1

When I was young

When you were six or seven and you first began to write stories you probably wrote something like this:

THE GIRL WHO HAD A TEDDY BEAR THAT DANCED

Chapter I

One night a little girls mummy said it is time for bath and the little girl said right shall I run the bath yes you may said her mummy and she switched the tap on and went to dance with her teddy bear for a long time till her mummy called are you in bed dear and she called back I am not in the bath yet because I forgot and she went into the bath-room and the bath had overflown and she burst into tears and her mummy said what are you crying for and the girl said the bath has overflown

* * *

If I were to ask you what is wrong with this you would have no difficulty in replying. 'There is no punctuation,' you will observe; and 'It goes on and on with **and**... **and**...**and.**' In fact I have no right to be asking you what is wrong. Sara has written this for herself, never dreaming that it would one day appear in a school textbook. For her, at six and a half, writing is only a way of putting down what she wants to say, and, because she is going to read this story to her teacher, she does not feel the need to put in punctuation marks. *She* knows

when to pause for breath, *she* knows when to put a certain expression into her voice that indicates that someone is speaking, and so she does not require anything to prompt her. Furthermore, all her efforts are at this stage bent on making her pencil make the letters that make the sounds that make the words that make the sense of what she wants to say.

I have said that, at six and a half, writing is only a way of putting down what the writer wants to say. Is not that equally true of sixteen and a half, or sixty and a half? What happens, as we get older and more experienced, is that our control over our written word becomes greater than our control over our spoken word (though that improves too). When we write, we have time to choose our words, our word order, and our way of linking up our ideas and statements. We have time to go back and amend, rewrite, cancel, add. At six and a half, speech and writing are closer together. This is how she speaks. **And**...**and**...**and** are not really words to join together her ideas. They are intakes of breath and they sound like '**h'n**...**h'n**...**h'n**' with the aitch going into the mouth instead of coming out. **And** is a signal to the other children in the family or in the class that she has not finished yet so they had better not interrupt!

You are not six and a half. You are not writing merely for yourself. You are beginning to practise the many skills and techniques that make up the craft of writing. You will not be surprised therefore if you are asked frequently in this course to practise punctuation and sentence joining, and to try to understand the purposes of these skills.

Imagine that you are a well-known author of stories for young children. One day when you are visiting her school, you see Sara's *The Girl who had a Teddy Bear that Danced*, and you decide that—properly re-written of

course—it will make a good story for children aged 6–8 years. You begin by re-drafting that part of the story that you have read. (Remember that you are writing for young children. Your vocabulary must therefore suit their understanding, and your sentences be short and uncomplicated enough for them to read without becoming confused.) If you have the imagination for fantasy stories that would appeal to children of this age, you may complete this story too.

I have said that you are very much better at the skills of writing than a six and a half year old. You are also better at the craft of writing. To begin with, you have seen more and read more, heard more and understood more. You have therefore a much wider experience to draw on when you write. I would not be sure, however, that you have a better imagination, for young children often surprise adults by their inventiveness and their dream-like stories; but you should be able to make better use of your imagination.

During the next two or three years you have a big task ahead of you. You have to learn not only to control but to expand your writing. These sound like opposites. They are not. 'To control' means, as I suggested, to become a critic of your own work, to cut out, for example, a line of writing, or a line of thought, that is not going in the direction you intend. 'To expand' means to try new styles of writing, new subjects and, above all, to read and observe widely so that you have both the words and the ideas that will make your work worth reading.

I want you to begin this experiment by writing about yourself when you were younger. This is not *A Day at the Seaside* or *The School Trip to the Tower of London* although there is no reason why you should not choose such a subject if you wish. The trouble with these stories is that

they are usually so alike that anyone in the class might have written them. This must be *your* story, drawn from your imagination and your experience. It must show the way you felt and thought as well as what you did and saw.

Before you begin to write, read these extracts from *Period Piece* by Gwen Raverat. She wrote the book sixty years after she had left her childhood behind, but it is as vivid as if it were happening at this moment. As you read, you will begin to understand what I mean by 'control'.

Here at the Grange (*Newnham Grange in Cambridge*) I was born in the summer of 1885, and here I and my brothers and sister spent all our youth.

From the big night nursery window we could look right down on to the slow green river beneath us; and if a boat went by it was reflected upside down, as a patch of light moving across the ceiling; and the ripples always purled in a dancing rhythm there, when the sun shone. Across the Little Island we could see up to the weir and the footpath along the Upper River, where I always thought the Lord walked when he led his flock to lie down in green pastures. Here we were never out of hearing of the faint sound of the water running over the weir; and on windy winter nights, when we were in bed we could hear, a long way off, the trucks being shunted in the station and the whistling of the engines on the line. That was when you couldn't sleep because you had a 'feverish attack' and, wonderfully, there was a fire in the night nursery, throwing up the flickering criss cross of the high fender on the ceiling; and you were glad to be safe in bed because of the lonely dreadfulness of the night outside. And in the dark early morning we could sometimes hear from the Big Island the crowing of the cocks, which disturbed my father so much.

Gwen was the granddaughter of Charles Darwin. He had died three years before she was born, but her grandmother continued to live at Down in Kent, and there the children spent their summer holidays:

The magic began from the moment when John, the coachman, met us at Orpington station with the wagonette, and we drove off through the tunnel under the railway all shrieking shrilly, to make the echo answer. We drove four miles, through the deep narrow lanes, where the trees met overhead, and there was a damp smell from the high earth banks on each side. The lanes were so narrow that it was often hard to pass a cart without stopping at a wider place. Then came the village and the wagonette rumbled round three sides of the churchyard which surrounds the humble little old flint church, before turning up past the blacksmith's shop and the pond, and reaching Down House. And as soon as the door was opened, we smelt again the unmistakable cool, empty, country smell of the house, and we rushed all over the big underfurnished rooms in an ecstasy of joy.

The Darwin grandchildren had far greater freedom than most Victorian youngsters. Above all, no game, however dangerous, appeared to worry Gwen's mother:

We used to climb about all over the roof, too (it was not so dangerous as it sounds), and Charles and I stole a cigarette from the study, and cut it in half, and smoked the halves, sitting astride of a gable in a very dashing way, expecting every moment to be sick.

As a matter of fact, I was secretly terrified at all this climbing, and I wished very much that my mother would take fright for once, and would forbid it. But she did not turn a hair, even when she saw us, in the course of a game of hide-and-seek, climb on to the top of the high old wall

which separates the Grange garden from the road, and run along it, chasing each other, and finally jump down into the garden at the end.

That wall is exactly nine feet high; it makes me feel quite green even now, to think that I was obliged to do such a thing, simply in order not to 'lose face' with the others. For they weren't in the least afraid—unless, indeed, they were pretending better than I did. Nora and Frances were great tree-climbers, and used to boast about bringing down birds' eggs in their mouths, quite like people in books. I pretended with all my might that I liked climbing, but it is difficult to be convincing when you feel sick and giddy; and the others knew very well that it was a sham.

* * *

Now try to picture an incident in your own life as clearly as one of these. Choose any subject. If possible choose something that frightened you, or excited you, or in some way made its mark on your memory. Remember that your feelings and your thoughts, either now, looking back on the incident, or at the time, are no less important than the actual events.

Select your own title carefully. A well-chosen title becomes part of a story.

To Think and Talk About

Have you a relative or friend who tells stories well?

What makes him (or her) a good storyteller?

Have you a favourite writer of stories? Who is it and what do you enjoy most about this writer's stories?

What is **biography**? What is **autobiography**? Which of these is *Period Piece*? Is there such a thing as a **fictitious autobiography**? Can you name one?

Tell the class, without mentioning the names of any characters, the plot of a well-known story you have read, and see who is able to guess correctly the title and the author.

Recommend to the class a book you have enjoyed that you think very few of them will have read.

A Reading Quiz

Keep a record for the whole of this term of all the books you have read for pleasure. The best way in which to do this is for your teacher to duplicate several hundred slips of paper set out like this:

Name ..... Date .....
Title ..... Author .....
F/NF Source .....
Why chosen: .....
.....

Name means your name and **date** the date on which you finished reading the book.

F/NF stands for Fiction/Non-Fiction: cross out the one you do not need.

Source requires you to put down where you obtained the book: class library, school library, public library, borrowed, bought, present.

Why chosen explains itself. There may not be a suitable answer to this question, of course, but if there is keep it short: recommended by friend, recommended by teacher, T.V. serial, have read others by same author, for example.

As you finish reading a book, complete one of these slips. Perhaps someone will make a 'posting box' in which you can post them. At the end of the term or at the beginning of next term, see what you can find out about the reading interests of the class. At the end of chapter 7 you will find a reminder about this quiz and some suggestions of questions to which you will be able to find the answers from these slips.

2

A Modern Mythology

Every country has its store of myths, legends and folk tales handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. In parts of the British Isles country folk still tell these tales; but as towns and cities have grown up and families have moved away from the villages of their birth, so these legends have gradually been forgotten. Indeed, were it not for scholars who have preserved these stories, most of them would already be lost.

Many legends owe their origins to the attempts of primitive people to explain away natural happenings that were rather frightening. A number of pillars of stone off the Norwegian coast that we know were caused by the sea and the rain eating away the earth and softer stone around them became in legend a number of rebellious giants turned to stone by the gods. We know what causes storms, but you can easily understand primitive man telling his friends that the gods were angry with each other or with man and that thunderbolts and lightning were their weapons. The growth of new crops each year seemed nothing less than a miracle, and every mythology has its story to account for this miracle.

Have you ever read the story of the Greek God of Fire, Hephaistos? He was the son of Hera, the wife of Zeus, who was the King of the Gods. One day he took sides

with his mother when she was quarrelling with her husband, and Zeus

seized him by the foot and hurled him from the threshold of Heaven. He flew all day, and as the sun sank fell half dead on the Greek Isle of Lemnos, where he was picked up and looked after by the inhabitants. Ever after he was lame; and there on Lemnos, below the ground, he built a palace. In this palace the God of the Crooked Foot set up a smithy in which he and his servants forged wonderful gifts for the Gods, made from bronze and gold and silver.

How did this story come into existence? On Lemnos, and in a number of other places in Greece, there are areas where, because of oil deposits underground, great jets of natural gas spout out, and burn everlastingly like pillars of fire. We know how they are caused, but to the ancient Greeks only a miracle could explain them, and what better miracle than a God-Smith working his bellows below the surface of the earth?

When the Greek traders reached the island of Sicily and the mainland of Italy, they took these stories of the Gods with them. Italy has no gas deposits, but it has many volcanoes, the most fearsome of them being Etna and Stromboli. These were much more terrifying than the burning gas jets of Greece. Frequently they boiled over in vast eruptions of flame and molten rock, bringing death and destruction to nearby villages. The inhabitants were only too pleased to hear of a Fire God to whom they might pray and sacrifice, and they adopted Hephaistos, renamed him Vulcan and gave him Mount Etna for his home.

I want you now to imagine that you are living in an age or in a civilisation that, unlike ours, does not have