Tony Booth

A brief synopsis of interests: confessions of a 'bad writer'

I wrote a short story recently. I had not written one since the age of 14 though many years ago I wrote a few political Christmas and street theatre sketch shows. I am left-handed and in primary school I was regularly told that my handwriting was poor and both I and my family associated this with being 'a bad writer'. I very occasionally write a poem – perhaps every five years - though there have been times of passion or despair when the frequency increased.

The story I wrote built on two lines from a school inspection report when the inspector asked of children learning in a wooded area during part of their curriculum called 'Forest School': "who owns this wood?" and a child responded: "the trees and the animals own the wood". I thought of asking children and adults in our project area of Norfolk, a County in the East of England, if they would like to imagine what could have happened before and after this brief exchange. Then on a flight back from India – where I had been talking about values led educational development using the ideas from my book 'the Index for Inclusion developing learning and participation in schools' - when I could not be bothered with trying to amuse myself with watching films on a tiny screen I had a go at writing the story myself. If I thought others might do this task, shouldn't I think of trying to do it? I based my writing method on what I had learnt from Harold Pinter's 2005 speech to the Nobel Prize committee when he had said that in writing, he just starts and trusts his imagination to work for him. So he had started a play with the word "black" and then discovered this was the colour of a woman's hair. I had read this speech when I was in India on a previous occasion and dreamed that night of a story that began with the words "50 pounds" which I discovered to be the cost of a 'cello bought in a market in the East End of London. I wished someone had told me about this method when I was at school. Harold Pinter died three years later and to mark the occasion I read a play of his I had not read previously called "the Hothouse" about a stifling and bizarre bureaucracy. I thought this was close to the experience in a University that I knew well at that time and in his honour, I started to imagine a play called the "Tree House" about the deceptions of University life. Like many things that I engage in – it has not yet been taken forward very far and maybe that doesn't matter. I based my image of a vertical set on the one for Trevor Griffith's play about the life of Thomas Paine, writer of the 'Rights of Man' and his involvement in the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution and his beliefs that these movements showed that another world was possible. He was born in Thetford, in Norfolk and I hope he would have approved of the work we are doing there. He is a resource for our project.

So in my story, I worked forwards and backwards from the brief exchange and found two inspectors in conflict over their world views. Going forwards, one inspector who knows about the distribution of landownership in the area is led to ask: "you mean I don't own my own house?", whereupon a child responds: "well you have the piece of paper that says it is yours, but no-one really owns a bit of the earth…" And another child says – "even the bricks are home to small creatures"…… The way the children speak up and engage with difficult and important issues stiffens the resolve of the other inspector to speak out for the first time during the many inspections he has completed. He tells his colleague, who is his much younger boss, to listen to what the children have to say…… Later, he reflects on land enclosures from the past (Robert Kett was hanged for leading a rebellion against the enclosure of common land in the 16th Century and taking over Norwich – Norfolk's capital city and once second only to London in size) and the privatization of school land in the present. The story is called "An Inspector Falls"…… I know it needs more work.

September 2013