

BERTHA AT 12



a different way of seeing

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

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This is the 13th month Bertha has been popping up in readers' mailboxes and I hope you have enjoyed them as much as I have enjoyed writing them. At 12 months old, I'll share some of the background to Bertha's World: its conception, future plans and what to expect in the next year. Also, have you ever wondered where the ideas for stories come from? And in the non-fiction corner: Why do most medicines taste so awful? Is it our penance for falling ill?

The [interview with horror writer Stuart Tudor](#) is available and I have [joined BlueSky](#), which seems like a good option for readers and writers. It is a social media platform—I know, do we really need another one?—but for book lovers it has its benefits and I've found some interesting material there.

Bertha's World: The First 12 Months

I was so taken with the character of Bertha and her way of seeing the world in *Bertha's Law* that I decided to create a newsletter dedicated to her. This was even before a publishing deal for the book was signed. It's difficult to say exactly what she represents for me, although the byline—*a different way of seeing*—goes to the heart of it. Perhaps it's her disregard for convention and her obsession with freedom for all creatures. Her belief system is entirely uncontaminated by people, laws, social norms, consumerism or anything like that. She 'lived her truth' no matter the consequences and it's intoxicating. I love that she is such a marketer's nightmare (look at the picture at the top!). On reflection I think it's this notion of being an 'outsider' that is so

captivating. (I think the artist agreed because I see how he has her stepping out the circle.) And she is defiant and untroubled by her differences. I was so taken with her that after the book was published a year ago I didn't want her to leave and that, in a nutshell, is why this newsletter is named after her and having her quirky spirit infuse its pages feels like a privilege.

Bertha's Books *something for readers, something for writers*

Sister to this newsletter is the podcast channel. The last of those episodes is the one published in June, and now that I have found my feet, I am making a substantial change. In the new season, I am making it an audiovisual publication and giving it a separate identity to the newsletter calling it **Bertha's Books *something for readers, something for writers***. I'm planning monthly (later bi-monthly) episodes of about 30-40 minutes and as the byline suggests there are two parts to the episodes. In the first half I'll share my thoughts about one or two books. In the second I'll have something about creative writing. To give you a sense of what kind of fiction you might expect, here are a few books I have lined up: *The Old Man And The Sea*, *The Savage Garden*, *The Vegetarian*, *If Cats Disappeared From The World*, and *The Vivisector*. The first book, as you probably know, is by Hemingway. It had a profound effect on me; the writing and the story. I also visited Hemingway's villa, Finca Vigia, in Cuba where he penned the novella. That's it on the left and on the right, part of his cat cemetery and his fishing boat called the Pilar.



For readers, I'll be coming at the books straight up as a lover of stories. I'm not a literary critic or academic. I'm interested in the world of literary and commercial fiction that transcends this one and I'll bring that excitement to you.

For writers, I'm coming at it as an author of fiction and will share my thoughts on styles, techniques, the process and how I think one develops. If you're a writer I think you will find it helpful or at least recognise the experience. And if you're a reader you may find some of what I say rather curious.

Forthcoming...

Are you also of an age that you remember 'drive-ins' (as a child I caught the end of that period just before drive-ins all closed down)? Can you recall the Forthcoming Attractions flashing up before the main feature? That period, about 1975 to 1995, makes me chuckle.

My forthcoming attractions for the next 12 months include, quite unusually for me because I am a slow writer, two books. One is a novella-length non-fiction work co-authored with Grant Ramsey (philosopher of biology, photographer, and avid one-wheeler) and contracted to Cambridge University Press. The subject is the evolution of mortality and the phenomenon of self-induced death across the tree of life. If all goes according to plan, it will see the light of day early in 2027 and it seems like the e-book will be free. Yahoooooo! Here's hoping the process goes smoothly.

The second work is a novel planned for early 2027. It is a tragicomic drama based on a true story. More on that closer the time. It is contracted to a new imprint coming under the umbrella of Hekma Press to whom I am very grateful for ongoing sponsorship.

Where Do Story Ideas Come From?

Readers and writers ask where the ideas for stories come from. It's difficult to pinpoint exactly, but here is what I know.

Ideas are usually not the problem. I get them quite often when doing mundane things: walking the dogs, getting a haircut. It's more about what to do with them because it's a truism that ideas don't write books. They're only a first, tentative step and so I let them rest. If the idea is worth keeping it will come back and then I may write it down and let it rummage through my subconscious. In most cases, the idea-cum-story fizzles out but very occasionally it doesn't and I start imagining the lives of the characters or the events that happen. It's at this point that, assuming the whole thing starts forming a narrative in my mind, I begin making rough notes, so I don't forget important nuggets. And then, only if that continues on and off over months or years that I know I've got something worth writing about.

I have one such story stashed away. It will only begin in earnest after the forthcoming attractions above, but the reason I tell you is because it is peripherally associated with Bertha. It's about Alphonse who appears in episode 4 in *Bertha's Law*. I know I will write a novel about him in the future because I've already imagined part of his life, his hopes, his dreams. And his disappointments. I've seen him in the street a few times. I know what he wears and I saw him having breakfast in a coffee shop the other day.

And at some stage, a few years from now, I'm going to tell you all about him

Non-Fiction Corner: A Bitter Pill

Have you ever wondered why so many medications taste awful? Is it just a quirk of the biology or are the drugmakers just not trying hard enough? For adults, I guess it's not an issue, but have you ever tried giving awful-tasting medicine to a child? I recently tried giving a three-year-old an over-the-counter syrup for nausea and there was simply no way he was going to take it. Can't say I blame him. It was horrendous. If he wasn't throwing up before, he certainly was going to be

afterwards. Thankfully a kindly Australian physician intervened and prescribed something a whole lot better. Something less vile that I could dissolve against the side of his cheek before he figured out what was going on.

With all this fresh in my mind, I'd like to throw down a challenge to biochemists. Please, tomorrow morning when you wake up, look yourself in the mirror and ask: Am I really applying myself to the problem of palatability in medication? I mean, surely, with all the amazing things you do, you can do this? Is the problem really so intractable? I can assure you there are millions of people in your corner rooting for you. Nay, tens of millions, hundreds of millions! Even if by some weird co-incidence none of you have children, spare a thought. Please. We begging. And if, for some odd reason this is an intractable problem, well, I'll just go on assuming this is payback for a particularly unforgivable transgression. It must have been pretty heinous.

In August...

...I'll share my thoughts on a couple of books I've read and explain why metaphor is so valuable for writers whether they realise it or not. For the non-fiction corner I'm still choosing what trivia to share...perhaps I'll tell you about the two squirrels who visit me most mornings. Or maybe I'll share a recipe for peanut butter flavoured ice cream that my dear friend Melinda Suchard gave me a long, long time ago. It remains a treasure.

Until then, warm greetings and be free to be.

Bertha and me.

Pierre



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