

## **Beowulf in Brisbane**

### **By Philip Neilsen**

Twenty students sat chatting in small groups on the blinding blue carpet outside the tutorial room. What snippets he heard of their stories suggested small injustices or joys. They took up backpacks and followed him in, to chairs anchored in a semi-circle. The council of wisdom, as he had called it in a whimsical moment of the first week. The Great Books class was diverse – ranging from creative writing students to pilgrims from law and information technology. The idea of reading eight book-length classics was exotic to students reared on a school diet mainly composed of fragments.

“Reading these books will help you understand others better – to live in their shoes for a while. And it will tell you things about yourself too.”

He’d said that in the very first lecture – and he believed it. Two hundred faces had looked back at him with scepticism. Many promises had been made to them. They wanted proof. That was only fair. It was a congregation without a binding faith.

He had read from his lecture notes: “In this subject, just like the warrior Beowulf, you will wrestle with monsters in the form of very long novels and slay dragons by unlocking their secrets. Your warrior’s reward and gold will be the pleasure and insights to be found in the world’s best writing. And at the end of semester you will be able to say, as Beowulf does:

‘We willingly undertook this test of courage,  
Risky a match with the might of the stranger,  
and performed it all.’”

They looked intently at him. It had sounded uplifting when he was writing the lecture at 1.00am. But at least a few were smiling.

“And of course, being a better reader will make you a better writer.”

They had probably heard that one before too. And he repeated the analogy of how you can’t just sit down at a piano and expect to start playing Mozart or jazz. The words went out into the large lecture theatre

and fluttered to the ground, perhaps to rest on a shoulder here and there, like dandruff. He wondered if anyone had dandruff these days. It was unlikely. What was certain was that even in a digital age the motivating dream of most creative writing students was to see their name on a book in a bookstore. Precious few would.

The text today was *Wuthering Heights*. The lecture before the tutorial had been going well – the Kate Bush music video (they liked the music, laughed at the choreography – he pointed out that she was sending herself up – a genius at 19), the PowerPoint images of the moors and Haworth, the Romantically suitable short lives of the four siblings, the return of Heathcliff as avenging entrepreneur in shiny boots to take over the Grange. Then, while mentioning the overlap of Gothic novels and vampire movies he had made an off the cuff joke about crosses:

“It’s amazing how ferocious vampires, capable of acquiring enormous amounts of castle real estate in a very competitive castle market - not to mention being immortal and having superhuman strength and intelligence – are supposed to run away whimpering when confronted with two bits of wood stuck together.”

Generous laughter for a slightly laboured joke. But the promising mood of the lecture hall was shattered by a thin young man of about 25 in a white shirt and dark tie. He stood up and shouted:

“Stop laughing! This is blasphemous!”

Complete silence. Oh shit. The man pointed at him.

“You shouldn’t make jokes about things that are evil.”

The automatic response after years of experience was to go into conciliation mode:

“I agree with you. But I’m sure no one here was mocking religion – I certainly didn’t mean to. We were laughing at superstition.”

The young man stood there rigid with intensity for a few more seconds. Then he grabbed his knapsack and walked quickly up the steps and out of the theatre.

A murmur started and began to build.

“Okay – okay now – back to the lecture. Emily Bronte uses elements of the Gothic genre – to create atmosphere, for example – but *Wuthering Heights* is not a Gothic novel.” He heard himself saying this. The sterile light of the lecture room flashed with images – Emily standing in the rain at Branwell’s funeral, Cathy’s bleeding wrists, the young man’s trembling anger. He and the class conspired to ignore them.

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“That was a dramatic lecture,” he said with forced levity to the tutorial. Sympathetic chuckles.

“There’s lots of fundos on campus,” a laidback boy with long hair said.

“Yes – there are,” he answered, grateful for this small solidarity. “But universities are about questioning your beliefs. I’ve had a student refuse to read a novel because it has pre-marital sex in it.”

More chuckles – but also some wariness.

“What did you do?” asked the laidback boy.

“Well, look - I met Bishop Spong once and asked him what I should do when students refuse to read books on religious grounds. I guess some of you have heard of Spong – he’s a progressive American theologian – his books are best sellers. I thought Spong would say something like ‘you have to respect their views’ – but he said ‘tell them not to be intellectually lazy’. I thought that was a good answer”.

“Is that what you told the pre-marital sex student?” asked a girl at the back.

“More or less. Anyway - how many of you enjoyed reading *Wuthering Heights*?”

Almost all hands went up.

“That’s great! It’s not an easy read – but it gets you involved doesn’t it?”

Nodding - sounds of strong agreement.

“I thought it really sucked.” A girl near the front had spoken with quiet but clear vehemence. A girl who always looked unhappy in these tutorials – who until today had said nothing, for all his coaxing.

“I’m interested to hear that, Belinda. Thanks for being honest. What was your main criticism of it?”

Belinda stared at him. Then she stared at the Penguin Classic that sucked. It lay insolently in front of her. Clearly it managed to rekindle the original animosity that had propelled her into expressing an opinion. Her face was flushed.

“I just, like, hated Cathy. She was just so – selfish!” She glared at him defiantly. “They were *both* so selfish.” She looked down at the book again.

Had she experienced the consequence of another’s selfishness – the offered heart broken? Had a clumsy mini-Heathcliff crossed her path?

“Okay – fair enough. But remember we talked about not discussing the characters as if they were real people - and about not making moral judgements on them. And we agreed to say more than whether we liked them or not.”

She glared at him. He turned and addressed the class.

“Did any of you find the novel made you think about how Romantic love is obsessive and destructive of people? Or did you think it represented love as transcendent of social norms and taboos? Or both.”

“I think the novel doesn’t want us to see everything as right or wrong,” said the girl at the back. “I think it destabilises us trying to do that. It wants us to suspend judgement.”

Before he could compliment the student on this observation, Belinda spoke again.

“If their love thing is so like you said, obsessive and destructive, then that’s the same as being selfish.”

The girl at the back answered her. “But what about when Cathy says ‘I *am* Heathcliff’. Wasn’t that going beyond the selfish? Totally identifying with another person?”

Belinda made a sound of choked off rage. “No - it wasn’t! She just wanted everything – that’s all she’s saying. She wants everything her way and she’s really *selfish*.”

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The tutorial took a detour around the impasse, revived, discussion flowed, Belinda did not speak again. They did a writing exercise – a short passage of description where nature is wild and alien to Lynton, but using Australian landscape elements instead of Yorkshire ones. Several clever scenarios were read aloud to general acclaim. They mimicked the novel’s language with gusto. Belinda did not volunteer to read her work, though he could see that she had written some lines. It looked like the long-haired boy, Michael, was about to read when the hour was up. An accountancy tutor, her students lined up neatly behind her, knocked on the door.

The Great Books class filed out into a world of judgement.

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The path back to his office skirted the top of the hill. The sun had almost gone, and black branches of struggling trees laced the horizon. At this time of year a gusting wind tugged at the hedges. It sent an orange plastic chair scraping along the concrete. But not the sort of weather you could lose your soul in. Even winter here was benevolent. That made the moors seem less threatening – loosened their purchase on the imagination.

He checked his emails. Twelve more in the three hours he’d been wandering the moors with self-absorbed Cathy. Admin and student enquiries. An exhortation to all academic staff to encourage students to fill in the all-important on-line evaluation of teaching survey (upon whose scores lecturers depended for promotion). And a reminder that his examiner’s report for a creative writing MA from another university was due. It was a competent enough novel and a bumbling exegesis, composed of half-digested and second-hand ideas. Planning for his own new novel was at a standstill. He was attempting historical fiction for the first time – the kind of novel he liked to read himself, as well as the kind that won awards. Something set in the past with big themes embroidered on the backdrop – and in the foreground two or three characters who had illicit sex, or witnessed a murder, or discovered a family secret - something likely to produce surprise and intimacy.

When you rubbed real life against literature the results were unpredictable. Sparks could leap up, or just a dull grinding. John Fowles saw a woman standing on a pier lashed by waves. The image haunted him. But all he could see with his own novel was a woman standing in a room in 1942, with a bundle of letters in her hand. There was something of fire there – but the street noise, the rumbling sullenness of trucks made her turn away from him.

It could be another false start, or it could be he needed to look at that room differently. Then again, he could blame it all on Bloom's 'anxiety of influence'. What was the point of writing if you weren't a Bronte or McKewan? Why add to the procession of dancing dogs, standing on their hind legs at book launches?

The MA novel wouldn't even make it that far. A stream of consciousness ramble about not very much on a single afternoon. Oh Virginia, if only your disciples had a fraction of your talent.

He opened the document where he had started writing the examiner's report. His last sentences had been: "The candidate has been courageous in limiting his narrative point of view to a central character, Timothy, who is less than sympathetic from a reader's point of view. It is problematical that this character seems to have a very limited emotional and intellectual range – especially as he is presented in the novel as being an award-winning novelist himself. His minutely rendered self-reflexivity does become a little tedious at times. The metafictional strategies are competently handled, but metafiction is a well-worn path these days."

He rubbed his eyes and turned from the screen. Outside it was dark – the distant city lights bright and serene. He could see car headlights moving in a golden thread across the bridge, finding their way home. And below, students made their way briskly to bus stops, or to car parks near the river. No monster, mother of Grendel, mouthed its blood-revenge beneath the murky water of the Brisbane River. No Heathcliff dug his sweetheart from her grave.

He typed one more sentence in the report.

"In a nutshell, the trouble with this novel is that Timothy is really, really selfish."

It felt good – though he knew he would have to delete it later.

Next week he would make an extra effort to make Belinda feel more comfortable in the tutorial. If she reappeared, that is. And what about the fundamentalist. Next week they were doing *Beowulf*. He would have to refer to Christian ideas in that lecture. If the young man shouted again, he would retort: “Since the Rapture is about to begin – and the four horsemen are going to gallop all over us – does it matter what we say in this lecture?”

“And it will tell you things about yourself too”. But only if you doubt enough.

The computer beeped as another email arrived:

Hey Rob. Thought I'd send you my writing exercise to cheer you up:

Cathy and Heathcliff went to a relationship counselor somewhere in Australia. No desert or red dirt canyons, just the outer suburbs - brick houses, almost touching each other. The counselor lit two candles and gave them a glass of wine each to calm them down. Heathcliff drank his in one big gulp and kept scowling. The counselor said: ‘You guys have a weird lifestyle. You need to get out more. Escape from the Grange while you can – capitalism is bad for you. Set realistic goals. Make some friends. Avoid big black dogs.’

Cathy said, ‘Thank you, good sir. Do you accept Visa?’

Heathcliff laughed savagely and his candle blew out.

Cheers  
Michael.

The window drew him to its moving face. The lights kept streaming out of the city. The distant kin of Hrothgar, bearing battle-gold to the halls of the brave. Hardy brick-dwellers, thriving where the earth's breast was fair.



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