

# Studies from a Writing Workshop

By Christopher Nagle

The three pieces below, 'The Walk', 'The Interview' and 'The Suitcase' were the product of a one day writing workshop in a seaside town called Cowes, in Victoria, Australia, with well know Australian author, Arnold Zable, on Friday 18th July 2009.

Arnold has a lot of publishing credits to his name, and besides being a delightful man, he really knows the story telling craft. His talks were peppered with published examples of the points about writing that he was trying to make.

What he was driving at, was to find ways to enrich the imaginative dimensions of a narrative, by allowing and following the unexpected, so that the story takes on a life of its own. Further, he suggested that the more widely and adventurously the writer throws this process open, the better the chances of hitting narrative pay dirt.

Part of this was to observe and explore the usually unnoticed idiosyncratic small details of surroundings, speech, manner and attitude that get lost in the welter of participation in events. The author thus has to become a very focused 'observer', even if what is being portrayed is entirely fictional.

He spoke of this as 'extracting silver threads from the coarse material of everyday life', or "turning text into texture", by economizing on factual description and expanding the rich emotional and contextual elements in even the simplest, barest and shortest event sequences.

For him, setting the scene is far more important than the bare 'historical' narrative of the story. Scene on scene development will largely create and carry that 'history' anyway.

For the purposes of the workshop, he divided these elements in his talk and the participants' response exercises to them, into three parts: 'Place', 'Character' and 'Object'.

Armed with Arnold's tips, our intrepid group of aging baby boomer aspiring writers all scribbled furiously, trying to bring his advice to life. As we read our pieces out to each other, it was obvious that following these maxims produced some really good outcomes.

The animation and stimulus of the day's work, I think, is reflected in the following writing exercises.

**'Place' in writing:** (As with many creative exercises that take on a life of their own, the original intention to deal with 'place' becomes something of an afterthought.)

## The Walk

B'ffy black dog waits, grey day, wet day notwithstanding. Alert, his head rests light upon his mat. He watches, eyes close to where his master's doing all he does each day, each way he punctuates the coming of his time to grasp the lead; a morning moment as urgent as the evening feed.

At last! Acceptance of the bursting need to pee and play, to introduce the day, to let the air display its blasting scent, rushing through the door to tell what life is all about; who's been around, who's in and who is out.

The man and dog all know their parts. Man takes the lead, attaches to the eager restless dog who whines complaint as muddy weary boots are dragged 'cross human feet; whines at the desultory progress of his treat, pushes at the door in case it won't resist, patters on the tiles in circles just to make a start, grabs the lead and dribbles as he pleads for speed, until at last the light beneath the scratched and battered outside door, starts to move across the floor.

Let out like balloons released, lead, man and beast cannon out into the atmospheric feast, the flash of colour, swishing branch and leaf, scudding cloud and ocean waves so loud and frothy foamed, they batter sense and matter, scatter birds and chase the walkers down the beach.

## **The 'character' in writing:**

### The Interview

Regimental Sergeant-Major Riverston sat with his back to the venetian blinds in his office. Through their half open slats, the passing cars in the street flashed sun filled metallic reflections across the shiny surface of his balding shaven head, briefly haloing him like a day time neon sign, or, occasional saint.

He gazed at the aging picture of a much younger queen on the opposite, otherwise bare and institutionalized army wall, and thought his army thoughts: parades not quite up to scratch, uniforms not starched enough, dirty boots and weapons and a myriad of other dissatisfactions that fill the void, until a well earned retirement from (spare me the laughter) a University Reserve Regiment, which is, as everyone knows, a professional soldier's graveyard!

He concentrated, picking at his somewhat red and bulbous nose; the product of many army nights in the Sergeants' Mess over a beer, or six, and reminded himself that it was two minutes til his appointment with an incoming transfer by the name of, wait for it, Private Eastman Hyphen Flaming Nagle.

“Geezus what a mouthful! How would you be carrying that bit of luggage around all your life”, he mumbled to himself as he rifled through the pile of files sitting on his desk. “Shit! Is it under ‘E’ or ‘N’? Why can’t he be happy with just one name for Chrissake.....?”

There was a knock and the R.S.M., who by now had found the delinquent and disorderly file, turned and gave the door a commanding “Come In!”, in that gravelly tone that all Sergeant-Majors affect, by deliberately stripping three-quarters of their vocal chords on regimental parade grounds too large to shout across for long, without damage.

As the door knob turned, he opened the manila folder and put on his most authoritative and forbidding look; the one you use when you have no nice youthful looks left to lose. “Ah, Private Nagle...” The light flashed once more over his balding and shaven pate, as he belatedly raised his eyes from the folder's fascinating contents, to the handsome young man entering the office.... “Take a seat!”

“Private Eastman-Nagle, Sir”, the young man breezily corrected, with that voice and manner that says, 'nice' family and private school education', especially to those who lack them.

“Oh very well!” growled the R.S.M, half crossly, half incredulous, at the sheer cheek of this jumped up snot nosed uni-bloody-versity student in uniform, “Take two seats then!”

### **The ‘object’ in writing:**

#### The Suitcase

The battered old suitcase is not leather, but of solid enough material, with metal corners and a handle that still holds its weight and contents, which are more than clothing and less than groceries.

It is a case that has no place, so it is routinely stored in remote regions of the many houses I have lived in, only just out of reach of damp and vermin.

It contains my long dead maternal grandfather’s papers; the detritus not merely of a man, but an age of still powerful, even if declining Empire, with enough time left in it to claim his whole career, just.

It is hard to open this case, for the old man I knew was not a pleasant character; bitter, marginalized and a maliciously spiteful bully of my long suffering mother, who put up with him after her sister threw him out.

It is a hard to open this case because it holds a life much of whose point was lost when the serried ranks of global bureaucrats, businessmen, missionaries and armed servicemen were driven back to their little islands in the North Sea, not long after the last World War

It is a hard to open this case because there is at least a year's work just to read the meticulous, spidery, yet often indecipherable script, on subjects as diverse as his accounts, letters to his family, reports to government instrumentalities, business agreements and finally, his querulous claims for government compensation, for property expropriated by the Egyptians after Suez.

It is a hard case, open or shut, as it reproaches me every time I heave it from one place to another. It indignantly demands that I do my duty; that I owe it to my immediate family, to my descendants and to the world to sort and analyze its contents, and put the acts that it records into some sort of context, which will in some measure, tell those who follow me where they come from.

Here, in this case is a piece of history waiting to be told and I like to pretend to myself that I am some sort of historian. Liar! Time Thief! History Denier!

Your case is waiting. Get on it.

© 2011, Christopher Nagle