

Learning To Play

When I signed up for *Writing Children's Literature*, it was like an afterthought. It was just another course to make me feel like I wasn't wasting my time in London.

Virginia Woolf taught here, I thought, looking up at the squat and ordinary brick building. I hadn't read even one book by her and I felt a little jolt of shame, as I did every time I felt I'd failed at being cultured. I slipped by the front desk of Morely College, not bothering to flash my florescent orange ID card since no one else had. It always made me nervous not to follow the rules, even when the Londoners clearly thought nothing of abandoning them. I had an irrational fear of being sent to "the clink" for even the slightest transgression, or worse, I might be fined. Living in London left me counting pence as it was.

I probably would have wandered around in confusion for another ten minutes but luckily, there was a sort of usher directing everyone to their classrooms.

"Room 214, top floor and directly on the left," the man said. I thanked him twice, as I'd been told to do. English people, I was informed, always said please and thank you after every statement. Anything less was rude.

I kept my eyes on the ground in front of me. Don't look at anyone, I told myself. Londoners don't like to make eye contact! Consequently I had a lovely vision of the cracked off-white tiles as I tripped up the two and a half flights of stairs.

I passed my room twice, mistaking it for a janitor's closet. It took most of my nerve to open the door. I could hear animated voices from within, unsurprising since I

was 15 minutes late. I darted in, hoping that if I moved to my seat faster it wouldn't be as embarrassing.

"The Americans have ruined the bloody language," an old man growled. I slipped in the door behind a middle-aged mom-looking woman who was leaned forward like a therapist.

"Come on, Arthur- they're not *that* bad," prodded a woman with a sarcastic twist to her mouth, limp brown hair, and slouched posture.

"They've bloody ruined it!" he persisted, his eyes magnified to epic proportion by his massive black glasses. "They have it all wrong. What's worse, they keep adding words that don't exist and call it slang!"

"Dirty Yanks!" I agreed as I plopped down. I realized in a sickening moment as all the eyes in the room swiveled to me, that not only was I the youngest person there by a good twenty years, I was probably the only non-British person as well.

The professor looked worried, but the situation was so ridiculous that I felt my face twist against my will. The twist turned into a snort and the snort erupted into a sharp American laugh. The only one who didn't visibly relax was Arthur Nightingale. He'd never been worried.

The professor, Thomas Bloor, was a man with enormous, earnest blue eyes. He was decidedly less creepy than I'd expected from the back jacket of his book, which I'd read beforehand like any quality overachiever.

In fact, he looked nicer even than the old man, Arthur, who had enormous white eyebrows and handlebar mustache, funnier than the sarcastic woman in the corner, and more parental than the mother figure. No doubt he looked more approachable than me

as well. Despite being American, I rarely matched the perky image I was supposed to convey.

I looked around the classroom, which was really more of a closet with an enormous wooden table. There was hardly room to scoot the chairs out and there were black marks on the walls where many had gone too far. The table was heavily grooved like art desks in elementary school but the walls were bland and empty, without a single poster or decoration. I wondered how I would be inspired here. My trusty tourist instincts said we should go play at Hamley's toy store or try to run through platform nine and three quarters at King's Cross Station. We were in London, after all.

I waited for the written instructions for our first project —eagerly, of course, because I love instructions. I'd been taught to love them by 15 years of schooling with handouts, projects, and group work. I felt my face fall as our professor handed out hand-sized squares of paper, upside down. What was this? Everyone snatched a piece and I pulled mine reluctantly forward as well.

"Write about the picture and begin from the middle of the story," the professor instructed. I stared. This was a child's exercise. We were adults. In fact, they were ancient. Surely we could manage a bit more than this! Feeling as grumpy as Arthur looked, I scribbled down some notes.

After a few paragraphs I began to relax. Here, in the home of the fantasy big names, I could do whatever I wanted. In fact, I didn't have a standard to meet so I could write badly if I wanted. I could explore and chop, and rewrite without worrying about a grade. I could write fantasy, horror, western, or all of them together. So I did. My fingers cramped as I wrote but I was grinning. "Bloody brilliant."

Bloor set a battered bag down on the table. This was our fourth class and by now I knew that a bag meant objects for exercises, and exercises meant fun. This class was like playing with the kitchen set in kindergarten. It was special and I didn't want to share it with the other "kids" of my group. I felt a little fiendish every Thursday, stepping off the tube at Lambeth North and pretending I was going to class when I was actually going to play.

"Ok, I'm going to give you some toys. Pick out the three you want to write about." Bloor dumped them unceremoniously in a pile on the center of the grooved table. I was admittedly grabby, taking all of the ones I perceived as best and then looking around like a squirrel that had stolen the tastiest acorns.

I had three hand carved toys: a giraffe, a painted Dalmatian, and a wooden turtle with ruby-colored eyes. To my surprise, no one else looked upset about what they had or envious of my choices. In fact, each of them had toys that seemed to echo their personalities. Arthur had mismatched odds and ends: a magnifying glass, a pink Barbie lawn chair, and a rather droopy looking plastic hound. The mother look-alike, otherwise known as Karen, had tiny, cute rubber toys like bunnies and squirrels. The sarcastic woman, Beth, had animals that all looked sardonic.

No matter how ridiculous the story we told about the animal toys, Bloor would find something good about it. He liked how I named my animals first and built their characters around it, how Beth made hers anti-heroic and snarky, and how Arthur was already cooking up a set of mystery novels about his toys. Bloor wasn't sugar coating anything. It was like he had a magic power that let him make everyone feel good about

even their worst and most underdeveloped piece of writing, yet still felt like we'd learned and accomplished something.

At first I didn't know how to feel about this style of teaching. Well, maybe that's a lie. I like to know when I've done well and when I've done poorly, but nothing was divided like that here. My favorite professor at college was notoriously critical and occasionally made students cry when he conferenced with them over papers. But I knew I'd learned in his class. That's what I liked — strict expectations I could work to meet. I assumed that was what everyone liked deep down, or at least what every American liked. Americans were all supposed to have the “nose to the grindstone” attitude about learning to keep up with other countries. I'd imagined an even more intense version of this in England. I'd been told that British professors expected U.S. students to do lots of outside class-work and be bright and vivacious in class. The course work was supposed to be grueling.

What could I do with Bloor's endless list of positives? I wanted a grade in red ink, even if it was a dreaded “B”. At Central College in tiny rural Iowa it could look like someone bled all over the paper, but here no one would even tell me what I'd done wrong without adding two complements.

It didn't matter to my classmates what grade they got, I learned early on. If they didn't do their homework all that happened was Bloor would look a bit disappointed. After the first four classes I learned to partially adopt this mentality. I stopped waiting for a grade, but I could never fail to do my homework no matter what happened the night before.

It was fresh and new to learn in a virtually stress and pressure-free environment where everyone was supportive. Never before had I gone to class to play. I liked this. Did I like it more than the American style? I came to realize that I needed them both.

It was incredible to me, at first, that London children should read the same books as American children. They loved Dr. Suss and I loved Roald Dahl. This confirmed for me what I'd already begun to suspect, that England and America were more alike than different. I'd never before had an idea of how many British authors I'd read as a child. I'd assumed they were all American for some reason: Tolkien, Lewis, Carroll, and of course the infamous J.K. Rowling were all on my bookshelf. Opinions on Rowling, I found, were as controversial in London as in any part of America.

Arthur hated Rowling. She was as offensive to him as Americans, maybe more so. What was surprising was why he hated her work. He used personification for everything from moonlight to lawnmowers, had characters in the mountains who yodeled and shot apples off each other's heads, but fantasy was to him like writing blasphemy. We all enjoyed a ten-minute lecture from him on the evils of it.

"But you see it could not happen! All that stuff about flying is just nonsense because it couldn't happen!" he explained patiently to us, slapping his wrinkled hand on the table. He hadn't read *Harry Potter*, of course, which made me dismiss his complaints.

I had read it, along with my entire generation of Harry Potter fanatics. I didn't especially admire Harry Potter as a series or as writing, but rather as a marker of my

teenage years. I thought, as they say in England, “It got a bit crap” near the end, but I wasn’t going to bring it up in a room full of English people.

“Now, Arthur, I don’t know,” Bloor said, trying to calm the situation down. The mother woman was looking a bit dragonish with flared nostrils and crossed arms. She had probably read *Harry Potter* to her children, as my mom used to. Beth was shaking her head as well and I winced at the wave of disapproval aimed at the oblivious Arthur.

Even more surprising than the knowledge that not all English people like *Harry Potter* was how self-described dinosaurs such as Arthur had read some of the same things I had. We both loved *The Secret Garden*. But despite the similarities in inspiration, we did not write the same. Not one of us came close to the other in subject or style.

Arthur wrote like a grandfather telling a quirky fairytale to his grandkids in the living room. He lived for dialogue and personification of inanimate objects. My favorite of his works involved the tragic love triangle of a car, a tree, and a rusty tractor. He wrote:

“But he knew he could not have her, she had fallen in love with the red race car. What hope did a rusted old ton of tin like him have with a beauty like her? The race car sped by every night and he knew if he didn’t cross the lake to her, soon she would be lost forever.”

Despite the shared quirkiness of my classmates, I could never pinpoint a “London tone” to their writing. There was no shared style or even slang. They all came from different backgrounds and generations.

At first, expecting my American style would glare like an uncovered light bulb, I tried to use terms that fit in. I called mothers “mum” and friends “mates”. No one said anything, but I could see after the first class how ridiculous that was- how unnecessary. Conformity was something reserved for the tube, not the classroom.