

September–October 2000

Bimonthly • Vol. 32, No. 1

# Urban Nature Writing

by Matthew Sharpe

“WHAT IS NATURE?” I ASKED A GROUP OF thirty or so seventh graders early one November morning. The air outside the classroom window was frosty, and the deciduous trees on West 48th Street in Manhattan were just about done giving up their leaves for the year. I added that I myself was not a scientist or science teacher, but I did have some ideas about nature, which I wanted them to join me in grappling with. Several hands popped up.

“Nature,” said one girl, “is anything that’s natural.”

“Okay,” I said, “so what’s natural?”

“Anything that isn’t man-made,” a boy said. The rest of the class seemed to like that answer pretty well.

Someone said, “A tree is nature,” and someone else said, “Yeah, but not if it’s planted and watered by a person. Like Central Park is not really nature. It’s like nature because it has trees and grass and flowers and everything, but all that stuff was put there by somebody, so it’s not *really* nature.”

This discussion began a ninety-minute lesson on urban nature writing that I taught as part of a twelve-week journal writing course for middle school students at the Professional Performing Arts School (PPAS) in Manhattan. The theme of the course was New York City. I met once a week with three classes—one sixth, one seventh, and one eighth grade—and

every assignment I gave them had something to do with city life. I told the students that at the end of the twelve weeks, I would gather their writing together in a book that would constitute a guide to New York City from their own point of view, a document of what it’s like to be a twelve- or thirteen- or fourteen-year-old living in one of the world’s great metropolises at the end of the twentieth century. And I told them that I thought such a document would not be complete without a section on nature.

I don’t think there’s a special genre of writing called “urban nature writing” or even “nature writing” in the way that there is, say, a genre called “mystery writing.” As far as I’m concerned, nature writing is any kind of writing on the subject

## IN THIS ISSUE

- 1** **Urban Nature Writing**  
by Matthew Sharpe
- 6** **Birds in the City**  
by Barbara Bash
- 8** **Beowulf Rides the Range**  
by Jordan Clary
- 12** **Shaping Longer Works of Fiction**  
by Meredith Sue Willis
- 15** **Q & A: Using Nonfiction as a Resource for Imaginative Writing**  
by Rhonda Zangwill, with  
Kristin Prevallet

MATTHEW SHARPE is the author of *Nothing Is Terrible* (Random House), a novel, and *Stories from the Tube* (Villard), a collection of short stories. He teaches writing at Columbia University, and has been teaching New York City public school students under the auspices of Teachers & Writers Collaborative for nine years.

of nature. So I didn't want to begin the lesson by teaching the students a particular technique of writing, but rather by asking them to observe and think about their immediate surroundings. I figured they could spend the first forty-five-minute class period thinking and talking, and the second one writing.

After some lively dissension and debate on the topic of whether Central Park was nature or not, I asked the seventh graders in what category they would put a building like the one we were in. "Definitely not nature," was the consensus.

I said, "What about a bird's nest?"

"Oh that's nature," someone said.

I said, "Well a bird's nest is not man-made, but it is bird-made. I mean, a bird makes a bird's nest—which is a kind of bird building—with the most advanced technology available to birdkind, right? So why does a bird's nest get to be nature while a brick-and-mortar school building doesn't?"

"Okay," a girl said, "if you want to talk about like a human nest or something then maybe a log cabin would be nature, but *not* a skyscraper. A school, I don't know."

Again the class was divided. Some felt that humans are entitled by the laws of nature to make shelter for themselves no matter what the shelter is made of, while others felt that a towering steel-and-concrete building was too far removed from the basic animal impulse of shelter-making to count as natural. What I was trying to suggest is that one could think about an urban center like New York City as a kind of teeming ecosystem; that cities, in other words, might be a natural habitat for humans and other urban-dwelling organisms.

"Okay, I have another question," I said. "If something isn't natural, what is it? What's the opposite of natural?"

"Artificial," one girl said.

I said, "What's an example of something that's artificial?"

"Polyester!"

"What *is* polyester?"

"Plastic."

"And what's plastic made of?"

"Isn't it made of oil?"

"And where does oil come from?"

"Dinosaur fossils!"

"Dinosaur fossils, hmm," I said, giving myself over to the role of Socratic investigator, aka pain-in-the-neck teacher. "Aren't dinosaur fossils natural?"

"Yeah," a student said, "but what they do to them when they make them into some ugly polyester leisure suit is definitely *not* natural." This shut me up for the time being.

Then one tall, elegant, and vocal girl named Rachel made an interesting leap of thought. If log cabins and skyscrapers and possibly even polyester are things that are natural because they are nature plus human ingenuity, then human ingenuity must also be natural. "Like when I was younger, me and my brother used to take all the remote controls in the house and use them as pretend telephones. I would hold the clicker for the VCR up to my ear and make like I was dialing a number and then I would go "br-r-r-ring, br-r-r-ring," and my brother would pick up the clicker for the TV and put it to his ear and we would pretend like we were having a phone conversation.

So we were doing something that was part of nature because when children pretend, that's nature."

What Rachel said reminded me of an essay by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson in which he discusses the way that non-human mammals play with one another. Bateson says that these animals, when they bite each other in play, must have a way of signaling to one another that the bite is a fake bite, not a real one; otherwise they'd be fighting and not playing. I told the class this and added, "That means dogs have such a thing as 'make believe,' too, so even if you're one of those people who says nature is anything that's not man-made, you'd have to admit that pretending is natural."

"See what I'm saying?" Rachel asked.

"So maybe," I continued, "we can say that at least some of the ways humans change the world are natural, whether the change is physical—like using technology to turn some trees and mud into a log cabin—or mental—like using your imagination to turn a VCR clicker into a telephone."

\* \* \*

The discussion in the sixth grade class I taught that day followed a different trajectory. The first twenty minutes were devoted to the differences between city and country, and what in each was natural or unnatural. A charming and opinionated boy named Massimo, for example, made a strong argument for buying "natural" toys for Christmas—that is, toys made one at a time from wood and cloth by trained craftspeople, as opposed to toys made of metal or plastic by electronic equipment on an assembly line. Then the sixth grade humanities teacher, Betsy Pratt, politely raised her hand and said, "There's one kind of nature that nobody has mentioned so far: human nature." The talk turned quickly to things people do to their own bodies. Most of the sixth graders were willing to concede that clothing and makeup and hair dye—though perhaps not green hair dye—are natural, while all of them were quite adamant that cosmetic surgery is crazy and gross and most emphatically unnatural. As I had done with the seventh graders, I encouraged these kids to consider as natural some of the things that didn't obviously conform to their ideas of nature—skyscrapers, for instance. But they found a place where they drew an absolute line between nature and non-nature. When people do something that is against nature by being destructive to nature, then what they are doing is clearly and unequivocally unnatural. The discussion that began with facelifts and tummy tucks moved from doing bad things to your own body toward doing bad things to the bodies of other people and other creatures, i.e., hurting the environment. In fact, the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade classes all agreed on this point: human carelessness with—and disrespect for—nature isn't natural. As one girl said, "Maybe a factory is natural because it's like an ant colony or something, but then if the people dump garbage and chemicals into the river that kill the fish, that's not natural."

I realize that by asking my students to consider the meaning of nature this way, I was running the risk of making nature mean so many different things that it would end up meaning nothing at all. But this was a risk I was willing to take, in order

to encourage them to pay attention to the world around them, and to pay attention to the way they think about the world and the conclusions they draw about it.

The last thing I said was, “For the next seven days, look around the city, and whatever you notice that you think is natural, observe it as carefully as possible, because next week you’ll be writing very thorough descriptions of nature.”

\* \* \*

A week later, I began the next session by handing out copies of the first paragraph of an essay by Joseph Mitchell called “The Rivermen.” I asked one of the students to read it aloud to the class. (As I usually do, I asked the other students to circle any words they didn’t know while they were being read to.) Joseph Mitchell was a southerner and a journalist who eventually made his home in New York City. In the middle part of this century he was a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* and developed an approach to nonfiction writing that combined the fact-gathering techniques of a reporter with the lyrical sensibility and ear for dialogue of a novelist. He was also an avid and delighted observer of urban nature, as this passage demonstrates:

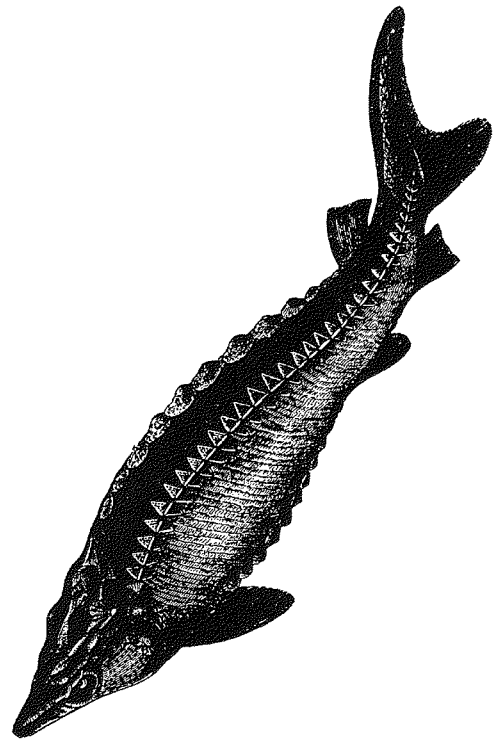
I often feel drawn to the Hudson River, and I have spent a lot of time through the years poking around the part of it that flows past the city. I never get tired of looking at it. It hypnotizes me. I like to look at it in midsummer, when it is warm and dirty and drowsy, and I like to look at it in January, when it is carrying ice. I like to look at it when it is stirred up, when a northeast wind is blowing and a strong tide is running—a new-moon tide or a full-moon tide—and I like to look at it when it is slack. It is exciting to me on weekdays, when it is crowded with ocean craft, harbor craft, and river craft, but it is the river itself that draws me, and not the shipping, and I guess I like it best on Sundays, when there are lulls that sometimes last as long as half an hour, during which, all the way from the Battery to the George Washington Bridge, nothing moves upon it, not even a ferry, not even a tug, and it becomes as hushed and dark and secret and remote and unreal as a river in a dream. Once, in the course of such a lull, on a Sunday morning in April, 1950, I saw a sea sturgeon rise out of the water. I was on the New Jersey side of the river that morning, sitting in the sun on an Erie Railroad coal dock. I knew that every spring a few sturgeon still come in from the sea and go up the river to spawn, as hundreds of thousands of them once did, and I had heard tugboatmen talk about them, but this was the first one I had ever seen. It was six or seven feet long, a big, full-grown sturgeon. It rose twice, and cleared the water both times, and I plainly saw its bristly snout and its shiny little eyes and its white belly and its glistening, greenish-yellow, bony-plated, crocodilian back and sides, and it was a spooky sight.

After we went over vocabulary, I invited my students to mention anything they noticed about the paragraph. “How old is he?” one girl in the sixth grade class asked.

“Well, he’s dead now, but I think he was middle-aged when he wrote this. Why?”

“Because he seems like a kid.”

“How so?”



“He gets so excited about the river.”

“Where in this paragraph do you see his excitement?”

“He keeps saying ‘I like to look at it’ over and over, like he’s a little kid or something.”

I asked which of the five senses Mitchell invoked in this passage. One student said sight, noting the amazing description of the sturgeon. Another said hearing, because Mitchell hears the tugboatmen talking about the sturgeon. Yet a third said touch, because Mitchell described the river as “warm.”

“Any metaphors or similes in here?” I asked. Someone suggested the word *drowsy* was a metaphor because water can’t really be drowsy, only a person or animal can, which meant Joseph Mitchell was comparing the river to a person or animal without using *like* or *as*. I added that Mitchell used a simile when he described the river as being “unreal as a river in a dream.”

Then I gave them their writing assignment: “Being as specific and passionate as you can, write a short description of something natural that’s in New York City. Remember that people who read this might never have seen or heard or smelled or tasted or touched the thing you’re describing, so help them out by appealing to any or all of their five senses. Also remember that similes and metaphors can help a reader to understand the thing you’re writing about by helping them to understand *your* feelings about it, plus they can make a piece of writing more fun to read since they usually convey something about the personality of the writer.” I asked one student in each class to repeat the assignment back to me so I could make sure that everyone understood. Then I fielded questions, many of which had to do with whether it was okay to write about a particular thing that wasn’t what people usually thought of as nature. “Is sleep nature?” asked a sixth grade girl named Swan.

“What do you think?”

"I think so."

"I think so too." (See her description below.)

Five minutes into the intended writing time, a seventh grader named Chaz wasn't writing anything. I asked him what was going on. "I can't think of anything to write," he said. I asked him if he'd had any memorable encounters with nature.

Chaz, a burgeoning comedian and raconteur, began to describe his philosophical differences with his mother: "She won't even kill a cockroach because it's a living creature like herself. But then one time I was in the bathroom and there was this red lizard on the floor. Even I didn't want to kill that." He then explained how he gently swept the creature into a dustpan and put it outside the bathroom window, pantomiming his own fear and comically exaggerating the details of the story. I often find that kids who are having writer's block need little more than a few moments of personal attention from the teacher and a question or two about what's on their minds.

Following are a few pieces of writing produced by the kids at PPAS, together with my brief comments.

### My Favorite Tree

My favorite tree is right in front of my apartment building in Manhattan. In spring, tiny buds open up fast, the first on my street, and sway carelessly, with a lazy feeling, in the cool, swift breeze. It looks prettiest then, unlike in summer. In the summer, the tree changes. It stands upright and still, as though it were glued into the ground. Often times, the tree stands there in the hot summers looking like it lacks water and air. As fall comes, the colors begin to change, and it starts to sway in the breeze again. For the last week of November, the tree looks like it is blazing with fire. The tree loses its leaves with every swipe the wind takes. By Thanksgiving, the first tree to have its leaves would be the first to lose them. The tree looks lonely without its leaves, so bare.

—*Izumi Miyahara, seventh grade*

I like how Izumi is alert not only to the physical details of the tree in front of her building, but to how those details change over time. She uses similes and metaphors to convey not only the way the tree looks, but also her own emotional connection to it. And she leaves us with the powerful image of the lonely, bare tree, reminding us that nature is not always a pleasant, regenerative force, but can sometimes be harsh and unsparing.

### Sleeping

Sleeping is one of the best things I love to do (next to swimming). What I like about sleeping is . . . that it smells like fresh roses, it feels like I'm cool and I am in heaven, it looks like I'm in a garden with roses all around me, it sounds like children laughing all around me, it hurts when something bad happens in my dream, and it helps when I have good dreams.

Once I wake up it is very different from my dream. It smells like my sister's bad breath in the next bed, it looks like I'm sick and in bed, it sounds like my sister snoring, it hurts me that I'm not in Wonderland, and it helps me that I'm with my family.

—*Swan Echeadia, sixth grade*

The two things I like most about Swan's piece are the odd originality of the subject—given that this was a nature writing

assignment—and the variety of sensory imagery, especially the smells. I also like the way she organized the piece, with one paragraph on sleeping followed by a contrasting paragraph on waking. But I do think her way of describing the different sensations of sleeping and waking was a little programmatic: if she had told the story of her dream rather than just making a list of things she smelled, saw, and heard, we readers would have a more complete picture of her dreamworld.

### My Backyard

In my backyard I have an old, shattered, worn-down porch. When I stand up there and look down I see my cemented backyard, old and gray. I see the swings that hang down from the porch with the blue ropes just like this ink. They have white bottoms to sit on, like this page. One of them has a hard bottom and the other one has a hard bottom but flexible and rubber. Behind the cemented ground is my garden with all different kinds of plants, including the roots of my rosebush that hovers over the wood fence that separates my backyard from my neighbors', as if it is going to eat it. The thorns are short, thick, and SHARP. Next to the rosebush is the grapevine, which seems to be dancing, going in all directions, instead of eating the fence. Then there's the path that leads to the front of the house. . . .

On the other side of the garden is a patch of some kind of plant that grows short and green, with little white flowers in the middle. Next to the path is a pile of old, old logs that I used to pretend the pioneers collected to burn for firewood. And then there are the steps back up to the porch.

—*Emily Parson, sixth grade*

I like the big stones of Central Park. They thrust out of the ground like great jaws of a beast. I like the way you can climb up them, and stand on a ledge with the sun beaming on you, and you feel like a god. I like the way you can climb up their jagged rock and slide. I like the bike road that slithers down the side of the river, where I can stroll up the misty brownish water where it glops on top of the small, sandy shore full of soggy wood logs from the devoured dock that the water had eaten up. It smells. It smells like sea water—salty. You can also smell boat fuel from small motorboats. I love that smell, and the calming sight.

—*Charlotte Blythe, sixth grade*

\* \* \*

In my ninety-minute lesson, I was mainly interested in getting kids to be attentive first to their surroundings, and then to the language they use to describe those surroundings. Since this was a journal-writing course, a descriptive passage of prose suited my purposes. But there's no rule that says you can't write a poem in your journal. So the next time I teach urban nature writing, I plan to ask my students to write a poem instead of a piece of nonfiction. As a model poem, I'll use "Millinery District" by Charles Reznikoff:

The clouds, piled in rows like merchandise,  
become dark; lights are lit in the lofts;  
the milliners, tacking bright flowers on straw shapes,  
say, glancing out of the windows,  
It is going to snow;  
and soon they hear the snow scratching the panes. By night  
it is high on the sills.

The snow fills up the footprints  
in the streets, the ruts of wagons and motor trucks.  
Except for the whirl of the car  
brushing the tracks clear of snow,  
the streets are hushed.  
At closing time, the girls breathe deeply  
the clean air of the streets  
sweet after the smell of merchandise.

One of the things this poem is about is how people who live in cities have their own unique way of experiencing a natural event like snow. Like the opening paragraph of “The Rivermen,” “Millinery District” is abundant in sensory information. How do city workers know it’s snowing? They “hear the snow scratching against the panes.” How do they measure how much it has snowed? By how high the snow has piled up on the windowsills, and by how quickly the snow has filled up footprints and the tracks of wheels, and by how it muffles the usual sounds of the city. I like that opening simile, in which clouds resemble merchandise, and the way that the poem’s last line seems to assert that if all you do is compare nature to merchandise, you’re not being fair to nature.

My writing assignment would be:

1. Describe a very particular kind of weather (a snowstorm, a thunderstorm, a hailstorm, the first warm day of spring, the first cold day of autumn, a summer day of unbearable heat and humidity, etc.).
2. Describe how people in a very particular part of the city notice the weather and react to it.
3. Include, as Reznikoff does, at least one simile that compares something usually considered natural to something usually thought of as artificial (“the chunks of hail were as big as footballs”).

Since I would be asking the students to write poems based on memories, I’d have them close their eyes for a moment

before they started to write. I’d do this to help them remember details about what happened on the day of the dramatic weather event in question. Where were they? Who was there with them? What did the sky look like? Smell like? Sound like? Did anybody make any memorable remarks? How did they feel? They could then use these remembered facts as raw material for the poem.

\* \* \*

I offer these few ideas—on how to lead a discussion on nature in an urban classroom and on how to give an urban nature writing assignment—simply as examples of one approach to a huge topic. I am not, as I said, a scientist or a science teacher. But a language arts teacher certainly could join forces with a science teacher to teach nature writing. A lesson on the Joseph Mitchell passage about the Hudson River could be combined with a lesson in marine biology, and a lesson on the Charles Reznikoff poem about snow in the millinery district could be combined with a lesson in meteorology. The nice thing about nature writing is that it links creative writing with science, and offers students an imaginative way to make a personal investment in scientific facts.

*This essay is dedicated to James Hairston, Betsy Pratt, and Joe Ubiles.*

### Bibliography

- Bateson, Gregory. “A Theory of Play and Fantasy.” In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Mitchell, Joseph. “The Rivermen.” In *Up in the Old Hotel*. New York: Random House, 1993.
- Reznikoff, Charles. “Millinery District.” In *Writing New York: A Literary Anthology*. Edited by Philip Lopate. New York: The Library of America, 1998.



The articles by Matthew Sharpe and Jordan Clary in this issue (as well as the drawings by Barbara Bash) are from T&W’s new book, *The Alphabet of the Trees: A Guide to Nature Writing*. Edited by Christian McEwen and Mark Statman, *The Alphabet of the Trees* is a collection of essays about teaching all aspects and forms of nature writing, including field journals, poems, fiction, and nonfiction. It is a practical handbook; an introduction to nature writing, nature poetry, and fieldwork; and a guide to some basic strategies for teachers at all levels.

The distinguished contributors to this volume include nature writers, poets, fiction writers, and educators: Gary Snyder, Susan Karwoska, Eleanor J. Bader, Joseph Bruchac, Sam Swope, Kim Stafford, John Tallmadge, Mary Oliver, Clare Walker Leslie, Charles E. Roth, Sarah Juniper Rabkin, Christian McEwen, Carolyn Duckworth, Mary Edwards

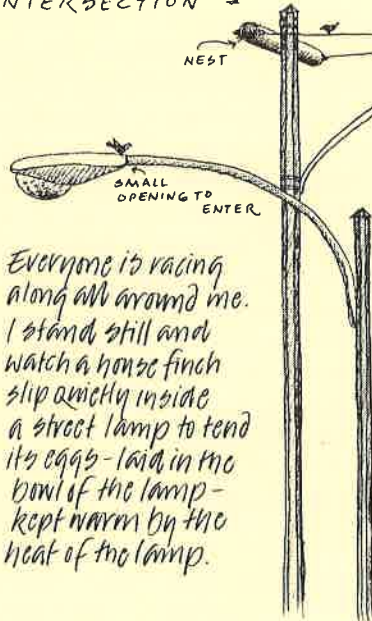
Wertsch, Michael Morse, Penny Harter, William J. Higginson, Cynde Gregory, Jack Collom, Margot Fortunato Galt, Suzanne Rogier Marshall, Holly Masturzo, Ann Zwinger, Terry Hermsen, Janine Pommy Vega, Barry Gilmore, and Carol F. Peck—as well as Sharpe, Bash, and Clary. Their essays present inspiring models from Tu Fu, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Denise Levertov, Matsuo Bashō, Muriel Rukeyser, Henry David Thoreau, Rainer Maria Rilke, Pablo Neruda, and many others. *The Alphabet of the Trees* also includes an extensive bibliography and resource section. This 320-page paperback is available from Teachers & Writers for \$19.95 plus \$4 shipping and handling. To order, call 1-888-BOOKS-TW (toll-free), or send your order with payment to Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306.

# Birds in the City

## Pages from a Field Journal

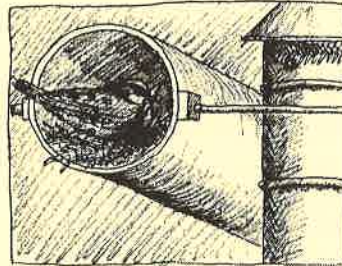
by Barbara Bash

AT A BUSY  
INTERSECTION

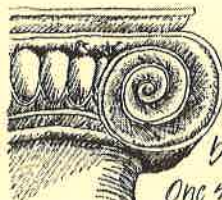


Everyone is racing along all around me. I stand still and watch a house finch slip quietly inside a street lamp to tend its eggs - laid in the bowl of the lamp - kept warm by the heat of the lamp.

Then I notice a pair of sparrows bringing grasses to the pipe at the top of the traffic light pole.

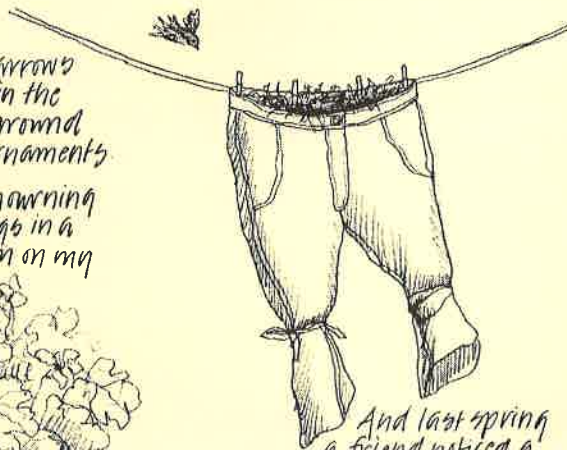
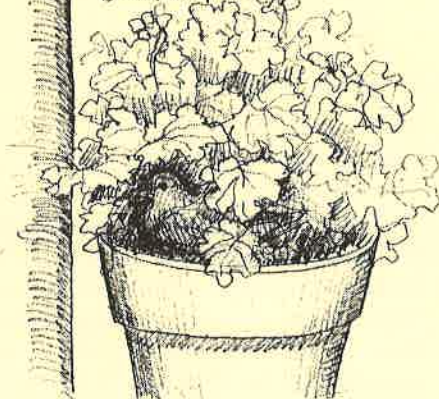


the bird's paws, looks around to make sure no one is watching - it doesn't notice me! - then disappears into the pipe with its twig.



I see sparrows nesting in the hollows around building ornaments

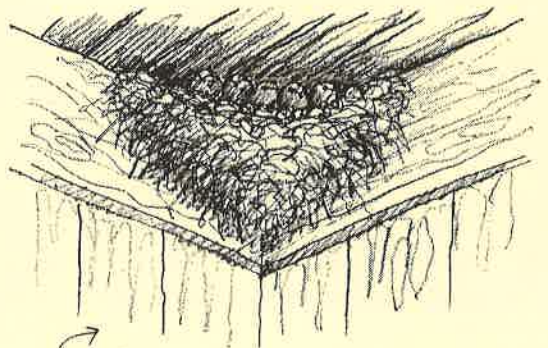
One spring a mourning dove laid her eggs in a potted geranium on my back steps.



And last spring a friend noticed a pair of wrens trying to nest in his trousers hanging on the line. He tied up the pant legs - so the twigs would stop falling through - & donated his pants to the wren family for the season!

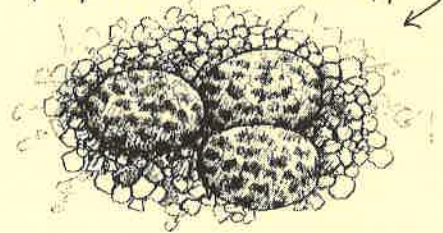
BARBARA BASH is the author and illustrator of several books on natural history for children, including *Urban Roosts: Where Birds Nest in the City* (Sierra Club Books). Bash, also a calligrapher and a teacher of book arts and nature journaling, lives in New York's Hudson Valley with her husband and son.

At twilight I listen to large crow gatherings in the winter trees of the park. Their wings rustle as they land. Then the calling out begins - rattling, squeaking, gurgling - even cat-like cries - it all mixes together in a cacaphony of sound until the light fades and quiet descends.



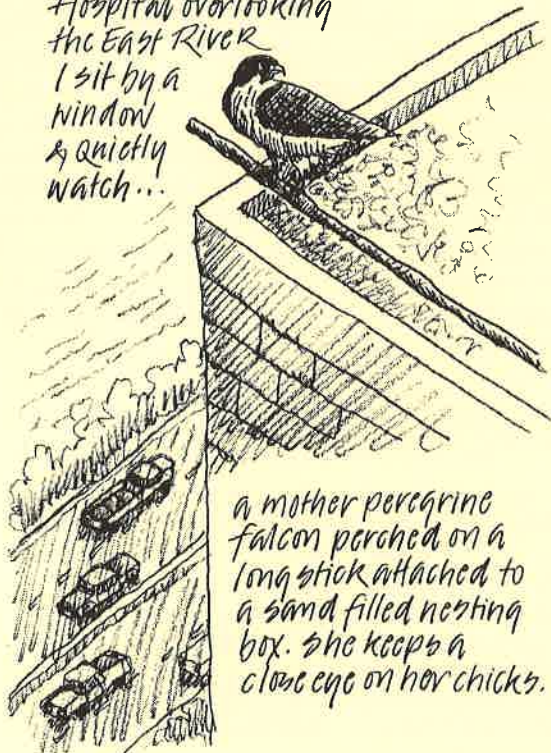
Looking up under some eaves - a family of swallows held in their mud-lined nest.

Looking down on the edge of a gravel parking lot - a camouflaged clutch of killdeer eggs.



On the 24th floor of New York Hospital overlooking the East River

I sit by a window & quietly watch...

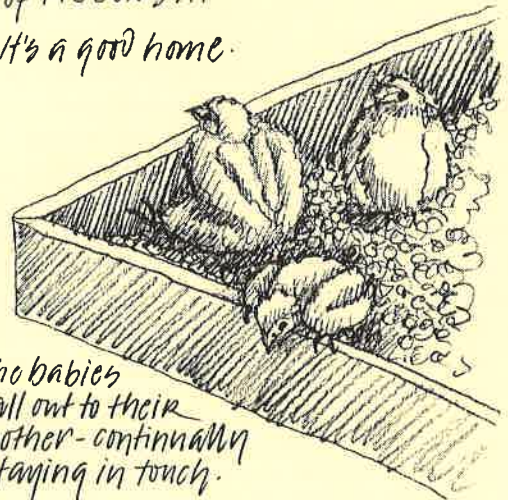


a mother peregrine falcon perched on a long stick attached to a sand filled nesting box. she keeps a close eye on her chicks.

#### FALCONS IN NEW YORK

Brought back from the edge of extinction, peregrine falcons now thrive in the cities - a world of high stone cliffs & deep canyons... and plenty of food to hunt in the form of PIGEONS...

It's a good home.



The babies call out to their mother - continually staying in touch.

# Beowulf Rides the Range

## Using the Nature Imagery in Old and Middle English Poetry

by Jordan Clary

WHEN I THINK ABOUT THE POET WHO HAS MOST influenced me, the answer is usually: Anonymous. The first time I remember coming across Anonymous was in the Middle English lyric:

Westron wind, where wilt thou blow,  
The small rains down shall rain.  
Christ, that my love were in my arms,  
And I in my bed again.

Anonymous intrigued me. Who had he been? A lover? A traveling bard? A young man, vital or dying? I believed that the writer of “Western Wind” was male, just as later I would read lyrics that would speak to me in a female voice. Part storyteller, part lyricist, Anonymous had many faces, many voices. Old and Middle English poetry led me into an ancient world of adventure and travel where waves battered rocky cliffs and monsters devoured warriors. I believe it was this poetry that also first inspired my love of the sea.

Last fall I was asked to do a series of poetry workshops for Janesville Elementary School in Janesville, California, for the River of Words art and poetry contest there, coordinated by Becky Thompson. Former poet laureate Robert Hass originated River of Words (a nationwide project) as a way for communities to learn about their local watersheds. It’s an idea I am especially attracted to because it connects poetry to the tangible world of nature, and also teaches students about the biology, ecology, and history of their area.

I had recently been re-reading poems from *The Exeter Book* and decided to use some of these poems and *Beowulf* as a springboard for nature writing. *The Exeter Book* contains the largest extant collection of Old English poetry and is believed to have been copied circa 970–90. The original manuscript is still housed in the Exeter Cathedral Library. Nature images permeate Old English poetry. To the wanderer on the sea, the only sound the wind carries is the cry of a lone seagull. The waves are violent and the weather is always cold. Anglo-Saxon England was a landscape defined by the elements. Yet I found the poetry challenging as well. Our modern concept of nature writing would have likely seemed strange to an Old English poet. It wasn’t until much later, with the Romantics, that nature began to be personified and idealized. Old English poetry generally presents nature as a challenge to be overcome rather than an idyllic symbol of beauty.

---

JORDAN CLARY lives in southern California, where she works as a poet-in-the-schools and as a private instructor. She has published poetry and nonfiction in *Red Rocks*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and other publications.

---

I also wasn’t sure how the two worlds of Old England and the contemporary American West would merge. Janesville is located in the high desert, a dry land where rocks crack in the summer sun and strong winds blow tumbleweed across the lawn in front of the school. Would the misty seacoast of “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer” inspire these students to create their own landscape images?

At the time, I was a writer-in-residence at two other local schools, Credence Continuation High School and The Community Day School, a small school for boys on probation. I decided to try out Old English poetry and nature writing on the teenagers first.

We began by discussing the area’s main watershed, Honey Lake. During dry years, Honey Lake exists only as mud flats, but in its current state, after several winters of heavy rains, it appears as a pristine lake stretching nearly twenty miles from Highway 395 to the base of the Skedaddle Mountains. Local legend has it that a tall person can practically walk across it without going under. Honey Lake was once part of Lake Lahotan, a huge inland sea stretching from Oregon and California through much of Nevada and Utah. It’s a watershed with a rich history: petroglyphs and artifacts abound, and legends from the Paiute and Modoc peoples of the area tell of battles fought and civilizations that have come and gone on its shores. The first settlement of Europeans was on the shores of Honey Lake, until dry years sent them farther north, to the Susan River.

I passed out a copy of my own translation of “The Wanderer” and a copy of Ezra Pound’s translation of “The Seafarer.” My treatment of “The Wanderer” is a fairly literal, rough rendition of the poem. I sacrificed much of the alliteration and rhythm that define Old English poetry. Pound’s marvelous translation, on the other hand, captures the essence of the poem while incorporating the alliteration and “feel” of the poet’s voice. The students first read through the translations on their own. Next I read aloud certain verses that emphasize the natural world, such as:

. . . Storms battered the stony slope,  
Falling snow storm binds the earth,  
The tumult of winter  
When the dark one comes.  
The shadow of night grows dark,  
Sends from the north a fierce hail storm  
To the vexation of men.  
All the kingdom of earth is full of hardship.  
The ordained course of events changes the world under the  
heavens.



I then read the beginning of Pound's translation of "The Seafarer":

May I for my own self song's truth reckon.  
Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days  
Hardship endured oft.  
Bitter breast-cares have I abided,  
Known on my keel many a care's hold,  
And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent  
Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship's head  
While she tossed close to cliffs. Coldly afflicted,  
My feet were by frost benumbed.  
Chill its chains are; chafing sighs  
Hew my heart round and hunger begot  
Mere-weary mood. Lest man know not  
That he on dry land loveliest liveth,  
List how I, care-wretched, on ice-cold sea,  
Weathered the winter, wretched outcast  
Deprived of my kinsmen;  
Hung with hard ice-flakes where hail-scur flew,  
There I heard naught save the harsh sea  
And ice-cold wave, at whiles the swan cries,  
Did for my games the gannet's clamor,  
Sea-fowls' loudness was for me laughter,  
The mews' singing all my mead-drink.  
Storms, on the stone-cliffs beaten, fell on the stern  
In icy feathers; full oft the eagle screamed  
With spray on his pinion.

For those of us who have been enchanted by these works, the poems' technicalities are only one part of the spell cast by Old English poetry. The poems create places where myth and history blend. They come from a time when poetry was spoken rather than written. For a glimpse into contemporary spoken poetry, I questioned James, a young Mexican-Native American from the Community Day School who hated writing but who could invent a spontaneous two-to-three-minute rap on nearly any subject. "They call me 'Music' in my group home," James had told me earlier. "I'm who they come to if they want something real said, whether it be a love poem for their girlfriend or an admonition to a little brother. They know I can do it 'cause I'm Music."

"So where do you get your words," I asked him in class, "when someone asks you to rap something for them?"

James shrugged. "I don't know how to explain it. It's like I get a sense of the person and the words just come to me."

"Do you know that if you'd been born in a different time you would have held an honored place in your community? This would have been your job, creating stories and poems and telling them to your people."

"My uncle does it, too," James said. "Only his is different. He don't do rap. It's more story-like."

This led to a discussion of how poetry is memorized and rendered from one telling to another. Rap is held in memory by its rhyme; Old English by alliteration and patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. Each line of poetry is divided into two half-lines with three or four stressed syllables and several unstressed syllables.

For the writing assignment I told students to choose an emotion and, without naming it, to write a description of nature



that would express that feeling. I told them to incorporate alliteration if they wanted to. Rick Baker, a young man who had been in my classes for two years and who usually wrote pieces with lines such as "dark shadows plague my sleep, running my mind ragged with their incessant jabbering," wrote:

The setting sun rested blissfully on the soft silky horizon  
The colors flowed across the sky like the graceful brush strokes  
of a talented painter.  
The gentle wind whispered and caressed the clouds into colorful  
cotton  
moving gently across the evening sky.  
Oranges and reds, purples and pinks all faded fast  
into deep blue shadows, silky and sensuous  
danced across the mountains and valleys.  
The land was drenched deliriously in colorful bliss  
then it faded, all of it, into deep blue and purple.

Tandi LaRae wrote:

The leaves swirl  
at a ferocious speed.  
The wind picks up,  
strangling you,  
gnawing at your face.  
Your eyes water  
and your breath catches  
your throat.

One of the great rewards of teaching is the surprises that it offers, the quiet student who creates magic or the hostile one who suddenly finds she has something to say. James's raps were among those rewards, although he always pointedly refused to commit anything to paper. That day, the magic came from Amanda Harlow, a new student most of the kids shunned. Amanda wore thick glasses and had long hair that hung over her face. Sometimes she made strange verbal outbursts or would ramble on about unrelated topics. She lived in one of the group homes out in the desert far from town, and was not destined for popularity. She usually sat by herself near the front of the room, often sketching in a spiral-bound notebook. That day, Amanda wrote the following poem:

A tree, a desert  
An image in water, pure  
Shimmering and cool.  
The sky high above  
Favors a ruddy color  
Like death  
Humbled tree branches

Bare, pale under the sky's view  
Bent in its defeat  
Yet held just above  
The water-tree position  
Favored but beaten  
Knowing no sorrow  
The tree holds its withered place  
For time yet to come.

That poem brought attention to Amanda, which inspired her to create more fine pieces throughout the year. I made a broadside of it and hung it in the hall. A few weeks later when the performers for the Poetry Alive! group came to the school, they asked her to autograph a copy.

The next week two students, Tandi LaRae and Rob Brocksen, accompanied me to a fourth grade class in Janesville. We read short selections from "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer." I also paraphrased the story of *Beowulf*, the Old English epic about the life and death of the Geatish warrior called Beowulf, who travelled across the sea to help the Danish king rid himself of a monster. I focused on Beowulf's fight with the monsters Grendel and Grendel's mother, reading the description of the mere where they lived (a *mere* can be a pond, a lake, a marsh, or an arm of the sea):

They occupied the secret land, the wolf slopes, the windy headlands, the terrible fen passage where the mountain stream goes downwards under the dark cliff, under the torrent of earth. It is not far hence in miles that the mere stands, over which hangs the rime-covered grove. The wood, firm in roots, overshadows the water.

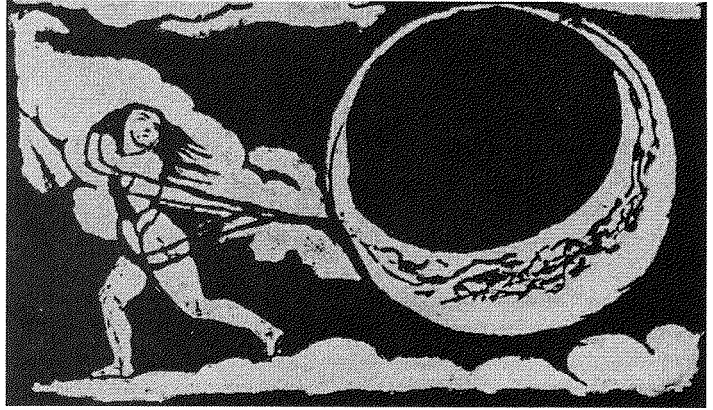
(trans. Jordan Clary)

We talked about alliteration and brainstormed a list of descriptive words and alliterative pairs, which I wrote on the board. I asked the students to choose a body of water they were familiar with. This could be the area's main watershed, Honey Lake, or one of the other local lakes or streams that run through the high desert. If they still could not get started, I told them to imagine themselves as a body of water, or as an animal who used the water, and then to write from that perspective. Personification came easily to these students. I was surprised at the large number of them who chose to become the object they wrote about, as in:

In the spring, the smell of fragrant tulips all around me.  
Colors of the rainbow on me after it rains—purple, blue and red.  
The fish in me splashing and playing.  
Trees and flowers whisper in the wind.  
The deer and antelope drink from me.  
Rain hits me like a thousand little rocks.  
I am the Susan River flowing in the wind.

—Nichol Shaver

In the spring the rain falls. My red berries smell ever so sweet in the morning. Rain drops still on the red berries with their sweet fragrance. The rain tingles the berries all over. The berries are talking to each other asking when will the next rain fall? Then the rain comes again. The berries cheer and laugh. When the



rain ends, birds eat my berries. What am I? I am a bush, a green luscious bush.

—Chelsea Harmon

Water holds a special place in the high desert. Nearly all the students had vivid memories of driving into the nearby mountains to swim or fish in one of the area's lakes. Eagle Lake, a pristine alkaline lake surrounded by pine-covered mountains, is equal in beauty and nearly equal in size to its more famous neighbor Lake Tahoe, 150 miles to the southwest. Eagle Lake was a favorite topic for many of the students, including Kelli Hallam:

Eagle Lake is like a bowl of soup to animals. It has green leaves like vegetables. Animals come and drink from it. It's surrounded with flowers. When it rains, it smells like wet grass. When the waters run the animals bathe in it. The trees sway when the wind blows. The animals love to swim in the shade. The animals love the colors of the leaves: red, green, and orange. After the long day they lie down on the grass and rest.

Later that spring I discovered another dimension to Old English poetry, through an unexpected channel—cowboy poetry. As part of my residency, I invited a local cowboy poet, Russ Collier, to do a performance at Credence High School and at the Community Day School. I wasn't sure how the students would react to Russ. Most of them had cultivated tough exterior personae. Many lived in group homes or foster homes. A high percentage had been sent to this rural area by courts in Oakland or San Francisco, to "straighten them out." Their music was rap, heavy metal, Goth. Most scorned country music and cowboys—those were for the kids who went to the "real" high school down the road. Yet within a matter of minutes Russ, with his easy manner and off-color jokes, had these city kids laughing and participating in the performance. Russ and James (Music) formed an instant connection with their love of wordplay and rhyming poetry. "A cowboy rapper" is what James called Russ.

During his introduction, Russ spoke of the way poetry travels, and about how many traditional cowboy poems could be traced to the sailors and pirates who came to the New World. Russ recited cowboy poems and old seafaring songs. Some poems were in fact nearly identical to the old seafaring songs, the only difference being the words *desert* or *prairie* were substituted for *ocean*. As he spoke, verses from "The

Wanderer” and “The Seafarer” flitted through my mind. I realized that I had considered the career of Anonymous to have ended hundreds of years ago, when in fact he or she was alive and well in isolated pockets of folk arts around the world.

That afternoon I bought a collection of cowboy poetry that Russ had recommended. Like Old English poetry, many cowboy poems tell of isolation and long nights alone with the elements while longing for some ephemeral comfort only half-remembered. The following verses from the poem “The Blizzard” by Eugene Ware, who is said to have written it “way back in the 1860s,” carry some of the flavor of Old English seafaring poems:

It was midnight at the Cimarron  
Not many a year ago;  
The blizzard was whirling pebbles and sand  
And billows of frozen snow.

He sat on a bale of harness,  
In a dugout roofed with clay;  
The wolves overhead bewailed  
In a dismal protracted way;

They peeped down the adobe chimney,  
And quarreled and sniffed and clawed,  
But the fiddler kept on with his music  
As the blizzard stalked abroad;

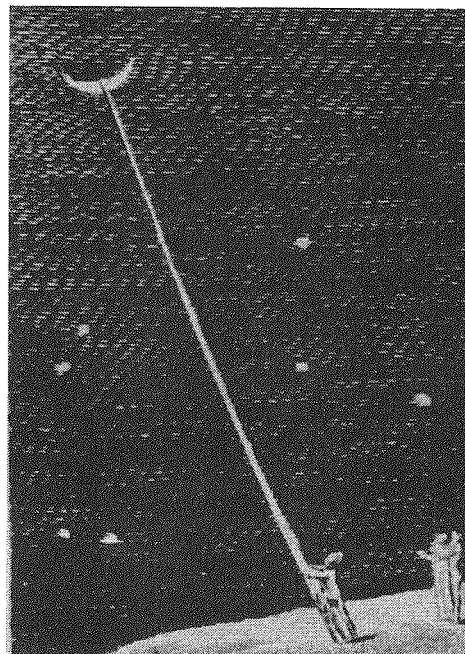
And time and again, that strange refrain  
Came forth in a minor key:  
“No matter how long the river,  
The river will reach the sea!”

From there it was an easy leap to imagine Beowulf as a cowboy. He rode a ship instead of a bronco, but the swaggering attitude, the love of adventure for adventure’s sake, and the strict codes of honor all had correlatives in the American West. Perhaps the Old West was not so far removed from the concept of the blood feud as we are today. Dragons and monsters such as Grendel seldom show up in cowboy poetry, but giant oxen, whirlwinds of mythic proportions, and talking animals that lead lonely cowboys astray are all common fare—as is the devil, who appears in this anonymous rendition called “Hell in Texas”:

The devil in Hades we’re told was chained,  
And there for a thousand years remained.  
He did not grumble nor did he groan.  
But determined to make a hell of his own  
Where he could torture the souls of men  
Without being chained in that poisoned pen. . . .

He put thorns on the cactus and horns on the toads  
And scattered tarantulas along the road.  
He gave spiral springs to the bronco steed  
And a thousand legs to the centipede.

And all will be mavericks unless they bore  
Thorns and scratches and bites by the score.  
The sand burrs prevail and so do the ants,  
And those who sit down need half soles on their pants.



Oh, the wild boar roams the black chaparral.  
It’s a hell of a place he’s got for hell.

*(This rendition recited by Roy Green of Shandon, California)*

Even the concept of fate, in Old English poetry called *wyrd*, shows up frequently in cowboy poems. In one called “Like It or Not,” contemporary cowboy poet Bill Simpson tells of an old buckaroo who talks “About drinkin’ and fightin’! / An’ ridin’ em hard! / About fate he called luck! / In the turn of a card.” Like Old English poetry, cowboy poetry uses the harsh elements of the natural world to provide a backdrop for its lyrics and narratives. In both, the natural world is often in opposition to the characters in it. Authors in both genres use natural images to speak of loneliness, struggle, and isolation. The forlorn wail of the wind, whether blowing across the empty prairie or the open sea, echoes through them both.

### Bibliography

- Abrams, M. H., editor. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Sixth Edition, Volume 1. New York: Norton, 1993. (Includes excerpts from *Beowulf*, “The Seafarer,” and “The Wanderer.”)
- Cannon, Hal, editor. *Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering*. Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, Inc., 1985.
- Cassidy, F. J. and Richard Ringler, editors. *Bright’s Old English Grammar & Reader*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.
- Pound, Ezra and Marcella Spann, editors. *Confucius to Cummings: An Anthology of Poetry*. New York: New Directions, 1964.



# Shaping Longer Works of Fiction

by Meredith Sue Willis

**M**OST OF US ARE NOT PREPARED EVEN AS adults for a big task like a master's thesis or the novel we always wanted to write. We may be very good at writing, but the long haul has special requirements. We may start with a period of enthusiasm and inspiration that carries us well into the Big Project, but that first excitement often dies out at some point, and we are left with the daunting tasks of continuing and completing. This chapter makes no promises about helping you finish that novel or thesis, but it will offer some advice and help for writing longer works.

I also believe that seeing the Big Picture and completing a Big Project are skills that can be transferred to other areas of endeavor. Some teachers teach these skills by having their classes tackle yearlong projects. Research in Mayan culture or the life cycle of butterflies allows students to learn how to plan and how to use previous work to enrich new work, as well as how to follow their natural interests and develop new ones.

Some teachers have their students pursue personal writing as the Big Project. These long-term writing projects typically include memoir, autobiography, and biography—life stories. I have been in classrooms where the walls were covered with photos of the students as babies, as well as autobiographical essays and newspaper reports from the days of the students' births together with collections of poems and stories about the events of their lives. Adult writers often write their first long work in the form of an autobiographical novel—a fictionalization of their own life experiences. The Life Story, like the dream, has a structure everyone seems to understand intuitively. The shape is obvious: origins and birth, childhood, young adulthood, middle age, old age, and (for biographies though not autobiographies) death. It is an organic structure that can organize our writing and give grandeur to our memories.

## Novel Writing as a Classroom Project

The Story Building sessions stimulate and structure a lengthier piece of writing. To turn these pieces into a novel involves exercises and assignments that propel the story farther into the future. Younger students may never have thought of writing a novel: for them, a Novel Writing project gives practice in planning over time, thinking about time, and working in a sustained way. This approach is not about The Novel as The Monumental Accomplishment of Genius, but rather about the novel as a creative endeavor that looks at long-term human behavior. Novel Writing projects can work with groups of students or with an

entire class. You can also, of course, do it alone. The same exercises, with little or no adaptation, can be used by the adult writer who needs to get restarted or to move forward. They can also give some shape to those treasure troves of fragments that writers collect.

I worked with seventh graders at the Bragaw Avenue School in Newark, New Jersey, on a Novel Writing project that lasted more than two months. We began with a couple of sessions in which everyone tried several possible ways to begin a novel:

- Writing Idea:** Start with real-life situations such as peer pressure to steal, family problems, etc.
- Writing Idea:** Start with something that really happened when you were younger, then change it (i.e., fictionalize it).
- Writing Idea:** Start with an interesting place. You can bring people in later.
- Writing Idea:** Write physical descriptions of three very different characters.

### From a novel by Shaunte Saunders:

A lawyer: Miss Shandell Walker is 22 years old. She is light skinned with long black hair that swings back and forth when she walks. She is very tall and thin, about 6'3". When she wears heels, she is even taller. She loves to dress up, so when you see her, she is always wearing sharp suits made to only fit her. She lives in a mansion, with a swimming pool in her backyard. She has no kids, so she invited her family to go over whenever they want to. Her parents and family members say she is an outgoing person, and they're right. . . .

After trying several "Starts," choose the one you like best and do these assignments to get deeper into the story.

- Writing Idea:** Put the characters in a scene in which they have to interact.
- Writing Idea:** Make the characters have a dialogue.
- Writing Idea:** Describe a setting (place) that you will add to the beginning of the story.

In the following example, the material added later is in italics:

### The beginning of *Disappearing People* by Umara Campbell

*The classroom looked like a big room with dark floors and big lights in the ceiling. The desks were old-fashioned with a lot of writing on them. The closet doors were darkish brown with language/reading pictures on them. The air was kind of cold and the outside was sunny with dark clouds and a lot of fog in the air like the streets of France.*

It was February 11 in Room 315 at Bragaw. Everyone was in class. It was quiet and dull—not much light and a dark floor. The class was doing reading comprehensive questions.

---

MEREDITH SUE WILLIS teaches creative writing at New York University. She has published six novels and a collection of short stories, as well as three books on teaching writing (*Personal Fiction Writing*, *Blazing Pencils*, and *Deep Revision*, all published by T&W).

---

Suddenly the closet doors start rumbling and shaking and everyone begins to turn around in shock. When the doors of a sudden stopped, the lights in the room started to bust and the room went pitch dark, then everyone started screaming. Kim said, "Mrs. Decree what is happening?" Then out of nowhere a light shined or it was really like a beam, with a deep voice which said please leave the school or mysterious things will begin to disappear—even children or people. . . .

Next came some assignments on how to extend the story. These don't have to be written in any particular order, although you may want them in chronological order after you have drafted the story.

- **Writing Idea:** Write what happened "One month later. . . ."
- **Writing Idea:** Write what happened "One year later. . . ."
- **Writing Idea:** Write what happened "Ten years later. . . ."
- **Writing Idea:** Write a part with lots of action.

#### From a science-fiction novel by Sean Williams:

. . . I ran down the hall hitting all the light switches but nothing happened. I ran in Mrs. White's room. And the Green Eyed Monster didn't see which room I went in. He walked right past, chasing Mrs. Thomas. I hid behind Mrs. White's desk. I needed a plan. So I climbed up to the light post. I cut it and put a rope on it. I was ready to attack. The monster came in the classroom sniffing around. He got right under the light and I pulled the string and it crashed his head and he fell. I got up and looked at his body and for some reason he wasn't there.

I heard a book fall off the shelf. I looked back and saw about 20,000 little men with green eyes smile at me. . . .

- **Writing Idea:** Write a crucial dialogue from the middle of the novel.
- **Writing Idea:** Write an important scene near the end.

#### From *A Friend's Betrayal* by Kia Saunders

"Pull your van over," said the policeman, but Maurice just kept driving crazy. We were telling him to stop, but he didn't. The cops caught us and arrested Maurice.

Later on the following month, we heard Maurice was in jail. Two weeks later Maurice had a visitor. It was his friend, Shakeetah, and Maurice had a long talk with her. Towards the end of their conversation, it was not nice.

"If I had the money, I would bail you out," said Shakeetah.

"No you wouldn't," said Maurice. "You and the others are no kind of friends. But that is OK 'cause when I get out (pause) I am gonna bust a cap in your grill. Enjoy your life while you can. . . ."

- **Writing Idea:** Write your last page.
- **Writing Idea:** Write your first page.

Larger structures generally need a kind of simplicity to support their weight and to help both reader and writer keep the whole thing in mind. This is why I like assignments like "Write your first page," which are at once very specific and totally open-ended.

After drafting several scenes, the assignment for the Bragaw Avenue School students became essentially to *Go On; Keep Writing*. Students who had been out sick caught up, and students who had lots to write kept writing. I began at the same

time doing one-on-one conferences in revision. The final step was book production.

Because we had limited access to the computer room and the classes were small, I acted as first-draft typist. I typed up the first several sections of each story before the end of the project because I wanted my students to begin seeing their work in something like its final form. The typed versions (thanks to the computer) became an important part of revision and were a great incentive to those who had never before seen their work in any finished form.

Despite the fact that some of these students were at risk in a dozen different ways—from the drugs on their streets to early pregnancy to a looming standardized test—editing their own novels engrossed them. They changed titles and pored over their author's notes at the end. They learned proofreader's marks from their classroom teacher and indignantly pointed out my typos. I worked with them individually, discussing word choice, how to extend, add settings, and use conversation form instead of dialogue form. We discussed the convention of standard English in the narrative text and street forms in dialogue, within quotation marks.

Here is an example from one:

#### A Conflict over Ibn

By Latoya C. Spruill

*This book is dedicated to my cousins.*

#### Chapter 1

Ibn gets married to Latoya . . .

*One day, one summer day on the side of the garage in a violent neighborhood.*

It was seven of my friends: Ibn, Bo, Nu-nu, Feezah, Tisha, Taneesha, and Baby Girl. We were all just sitting on the side of the garage. I used to like Ibn, so we used to say we go together. At this time I was 9 years old. I didn't know what girlfriend and boyfriend meant. Well anyway, we were all just sitting there doing nothing. When all of a sudden Ibn asked to marry me, I paused but said, "Yes," with confidence. So we started picking up those flowers with the yellow things around it, and got married. When Taneesha said, "You may kiss the bride." I was shy. Next thing you know a girl named Asia came over and said, "Ibn, come here." Everyone said, "No, they're getting married." "Getting married? No, they ain't getting married cause I go with Ibn!" said Asia. "No, you don't," said Ibn. Asia got very mad and hot. Asia was the bully around where I lived so everyone ran no-stopping. . . .

As we went into the revision sessions, I had the students brainstorm ideas for how to improve their writing, and we generated a list that I typed and handed out to each student.

• **Writing Idea:** Make a list of things to do to make your novel better:

- Divide it into chapters.
- Give the chapters titles.
- Put in quotation marks to make it easy to understand who is talking.
- Put in "tags" to show how the people are saying what they say.
- Trade novels with someone and check for spelling and punctuation.
- Change names from real people's names to fictional ones.

- Have several people read your beginning. Ask them if they want to keep reading? Ask them if they really mean it or are being nice.
- Do you have a conflict? Can you say what it is?

•**Writing Idea:** Do some of them!

As we added and deleted and corrected spelling errors, I used the opportunity to ask the students if they had figured out what was going to happen at the end of their novels. Some of them had the shape of their entire novels mapped out in mind already. Shaunte gave me a five-minute verbal sketch of hers, but Cory did not seem to have any idea of where his was going. I said, “Well, let’s think a minute. What might happen next?” His eyes flickered from side to side, and then he smiled. “I know,” he said. “The boy is going to jail, and then he’ll get out of jail, and get his revenge.” Had Cory figured it out in that fraction of a second under pressure? Likely—he’s a boy who probably thinks best on his feet. But the question challenged him, and he came up with his completed story line.

These seventh graders’ novels were not 300-page manuscripts, but they did use novelistic techniques, and the students worked hard for the duration of the project. I was not only seeking good description and lively conversation, but also a commitment on the part of the writers to work with an idea of past and future, and a concern for the consequences of actions. This large scope and span is part of what gives a novel its special flavor. I wanted these seventh graders to plan and try out different possible endings, to think about causes and effects. Several of the girls made the future into a fantasy of married happiness; a number of boys ended with violent climaxes. Zachary McDaniel ended with a dream of the past:

About two months later, Jim was in his favorite chair. Jim fell asleep. He started to dream. Jim remembered when he was a little boy in his backyard playing ball. His older brother came outside and said, “Let’s get a game.” So they started to play, and he took out. He started to drive to the hole. He jumped and shot. Block! His brother destroyed his shot. They both laughed and then he tried it one more time, but this time he scored. He had beaten his brother for the first time in his life.

The End.

## Novel Writing for Adults

The adults who take my classes at New York University are self-starters. They have chosen to use their time—often after a long day of work—to write books. I am full of admiration for their energy in taking this on. Some of these adult writers have a plot idea that they hope will sell as popular fiction. Others have stories and material from their lives that they feel compelled to tell. Some have taken writing classes in high school and college and use the novel-writing class as a place to get feedback, and perhaps as a touchstone in a lifelong commitment to writing.

Usually what an aspiring adult novelist needs most is the support of peers and a teacher plus ideas for structuring. While the few pages here are not a course, they do suggest ideas for getting on with your novel. These adult exercises, like those for young writers, use the basic elements of fiction. It is also important to learn that sometimes you move forward best by writing a number of high points, then filling in later. The assignments here leapfrog through a projected book, and this

## 14 • Teachers & Writers

leapfrogging ideally offers the writer some tentative ideas for giving the novel form.

I begin with Place for many of the same reasons I do with younger students—the process of slowing down and mulling over a description—although this writing does not have to be at the very beginning of the book. *Rather, it is a place that the main character enters and observes.* This allows the writer to explore the character further as well as to create a setting.

The second assignment is to *describe a minor character.* Both these first assignments should focus on the senses, especially the ones other than sight. The third assignment begins the leapfrogging. This assignment is to write about another appearance of that *same minor character much later in the novel.* This assignment furthers the plot by exploring a minor character’s function. It projects the writer deeper into the work. It is extremely freeing as you work on any long project to realize that you need not go in the same precise order that the work will eventually be read. Often, by working on the high points, you discover less interesting parts you can skip. You create an archipelago of scenes that you can connect later or even leave without explicit transitions.

After the second appearance of a minor character from the novel, I ask my adult students to write *a passage from the middle of the novel, inside the main character’s head, while an action is under way.* This can be internal monologue, stream of consciousness, internal third person (also called “the Reflector”), or other. Sometimes I suggest an ordinary action—a kiss, running to catch a plane—but it can be any combination of thinking and acting.

Next I assign a short scene *from somewhere in the middle of the novel.* This scene should have both dialogue and conflict. Conflict can, of course, be overt, subtle, interior, or other. I ask the students to make the scene a little longer than they think it should be. They can always cut later, and they might, by pushing themselves, come up with something interesting that they didn’t know yet. Scenes, often with dialogue at the heart, are the essential material of novels, the basic building block. In poems, the line may be most important, but in novels, it is the short action or scene, which usually but not always involves two or more people. Scenes are the explicitly dramatized parts of the novel, as distinguished from narrative and from long passages of description or internal monologue.

After perhaps writing two or three such scenes, the students draft an outline. Outlines work best after a substantial number of pages have been written. I like to use an outline as a tool to get a grip on the material I’ve drafted so far. The outline can be any form: chapter titles, scene treatment, flow chart, webbing, etc. The next assignment is *a complete scene from the second half of the novel* using dialogue, action, narration—in other words, a scene combining the elements of fiction.

Further assignments, in class and out, might include some of the following:

•**Writing Idea:** Have a character view the contents of her or his refrigerator.

•**Writing Idea:** Write page 267 of your novel. You have no idea what is going to be happening on page 267? After you write it, you will!

•**Writing Idea:** Describe a drawing that would be chosen for the frontispiece of your novel if it were illustrated—that is, an image of some emblematic scene that would attract a reader to the story.

•**Writing Idea:** Write a scene in which a character is seen at a great distance, as part of a place, like a long shot in film.

•**Writing Idea:** Do the same thing, but with a close-up.

•**Writing Idea:** Write the last important dialogue in your novel.

•**Writing Idea:** Write a friendly review of your finished novel.

Ideally, the student of this novel-writing course would end the semester with quite a few sections and scenes scattered through the book, plus an outline. The writing from these exercises will not necessarily end up in the final version. Rather, they are intended to jump-start the author from vague ideas to a written first draft. They are aimed at getting the beginning author to imagine the novel as a whole thing.



## Q & A: Using Nonfiction as a Resource for Imaginative Writing

by Rhonda Zangwill, with  
Kristin Prevallet

*In her residency at P.S. 116 in Queens, T&W writer Kristin Prevallet used journalistic and historical narratives—nonfiction—to inspire her students to write imaginatively.*

**QUESTION:** How do you use the children’s existing social studies curriculum—in this case, World War II—to teach writing?

**KRISTIN PREVALLET:** I use first-person eyewitness accounts of the war—journalism and oral histories—mostly taken from the Library of America book, *Reporting World War II*. Since the texts can be long and complicated, I use a technique called “active reading.” As I read a passage aloud, I have the students reimagine the text in their heads and at the same time underline everything that they understand, anything that really pops out at them. We then do an “I See” exercise. I ask the kids to write poems based on what they reimaged, what they visualized in the original text.

**QUESTION:** How do you move the students beyond the literal text?

**KP:** Well, I tell them that they are not simply copying what the writer wrote. Instead they are reading it, visualizing it, trying to write things down as they see them in their heads. Of course, just as in regular poetry workshops, students use the language of model poems to write their own poems. That’s how you get them to think about language, visual language. That’s also how you get kids to write interestingly—you give them a text that’s a little beyond them and they mimic the flow, mimic the language, mimic some words. Some of my students took what they initially visualized and then made up a whole stories.

**QUESTION:** Some of the themes—the Holocaust, or the bombing of Hiroshima—can be overwhelming. Do you have any special strategies for getting students to write about such themes?

**KP:** I use an exercise from *The Story in History* by Margot Fortunato Galt (T&W, 1992) that works very well. When we are dealing with something that is so big, almost too much to manage, I ask the students to look at it through the eyes of an animal, perhaps a stray animal walking through a concentration camp. At P.S. 116, we read an extremely powerful account of a journalist who witnessed the bombing of Nagasaki from a boat. He wrote about it in vivid detail, describing it as something like a monster being let loose. We talked about his descriptions and then I had them personify the bomb. I also brought in photographs and had the students “read” them. They had to pretend the photos were like a text and made lists that described every single thing that they saw. The next exercise was that they were reporters on the scene. Using the lists—and their imaginations—they wrote the story of the events leading up the scene in the photograph.

**QUESTION:** Did you talk about the difference between journalistic and creative writing?

**KP:** The journalists we read all describe things in very poetic language. At the very beginning I asked the students, “Who they think writes history books?” and “What is the difference between history books and oral history?” They understood instantly that oral histories are by people who were actually there. But I really don’t make a separation between the texts we read and creative writing, and the writing that the kids did was creative writing. We used metaphor, personification, vivid language. And most of the exercises we did are exactly the same as I would use in more traditional poetry residencies. I just used different readings—nonfiction texts.

---

KRISTIN PREVALLET is poet and essayist. She has worked with Teachers & Writers for three years. RHONDA ZANGWILL, a freelance writer, also teaches through T&W.

---