



# Writer Reply: The Librarian's Lament

Article Author:

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Article Category:

Writer Reply

Byline:

An impersonation by **Anne Fine**.

**Anne Fine**, survivor of many an author visit, impersonates her least favourite host or hostess. Any resemblance to an actual person, living or dead, is *entirely* coincidental.

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Who? Oh, of course! Welcome, Miss Bitafiction. Come in. Ignore the piles of paper. This place gets into such a mess. In fact, I was just looking for the cheque our finance officer made out for you, but it's vanished. Completely vanished. Still, never mind.

Now, Miss Bitafiction - Raita, then. And you must call me Iris. Raita Bitafiction. Such an unusual name. Is your husband foreign? Oh, it's your *own* name. Of course. And how was your journey? I'm sorry I didn't think to phone and tell you not to bother to catch the early train, because as it happens the school rang up yesterday to say they can't possibly get the children down to us before 11.30 after all. But never mind. Did Miss Holiday find you at the station with no trouble?

Oh, I see. Well, I think some young librarians are a bit embarrassed to go up to perfect strangers and ask if they just happen to be the visiting writer. Though I do agree it was a little strange that she simply stood there staring into that enormous bag of books you're carrying for fully ten minutes without trying to make eye contact. Still, never mind. You're here now.

Nearly weren't? Nasty moment on the bypass? Well, yes, I agree that Miss Holiday does drive a wee bit too fast. Between you and me, I don't think that, as yet, she has perfect control of her pedals. She's only just passed her test, you know. And I expect she was trying to make up for lost time because she gets her break about now and likes to get off to meet her boyfriend at the Cycling Proficiency Centre. Apparently he doesn't like standing around waiting. Yes, well, I expect you do feel you'd rather he was five minutes longer hanging around outside the centre than that you were 40 years longer hanging about in your coffin, but personally I think these old Ford Cortinas are a lot sturdier than they look, and lorry drivers are quite experienced at noticing cars coming up alongside in the inner lane. So let's just be grateful that you're here, shall we? Let me get you a cup of coffee. How do you like it? Milk with no sugar. Fine.

Oh, dear. Bit of a problem with the milk, I'm afraid. Joy doesn't seem to have brought any this morning. There's a tiny bit in this carton - no, you'd better not have that. It's gone niffy. What a shame. But I'm sure you won't mind it black just this once. I can't send Phil out because he's on the desk. It's pension day, so they all pop in this morning. In fact, you might find that a tiny bit of a problem while you're speaking because so many of our senior citizens are a little bit audially challenged and -

What does that mean? Well, how embarrassing! You're supposed to be the wordsmith, Miss Bitafiction, not me! Fancy *me* ending up telling *you* what something means. It means deaf. Phil will be shouting a lot because our old folk are *deaf*.

Now, do you need anything for this talk? A table? A chair?

A *lavatory*? Well, how extraordinary!

Oh, silly me. I see what you mean! For a moment I thought ... No, of course. No, honestly! Oh, how funny!

Where's what? Oh, yes. Sorry. Let me explain. No problem. You go through that door over there and turn left between the stacks. Now, is it between the fifth and sixth stacks, or between the sixth and seventh? Well, never mind. You can't miss it. If you overshoot, you'll only fetch up in Returns for Rebinding and have to backtrack a bit. Then it's up the stairs, first left, second right, then round as far as you can go, and though it's not actually marked, it's the door actually facing you. Don't open the door beside it whatever you do. You'll have an avalanche. You see, we're going issue-led, so we've taken an awful lot of boring stuff that never goes out off the shelves. What sort of things? Well, things with no date stamps since October last year. The **King James Bible**. The **Koran**. The **Oxford Companion to English Literature**. **Great European Paintings**. **Lives of the Composers**. Just stuff people nowadays simply don't want to take home. It makes space, you see, and we're so short of space. We have twenty more metres of Mills and Boon this year.

Yes, *isn't* it a shame that so much junk gets published? Mind you, we can buy 10 paperbacks for the price of one hardback. That's why we don't have any of your last three books in this particular branch. I did try to fish a copy or two out of one of the other libraries, but they were all checked out. You must be very popular!

Buy more? I don't think so. Not till they're in paperback anyway. And presumably that will depend on your hardback sales. Yes. Bit of a Catch-22. Silly, really.

Where will you be giving your talk? Well, right here. We're open plan, you see. Yes, you're right, there was a nice big soundproof room with lovely marble pillars in the old library, but that place was all so old-fashioned, it had to go. We're all modern now. You won't mind if a few people riffle quietly through the shelves while you're talking to the children. I'll try and remember to turn the video down a bit, of course, so you won't have to compete with that, but I don't want to turn it off completely because the school refusers so enjoy it. But I will try and keep all the young mums with their pushchairs out for the hour-and-a-half you'll be talking, because you'll actually be standing next to the picture book boxes. Yes, I agree it is a shame if they've paid for a bus or struggled a long way with their prams in this weather. But it can't be helped. You see, we're a *community* library now, and they're open-plan. It's so much better.

Can you shriek over the noise of the fans? It gets a bit hot in here. Yes, the old library was quite good in that respect, I suppose. Cool in summer, warm in winter. But those dreadful Victorian buildings! Our architect thought a glass ceiling and walls would be so much more interesting or those with a more visual or spatial cognitive approach - Non-readers. Miss Bitafiction. It means non-readers.

Speaking of which... Here they come! Swarming over the hill. Is that one *dead*? Oh, no. Thank God for that. She's just rolling. Oh, no. Now they're *all* rolling. I certainly hope there's not as much dog dirt on that hill as there was yesterday, or we're going to have a very whiffy morning. Yes, I suppose it does look a bit like Culloden. They don't seem to have a teacher with them. Now that is naughty! I most particularly asked the headmaster to send enough teachers, especially after he insisted that we'd agreed on your taking 80 children, and not just 40. Mind you, I think he was a little put out that you wanted them all the same age. He thought that was a bit - how did he put it? - *discriminatory*. Anyhow, he's sending all his primary sixes and sevens, but he says he's just sending a couple of infant classes along as well. He knows they won't be able to keep up with what you're telling the others and they might fidget and fuss a bit, but they do so love books, and he's sure they'd get a kick out of seeing a real live author. He was quite sure you wouldn't mind. That's all right, isn't it, Miss Bitafiction?

Miss Bitafiction? Miss Bitafiction?

**Anne Fine** is a hugely popular writer for all ages. She's won numerous awards and her two latest books are **Step By Wicked Step**

(Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 00161 7, £9.99) and **How to Write Really Badly**, illustrated by Philippe Dupasquier (Methuen, 0 416 19254 8, £8.99; Mammoth, 0 7497 2023 9, £2.99 pbk).

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