

The Ordinary World

There's a great power of imagination about these little creatures, and a creative fancy and belief that is very curious to watch.

William Makepeace Thackeray

One of the great pleasures of spending time with young children is that 'these little creatures' are so different from ourselves. They live in another world because they see things in a completely different way, and the way they see things isn't something they have learned from us; it's their own natural substance.

We are not born a clean slate on which the ability to think and understand things rationally is gradually written. Our lives and personalities are not built, block by block, on worldly experience alone.

Babies in the womb display all the physical signs of dreaming, and so it seems that the dream is there first, before mother and father, family, culture. We are born out of the dream and emerge, still cocooned, into the magical world of childhood, where teddies can talk, fairies grant wishes and monsters hide in the shadows.

As long as we are young enough to feel protected by the magical power of our parents, and by our own magical powers, we can stay in that shape-shifting world, but we soon become aware that in the grown-up world the magic doesn't work.

Then we want and need to leave the dream and learn to think like an adult, to understand the rules of the ordinary world that everybody shares, so that we can survive and thrive in it.

I was lying in a shallow ditch. I had no idea how I had got there. The earth underneath me felt warm and grainy, and the sun on my bare arms and legs made my skin tingle...

Life is resonant. Small events set up vibrations in the soul that still reverberate long after the event itself is forgotten. So it was with the ants on a hot summer day in 1955 which, two years later, were to bring me my first understanding of dreams.

I was making mud pies on the back step, scraping the dry earth into my bucket, adding water from the dribbling outdoor tap and stirring the mixture like my mother did when she made fairy cakes for tea. I spooned it out in sloppy dollops onto the hot concrete and, by the time I had found enough small stones for cherries, my mud pies were already drying out, going hard and pale at the edges.

My mother was at the kitchen sink doing the washing. The hankies were boiling on the stove and she had the back door open to let the steam out. My father was mowing the grass. I could hear the whirr-whirr of the blades behind me as he pushed the mower up and down. My big sister Susan was riding her bike, bumping and rattling along the path that ran down the side of the garden to the wooden gate at the bottom.

Our garden was a large patch of scrubby grass, featureless except for a washing-line and a compost heap in the far corner comprised entirely of grass cuttings. On one side, a chain-link fence separated the garden from next door's identical one, and then another chain-link fence, and another, all the way to the main road. On the other side, a tall hedge hid the flower beds and orchards that surrounded the big bungalow at the end of the close.

We heard Monica calling but we couldn't see her over the hedge. Susan ran down to the gate. I ran after her. I always followed although Susan never asked me to and sometimes I ended up wishing I hadn't. I hoped Monica wouldn't have her doctor's set with her because, if she did, they would make me be the patient. They would take me to secret places and hold me down. Susan would wield the syringe, of course – she was the expert when it came to injections.

We went out of the gate and clambered over the stile into the woods, where Monica was waiting impatiently.

'I've found something!' she said to Susan. 'Come and see.'

I followed them along the dirt path under the trees. Monica was pulling a plank of wood along the ground behind her, tied to a piece of string. I didn't know what it was for, and I didn't like not knowing. Suddenly, Monica stopped.

There was a dead animal lying under the long grass at the side of the path. It had a dribble of dried blood stuck to its face where its eye should.

'What is it?' Susan said.

'I don't know,' said Monica. 'But we're going to pick it up and put it on my sledge.'

They both looked at me.

I was frightened of Monica. She wasn't as big as Susan, but she had bright ginger hair, and her pale face was covered in freckles. She claimed she could eat the skin of oranges, and I had seen her mother do it, her bright red lipstick lips drawn back from her teeth. When I tried to do it myself, I couldn't. Even the fleshy pith was too bitter.

I looked at the animal. I didn't ask why we had to put it on the plank, or where we were going to take it. There were fat flies buzzing around it and ants crawling in and out of its fur. I wanted to run back along the path, but I couldn't see the house from there and I wasn't sure of the way.

My sister flicked at the flies with a bit of bracken.

'Go on then,' she said.

Monica put her hand on her hip, her orange hair gleaming dangerously. Susan's hair was black, in thick curls around her face. They were both much bigger than me. I could feel the ants crawling in the rat's wiry fur as I picked it up.



No one knew about the rat, but here's a photo our mother took at the seaside of me holding another dead animal that Susan and Monica found

The ants crawled out of the rat and surfaced again soon after when I was watching a film on television with my father. The Indians buried the cowboys up to their necks and smeared honey on their faces.

‘Why have they given them honey?’ I asked my dad. ‘Is it to tease them because they can’t reach to lick it up?’

Before he could answer, the ants came and everything became horribly clear.

So the ants crawled out of the rat bringing fear and revulsion, and they came to the honey, and they hurt the cowboys, and then, with fear and revulsion and cruelty, they marched on. They caught up with me two years later, when my family had moved to a suburban street far, far away from the woods.

I was lying in a shallow ditch. I had no idea how I had got there. The earth underneath me felt warm and grainy, and the sun on my bare arms and legs made my skin tingle. I raised my head and looked down at my body. There was an ant on my leg. I stiffened. Suddenly, the ants were everywhere. I wanted to brush them off but I found I couldn’t move. I started to scream.

My mother came rushing into the bedroom.

‘Get them off me!’ I shouted. ‘Make them go away!’

‘What? Get what off you? What’s the matter?’

I couldn’t tell whether my mother was angry or scared, like me.

‘The ants! Get them off me!’

My mother said, ‘There aren’t any ants here. You must have been having a dream.’

What did she mean, there weren’t any ants? I could see them. I could feel them crawling all over me. I started to scream again.

My mother ran out and came back with my dad. He stood in the doorway in his pyjamas, bleary with sleep.

‘Get them off me!’ I yelled.

The ants were everywhere. They were nibbling at my skin. They were eating right through to my bones.

‘What’s going on?’ my father asked talking to my mother, not me.

‘Just tell her there aren’t any ants.’

He nodded, and pulled back the blankets. He said, ‘Look, Jennifer. No ants. There aren’t any ants.’

I couldn’t see them now, but I knew what I had seen, and I knew what I had felt. I knew what every five-year-old knows – that dreams are real. The only

difference between the ants on the rat and the ants in the ditch was that nobody else could see the ants in the ditch. In dreams, you were on your own.

After my mother and father had gone back to bed, I lay there rigid, not daring to move in case the ants came back. Then I did what every child eventually does – I turned my face away from the dream towards the light streaming in from the landing.

I looked away and my dreams disappeared, as dreams will.

I learned that you should feel when writing, not like Lord Byron on a mountain top, but like a child stringing beads in kindergarten, happy, absorbed and quietly putting one bead on after another.

Brenda Ueland

We have to leave the magical world of childhood to live in the ordinary world but it remains our root and essence. Carl Jung said that the dream goes on all the time beneath the surface throughout life, although we only experience it in sleep when the distractions of the dayworld are silenced. James Hillman described it as part of the human psyche, the ‘imaginal layer’ – where reason holds no sway and imagination rules.

We can’t live in it wholly, like young children, but we can reconnect with it once we have fully understood and rooted ourselves in the reality of waking life. The key to reconnecting with the ‘imaginal layer’ of our self through dreams and creative activities is the ability to put our pragmatic, logical, adult way of understanding on hold and think like a child.

The child mind is characterised by curiosity, playfulness, openness and non-judgement; it is infused with a sense of wonder. To engage with dreams in our child mind we need to put aside all thoughts of interpretation, and not allow ourselves to run ahead looking for rational explanations even before we decide which dreams are worth recording, as our adult mind is inclined to do.

To engage with creative work of any kind we need to keep the adult, critical voice out of the way, and allow our inner child to delight in the simple joy of finding out what the story or picture or song wants to be.

Dorothea Brande expresses this brilliantly in her book, *Becoming a Writer*, which was first published in 1934 and is still in print today (that tells you how good it is). She suggests that writers should think of themselves as two people – the spontaneous child and the adult, the artist and the critic – or as a person with two minds, the unconscious and the intellect.

These two people, these two minds, are both essential in becoming a writer, and we need to train them both in their particular skills but keep them apart, not letting the critical intellect interfere before the work of the unconscious is finished but also not letting the unconscious refuse to hand over to the critical process when its work is done.

There are two stages to every piece of writing, and the first is the realm of the spontaneous child. The joy of the first draft is that it doesn't have to be good because you will be redrafting. All you need from your first draft is to find a structure that works and a voice.

The second stage belongs to the critical mind, which shapes, sorts and selects. It decides what is good and tries to make it better. It works on language and style. It doesn't stop until the story is the best it can possibly be.

In my writing workshops I concentrate more on the first stage because I find that's nearly always where people are stuck. They might have been stuck there since school, wanting to write and not being able to get started, or they might have got stuck in the middle of their novel.

Whenever writing gets stuck and for whatever apparent reason – a failure of confidence, a lack of ideas, a problem with structure – it's almost invariably because the writer has run ahead and allowed the critic, or adult mind to interfere too soon.

I think that's the function of writer's block – it forces you to stop trying to take control and start listening again with the open, adventurous mind of a child. Feeling blocked isn't a problem, but part of the creative process.

Carl Jung said that creativity isn't a product of the intellect but rather of the play instinct, and Brenda Ueland captures this idea when she says that when we write we should feel like a child in kindergarten, happily stringing beads.

Writing about your childhood can be a powerful way of remembering how it felt to be in your child mind and that's why, in my writing courses, I teach sessions on autobiography and memoir including one I call Seed Stories.

I had forgotten about the rat on the plank and the ants in the ditch until, somewhere along my writing journey, I came across the idea that three random incidents you remember from your childhood can contain the seeds of all your stories in later life.

They have to be private memories, things no one has ever talked about, so you can be certain they are authentically yours. They can't be the sort of anecdotes people in the family remember and share, because those have a kind of group ownership.

No one in our family except Susan and me knew about the rat, and by the time I remembered it she was long dead. If our parents had known, I'm sure they would not have thought it significant. The same thing goes for my dream about the ants and my third story, which was about the day the vicar came.

Once I had written my three Seed Stories I began to see they do indeed contain the earliest beginnings of several important themes in my life – dreams, death and God. These threads have run through everything: they are both the motivation and the substance of this book.

Here is the exercise, in case you'd like to try it yourself.

Seed Stories

You'll need a pen and paper, a quiet place, about an hour of free time and an open, receptive frame of mind.

Warm-ups

- a) Begin with a warm-up to get the memories flowing.

First write some headings down one side of the paper:

Favourite foods at home

Best and worst school dinners

Favourite toys

Favourite items of clothing

Pets

Holidays/outings

People I liked/admired

People I disliked/ feared

Favourite books

Favourite radio/ TV/ films

Family catch-phrases/ songs

Then jot down the first random things that come into your head for each one, not selecting or censoring. These are notes, just words and phrases, not long-winded descriptions. They can be from any stage of your childhood before the age of about ten, in no particular order. Take ten minutes. Enjoy it!

- b) The second warm-up is to move into writing mode with a few short timed pieces.

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The idea here is that you write for two minutes continuously, keeping your pen moving on the paper, the first things that come into your head on a theme. The reason they're so short is because then you don't have time to ponder and select or, to put it another way, your inner critic can't get a look in.

The timed writing warm-ups in the Seed Stories session are descriptions of childhood places, so choose two or three from this list:

My mother's kitchen

My classroom

My favourite place to play

My grandparents' garden

My childhood bedroom.

This is choosing with your playful mind, not with your intellect, so don't think about which ones will be most appropriate and telling, just which ones you fancy writing about right now. Use all your senses – that's the key to vivid remembering just as it's the key to effective scene-setting in fiction.

Stories

Now that you're in the zone, forget about your warm-ups and write a list of the first random, non-momentous incidents that come to mind from your pre-teen years. Avoid the big familiar stories that have become part of your family's shared history and the ones you have thought about a lot and feel are significant.

Choose three to write about, the first ones that call to you, not worrying about whether they are the best ones. Let yourself be surprised. Spend a maximum of ten minutes on each of them. That's long enough for a first draft, which is basically just about finding the story. You can redraft it later if you want to.

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.

William James

The ordinary world of work and relationships, money and shopping, sports and activities is like the surface of a pond; underneath is the inner life, teeming with stories, themes and images that drive and energise the world above. We are born

out of it and return to it every night in sleep, although we may be barely more aware of it than we are of our own heartbeat.

Recalling and recording dreams is the supreme way of breaking into the inner world, capturing its bright contents and letting them bring colour, depth and meaning to the ordinary world. Writing will do the same thing, and I think that's one hidden reason why so many people want to write.

Because the first stage of writing is so like dreaming, a lot of the quotations I used in my early writing workshops actually came from books about dreaming and one day somebody asked me if I taught workshops on dreams.

I called my first series of dream workshops 'Opening to Dreams' and I had an exciting plan, but I lost my nerve and jettisoned it after the first session because I felt people had come with the assumption that the workshops would be about dream interpretation and, being a bit of a pleaser, I wanted to deliver.

I had been to lots of workshops about dreams as well as working in different interpretative traditions with various experts, and finding meaning had been a regular aspect of my dreaming life for several decades, so I didn't feel unequal to the task; I just felt disappointed.

What I wanted my workshop participants to experience was the excitement of entering the world of imagination like a child, experiencing it directly in all its power, not filtered through ideas and explanations, which are the tools of the ordinary world.

So after that I didn't try to teach dreaming on its own, but along with writing, calling my workshops 'Writing in the House of Dreams', to make it clear from the outset that their primary purpose was creative rather than interpretative.

Dream awareness and writing are both ways of breaking out from our 'rational consciousness' and experiencing 'forms of consciousness entirely different.' A life lived too much on the surface may be haunted by a sense of something missing or lost, forgotten or unrealised, and that's when we may hear the call to dreams.