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Creator(s): Smith, A.

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I have been working in the prison system for fourteen years and that experience has inevitably found its way into my writing. I have written plays and novels where, whether or not I initially intended it, prison has intruded itself. I also regularly write newspaper stories which are six hundred words long. If I write more words than this then my editor chops my story to size. If I write fewer then my fee is reduced. Being paid by the word is an effective and humbling discipline. A little while ago an editor telephoned me to ask me for a couple more centimetres. I think that what I conjured up was truthful, at least not wilfully false, but I had about ten minutes to do it. What could I do, the woman was offering me money? This is the kind of crude treatment to which writers and their texts become accustomed; it is also an ever present reminder that when I write I am making an artefact and that the quality of that artefact need not have much to do with truth.

These experiences have made me protective of what I write and very wary of eye-witness accounts, narrative accounts which claim to be telling the truth. Those of us who attempt to extract propositional knowledge from storytelling need to be aware not only of the profile and situation of the teller but of the editorial and commercial pressures which inevitably exist and which may be beyond even the teller's influence. Because of these pressures it may well be that the narratives we read are not sourced unambiguously in their author; they may have been remade in response to the commercial or ideological ambitions of an editor or a publisher. Some Captivity Narratives may have been shaped to serve particular ideological ends. My stories appear in a leading liberal newspaper, my values are, largely, the values of the editorial staff and I

am self-consciously pursuing ideological ends. I am always open and self-conscious about this and writing for The Guardian marks me out unmistakably as a bleeding heart liberal. This kind of transparency is not always available and is made more complex when what is related comes in the form of storytelling. This goes beyond ideology. We have to consider a range of narratological judgements: point of view, the reliability of the narrative voice, genre and so on. Does our study of captivity narratives engage us with captivity at all or are we rather students of story? I do not wish to claim that there is no truth to be had from storytelling just that you, not me, I'm the one making this stuff up, you need to have your wits about you.

As a journalist I have a responsibility to tell the truth but as a writer of short stories, plays, novels, I have developed attitudes to the truth which are not altogether scientific. Scientific truth seems to me to be relatively simple: something either is the case or it is not. Scientific truth is verified by a system of investigation which is itself testable and open. In my true stories, and I wish to claim that they are all true stories, it might be that the dialogue was never said in quite the words which I quote or that there is an exaggeration here, an understatement there, perhaps time has been rearranged. I set out to tell truths about prison but limits of my medium have driven me to employ the devices of fiction.

As well as being as watchful as any prudent person would be in a prison I am also watchful in that noseyparkerish way, that intrusive way that writers need to have. If a prisoner tells me something about a book they are reading or about the best way to rob a supermarket, I always

press them for detail and I know that when they say: 'What do you wanna know that for,' I can disarm them by saying: 'Well, you know I'm a writer don't you?' And then, generally, it needs a dose of valium to shut them up. Most people, and especially convicts, will tell you anything if they think that you will write about them. I have notebooks full of stories which can never be told if only on the grounds of taste and decency. The men know that I am always on the look-out for dialogue, anecdote, incident and sometimes it occurs to me that they might make things up just to be obliging. Not only to be obliging but to be thought well of. It might also be the case that someone might make things up out of a sense of fun or mischief or just to see how far my credulity can be stretched. None of this worries me. When I am sitting there on the Lifer Wing listening to someone's thrilling adventures I am not too bothered whether the stories are true or not and to be honest I seem to lose my grip on morality as well. Is this shocking? No, of course not; a good story well told is what I really enjoy and what's more it is something which I can easily recognise and appreciate. The truth, on the other hand, presents me with all kinds of difficulties and raises all sorts of troublesome questions. I feel quite secure about scientific truths but once I get into moral, social, emotional truth things quickly become less certain, more about what I feel than what I know. Luckily I am not engaged in methodical, scientific research I am engaged in producing primary texts, stories, about captivity and I know that this production is subject to pressures which go far beyond a concern for truth. I am not unconcerned with truth but I have to acknowledge that my concern for impact, dramatic effectiveness, the aesthetic of form and language are often my foremost considerations.

Amongst prisoners the man who can tell a good story is highly valued. Ralph was the best storyteller I have ever heard. Ralph came into my class when he had done twelve years of a sixteen year sentence. He was an armed robber and had all the innocent self confidence which is common in the armed robber community. He was a well spoken, good looking man who kept himself well-groomed and dressed smartly. He was polite, pleasant and good natured. You had to see past the armed robbery part of him. Except that he would not let you. He loved to tell the armed robbery stories. What was stunningly shrewd was that he never told these stories directly about armed robbery; his narratives were indirect, elusive, the main event, like Godot, was always offstage. If Ralph were being chased by the police it was neither the chase nor the police which was significant. It was the ploughed field.

'I drove until I just ran out of road and I was out of the car and legging it across this field. It was a ploughed field and it was wet and I couldn't run. I was sinking in and pulling my legs out and running in slow motion and getting nowhere, it was like a cartoon, and I thought I'm fucked they're gonna get me easy. And then I looked behind and there was a line of Old Bill behind me all doing like me all treacked up in the field and we did this slow motion chase until I got to the hedge and I was away. And I hid in this lake and it was freezing and...'

Ralph didn't give a hoot about anything but the Charlie Chaplin effect of the mud. He was the least reliable narrator in the world. He completely misrepresented the world of armed robbery. He told stories about his mother-in-law, about his wife, about his disguises. I used to

hang on his every word and believed completely in everything he said. Ralph's stories helped to establish him in the prison; he showed us a version of himself which was made in the process of storytelling. He told me a story about his family and when I was writing a play which was about men in prison I remade it slightly and gave it to a character who was not like Ralph at all and now I have people talking about the authentic voice in my play. I made it up.

There were accounts which I have suppressed. Some of the truth about prison is so dreadful that I do not want to tell it. I suppose that many of the people in captivity and many of their guardians share this reticence. Even in the shelter of my classroom there were moments of ugliness from which I still shrink. This is a part of a story which came out of nowhere one Wednesday afternoon in an English Literature class. Paul was a man I got on with really well; in fact years later I still know him and think of him as a friend. But that afternoon he sat there, pallid, blank faced and said:

This guy I went after once, there were three of us looking for him. He was parked up in this pub car park, off in a little dark corner. He was my pal, he was. He'd just got out of jail and he had nowhere to stay so we put him up. I was living with my missus. Me, I was out all day, working. I was really getting there up to the top level where I'd be able to put some soldiers out on the street. When I was selling drugs, I didn't mess about, I didn't. I really worked hard. I was working hard for my missus and my kid to make a better life for us. While I'm out, he only shags her and gets her on heroin. I was fuckin furious. I had her persuaded she was allergic to it.

I'd given it to her too strong and she was sick as a dog. You're allergic to it, I told her. But anyway he got her on it. I scoured the place for him. I had a fireman's axe. You know, with a blade and a point all made as one with the handle so the blade won't come off. 'Stay there,' I said to my two pals, don't look.' They didn't want to look did they? Got to the car and tapped on the window with the axe. 'Get out.' He didn't want to get out. Bloke with an axe taps on your window, whose gonna want to get out. He was a big bastard as well. I smashed the window, the windscreen, smacked him with the axe, laid his head open. Couldn't get at him right. Then I dropped the axe inside the car. He was out of it and I was diving in, trying to find the axe, just me legs sticking out. Couldn't find it, so I punched him for a bit and then I went and shouted for the knife. They wouldn't give it me and I walked towards them and they must have seen something in my face because they threw me the knife. Proper big knife it was with a serrated edge on the back of the blade. They threw it, didn't want me near them. I went back to the car, pushed him over on the seat and stuck it in his kidney, gave it a little twist and pulled it out. As he fell back his arm was out of the window and I slashed at it. Nearly had his hand off. It was flopping around. 'You'd better drive to the hospital.' I told him. He managed to get there, car full of blood. Collapsed on the hooter and they had to come and drag him in. I bumped into him in prison. Dead chummy he was.

There was lots more like this and through all of the telling Paul sat like a man at a seance, possessed by another voice. I sat quietly, trying not to be noticed, and wrote as quickly as I could, getting the story down. I have reproduced the story for this paper, sitting with that ten year old

notebook in front of me. Later, as I was typing, making this into a story, I suppressed the desire to edit and improve. But, when I look at the notes themselves I can see that I have gone back and altered the text. I have added phrases, shaped sentences, made notes on my notes. Even so this story is true in a way that Ralph's stories are not. Paul set out to confess, Ralph to entertain. Ralph brought us together and made us think better of him. Paul made us want to slink off on our own. When we reflect on Ralph's use of detail we can see that it is highly selective and intended for a particular purpose. Paul's use of detail was not intended to entertain it simply drove the story forward in a stark trajectory of self-disgust. What convinces us about both storytellers is their skill in telling. When Ralph told us about his mother-in-law finding a bullet down the back of the settee he told us about her hairdo, the pattern on the cushion covers, the coffee table on which she carefully placed the bullet. Paul telling us about injecting between his fingers knows that he has no need of detail.

Both of these men were convincing, skilful storytellers and when I look at their stories afresh they have both produced well-shaped shrewdly told tales which have the power to convince. I am left, of course, with the worry that I have been doing some of the shaping myself. But, I am interested in the truth; most of us would be dubious about anyone who said that they were not. The truth is though, that my real interest is in how the truth is told. If someone is trying to sell you double glazing wouldn't you rather that the salesman had the gift of storytelling rather than be some dull plodder who bored you to death. There is an equal chance of either of them telling the truth about double glazing.

Stories convince and, almost always, they convince because of their narrative qualities rather than because of their relationship with the truth. Telling the truth as narrative makes an appeal to good faith. Narratives about captivity are produced in closed circumstances their context, their references, are not available for scrutiny. It is not, for example, like reading Dickens for an insight into social conditions in London in the 19th Century; Dickens is part of a visible web of evidence. Captivity is a secluded place where security arrangements are specifically designed to exclude scrutiny, sometimes to deceive. We have to make judgements about the quality of the people and the processes involved in the production of the finished narrative. Most readers do not wish to be deceived or manipulated and they might well desire to be clear about the ideological or commercial purposes of a text, It might though, be good for sales and box office to suppress this kind of clarity. The last thing an audience wants is to be bored.