

## BOOKS

## Know the facts backwards



GREAT SENSE OF TIMING: Winner Scott is 40 this week

**T**HE secret of writing good historical fiction — apart from starting out with the basic talent — is to do the research, then forget it.

Dates and facts should be digested so thoroughly that they do not interfere with the development of the characters, or you risk ending up with little more than a history lesson.

Scott Hunter's story, printed below, won the final category in our Short Story Competition, impressing the judges because it crackled with life and communicated a real flavour of the English Civil War.

"I am interested in that time," he says. "It was brought home to me when I went walking round the site of the battle of Newbury." The story is based on a real incident, on the eve of Naseby, which sparked his imagination.

Scott, a computer programmer who lives and works in Reading, Berkshire,

By Kate Saunders

Literary Editor

celebrates his 40th birthday this week, so his £1,000 prize is well timed.

"Before this competition, I had only ever written a small selection of children's stories, for my 11-year-old daughter Claire, when she was little." He is "contemplating a novel — there are a few ideas floating round".

And yes, they tend towards the historical. As a committed Christian, Scott takes the religious aspects of the Civil War seriously; but his heart belongs in the Dark Ages. "A very turbulent time," he says with relish.

The Short Story Competition has revealed a rich seam of literary talent. In two weeks we will announce the overall winner, who receives £5,000. Many thanks to all who entered.

## Cousins caught in the horror of war

**T**HE mild June afternoon was fading into evening. Across the fields, on the other side of Naseby village, Matthew could see the fires of the Royalist camp, glowing in the dark.

They would be roistering and carousing now, he thought, while the soldiers around him watched and prayed.

Tomorrow, he would ride out with Cromwell's cavalry, perhaps to slaughter his own cousin, perhaps even to face his own death. The latter possibility he could face, but the former was too awful to contemplate.

He loved his cousin James dearly. "James the impetuous" his mother had named him, while he, Matthew, was more cautious and reserved.

As children they had played together, enjoying days when the summer seemed endless, when they knew nothing of war and the horrors it could bring.

And now... Matthew sighed deeply. Sparing one last glance at the distant fires, he moved away to find his comrades.

Earlier in the day Fairfax himself had called for him. The King was seemingly unaware of the proximity of the New Model Army and Fairfax was keen to press home the advantage.

Matthew's orders were to join Colonel Ireton's men and to attack the King's rearguard if it could be found. He rejoined the troop and reported to Colonel Ireton: "No sign of opposition sir, we are clear to move on."

The colonel nodded briskly and motioned for Matthew to ride alongside. The foot soldiers emerged from the trees and took up position in front of the horsemen. As silently as their heavy armour permitted, they moved forward towards the outskirts of Naseby.

Many Royalist troops were gathered in the square, some preparing to ride out towards Clipston and Market Harborough, some tarrying by the inn to laugh and flirt with the village girls who willingly sat on knees and carried ale.

The surprise was complete — most of the King's men had no time



ANNIE FARRALL

## Scott Hunter wins the historical fiction prize in our Short Story Competition

to draw their swords and those who did were quickly overpowered. Matthew dismounted outside the inn as the door opened and a number of enemy troops spilt out, weapons drawn.

He flung himself to one side, losing his footing as the first soldier lunged at him. Matthew rolled instinctively, knowing that the next blow would follow swiftly. Raising his arm to protect himself, he reached for his weapon.

The Cavalier fell across him heavily, killed outright by a musket ball. Matthew scrambled to his feet, nodding in thanks to the trooper who had saved him. His eyes alert for further danger, he cautiously entered the inn.

**I**NSIDE, tankards of ale and platters of meat lay forgotten on the tables. The innkeeper eyed Matthew in desultory fashion from the corner of the tavern. He was flanked by two young women who clung to him for support.

"Good evening landlord," Matthew smiled reassuringly, "we shall not harm you or your good ladies..." The landlord's face remained blank, but something in his eyes warned Matthew of danger. He spun round in time to parry the blade which threatened to run him through. His assailant pressed forward determinedly,

forcing the blade upwards to Matthew's throat.

His eyes met the Cavalier's and, in an instant, recognition flooded in. The pressure eased. He lowered his sword. "James," he gasped, "is it you?" Indecision clouded the face of the Royalist. "Matthew, I didn't — I didn't expect..." His voice trailed off.

"You must come with me cousin," Matthew insisted, "it is foolish to fight — we are too many..." James seemed to relax and let his sword arm fall, then without warning he struck Matthew across the head with the flat of his blade.

Lights exploded before Matthew's eyes and he fell, stunned, to the floor. Struggling to rise, he was dimly aware of James's departure through the back door of the inn. "No, James, no..." he croaked.

Staggering across the room and holding the door frame for support, Matthew looked out into the lane.

**H**E saw James some yards away and watched impotently, horror-struck, as three of his compatriots thundered past in pursuit of the fleeing figure. "James!" he called out despairingly, "in God's name, give it up!"

But James turned to face his pursuers, raised his weapon aggressively and was cut down in an instant. The cavalymen rode on to search out further stragglers.

Matthew stumbled up the lane, dropping to one knee beside the inert body. James's eyes fastened on his. "Forgive me cousin," he whispered. "This is not our war, never between you and me..."

Matthew knelt silently, helplessly watching his cousin's life slipping away as the night closed in like a blanket, threatening to engulf him body and soul.

★★★★★

The morning of June 14 dawned bright and clear. Matthew, pale, grim-faced and seated high in his saddle, waited for Cromwell's order to advance.

## Hardback



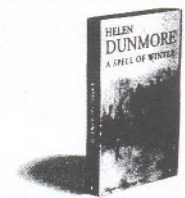
AN intricate jigsaw of characters slots together into a sinister picture of murder in Ruth Rendell's *The Keys To The Street* (Hutchinson, £15.99).

With her usual obsessive attention to detail, Rendell sets the action around Regent's Park, London, numbering every spike on every railing. Mary Jago, a frail-looking, genteel beauty, is house-sitting in a chocolate-box villa. She has donated her bones marrow to save the life of a stranger.

When she meets the man she has saved, an intense relationship develops. How do their lives mesh with those of the park's waifs and strays? Rendell pounds Sherlock Holmes's manor in top form.

The Keys To The Street: ★★★★★

## Paperback



WISTFUL, tragic, more of an slightly creepy, Helen Dunmore's *A Spell Of Winter* (Penguin, £6.99) indelicately works its way into the bloodstream. Intense, vivid flashes of memory gradually build into a deeply moving story of forbidden love.

Catherine and her brother Rob live with their grandfather in a crumbling country house. "I look at the house, still and breathless in the frost," says Catherine. "A spell of winter hangs over it, and everyone has gone." Deserted by their parents, isolated by family mystery, Catherine and Rob take refuge in their love.

The story is as strong as anything by Edgar Allan Poe, but this House of Usher never careers off into melodrama. The writing is everything — Dunmore's beautiful word-pictures are perfect settings for triple-strength emotions.

A Spell Of Winter: ★★★★★

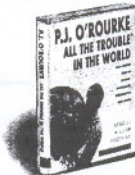
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## Audiobook



FOR the determinedly liberal-minded, it can be incredibly refreshing to take a holiday from political correctness.

All The Trouble In The World (Reed Audio, £7.99) by American bad-boy comic writer P.J. O'Rourke, is an irreverent tour of all the things that fret fashionable dinner tables.

Overpopulation, famine in Somalia, plague in Haiti — O'Rourke tackles them all.

Read by the gloriously named William Hootkins, this would make an ideal gift for an opinionated person who needs a crash course in humour.

All The Trouble In The World: ★★★★★