

TARANTISM AND THE PRAGUE CEMETERY

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



**Pierre Durand's monthly newsletter for readers of quirky realism
and that kind of thing**

May 2026 - Volume 2, Issue #05

Ever heard of the bizarre condition known as tarantism? Or the delightful story of 10 year old scientist Jo Nagai? More on that in the non-fiction corner. In the fiction section, I'll share my experience of the book *The Prague Cemetery* and tell you why newsletters are so important for authors like me.

Some news: [On the podcast channel](#) there are interviews with non-fiction writer, editor, and educator [Mark Potterton](#), creative writing student [Imogen Poulter](#), and fiction author [Etienne Lombard](#). Details for Mark Potterton's edited anthology to which I contributed fiction and non-fiction chapters are on my website.

Writers And Readers Engage More than Ever Before

Publishing has changed so much in the last 10 years. It was already a crowded field, but now with diminishing reader numbers, the (welcome) growth in indie authorship, and the noise from AI-generated books, it is more important than ever that authors and readers have a way of finding each other. In fact, some publishing houses require that authors have a channel for engaging readers before they entertain the idea of signing them up. I struggle with social media, so my Bertha's World newsletter, which brings me much enjoyment is my way of reaching you. I am very appreciative of your support, and I sincerely hope you enjoy reading them. Feel free to let me know what you like or don't like.

Bertha's World turns 12 months old in June, and the newsletters have matured and grown more specific to my readers' interests. There is nothing I enjoy more than hearing that something I have written enticed someone into my imaginary world. And now, with two books under contract (I'll be telling you about these and Hekma Press later in the year), it is time to reach more people. Avid readers may already know that authors attract subscribers to their newsletters (and thus their writing) by offering a so-called 'reader magnet'. They offer a short story, a prequel or something like that in exchange for the reader signing up for the newsletter. Of course, the subscriber can unsubscribe anytime with the click of a button if it doesn't interest them, but it is a way of introducing writers and readers to each other. Platforms like [Book Funnel](#) and [Story Origin](#) are good at this, and I will explore one of them in a few months. My reader magnet, which I will send you a copy of, will be the episode entitled *The Hunter* from *Bertha's Law*, but with a difference. The reader magnet version includes material that didn't make it into the book—a director's cut if you like. One of the intriguing aspects to the episode is that no one is sure whether Bertha intentionally shot the hunter or whether it was an accident. The extra material continues the intrigue and includes the three witness testimonies made before a judge. The testimonies are those of the hunter, Bertha, and the guide who witnessed the shooting and each person gives their account of what happened. So, the uncut version will be in my showcase for subscribers and, of course, being subscribers already I will send you a link to download it.

The Prague Cemetery by Umberto Eco

The first time I came across Umberto Eco was when I watched the movie *The Name of the Rose*. You may remember it, a wonderful film with Sean Connery as the 'detective' monk who is dispatched to an abbey in medieval Europe to investigate a series of murders. It was tremendously entertaining. In one way it's just a mystery-thriller, but I could tell there was a lot more to it (Umberto Eco was a historian and philologist). There was something being said about medieval Europe, language and philosophy, but I'm not schooled in that to appreciate it. So, I tried to read the book but found it just too difficult. I tried another of his novels *Foucault's Pendulum* years later and that was even more difficult. Still, I promised myself I'd have another crack at Eco at some point, so when I came across *The Prague Cemetery* (which you can [read more about here](#)) in a second-hand bookstore, I decided now was the time.

I'm nearly finished the book and certainly will because, even though it can be heavy going, it gets more enjoyable the longer it goes on. And it does go on. It's like a complicated game of chess or bridge: growing ever more interesting. There are also some things that are just up my alley. The protagonist keeps a diary and finds someone else is also making entries in his journal. At first, it's not clear what's going. Is there someone else living in his apartment that he doesn't know about? Is it his alter ego? Or maybe he's just mad. Anyway, the creepiness of that is the kind of thing I love. I also like the book because it's interesting to see how Umberto Eco either ignores or intentionally breaks all the rules they teach in creative writing courses.

Having said all this, I don't think most people will like it. It's not an easy read. It's long, it's dense and it's packed with historical events like the Prussian siege of Paris, the fight for Italian unification and a lot more, and if you don't know some of the history, which I don't, you might find it a real challenge. Then there's the main character. Heavens above he's an objectionable, unpleasant individual. Nowadays he would come with a trigger warning! But he is intriguing. Very intriguing, which is one reason I like the book. He is a forger of documents by profession, which I find fascinating, but I suspect for most people that won't be enough to plough through the story.

The book also reminded me of how quickly publishing trends change. I don't think Umberto Eco is still alive but imagine if he wasn't famous and submitted *The Prague Cemetery* to a publisher today. Maybe some very niche academic-leaning presses may have been lukewarm about it, but certainly no commercial publisher would have touched it. He probably would have had to self-publish it. And about self-publishing, you may be surprised by just how many excellent books and classics are self-published. I'm going to talk about that next month.

The non-fiction corner

I was sent an inspiring video by [Dr Viktor Radermacher](#) a palaeoscientist at the [Karoo Origins Fossil Centre](#) in South Africa. It recounts the story of 10 year old [Jo Nagai](#) and is a wonderful example of curiosity driven scientific inquiry. Jo wondered whether his pet butterflies could recognise him and, if so, whether they would still be able to recognise him after they go through the caterpillar stage. I won't spoil the story for you except to say he did demonstrate that they have a capacity for memory. I loved hearing about his research and, even more, learning about him. The world needs people like Jo Nagai.

Have you heard of tarantism?

Tarantism was, and it seems in some communities it still is, considered a psychiatric disorder. It is the result of the bite of the wolf spider, and the story begins in southern Italy sometime in the 1800s. Victims (called tarantati) cured themselves of the madness and melancholia induced by the arachnid's poison by dancing in a wild, lascivious manner. The dance became known as the tarentella. Their gyrations and frantic movements was said to expel the venom and it usually took many episodes of dancing to lead to a cure. What's more, the dance was infectious and physicians considered the tarentella to be a kind of mass psychosis caused by the spider's bite.

It does make me wonder, though. The kind of dancing the tarantati indulged in was considered immoral and something to be discouraged (presumably because of the sexual overtones) by the religious authorities. Unless, and here's the rub, unless the dance was done to cure oneself from the venom's effects. So maybe they just liked dancing and used the wolf spider as an excuse to get past the religious classes. Sounds like a good enough reason to me. Good on them, I say.

In June...

...there will something about disturbing books in modern fiction, something that has grown in popularity. Also, did you know that some of the most successful books of all time were self-published?

Until then, warm greetings and be free to be.

Bertha and me.

Pierre



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