SPIDERS, POETRY, AND IMMORTALITY

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

Sponsored by Hekma Press

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

January 2026 - Volume 2, Issue #01

Join Bertha's World and you will discover that the untold stories are usually much 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 meaning has a different flavour.

January 2026 marks six months of Bertha's World. Thank you ever so much for the support, I am very grateful to everyone and special thanks to Hekma Press for their ongoing sponsorship. From the metrics on my email server, it seems that readers enjoy reading these newsletters and I hope that as Bertha's World evolves, they become ever more engaging.

If you're following the podcasts, the interviews with author Sue Robertson Danells and co-ordinating editor Aimee Armstrong from the self-publishing house Staging Post were released during December.

In this newsletter, I share one short story with you and a poem I wrote in gratitude to Bertha, and in the non-fiction corner I will tell you about the 'immortal life' of Henrietta Lacks. But first, here are a few things to expect in 2026.

Some Plans For 2026

I have planned some reading for the first six months of 2026, from classics like *Dracula* (Bram Stoker) and *Prague Cemetery* (Umberto Eco) to other gems

like *Letters To My Sheep* (Teya Brooks Pribac) and *The Vegetarian* (Han Kang). I will let you know about these and others as I get through them.

Some readers of my newsletter have said they want to know more about my personal thoughts, experiences, and opinions of books and other creative writing topics. Indeed, it seems that getting to know more about the authors they follow is something readers enjoy. I recently interviewed Nate Gillik of Laterpress and he said the days of faceless authors are gone. Readers want an authentic, personal engagement. So, I am going to make my newsletter a tad more personal even if authenticity can be risky. From past experience, in public engagements I usually end up apologising to someone for something they found deeply offensive!

Here are some topics that will come up in 2026. In creative writing (writers, readers, publishers) there is the thorny issue of AI in writing, the push towards self-publishing and the perceived diminishing interest in reading. I don't always share the views of others and wonder what you will think of mine. Then there are a bunch of other things typical of the quirkiness of Bertha's World. I've thought about what quantum physics and creative writing have in common—there is a surprising overlap there. There are the on-trend and off-trend genres I will talk about, and the 'weird' ones. I also plan to tell you about some of my strange experiences during my travels, like the unusual encounters with coyotes, pigs and sheep (not to mention people) among others. As always, I will share with you the interesting websites, publishers, writers, etc. that I come across.

A short story by WJ Wintle

The Spectre Spiders is available free on audio on several platforms. It is by WJ Wintle, an English writer from the late 1800s and early 1900s who wrote many creepy tales while working primarily as a journalist and naturalist. It always surprises me how gifted some people are. As a naturalist, he probably knew about ghost spiders (less commonly called spectral spiders). They are pale and nocturnal, and move quickly in unpredictable ways, which, I guess, is what makes them all the more scary. Maybe that's why he borrowed the name for this story, that and the confusion about whether the spiders are real or imagined.

I listened to the story as I drifted off to sleep one night, and oh my word, creepy it certainly is. The story is about a pretty unsavoury character, a moneylender called Ephraim Goldstein, so I didn't feel particularly sorry for him, but that didn't diminish the frightening parts. If you are an arachnophobe I wouldn't suggest you listen to it. There is one part where my semi-sleep reality mirrored what happened in the story. Ephraim is sleeping and a large spider climbs up the foot of his bed and makes its way towards him. The movement disturbs him and he wakes up to see eight, terrifying eyes bearing down on him. It must have scared the living daylights out of me, because I also woke up in a panic. Maybe this is too personal, but I nearly had a dreadful accident.

In the beginning of the story, there is a lovely part where Wintle describes something that we have probably all experienced. Ephraim catches a movement out the corner of his eye but, of course, when he turns to look there is nothing there. He begins experiencing this more frequently and consults an eye doctor who says he is suffering from stress and needs rest. He takes the advice, but it is to no avail and the fleeting apparitions become more and more concrete. To add to his neurosis, he has a little dog that sleeps on a mat

outside his bedroom door and one night he hears the dog growl and then yelp. He ignores it, but in the morning the little dog is reduced to nothing more than skin and bone, as though the insides have been sucked out. I won't tell you how the story ends but it's a terrifically atmospheric story in the mould of Walter de la Mare or Edgar Allan Poe.

I enjoyed the story very much, despite the threat of the embarrassing accident, although I couldn't help thinking about something I would have done differently, not because it would have been 'better', just as a way of experimenting with characters and storylines. Instead of the protagonist being a Scrooge-like money lender, what if he was a likeable fellow, unexceptional in every way, just trying to live out the uninspiring hand of cards he was dealt, and along comes this bizarre haunting by spiders. I'm not sure why something like this happening to an unexceptional character appeals to me. Ephraim is a more interesting protagonist perhaps, but there's something about extraordinary events happening to unextraordinary people that sits just right with me.

A Poem For Bertha

Speaking of the ordinary being extraordinary the character of Bertha has, as I am sure you realised, given me so much to think about. Perhaps it is the contrast between the first, rather bland, impression she gives and her internal world, her unwavering commitment to her life's mission. She looks to be, at first glance, no heroine. But she knows something, something that most others don't and lives her conviction without compromise. Discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary has given me tremendous pleasure and to give something back, I have written a poem for her. It is something I wrote a long time ago in a very different form and polished it up over the recent holidays. It aligns with Bertha's belief that we're really all part of one kind of thing, that on some level we're all in this together. I hope she likes it.

> *in dust and stone she wrestled*
> *flints and flakes of limestone*
> *light up a once refulgent, slimy lair*
> *her reciprocal stare, one frond at a time*
>
> *and then a spore*
> *close to the shore*
> *where Mother once crawled*
> *to lay her eggs*
>
> *this they said was proof*
> *the land was sea*
> *the sea was stone*
> *the air and the sun*
>
> *transformed us one by one*
> *and made us green and blue*

The Non-Fiction Corner

If you don't have a biology background or read popular science books, you may not have heard of Henrietta Lacks. In 1951, Lacks was diagnosed with cervical cancer, a biopsy was taken and the cells cultured in the laboratory. The cell line was shared by researchers around the world and became known as the *HeLa* cell line. The remarkable story of how this happened was published in 2010 as a popular science book by Rebecca Skloot called *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.

The story of Lacks' life raises all sorts of ethical issues. Of course these are important, but I was really taken by the author's term immortality. The cells were, and still are, malignant and thus defined biologically as immortal. But the questions around identity, personhood, individuality and true immortality are what I found intriguing. I don't think any reasonable person would think that the person Henrietta Lacks is immortal because some of her cells are spread around the world—organisms are so much more than cells or a genetic code. The book doesn't deal directly with these questions directly, but the author tells a compelling story. If you want to find out more you will find it here.

Coming In February

I will tell you about a wonderful short story called *As We Wind Down the Road* by Juliet Slattery. This time there are no spiders, ghosts or anything else creepy or gothic. And I will share my thoughts on one of the other topics I mentioned above, perhaps AI and creative writing.

Until then, warm greetings and be free to be.

Bertha and me.

Pierre