

## THE WORST KIND OF REGRET

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



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

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Have you ever read a story that really laid you low for a while? Thinking that, there but for the grace of God go I? I read one this month that did just that. I'll also share my thoughts on Artificial Intelligence (AI) in creative writing, and in the non-fiction corner there is Hobson's Choice. Or is it Sophie's Choice?

I am delighted to say that the French translation of Bertha is published. It is titled *D'après Bertha* and if you read French or want a gift for someone who does and likes the quirky genre, [the book is on Amazon here](#) or for readers in sub-Saharan Africa it is easier to [get it direct from the publisher here](#).

On the Bertha's World podcast there are interviews with fantasy author Nate Gillik, who is also the marketing and community lead for the self-publishing platform Laterpress, and over the holiday season the technical producer Lisha Radjew suggested she interview me about my own writing journey. When you receive this newsletter, those two podcasts will be published.

### As We Wind Down the Road by Juliet Slattery

I came across the short story competition run by the NZ-UK-SA Writer's College and the winners made for interesting reading; the runner-up, in particular, stayed with me. The story is *As We Wind Down the Road* by Juliet Slattery and, it is no exaggeration to say, I was pretty shaken by it. You can [find it here](#).

The story takes place over different time frames. It begins with the protagonist on a bus, a journey he has taken many times before, and

he's reminiscing about previous trips and their associated circumstances. The reader doesn't anticipate the protagonist's reverie, and it all feels a bit dislocated at times, but that may have been the author's intention because it adds to the unsettled feeling.

The protagonist is the kind of person we have all met, we might even identify. He has opted out of the trappings of the middle class: a 'proper' job, a sensible retirement plan. But what if opting out doesn't turn out the way you planned? Instead, life unravels because there is never enough money, your partner finds security with someone else who does have upper middle-class ambitions, and worst of all, travel and emotional distance dilute the relationship with your son or daughter. Cherished bonds fizzle out.

I'm sure this kind of life story happens all the time and realising it's all gone wrong must be devastating. What does one do? What *can* one do? I am guessing it may lead to deep regret, perhaps even the worst kind of all. By the end of the story I was living the protagonist's anguish and it troubled me for days. I know, part of me gravitates to these sorts of things, more than is healthy I suppose, so you may not find it as unsettling. Either way, the story captures something that is relatively common, especially is this period when the future seems so unpredictable.

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## AI And Creative Writing

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Every writer is probably asked at some point what they think of AI. I don't know what the endgame is, or even if there is one because our relationship with AI will go through phases. What I can share is my own opinion, which is probably different from what you usually hear.

I find AI in creative writing more of an annoyance than anything else at this stage, largely because you never stop hearing about it and I've had so many people tell me I will be replaced by AI. Sure, it does, and will, impact me, but why don't I feel like it affects me at this stage? Well, first, it doesn't affect what and how I write and I don't plan on using it. If I used it, it would shackle my development and what I want, is to grow through the challenges. I want to evolve as a writer, to experience the joy and catharsis that comes with creating something on my own steam and for readers to share in that. I know some writers use AI, especially when they're looking for ideas or struggling with a particular part, but I can't see the attraction if you want to hone your craft or struggle through the creative process. And the second reason is that AI cannot write the same book that I can (or any other human for that matter). This requires a bit of an explanation.

AI can write similar books, yes, but never the same one. As it improves in range and scope, it may get very close to writing in the same kind of style with similar characters and storylines, but it will never be the same story that bubbled up inside me and found a way out. We all have unique experiences in the world that influence us. Granted, 'on-trend' writers will face a bigger challenge from AI than 'off-trend' writers because the more formulaic the writing is and the more specific the material is to train AI on, the closer the book will be to the real author. I am not being disparaging to say that a story in the mould of, say, Agatha Christie's Poirot or Miss Marple is easier to train AI on. The story takes place in a specific location like a hotel, train,

island, etc., there's a murder, there's the character intrigue, and then the denouement. All these features are baked into the story, and the predictability is what readers want. So, it's easier to create variations around a theme and copy a style like this. This is no criticism of the writing, it takes great skill, but it is easier to copy in an AI kind of way. But even in these cases, it will create similar books and never the same one that Agatha Christie, had she been alive today, would write.

I hear someone say that AI might create a better version of a specific kind of book. Better in what way? And anyway, better or worse is not the point. A few publishers and authors have stressed to me that readers will read an author if they like their work and know something about them. The days of faceless authors, they tell me, are gone and AI is only hastening that process. Authors have followers who want to read their books and listen to them speak about them. For many readers, the human connection is important, although I have a suspicion that many diminish in time but never completely disappear.

Let me not create the impression that I think that AI won't impact writers and make life more difficult for them. That, it surely will unless you already have a large fan club. AI books are undoubtedly crowding out the space and making it more difficult for writers to attract readers. Just look at what I hear critics call the "AI slop" on YouTube and online stores like Amazon. That is a major problem for writers because readers have a massive selection to wade through. And if a reader only wants to find human authors (not AI or hybrid human-AI authors) how will they know? I suspect the machine learning process will advance rapidly and it will become increasingly difficult to distinguish human from AI works. And, of course, there are also readers who don't care or who may choose to follow an AI writer anyway.

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### The Non-Fiction Corner

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Coming back to the Juliet Slattery's short story and regret. If the protagonist was aware of what was going on, and I think he was, then he had to make a choice at some point. Did he choose to 'live his truth' knowing that it could end up the way it did? After all, he could have compromised his decision to rebuff the middle-class way of life. And then I wondered if this choice he faced would be a case of Hobson's choice. Or is it Sophie's choice? So, I looked them up.

Hobson's choice is when you don't really have a choice. So, if the protagonist felt like he had no choice because he simply had to live his truth come what may, then it probably was a case of Hobson's choice. By the way, the origin of Hobson's choice is quite amusing. See it [here on the wiki](#).

Sophie's choice it seems is an impossible choice. Both outcomes are equally catastrophic or unbearable. Maybe the protagonist felt that way because whatever he decided it was a compromise for him, and so he didn't make a choice and just stumbled through it all. If that's what he did, then I guess it was a case of Sophie's choice.

For language teachers reading this, maybe this will make a fun class discussion.

## In March...

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I am going to be telling you about sheep. Actually, quite a lot about sheep. There's the wonderful book *Letters To My Sheep* and then I will tell you about the time I lived in Ireland and became obsessed with them. The sheep I mean, although the Irish were just as much fun. You may find my obsession interesting, or just odd.

Until then, warm greetings and be free to be.

Bertha and me.

**Pierre**



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