes to spike with tears. He sniffs them back and removes his glasses to give them an unnecessary wipe.

'All set?' He clears his throat and smiles up at her.

‘Set.’

‘C’mon then. Let’s get a move on.’

He grabs a grey knitted scarf from the stand and lets it hang around his shoulders. As he reaches for the doorknob he realises he hasn’t heard Emily descend the stairs. He looks back up. She’s still standing at the top, only her hands are now on her hips— a stance inherited from her mother— and she looks impatient.

‘What’s up?’ He frowns.

‘Um... heavy?’ Emily’s raises her eyebrows.

‘You wh—?’

Emily’s head nods to the suitcase at her side and Michael slaps his forehead.

‘Sorry. Oh God, sorry. I wasn’t thinking. Here.’

‘No. No worries.’ Emily watches her father take the stairs two at a time. ‘It’s heavy that’s all. I’m not supposed to lift—well, you know.’

‘No, I know. I’m sorry; I don’t know what I was thinking. Well, I wasn’t. Never mind. Let’s just—oooof—what the hell have you got in here? The family silver?’

Michael hears Emily laugh as he hauls the suitcase down the stairs. Once he’s at the bottom he turns to check her progress. She’s standing just three stairs down, glancing across the landing at her bedroom door and inhaling the air around her as though there’s a particular scent she needs to capture and hold inside her. Like a talisman.

## Eric

If he has to kick away another pile of somebody else’s dog shit then he’s going to write to the council and give them a piece of his mind. In fact he might even slip a piece of excrement inside the envelope to prove he bloody well means business. Because it’s enough to send a sane person mad. Don’t these other—*filthy*—pet owners think he’s got anything better to do than stare at the ground beneath his feet every time he’s out walking Petula? What is the point in even owning a dog if you can’t take it for a walk and enjoy the scenery without worrying you might be stepping in a pile of steaming crap or—*worse*—week-old poo that’s gone furry with mould spores and disguised itself as a trodden-down leaf. God, he despairs, he really does.

Once he’s settled inside his daughter’s kitchen, he removes his fur-lined hat and presses hair down which has gone staticky. ‘What time’s she due?’ he asks.

He notices Tess's shoulders tense as she stands with her back to him at the sink. She doesn't respond. He knows what she's doing. She's practising those breathing exercises that shrink's been trying to teach her. He doesn't know what for, or even why she still goes to see the weird hippy bloke because she still doesn't seem to have controlled whatever *anxieties* she has since she's been going to these sessions for—well, it must be more than five years.

'Around lunchtime,' Tess exhales, still with her back to him.

'And what does that mean exactly?' Eric snorts. 'Anytime from twelve to two, surely? I suppose *he* told you that did he? Him and his non-committal ways.'

'*He* did. Yes,' Tess says. 'But I think it has more to do with traffic hold-ups than *non-committal ways*. And anyway, sometimes it's good to be vague.'

Eric rubs his bristled chin as he sits. When he puts a hand on his knee he finds his Schnauzer's equally bearded chin resting on it and pats the dog's smooth, silver-white head. "'Vague", Pet,' he repeats so that only the dog can hear.

'In fact it's probably a good thing.' Tess is still speaking. 'Benito wants me to embrace less rigidity... to not let fear overwhelm me when plans are disrupted. That sort of thing.' She turns to face her father.

"'Embrace less rigidity",' Eric repeats. 'And what kind of mumbo-bloody-jumbo is that when it's at home? Less rigidity my arse. How much are you paying him again? To tell you stuff like this?'

'Thirty pounds an hour. But that's not the point. The point is that it keeps me going; if I didn't have that hour a week with him—offload all the things that're going on inside my skull then I'd go mad— no, properly I mean.'

Eric opens his mouth to offset his own words of wisdom with the rubbish that he fears this Benito chap is filling his daughter's head with and then, seeing smudges of dark beneath her eyes, clamps his lips tight again. He knows whatever he's got to say won't change anything. It never has.

'We-ll,' is all he allows himself to say.

'And he's concerned about Emily coming to stay. Worried it could block my Chakra.' The corners of Tess's mouth begin to twitch as she speaks, holding her father's eyes. Eric knows that she knows he's going to make a joke about this; ah well, at least she inherited his sense of humour. At least she still "embraces" that.

‘Actually I can help you out there,’ he says with a grin. ‘I’ve some Mr Muscle back home that’s good with blockages.’ He raises his eyebrows.

‘Cheaper than Benito?’ Tess’s eyes shine.

‘To you... a fiver.’ Eric laughs. *Chakra be buggered.*

Michael

### **Home stretch. Eta 12.43**

He presses ‘send’ on his phone and pushes it back inside his pocket, his other hand firmly clasped around the petrol pump. He knows you’re not meant to use mobile phones on garage forecourts but it was only a text message; not a full-blown phone call. And he can’t do it while he’s driving can he? He likes rules and regulations but they’re only meant for guidance purposes. A bit like the Ten Commandments. The pump clicks indicating maximum capacity and so he shakes the nozzle, wriggles it out gently and replaces it in the holder. He rips off a piece of blue paper towel and rubs at an invisible drip on the car’s wheel-arch, frowning. As he peels the plastic glove from his hand, the card machine whirrs and spits out a receipt. He sniffs his un-gloved hand before tearing the slip off, checks the amount, folds, then tucks it into the far back of his wallet. Date order.

He does a “want anything?” mime to Emily through the windscreen and she shakes her head, smiling.

‘It *will* be fine,’ she tells Michael as he adjusts himself back into the driving seat. He repositions the rear-view mirror unnecessarily. ‘I know you’re worried—well, a bit anyway—but it’ll all work out okay in the end. Things always do.’

Michael laughs. He can’t help it. It comes out of his mouth as abruptly as a shriek and he stares at her—this girl masquerading as a woman and sounding as if she knows all the answers to all the questions ever presented in the universe. Ever. She’s sixteen for Christ’s sake. Sixteen! She got pregnant at fifteen and now what? She thinks she’s got a free pass to existential knowledge or something? He wants to grab her by the shoulders, give her a slap across the face and tell her to grow up. Instead he lets all the air leave his overwrought lungs. He feels beaten. Both up and down. He’s been beaten ever since he found out that *thing* had been growing inside his little girl without his knowledge. And now there’s nothing to be done about it—nothing *he* can do about it—and he can’t help it. He hates both *It* and himself for feeling this way.



'Oh Dad,' Emily murmurs into the top of Michael's head as she draws him closer to her side of the car. 'Don't. Please don't. You were doing so well.'

Michael forces back sobs. He's a crier. Always has been. It's something he's encouraged himself to do ever since when, at college, he'd been dumped by his girlfriend of two years for the jerk he shared digs with. It'd been the only way he could cope and now he cries whenever he feels the need. Of course it's all the rage these days: being in touch with your sensitive side but still, he doesn't want Emily to feel sorry for him.

'I'm fine.' He pulls his head back. 'Absolutely fine. And you're right. Things *will* work out. They always do. One way or another. It's getting through them that's tough, right?' He looks down at the seatbelt strapped across his daughter's still-trim belly and wonders, not for the first time, if the pregnancy tests might have come from a faulty batch. All five of them.

## Tess

Her stomach feels like home to a thousand writhing eels swimming around in gallons of tea vying for position. While her dad and Pet are in the garden doing whatever it is men and dogs do in gardens, Tess slides open the kitchen drawer and checks the strip of tablets for the fourth or fifth time. It's fine, she sighs with relief. She's taken today's. And she hasn't mistakenly taken today's' and tomorrow's' so it's more than fine. It's managed, it's measured and it normally works. But then today was never going to be normal. When she looks outside and the sun bounces a painful bright light off of a window in the distance and directly into her eyes she takes it personally. It wants to give her a headache. It's saying she *deserves* to have a headache. It's one of those recurring "unhelpful thoughts" that she still can't prevent her brain from receiving.

'Well, I've managed to get most of the wrappers back in the bin,' Eric comes back into the kitchen, Pet's claws click-clacking on the tiles as she follows. 'Lid must've blown off in last night's winds. You'll have to be careful or you'll get vermin.'

'Wrappers?'

'Cod and chips was it?' He leans across Tess to get to the sink and turns the tap on too fast so that she, the draining board and the worktop are drenched by a fountain of sprayed water. He swears, turning it down swiftly. She tries not to look, tries to imagine Benito repeating the mantra her breath needs to follow: *in.... one... two...*

*three.... out... one... two... three... four...* and lets her eyelids drop in the hope that darkness might go some way to appeasing her pounding head.

‘Probably.’

‘You went out for them?’ Eric steps back from her now, wiping his hands dry on a chequered tea-towel. ‘Can’t remember the last time you went out for something.’

‘What? Oh. No.’ She realises her father must imagine she’d gone out to fetch some fish and chips yesterday. Her heart sinks. Oh, but *why* would he think that? *How* could he think that? Does he seriously imagine that she can just go from having never properly stepped foot outside her own home for years to simply deciding one day to merrily trip down to the Right Plaice—halfway across the village—to fetch a fish and chip supper when the urge strikes? *Surely* he would know she’d have said something about it if she had. It wounds her—*seriously, painfully* wounds her—the realisation that he doesn’t listen to her or understand her at all. Not really. But then nobody does. They never have.

No. Stop. Self-pity won’t do. She tries to take her brain on a different route, the way Benito suggests: come on, let’s see what’s down here. Oh, look, an innocent little squirrel who has nothing more on his mind than finding a safe place to hide his nuts for the winter. Let’s not berate him for not knowing how I might be feeling, because he’s not to know, is he? The only way he’d know would be if I sat down and explained it all to him, or gave him my brain complete with nerve endings for an hour and then he’d *feel* what it was like to be me. She draws in a deep breath, channels the distraction by placing one of her father’s ties around the squirrel’s neck and watches him go about his carefree business. Of course her dad doesn’t understand. How could he if he’s never been interested in the way she feels?

‘Oh, people,’ she says distractedly. ‘People throw their rubbish in any bin they like these days.’

She sees a flicker of disappointment flash across her father’s face. The sides of his mouth drop and he nods a kind of sad acceptance at this explanation. Now she feels as though she’s let him down. Momentarily, she assumes, he’d hoped she’d become normal overnight. He’d *wanted* her to be an emotionally stable daughter who just decides to take herself independently off to the shops and buy whatever she needs or wants—even buy things she *doesn’t* need or want—now *that* would be a proper victory. She’s mentally composing a list of feelings she can add to her Mood Diary later on, but once

she's established *sad, sorry, squirrel*, the sound of a key turning in the front door brings the buttered toast she had earlier halfway back up her throat, preventing her from continuing.