WELCOME TO VILLA DIODATI

The summer of 1816 was unseasonably wet and miserable. A near bankrupt, scandal-plagued Lord Byron had fled England and was staying at a villa near Lake Geneva with his personal physician, John, and their new friends Percy and Mary. The relentless deluge kept them indoors, so they passed the time reading ghost stories to each other from a collection of magazines that came with the house. When those ran out, Byron suggested they have a competition to each write a ghost story.

John wrote "The Vampyre", the first modern vampire tale that went on to inspire Bram Stoker and spawn countless toothy progeny across the following centuries. For her contribution to the game, the 18 year old Mary Godwin crafted a tale that proved to be one of the most imaginative psychological ghost stories ever written, and in the process single-handedly invented Science Fiction. Before it was published, Mary and Percy got married and she changed her last name to Shelley…

Thank you for signing up to take part in Villa Diodati, our new writing event inspired by the Year Without Summer that changed fiction forever! We're going to be accepting Lord Byron's challenge and coming up with an original ghost story each which we'll be publishing towards the end of the month, just before Hallowe'en!

THE RULES

Participants aren't following a set brief, other than the genre itself. You must submit an original ghost story by the deadline to be included in the final publication.

What do we mean by "ghost" story?

Literally anything inspired by the prompt "ghost story" is acceptable, be it spooky, scary, sweet or sassy; horrifying, hilarious, heartwarming or, erm… hinteresting!

For the purposes of this event, *Casper the Friendly Ghost* and *A Christmas Carol* are just as much ghost stories as *Hellraiser / The Hellhound Heart* or *A Nightmare On Elm Street*.

What do we mean by "original"?

We simply mean that it must be entirely your own work. This isn't the place for fan fiction based on someone else's stories or characters. For example, you are welcome to tell a vampire story if you wish, but you can't tell a story about Anne Rice's *Lestat de Lioncourt*.

This also means that you must be the author and hold the copyright in the work — i.e., you can't have sold it or given away the rights already, e.g. because it's already been published elsewhere.

How long does it need to be?

The *maximum* word count is a pretty generous 3,000 words but — as with all our writing events — we're looking for quality not quantity (we're not NaNoWriMo). We want to see your best work, that you're proud to share. As such, we'd much rather you submit 500 well edited and expertly crafted words that invoke genuine emotion than a 2,999 word "vomit draft" that readers would skim over. If you can tell a unique and original ghost story in just a haiku — that's absolutely fine by us!

Endlessly haunted

By the ghosts of my victims.

Spiders! Everywhere!

Will I still own my story?

Yes! You will retain all the copyright in your submission and are free to use it elsewhere as you see fit. By submitting, you are confirming that you are the author of the work, that you hold the copyright, and that you grant an irrevocable perpetual licence to Literature and Latte and Novel in a Day to include the work in the Villa Diodati publications.

When is that deadline again?

All submissions must be received by midnight on the evening of Sunday 27th October 2024 to be included (i.e., if they arrive at 0:01am on Monday 28th October they are too late!). We'll then take the next few days to import and compile everything and aim to get the final publication released before Hallowe'en on Thursday 31st October.

HOW TO SUBMIT

Please submit your entry via email to: rog@novelinaday.com by midnight on the evening of Sunday 27th October 2024 (UK time). I.e., you must submit *before* it becomes Monday 28th October in the UK! Make sure you include both y̲our forum name so we can tick you off the list as well as the name you would like to be credited as in the book.

Once your submission has been received and we've checked we can open it, we'll send you a confirmation email. If you don't receive the confirmation email, it may mean that your submission has gotten stolen by internet goblins, so please get in touch ASAP to let us know. In addition to the rog@novelinaday.com email address, you can also reach us to flag a problem at rog@pigfender.com or via the Literature and Latte forum if there is an issue. On every event we've run over the past 13 years, there has always been at least one entry that has an issue that means we can't open the file so please do check for the confirmation. If we can't open your entry, and we can't get hold of you to chase it up, we can't include it!

Submission format

We're not overly fussy about what format you send your chapter in, as long as we can easily get that text imported into a Scrivener project. An *RTF file* is probably about as easy as it gets, but you can just copy the text into the main body of an email if that's what works for you.

The one to avoid is PDF. Once again, please don't submit your entry as a PDF file!

Submitting early

Please, by all means, submit early. If you've finished already, by all means submit now as long as you're comfortable that you've done all the editing that you're going to want to do. If you do submit early and you later decide you want to make a change, let us know as it may still be possible depending on how close we are to deadline, and how much else is going on. It's much (much!) better to make sure you're

100% happy it's as good as you can make it before you submit though!

Style guide

There are relatively few rules here. Don't worry about fonts or anything like that as we'll be taking care of all the formatting and layout in Scrivener when we import the entries and compile. Note, the final book will use indentation to start new paragraphs, rather than blank lines between paragraphs, so it will make things a bit easier if you do the same in your submission. If you want to retain any blank lines in the final work for scene breaks, etc, then please indicate this using three hash marks (###). Any blank lines that you leave in your submission will be collapsed, so if you want a gap, use those hash marks.

Deadline reminder

Once again, the hard deadline for submissions is midnight on the evening of Sunday 27th October 2024, UK time. So, 23:59 UK time on Sunday evening is on time. 0:01 UK time on Monday morning is too late! Feel free to submit early. That includes weeks early if you're ready!

Oh — and don't forget to confirm what name you'd like to be credited as in the book, as well as your forum handle!

WHAT IS A SHORT STORY?

Stating the obvious, it's a story that's short.

So it's about length, then?

You'll find all sorts of references on the internet to how word-count drives the classification of stories: 50,000+ words is a novel, 20,000 is a novella, below 1,000 is flash fiction; that sort of thing. As part of the Villa Diodati event, we're asking for submissions to be under 3,000 words, but that's more to do with keeping the event approachable and the anthology balanced than anything else.

I've also seen a more prosaic definition that makes me feel less like an accountant or statistician: a short story is one that can be read and enjoyed in a single sitting.

So it really is all about length, then?

It's about what that length constraint means in terms of the story, in a way that the constraint itself becomes a sort of freedom. A novel requires a more complex narrative to keep people engaged. Similarly, the luxury of length means you can be slow in your pacing, and introduce larger worlds (or at least show more of those worlds) and have your readers follow along, but short stories give freedoms. Freedom to focus on a core idea or theme. Freedom to explore a single character or concept without it feeling too small. Freedom to play around with unusual story structures, and play with audience attention in a different way.

With short stories you can paint a beautiful picture that allows readers to lose themselves in the detail with an intensity that would be straining in a longer work, or use pacing that would be either tiring or frustrating in a novel. In other words, short stories allow the author to focus on the story.

TIPS ON IDEA GENERATION

Unlike our normal Novel-in-a-Day events where participants are given a set brief for their part of an overarching story, Villa Diodati is an open event for whatever stories participants want to tell (as long as they're on our "ghost story" theme). If you know what you want to write then you can <u>ignore the rest of this pack and get down to writing</u>, but if you're in the market for a little bit of inspiration, we've pulled together a few brief thoughts to (hopefully) ignite some inspiration.

<u>Where to get ideas</u>

Waiting for inspiration to strike is all well and good, but not that helpful when it's not actually striking and you have a looming deadline! Here are ten quick exercises you might like to try if you're still at the Haunted-By-A-Blank-Sheet-Of-Paper stage:

1) Start with the emotion you want the reader to feel.

It's a ghost story, so you might assume that "fright" is the obvious answer here — but is it? Is that your style? Or would intrigue, humour, or arousal better suit your voice? Plus, even within the whole fear / fright gambit, there are plenty of options. Are you going for out-and-out terror, or just a jump scare? Are you looking at Lovecraft-ian disturbance, Poe-ian anxiousness or Barker-ian discomfort? Pick what "vibe" you're going for, and then think: what makes me feel like that in real life?

2) Challenge yourself to read or watch something you normally wouldn't

Now, I'm not saying that you need to go out and watch bloodthirsty horrifying scandalous splatter films and scare yourself silly. There are a wealth of great ghost stories out there, in both book and movie form. Perhaps you'd like to read a few of MR James' classic ghost short stories (I'm enjoying them at the moment!) or the Dickens classic, A Christmas Carol (if you're pressed for time, maybe just watch Mickey's Christmas Carol!). Maybe even go out and read Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, which inspired this whole event!

3) Find a different perspective

In the movie Dead Poets Society, Mr Keating got his students to stand on their desks to remind them to "always look at things differently". What can you do to approach a familiar concept from a different angle? That perspective could be a different time (in "The Dark", our original NiaD back in 2011, we took this approach and set the novel in the immediate aftermath after a character had survived a horror movie), or from a different character's view (in "3 Ghosts", our 2016 NiaD, we took a Christmas Carol environment and put ourselves in Marley's shoes instead of Scrooge's).

4) Make it POOEE

For the planners amongst you who want to brute force an answer, a good trick is to simply answer the "Pigfender POOEE Questions" with the very first things that come to mind… and then tweak and iterate until the combination excites you. For those that don't know, the POOEE questions are what Pigfender considers the irreducible elements of any story: Protagonist, Objective, Obstacle, Escalation, and Ending. Just make all of them as cool as possible!

5) Put the wrong person in the frame

As an expansion of the above… think about who would be the absolutely wrong person to be solving a problem. What makes them the wrong person, and what impact does that have on how they approach it? Or, to go the other way, come up with an interesting protagonist, and ask what is the situation that they'd be the worst person to have to deal with!

6) Invent a backstory to the ordinary

Have you ever played the "Why Are They Here?" game? This is where you sit in a public place (like a coffee shop) and look around at the various couples, groups, and individuals around you and invent your own little soap opera about them. Why is that guy sitting on his own? Has he been stood up for a date? That lady in the corner who's been staring at the same page of a novel for 15 minutes… what is she thinking about instead? Is she rehearsing job interview answers in her head? Do these two people actually know each other? Why are they so studiously avoiding acknowledging the other…?

In short, find an interesting detail from a normal scene (actual or

imaginary) and then invent a backstory for how it all ended up here.

7) *Extrapolate forward*

The flip side of the "invent a backstory" coin is taking a detail and then extrapolating from it by asking what the potential consequences are from that event… and because we're writers, we're talking worst case, nasty unintended consequences! In 2019's NiaD, "Butterfly Dawn", our protagonist found themselves turned into a vampire while on holiday in Paris… but extrapolating forward, the first thing you'd need to know if you found yourself in that scenario is which of the many myths and legends about what kills vampires are actually true (and which can you safely ignore), and how can you prove that without, well, going out and testing them on your fellow vamps?!

8) *Consider being bland and ordinary*

Okay, I don't really mean be bland and ordinary! But… sometimes it's nice to immerse yourself in the established conventions and story-telling norms associated with a particular genre and think about how you'd craft something that would fit very nicely within that existing niche. The slow way to do this is read a lot of books in the genre. A much faster and highly entertaining way is to head over to tvtropes.org — a fantastic (and very tongue-in-cheek) website where (if you're anything like me) you can lose entire evenings to exploring rabbit holes of the various tropes, clichés and conventions from pretty much every genre and medium of storytelling! Learn the rules that define the genre you're writing, and see what that inspires!

9) *Ignore plot and focus on theme*

Sometimes you have to approach a problem backwards. In much the same way that in idea (1), above, we said try starting with an emotion and then work out what makes you feel that way, sometimes the best way to come up with a story that has deep meaning and resonance is to come up with the meaning first, and then think what story you can use as an example to illustrate that meaning.

What theme do you want for your story? Perhaps it's "You'll regret sacrificing what you love for what you desire" (2012's NiaD, "Lunar520"), or "There can no justice without truth" (2020's NiaD "On Your Honor"), or "Helping others is only hell if you're an arsehole" (2017's NiaD, "3 Ghosts")… and then think about a great way to play

that out (preferably with ghosts!!!).

10) Combine two or three fragments of unrelated ideas

The best stories come from more than one spark — so if the above exercises suggested a couple of interesting thoughts, try combining them! For example, 2017's NiaD "Start Wearing Purple" is what happens when three completely separate sparks are combined into a single story… a) inventing a backstory for the photo on the front cover of the book, where a truck had in the back a cooler with "Sleepwalker" spray painted on it; b) the different viewpoint of showing the villain's perspective on a superhero story, and c) inspired by listening to something I wouldn't normally — in this case the song "Start Wearing Purple" by the band Gogol Bordello.

A HANDFUL OF STORY PROMPTS

Below is a set of spooky story idea prompts to start you thinking. In these we've used "ghost" as a blanket term and shorthand for whatever spooky creature or phenomenon you might prefer. You are welcome to use any and all of these in any way that you like. Equally, these are just a handful of random prompts, and you can ignore all of these completely!

1) Pick me!

A ghost becomes a such an on-trend popular cultural phenomenon that people are actually volunteering to be victims.

2) Supernatural origin of a natural phenomenon

What are some interesting things from the natural world that could have an alternate supernatural explanation — such as the Aurora Borealis, or the Sailing Stones of Death Valley.

3) Is death permanent?

How could death be reversed, and would it even be desirable to the "ghost"? Would the ghost actually be trying to be exorcised?

4) Is there a lost, sinister origin behind a common idiom?

…such as "be in high spirits", "violate the spirit", or "thrilled to bits".

5) What scares you or makes you feel uncomfortable?

Going to get a glass of water at 2am? Walking down an empty street in broad daylight? Sleep paralysis? Swarms of bugs? How can you bottle that fear in a supernatural story?

6) Do animals have ghosts?

Are all ghosts from dead humans? Do cats and dogs have ghosts? What about spiders…?

7) Sorry I killed you

Who can see the ghost? What if you can only see the ghost of

people you killed?

8) *Location, Location, Location*

What locations would be likely to have caused ghosts (e.g. through high trauma, or high levels of deaths) — Alcatraz? The site of a historical bloody war? A concentration camp?

9) *Locations, Locations, Locations*

What locations would be attractive to the dead, making them want to congregate? Are they drawn to human suffering? Are they attracted to populated areas, or certain smells? Do they all just want to go and watch "Hamilton"?

10) *Ghost in the machine*

Did we accidentally create a monster with technology? Is there a metaphor for AI in here?

11) *The least likely object or place to haunt*

As the prompt suggests — what is the least likely object to be haunted? A musical instrument? A really comfortable arm chair?

12) *What are the remaining areas of the "unknown"?*

What things that we still can't explain scientifically could have a supernatural cause? Dark matter / energy? Ball lightning? Why we sleep? The Bermuda Triangle…?

13) *Does the ghost even want to be here?*

Why are you haunting me? Can you be freed? Do you want to be?

14) *Ancient myths and legends*

If the vampire was inspired by old folklore — what other myths can be drawn from ancient cultures and beliefs with a modern tale? How about the rakshasa from Hindu mythology, or Iktomi from Lakotan legend?

15) *The ghost's perspective*

There is an internet theory that "Alien" and "Die Hard" are the same movie, with one told from John McClane / the Alien's

perspective, and one from the perspective of the crew of the Nostromo / Hans Gruber's gang (similar arguments have been made about the book "I Am Legend"). In that spirit (hehe), if this was the ghost's story what would they want?

16) Bad science turns out to be correct

It turns out that bird migration is a relatively recent discovery, with the earliest recorded actual evidence of migration as recent as 1822. Before then, the seasonal disappearance of birds spawned multiple theories, including hibernation (ok) and transforming into mice (okaaaay?!). What if this (or other previous "bad science") could have had some truth…

17) Metaphor for madness

What psychological conditions / disorders could be explained(*) by supernatural causes. A Schizophrenic hearing actual voices from ghosts; Dissociative Identity Disorder caused by possession; Prolonged Grief Disorder impossible to resolve because the deceased individual still being grieved won't leave the sufferer alone. It's enough to give their psychiatrist a Shared Delusional Disorder!

(* - to make the obvious caveat: by suspending disbelief for the duration of the story)

18) The worst possible time to be haunted

A ghost that starts harassing people at the worst possible time — for example, while climbing an icebound mountain summit.

19) Actually trying to help

What if the ghost doesn't have any sinister motives, but is actually, if not friendly as such, trying to fix things / prevent a bigger issue. E.g., trying to save someone's life?

20) My replacement

A ghost, trapped in a repeating cycle / specific location / on Earth instead of "the afterlife", can only escape by finding (and tricking / convincing) someone to take their place.

OVER TO YOU...

That's enough… over to you! Have fun writing!!