

Creative Writing Course

Never start at the beginning. Start at the end and flash back, the girl teaching the creative writing course said; or start in the middle, and gradually catch up with what's been happening. Make the reader intrigued to know how we got there. But don't tell them yet.

She was a cartoon-brained barely-literate dimwit – she thought all right was one word – how she got to be a best-selling author on both sides of the Atlantic (said the brochure) I can't imagine. I'd never heard of her.

These tips or rules of hers were printed on cards, and when she got them in a muddle she had no idea which one came next; she also projected them on to a screen, in case we were deaf I suppose. Or in case *we* couldn't spell 'denuement' either. Or perhaps to stop us staring creatively out of the window. The examples she used from her own work were just twaddle, trendy twaddle.

Nor did she seem to realise that people come on a creative writing course not because they have loads to say but don't know where to start, or how to structure it, or how to submit it to a magazine, not because they're bursting with creativity or itching to communicate or longing for a new career (half her talk was how much magazines used to pay in the States but she didn't know if they used to over here), but because they're lonely, or bored, or frustrated, or insecure, or have just split up with a boyfriend of four and a half years and want to escape from the flat full of his stuff and weep ink.

Not that she'd ever been near any ink, I doubt if she could even spell it, there was nothing liquid about her writing. It was all taps and clicks. The other daft transatlantic presumption she made throughout was that everyone writes at keyboards. The delete key is your friend, said one of her stupid cards.

You should think of investing in one, she said, when I said. I nearly asked for my money back. Presumably they could be sued under the trades descriptions act.

Tabford was nice (top of her list of banned words), well it was 'alright', but to be honest (avoid colloquial clichés) every free day and most half-days I got on the bus and went to Exeter. Rural retreat sounded nice in the brochure but actually (number four on the list) chirpy butterfly-infested solitude wasn't what I needed. Or if I must be alone I wanted to be alone amidst traffic and scaffolders and people shopping. If there'd been a creative *shopping* course I'd have gone for that.

And that's where I met Audrey. Amidst the traffic and scaffolders and people shopping.

I have to admit I don't remember how or why we struck up a conversation. I don't even remember which of us did. By the time one of us said (I don't remember which one) Might as well, you don't mind do you, we were already talking. About the traffic I think. So we did, we shared a horrid little formica table on a chrome pole. And red plastic bucket chairs – well we didn't share the chairs, we had one each. And a cheeseburger. And a coffee.

Her slightly quaint way of speaking struck me straight away. And her clothes. I assumed she was a Quaker. And perhaps her naivety, or anyway a sense that she was not at home amidst the urban bustle.

It didn't surprise me at all that she was the next-to-youngest in the family of eight (that survived) of the village saddler of Tabford, and had never been further than Plymouth (when her second-oldest brother sailed for New Zealand). It should have, of course, it should definitely have surprised me. In the whole of a busy Exeter to happen to strike up chatting for no reason with someone who turned out to come from the very village where I was staying, should have surprised the socks off me, it should have flabbergasted me.

Nor do saddlers have families of eight these days – even if villages like Tabford still have saddlers. I suppose a few do. But somehow it all passed over me without seeming even slightly implausible. Suspension of disbelief was on one of teacher-girl's cards.

She wasn't unintelligent, Audrey, even if she hadn't travelled far. I was a monitor, she said proudly, might even have gone for student teacher, but they wanted me bringing in money, so I went to work in the Post Office. Good at sums I was.

What do you do now? I'm Assistant Sub Post-Mistress, she said, with tremendous pride. And I looks after my old ma. I think tremendous is somewhere on the list of banned words too.

It didn't take long to get around to boyfriends – it never takes me long to get around to boyfriends, to moaning about them anyway. She'd never really had one. I always liked Herbie Green. In fact ... I fancied him ever so, at school and in the Post Office. He came in regular, always dawdled for a chat. She said it all with such girlish innocence. But I either didn't give him enough sign of it, or he weren't really interested. Leastways neither of us ever said. Then he was killed in the war.

No, that didn't surprise me either. Perhaps I was too keen to bemoan my own experiences, which for all they were more real had ended up

getting me nowhere different from my new friend. Well, they ended up getting me here, skiving from ‘unstructured writing time’.

I droned on about how I’d just wasted four and a half years of loyalty and love and laundry (avoid unnecessary alliteration in prose) and buying presents, on someone who ditched me for some leggy trollop he found in an auction. Well she works at Bonhams.

It didn’t seem to be many leaps from there before we were talking about finding a hotel. I know, it seems ridiculous, now, to think of it at all never mind to seem to get around to it so naturally, to speaking of it, to doing it. We were neither embarrassed nor romantic about it, it seemed to come up as a very matter-of-fact and practical suggestion (I can’t remember which of us actually dared suggest it), as if it was a normal and ordinary thing for two lonely women to do.

And it was. It stayed matter-of-fact and ordinary, and perfectly natural. Even when we were there, in the hotel, in the bed, even when we were in each other’s arms – it seemed the most normal, natural thing for us to be doing.

I paid for the room in advance with a credit card. She was already undressing when I went back in. I locked the door, I went to the toilet, I dropped all my clothes on to the floor between the bathroom and the bed (she’d folded hers neatly and put them on the chair). As far as I can remember we said nothing. I lay beside her and kissed her on the lips, and as we cuddled together I closed my eyes.

When I woke she and her clothes were gone, and all *my* clothes were neatly folded on the chair.

The next morning after breakfast I went to look at the war memorial. Herbert Green was one of the names listed under 1914-1918. We Will Remember Them.

I looked round the little churchyard, paused by the Old Post Office Guest House, passed the gateway of a modern horsey place that might possibly still have employment for a saddler. I was wandering through the village with a kind of reverence, as if it were somehow connected with me now. As if someone I loved came from here.

Leave the reader to do some of the work, to fill in the details. Explicit descriptions and explanations are for schoolbooks (she said – I thought ‘pornography’ would have been cleverer). Leave plenty to their own imaginations – their imaginations are probably better story-tellers than we are. I was with her on that one.

Back in Exeter two days later she was there again, Audrey I mean, at Burger King. She was waiting in the doorway, waiting for me. Or it seemed as if she was – I was about to ask, but her evident delight at

seeing me dissuaded me, as well as my own thrill to see her (thrill doesn't quite do it – I can't think of a word).

Never be lost for words, that's for real life ('press conferences' surely). If the Thesaurus lets you down invent a simile, which is what you should probably be doing anyway. Seeing Audrey waiting at the entrance to Burger King was like seeing someone waiting at the entrance to Burger King whose being there is the only reason you're there even though you didn't know she was going to be. No, it'll have to stay as 'thrill'.

Anyway in real life you don't necessarily have to think of words – we kissed, it said all we needed to say. I honestly don't remember making an arrangement; yet I'd rushed there, as if I was supposed to be there that day, at that time. She seemed older.

We ate our cheeseburgers and then window-shopped. She didn't have much money. I can't say I was flushed either, but I certainly had more than her. What would you like? She shook her head diffidently. I want to Aud, I'd like to, I'd love to buy you something.

We fitted her out with modern underwear. Hers looked like hand-me-downs from my granny – or her granny.

Back in the hotel room she put them on, and I took them off. She looked nice in them. And out of them too, though pale of course. I think she liked me in mine, between the giggling – I hadn't resisted temptation, I'd bought myself some lacy little pants and a naughty shorty nightie.

I'd noticed before how out-of-date her clothes were, under and over. But we just gelled so naturally, in conversation or in bed, she was so agreeable, so nice to talk to, so easy to make love to – that in spite of her slightly quaint speech, her unfamiliarity with modern urban life, her dowdy clothes, her boyfriend killed in the First World War, I didn't really think of her as being from the past. I didn't seriously think of her as a ghost.

In bed she was solid tangible flesh, soft and breathing, and a bit wriggly. She quickly warmed as we embraced.

With clothes old and new scattered about the room and ourselves bare, we lay and kissed as before, it was easy and ordinary, as before, we fitted perfectly in each other's embrace, as before – no, more perfectly, more perfectly this time.

And I woke up as before to find her gone, and all my clothes neatly folded.

Don't be predictable. Don't throw away suspense. Don't get bored with your own narrative. Follow through (the projection said 'thru'), build to a climax, but give no notice of the twist. Take them by surprise.

That was it really (banned word number three). We continued to meet, to talk, to shop, to love, each free afternoon, in Exeter, until the course ended and I had to go home. Each time we went a little further, a little deeper; each time we loved longer and freer, and at the end clasped tighter, sighed louder, at least I did. The fifth time, the fifth time we met and made love, was the best, for me. The best ever.

Each time she seemed older, years seemed to have passed; each time she had more to tell than I had, more to remember. The sixth time we met, the sixth time we loved, she was distinctly elderly. It made no difference.

Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds. An example of a pretentious cliché, that, apparently; to be avoided. I'm not sure if teacher-girl even knew who wrote it.

What actually bothered me now was the expectation that she wouldn't turn up, Audrey I mean. This one time, the final time, that she just wouldn't be there; that something would have happened to her.

People grow old and then die. The people we love grow old and die. The people who love us, they too grow old and die. Even if they don't leave us, even if they don't fall out of love with us, even if they don't announce one morning, just after the traffic news, that they're fed up of us ...

Fed up of us fussing over them like a fly they can't swat.

It's just a hair on your shoulder love, I said. Leave it, it's all right, stop fussing – I'm fed up of you fussing over me like a fly I can't swat. That's not a very nice simile ..., I said. Oh leave me alone will you, I'm fed up of it, every morning. What are you fed up of? I said. This, all this, this charade. You're fed up of me, I said. Yes, if you like.

So the morning before my final trip into Exeter, to catch the train home, I loitered in Tabford. I wandered round, only half purposefully, only half expectantly; half longing for, half dreading where my irrational heart was leading me.

Laburnum Cottage, she'd said. After she retired from the Post Office.

There it was, shaded with foliage, seemingly unmodernised, dusty net curtains at the little window.

She was a while coming to the door. I barely recognised her at first, the delicate old lady with a stick. But she knew me instantly, she was expecting me – as usual. She raised her free arm, to invite an embrace. I embraced and kissed her tearfully.

It's you, I said. You weren't a ghost. It's you Aud.

She spoke of our meetings, our liaisons, as if they were fresh in her memory, as if it had all happened in the past couple of weeks. Which it did. But you see, I thought they must have begun fifty years before, for her, judging by her age. Yet she remembered exactly what we'd talked about, exactly what we'd said, and done, each time.

How I moaned about the creative writing course, how hurt I was by the way he rejected me; my love of shopping, my passion for Helen Dunmore; my passion, my moans. Her pride in her promotion to Sub Post-Mistress, her rejection of Wally Stewer from Okehampton in favour of looking after her ma, her bittersweet memories of Herbie Green.

Her reading Mr Polly and liking it, and thinking how nice it would be, to be educated, to be literary, to be able to write like that.

I reminded her she was my age, or a little younger, when we'd first met, when we'd first spoken of these things, when we'd first made love – it must seem like such a long time ago to her. She shook her head.

It was the best love of my life, she said. It seems like yesterday.

Keep your dénouement brief.

It was for me too. It does to me too. It still does Aud.

