

Fallow Season

“The problem with you,” says his mother, “is that you love failure.”

Nigel doesn't hear the words at first, just keeps scribbling around the cryptic crossword. *For stimulation, no English client is taking an alternative* (8). Like his mother, it's been nagging at him all morning.

“You sit there in your dressing gown. It's one o'clock and you haven't shaved or showered. I'm not sure you've had breakfast. And I won't even ask whether you've cleaned your teeth.”

He doodles letters in a gap on the newspaper. He's sure this one's an anagram. Glitch...?? Gnash...?? The words he glimpses can't be right.

“Devouring every single column in the paper, slouched before the TV all afternoon – why don't you get up and paint something?”

“Will you shush for two minutes, Mother? I'm trying to think. This is a tricky one.”

“Brush, canvas, paint. It's not that tricky.”

“I'm having an intentional fallow season. To feed my creative spirit.”

“If you really want to feed yourself, then put a shift in and earn some money. Painters, they go out into those meadows and find stuff to look at. Or if not landscapes, then portraits. Life! It's already out there! What's fallow about that?”

Maybe it's not an anagram, he wonders.

“I'm getting tired of watching you mope about. It's not healthy in a man of your age. Honestly, you get out of bed but it's as if you're fast asleep. Or on drugs. Which you probably are, come to think of it. And if you're not going to paint, isn't it about time you hunted down a proper job? Or a relationship? You can't stay here scrounging off me forever, what kind of a life is that?!”

“Clitoris!” he cries, then puts his pen down.



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Who exactly do we write for and do we care who reads us?

Andrew Melrose

TAKING ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON AND TREASURE ISLAND AS AN EXAMPLE

When I was in discussion with Anne Caldwell about reviewing her wonderful new collection of poems *Alice and the North*, she said she had no secrets from her son because he had read all of her poetry. Lisa Koning, in putting together her covid quarantine diary 'Lockdown, quarantine and the splinter of ice in the writer's veins', on the value of taking biographical notes as a useful writing tool, confessed she was nervous about revealing some of the 'personal details' her diary blog contained and then proceeded to reveal the link to strangers. Jen Webb in 'Ethics, writing, and splinters in the heart' confirmed she asked her son's permission to write about his hospitalisation as the victim of a serious assault and then when he gave it she shared what she had written to an international audience. I know all three writers and love their writing. However, each time I was intrigued by their on-the-page honesty. That's because I, on the other hand, have spent the lockdown period writing a new clutch of songs and a chapbook to accompany a record, called *Fisherrow*, which says:

Fisherrow is a small harbour town at the delta of the River Esk where it meets the Firth of Forth. I lived there for seven years. This isn't in any way a biographical account of my life there, or a travelogue of the place but echoes I heard during the time of Covid (2020) when I had lockdown and quarantine time to listen out for them. Like all echoes they are imprecise and often only loosely attached to the source, so it's only a true story, maybe...

I have a tendency to move what I write away from being too close to the real me, so that quite often what people get is an echo which has travelled a good distance from the source, and is thereby not the same as it was when it

started – and now I have just confessed that, telling you, strangers, something I had previously kept to myself. If I write from biographical experience it is often *only a true story, maybe*.

I am intrigued by the process of writing, like all of us, and like you reading this I am interested in the people who do so. Don DeLillo (and others) said he writes to find out what he knows, others might write to show how much they know, some even write telling you things they obviously know nothing about. That's the writing life, either way I am interested. I know in the 'it's not the teller but the tale' days, or the critical analysis, critical theory party where we deconstruct narratives for meaning and hidden subliminal, psychoanalytical resonances of childhood trauma and suchlike we are discouraged from considering the person behind the story, the poem, the lyric etc., but it's a natural human response, surely? I want to know that the writer of my favourite song, poem, novel shares my sensibility. I was once in an English tutorial (as a student) and someone called Virginia Wolf's Mrs Ramsey (*To the Lighthouse*) 'stupid'. My tutor, who I won't name, cried and said she had felt a deep affinity with Mrs Ramsey and Virginia Wolf ever she had been an undergraduate – and I had wondered then what kind of impression Wolf had hoped to make. Here we had two readers with hugely different views of the same character. Then more recently, when I started researching Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* for a different article, I discovered something really interesting about a hugely popular and famous author who was torn in all kinds of directions about his writing; and why he was writing *Treasure Island*, who he was writing for and who he wanted to please all at the same time makes an interesting case study. I hope what I reveal about the writing of that novel and Robert Louis

Stevenson's relationship with it, beyond the actual book currently available to us, might help us to reconsider a literary legacy with a story of its own. But also ask us to address the idea, for whom do we write?

Edinburgh at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century was known in critical circles as the Athens of the North. The man of letters (for he was invariable always a man in those days) was a position of esteem. The young Robert Louis Stevenson was keen to join this tradition and his early work was designed to provide him entry into the club.

Having sculpted a reasonable literary reputation, with titles such as *An Inland Voyage* (1878), *Edinburgh. Picturesque Notes* (1879) and *Travels With A Donkey* (1879) along with other essays, poetry and fiction, there is an element of him putting a toe into the notoriously outrageous 'penny dreadful' territory with *Deacon Brodie, or The Double Life* (1880). As he moved into 1881 there were two significant developments in his literary life. The first of these was the publication of *Virginibus Puerisque*. This was the first collection of Stevenson's essays and contained what were regarded as personal essays in the tradition of Lamb and Hazlitt. Bringing together essays previously published in the prestigious magazines such as *Cornhill Magazine* and *Macmillan's*, they promoted a spirit of the gentleman writer. The man of letters he aspired to be.

Despite a good critical reception however, the collection didn't sell well and Stevenson, while cementing a reputation, was not making money. So in the same year he wrote to Sydney Colvin about another project, quite unlike *Virginibus Puerisque* altogether.

807 To Sydney Colvin

Text: Letters, II, 150-51, supplemented from Colvin's

Galleys, Silverado
[Mid-June 1881] Kinnaird Cottage, Pitlochry

My Dear Colvin, *The Black Man and Other Tales*
The Black Man

- i. Thrawn Janet
- ii. The Devil on Cramond Sands

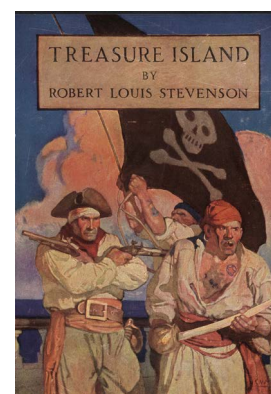
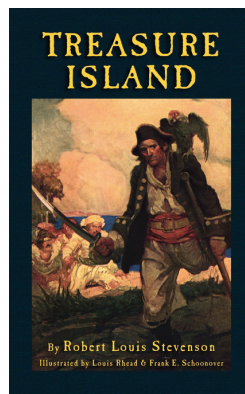
The Shadow
The Body Snatchers
The Case Bottle
The King's Horn
The Actor's Wife
The Wreck of the *Susanna*

This is the new work on which I am engaged with Fanny; they are all supernatural... the tales are all ghostly. 'Thrawn Janet' frightened me to death... Yours exuberantly, R.L.S. (Booth and Mehew, Vol Three: 188-9)

While there is no direct evidence or correspondence, at that time, relating to the subject of 'penny dreadfuls' or the marketplace dealing with them. But just by the tone of the correspondence it is clear that in the *The Black Man and Other Tales* proposal, Stevenson is beginning to see the possibilities of writing for a more commercial (and highly lucrative) market. And indeed he accounts for this switch and his love of the genre later. In his 1888 essay, 'Popular Authors' RLS wrote of his childhood fascination

with the cheaply published, cheaply printed, *Penny Dreadful*:

This inexpensive pleasure mastered me [my italic]. Each new Saturday I would go from one news vendor's window to another's, till I was master of the weekly gallery and had thoroughly digested "The Baronet Unmasked," "So and so approaching the Mysterious House," "The Discovery of the Dead Body in the Blue Marl Pit," "Dr. Vargas Removing the Senseless Body of Fair Liliias," and whatever other snatch of unknown story and glimpse of unknown characters that gallery afforded. I do not know that I ever enjoyed fiction more...



The growth in cheap publishing, cheap printing and sensational stories throughout the Victorian period is well documented – and with it the moral arguments which surrounded the industry and their suitability for the Victorian young. The young man of letter, dependent on his father and desperate to keep writing was looking at the cash, not literary potential. Then something happened. *The Black Man and Other Tales* gave way to something much more important:

[24 August 1881]

My dear Henley, Of course I am a rogue... now see here.

The Sea Cook

Or Treasure Island

A Story for Boys.

If this don't fetch the kids, why, they are gone rotten since my day. Will you be surprised to learn it is about Buccaneers, that begins in the *Admiral Benbow* public house, that's all about a map and a treasure and a mutiny and a derelict ship and a current and a fine old Squire Trelawney (the real Tre, purged of literature and sin)... a Sea Cook with one leg, and a sea song with the chorus, 'Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of Rum'...

In short Stevenson had changed course and was about to sail in different waters in the style of the hugely popular Jack Harkaway stories. The why is easy to establish from his biographies, money and financial reliance on his father was a constant concern. As he wrote to Mrs Sitwell, 'If Colvin does not think that I shall be able to

support myself soon by literature, I shall give it up and go (horrible as the thought is to me) into an office of some sort.' (Booth and Mehew, Vol One: 91).

Here he is, then, pitching the *Sea Cook* or what was to become *Treasure Island* as a potential best seller to a publisher. A story for boys containing recognisable 'penny dreadful' tropes such as a public house, Buccaneers, treasure, a derelict ship and mutiny, rum and so on (and 'the real Tre who was based on the recently deceased Edward John Trelawney (1791-1881) erstwhile swashbuckling friend of Byron and Shelley), it had all the perfect ingredients.

As a writer, though, he was obviously excited by the prospect. A week or so later he wrote to his dear friend again:

[Early September 1881]

[*Braemar*]

My Dear Henley... The tale advances a chapter a day. The Japp thinks he'll get me £100... I have all my work cut out to write my daily chapter of *The Sea Cook* but £100!

'The Japp' being Alexander Japp who had been in correspondence with Stevenson on an article about Thoreau had visited him and became enthused by the project, after Stevenson read him the early chapters, and offered to show it to, the proprietor of *Young Folks Magazine*. And his enthusiasm for this venture was confirmed by himself later. In 'My First Book,' Stevenson (1884) wrote about *Treasure Island* saying, 'It was to be a story for boys; no need for *psychology* or *fine writing* [my italics]'. But while, with his *Treasure Island* proposal, the man of letters Stevenson is enthusiastically looking to enter a market place which anticipates a certain kind of material fed by the shabby but profitable 'penny dreadful', a number of factors made his writing life a little more difficult than it otherwise could have been.

At first everything appears to be in order and he works gainfully on the 'penny dreadful' tropes well. *Treasure Island* has three deaths in the first five chapters; Jim's father dies of an illness (Stevenson 1999: 17); Billy Bones dies of apoplexy at receiving the 'black spot' from Blind Pew (19) or from a stroke after a lifetime of drinking rum, according to Dr Livesey, and Pew himself is trampled by Dance's horse (28). While they are not murders, murderous threats and violence lurks, "'Ah! Black Dog... He's a bad 'un; but there's worse that put him on. Now, if I can't get away nohow, they tip me the black spot.'" (16) The 'black spot' as we are to find out is a warning which the old buccaneer, Billy fears as much as 'the seafaring man with one leg' (5). And even as Pew arrives to deliver the black spot, his blindness is no concession; as he says to Jim, "'Now boy... take me to the captain... that's it! Take me straight in, or I'll break your arm.'" (17). Thus, the threats of violence and criminality isn't far away. In fact, the early chapters in *Treasure Island* have the kind of titles that lend themselves well to serialisation in the street literary form. 'Chapter I' gives us, 'The Old Sea Dog at the 'Admiral Benbow' and it is a convincing opening. Billy Bones is introduced as the paranoid seaman, whose dreadful stories, 'about hanging, and walking the plank, and storms at sea, and

the Dry Tortugas, and wild deeds and places on the Spanish Main,' which we never actually get to hear, 'were what frightened people worst of all...' (5) alongside his 'eternal song... "Fifteen men on the dead man's chest/ Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!"' (6). It sets the story up well, we have treasure in the title, a mystery seaman, scary stories, the Spanish Main, fifteen dead men on the dead man's chest and a bottle. What boy could resist, as Stevenson himself, said, 'If this don't fetch the kids, why, they are gone rotten since my day.' (ibid).

But Stevenson's reluctance to go all out by writing in this rough and rugged manner is linked to his own problems. Hindered by his own literary snobbery, he was also making efforts to please his pious father, whose financial support and influence were strained. Stevenson desperately wanted parental approval. In the letter (844: 226) to Henley (referred to above), he talks about the financial potential of *Treasure Island* with almost flippant gait. But in the previous letter containing the initial proposal, he wrote:

And now look here – this is next day – and three chapters are written... All now heard by Sam [Samuel Lloyd, Louis' stepson], F., [his wife Fanny] and *my father and mother, with high approval* [my italic] – it's quite silly and horrid fun, - and what I want is the *best* book about the Buccaneers that can be had... (Booth and Mehew, Vol Three: 225)

The joy and the sheer enthusiasm can hardly be contained, taken along with the fact that his wife, father and mother approve is all the more satisfying for him. In their extensive biographies of Robert Louis Stevenson, David Daiches (1973), Jenni Calder (1980) and Frank McLynn (1993) alongside other commentators and critics discuss his uneasy relationship with his father, Thomas. Indeed they had a huge falling out. Having already disappointed for not studying to be a lighthouse engineer, like his father, and only playing at studying to be a lawyer, two things come to the fore which are relevant. The first was Louis' confessed agnosticism which was a profound disappointment to both his parents who were severe in their Christian beliefs. Indeed it caused a rift between them which never really healed. Louis confided to Charles Baxter (Booth and Mehew, Vol One: 23-24):

The thunderbolt has fallen with a vengeance now. You know the aspect of a house in which somebody is still awaiting burial: the quiet steps, the hushed voices and rare conversation, the religious literature that holds a temporary monopoly, the grim, wretched faces; all is here reproduced in the family circle in honour of my (what is it?) atheism or blasphemy... My father put me one or two questions as to my beliefs... I think I should have lied as I have done so often before. I so far thought of my father, but I had forgotten my mother. And now! They are both ill, both silent, both as down in the mouth as if – I can find no simile... I think I could almost find it in my heart to retract, but it is too late; and again, am I to live my whole life as a falsehood... and I confess I cannot exactly swallow my father's purpose of praying down continuous afflictions on my head.

It is clear Louis is shaken by his parent's reaction and indeed would continue to be throughout his life. And it did have an impact on his life. But it was to have an impact on his writing and even after initial enthusiasm, he knew the 'penny dreadful' route he had taken was laying a bear trap. The first clue is in Fanny's note,

My father-in-law would sit entranced during our daily chapter, his noble head bent forward, his great glowing eyes fixed on his son's face. Every incident of the story could be read in his changing countenance. At any slip in style, or taste, or judgement he would perceptibly wince. (Calder1980: 167).

But there is also the confession from Fanny herself in a letter to Gosse's wife,

I am glad Mr Gosse liked "Treasure Island." I don't. I liked the beginning but after that the life seemed to go out of it and it became tedious. (McLynn 1993: 197).

It would seem his reluctance to go all out and write the kind of contemporary buccaneering, treasure hunting fiction in the popular style he enjoyed as a boy and Fanny preferred was hindered by his wincing father – Louis was caught, to use that old cliché, between a rock and hard place. As I write this piece I wonder, what must that have been like? You are writing for boys, your wife likes it but your father is wincing at 'any slip in style, or taste, or judgement...' Of course, he could have ignored this but the evidence suggests he didn't.

Stevenson wrote to Henley again in February 1882 (285) that Fanny had recanted, 'after re-reading the whole of *Treasure Island*, [Fanny] has eaten much of her venom... and only wants a chapter or so re-written in the midst...' there is a tension, because the early chapters tackle the ideas of death and violence differently from the latter, and the reason for that becomes clear.

While he had to contend with his own establishment critics who were reading the daily drafts, as they were being serialised, there is also evidence his father even tried to intervene. Thomas wrote to Louis on the 26th February 1882, suggesting improvements to *Treasure Island* should include 'a long passage 'of a religious character' – 'a kind of religious tract... but all in the Defoe style' – in which Ben Gunn looked back to his childhood and the sayings of his father and mother.' (letters 3, 291: n1).

If you read the novel, it will be recalled the character Ben Gunn confessed to Jim that he had a pious mother and became a pirate despite his wholesome upbringing.

I was civil, pious boy, and could rattle of my catechism... And here's what it comes to, Jim, and it begun with chuck-farthen [a gambling game] on the blessed grave stones... predicked the whole, she did the pious woman.' (81)

But as Louis replied, to his father:

My dear Father, I highly and thoroughly agree with you as to Ben Gunn. I had meant to dwell on Benjamin later on, and never had room for him, but as you say, we'll put in a whole religious tract in that very place... My own feeling is to rewrite most of it from the beginning of the story, or say chapter III... But I'll have your views on this...' (Booth and Mehew, Vol Three: 291-292)

It's a curious prospect, to be writing for the commercially lucrative boy's market, getting serialised (as he was writing) in the boy's paper *Young Folks's Magazine* which expected a different kind of 'ditch-water stories that a child could dip and slip and doze over' (Stevenson 1888) while facing the editorial eye of a religious and devout father, is it not?

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island* for boys (as he once was and in the style he once liked as a boy), he was under pressure from *Young Folks's Magazine* (imagine writing a novel which was getting serialised as it was being written – of course *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens comes to mind) he was under pressure from Fanny who wanted him to keep the buccaneering pace up and from the pious demands of a father to include some religious tract.

I mentioned Virginia Woolf earlier and we could let her husband Leonard have the last say. In 1924, after the delivery of the first ten volumes of the thirty-five volume Tusitala volumes of Stevenson's work, Leonard Woolf took the opportunity to describe what he considered to be Stevenson's failings as a writer. While implying he was enjoyable when in top storytelling form, he writes, 'The worst thing about him is his style... quite a good imitator of great writers...' An imitator, well we can see where that might have come from. Writing a novel is hard enough, do you have the courage to write it as only you see it?

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Action Learning Programme

Fiona Linday

WEATHERING THE PANDEMIC STORM

In September 2020, NAWE launched its new virtual action learning programme. Billed as free group coaching to help writers weather the pandemic storm, it was the brainchild of Fiona Mason, NAWE's Interim Director and facilitated by Julia Payne, Director of the hub.

So, what is Action Learning?

In a nutshell, Action learning is a type of group coaching, where participants become their own team or 'set' of brilliant, inspiring coaches, working with each other to help tackle with the big decisions each set member needs to make. It involves working on real problems, focusing on learning and actually implementing solutions.

Through the initiative, a group of eight writers in education would have the chance to come together as part of a new action learning set, to assist each other develop new insights, plans and understanding and to receive support to set up their own follow-up action learning sets with other writers later in the year. As Fiona Mason explained - 'As set participants go on to establish their own action learning sets, we hope that from this initial cohort we might be providing action learning support for a further 60+ writers.'

When a NAWE newsletter arrived in my inbox detailing the call-out for participants to join this Arts Council England funded professional development opportunity, I leapt at the chance. As a writer, coach and facilitator of inclusive creative writing workshops for lifelong learners, I was prompted to apply as I was questioning the way forward for creatives to adapt during the pandemic.

I was honoured when the kind offer came back inviting me to join the programme, as one of the lucky eight applicants in this nurturing space. The good news that I'd been selected came via email from Fiona Mason, saying that there was a good fit between my background, needs and plans and the aims of the scheme. The invitation was a massive boost for me when, like many others, I had dwindling literature development activity taking place and just a few paid and free online poetry workshops. I was adapting practice, and challenged to reach an audience digitally but having fewer time constraints was fortunate as an essential part of the offer was to commit to attending six, three-hour weekly Zoom sessions.

Before the programme began, the eight participants received an email list of proposed set members with their contacts details. This prior notice ensured no conflicts of interest and enabled us to Google set members if we wished.

During the first virtual meeting, we met Julia Payne, our guide and mentor, and connected through the audio and video to introduce ourselves to one other. I was impressed with my fellow set members writing credentials as they introduced themselves. Set members held huge responsibilities through publishing their own creative writing and contributing to literature development management. Also, the genre of expertise in their creative writing had a vast range, which was humbling.

It was exciting to hear Julia explain, 'We want set members to develop new insights, plans and

understanding and to help fellow set members unlock their own insights. We'll get properly inside how action learning works, and develop the facilitation skills and the confidence to set up our own action learning set. We'll gain a new peer group - a go-to bunch of peers we can really trust to help you fathom the difficult stuff out.'

I felt safe in Julia's hands, hearing that she had run sets for hundreds of creative freelancers up and down the country – from creative producers to illustrators, composers, copywriters and even acrobats – and is currently heading up a national action learning programme, funded by Arts Council England. She also shared her own journey with action learning:

'For me, being part of an action learning set has been the single most useful investment I've made in my professional development in the past decade, and I can't recommend it highly enough. Since training as an action learning facilitator a decade ago, I've seen over and over again, how it supports set members to unlock really powerful reflection, decision making and action – true lightbulb moments – and have seen set members increase their confidence and resilience. It's incredible how quickly bonds of trust and relationships develop, and I love how everyone leaves each session with new energy and resolve. I think the key to action learning's success in our sector is that action learning sets provide a structured process for reflecting on the experience with a group of peers. It's not about giving answers, but about helping people to find the answers themselves, through careful listening, asking open questions and providing thoughtful feedback.'

Julia went on to explain how the experience of running her own creative enterprise had been critical in motivating her current approach to the Covid-crisis. 'Everything we do at the hub is about helping people and organisations in the creative sector to develop more sustainable careers and businesses. That help is needed now more than ever, as we all navigate the new normal.'

Accompanying introductory slides covering the role of a facilitator meant we had notes to guide us in holding the space. Julia explained that we needed to stick to these protocols with strict timekeeping and I admired the rigour of the process setting firm boundaries. We were reminded to respect confidentiality and given information on coaching etiquette. There was much to process, and throughout, Julia calmly modelled that appropriate behaviour to us.

Julia clearly explained the format of an action learning set: it was reassuring to learn that how we we're all doing was a primary part of 'reporting in', on the slide illustrating What happens in a set. Then we were asked what we wanted to leave outside. With a pandemic, there was plenty to consider leaving outside the space for three hours. After that was the bidding process – those who had an issue declared what they would like to present. Julia chose the two most pressing conversations at each meeting, each one being given around 50 minutes – 1 hour. The initial presentation was followed by clarifying questions. The open questions took most of the time with

the formulation of action following. Presenter's initial reflections came next, with set members' reflections to the presenter and set members' reflections on their learning. Presenter's concluding reflection finally took place. Julia completed a summing up in a process review and provided support and guidance.

So, by the beginning of that first session, I had been introduced to nine other creative individuals (the seven fellow participants, Julia and Fiona) enlarging my creative contacts effectively.

The background information came as a relief. My hope was to be lifted out of the isolation of staying home and be inspired to communicate more effectively in my workplace by using the set as a sounding board. Armed with our introductory slides and Julia's mind map of a set, we ploughed ahead to take care of presenters as best we could. After the democratic bidding round to present, Julia prioritised those members without other sources of support to discern the most time-sensitive issues to facilitate. She then modelled that part of the process with the first brave presenter. Another set member agreed to facilitate the next presenter, following Julia's example. So, we dived straight in with support from Julia, sure we'd each have the opportunity to perform all three roles within action learning across the six sessions: facilitating, presenting and coaching.

Early in the programme, I was sparked to write an article about the action learning process and when this was encouraged by NAWA, I overcame any hesitation because I'd been chosen to participate alongside seven capable writers with considerable literary credits. During the early stage of reporting-in I discussed the idea with the set and reassured them about anonymity. I asked for their feedback on their experience and they agreed to share their reflections.

One early presenter gave this feedback to Julia, 'Presenting my proposal and having people ask questions, was intense and very helpful. Presenting meant that I had to collect my thoughts about the proposal and put them in some kind of order. It was a process that gave clarity to my thoughts and also allowed me to concentrate. Hearing the questions, suggestions, and reflections was helpful too – it was like hearing my own questions voiced plus getting suggestions that might not have occurred to me.'

The thought that I would soon be sitting in that presenting chair, receiving reciprocal care to explore my outcomes, focused my mind. I was fast learning about the enormous energy gained from the 'talent in the Zoom'. I recall the privilege of witnessing definite lightbulb moments among fellow set members, given time to think outside their regular boxes and come up with solutions through listening and learning from their peers. From this welcome interruption to our busy schedules and lived experiences we gleaned new ideas about how to plan actions, overcoming our hesitations. For me, it was around how to engage and serve participants in my proposed literature activity remotely. The answers we reflected on were revelations that regularly emerged for

us to take away to use in our real-world settings. While the actions formulated were mostly stemming from our own conclusions, wise clarifying questions broadened our thinking. The set member's reflections in the hour-long conversations, were full of tips for utilising tried and tested techniques.

During the second session, I plucked up some courage to ask the group about a project of mine. Another set member volunteered to facilitate my presentation, and did so ably. The impact of presenting allowed me to have an internal dialogue around my issue prompted by explanation and exploration. The discussion questions prioritised my writing activity by making me accountable for the actions I formulated. During the process, I reminisced about my last project, validating my ability, but then the set's questions moved me forward to the present task. The process was reaffirming with the conversations offering various insights into broadening my practice. There were times when I said, 'Thanks for that brilliant idea; I would never have thought of it.'

I concluded that the differences found in our present pandemic situation were no longer a barrier. Through listening back to the Zoom recording, I discovered highlighted areas for me to pursue further, and the potential to achieve a better outcome. The set got me thinking outside my usual parameters and boosted my confidence to keep going. Their refreshing cheerleading was motivational. Their vast experience and insights were informative, energising my future efforts.

Julia very kindly did an hour-long practical add-on for a couple of the set members all about hosting Zoom. I took away the knowledge about how to share slides and how to video the meeting to capture actions, as well as including participation via a telephone link. There were homework tasks around bringing a tangible item to reflect our practice, again helping us identify and illustrate what we do. One member brought a learning tool she frequently used during workshops. Visualising our creativity was shown by one set member through a workshop prop to spark writing. I took note of the useful tool.

Then in a session dedicated to developing our own practice as future action learning set facilitators, we went into breakout rooms. After anticipating possible challenging facilitator scenarios, we explored the potential responses to these and reported back to the group. This practical problem-solving activity allowed us to bring our worries about the applicable delivery of the programme. I asked our breakout room to reflect on what to do in the extreme circumstance of a set member experiencing a meltdown during a session. We agreed to show empathy by listening, then offering comforting words to the frazzled participant and reassurance about our ability as a set to be flexible enough to rearrange their presentation to later in a session or to another session. We thought of ways of countering negative bias to find a balance. Julia helpfully offered to bring those interesting solutions for managing situations such as problematic behaviour and tricky internet connections together to use again, in a toolkit. That information would help

our coaching practice. During further conversations, Julia stepped back after reporting in and the bidding process and only helped if needed. She allowed set members to practice presentation and facilitating, providing supportive feedback at the end. She was able to communicate privately via the chat and sent me an encouraging text as a set member on asking a helpful follow-on question. That encouraged me that I was on the right track.

Later another presenter commented about their experience, 'The process of presenting and listening back was very helpful for me. It enabled me to reflect on the dilemma I presented and to identify strategies for addressing it. I think the questioning and reflecting which the action learning process entails is enabling and empowering. I am so pleased to be involved in this programme!'

During the third session, I bid to facilitate an action learning conversation so that I could report on the full process for this article. By that time, I'd been impressed by a handful of other facilitators in the set making it look easy! For me, there was much to remember about keeping the set interested by letting the presenter decide the topic and direction of questioning. So, we asked questions on the topic instigated by the presenter. By inviting the set to reflect, I kept the conversation on track by helping the flow with adequate thinking time for the presenter. I knew that if I got muddled at any point, then the chat box was there to ask for help from Julia if I didn't want to admit it to the group. I tried to ensure members used open questions to aid presenter reflection and action planning. As I intently listened, looking out for closed questions or advice-giving was a challenge while absorbing the insights. To role model good questioning I probably over-did interrupting and was advised in the process review to do less next time. This was valuable learning for me after my first stint as a facilitator, a role that requires quite intense listening. That said, the presenter found the session useful, so on balance I think I did okay. We finished within the 50 minutes, making me feel I'd accomplished the desired effect. With experience, it becomes more manageable, and with a bit less intervention from the facilitator, the presenter gains more from the members' attention.

Among the set, we were encouraged to come up with metaphors for our practice. The analogy of the overall action learning process was being gifted a powerful tonic of questions and ideas in consultation with experienced physicians, to help resolve the pain. Also, I gained transferable skills in expressing my aspirations more creatively to utilise as marketing tools when pitching projects to supporters to achieve positive literary outcomes.

This positive conclusion of her experience came from another member, 'Being part of this Action Learning set has so far been a hugely positive and inspiring experience. After the isolation of the last six months, it is fantastic to be able to connect with other writers working in education and the arts. I feel I am learning a lot as well as being reminded what's important to me and what I

would like to achieve in the future. I think it will improve my practice by making me think more strategically about the goals I have, not just for projects I'm working on but for my own development as an artist. It is helping to combat feelings of anxiety and helplessness around the impact of Covid on my working life by opening up the possibilities of moving projects online and what can be achieved via zoom.'

In the fourth session, we further considered the uses of action learning for individuals and whether we wanted to continue as a group. We talked about the different settings where action learning can be helpful, such as conflict resolution in organisations. Julia shared how the process had been successfully used to get insight into how a new organisational strategy impacts a workforce, with the process allowing the Chief Executive able to step into his employees' shoes. Through considering the wide use of action learning, we thought about how we might develop facilitation skills in the future across our own network of writers. We had many questions to ask ourselves about the purpose of extended time for this set and creating new ones. Julia gave us pointers as to best practice for setting up a set from her long experience. She went over the host's obligations to recruit and select members and enter into a contract with new set members. It was important to state the terms of confidentiality, the required commitment and a code of conduct whilst also thinking about what each set member could bring. We addressed the prospect of running face to face sets as an alternative to delivery via a platform such as Zoom and any shared costs this might throw up, such as venue hire. Julia summed up that proven successful outcomes of the action learning programme resulted from a careful selection of members from a wide range of backgrounds to stretch the 'atomic collision thinking' - where ideas and experiences collide and new connections are created.

We had first-hand experience of 'atomic collision thinking' in another conversation where there were resonating open questions offered to the next presenter. The aha! moment came in the familiar conversation regarding developing our own writing. Many empathetic set members made a connection with the problem of guarding our writing time by relaxing to tune in by asking the right questions. These bionic questions targeted the presenter, focusing on the topic.

Overall, the training provided empowering midweek punctuation to help me chart a new course to make clear decisions by exploring the future. I am most grateful

for that support. The eight set members confidently presented about their own challenges, opportunities and dilemmas, and helped fellow set members unlock their own new insights, in learning about how to become an action learning facilitator. Through taking part, we gained solutions to set goals. In attaining these new skills through doing action learning over six weeks, we hoped it helped us develop our business and career. I cherish the bonus of this new peer network – they are now a go-to bunch of peers I can trust to help me fathom stuff out.

Julia indicated that during the last two sessions, set members would continue to practice presenting and facilitating plus asking thought-provoking questions as set members. The desire was for us to gain sufficient experience facilitating action learning conversations that we will attempt to extend their benefit to rolling out our own action learning sets to our own contacts in the future. Since I have developed the skills, I can consider whom to invite along to my own set. I feel this training was a pertinent extension of my coaching practice allowing all members to become aware of their systems of thinking, creating a catalyst for change. Now I feel the implementation of our future creative projects is enabled by updated interaction with this energetic writing community.

From the outset, Julia trusted that we eight would enjoy working together as set. Her instinct was right, and I hope to keep some of these folk as colleagues, too. She asked what a collective noun for us might be. My aspirations over the six weeks elevated from 'a scribble of writers' to 'a library of authors', perhaps indicative of the journey we went on together.

I plan to give an update on the results of the remainder of our successful training and how I fare at hosting a set, at a NAWE panel discussion at their March 2021 Conference.

See www.fionalinday.co.uk

Julia Payne www.thehubuk.com



Fiona Linday has had success in a couple of short story competitions and written a young adult debut novel called, *Get Over It*, 2009, Onwards & Upwards Publishers. She benefited from NAWE/Arvon Performance Coach Training in April 2011, as a Relational Dynamic Foundation Coach. Since then she has continued and has written a New Adult novel for America, under a pseudonym and had numerous inclusions of short prose and poetry in anthologies. Previously she wrote the pedagogical article *Teaching Writing at Post-16*, Autumn 2014, *Writers in Education* no 64. She edited an ACE commissioned anthology with learners at the Attenborough Arts Centre, Leicester called *Family Matters* an anthology of new writing, 2019, Dahlia Publishing. Presently, she is under contract for a collection of prose and poetry called, *Count Our Blessings*, out next year, Onwards & Upwards Publishers. She is also pitching another ACE community anthology project for 2021.

REVIEWS

Inspired by Thomas Hardy: An Anthology of Student's Works 2020

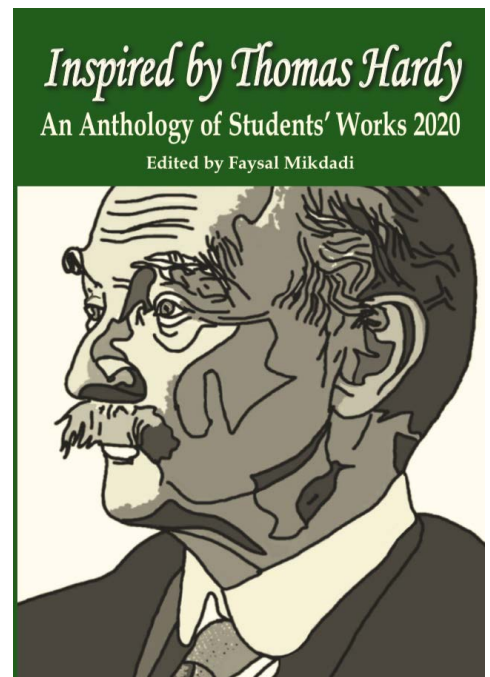
Faysal Mikdadi (ed)
Roving Press, 2020
ISBN 978-1-906651-367
Paperback £10.00

I frequently offer Thomas Hardy study poems when I run group workshops, or perform them at memory cafes. They are well received, as they reach out to all ages, even when they may be seen or heard for the first time. I'm excited to review *Inspired by Thomas Hardy: An Anthology of Student's Works 2020*. This is a selection of writing generated by eight secondary schools from Dorset, Wessex and further afield (with additional submissions from Max Gate workshops) during two months of the Thomas Hardy School Creative Workshops programme that took place in February and March of this year. It has been edited and produced by The Thomas Hardy Society, and was published by Roving Press in July 2020, following on from the success of the same project and similarly titled publication in 2019.

As you would expect from a publication produced by The Thomas Hardy Society, this is a celebration of Hardy themes, language and landscapes, and gives clear indication that young poets continue to engage and take inspiration from Thomas Hardy's writing. The testimonials in the preface are encouraging:

*"I was never a great fan of poetry....but I am now!"
"It was a lot of fun."*

The workshops were cut short due to lockdown but plenty had been achieved, with 100 poems by young poets and their teachers included in the anthology, as well as



a selection by the 2019 National Trust Max Gate young writer in residence, Rose Day.

The project offered a selection of Hardy poems in workshop packs, and these are listed in the back of the book including: *The Frozen Greenhouse, At the Railway Station, Upwey, The Self-Unseeing, Tess and Jude* together with poems from other writers including Christina Rossetti, Anne Bronte, Phillis Wheatley and Laurence Dunbar.

The standard of response poems is high, and pupils show a good listening ear, musicality and imagination. I enjoyed the lockdown poems, such as, *A View from a Window* (Tommy Hallows), and particularly noticed young poets who explored further beyond, like *The Atrocity Exhibition* (using Kayne West lyrics). Personal favourites also include *A square peg being forced into a round hole* by James Biley, *Ad Lib* by Amelie Nixon, and *Boldwood: Deafening Report* (Similce Jacobson):

*A tear. Loud.
So to raise a sleeping man.
To hold, clasp
A waterskin of her.*

There is a wealth of good work here and promising attention to sound, rhythm, detail, form and music, as you may hope and expect during a schools engagement programme.

Fast forward five months and we have entered a new era that includes elective inclusion of poetry for GCSE English Literature. At this time more than any other, it is appropriate to support and buy this book in the hope that the programme may be funded and offered at multiple secondary schools again next year.

With this potential in mind, and as a workshop facilitator, I would also love to see more materials from teachers and pupils during and after the workshop process. It would be fascinating to see what worked well and how it was presented, together with prompts and context, and equally, any teaching elements that were not as successful. I am interested to know if teachers/workshop facilitators juxtaposed contemporary poems, voices and styles on similar themes, which might have helped to broaden the scope.

In my view, this project and its following publication has potential to offer an excellent practical teaching resource if more of the process and reporting could be included. The anthology quite rightly showcases pupil poems, but also included is a useful and interesting small end section with extracts, including: Sample Guidelines to Workshop Facilitators, List of Participant Schools, Expected Outcomes, Permissions and Evaluation Forms and a Short sample of a bespoke Creative Workshops booklet for students at Southlands School.

If possible, I am sure that further publications would benefit from the inclusion of the full Schools Creative Workshop student and teachers booklets, workshop plans and notes from facilitators, details on class size, ages and number of workshops per school etc. Having read through the anthology I am not sure how many workshop facilitators visited the schools, and if the teachers also presented the packs, nor how many students in total benefitted from this wonderful project. The webpage refers to testimonials collected 'from workshops run by THS Academic Director Dr Faysal Mikdadi.'ⁱ

Of course, I realise that this suggestion extends and stretches beyond the limits of an anthology. But is during times such as these, when we need to look broadly at all learning opportunities, that we need generous sharing of best practice and support for teachers and educators.

A brief look at the online Thomas Hardy Society Schools project webpage from 2019 provides additional clues as to the teaching process and prompts last year, which unfortunately did not make it into the book, for example: "At interludes, the young poets took part in two light hearted verse 'games': 'Exquisite Corpses' and 'Collaborative Genius,' where students composed poems together firstly without seeing what others had written and then, in the second instance, by adding one line each after reading what others had written.

The students had between thirty minutes and one hour to compose their own individual poems. If participants needed a framework or writing scaffold, they could use any Thomas Hardy poem, emulate it or, if they felt the need, borrow from it as long as any borrowed lines were clearly acknowledged."ⁱⁱ

Conclusion

Inspired by Thomas Hardy: An anthology of student's works 2020 is an enjoyable read a wonderful testament to Hardy's enduring voice and poetry, and a great achievement for the pupils and staff at the participating schools. It is also impressive in ambition and quality over two years of partnering between The Thomas Hardy Society Academic outreach programme and diverse schools.

Following on from this strong footing, it would be wonderful if, going forward, The Thomas Hardy Society might consider balancing the outcome of the workshops with equal focus on process and development of themes with schools and students, as well as detailed workshop plans, notes and learning points to enable wider reach and accessibility. As a poetry anthology of young poets it is clearly a success, but a slight change of focus and adapting how the material is presented might also allow this type of publication to become a useful teaching resource. Either way, I hope there will be more next year. This is the kind of partnership project we all hope will thrive, continue to inspire young poets, and fill in the gaps.

Notes:

i. Available from: www.hardysociety.org/oxo/310/inspired-by-thomas-hardy-an-anthology-of-students-works-2020/ (accessed 21/9/20)

ii. Available from: www.hardysociety.org/oxo/177/thomas-hardy-poetry-workshops-in-schools/ (accessed 21/9/20)

Review by Sarah Acton

Sarah Acton is a landscape poet, playwright and creative facilitator based in East Devon. She is the Jurassic Coast (UNESCO) World Heritage Site poet-in-residence and has been published in magazines and various anthologies. Sarah is currently working on WildWriting! a creative writing project focusing on nature connection and creativity at home, commissioned by Activate as part of the micro commissioning programme, and in partnership with Stepping into Nature. Sarah has also recently started a new project to write a community play about Portland life and stone quarrying, Heart of Stone, supported by the Arts Council England Lottery Funding project grant awards.

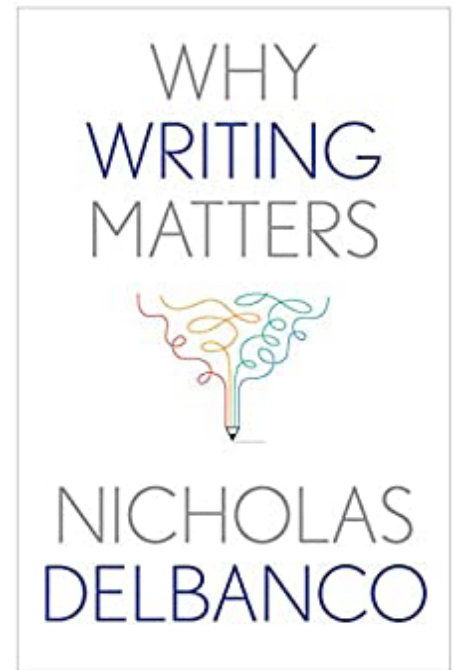
Why Writing Matters

Nicholas Delbanco

Yale University Press, 2020

ISBN: 9780300245974

Hardback £16.99



Nicholas Delbanco seems the ideal person to write this latest contribution to the “Why X Matters” series from Yale University Press: the author of over thirty volumes of fiction and criticism, Delbanco is the Robert Frost Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan. He has spent decades teaching creative writing, has served on the judging panels of most major American fiction prizes, and can boast an impressive list of successful ex-tutees, including Uwem Akpan, Celeste Ng and Jesmyn Ward.

Few people would argue with the author’s credentials, then, and indeed he answers the question raised by the title even before his book begins. In his preface he tells us that writing matters because “Written language has a gravitas only rarely accorded to speech” (xvii); basically we take words more seriously when they are written down, and we are less likely to forget them. However, rather than unpack this idea and develop a thesis fully germane to the title, Delbanco writes what is essentially a book about teaching creative writing.

This does not mean that it is not worthwhile: it’s an engaging book, made all the more so by Delbanco’s account of his own development as a writer, and the various teachers and colleagues who’ve influenced him over the years. These include the novelist and poet, Theodore Morrison, for instance, who taught him at Harvard. After reading one of the young Delbanco’s drafts, Morrison asked: “Nick, do the beds need to be both small and little?” Apparently this served as a lesson in narrative economy that the aspiring author never forgot: “All these decades later, when I write ‘small’ and ‘little’ in an adjacent phrase, I cringe as when I learned from Theodore Morrison that less is decidedly more” (p. 11). Other influences are more inspirational than practical, and include the likes of John Updike, John Gardner, and James Baldwin: his succinct portraits of such characters are very well drawn, revealing Delbanco’s indisputable flair as a memoirist.

As a writing teacher, Delbanco advocates imitation as the key to proficiency. He talks at length about authorial

influence, the myth of originality, and his ‘Strategies in Prose’ course designed to take emulation as a starting point. Students receive a reading list of 6 exemplar authors and are invited to copy their prose styles: “The article of faith on which this course is based is that imitation is not merely sincere flattery, but also a good way to grow” (p. 113). I wouldn’t necessarily argue with that, although I was concerned that all of his models of excellence, with the sole exception of Virginia Woolf, are dead white males. He notes that Jesmyn Ward initially struggled with the course, describing her “tin ear” and deeming her “imitations of Hemingway, Ford, and Woolf [...] second-rate”. She only began to flourish when they “came to William Faulkner”, whose prose style she warmed to: then “the student got it” and “by borrowing the syntax and inflexions of a dead southern master, the writer found her voice” (p. 130). Given that Ward, like Faulkner, was raised in the Deep South, I’m not as surprised as Delbanco seems to be by her affinity with his grammar and tone. What’s perhaps more surprising is that her “tin ear” and “second rate” performances didn’t undermine her confidence before she eventually “got it”. While it’s hard to argue with success, I do worry about his strategy’s potential for forcing round pegs into square holes.

Why Writing Matters doesn’t claim to be a scholarly book: there’s no referencing or bibliography, and it’s largely devoid of theory—he discusses his favourite topics of imitation and originality, for instance, as if postmodernism hadn’t happened. But there is a high level of erudition throughout, and while he struggles to adhere to his brief, the book as a whole has substance. Above all, Delbanco writes well, his own prose exhibiting brio and wit that is a joy to read, and itself worthy of emulation.

Review by Paul McDonald

Paul McDonald taught at the University of Wolverhampton for twenty five years, where he led the creative programme. He took early retirement in 2019 to write full time. He is the author of twenty books, including poetry, fiction and scholarship, the most recent of which is Allen Ginsberg: Cosmopolitan Comic (2020).

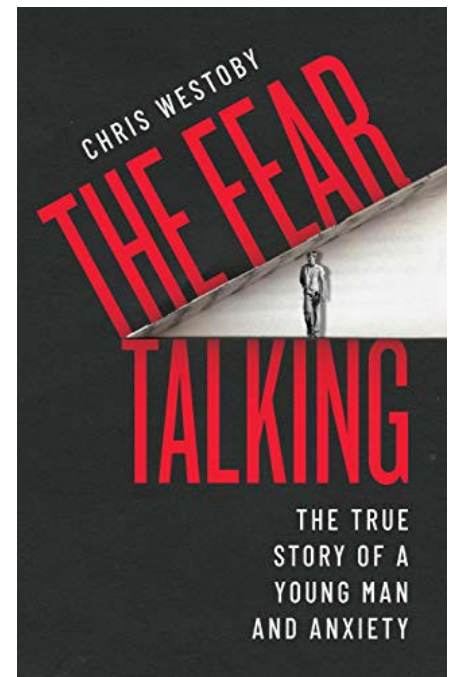
The Fear Talking: The True Story Of A Young Man And Anxiety

Chris Westoby

Barbican Press 2020

ISBN 978-1909954441

Paperback £7.99



The successful memoir sets out to reveal the intimate details of an author's life, the lessons learned and key moments that shaped who they are. Chris Westoby's *The Fear Talking* is that rare thing that manages to use the form to explore the highs and lows, (mostly lows), of a teenager living with an undiagnosed anxiety disorder that quickly spirals out of control to dominate his every thought and action. It also serves as a manual to help identify young people suffering in this specific way and what might be done to help them—or at least come to understand them a little more.

The narrative opens with a family holiday to Florida and the dramatic image of the Discovery space shuttle rising into a cloudless sky. Although, sixteen-year old Chris is pre-occupied with an 'empty Coke beaker', wondering if it is large enough to contain the vomit he expects to appear any second and ruin his family's special day. The catalogue of events that follow this initial episode are expertly handled and are always presented with a searing honesty that is introduced here and maintained to the final page.

The fact that this is about an otherwise ordinary boy from an ordinary working-class family, enrolled in ordinary college in an ordinary town, means the story will resonate with many readers. Chris's yearning to blend in, be a good mate, attentive boyfriend and dutiful son, mirrors most people's lives at this notoriously difficult age and forces the reader to reflect on their own complex journeys to adulthood. In fact, Chris' running commentary of fairly prosaic events provides some of the memoir's standout comedic moments, covering everything from drunken parties to awkward sex, mammoth X-Box sessions and internet porn. But it is in the quieter moments where the memoir could be said to achieve its true power and the need for the narrator to always be within a short distance of a toilet or his 'Immodium tablets', imbues the text with an almost rhythmic-quality. Vibrant natural settings also punctuate the urban decay and are symbolic of Chris's need to escape but also, ironically, fuel his mounting feelings of isolation and despair. Even away from everyone and

everything, anxiety manages to track him down. 'When I touch the gate,' Chris notes. 'I make a note to wash my hands. I use as small a surface of skin as possible to do the latch. The very tips of my fingers on only one hand.'

After reading, I came away enlightened and richer for the experience, particularly as I have been in education for twenty-five years and was a secondary school teacher for much of that time. This account helped put a story to the empty seat in my English literature class and the growing string of absences in my form register. But Westoby's talent as a writer lies not just in giving a voice to teenagers who find themselves unable to cope with everyday life, it is also the way that even when presenting moments of apparent utter futility, his prose bristles with hope. Suddenly there is light enough for Chris to navigate the darkness and find a way out for himself and others like him—and for anyone interested in witnessing this daring feat alone, *The Fear Talking* is an essential read.

Review by Paul Taylor-McCartney

Paul Taylor-McCartney is a doctoral researcher with Leicester University, following a part-time PhD in Creative Writing. His research interests include dystopian studies, narratology and initial teacher education. His poetry, short fiction and academic articles have appeared in a range of notable UK and international publications including Aesthetica, The Birmingham Journal of Language and Literature, Education in Practice (National Association of Writers in Education), Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine and Dyst: A literary Journal. He lives and works in Cornwall.

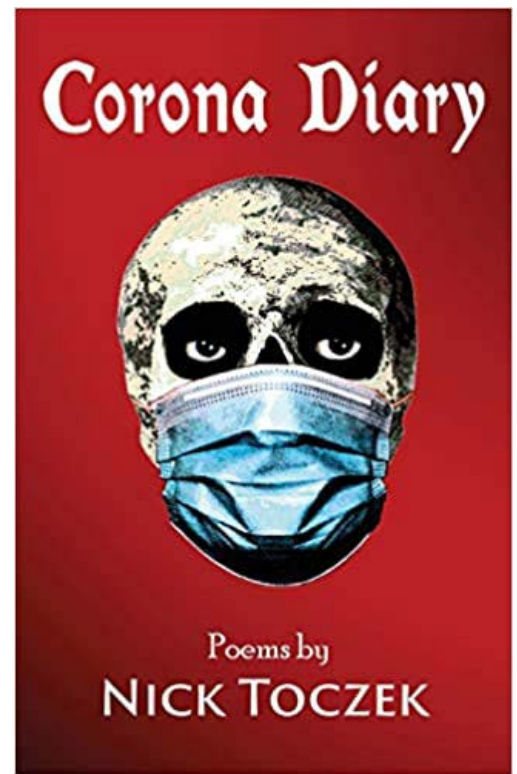
Corona Diary

Nick Toczek

Mutiny 2000 Publications, 2020

ISBN 9780992675530

Paperback £7.99



I approached this collection with enthusiasm because, like many others, I have kept a Corona diary since the start of the pandemic. In Toczek's Corona Diary, each entry takes the form of a poem written daily since early March - an impressive total of 108 poems. Another set is to follow in a second volume, as if the energy of each poem carries him towards the next one. And he has 'no plans to stop writing'. This collection is a close record of those first four months to which we can all relate.

The poems were initially posted on the Coronavirus Facebook page where they met with enthusiastic, positive responses in difficult times. They were soon being shared on other Facebook pages, so they were out there when they were needed. They offer, above all and most impressively, a sharp, hard-hitting political commentary on the government's handling of the pandemic.

Toczek is a poet, writer, performer and vocalist. It is the sense of performance which comes across strongly in his work. While I could hear his voice in each poem, I think live performance - remember that? - is perhaps where they would really come into their own. I would love to hear, for example, *THEIR NEW 'WORLD-CLASS; TRACK 'N' TRACE APP*, a title which records something else the collection does brilliantly—captures the buzz lines and words of the time.

*Now their apps per-apps won't appen.
Per-apps nobody's cl-app-en.
Per-apps they've been caught 'n-app-en.
Per-apps their app needs scr-app-en
Cos per-apps their app won't app-en.*

Lines which, as you can see, are almost impossible to resist quoting.

Each poem is prefaced by a line which sets a specific

context and highlights the writer's bitterness with the political situation, as in:

*POEM FOR MATT HANCOCK, HEALTH SECRETARY.
'Of all Johnson's lying toady crew, this man was perhaps the least honest'.*

Energy is what the collection has in abundance despite, or maybe because of, its sombre subject. Its command of rhythm and rhyme powers us from page to page and this applies from the first poem in the collection.

*Tell our employers they don't need to fire us.
World goes to shit, we'll go back to papyrus.*

I did sometimes find the rhymes and overriding rhythms veering towards monotonous. The rhymes are mainly, but not always, end line and often every line. In some poems, like the poignant *CLOSE UP*, this works brilliantly. Here, a sense of gasping breath is punctuated by full stops at the end of every line:

*Inhale, exhale; inhale, exhale.
Listen to the lungs. Don't let them fail.
Weak where once they blew a gale.
Hear them whistle. How they wail.*

The collection explores a variety of stanza forms, from couplets to triplets to quatrains and of different structures: *'I wish we had a government that didn't cause offence/I wish we had a government whose policies made sense.'* I was occasionally puzzled, as in *ACROSTIC ODES*. Acrostics, yes, but not in praise of anything unless in ironic reverse of the ode form.

There is overriding consistency of tone and viewpoint, but I would sometimes have appreciated more variety. At times, I felt as if the poems came close to one long

moan, however understandable. The poems reveal that the poet has a house, a garden, a partner, but there is a still a fairly continual sense of being disgruntled, almost as if the majority of humans can't cope without regular trips to pub, coffee shops and the freedom to go anywhere. 'Home's this hole we're occupying/Oh it's dull this death defying.' As a writer who works in prisons, I wanted to say 'Try lockdown in prison.'

The natural world, and this opportunity we were given to appreciate it during lockdown, was almost entirely unmentioned in this collection. There was also little emphasis on how the pandemic gave nature a brief chance to recover: how pollution levels dropped, with no flights, far less car travel, no relentless vehicle noise. I felt that the awareness of the way in which we have brought this pandemic on ourselves by our own reckless exploitation of the creatures and places of the natural world of which we're an integral part, is an essential part of the pandemic's context which is absent. If you're looking for moments of appreciation of the natural world, of peace and joy, you will find them in scant supply.

Voices in My Head

Nick Toczek

Caboodle Books Ltd

ISBN 978-1-9997749-5-0

Paperback £5.99

Poetry in the classroom, for me, is the ultimate resource. Poets themselves tend to notice, to think, to express; precisely what we want our learners to do. They may have an intended meaning, but that is not the important thing. As soon as it is in the hands of the reader, it belongs to another. The poet may imply, but what the reader infers can be quite another thing. There is no one answer. Where some see this as unnecessarily opaque, I see it quite differently. The sense of achievement that comes from reaching your own understanding of a poem is profound. There is one key caveat though: the poems must be good.

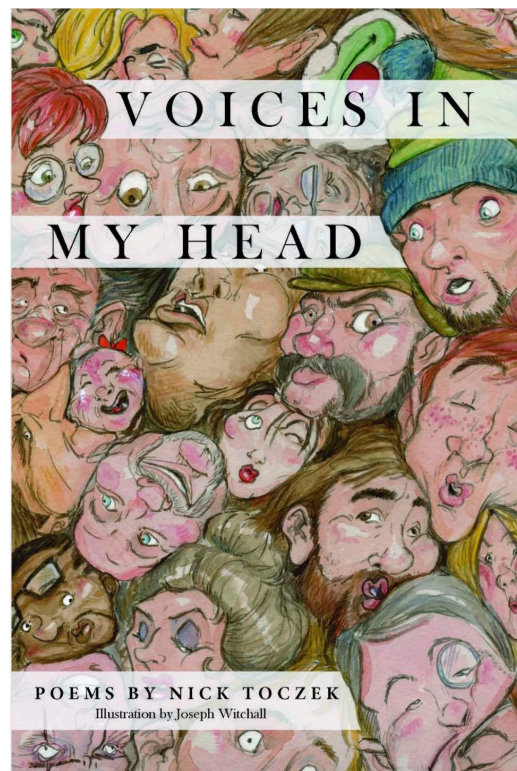
Fortunately, the majority of these are. That they are

In the last couplet of JUST A LIST he says, 'Life back as it was before/All of this and much much more'. Does he, do we, really want life 'back as it was before'?

Maybe the next volume will counterbalance this energetic, stimulating, but relentlessly angry set of poems.

Review by Lydia Fulleylove

Lydia is a writer and poet who works in settings across the community, including healthcare and prison. www.lydiafulleylove.co.uk



deliberately intended for classroom use should reassure more reticent teachers. The poems contained here show Toczek's awareness of current international events and issues, and his determination to bring them to the attention of today's pupils: refugees in 'Asylum Seekers and Refugees', domestic violence in the short, terse poem of the same name, and life in conflict in 'Propaganda'.

Do not look for comfortable poems about love in this collection—there are none. Romantic love here is unrequited or cynical, as we see in 'Don't Care Where You Go To My Lovely', and 'The Poem I Wrote About You'. This cynicism extends to several other poems. I would recommend choosing poems from this collection

for your audience wisely. However, this is, of course, for each individual teacher to decide, knowing their own students and context best.

Mental health also plays a role, as might be expected from the collection's title. The collection was published in January 2020, before the current emergency. However, at virtually no time in living memory has mental health been such a pressing issue as it is right now. The poem, 'The Voices in His Head', will be useful for educators to start their own discussions about the current stresses, and, when this is over, the other stresses which occupy the thoughts, encouraging discussion and compassion.

His poems of place, including 'Beggars', 'Dusk in Bangkok', 'In Penang', 'Watching this City by Night', 'Inside the Market', 'In Kuala Belait', 'Moon above the Movenpick' speak of a wider world outside the classroom; a world that many pupils will have first-hand experience of. This in itself is instrumental in breaking down barriers and encouraging pupils to focus on the details of their places of origin, or places they have travelled to, and to truly notice the sights, smells, sounds and sensations in a moment.

Throughout the collection, Toczek's love of language is evident—he even states it overtly in 'Words Extolled'. He plays with rhyme and vocabulary throughout, making liberal use of assonance and alliteration. His use of literary devices throughout will reassure many teachers who are more familiar with these than with deconstructing the assumed meaning of a poem, and the reader does not need to look far for them. However, the use of rhyme comes with a significant limitation for EAL classroom use, and this is in no way exclusive to Toczek's work. For many of us, when we read poetry, we "hear" it in our own voice. This is much harder to do if the poet's voice is actually intruding. For example, in 'Concerned', there are rhyming pairs such as 'arms/palms' and 'alarms/qualms'. In 'Beggars', 'poor'/'raw'/'ignore' are rhymed, and in 'Ola!', 'Lola' and 'roller'. Including 'r' in the rhyme position, though it

doesn't affect the meaning of the poems concerned, jars for those whose accent is different.

Toczek's use of form is also instructive, and a good framework for students to perhaps attempt their own poems. While he uses a formal sonnet in 'First Sonnet'—a literal guide on how to write a sonnet—he tends to create his own forms in many poems. Very little comparatively is in free verse; most poems here are tightly structured. By restricting oneself to such forms, creativity is not stifled, but is demanded. English vocabulary is rich with nuance; very few true synonyms exist. The challenge for the poet using rigid forms is carefully choosing the perfect word for the perfect place, while rephrasing constantly for a perfect fit. This challenge, when extended to both native and non-native speakers and students of English, tends to produce real satisfaction.

While Toczek chooses his vocabulary carefully, either for the impact of a rhyming pattern or for greater descriptive weight and nuance, his sentence structures tend to be simple and uncomplicated. This consistency throughout virtually every one of the poems is helpful for students, who can focus on other aspects of the language and meaning as a result.

In sum, as poems for students, 'Voices in My Head' is a solid collection, and one that educators will find accessible too.

Review by Gillian Craig

Gillian Craig is a poet, children's author (Gillian Spiller), EFL teacher, trainer and materials developer. She has spent 20 years teaching in Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, Oman, Egypt, Vietnam and Singapore. Her areas of specialisation are EY, pronunciation and phonics, and using literature with YLs. She is the author of the British Council's Learn English Kids poetry section. Her poems have appeared in anthologies and journals, including New Writing Scotland and Orbis.



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