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Writing and Speaking of English: Book 2

C. D. Poster Illustrated by Robin Jacques

Excerpt

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1

The Storyteller

It was a hot afternoon, and the railway carriage was correspondingly sultry, and the next stop was at Templecombe, nearly an hour ahead. The occupants of the



carriage were a small girl, and a smaller girl, and a small boy. An aunt belonging to the children occupied one corner seat, and the further corner seat on the opposite side was occupied by a bachelor who was a stranger. Both the aunt and the children were conversational in

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a limited, persistent way, reminding one of the attentions of a housefly that refused to be discouraged. Most of the aunt's remarks seemed to begin with 'Don't' and nearly all of the children's remarks began with 'Why?' The bachelor said nothing out loud.

'Don't, Cyril, don't,' exclaimed the aunt, as the small boy began smacking the cushions of the seat, producing a cloud of dust at each blow.

'Come and look out of the window,' she added.

The child moved reluctantly to the window. 'Why are those sheep being driven out of that field?' he asked.

'I expect they are being driven to another field where there is more grass,' said the aunt weakly.

'But there is lots of grass in that field,' protested the boy; 'there's nothing else but grass there. Aunt, there's lots of grass in that field.'

The children become more and more of a nuisance until the bachelor begins to eye the communication cord threateningly. The aunt then attempts to keep the children quiet by telling them a story. She fails miserably. Finally the bachelor offers his services.

'Once upon a time,' began the bachelor, 'there was a little girl called Bertha, who was extraordinarily good.'

The children's interest began at once to flicker; all stories seemed dreadfully alike, no matter who told them.

'She did all that she was told, she was always truthful, she kept her clothes clean, ate milk puddings as though they were jam tarts, learned her lessons perfectly, and was polite in her manners.'

'Was she pretty?' asked the bigger of the small girls.

'Not as pretty as any of you,' said the bachelor, 'but she was horribly good.'

'She was so good,' continued the bachelor, 'that she won several medals for goodness, which she always wore,

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pinned on to her dress. There was a medal for obedience, another medal for punctuality, and a third for good behaviour. They were large metal medals and they clinked against one another as she walked. No other child in the town where she lived had as many as three medals, so everybody knew that she must be an extra good child.'

'Horribly good,' quoted Cyril.

'Everybody talked about her goodness, and the Prince of the country got to hear about it, and he said that as she was so very good she might be allowed once a week to walk in his park, which was just outside the town. It was a beautiful park, and no children were ever allowed in it, so it was a great honour for Bertha to be allowed to go there.'

'Were there any sheep in the park?' demanded Cyril.

'No,' said the bachelor, 'there were no sheep.'

'Why weren't there any sheep?' came the inevitable question arising out of that answer.

The aunt permitted herself a smile, which might almost have been described as a grin.

'There were no sheep in the park,' said the bachelor, 'because the Prince's mother had once had a dream that her son would either be killed by a sheep or else by a clock falling on him. For that reason the Prince never kept a sheep in his park or a clock in the Palace.'

The aunt suppressed a gasp of admiration.

'Was the Prince killed by a sheep or by a clock?' asked Cyril.

'He is still alive, so we can't tell whether the dream will come true,' said the bachelor unconcernedly; 'anyway, there were no sheep in the park, but there were lots of little pigs running all over the place.'

'What colour were they?'

'Black with white faces, white with black spots, black

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all over, grey with white patches, and some were white all over.'

The storyteller paused to let a full idea of the park's treasures sink into the children's imaginations; then he resumed:

'Bertha was rather sorry to find that there were no flowers in the park. She had promised her aunts, with tears in her eyes, that she would not pick any of the kind Prince's flowers, and she had meant to keep her promise, so of course it made her feel silly to find that there were no flowers to pick.'

'Why weren't there any flowers?'

'Because the pigs had eaten them all,' said the bachelor promptly. 'The gardeners had told the Prince that you couldn't have pigs and flowers, so he decided to have pigs and no flowers.'

There was a murmur of approval at the excellence of the Prince's decision; many people would have decided the other way.

'There were lots of other delightful things in the park. There were ponds with gold and blue and green fish in them, and trees with beautiful parrots that said clever things at a moment's notice, and humming birds that hummed all the popular tunes of the day. Bertha walked up and down and enjoyed herself immensely, and thought to herself: "If I were not so extraordinarily good I should not have been allowed to come into this beautiful park and enjoy all that there is to be seen in it," and her three medals clinked against one another as she walked and helped to remind her how very good she really was. Just then an enormous wolf came prowling into the park to see if it could catch a fat little pig for its supper.'

'What colour was it?' asked the children, amid an immediate quickening of interest.

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‘Mud-colour all over, with a black tongue and pale grey eyes that gleamed with unspeakable ferocity. The first thing that it saw in the park was Bertha; her pinafore was so spotlessly white and clean that it could be seen from a great distance. Bertha saw the wolf and saw that it was stealing towards her, and she began to wish that she had never been allowed to come into the park. She ran as hard as she could and the wolf came after her with huge leaps and bounds. She managed to reach a shrubbery of myrtle bushes and she hid herself in one of the thickest of the bushes. The wolf came sniffing among the branches, its black tongue lolling out of its mouth and its pale eyes glaring with rage. Bertha was terribly frightened, and thought to herself: “If I had not been so extraordinarily good I should have been safe in the town at this moment.” However, the scent of the myrtle was so strong that the wolf could not sniff out where Bertha was hiding, and the bushes were so thick that he might have hunted about in them for a long time without catching sight of her, so he thought he might as well go off and catch a little pig instead. Bertha was trembling very much at having the wolf prowling and sniffing so near her, and as she trembled the medal for obedience clinked against the medals for good conduct and punctuality. The wolf was just moving away when he heard the sound of the medals clinking and stopped to listen; they clinked again in a bush quite near him. He dashed into the bush, his pale grey eyes gleaming with ferocity and triumph and dragged Bertha out and devoured her to the last morsel. All that was left of her were her shoes, bits of clothing and her three medals for goodness.’

‘Were any of the little pigs killed?’

‘No, they all escaped.’

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‘The story began badly,’ said the smaller of the small girls, ‘but it had a beautiful ending.’

‘It is the most beautiful story that I ever heard,’ said the bigger of the small girls, with immense decision.

‘It is the *only* beautiful story I have ever heard,’ said Cyril.

* * *

‘Saki’, the author of *The Storyteller*, had a curious, and sometimes cruel sense of humour. His short stories, most of them no more than three or four pages long, often have a sharp twist in the tail, like this one. You expect it to be a story with a moral. Instead, it is the very reverse, or, if there is a moral, it is directed towards aunts who tell children dull stories.

Write one of the following:

1. A short story about a young child in the care of a relative who obviously does not understand children.
2. A personal account, true or imaginary, of the difficulties you experience in looking after a young child for the day.
3. A moral story with a twist. If you cannot invent a plot for yourself, take a well-known children’s story, like Little Red Riding Hood, and bring it ‘up to date’.

What’s in a Name?

Some children think that *language study* is just another way of saying *grammar*; the same bitter pill is there, but this time it has been stuck in a teaspoonful of jam. This is not true. *Language study* means what it says, the study of what we say and write. If we speak or write incorrectly—

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or punctuate badly, since punctuation is, as you may remember from Book I, a part of writing—then we may need to study the language to see where we have gone wrong. We do not, at this stage, need to learn expressions like *adjectival clause* or *participial phrase*, *verb of state* or *incomplete predication*.

In this English course, you will meet with grammatical terms only when we require a short cut, a means of giving a name to something you already understand.

Furthermore, language study is a larger subject than grammar. It includes the study of the words and expressions we use, in particular how they originated. One of the words your teacher frequently uses is your name, either your surname or your Christian name, according to the custom in your school. I find names fascinating, particularly surnames, and I enjoy challenging my classes to discover the origins of their names and those of their friends.

Many of them are easy to track down. Surnames frequently derive from Christian names. *Richard*, with its pet-forms *Dick* and *Ricky*, and, once, *Hick* and *Hudd*, gives us *Richards*, *Richardson*, *Riches*; *Dix*, *Dixon*, *Dickinson*; *Rix*, *Rixon*; *Hicks*, *Hickson*, *Higginson*; *Hudd*, *Hudson*; all of which mean ‘son of Richard’. *John* similarly gives us *Johns*, *Johnson*, *Johnston*, *Jones*, *Jacks*, *Jackson*. From *Paul* come *Pool*, *Poole*, *Pollitt*, *Polson*. *Parry*, *Powell*, and *Price* are Welsh in origin, and are *ap Harry*, *ap Howell* and *ap Rhys* (*ap* meaning ‘son of’, like *Mac-*, *Mc-*, *M’-*, *O’-*, and *Fitz-*). *Simkins*, *Atkins*, *Perkins*, *Dawkins*, are ‘son of little Simon, Adam, Peter, David’.

Many more surnames come from occupations. *Smith*, the commonest surname of all, owned by 1 in every 36 people in the British Isles, is ‘worker in metals’. *Wright* is ‘builder’, and by itself or in combination—*Arkwright*

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‘maker of wooden bins for grain’, *Wainwright* ‘maker of waggons’, *Cartwright*—is a frequent trade surname. *Turner, Butler, Barber, Fisher, Marshall, Spencer, Harker* (or *Hawker*), *Shepherd* (or *Sheppard*), *Ryder, Taylor, Weaver* (or *Webber, Webb, Webster*), *Mason, Ward*, are further examples.

Like these trade names are the ‘rank’ names. Do not be too boastful, however, for some of them may have been given in mockery as nicknames, or to denote that your ancestor was servant to one of them: *King, Duke, Masters, Abbott, Bishop, Monk, Priest, Knight, Squire, Bailey*.

Many nicknames explain themselves: *Armstrong, Small, Long* (or *Lang*), *Fry* (‘free’). Others derive from birds and animals: *Drake, Lyons, Hogg, Oliphant* (‘elephant’), *Arnold* (from Old English *earn* an eagle). Colours of clothing in the days when materials had to last half a lifetime, of hair, or of complexion are common surnames: *Black, Brown, Rudd, Dark, Grey; Boyd* (‘yellow-haired’), *Roy* or *Roe* (‘red’), *Duff* (‘black’) from the Gaelic; *Lloyd* (‘grey’), *Morgan* (‘sea-white’), *Gough* (‘red’), from the Celtic; *Russell* (‘red’) from the French.

The countryside gives us a long list of surnames. They originate from the names of countries and nationalities: *Holland, Welch, Scott, Morris* (from ‘moorish’); from directions and seasons: *North, Southam, Westland, Eastwood, Summers*; or from geographical terms: *Haig, Hayes, Haines* (‘a hedge’), *Attwell, Attwood* (‘at or near the well or wood’), *Hyde* (‘a piece of land’), *Brooks, Warren, Field* or *Fielding, Hill, Moore, Myers* (‘a marsh’), *Wade, Ford, Shaw, Whitaker* (‘white acre’), *Boyce* (French ‘bois’), *Lee, Lea* or *Leigh* (‘a meadow’).

A. Have you found your surname here? See how many names in your class, or of the staff, you can trace. If you think that a name may have French, German or other

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foreign connections, try to trace it through that language: *Waldman* (German ‘wald’ meaning ‘a wood’).

B. Discover as many surnames as you can that may derive (1) from coins, English or foreign; (2) from names of counties of England. A telephone directory will be most useful.

C. Stage, screen and television stars, and writers,* often choose names other than their own for their public appearances. There are a number of reasons for so doing. Give as many as you can. What French phrase do we use for an assumed name?

Invent a stage name for the following: a glamorous, blonde filmstar; a sixteen-year-old male pop singer; an elephant trainer; a jazzband leader and his group; a television gardening expert; a writer of science fiction.

D. Playwrights often give characters in their plays names which suit their personalities. *Sir Epicure Mammon*, for example, wants the best of everything that money can buy. Look up in the dictionary the two words that make his name and you will see the point of it. *Tony Lumpkin* is an unlettered country bumpkin.

Make up the cast list for a play that includes a police sergeant, a schoolmaster, a little boy with a squint, an ancient countryman and at least two other characters of your own devising. Describe any one of these characters.

* Saki's real name was Hector Munro.

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Summaries

Three children in the care of their aunt are exhausting the patience of a gentleman in a railway carriage. The aunt tries to entertain them, but fails. The gentleman relates the story of a girl who has won three medals for good behaviour and who is privileged to use a private park. A wolf pursues her and she takes refuge in thick-scented shrubbery. The wolf, unable to track her further, is about to depart when the clinking of her medals attracts him. He attacks and devours her. The story delights the children.

A. Here, in less than a hundred words, is a summary of *The Storyteller*. It contains all the essential facts. In what ways is it less satisfactory and less satisfying than the story? What do you try to exclude when you write a summary?

If I had permitted myself *two hundred* words for the summary, what further points might I have included?

If I had permitted myself only *one hundred and fifty* words, which of these further points would you recommend me to omit?

B. On the back or on the inside half-leaves of the dust-jacket of a library book of fiction, you will often see a summary of the story it contains. This summary is technically known as the *blurb*. If you can, look at the last book of fiction that you read. If the dust jacket is still on the book, and if it does contain a blurb: (a) where the summary is *under 200 words*, expand it to about twice