

Creative legacy



It is 1897, and Herbert George Wells sits quietly over his writing desk, the first draft of *War of the Worlds* spread before him. As a struggling biology student, who complained of being 'constantly hungry' he could not possibly have foreseen how his burgeoning passion for writing would eventually transform his fortunes and indeed give rise to an entirely new genre of literature.

Wells, the 'father of science fiction,' of course went on to enjoy a successful writing career, publishing over 50 books and earning four nominations for the Nobel Prize, in literature along the way.

Curiously, Wells' first published work was in fact a biology textbook in 1893. Shortly after its release, he won a scholarship to study Biology at the Royal College of Science, which ultimately became part of Imperial. Wells later helped to set up the student publication *Science Schools Journal*, which paved the way for *Phoenix* and then *Felix*. He continued his studies at the Royal College until 1887, the same year he finished writing his dystopian *War of the Worlds*.

By fusing his scientific education with his love for writing, Wells created a literary hybrid now widely regarded as one of the greatest science fiction novels of all time.

Wells was a pioneer, and the path he took from science education to literary fiction is still an unusual one. Yet, in this age of increasing interdisciplinary collaboration, the insight that scientists can bring to literature is perhaps starting to be acknowledged more. One indication of this is the introduction of optional humanities modules to traditional

STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine) degrees.

Imperial Horizons is one such programme run by the College's Centre for Languages, Culture and Communication. It offers students across all years of their degree course the option to study everything from Mandarin for Beginners, through to Cultural Anthropology and Philosophy and Sociology of Art. But perhaps the module Wells would have opted for is Creative Writing – which culminates in students writing a short story and a critical analysis of their own creative and technical progression.

As well as being formally assessed, these short stories can be submitted for an annual College competition – the Sir Arthur Acland Prize. Mathematics MSc student Cassandra Yong won the prize in the 2014/15 academic year – and then went on to submit her short story to a national competition, fittingly named the HG Wells Prize for Creative Writing, picking up the Junior Category Judging Panel Prize.

"The whole awards process was slightly bizarre," Cassandra recalls, "I talked to the other shortlist nominees and they were shocked that I was a maths student."



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I was a maths student; writing was a primary focus for all of them.”

Cassandra had enjoyed reading and writing since she was young, but had stopped any formal literary study after her GCSEs. “Horizons presented a great opportunity to pick up writing again after a long break. I had no idea if I would be good at it but I thought ‘why not?’ It was something different from maths, which I loved, but I really wanted to go a little more leftfield and out of my comfort zone. The Creative Writing module was fantastic because going into it I had no idea how to write a story and they coached me back into it really quickly; in many ways it reignited my passion.”

Cassandra's short story *Adrift* gracefully weaves fascinating family history with fictional embellishments, as she unravels the harrowing experiences of her great grandmother Ngow – sold as a child bride aged nine to settle her father's gambling debts in Malaysia at the turn of the 20th Century (coincidentally around the same time Wells was in his writing prime). It is a wistful story of class, family, loss and love that drags the reader into Ngow's frightening past. Cassandra built her story upon fractured recollections



*Petaling Jaya, cat's paws of Kuala Lumpur
January 1918*