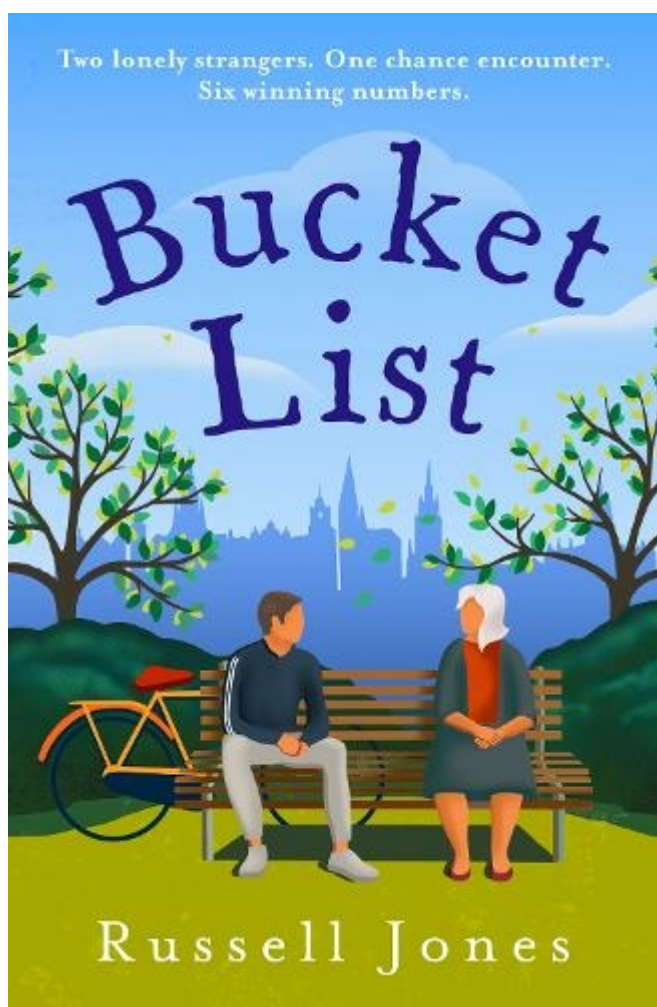


# Book Review: Bucket List by Russell Jones

An old lady sees two women shoplifting. She bravely reports them to the shop's security guard, who finds the stolen items in their bags. Justice is done.

But Dot isn't quite the guardian of moral values that she may seem. She's just better at shoplifting than the people she's shopped. And off she trots home, her own swag safely concealed in her old lady shopping bag,

*'This wasn't her first heist, after all.'*



In Russell Jones' new novel ***Bucket List*** Dot is a lonely Edinburgh widow who fills her life with visits to the garden centre café, weekly fish suppers from Mister Fish – and stealing. She doesn't have much money, but that's not really why she does it,

*'It had made her feel superhuman.....a part of her liked the rush she felt when she took something and got away with it: it was like she'd cheated the system...she was the bear, taking the honey. And it tasted oh, so sweet.'*

And Dot's shoplifting isn't a random affair; her wish list has just two subsections; plants and Christmas centrepieces. She's building a Christmas community in her sitting room, and if the people of Christmas Town need a candy cane factory or a skating rink, well, they're jolly well going to have one.

So Dot leads her insular life, eking out her pension in her cold and lifeless house. She goes for her walks, watches bored teenagers drinking in a playground, mentally criticises a sour-looking dog walker. Gets her kicks from lifting the odd peace lily or plastic snowman. But even the shoplifting's starting to be more of a worry than a pleasure; she knows she'll be caught in the end.

Jones then takes us back to Dot's youth; she's 22 and about to marry Charles, the love of her life. She's 10 years old and her much adored Dad is taking her to the fair. These little scenes are so important, because they remind us that every old person was a young person once. They had fun, they took risks, they loved life. And in *Old Lady Dot* we catch glimpses of the girl she once was. Until, that is, something terrible happens to her, destroying her confidence and almost making her a prisoner in her own home.

But then, through a series of coincidences, Dot starts living again. For Dot meets Max, another lonely soul; he's on the Young Offenders programme and in a group charged with clearing

up the park. Max has his own problems, but he and Dot form an unlikely friendship. On a whim, Dot decides to use Max's shirt number for her final ball in the lottery.

And she wins.

How Dot's win affects her, though, is only part of this story. Max persuades her to write a bucket list, and together they work through it, enjoying everything from afternoon tea at a thinly-disguised Dome in George Street to drag racing, carriage rides and dancing to a flash mob. They have a lot of fun, but Dot soon begins to realise that there's more satisfaction to be gained by giving than getting, by connecting with her local community, reaching out to other lonely people – and finally rebuilding a very important bridge.

Dot and Max's story (but no, they are not a couple – this is *not*, thank goodness, *Harold and Maude*) illustrates just how damaging isolation and loneliness can be. Alone and sad, Dot is starting to become embittered and depressed. She doesn't want to fall into the curmudgeonly pensioner trap, but she's heading that way. Life has taught Max that the world's a bad place, and that no-one (apart from his Mum) can be relied upon; he's grown up resentful and defensive. When Jones reveals a particular scene from Max's childhood, our hearts break for the trusting little boy who's been so badly let down.

And in the end it's not Dot's money that helps both of them rediscover joy (though they certainly have a great time spending it!), it's the connections they learn to make with the community around them. It's finding out that when people – even the most unlikely people – are brought together, they do care more than we ever imagined. Dot doesn't need Christmas Town any more; she's found a real one, and it's so much better.

Bucket List by Russell Jones is published by Polygon, an imprint of Edinburgh-based publisher Birlinn Ltd.