

By Theresa Stoker

A few years ago **Carol McGrath** hosted a Meet the Author event at Patriko bar in Stoupa, where she talked about her first published novel, *The Handfasted Wife*. I enjoyed the talk, stayed for lunch and a friendship was born. In the summer 2018 Carol, Mel and I were having a coffee in Patriko when she asked the owner Christina if she could hold a similar event in relation to her fourth novel the following October. Christina readily agreed and as we drank our second round of coffees the idea of making the book launch an all-day literary event was born. Mel and I, with no experience and zero budget, were suddenly festival organisers.

From the start we were determined this would be a free event. We were rather nervous of approaching writers and asking them to give their time for free, but we proceeded on the basis of 'Don't ask, don't get,' and the worst that could happen would be someone saying no. Everyone we approached said yes. We had a Lit Fest on our hands. Some fabulous writers and teachers ran free creative writing workshops in the daytime, whilst the evening included Carol's talk, a specially written story from Sarah Bower and a writers' panel taking questions from the audience. We were keen to include local writers' groups, so we invited input from Write Club The Podcast and the Stoupa-based Memoir Group. A wonderful day and evening was rounded off with a poetry performance from Neil Fawcett, which was moving, funny, and at one point had us singing along to the Manchester Rover. With a lot of help, we had pulled it off. We were exhausted and elated. It took about a week for the feeling of 'We're never doing that again' to wear off. Soon it was 'Let's make it bigger and even better next year.' So in 2019 we expanded to a two day festival, fingers crossed (as usual) that we could actually fill the programme. We needn't have worried as our writing workshop programme expanded to seven sessions over two days, with some Meet the Author and Story Reading sessions in between.

Although the weather was not as kind to us in 2019, we managed to move some of the workshops indoors at Patriko and Elaia, and the evening events continued outdoors as planned. We were particularly delighted to welcome some new (to Mani Lit Fest) authors last year, including Greek-American author Rita Wilson, who found some distant cousins in Stoupa, historical novelist James Heneage, whose talk on the Greek War of Independence pulled in the crowds, and the wonderfully entertaining children's author Chris Heath. Local writers as well as published authors continue to be represented, with Ann Richardson from the Memoir Group running a very popular memoir writing workshop, and members of Write Club The Podcast organising a version of a balloon debate called Pedalo Peril and an Open Mic session. In Pedalo Peril literary characters competed to be saved on a sinking pedalo. It's not every day you see Atticus Finch and Willy Wonka going head to head. Some fine acting and surprising arguments were aired. Who would have thought Eleanor Oliphant would out-argue Portia and scare off Jekyll and Hyde? The Open Mic, too, was a revelation of talent in fields as varied as children's stories, poetry and historical fiction. In what I personally hope is already a tradition, the second Mani Lit Fest closed with another fabulous set from Neil the Stockport Poet.

At the end of Mani Lit Fest 2019 all the writers and teachers who so generously gave their time and expertise expressed a desire to do it all again in 2020. After a few weeks rest Mel and I started looking at who we might add to our already amazing line-up. Dare we ask best-selling author Anne Zouroudi, author of a much-loved series of detective novels set in Greece? We dared, and she said yes. We also invited Gail Aldwin, a prolific writer in a variety of genres whose recently published first novel has won critical acclaim. She too said

yes. Meanwhile we were thrilled to be approached by the Scottish poet Hugh McMillan, twice winner of the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award, and other prizes too numerous to list. This time we said yes, as we did when contacted by the Russian poet and performance artist Marina Kasakova. It was all looking very exciting, but then the world changed. At the time of writing, with mass tourism seeming unlikely this year, festivals banned in Greece and quarantine still in place, the fate of Mani Lit Fest 2020 hangs in the balance. Please check out [manilifest.com](http://manilifest.com) for the latest news.

Theresa Stoker is a writer and podcaster. She has recently completed her first dystopian novel for children and is actively seeking a literary agent.

### **THE 2019 SHORT STORY WINNER**

Our judge Sarah Bower commented: 'Although up against some close competition, A Walk in the Mani is my choice of winning story. ('A Walk in the Mani' by Pat Woolfe, available on [www.manilifest.com](http://www.manilifest.com), in the 'Lit Fest Library') This is a darkly humorous tale of an oppressed wife's bid for freedom which uses humour effectively to examine a serious subject. The gaslighting Robert is particularly well characterised and I was cheering aloud when he got his come uppance. The Maniot setting, from beachside cafes to mountain walks, is beautifully done and the whole written with a fluency and pace which makes for a very enjoyable read.'