

Bed Time Stories for Beginners
Creative Writing with Prisoners in Protection
by Stewart Ennis

I work as a creative writing tutor with male prisoners in the protection wing of a maximum security prison. Prisoners are in 'protection' because – for a variety of reasons – they're vulnerable to attack from other 'mainstream' prisoners. Freedom of movement for 'protection' prisoners is more restricted than usual, with less access to *The Learning Centre*, where the majority of classes take place.

I teach prisoners of all ages from 20 to 60 years old. Some are coming to the end of a lengthy sentence, while others have only just begun to come to terms with a sentence of 30 years or more, and of an age where it is highly unlikely they will leave prison alive.

Let's take one prisoner in my class. We'll call him *Homer*. Until recently Homer had never written a story, a poem or done anything he'd call 'creative.' His reading, if he read at all, was restricted to the 'True Crime' genre – very popular in prisons.

Almost everything in Homer's strictly regulated life (number, uniform, blue plastic cutlery & crockery, the sound of his metal cell door slamming, the prison stamp that appears throughout the pages of his library books) seems designed to reinforce one particular aspect of his identity –that of *prisoner*. Even the view from his cell window; if you're lucky and have a cell on the top floor you might look onto hills & trees. But Homer's on the ground floor. All he sees is a sheer 20ft grey concrete wall rimmed with razor wire. Also, *the thing* that Homer's in for, the reason he's here, (the reason I'm teaching here) is the one thing that we *never* (for good reasons) talk about, or write about. It is the elephant in the room. On one occasion early on, during tea break, Homer secretly confided that he was wary of appearing weak by showing emotion in

front of the rest of the class. He was quite sure the others felt the same, and, like Homer, they'd all prefer it to be otherwise.

It should come as no surprise that Homer, like many prisoners, is on medication for mental health problems.

At times, when Homer has been on a low, maybe for family reasons, I've wanted to put a brotherly/ fatherly/ friendly arm around him and say,

“Hey Homer, I'm a father too, I understand.”

But to do so would be to break a professional boundary and could lose me my job. So, I kept my distance and talked in generalizations.

Furthermore, Homer's prison narratives were, initially, about just that, *prison* - about *being a prisoner*. Understandable; *prison* was Homer's world. I began to wonder though if, as creative writing tutor, I might encourage Homer to create *new narratives* 'for' and 'about' himself – beyond that of *a prisoner in prison*. Now, in a maximum security prison environment, any small act of creativity is an achievement, but the creation of new narratives felt important for other reasons; it might alter how Homer saw himself, and help facilitate positive change.

And so it proved. Through the sharing of stories and poems in the creative writing class Homer and the others began to see one another – and themselves - in a new light. As important, if not more so, Homer began sharing his stories, poems & songs with family & friends on the outside; people who'd known him all his life! It was quite a revelation;

“I never knew you wrote poems!”

“You're a bit of a dark horse aren't you.”

“Did you really write that story?”

“Did you really write that song?”

“Did you really write that poem?”

“I’ve never seen this side of you before!”

“And I thought I knew you!”

And likewise, Homer might well say to himself...

“Did I really write that?”

“I’ve never seen this side of me before.”

“And I thought I knew me!”

One day Homer and some others were talking about visits from children & grandchildren.

“Why don’t you write them a bed time story?” I cleverly suggested, adding, “What story books do you usually read to them?”

I’d just made two huge and *false* assumptions here; that *everybody has been read a bed time story* and that *every parent reads their child a bed time story*.

So, I brought in some of my daughter’s picture books; old favourites like *We’re Going On A Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen and *The Tiger Who Came To Tea* by Judith Kerr. I suggested we go round the table, reading a page each. It didn’t go down well,

“My voice is really bad,” said Homer

“My voice is really boring,” said another

“Will you read it?” asked Homer.

Why not? I loved these books. These people had never had a story read to them. Why not give them a treat?

They sat huddled in a group. I turned the inside of the book towards them so they could see the pictures and follow the story. I admit it did feel odd, the idea of reading *We’re Going On A Bear Hunt* to a group of great big grown up prisoners. But I began,

“We’re going on a bear hunt.

We’re gonna catch a big one.”

Their knees were up to their chests, arms folded around, heads to one side.

“What a beautiful day!

We’re not scared!”

They loved it. Homer had never heard the like of it. He loved being on such an unadulterated flight of fancy. Another prisoner asked,

“Can I borrow it to read to my grandson? He’s on a visit tomorrow.”

“Another one,” said Homer.

So I read the *Tiger Who came To Tea*. Again, the same reaction. It wasn’t just the story; (though it’s a great story) it was the receiving of the gift of *being read to*. The gift of being read a bed-time story.

This then was my brotherly/fatherly/ friendly arm around the shoulder, achieved without breaking a professional boundary.

Homer and some others started to write stories for their children, grand children, nieces and nephews, to read at visits, or to take home and have read to them at bed time. The feedback that Homer got was wonderful,

“I read him your bed time story last night. He loved it!”

Homer had reached into himself, and reached out to his family, beyond the prison walls, with the gift of their own imaginations.

Homer had created a new narrative about himself, that wasn’t only about *being a prisoner*.

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On Making Assumptions

On my first day I thought I'd start with something *everyone could relate to*.

"I'd like everyone to write about a happy childhood memory! Christmas! A birthday party! Summer holidays! That sort of thing."

Easy! Yet Homer and the others were thinking about it for an inordinate amount of time.

"Happy childhood memories!" I repeated, "Just choose one at random!"

"I don't have one!" said Homer

"One what?" I asked.

"A happy childhood memory."

Don't assume, as I did, that everyone has a 'happy childhood memory.' Don't assume that everyone has had a bed-time story. In fact, don't assume *anything*; certainly not that we all share the same or even similar life experiences.

Okay, maybe there are a couple of things you can assume; that *we all have stories*, and that these stories are well worth the telling and well worth listening to.

stewartxennis@gmail.com