

Bourne toWrite...

creative writing
workshops

ALAN

by Garf Collins

(Alan Reid was a valued friend and member of the Bourne to Write Creative Workshop in Eastbourne. A well-loved character, he will be missed.)

In the 18 years since Gill and I moved next door to Rosanna and Alan, he became one of the best friends we have ever had. It would be impossible to meet a kinder or more generous man. There's hardly a room in our house, which doesn't show the extent of his practical skills. But his irrepressible curiosity and ability to try new things took him far beyond this. You will hear tell today of his sporting prowess playing rugby, on the sea and in karate etc, but he also had an artistic side. This was shown in his ability to play the piano and above all his skill as a writer.

I was privileged to be the editor of this book of 50 stories, which Alan wrote about life as a 9 year old on a farm in the Scottish Borders. The stories show his adventurous spirit and the great sense of fun, which endured throughout his life. Despite knowing them well, I was again laughing out loud as I read through these tales looking for a suitable extract to read you. This is part of a story called...

THE PARACHUTE

We decided to go to the Telfer's to play with Robert and Austin because while rummaging through their uncle Bob's out-house, they had found some of his old Army gear and amongst it was a white desert helmet, a gas mask and a big greenish parachute.

When we got there, their Mum wanted them out of the house because she was sewing up Mr. Telfer's dungarees that got ripped when the old bull gave chase.

He just made it over the gate in time but got caught on a nail and it ripped the arse out of them. So she didn't want to be bothered with folks around.

We headed for the barn where Robert and Austin had hidden their Uncle Bob's army gear under some bales of hay and we all had a go at wearing the white desert helmet and gas mask. George ended up marching up and down the barn with the hat and gas mask on at the same time doing Nazi salutes and shouting in a muffled voice, 'Heil Hitler' to everyone's amusement. We then turned our attention to trying to figure out how to use the parachute.

In the end we decided on the barn roof, it had to be the highest and best launching pad. At one end of the barn there was a big heap of loose coal and slag. It was only about twenty foot from the top of the roof to the heap of slag and if the parachute didn't open, it would be a soft landing for the jumper. We climbed up over a couple of lower roofs to gain access to the main barn roof, dragging the parachute behind us. When we looked down it looked a lot higher but at least it would be a softish landing.

It was decided George should go first because he was the lightest. He didn't want to but we insisted it had to be him. He finally agreed so we hitched him into the parachute harness and got him on the edge ready for the jump. We spread the parachute out behind George. If he survived, we told him, he would be hero.

Everything was in position for takeoff and landing. Bob was standing by at the slagheap; Austin was in charge of the takeoff, holding the parachute open to catch the wind and so on. I was in charge of being in charge, I suppose. George was the test pilot or was it the dummy. Yes it was well organised. We had spent at least ten minutes working things out to the finest detail. We knew precisely nothing about what was going to happen to George. Neither did George but he liked surprises.

I lifted my hand shouting to everyone to get ready for the jump or, should I say, leap of faith. I dropped my hand and George just hopped off the end of the barn and dropped feet first into the slagheap and sank up to his knees in it filling his wellie boots full of dross. Austin was still standing in the launch position, holding the end of the parachute, shaking it like a tablecloth.

Then we analysed what had gone wrong with our meticulous planning. The thing we realised straight away was the need for more height because with the barn being twenty foot high and the slag heap being five foot high and the parachute being at least thirty foot when stretched out, we had got our sums wrong. What we needed was a steep hill or something a lot higher than the barn.

*

They did indeed take the parachute to a steep hill and had more hilarious adventures there. You would have to read the book to find out what happened.

Alan carried that boyish enthusiasm and a wish to pursue many adventures throughout his whole life. This always accompanied with that wry humour. Once he was your friend he was your friend forever.

It seems very sad to be saying farewell to a man who was big in so many ways. But rather than say goodbye, I prefer to think that he lives on through his fantastic family and in the influence he has had on each of us.

Thank you Alan. We'll always love you.

Oh. And I'm sure he would want me to tell you that his book can be bought on Amazon. It's called 'An Experimental Childhood.'