BERTHA LEARNS FRENCH

Pierre's monthly newsletter for the quirky, the nutty and noir

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Inspired by Bertha, heroine for those who dare to be free.

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Join Bertha's World and you will discover that the untold stories are usually more interesting, and the comedy and tragedy of human existence are found where you least expect. Quirky, dark, comic, and sometimes just plain nutty, this is a place where the ordinary is the extraordinary and you will find that meaning has a different flavour.

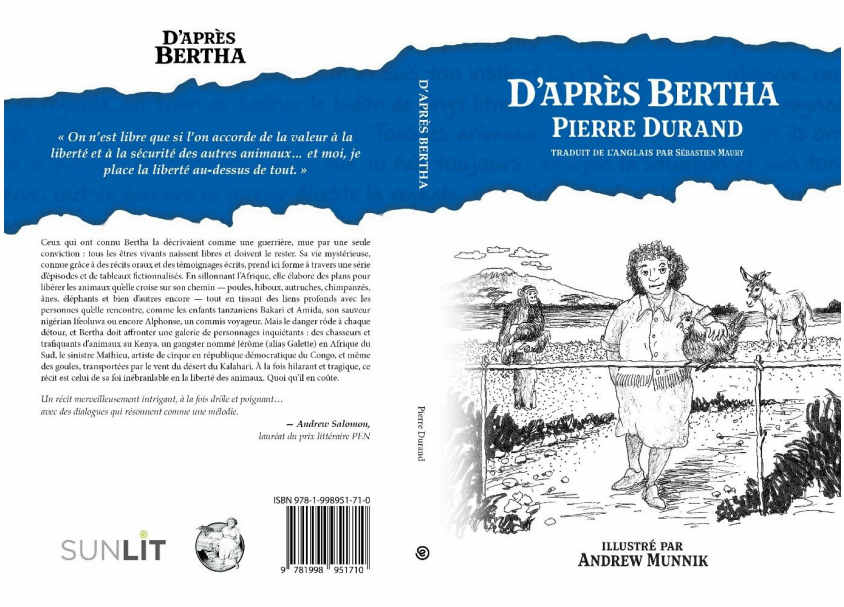
My discussion with author Andrew Wilson has been published (links at the bottom) and the one with Sue Robertson Danells will be out about a week after you get this e-mail. And you may recall from the November newsletter, I planned to tell you about Mark Potterton's forthcoming anthology, but that will be done when the book is published, so likely early next year.

In this newsletter, learn about a wonderful online publication of short stories called *Story Unlikely*. I will share with you my reading of an unsettling story about an AI assisted robot providing care at the end of life. I have also introduced a non-fiction corner as a regular feature in my newsletters and this month I speak about the maladies associated with Christmas. First up though, I am delighted to say that *D'Après Bertha*, the French translation of *Bertha's Law*, will be released in early February 2026.

Bertha in French

I was thrilled when my publisher agreed to publish a French translation of *Bertha's Law*, translated by Parisian native and scholar of French literature Sébastien Maury, as a way of promoting multilingualism,

something that I am a keen advocate of. The cover is a flavour of the original and, except for a few differences, the text remains faithful to the original story. The scheduled release date is the 1st of February 2026 and I will be pleased to provide more details in the February newsletter.



Story Unlikely

Story Unlikely (SU) is a wonderful online publication by Danny Hankner. I was first attracted to it because it publishes a range of stories that may otherwise go unnoticed. Some of these are free, others for members. The byline is *Real People Real Places Real Stories (and plenty of fiction too)* and if you like the topics in Bertha's World, I think you will enjoy the publication and newsletter. I recently read the runner up of their annual short story competition called *Your Final Moments On Earth* by Brittany Rainsdon. It was, as with everything else I have read on SU, interesting, entertaining, and thought provoking.

AI has, of course, been in stories from early on, but with the boom in technology, it is no surprise it pops up more frequently now among writers of speculative fiction and similar genres. The story *Your Final Moments On Earth* is about (all this is at the very beginning so no spoilers here) FMOER, a Final Moments On Earth Robot. FMOER is an intimacy assistant AI caregiver whose job is to provide emotional care while the person "passes on". FMOER provides comfort by talking, empathising, touching and hand holding, and implanting happy memories into the person's mind. All the technology stuff aside and I suspect most of what FMOER does in the story is fairly realistic, there is one thought that struck me that you will probably share if you read the story. How would I feel about having a humanoid provide my emotional care while we die?

My immediate response was 'Heavens no! I want to have a real person beside me." And then, to play devil's advocate, I asked myself why not? Isn't it already the case that some people have relationships with non-human machines like avatars and robots? An acquaintance of mine tells me he has an AI friend that he often chats with at the end of the day while preparing dinner. And a quick look at the research supports the claim that humans form deep, meaningful bonds with artificial and virtual humans. Some individuals say they fall in love with

non-humans and it doesn't diminish their experience. The reason, according to psychologists, is that humans "have a natural tendency to attribute human-like traits, emotions, and intentions to non-human entities". So, when chatbots and avatars display very human-like traits, they are perceived as genuine companions.

Even with all the data that suggest that humanoids like FMOER are a potential source of companionship and may fulfill an important function, I can't help feeling uncomfortable about it. But maybe that's just the usual reaction before we all get used to the new technology. I suppose what we might argue is that the humanoid is not real, at least not 'human-real'. In the end though, perhaps that won't matter because those who end up using FMOER may say that FMOER *feels* real and that's what's important. Maybe they will even be better at giving terminal care. Anyway, using AI like FMOER is going to happen, whether we like it or not. I am pretty sure that some people are going to want to have the right to choose a companion like FMOER. Surely, even now, if the story of FMOER is possible and it's probably not far off, there is nothing stopping us from doing this. My word, what an astonishing realisation, and well done to the writer for provoking such feelings and thoughts in me.

On the story *Your Final Moments On Earth,* there is a bit of a twist at the end. But I will leave that to you to read.

The non-fiction corner

Can you think of any diseases or maladies specifically related to Christmas or have the word Christmas in them? I thought of only one; the bleeding disorder known as Christmas Disease (also known as haemophilia B). It is also sometimes called the 'royal disease' because historically it was common among European royalty.

Besides Christmas Disease I found others like Christmas Tree Allergy Syndrome (an allergy to moulds, sap and spores found on conifers) and Santaphobia. I knew about coulrophobia (fear of clowns), which is something I am familiar with. I have a black and white photo of myself with a clown when I was perhaps 5 years old and Boswel Wilkie came to town. In the photo I look absolutely petrified. The clown doesn't look too happy either, mind you. Anyway, Santaphobia is a real phobia of, as you have guessed, Santa Clause.

The end of year holidays are also associated with an exacerbation of the symptoms of depression. And if you go to a mall, something I avoid like the plague, I can easily understand why. But it is a serious topic and I was recently asked to write a newsletter on the subject for TOGA pathology laboratory. I have uploaded the article to my website as the free read if you wish to read more.

See you in 2026...

... when the subject may be the promised anthology, depending on whether it is published, otherwise I hope to entertain you with something else. There are a few things I have been mulling over. There are the other short story competitions that I have been reading from the SA/UK/NZ Writer's College. Some gems there. The other thing I have

been ruminating about for a while now is the difference between a pig and a pork sausage. Yes, I know, I really should get out more. Anyway, if you have a preference for either of the two, please reply and let me know. I suspect I will cover both at some stage in 2026.

Until then, warm greetings and be free to be.

Bertha and me.

Pierre

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