

Peter
Fox



Not
all
fun

Stories 2009 — 2012

Not all fun

Stories of Peter Fox 2009 - 2012

A varied collection of sixteen heavy-weight and lightweight short stories written for fun but sometimes the subjects get quite serious.

As well as the traditional short-story form there are a number of tableaux (where the emphasis is on interpreting symbols) and cognostories (episodes where the reader takes the story forward for themselves).

There are two important essays on tableaux and how the girl's heroic story differs from the boy-goes-on-adventure monomyth.



Preview

The full version of [Not All Fun](#) by Peter Fox (Merlin Smallbone) is available in the following formats.

- Paperback A5 125 pages
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Not all fun

Short stories, tableaux
and essays about writing

Peter Fox

2009 -2012

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INTRODUCTION

I write for fun but the stories may not be funny to read and the essays should be revealing rather than entertaining. The heavyweight stuff is at the front. The Ken and Jen stories should be read in order.

A Cognostory is a story split into episodes where the reader is invited to think 'what happens next?' There are three unrelated stories running in parallel and I really hope you stop and think how you would develop each tiny plot before finding out which path I chose. You can also join in from scratch with a practical story where you'll be doing a fair bit of creative writing backed by imagination, attention to detail, technique and underlying themes. This is absolutely ideal for people who say "I can't write" or "I never have any ideas."

I call the two main essays 'important' because they describe two ways in which writers sleep-walk their way into familiar genres without thinking. With any luck these 'it doesn't have to be done like that' prompts will encourage writers to broaden their work.

Cognostories I of 5

The last pint

George Barker decided this would definitely be his last pint. He'd lost count long ago and it was time to stop.

Revenge

Lady Ephemera Snipped ascended from the cellar with tears running down her face and croaked through the dust "My eyes are dim I cannot see" then collapsed in a heaving heap.

Yak story

Chisel stood motionless in the drizzling rain.

He gripped his weapon and thought about all the cleaning it would need after today.

Have a go yourself

Exercise: There is a tower in a remote area in the moonlight.

Describe it from the perspective of a person viewing it for the first time. This must be 'from the outside at a distance'.

Detail: If you prefer daylight then that's fine, but I thought I'd give you a helping hand. You can pick whatever genre you like. You can narrate the scene from the 1st singular or 3rd and a horde - however you like. What do you think the reader will be interested in? Apart from the general striking 'romantic' image what emotions will you be wanting to suggest.

It is probably too early at this stage to suggest a plot. This is just a warm-up exercise. However you could experiment with some reactions from the viewer(s).

STORIES TO STUDY

Let us consider a wall

Let us consider a wall as an autumn evening falls across a vale in the Home Counties. Crooked Wisteria climbs across the hanging red clay tiles of the upper storey. Irregular Kentish rag beneath is a backdrop to roses, a tangled bed of sweet peas and ferns springing from beside a water butt. The wall belongs to the sort of house that has a tennis court amongst rhododendrons, woods at the back and a panoramic view of the valley at the front. Tresses of white wood smoke float in the deepening dusk below.

Recessed amongst the tiles there is a bedroom window through which, drained of colour in the fading light, we can just make out a figure lying neatly at rest.

From around the corner a tortoiseshell cat makes her familiar

patrol. Entering the garage she dutifully examines the webbed rodent runs behind rusty tins of paint, the edges of abandoned tools, possible scents on the cardboard boxes of old crockery amongst the collapsing wellingtons and other remnants of household life.

The end of her investigations brings her to the cosy kitchen where a soft mew and slow stare reminds Bill it could be tea time for cats. Bill is glad of the distraction. "Alright Sweetie. Let's see if there's a bit of something special for you shall we?" Bill goes through the time-honoured cat satisfying ritual. "I'll need you soon - We're going to do a dark deed." Expecting loyalty from cats is a foolish folly but Bill has had a drop of Dutch courage which let the feeling out. Let him explain:

I started working for Simon in 1976 - The drought summer - He needed a man to look after his plants while he was away. He was an amateur botanist and went to great lengths to grow foreign plants. He tried exposing tomato seeds to radioactivity. But the greenhouse is still intact so we didn't get any monster mutants! Everything was very carefully recorded in his notebooks. He wanted, no, needed, precision. An easy man to work for as he told you what he was trying to do, why it was important and how you

could help him – you couldn't help but volunteer to do the best you could. He made everything seem so worthwhile and worth your best try. Can you imagine a man like me talking to plants as I watered them? Well I did 'cos "come along do your little best" is contagious.

Simon is a bachelor. It's funny but I can't imagine him having a wife. Just one of those things I suppose. Oh he liked women – One time he came back from a conference in Australia and telling me about the gorgeous girls; and perhaps I should try my luck out in a vibrant, growing country where there's plenty of 'sun and sheilas'. I'll always remember that...

...Sorry I'm supposed to be telling you about Simon. "Come on Sweetie let's look at the scrapbook. Tch-tch. Up you come you scheming seed-bed digger you – I know what you plant there you toad. There will be a short test afterwards so pay ... umm anyway" Bill takes a drop more whisky, settles the cat in the crook of one arm and takes the plunge into Simon's life.

Born 1916. Windsor, Berkshire. Father's occupation: Stockbroker. Only child. Here he is as a chubby kid on a rug with baby-grin and huge awe-filled eyes gazing at the photographer. Privileged childhood. Public school then mathematics at

Oxford. Here's a studio family portrait: Simon formally dressed, aged five perhaps, model aeroplane in hand is caught looking straight at the camera. Here he is in cricketing gear; and the officer cadets. Here a confident young student in his motor car. Apparently there was a group of them that had the motto "Better cars" not faster or noisier. His hobby turned into a job at Austin motors - Austins were in Oxford. A maths graduate had to pick up practical engineering pretty quickly, which he did and soon became a thorn in the side of the established production staff as he suggested improvements with the figures to prove his point.

Here there are two blank spaces with captions. "Judith North Yorks moors 1938", and "Judith Hampton sanatorium 1939". Judith must be a girlfriend – I don't know any more. Did the love of his life desert him for another or did he watch her die of TB? Possibly by then he was in the army and wanted to be with her? Or later felt he should have been instead of fighting the army.

'Fighting the army' is a typical 'Simon' phrase. "The reason you are in power is that you won yesterday's battle but today's battle may be different. The reason people are dying is that hospitals are staffed by people who don't know any better."

With war inevitable it was a difficult decision for him whether to stick with manufacturing, by then they were building a huge fighter plane factory, or volunteer for the army. He regretted not being able to do both but the Army with all its faults gave him the opportunity to learn how to fix them. "If I'd stayed in the factory we may have made a few more Spitfires with a bit less effort, but all I would have been doing is keeping the system going. In the army I was lucky enough to be able to bypass blockages under the smokescreen of war." He became an engineer in the Medical Corps. Here are some cheerful photographs in Tunis. This one is of Simon and some capable looking chaps relaxing in front of a three-tonner. Difficult to see now, but painted on the side is 'Major Jump's three tons of fun'. Probably his mobile workshop where he repaired and improvised. "My guys were basically motor mechanics and electricians but every one, well except the cook - he was a psychopath, would study delicate medical equipment when off-duty. They'd have a private hoard of specialist parts and be known as the 'something king' or perhaps say 'the anaesthetist's friend'. Those chaps who would quietly spend hours plagued by desert flies studying any instruction book they could get their hands on were an inspiration to me."

I know Simon was their inspiration. Here's to you mate!

He told me "Young men in an operating theatre need all the help they can get - and that helps the other young men who are lying on the tables." I asked him if he watched the operations and he said yes. "But I thought about it, and although I would come away thinking of possible improvements to tools and techniques - even calculating 'lives per hour' - I couldn't imagine doing the surgeon's job. You see when a mechanic is looking at something that's broken he's always got the option to salvage the useful bits and fill in a write-off chitty."

This is a funny photograph. Simon is alone in the driving seat of a filthy American army jeep, wearing a US-style helmet with one of those light-cum-reflectors that doctors sometimes wear on their foreheads fixed on it. "How is it?" He'd say "That Italian wine tastes of sun-baked vineyards when all I remember is being covered in freezing mud?" The go-ahead, technologically advanced Americans just loved him. I think he was a bit ashamed later at how easily he changed sides. Anyhow, that's how, after the war he designed hospital equipment in the states. Here is a glossy publicity photo of Simon in an immaculate business suit

in front of a cabinet with gas bottles, tubes and dials.

This is interesting: Here is a full page magazine advertisement of him with a dozen electronic components in his open palm - "My job is to make people better at making people better." After the headline it goes on: "Today the Meditex corporation sells state of the art equipment to more than 50 countries around the world. You all know the details - just check the Meditex catalogue everyone uses. But the money-saving, time-saving, life-saving devices to go in *tomorrow's* catalogue haven't been perfected yet - so that's why I need *your* help. I have brilliant scientists who don't do ops on babies. I have alchemist metallurgists who don't replace hips. I have engineers that don't watch people die. Please let me send them to you - call Free on etc. etc. - Your call could save lives." I believe every word of that is his.

That way he got to know all the progressive surgeons in the West. He also had some difficult dealings with inspired innovators from behind the Iron Curtain. I remember after visits to the Eastern Bloc in the 80s - in his business an international reputation lasts you well past normal retirement age - he would come back depressed. He'd try to explain: "Some of those guys are brilliant. They've reduced everything to the bare essentials. I

know I have the know-how and technology to help them further but they can't afford it, and perhaps I wouldn't be allowed to sell the computer stuff anyway. I have seen what it's like on the other side - they have dreams, nightmares and alcohol. At least in the West we have a fix. The price may not be cheap but while we have fixes it we have hope." He didn't need to work by then of course: Royalties on inventions, and a long and successful business career, but making the world a little bit better was all he knew. Here is a menu in Russian and English for the XII neonatal world congress dated 6th February 1995. On it is sketched a hand with rings on the fingers with attachments: A miniature light, a spring clip, a magnifying glass and a drill.

About then he came back from a conference sad and unsettled. I guess that his generation had faded away and he didn't fit in with changed ideas. Having worked for him for nearly 20 years I got round to asking him if he'd finally retired. I got a very weary "Yes I suppose so". "We all have to stop playing when the whistle goes" I said. Quite quickly he brightened up, if I'd been a woman he'd have kissed me! "You're making me better. Well done". I suppose when you spend so much time with a fixer you get used to thinking about fixing things. Now the patient had

come to my hospital I had to find a cure. "What will you do? Gardening? Or some hobby that you had to give up long ago?" To see him drift into a coma of mellow contemplation is a picture which I will always remember.

"Bill, you have done me a great favour today and I am now going to ask for another. If I should be suffering from something incurable I'd like to share a last drink with you when there are no more corks to be drawn. In the back of the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet is a tobacco tin marked 'Ta ta for tears' - it's what nurse used to say when I'd fallen or been scared. 'Ta ta for tears' and the brave young man would get a little older. In that tin you'll find a phial to be mixed into a glass of brandy." The remaining photos show Simon with constructions and contraptions in the garden and greenhouse.

Thank you for listening. I should have done this before but there's a difficult thing I have to do before it is too late. "Off you get Sweetie - I know it's not fair - Come on time to go. Let's hope this won't take long."

A goblet and a tumbler are warming on a tray by the Aga. Bill goes to the study to discover the Ta Ta for Tears tin. For a moment he is afraid that he wouldn't be able to find it - but here it is. Back in the kitchen he finds

there are no instructions for opening a glass ampoule! Gardening gloves might be best... With a lot of sweat the neck is broken surprisingly easily and cleanly. He pours the tiny amount of bright fluid into the goblet making sure of the last drop then carefully puts the empty ampule aside for later disposal. A slug of brandy for Simon and a drop of whisky for himself complete the preparations. He switches on the hall light and carefully carries the tray upstairs.

By the odd ear swivel and occasional curious look, the cat gradually changes from a study in cosy meditation into a sleuth. Eventually she decides to attend to the mysteries of the night outside. Later Bill returns, draws the curtains, pours a generous measure then sits at the table to start a lonely vigil. He considers the fact that there are three empty impressions and two unused phials nestling in the cotton wool lining of the tobacco tin.

Good poems are sound effects.

Tuffet : An illustration of the power and persistence of trivial learning experiences. Most people have never seen a real one and not used the word in twenty years but have no problem describing one and mentally recognising that a tuffet is somehow more romantic than a log, rock or chair. Rapsallion also.

Going round the world once a day is enough for me.

New suit of words

Reluctantly but resolutely I struck out along the wet London pavement. Perforce to battle with other umbrellas and avoid the worst sock-soaking splashes. On the corner where the Strand and Aldwych meet I was gripped by a display window where three lines written on a snowflake, an aeroplane and 'skull as a hot-air balloon' caught and tingled me.

Inky characters
By shaking hands
Sonnet or Haiku

If only it had finished with '6 across ten letters' I'd have known where to start. This puzzle poem, presumably a poem, had just knocked a hole in a wall to reveal an attic in my mind I never knew existed. At my age this sort of discovery is worrying. How can you talk to anyone about finding a hidden room when you're fifty nine? Mysterious clues to hidden treasure are supposed to be for lonely neglected twelve year-olds with delicate health. Auditors aren't supposed to hide away and be lost in the stories behind the images found in long-abandoned books. The frisson of illicit dreaming in a private world can't be shared.

This turned out to be my destination so I had to go inside anyway, but I wish there was someone watching over me I could ask.

The revolving door hushed round then puffed open to reveal a much larger and impressive interior than I was expecting. Stairways, alcoves and powerful columns stretched into the back. There were smooth sweeping outlines in chrome and diffused neon; lively friezes of leaves and flowers in cream and brown ceramic tile; wooden cabinets of various sizes, styles and coordination. Cinema? Club? General emporium? My imaginary friend - where did he come from? out of the attic? - would live here and show me round.

A lady receptionist looked up from a stack of exercise books and smiled patiently. "May I help you?"

"Er. Yes. Good morning. My dear lady spouse has prevailed upon me to visit your establishment, and may I say what an impressive institution it appears to be upon first acquaintance, in order that I might obtain a more contemporary manner of speech. I wonder if it possible for that thing to be arranged?"

"Certainly Sir. Would you be a darling and wait here whilst I ask for an assistant to attend to your mission. He will be here soonest." I obeyed of

course, but being called *darling* made me start wondering what other undiscovered attics there were.

The variety and previously unnoticed details of the decor were amplifying the puzzling effect of the words in the window. Where is your imaginary friend when you need them? This was like being unexpectedly left money in a will - Of course you can use it, but time, precious vanishing time, is needed to discuss and dispose of the loot. A framed poster with a crude woodcut of a cat 'My cat Jeffry', some lines of verse, and the modern headline *My electrical skin is felt* hit that spot where a voice inside tells you to look for the attic and see if your friend has come across this before. I can't say why there was a holographic display with the word *Disbelief* floating in space but I wanted to know the answer. I don't think of myself as a philistine, we were all a bit saucy-gauche at Oxford, but ... well this was worth having an imaginary friend for. I'd come to visit him and we'd slice scents, steal inscriptions from tombs, apprentice ourselves as blacksmiths and come over all faint at the thought of the female form.

At this moment a dapper middle-aged man took my rocking-horse by the reins. "Good morning to you Sir. How exactly may I render you a service?"

Exactly? "Er. Yes. Hello. Are you the assistant? Um. It has been decreed by the mem-sahib that my manner of speaking is not very modern. *Antediluvian* was her description. She has forcefully intimated that today would be an ideal opportunity to rectify this state of affairs. Accordingly I have been dispatched to your establishment forthwith in order that I may acquire something more colloquial."

"Of course sir. The distaff side often take interest in these matters. Where they lack accuracy they make up with instinct." *Make-up with instinct?* What had make-up got to do with it? After the window break-through and the treasure maps of the foyer this confused me. Then my friend explained: This was an *English* shop so I should expect words to be on the loose.

"If Sir will accompany me I'm sure we can find what your lady wife is looking for - and what Sir would be very happy with also".

Whilst at breakfast I had been distinctly uncomfortable about this fanciful expedition, but now I'd found the explorer's instinct and was looking forward to dangerous and exotic adventure. The words in the window, the art in the foyer. Let slip the dogs of war. It is a far far better

Who killed Lord Smythe?

The flies. The dust. The soft sand. The ankle-turning rocks. The heat. The sun filling the whole sky in molten bronze. Each day the hated blowtorch above stripped another layer from our crusted sores. Each interminable day our cracked skin was broken into stinging flakes for the flies to settle on.

"Does that sound right to you Agatha? Would a judge believe it?"

"Why shouldn't he? It sounds like that chap Rider Haggard who stayed with us at The Hall last year. Terribly interested in Africa and the colonies. Carry on darling."

If I hadn't done what I did I don't think I would be here today. Thankfully a proper diet and weeks of heroic nursing by Lord Smythe's wife has given me the strength to tell you the truth of what happened in the desert. Words are not enough to thank Lady Smythe for the trouble and tenderness she has shown me – especially after such a blow as losing her husband. In my delirium on Lord Smythe's steam yacht moored in Tripoli harbour I truly thought I was in heaven with the light reflecting through the cabin portholes to ripple on the ceiling. Dark velvet hangings and iced water. To an active man like

me, used to the rough ways of men, the white arms of an angel lifted me from my grave to paradise.

"You angel!"

"You devil!"

Hearing of Lord Smythe's desire to explore the many ancient classical ruins of North Africa, I offered my services as general assistant. My military service in India and the deserts of Mesopotamia during the war had prepared me for dealing with the ways of natives. We started at Tripoli then headed east to the ruins of Leptis Magna where Lord Smythe observed the excavations being undertaken by the Italians. Then we made our way south along an old caravan trail to where a decayed oasis was rumoured to be a Roman slave trading town where we would spend the autumn making preliminary excavations. I managed to collect a rag-bag of natives to cook and carry. I had a personal servant called Ahmed who I was very pleased with, one of the few of those shifty kaffirs I felt I could trust. This expedition was not one we took lightly but we soon met bad-luck. The Gibli wind brought two days of sand storms the like of which I'd never experienced even in Mesopotamia. It was like being rolled in a dusty carpet and pelted with gravel. We could hardly see or breathe and there was no hope of making progress. Even inside our tents the blood-red mist swirled in

the lamp light as the sand and stones whistled and rattled unceasingly outside. There was no knowing when it would end. To leave the tent was perilous as often you couldn't see three feet with a lamp and it was constantly dark. I think two natives went out for a call of nature and were never seen again. I made sure to keep the water under lock and key. The camels of course were not pleased being staked down in this maelstrom.

When it was finally over the natives had terrible trouble with them and Ahmed warned me that they were demanding more pay or they would refuse to continue. Lord Smythe wouldn't have it and refused my request. Ahmed was very worried and with good reason, as that night they deserted and took camels and supplies leaving us sixty kilometres from nowhere with no food and hardly any water. We buried our valuables and made a stone cairn to mark the place, then with the grim knowledge that we had at most three days water, the three of us started marching back following my compass.

I will spare you the horrors as much as I can. Every fly in the Sahara must have found us and told his friends. The wind had made drifts of silky soft sand that sucked our feet, and had stripped the rocks bare in other places. The sun baked everything so our boots were unbearable as our feet boiled in sweat and abrasive sand. Ahmed spat on a stone and it dried in

a breath. Oh no! That reminds me! The agony of every breath with a sore throat, and the irresistible urge to drink water for a few seconds relief! Conversation was too painful even if we had anything more than profanities. Each step was all we could think of.

"I'm glad you 'spared us the horrors' George."

"I thought it was clever too Agatha."

There is no real dusk in the desert. One minute it is bright burning day then five minutes later pitch night with ghostly wafts of air as the warm rises and cold descends. There was no moon so we tried to keep out the bitter chill with a blanket each. At the very first sign of dawn we forced ourselves upright to make the most of the only bearable part of the day. We all swore as our sores stung again. Lord Smythe started mumbling, then as the day went on we had to pull him along more, then he began being angry in tiny fits until the pain of shouting was too much.

"He swore to kill everyone connected with the cursed expedition. He even blamed you my love for suggesting the idea."

"If Lord Carnarvon can send that Carter man to look for mummies in pyramids then Anthony should do better and go himself. And anyway I want to spend time on the yacht in

the Mediterranean - With you George."

Ahmed was still faithful to me. He whispered that Lord Smythe would be insane by morning and we would probably have to fight him or bind him to save ourselves. Even this worry was a mere prick amongst the coat of pain of every step. I had no way of knowing how far we had gone but we had no other plan but to carry on until the last drop. Tomorrow afternoon all our water would be gone and we would die like dolls of clay and twigs. At nightfall I soon fell asleep. To judge by the turning of the brilliant bowl of stars I must have awoken at perhaps midnight. Ahmed was murmuring prayers. I followed his lead. I prayed to God to look after us all and thank him for giving me such a glorious display of a million stars for my last night on Earth. Then I wondered about Lord Smythe. He was asleep now but what would he be like tomorrow. I prayed again. The Lord gave me strength to end his life as soon as possible. If he had no water we would leave him here and perhaps providence would see one of us rescued and send the rescuers on to him. It would be impossible to travel with a mad man trying to kill us. It would be the kindest thing. "This is the clever bit coming up Agatha."

"It sounds gruesome dear."

Silently I sneaked close to the sleeping Lord Smythe and carefully punctured his water bottle with my knife. It was agony to watch those few drops leak into the sand. Now his mad suffering would soon be over. I went back to my blanket and prayed.

Before first light I was awoken by Ahmed with a hand over my mouth to keep me silent. Then he indicated we should make our way by starlight without Lord Smythe. After we had gone a hundred paces I turned and said a prayer asking the Lord to take him quickly. Too soon the sun came up. Too soon we settled into what was now just shuffling existence like ants across a parade ground. At one of the increasingly frequent rest halts Ahmed whispered he had a confession and I wasn't to be angry. I was past caring. He said he had poisoned Lord Smythe's water to put him out of his misery. Allah would be merciful. As this became clear to me through the fog of my aches and sores I laughed and laughed then stopped as Ahmed looked at me suspicious that I too was mad. I told him what I had done then it was his turn to laugh. I don't know how long we stood there hugging each other in delirium. By the joint efforts of Allah and our Lord God we were found later that day and I don't remember much more. Lord Smythe's body was never found.

"Clever don't you think?"

"Why didn't you just strangle him or cut his throat?"

"Ah! Don't you see my angel? Which one of us killed Anthony? Me or Ahmed?"

"Um. You did George."

"No. I *saved* his life. The water I drained away was poisoned."

"So it was Ahmed."

"No! Not him either. Anthony didn't drink any poison."

"Both of you?"

"But neither of us knew the plans of the other. There was no conspiracy."

"Oh I see. You are wicked George. You can't be found guilty by a jury even if it came to court."

"Now do you think you can you persuade Anthony that an African expedition is fashionable Agatha?"

"I can try. But what about sandstorms and things. How can you arrange that?"

"Oh well we just bribe some natives to do some games and then you send out a rescue party because you have a premonition. You're worried that poor old Anthony will sleep forever under the brilliant desert stars."

"And you be forever in my arms. Kiss me again. Shall we do it George?"

"Again? Why not? But I have to be back in the office by two thirty."



When I sit down at the table as dinner is about to be served I'm full of anticipation and curiosity. The same happens at my keyboard.



Like standing on one leg only to be told the hopping race was yesterday.



- An ignorant (but wise) man says "I ask a question when I don't know"
- A wise man says "I ask a question when I already have an answer"
- A teacher says "I ask questions to teach my pupils"
- A professor says "I teach my students to ask questions"
- A leader says "There is a time for questions and a time for action"
- A pupil says "I must know the answers"
- A student says "I must know the questions"

Good cause

When I come to your door asking if you have any spare dolls I could have, then please support my work. I am collecting dolls with blue tippy-balance eyes and hard pink limbs.

Today the Suffolk plateau, once planed flat by white cliffs of ice, now ploughed brown by men, is abandoned. There are no livestock grazing, no birds exploring. Even the shadows have gone. It is February. The burnt bones of trees can't keep back the chill fog. It sneaks past, smothering the unnoticed countryside sounds of tractors and churches and extinguishes the wind.

Clicky-clack eyes rock shut and open until I push them through.

The fog drowns the black trees and grey hedges. Its anodyne smell overpowers the damp tilth. Furrows are submerged by the tide of returning white cold. A harrow for scratching the earth is being eaten by brambles. The broken gutter of the unloved farmhouse drips apologetic tears onto the naked farmyard concrete.

Arms and legs snap out with surprising reluctance. I leave separating head and torso for later.

My visit is no surprise to him. He has feared this day and now it has come. A dozen eyeless doll heads accuse him from the churchyard railings. Plastic children are wedged into a tractor's engine. A hundred dismembered arms lie twisted in the gravel of his local pub's carpark; all their tiny hands waving silent farewell.

Is that a crow call or wire biting into a neck? Is that a soul escaping torment or a cat racing for a warm nest? What has that seagull, black against the sky, come to scavenge? The sound of fire! Listen to its pent anger. Listen to its heartless greed. See the wicked start. Stand back at its haste. Be bedazzled by dancing red fingers and acrobatic sparks. Bloody gouts of flame. Crackling of a thousand small bones. Grey bruises of smoke punch their way out of the barn then hurry away to be forgotten in the white, edgeless, distance.

KEN AND JEN

May day bank holiday was wet and I had woken up with a title in my mind 'Grass is green, sky is blue, blood is red' but not a clue of a story. The weird first one appeared and the rain fell. As a stylistic finish I ended it with '...but that's another story' and I had to find out more. Only one way to do that isn't there...

Grass is green.
Sky is blue.
Blood is
carmine.

"Another pink letter from your secret admirer Ken." Said Rob as he dropped it on Ken's desk. "Why doesn't she text like everyone else?"

"Because some people are more sophisticated than 'I heart U'. Her fingers softly caressed the pen that wrote that."

"Well they could caress a keypad."

"So they have phones that do scent now do they?" He held the envelope to his face, breathed in and closed his eyes. He had no time to succumb to

the waves of reunion as Rob continued.

"What's her name?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Because I might know her."

"She's never mentioned you. Hmm – What's it worth?"

"Nothing. Just curious."

Ken stood up facing Rob to defend Jen's privacy. "It's none of your business understand! Go back to Twitter and leave me alone!"

"Alright. Alright. No need to get upset." The shirt-sleeves of the office paused to look at the confrontation then resumed their monotony.

Pleased with his outburst, Ken propped the unopened envelope against his monitor and continued airbrushing, cropping and highlighting. God this was dull. Just another monkey shuffling bits around a computer screen. Why did he always get the supermarkets and D-I-Y chains and never the fashion accounts? Painters and decorators who looked like they'd won the ashes. Tattoo-less plumbers in carefully pressed boiler suits. Cardboard cut-out blondes posing by sparkling barbeque sets. It was tawdry deception not even fantasy.

While eating newsagent sandwiches at his desk he used a banned substance,

Indian ink, to draw a pair of irresistible lips on the back of the unopened envelope. Naturally light coral, was that a good colour for Jen's lips? Perhaps eye-blue to go with her pleated cornflour dress. Hmm. What about cherry-wood and burnt umber for a strict but soft hausfrau? He settled on dusting around the lips with white pastel and left them newly plump, untouched, to speak for themselves.

Scissors cropped the top off the envelope. Paper unfolded. His heart turned to stone. Clammy with dreaded darkness revealed. After all they'd done together. Six months of teasing and submission, testing and reward. What had he done wrong? Why was she dismissing him? Stumbling through the dust of the collapsing relationship he saw her standing shining elegant and proud, dismissing his worthlessness. He could only go one way - where the light was.

After work Ken stopped for quite a bit of Dutch courage at the Badger bar which was themed in black and white while the customers were mostly grey. On the bus back to his little flat he started getting angry and began experimenting in his head with knives and plastic bags and ropes.

Jen looked in the mirror. She was superb. Carbon-black hair falling straight to her shoulders. Skin the colour of sunset reflected off clouds. Big blue eyes outlined in warm black. Lips like a fresh polished fire-engine. She pouted and growled to start the motors of desire. Bare neck, loose white blouse and smooth linen apricot skirt would be magnets for Ken's hands. Pale bare feet with turquoise-blue nails to ignite his passion.

Ken was making her wait. He would be angry. She had another glass of wine. Maybe the wimp hadn't got the guts to make her submit for a change. She was fed up with chasing fog - he was spongy and disgusting like rotting wood. What would he do? Would he fling her on the bed with his hands stroking her throat until the moment they clamped her breath for ever? She slid her fingertips across her throat to feel the sensation. Would her eyes bulge like black-fringed sea-anemones? She looked in the mirror and pulled a scarf round her neck to see. Would he grimace and gloat like a primitive hunter, or bring her some chocolates and offer to make some coffee? Would he kneel sweating on her chest and slap her face from side to side just to see her make-up blurred with carrotty bruises. Oh no! Oh God! He might burst into tears and she'd have to

watch him squirm in his aimless incapacity. Perhaps he'd use a knife? Yes! Painting with bright berries of blood growing from little slashes. She shut her eyes, swallowed, and deliberately scored the point of a carmine fingernail across her forehead, down the side of her face, under her chin and across her neck.

Ken made a bit of money by selling disturbing drawings of Jen, self-portraits he called them, and went on to become a proper artist and meet real women. What happened then is another story.

Curse of the narrative

Preamble - "The unfinished breakfast"

Let me describe a picture to you. There is a half-eaten breakfast set out on a patio table with nobody in sight. The post has arrived and there is a fan of assorted letters - perhaps one is opened. A sparrow is perched on the table edge eyeing-up crumbs. If you look closely there is a gnat making ripples in the tea-cup.

That's the end of chapter 1 of this mystery. What has happened? What will happen? The narrative waiting for you to invent it. More at the end.

History

The power of non-narrative writing has been forgotten as the *reading* and writing skills associated with it have been lost. The pervasive pressure of television that can't bear a moment of stillness and the women's magazines that require formula stories has smothered the art of carefully harmonious arrangement of ideas. Some people think the only sort of writing is fiction or documentary with a narrative. If you ask them

about poetry they will pause for a moment then admit the possibility of an exception - but poems 'don't really count'. The sad truth is that the wind of the paperback novel then the hurricane of television has conditioned us to flump into the sofa for a story rather than go out to observe the many detailed nuances of life. Everyone now jumps aboard the narrative plane for the sake of travelling rather than take a stroll through the park for the sake of being there. As town planners destroyed the soul of towns so authors and publishers have destroyed the colourful and meaningful art of descriptive impressions and unexpected insights. The vicious circle is completed by the readers who forget or never learn how to appreciate symbols, the connections between ideas and contradictions or questions within a picture.

Narrative must be as old as any form of communication. It is easy to understand and is full of opportunities for the audience to empathise with the events. For as long as stories have been told, the trials of the hunt, the anger of gods, the social situation of cuckolded husbands, suspense, resolution and many other emotions are immediately recognisable as the common currency of story telling. But in times past the business of

telling stories was more than the exciting jingling of these coins in the storyteller's purse; it was real trade in the form of symbols and role models for the audience to interpret, emulate or avoid. For example the way Byrhtnoth led his fighters at the Battle of Maldon¹ was something to be carefully considered: He was brave and fought heroically but was he foolish or acting in the wider good of the whole of the east coast? These issues are still discussed today by academics out of curiosity but originally the audience's interpretation would affect their own behaviour². In medieval times we have the Canterbury Tales with many observations on manners, morals and the way of the world. Later Mystery plays such as 'Noah and the flood' from the Chester cycle highlights the dangers of gossiping while urgent tasks need doing. The audience would know the basic narrative, and no doubt it was a good rollicking day out but "don't expect to understand God's ways", "expect punishment, but God

is merciful" and "STOP GOSSIPING and get on with ..." would be lessons taken home.

There is plenty of symbolism in medieval carvings and paintings which may *refer* to stories, folk-tales, fables and such like but, crucially, are of course by their nature static and without narrative.

Shakespeare serves as an excellent example of how entertaining narrative became firmly about the characters of the *characters* rather than the audience. Allusions to legends were mostly³ to add colour and possibly short-hand for character-traits and background. Interestingly, at the same time he was writing poetry with exquisite composition and imagery without any narrative. A sonnet as a miniature essay rather than a short story. His genius explores metaphorical territory from the point of view of an individual's observations and feelings rather than a very dog-eared legend. Lying in an orchard rather than sitting in a pew.

¹991 AD Anglo-Saxons lost to the Vikings who had to be brought-off with 3 tons of silver. Narrative in Old English 10th or 11th century.

²Individually as their empathy with the situations the characters informed them, but also as a powerful group, or tribal, builder of acceptable behaviour.

³Although some allusions would have an immediate political or social significance that only scholars can recognise today.

After reading a poem we might ask the question "What do you think of *that*?" - not "What do you think of *them*?". "How does that affect *you*?" not "Were you entertained by the characters and engrossed by the events?" In short, stories are now things that happen to other people. War, famine, pestilence and death on the nightly news or cinema screen or TV serial are entertainment with a frisson of shock not 'a lesson for us all'. The bifurcation of poetry and drama is complete.

Non-narrative creative writing was quite common until the last quarter of the 20th century. These were sketches with the emphasis on careful writing and usually sardonic observation, often later compiled into collections of humour. These are closely related to polemical fictional works and reportage by writers and journalists with something more than bare facts to report such as William Howard Russell and James Cameron.

How a story and a tableau differ⁴

A story is an engaging set of events where things happen to *characters*. The essence of a tableau is to present a set of ideas *for the reader* to mull over. There will probably be events in a tableau and there might be a 'moral' but in their pure forms they set out to do different things at *different intellectual levels*. A story can be of any length while a tableau is in the poem or shortish short-story class. In the extreme Haikus and especially Trikus⁵ distill the form into just three very idiomatic and suggestive lines.

Use of objects

If stepping stones across a stream appear in a story they are something for characters to engage with and might be an interesting environment for some action. In a tableau stepping stones are going to hint at 'things'

⁴Take this section as 'in the main'. Exceptions, variants and mixing genres muddy these waters. For example a documentary may have a narrative without involving characters.

⁵A Triku is similar to a traditional Haiku but with a much greater emphasis on deeper meanings, associations and mixing ideas in an impressionist style. See my essay *Haikus, Trikus and three-liners*.

that happen in steps, may be tricky, overcome some barrier, 'being on one side' is somehow different from being on the other, and – did you fall in? – Have no crossing places...

In a story a mirror is usually just another prop enriching the setting and possibly being an opportunity for a character to 'reflect'. In a tableau a mirror is a prompt for the reader to ask themselves about what might be reflected. Perhaps there are multiple mirrors in the form of lake, shop windows, puddles and so on. Any good poem about a mirror will insinuate the message "And what happens when you, the reader, look in the mirror?"

Use of names

In a story the names "Arthur" and "Lancelot" are mostly about Victorian parentage while in a tableau the reader is directed to the Arthurian legends as background or another way of interpretation. Less crudely a tableau might begin with "The main street in Sometown stretches from the park at the top down to the old toll bridge over the dark polluted river." For a major element (major because it's the first thing we see) that's not very interesting. If "Boatman's undertakers" is added adjacent to the possibly "stygian" water and "Good Intentions café" half way up the hill and "Evan's the

undertaker" at the top; now we've got a straightforward path between heaven and hell as a background to place other things.

The subtle art of arrangement

Painters have a sensitive eye for layout, not only for the aesthetic but also the symbolic. If a painter has a figure with a shadow there are many possibilities: Does the figure face their shadow or the light? Is the light source visible or assumed and what can we tell about it such as time of day? Is the shadow more prominent than the figure and how is it distorted and delineated? That's just two (-ish) objects for the painter to play with and for us to interpret. The texture, colours, details and drawing style are other matters which we hope will help to flesh-out the basic idea.

Poets and playwrights are used to the need for very careful construction as they have to be economical. The general story writer is less inhibited by what's where and more concerned with getting a good flow of events and interaction. While items in a story might have significance *for the characters* which the author might cleverly reveal, symbolic echoes and connection *for the reader* are a low priority.

Also

The full version of [Not All Fun](#) by Peter Fox (Merlin Smallbone) is available in the following formats.

- Paperback A5 125 pages
- PDF A5
- PDF A5 2-column (for limited width readers)

Go to merlinsmallbone.shop for purchasing options or search for [Not All Fun](#) at lulu.com

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.