

The First Two Pages: “Happiness Is a Warm Gun” by Kate Ellis

From *Happiness Is a Warm Gun:*
Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of the Beatles,
edited by Josh Pachter (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by Kate Ellis

When I was asked to write a story based on the work of the Beatles, I couldn't have been more delighted. I was born and raised in Liverpool at the height of their fame, lived near Penny Lane and Strawberry Field, and even walked to Paul McCartney's house with my friends and picked leaves off his hedge. I was a Beatles fan from the beginning.

I love writing short stories. After working on one of my series crime novels, I usually embark on a short story or two because I find the complete “change of scene” refreshing. A short story can be set in any location, during any period of history, using a whole new array of characters. I find that it keeps my writing fresh.

The idea for “Happiness Is a Warm Gun” came from an experience I had as a teenager. I attended a very traditional girls' Grammar School in Liverpool, and at the start of one term, a new English teacher joined the staff. Unlike most of our other teachers, she was rather bohemian and unconventional and, to our surprise, one day she invited a few favoured members of her English class to a party in her flat in an “arty” part of town. At that time, we were only about fourteen and highly impressed by the invitation, although the resulting party didn't turn out to be as exciting as we'd anticipated—and certainly not as

eventful as the party in my story. However, the memory did give me the initial inspiration for “Happiness Is a Warm Gun.”

Every story I write takes a situation and then asks the question “what if something unexpected happens here—a crime perhaps, the discovery of a body or some other mystery?” After asking this question, I let my imagination run wild and see where the characters and the situation take me.

“Happiness Is a Warm Gun” begins in December 1967 when Julia receives an invitation to her teacher, Miss Howlett’s party. All at once conflict is introduced because she knows her mother will ask questions and possibly stop her going.

There were bound to be questions. Who was Miss Howlett? Where did she live? Who else was going? Why on earth would a teacher, a grown woman, invite a group of sixteen-year-old pupils to her flat to celebrate her birthday? Surely she saw enough of them at school.

Julia knew Mum would stop her going, which meant another evening in the bungalow with Bill slumped in his favourite chair like a sly, watchful lizard, so she lied and said she was going to Prudence’s house to revise for the exams. She added that Prudence’s dad had offered to bring her home, which was true because Prudence had also been invited to what Miss Howlett called her *soirée*.

Julia’s mother’s misgivings seem understandable. But then we hear about another character—Bill, the man “slumped in his favourite chair like a sly, watchful lizard.” We know immediately that there is something about Bill Julia doesn’t like or trust, and the use of the word *lizard* suggests that there is something reptilian about him—and that he has possibly slithered his way into

her home. We also see Julia's thought processes; if she lies and says she's going to her friend's house, she'll get away with her deception. And the fact that what she's told her mother is a partial truth, that Prudence's dad is indeed bringing her home, makes her feel better about the lie.

Then the reader is then told more details about Julia's plans.

Julia had bought a bright yellow dress with the money she'd earned from her Saturday job selling truffles and cherry creams from Des Barrow's sweet stall in the market. According to Mum, the dress was far too short but Bill told her it suited her. The way he'd said it had made her shudder but she was still determined to wear it for the *soiree*, along with the grown-up velvet gloves she'd found on a vintage stall. She wanted to look her best.

Here we discover that Julia's mother says the yellow dress is too short, suggesting that she's protective of her daughter. However, there are hints that Bill is taking a sexual interest in the adolescent girl. But even though Bill's words make her uncomfortable, Julia is still determined to wear her new finery to the party. She and her friends are about to do something grown up and nobody is going to stop them, especially not Bill.

We then find out a little about the hostess, Miss Howlett, and we get a further sense of Julia's excitement as she anticipates an encounter with a new, more sophisticated world.

Miss Howlett wasn't like the other teachers at St Martha's. She wore long skirts; lots of cheesecloth and flowing scarves and the nuns regarded her disapprovingly which, to her teenage pupils, gave her an aura of glamour. Julia and Prudence often wondered what Mother Superior thought of Miss Howlett—and whether she regretted employing her as their new art teacher.

Miss Howlett lived in a flat on Princes Road which the girls considered terribly modern. Julia lived in a bungalow, the height of suburban dullness—although the place had acquired an edge of danger since Bill had moved in.

There are more hints here about how Bill's arrival has cast a dark shadow over Julia's cosy suburban existence.

At the start of "Happiness Is a Warm Gun," I have used Julia's point of view, to introduce her dilemmas and give an insight into her character and the excitement she feels as she anticipates the coming party. If you want to know how things develop for Julia, Miss Howlett, and Bill, you'll have to read the story.

I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. And inserting all those references to Beatles' lyrics was terrific fun!

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Kate Ellis was born and brought up in Liverpool and she worked in a variety of jobs before discovering that writing crime fiction was what she'd wanted to do all along!

She has written twenty-seven novels featuring archaeology graduate DI Wesley Peterson and five supernatural crime novels featuring DI Joe Plantagenet along with a trilogy set in the aftermath of the First World War featuring Scotland Yard detective DI Albert Lincoln. Her latest Wesley Peterson mystery is *The Killing Place*, published in August 2023.

Kate has been twice shortlisted for the CWA Short Story Dagger and she was awarded the CWA Dagger in the Library in 2019.

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