

## Scream when you burn

*Rob Hopkins*

Some years ago, I signed up for a creative writing class in north Dublin. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Work had long dried up, and the sunny little apartment I'd been so happy to move into was, because I had no money, turning into a self-imposed open prison. The classes were cheap – the college hosted them a five-minute walk away – and I thought it would do me good to get out.

I'd had some experience of writing classes. There are good classes and those that are worse than useless, and I'd encountered both. I suffer from a natural bias against groups of writers: I find the idea repulsive. You might say that means I have a natural distaste for myself, and I would reply that is exactly what it means. Most days I just about manage to get along with myself. Somehow I forced myself to get over this distaste and, if the class was good, generally had a good time.

I inquired at the college office for a lesson plan, and after a prolonged search was given a sheet of paper that contained the outline of a well-organized class. Reading material would be given out and discussed a week later. Students would be required to submit work that would also be discussed in class. I was given the sheet with the proviso that this outline was slightly out of date, but the clerk assured me that the present class format would be very similar. "It's a very good class," she said. "It fills up quick." I was mildly excited.

On the night of the first class I packed a notebook and a biro into a gym bag and made sure I arrived at the school five minutes early. The college was located in an old granite building on a narrow, busy backstreet near the city center. Inside I was directed up a wide-beamed staircase that rose to a landing with three doors. The landing was crowded with people waiting, and I threaded through the crush to a space next to one of the doors. I asked a young, blond-haired woman standing there if this was the room for creative writing. She nodded.

There were a lot of people waiting, and I presumed there were classes going on in all three of the rooms and when the bell rang at seven they would all empty out. Instead, when the bell struck only one of the doors opened, and about twenty people filed out of the room. The blonde-haired woman said, "Creative writing this way," and the whole crowd surged forward and followed her into the room.

It wasn't until the tables had been arranged in the traditional

horseshoe and everyone sat down that I was able count the number of people in the class. There were thirty people present. The vast majority was under forty. Everybody was looking at everyone else while pretending not to do so. The blonde-haired woman introduced herself as Sarah. She had an MA in creative writing. She was so well wrapped against the cold – she was wearing multiple coats and scarves, a cap and gloves – that I immediately thought she looked like a well-dressed bag lady. Clean but scatty. She told us that the first order of business was a game designed to make us all familiar with each other’s names. The person at one end of the table would begin by saying his or her name. The next person would repeat the name just said and state their own. The next person would repeat both names and state his or her own and so on, around the whole table, until the unlucky individual at the end of the table had twenty nine names to remember. I was sitting third from the end. I would have twenty-six names to remember.

I understand the first night of class is the most difficult for tutors. No reading has been given out, so there is nothing to talk about. They have two hours to kill and there are several name games they can employ that should normally be good for twenty minutes. By the time our class had completed ours, thirty-five minutes had passed. Afterwards an A4 sheet was handed out to everybody. On it was the class schedule for the next ten weeks. A different topic would dominate each week. There were titles like “First Sentences,” “Short Sto-

ry”, “Poetry,” “Memoir.” Sarah explained that no reading would be handed out. No writing would be handed up. Nobody had to write anything. In Sarah’s experience, giving out homework could lead to people not showing up for class if they didn’t do it. And somehow, even though there were thirty people in the class, that would be a bad thing.

I wasn’t happy. Sarah’s lesson plan, while thoughtfully ensuring no student would be over-worked, also meant that she would not be over-taxed herself. She would not have to read the stories we didn’t have to write. She would not have to talk about the authors we didn’t have to read. The class was going to proceed at the pace required by the theoretically slowest member. Nobody’s feelings would be hurt by the possibility of their own inadequacy. The class would exist in a state of emotional communism.

I ought to state here that I do not mean to insult or criticize Sarah as an individual; she merely represents a type of tutor with which I often used to come in contact when I was taking courses, and, based on what I hear from other people who have taken evening creative writing courses, seems to be the type of tutor aspiring writers are most likely to face. Obviously, I have changed her name, and many other unimportant details about the experience, and if I speak of her negatively it’s meant as a broader criticism of the way creative writing courses are usually taught.

On that first night, Sarah suggested that, as a limbering-up exer-

cise, we take out our notepads and write the first thing that came to mind for five minutes. It didn't matter if it was the same word over and over again, or an extended shopping list or a suicide note saying you had brought a bomb into the room and were intending to detonate it at the first mention of a free-writing exercise, because when we were finished nobody had to read them out. This was just loosening up. She would give us the real writing exercise in five minutes' time. I spent the five minutes with my head down drawing crooked circles on a page in blue biro. When I heard, "Time's up," I raised my head. Sarah rose from her chair and came round her table, entering the horseshoe carrying a black-plastic sack.

"I want everyone to choose an object from the bag," she said. "You have fifteen minutes to write something based on it. And if you like – but nobody has to – people can read them out."

For me writing is a secretive, solitary pleasure. I find the idea of writing in a class full of other writers absurd. I can never quite forget that other people are present and that makes it difficult for me to concentrate. But just as absurd is the flawed educational technology behind the idea that someone can learn a craft by blind application. Subconscious-trigger writing exercises are generally favoured by teachers who will never criticize bad writing. This is not instruction. You could replace such tutors with a goldfish in a bowl and arrive at a similar result.

Writers are touchy creatures and for good reason. To criticize

somebody's writing is to criticize their thinking. It's not like saying to somebody, "You're not very good at playing the piano." That statement, while an insult, doesn't suggest a deficiency in their core functions as a human being. When you criticize what a person has written, you criticize their very thoughts, their faculties for perception, interpretation, and most of all communication. Most creative writing tutors understand this and it presents them with a dilemma. Students are paying them to learn a skill. But the correction involved in the process can be humiliating. Most people will not spend money to be insulted. Constructive criticism is an elusive art that involves an element of risk. Unfortunately some tutors seek to avoid the risk by child-proofing the learning process. No sharp objects are left lying around. Mediocrity is promoted as a virtue.

After class, four of us made it to the pub, which is probably a much better way of getting to know people's names than inane, mnemonic acrobatics. There were two Australians, a young Asian woman and myself. We had a couple of drinks and exchanged the sort of guarded misinformation one does when meeting new people for the first time. The two Australians couldn't have been more different. Ray was small and slender, with fine features, thinning red hair and a small over-bite that made me think immediately of the snout of a ferret or a rat. He spoke rapidly and quietly, each sentence expelled upon a single breath of air. He dug Bukowski and the Beats, and I knew with the certainty of a struck tuning fork that he liked or had

liked narcotics. Tom was large and beefy and looked like he sweated a lot. He was in his mid-thirties and exuded anxiety. When he wasn't grinning nervously he was fidgeting with his pint glass from which he would occasionally take a worried little nip. He kept talking about some website that promoted genre mash-up. He wanted to cross-fertilize *Star Wars* and the Harry Potter books. Secondary school must have been a painful experience for him. Every time he talked directly at me, my mind glazed over. I possess patience in a finite number of situations, and I hate to waste the effort of a conversation on a person incapable of interpreting what I have said.

Anya, the Asian girl, was small and pretty, and Ray and I took turns talking to her. After the second drink, everyone left. Ray offered me a ride home, and as soon as I'd sat into the passenger seat he began telling me about his problems with his girlfriend. Men suffering from terminal relationships like nothing better than telling a single guy how lucky he is. I sympathised but didn't make the mistake of proffering advice. Ray wasn't looking for advice. We both knew he was making it sound worse than it was. He spoke with the urgency of someone who spends a lot of time isolated. No chit-chat, no polite conversation, straight to the bone.

I didn't know if I was going to return to the class. I told myself it was only going to get worse. Then I'd broadside that notion with the argument that my shitty cynical attitude was never going to allow for the possibility that it might get better. This is the way that I

spend my days. I'm like a room full of people crammed into a coffin made from skin, trapped in a never-ending argument. Two days before the next class I was passing the school on my way back from the gym when I decided to pop in and have a chat with whomever was in charge of the night classes. I was directed to an office on the first floor and knocked on the door before pushing it open. Inside a middle-aged man sat beside a desk holding a phone. He wore glasses and a washed-out grey suit that looked ten years out of date, and he placed his hand over the receiver and asked did I mind waiting outside. I sat on a chair outside the office and tried to rehearse in my mind what to say to him. While passing the school I'd made the decision to either ask for my money back or try and get a gig teaching there. I still hadn't made up my mind which to choose when he came out of the office in a flinched posture, suggesting he expected I had come to make a complaint. I spun the roulette wheel of possibilities. The ball landed on – *ask him for a gig*.

I laid out my position. I told him it was insane to run a creative writing class and not familiarize students with classic examples of what they were trying to achieve. I underlined the fact that it was mostly through peer review that people could learn the language and tools of critical analysis that they could then apply to their own work. I told him there were way too many people in the class. I told him that if he had smaller numbers and a higher quality class he could charge more and people would re-enrol for more classes, thus ben-

efiting the school in the long run. I tried, quite unsuccessfully, not to attack what Sarah was doing per se but to criticize her method.

The man listened patiently to me, nodding at times, then told me that the rates they charged were fixed by a government scheme and couldn't be raised. I understood at once and appreciated his brevity. No more needed to be said. They couldn't raise their prices so they crammed way too many people into the classes. Quality was not an issue because they were administrators on overpaid government salaries, trapped in the aspic of civil service lethargy. I have never in my life encountered a situation that would have benefited more from the application of the principles of privatization. Peer review though, he thought, was a good thing. His wife was taking art classes and she and her fellow students reviewed each other's work, and she thought highly of the process. He asked me did I want my money back. I demurred. It seemed like giving up. I was determined to stay and see just how bad it would get.

We played the name game for the first three weeks. We spent all that time trying to memorize each others names and then never used them. Nobody talked to each other. By the third week it was just Ray and me in the pub after class. The enthusiasm I had seen in people's faces on the first night began slowly draining out. Most people would turn up for class, read through the handouts for the topic of the day, remain silent when Sarah asked for some comments, dutifully apply themselves to the obligatory writing exercises and not volunteer af-

terwards to read anything out. At times Sarah would plead for someone to read in a tone that contained equal measures of exasperation and desperation. She wouldn't talk on a subject for any length of time. She was continually trying to bounce the conversation off the material on the handouts, but the information they contained was too limited and arbitrary. For example, a topic one night was the importance of first sentences. We received a handout with twenty first sentences on it, the vast majority of them from famous novels (one of the first ones was "Happy families are all alike..."). We were then supposed to talk about which sentences we liked and which ones we didn't. My first thought was that I was pretty sure nobody in this class was writing a novel. My second thought was that she was asking the class to respond as readers, not writers. A reader can have a strong reaction to a solitary sentence because they are free to engage their imagination with the possibilities the line might suggest. What can a writer say about a single sentence? Perhaps that there are too many adjectives or the verb isn't sharp enough but a writer instinctively knows that one good line is practically useless without others. At every turn Sarah's teaching method was being frustrated by her refusal to disseminate complex material in advance and give people some time to think about what they could say of it or how they could emulate it. She expected her handouts to act as inspirational springboards that could enable a student to vault a story-high obstacle. Her aim was to make people feel something and then follow this emotion.

Thinking was unnecessary.

Each week at the end of class I asked myself what the hell was I doing there. I found the two hours of class increasingly frustrating. Writing can involve many frustrating moments. There's the frustration of not being able to think of anything, of not being able to finish, the steady, water-torture drip of rejections, the realizations after months spent working on certain pieces that they are still piles of crap. You can end up watching others succeed while you slowly fry in your own ambition. The second noble truth of Buddhism says that desire leads to suffering. Writing needs desire. You strip the sheaths from your nerves and serve them at a public feast.

I had hit a low point right before I took that class. I had ceased to believe in myself. There was a vast distance between what I expected of myself and what I could achieve. I talked to a friend of mine about it. He was a jazz-trained drummer, had spent years practising and playing and he told me he'd reached a similar impasse too: instead on focusing on what he could do, it became all about what he couldn't. He'd spend hours practising complicated drum patterns and not be satisfied. To his ear they sounded imperfect. Playing or even listening to music became a problem. Enjoyment was eroding.

When I started the class, I was hoping it would give me something new and fresh, uncomplicated but enjoyable. I encountered confusion and time wasting. The saddest thing was to watch the other writers, many of whom had never written before this class, become

more baffled as the weeks went by. It seemed like such a waste of potential.

In a Bukowski short story, Henry, one of Bukowski's alter egos, discusses Camus:

“Camus talked about anguish and terror and the miserable condition of Man but he talked about it in such a comfortable and flowery way... his language... that one got the feeling that things neither affected him *nor* his writing. Camus wrote like a man who had just finished a large dinner of steak and french fries, salad, and had topped it with a bottle of good French wine. Humanity may have been suffering but not him. A wise man perhaps, but Henry preferred somebody who screamed when they burned.”

Hanif Kureishi once said that there are two types of writers – terrorists and masseurs. You can challenge the way things are, within and around you, or you can submit to them. You can scream when you burn, or you can eat steak and pommes frites with a bottle of good French wine. The comparison is a simplification, but it speaks to what a writer wishes to do with what he writes, and why he writes, not what he writes about. The masseur's challenge is reassurance; he writes books that tell us art is for comfort, that books are, in the long run, irrelevant. The terrorist's challenge is finding out what matters most, and getting it down right. And if he gets it right, his books remind us that good art is dangerous, it troubles the world, somehow.

If there is a useful question a writing class can begin to answer, it's one that asks students what kind of writer they'd rather be.

We lost two or three people every week. I think most people were genuinely puzzled as to what exactly was going on. After class I would rail about the pointless writing exercises to Ray in the pub. He disagreed. He said if it weren't for the writing exercises he would write nothing at all. He was trying to think of some way he could segue all the snippets he had written into a single story. Whenever anyone read out an exercise they had written in class, Sarah asked them if they thought they could go on and write a story from it. She always asked, and she always got the same response. The person would pause, mumble something, pause again, then say yes, but never look directly at her as they spoke. In the fifth class a woman put up her hand and actually asked to be given some homework. By the sixth class there were fifteen people left. My endurance was failing. Much as I wanted to see just how many Sarah could whittle out of the class, the experience was beginning to fester. On the night of the seventh class I gave up.

*Rob Hopkins lives in Dublin*