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**THE DELPHIC ORACLE, FRANK SPENCER AND ME
(Or the things I have learnt which I constantly forget . . .)**

I like the title of our session ‘Learning How to Develop a Narrative’ even though it unnerves me. Although I’ve written a number of books, I think I can declare that I’ve never felt I’ve arrived at the state where I could claim to be a Delphic Oracle, able to dispense profound, prophetic, writerly revelations.

If the truth is known, both as a writer and maybe even as a person, I have much more in common with Frank Spencer. I bumble here, I bumble there, falling down plot holes, climbing out of false starts, chasing no good characters down dead end streets, sometimes making the same hideous narrative mistakes over and over again — from the serious to the most basic, like overusing the word ‘that’ and the word ‘big’ in the early drafts of my first novel for teenagers to the point where my editor required therapy.

So as I share with you some of the things I have learnt about developing a narrative, I hope you will keep in mind my intrinsic Frankishness and receive my words lightly.

One of the things that I have learnt about writing is that at certain times in my writing life, a ‘no’ has been more significant for my writing than a ‘yes.’ A ‘no’ never makes me happy. I want to be completely honest about that. When I receive a rejection, I often find my sneaky, horrible side wishing just for the tiniest smidgeon, that God might get involved in some good old-fashioned smiting on my behalf.

One of my most significant ‘no’s’ happened early in my career, when I laboured for over six months on a sequel to my first book *Sweetie May* and then sent it off, only for it to be rejected. Once I got over the wound to my soul and my ego, I eventually went on to write a much better sequel, with a radically different storyline, called *Sweetie May Overboard* which was accepted with much rejoicing. Although I hated getting that first

rejection, today I have to admit I would happily kiss the feet of my ABC editor, even if she does have a whole heap of hairy corns — because she respected the integrity of my first book, when I was ready to sell it down the river to gain another publishing credit.

In some ways I am prouder of *Sweetie May Overboard* than I am of my other books because the writing of it taught me a whole lot of things — the importance of being able to give up characters and storylines that don't work, the importance of being patient, of allowing ideas to ripen on the vine rather than greedily snatching them unripe. It taught me that as writers we have some inherent responsibility to serve the text rather than forcing it to serve us. It taught me that something bright and better could rise out of something bitter and ashy.

Although I am grateful for that rejection, I can say that it's still not the best one I've ever received. My best 'no' came only a few years ago and it reverberates in my writing life to this day. I received this 'no' from the members of my writing group. They were the first to read the completed first draft of my novel for teenagers *My Big Birkett*, and when they were finished, they told me as gently and delicately as possible that my paragraphing was dodgy.

I was so stung! In fact, I was so outraged I went away to examine a heap of other writers so I could prove to them just how wrong they were. I read novel after novel, both for children and adults. And rather than finding that the members of my writing group were wrong, it was like the scales fell off my eyes and I saw for the first time all the things that were missing in my writing. And it was completely humbling.

What I encountered in those novels was what Malcom Knox, the SMH Literary editor, recently described as the great, transcendent power of original line-by-line prose writing. Writing that snags at your throat with a sharp hook. Writing so brilliant and subtle, so fresh and unaware of itself that it made me hungry and thirsty and feverish and dissatisfied.

Dodgy paragraphing aside, as I looked at my first draft in the light of those other books, I realised that not only was great line-by-line prose writing missing from my first draft but even good line-by-line prose writing had gone AWOL.

I knew that if I wanted to catch even a tiny glimmer of the goodness of that writing, I would have to go back and re-learn how to see the world. I would have to be more sharply observant of detail. I would have to be always tasting, seeing, smelling, hearing, touching. And fishing – fishing, fishing - for just the right metaphor, teasing stubborn, reluctant similes from dark, crab holes, always trying to capture in my net, a moment, a face, a place, a person, reeling them in to make sense of this beautiful, sick, glorious world.

So thanks to the members of my writing group, my dodgy paragraphing improved and *My Big Birkett* went on to be accepted by Allen & Unwin. But also thanks to them, my eyes were opened reading those novels and I saw how wide and long and high and deep great writing could be. I learnt about the type of writing I aspire to, even if most of the time, it's so dizzily out of reach.

There's a part of me that's always hopeful that the gap will get smaller the longer I write, the more observant I am. One of the things I have learnt is that this hopefulness is somewhat affirmed by the practice of writing. I often forget and I think most readers and many writers do too that most books (aside from *Charlotte's Web*) emerge from sad sack early drafts. For some reason, I like to disown my early drafts in the same way I tend to disown those awkward old male relatives who tell sexist jokes at Christmas lunch.

There's something much more lovely about focusing on the final version of a story, the one with brilliant characterisation, the one with perfect, plump, creamy sentences. Just as there's something so much nicer about talking to reasonable relatives who have a good grasp of social decorum.

One of the things I am learning is that maybe it's a mistake to be so quick to ignore old drafts. Just as no doubt it's a bit rich to ignore an awkward old male relative when he's endured your festy childhood tantrums and teenage rebellion at Christmas lunch without complaint for years.

The other day I came across one of the first handwritten drafts of *Daddy's Having a Horse* which had an ending that was so seriously bad I found myself wanting to shred it in case it fell into enemy hands and was printed onto pieces of paper and slotted into Christmas crackers.

But I resisted – because that bad ending is important to me – as are all those original lopsided and lame drafts of *Gordon's Got a Snookie* or *Bear and Chook* or *The Postman's Dog*. Their very lameness is a comfort because they remind me that the most polished of my finished narratives began imperfectly.

It's got me thinking, that perhaps after all, old drafts should be celebrated, even venerated and given a place of honour at Christmas dinner. Perhaps old drafts are not signs of embarrassing failure. Perhaps they can be voices of encouragement. Particularly when those cold calculating wraiths called Doubt, Condemnation and Perfectionism come stalking over a blank page. 'Are you sure that's a good sentence?' whispers Doubt, at the very beginning of any new writing. 'Maybe you should start again? Maybe you shouldn't start at all?' 'You call that an ending?' shouts Condemnation. 'That's the crappiest one I've ever seen!' 'Give up now,' screeches Perfectionism, 'before the whole world discovers you're an artistic fraud!'

Sitting around my table, these lame old drafts give me the courage to face down those three bullies, they give me the courage to say, 'Yes, this writing is bad at the moment, it's crap and yuck and going nowhere . . . but let me tell you, it will get better, I've seen it happen before.'

Finally, I have to say the most exciting discovery, the one that I constantly forget and need to re-learn, is the infuriating and exhilarating truth that there will be always something more to learn about writing, some new level to go to.

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