



"I MOURNED THE SLAIN TEXTBOOKS AND SWORE THAT THEY WOULD BE AVENGED..."

TS readers; meet Tom Starkey, our new, regular columnist. Mr. Starkey; meet the readers. Now, play nicely...

My introduction to teaching didn't happen when I became a Teaching Assistant or when I decided to apply for a PGCE course. It didn't start when I was accepted and was subjected to torturous hours of theory and activities designed to degrade my body and break my spirit.

(They made me do role-play. No man, you don't get it. They made me do role-play. You don't understand man, you weren't there.)

It didn't even start when, shaking like an alcoholic suffering from a particularly nasty case of the DTs, I stumbled through my first class, leaving my students with considerably less knowledge than when they walked in and baffled as to why the school recruitment policy extended to those who would obviously be better suited sat on a nice park bench somewhere with a bottle of something fortified.

No, I got my first taste of teaching life at 4 years old when my mother, due to the fact that she liked a completely heinous challenge, decided to take me into work with her.

I remember the staff-room; the odour of stale coffee and fresh despair, dead-eyed ghosts who would startle and scatter at the sound of a dropped stack of exercise books. I remember the corridors; waves of giant, uniformed kids rushing at me like an easy-wash polyester tsunami as my Mum, HOD at the time, half cajoled, and half dragged me to her base-room.

I remember the books (god, those poor books) used and abused with various annotations as to who was doing what to whom, who would be doing what to whom in the near future (with accompanying, anatomically exaggerated diagrams) and who would do what to whom when whoever else wasn't around. Broken spines and mercilessly folded corners. I looked up at them and they looked back and I swear I heard one of them whisper, in an ancient and throttled voice, *'Please... kill... me.'*

Cardboard burgers and gangster dinner ladies with the face and sweet disposition of Al Capone. History teachers who were more lizard than woman. Pushing and shoving and shouting and noise. Infinite chalk-stained blackboards. Projectiles of all sizes and all materials. Complete and utter chaos.

Naturally, when the day was over and Mum asked me if I'd enjoyed myself, I promptly burst into uncontrollable, traumatised tears and begged her to never, ever take me back to that awful place. Whatever I'd done, I was sorry. I would be good from now on.

It's funny how pain fades over the years, isn't it?

When the time came to choose my own career, I closed my eyes, spun the wheel, and teaching came up.

'Cool', I thought 'I've got some experience. It didn't kill Mum! Let's do this thing!'

It was only when I set foot inside my first placement school that I realised what a terrible mistake I'd made. I had forgotten that long-ago terror. And nothing had changed.

My first few weeks were a nightmare doubling of past and present. My inexperience once again made me feel like a child playing in a world outside my understanding.

I jumped at the dropped books. I swam against the polyester wave. I mourned the slain textbooks and swore that they would be avenged. I ate cardboard burgers, had heated conversations with lizard-women historians and tried my damndest to do some teaching in between it all. Complete and utter chaos.

And life. So much life.

Slowly (students walking to lizard-woman's double history slowly) the horror turned to exhilaration as I realised something:

If you're in a school, you're knee-deep in life. All its beauty and all its tragedy – it's right there. The child I was had been scared by it. The adult I had become fed on it.

By no small miracle my career has continued. I've taught in tough comprehensives where I've had to disarm pupils in one class and then be deeply moved when the next bunch perform heartfelt poetry an hour later. I've worked in EBSDs where I've held onto kids as they've been wracked by uncontrollable sobs whilst telling me a life story that has no place existing outside of a horror film. I've seen students who have been in this country for less than two years punch the air and whoop for joy as they receive a C for their GCSE English exam, knowing that it's enough to get them into college.

Teaching allows me to be witness to life. Dodging a few projectiles and tearing through a few tasteless burgers is a small price to pay.

Saying that though – you write in my books, and I will end you.

Thanks for reading.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TOM STARKEY IS A TEACHER IN AN FE COLLEGE IN THE NORTH OF ENGLAND. HE BLOGS AT STACKOFMARKING.WORDPRESS.COM.

