Wild Storytelling

By Anthony J Quinn

Supported by Cavan Arts Office

**Workshop One**

Hello, welcome to Wild Storytelling, a set of six creative writing workshops supported by Cavan Arts Office. My name is Anthony J Quinn and I’m the author of nine novels, most of which are set in Ulster landscape.

One of the most enjoyable and easiest ways to feel happy is to be creative. And one of the easiest and cheapest ways to be creative is to read and write a little every day. You don’t need lots of expensive craft materials as in art, or years of training and skills as in music or dance; all you need is your imagination and time.

Remember there are no right or wrong answers, and this isn’t an exam or an assignment. Focussing on ticking the right boxes while writing and reading can sometimes drum the creativity out of us, and the purpose of this masterclass is to do the opposite of that. You can learn a lot from making mistakes, and many creative breakthroughs happen by accident. Try to keep your total attention on the empty white page and the words you are forming, and don’t judge or think too much about what you are writing. Leave all the editing to the final stage.

Great stories come not from the mind but from the place where you dream, rather than the place that thinks and analyses.

Athletes call this state being ‘in the zone’, the state where you let your subconscious come up with the gold! Any great sportsperson will tell you that they are not thinking at all when they score a mesmerising goal. The moment they process what they are doing in their minds is the point where they drop the ball or mishit the kick. Great sporting moments happen from instinct and what they call muscle memory. For writers, it’s dream space, and one of the ways to feed this part of our brains is by reading regularly. That’s all you have to do to write a great story: read and dream. This is the challenge I’m setting you over these next few weeks.

The most important thing is to enjoy the process, and hopefully feed your imagination, as well as learn new skills and techniques that you can apply to achieving other goals in life. Remember every paragraph you read and every sentence you write are important steps towards realising your goal. Don’t put undue pressure on yourself by trying to get it all done too quickly. Slow and steady is the best way forward. This goes for reading as well as writing. If you’re always rushing ahead to get onto the next page or scene, you don’t allow yourself the challenge and pleasure of going deeply into the scene you’re writing or the page you’re reading right now. So slow down and concentrate on what is happening in your reading and writing in the present moment.

And don’t be afraid of letting yourself daydream while reading, of opening the doors to your own thoughts and feelings. Project yourself into the scene, and think what would you do or say in such a scenario, or how have you coped in the past when confronting similar situations. This is enhanced reading, or intensive daydreaming, and it is the most vivid form of entertainment you will ever experience, because it’s powered by your own imagination, your dream-space and your hopes and fears.

In this course on Wild Storytelling, you will discover how to set your story in a convincing landscape, you will get the chance to grow your skills at describing the world your characters inhabit, so that readers can clearly visualise the scenes as they unfold, experiencing the action as it takes place, and hear, touch, smell, feel and see the world and its objects.

You will also learn how to use your powers of description to create suspense and drive your story forwards. Every story has to take place somewhere, and the setting and landscape are essential ingredients. A story set on a remote island is sure to develop differently than one set in inner-city Belfast. In many stories, the landscape and setting are so important that it becomes a character.

A story can’t take place in a vacuum. Without a strong sense of place, readers will feel lost. Stories with a strong sense of place take readers out of their own worlds into a different reality, and this is the greatest gift that a writer can give. The chance to escape! The success of your fictional landscapes depends on making them come alive with detail.

Over these six workshops, we’re going to focus on writing about what we know, and the landscape we will be developing over the workshops is one which we already know very well. This will help us convey the setting convincingly to our readers. The more details that we know about the setting the more real it will feel to the reader.

In the first creative writing exercise, we are going to create a story map of a place we know very well. The earliest maps we used as human beings were stories describing landscapes and the events that took place in them. These types of maps were part of the oral history of folk tales, learned, developed and passed down from one generation to the next. For example, a distinctively-shaped mountain, a certain tree, a bend in the river, a gloomy rock, these features in the landscape were woven into a plot that was part journey, part story.

Long before we had maps and their multitude of lines, we had stories through which we knew our place in the world and could project our emotions and memories upon the landscape.

For instance, the thorn-hedged fields of my grandfather’s farm in south Tyrone all had Irish names, and there was a story for each one, even the most rush-filled and marshy. Their names described features in the landscape, trees, rocks, rivers, or events that took place there. These word maps can be felt in a way that modern grid maps cannot. They are more sensory based than grid maps, too, and they carry secrets, a sense of mystery in the landscape that the reader can enter in their imagination. .

Think of gathering a portfolio of these words maps, describing your favourite landscapes. Consider the associations between places and people, the events that occurred, for example, at that crossroads, or in that ruined house.

So now to the creative writing exercise.

**Writing exercise**

Describe the town or the countryside you grew up in – the streets, shops, rivers, bridges, trees, hills, hedges and roads. Convey as much physical detail as you can manage. You can draw a map if it helps you visualise the landscape better.

Indicate the boundaries on the sketch which you were not meant to cross as a child. Perhaps something bad or mysterious had happened around these places, or there was a haunted house or a fast-flowing river. Did any locations have a strange or exotic feel? What did you imagine happened in these places?

Think of a place where something happened. Sketch out the event with special attention to the physical details of the setting. It need not be a big event, you playing a game with friends, jumping from a height or across a river, exploring a new patch of forest, visiting a new house. Perhaps you had to escape something such as a nest of wasps or an angry farmer. If you can develop a strong sense of place it should be easy to write. Let the roads and rivers speak.

Now describe the event using strong verbs. In place of ‘went’ for instance, use ‘strolled’, ‘ambled’ ‘careered’, ‘crashed’, ‘charged’, ‘scrambled’, ‘scurried’, ‘lurched’, ‘hurtled’, ‘dashed’....

In place of ‘put’ use ‘placed’, ‘positioned’, ‘slammed’, ‘banged’, ‘flung’, ‘plonked’….

In place of ‘took’ use ‘seized’, ‘grasped’, ‘snatched’, ‘swiped’….

These words will make your writing more precise and create an impression of movement and drama, helping the reader to visualise the scene.

Use short sentences to create a more urgent rhythm in an action scene and give readers an impression that things are happening quickly. Alternatively, if you want a slow-motion effect, go right into the moment and use longer sentences and more detail.

Cut down on adjectives and adverbs to give your writing more impact. For instance , ‘he hurtled’ is much better than ‘he moved forward rapidly and with force’.

To give you an idea of what you might create, read through this extract from *Readings in Palmersville* by Sean O’Brien, in which the author lists the features of his childhood landscape.

*“The original landscapes of my life – Anlaby Road, Hull, in the mid-50s, the flat behind the butcher’s shop, with its garden of lilacs, Salisbury Street, with its vast, lost orchard, the tenfoots between the avenues, the riverwide greenmantled drains before they were filled in the 60s, the goods line at the back of the houses, the bodily stink of purple furnace ash and free milk in the vast yards of St Winifred’s RC Infants, these are not something to use but to enter. I don’t know why, they are sufficient….it would also contain railway arches, viaducts, junctions, cuttings, dead stations, torn-up lines, dockside buffers, lock-gates, estuaries, the Ouseburn, statues of De La Pole and Collingwood, lighthouses, sea-lanes, icebergs, places which only exist as numbers on an Admiralty map.”*

**Workshop Two**

OPENING THE SENSES

Writing is about perceiving the world and creating images through language to help the reader understand the world you are realising. If you want to write well, you have to keep your senses alert and be able to see your world in a heightened way, to be deeply aware of what is going on in it, in a full a way as possible. Think of it as a writing muscle, one that you have to exercise and flex every day. Often, we take the world for granted, and become immersed in habitual ways of looking at things. It is important to go about your daily routine with your eyes and ears open, always looking for the unusual in the ordinary, or a fresh perspective on common-place things. Keep your other senses alert, too. Think of the smells, tastes and textures you encounter. Is there a way of putting these experiences into words?

Becoming more aware of the everyday world around us involves more than just looking. You must also start to smell, feel, taste and hear the world you are trying to create. By awakening your senses and becoming more aware of the world around you, you will be enrichening your grasp of that world. Once this heightened way of perceiving your environment has trickled down into your writing, your reader will benefit, getting a much fuller picture of the world you are creating.

Writing is a process of scrutinising, looking closely at things, and then using these observations to raise the level of perception, one in which you and your reader understands the world a little bit more. So, how do you describe a rough surface or a bitter taste in an interesting way that has an immediate effect on the reader? A great way to lift the reader’s perception is to use metaphors and similes. Metaphors are figures of speech that directly refer one thing to another, without using the word as or like, eg, the sun was an orange; his eyes were a laser; the mud was treacle. Similes are comparisons which use the word as or like, eg. The sun was like an orange, his eyes roved the room like a laser, the mud was as soft as treacle. Think of comparisons that fit the sensation you are trying to describe. For example, the rough surface might be compared to gravel, and the bitter taste might be compared to that of a lemon. Try to find a metaphor or simile that fits the context.

Remember your writing will always benefit from exercising your sensory awareness. Sensory perceptions will offer dimensions that will enrich your stories and poetry.

Good writing that draws in the reader must use as many of the senses as possible to convey a convincing story. Too often, writers fall into the trap of using just visual descriptions and ignoring the wealth of detail that comes through the other senses, i.e. sound, smell, taste and texture. These senses have just as strong an effect on the reader and help them step into the world you are creating on the page.

However, be careful of giving too much detail and writing long passages of description. Highlight the most important eye-catching details, and weave them in with action and dialogue.

Hearing is the sense that people most often forget to use when writing fiction. However, the world is full of sounds that can have a powerful effect. Even in the most peaceful scenes, there are always noises that can be detected. Descriptions of music can be uses to trigger flashbacks or memories.

Describing the taste of food is one of the best ways of getting your reader involved in the story. Well-written descriptions of food can leave readers salivating. Eating food is often a social occasion, and you can reveal a lot about your characters through the food they eat and how they eat it.

Smell is the most nostalgic of the senses, so use it to great effect. It can be used to prompt a character’s memory or to symbolise something else.

**Writing Exercise**

**Think of the childhood landscape you described in the first workshop. Try to remember as much detail as possible. Try to write down three things for the following. Don’t worry if at this stage you can’t recall three things for each sense.**

* **Sounds that can be heard, eg the whistle of the wind.**
* **Textures that can be felt, eg the rough bark of a tree.**
* **Odours that can be smelt, eg the fresh smell of newly mown grass.**
* **Flavours that can be tasted, eg the bitter dryness in your mouth that hot weather causes.**
* **Objects that can be seen.**

**If you can, take a walk through a similar landscape. It might be a local park, a street, or country road. Can you find sights, sounds, smells, textures, tastes that you didn’t mention in the first part of the exercise? Try to capture them in words. Close your eyes and listen to all the different types of sound you can hear. Try to come up with words that describe the sounds.**

In this exercise, you might see or hear something that isn’t usually in your view, or notice something that you haven’t thought about for a while, an object that is always present but not always seen. These perceptions can be used again in further creative writing exercises, so keep them in your notebook. In your writing, try to use as many of your senses as possible, sight, smell, sound, touch, taste, to evoke setting, and aim for exact imagery. Be specific, eg instead of saying a flower, make it a bluebell, instead of a car, a battered Renault. Give the reader as much detail as possible.

Read Seamus Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist* (below) and make a list of the different sense perceptions under the headings SOUND, SIGHT, SMELL, TASTE and FEEL. Do any descriptions combine a number of senses, eg sight and sound?

Eg. SOUND

Bubbles gargled

A strong gauze of sound…

DEATH OF A NATURALIST

By [Seamus Heaney](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/seamus-heaney)

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart

Of the townland; green and heavy headed

Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.

Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.

Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles

Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.

There were dragonflies, spotted butterflies,

But best of all was the warm thick slobber

Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water

In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring

I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied

Specks to range on window sills at home,

On shelves at school, and wait and watch until

The fattening dots burst, into nimble

Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us how

The daddy frog was called a bullfrog

And how he croaked and how the mammy frog

Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was

Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too

For they were yellow in the sun and brown

In rain.

    Then one hot day when fields were rank

With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs

Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges

To a coarse croaking that I had not heard

Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.

Right down the dam gross bellied frogs were cocked

On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:

The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat

Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.

I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings

Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew

That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

In this poem, Heaney evokes a very strong sense of place through his rich descriptions. The sensory description is so rich that it almost becomes intoxicating. The senses become confused and merge together, eg. ‘bluebottles wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell’.

**Using colour**

One of the most powerful description tools a writer has at their disposal is colour. We all react at an unconscious level to colours, and they can change our mood. Bright red is exciting, while deep blue and green are calming. You can use colours deliberately to reflect the emotions of your characters. Colours also have personal associations and memories.

When describing colour, be precise about its shade. Don’t just say blue – think of the innumerable shades and contrasts within that colour tone: peacock blue, sky blue, lavender, marine, turquoise, indigo, etc.

Different colours can affect the mood of a scene. In this extract, from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the colour yellow is used to create a sickly, unhealthy mood.

*It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw – not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul bad yellow things. But there is something about that paper = the smell! The only thing I can think of that it is like is the colour of paper! A yellow smell?*

Note again, how the writer combines different senses – yellow – and – smell- to create a powerful and original effect.

**Writing exercise**

**Returning to your landscape story, write a scene in which one colour dominates. Your character might be wearing that colour, and it might also be apparent in the landscape. How does the colour affect the character’s mood and behaviour? For example, bright colours might indicate a confident outgoing personality, whereas dull shades may mean a character is shy and doesn’t want to stand out.**

**Now, choose an opposite contrasting colour and rewrite the scene with that colour instead. Which works best? Develop the one that draws your attention and appeals to your reading instincts.**

**Workshop Three**

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT…

Don’t hesitate to let the weather help you set the tone of your story or novel. Even though writers are often discouraged from beginning a novel or story with weather, such descriptions in a landscape can be a great way to create atmosphere, mood and suspense. Disruptive weather such as storms, thunder, drought and heatwaves, can be added to create a mood of danger and suspense, and often what’s going on outside is reflective of what’s going on inside of characters and plots.

Weather is important in our everyday lives: it has the power to change plans, alter our mood, and forms the basis of a lot of small talk. It’s such an important part of our consciousness that it should be part of every scene in a story. It can be used to supply background atmosphere to the action. If your readers don’t get some idea of what the weather is like in your story and its effect on the landscape, then there will be something fundamentally missing in your story’s descriptions. Weather is a constant in all our lives, and it’s impossible to ignore it, even when we’re indoors.

Undoubtedly, weather affects people’s moods. People tend to feel happy on bright, sunny days, and sad or depressed when it’s cold and rainy. A storm brewing makes the characters feel tense, and a howling wind makes them jittery. Severe cold can freeze people’s emotions as well as their bodies.

Think about SHOWING the weather rather than TELLING it, as in the following example:  
*Red-faced passengers, people with wet coats and windblown hair came in stamping their feet and rubbing their cold hands…*

In this description, we know exactly what the weather is like, without having it directly reported to us. The image is much stronger in the reader’s mind than if they had been told it was a cold, wet day. Their senses have been stimulated by the description.

**SHOWING NOT TELLING**

Sometimes you will have to convey events quickly because their small detail is not relevant to the story. Sometimes you will have to dramatise the small details because their particulars will be of great significance, either for the character or your story in general.

Telling summarises abstract emotions in ways that don’t quite satisfy the reader. There are times when it will be appropriate to write ‘She was angry’ or ‘He was sad; but there will be times when the reader wants more: they will need to see the scrunched up paper bouncing off the wall; they will want to see your characters laughing or crying, and interpret events for themselves.

‘He was sad’ if shown, might become: “His shoulders heaved and he let out a long frail sigh as he turned towards the door.’

‘She was irate’ might become: “She glared through him, past him, stabbing the desk with her pencil.”

Showing generates more vivid sensory images and arouses a more pressing intrigue than telling.

You can use weather in your story to reflect the way you want a character to feel. This is called Pathetic Fallacy.

You can create subtle effects by avoiding extreme forms of weather. It may be sunny but with a cold breeze, or overcast but not hot. Drizzle can be more effective in conveying a mood than heavy rain. You can also keep the weather changing in line with the character’s changing feelings. Clouds can be useful for creating atmosphere and suspense, too.

**Understanding Pathetic Fallacy**

**This term, coined by the art critic John Ruskin, refers to the tendency to give human feelings to things in nature such as brooding clouds or laughing brooks. It later came to mean the way that writers use the weather to reflect the character’s emotional state. Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte is full of instances of this technique. She frequently uses storms to mirror and foreshadow dramatic events. It’s a wild and windy night when Mr Earnshaw dies, and a violent thunderstorm strikes when Heathcliff leaves Wuthering Heights.**

Dickens also uses weather to give atmosphere to his novels. *Bleak House* opens with a description of fog.

*Fog everywhere, fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great and dirty city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships, fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the fireside of their wards….*

Fog can also be used to disorientate the reader and reflect a character’s inner confusion, as in this extract from my novel, *Disappeared*.

*The lough-shore fields and hedgerows were slipping back to fog and water. The mist crept ashore while the old man watched, wandering on the road behind him. Listening carefully, he could hear the muffled flight of each water droplet, the soft implosion that marked the disappearance of another tree, another house, another landmark, as the fog sneaked him and enclosed him in walls of whiteness….*

*Even though he was in a hurry, he could only manage the small mouse-like steps of an ill man not fully anchored in reality. His body felt like a massive bulk to be coaxed awkwardly through the gaps in the fog. The harder he tried, the slower his progress became…..*

*His shuffling steps stopped. He stood impatiently, wanting to reach down and grab onto each resistant limb. The fog thickened, spreading white wings of atomised water over him, and he tottered as if brought to a dangerous brink. Where was this unfathomable hesitation coming from? It was his illness. Alzheimer’s seemed to have a direction and will all of its own, a destructive force over which he had no control. As he stood there, his thoughts and memories vanished one by one, swallowed up by the mist inside him. He was reduced to an inner silence, a trance, breathing in the damp, morning air. He was on a road he had known all his life, but he had reached the end of himself. The point where the rest of the world tips over in oblivion.*

Fog is one of my favourite weather conditions, and I confess to using it in every book that I’ve written, not only as an obstacle to overcome but as a metaphor for disorientation. The experience of being enshrouded in fog befits my characters, who are always searching for the hidden beyond of things. Opening a chapter or a story with a strong setting and immersing the reader in a sensation, such as groping through clammy fog can be a good way of easing your reader into the story. Remember to sustain the weather theme and build the mood – keep adding to the descriptions of the particular weather pattern you are using. Make the sensory atmosphere all-encompassing and pervasive. Here’s a description of Lough Neagh at the beginning of *Undertow,* the fifth in my Inspector Celsius Daly series*.*

*Fog, dragging across the shoreline, hung over the heaving expanse of the lough.*

*The view at the jetty had no depth; nothing to see or touch but a cold stagnancy pressing upon everything, no stealthy shapes or shadows and no sign of the drowned corpse. The vast mass of the lough and its secret, washed ashore overnight, had slid into oblivion.*

*A disorientated Inspector Celcius Daly stepped from his car and listened for the telltale sounds, the churn of the waves, the wash of shifting currents, the web of birdcalls bubbling up from tree-lined coves, but heard nothing. It was early in the morning, too early for most. He had worked all night, and had been looking forward to clearing his head with the exhilarating air of the lough, and a glimpse of its wind-slapped waves, their rainy glitter and gloom thrusting towards him. For the past year, this great wild space had been his only respite from the two habits that governed his existence, work and insomnia; the only place he could breathe freely and figure out his thoughts by himself.*

*Daly groped in the direction of the water, trying to get his bearings, but almost immediately, the fog enclosed him in walls of whiteness, and all he could see were floating fragments, dark rocks, thorn trees and an abandoned fishing boat with rotten timbers. No sounds, no sense of direction, no signs of his colleagues or police tape, no sad clues as to what had happened overnight, only these white suffocating corridors to roam.*

*Where was everybody? Lough Neagh might be one of the largest lakes in Western Europe, but it was small in the parochial sense. Bad news travelled quickly along its shores, and Daly had expected to encounter a few press photographers and gawping members of the public fringing the scene, but the shrouded cove was completely devoid of life. Perhaps he had made a mistake and parked up at the wrong place. A solitary swell broke, heaving and sucking along the invisible shore. He wheeled around and changed direction.*

*He was supposed to know this terrain by heart, but this morning the very presence of the lough seemed unimaginable. He clambered along a muddy bank, shuffling slowly, playing blind-man’s buff with the shoreline.*

*To his relief, the fog had other occupants. The profile of a young man floated into view, a police officer minding the crime scene, his face becalmed by the fog.*

*Daly flicked open his ID. “Which direction?”*

*The officer pointed the way. A colleague drifted close by, another ghost, and then the world whitened again. Daly slithered down an embankment of rocks, treacherously greasy with algae, hearing waves splash nearby. Gobbets of water soaked his trousers and dribbled down his legs. Thin air one moment, deep dark water the next; he’d better mind himself. He reached out a hand to steady himself against a post, the strangeness of the invisible shore made stranger by the fact that each footstep was one he had taken countless times before, loping and clambering over the uneven terrain as a boy, but somehow the fog had swept those memories aside. Wary of jumping from one rock to another, he plodded on, slipping down the sides, getting his feet soaking wet.*

*A thorn tree in blossom appeared and then disappeared, recoiling into the fog, otherworldly. Again that disorientating sense that the lough was suddenly far away, that it had fled with the crime scene undercover of the fog, its waves breaking on a distant shore.*

*He shouted: “Hello, police,” hoping to call his way out of the murk. His words came out more querulously than he intended, half-strangled and hoarse. Annoyed at having to draw attention to himself in this way, he shouted louder, and then listened. The lough lay cushioned in silence. Then it came, a murmuring response further along the shore. Followed by another gurgling call, further away, repeating the first. Was it just his muffled echo? Or were there other detectives out there, searching for corpses, trying to yell their way out of this mist-shrouded labyrinth?*

In this opening chapter, Daly doesn’t achieve much as a detective - which makes it easy for me as a writer because he doesn’t have much to live up to in the rest of the book! But, hopefully, a sense of intrigue has been established. He confronts different obstacles, including the weather, and each one leaves him increasingly disorientated. The beginning is the door into your story, and the most unforgiving place. There are lots of ways of beginning a story, and you have to choose the right one – with a question, an anecdote, a symbolic object, a character portrait. For me, I always like to immerse my readers in interesting weather.

If you’re writing fantasy or science fiction, you may also want to think about the weather conditions in your fantasy world or on your alien planet and how they affect your characters and society in general. In Poul Anderson’s 1954 science fiction story *The Big Rain,* the explorers visit a planet where it never stops raining, and they end up going mad! Persistent rain or suffocatingly hot weather can be used to build tension between characters.

Many stories use weather events as the backdrop: eg a drought, a great flood, a big storm. Don’t underestimate the power of weather, it can change history. Battles have been won and lost due to bad weather. Freak weather events can postpone or destroy lives.

**Using the Seasons**

The changing seasons can be a useful way in stories to show the passing of time, and also creating a mood. A story set in autumn and moving into winter has a very different tone to a story set in winter and moving into spring. Think about the best season in which to set your story, and make sure the reader knows what time of the year it is. Don’t tell them that it’s winter or spring. Give them the tell-tale signs, eg swallows returning and building nests, snow falling, blazing sun, leaves falling. I set most of my novels at the point when winter is turning into spring, the cusp of the year turning, because it suits the plot-lines which involve characters moving from mystery and shadow towards the truth and the light. And because I’m the author and in charge, I can plunge a character back into wintry weather or give them a foretaste of the spring to come, as befits the mood and plot.

From *Disappeared*

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*It was still light when he arrived home. The sun had bored through the blanket of greyness and was sprinkling the waters of the lough with a dappled light. He stretched his cramped limps and took off with a spurt of energy across the patchwork of fields to the shoreline.*

*The breeze was soft, and he soon found a sheltered spot under an oak tree to rest. The evening felt like a comparative heaven to the purgatory of dark winter nights he had endured in the cottage. He watched the smoke start to rise from the chimneys on the western shore of the lough.*

*Even though the sun was setting, Daly sensed by a hundred little signs that light was beginning to win over darkness above and below. A sharp volley of swallows shot over a row of trees and swooped overhead, a travelling kink against the edge of winter. He reassured himself that he no longer lived at the brutal edge of history, that he was beyond the reach of bullets and bombs that had blighted the career and lives of policemen like Mitchell. The evening air was thick with the promise of spring.*

*Soon the daffodils his father planted would be bursting out of the hedge banks. He would take pleasure in their appearance this year, a simple, enclosed contentment that had much to do with the sense of failure that had overshadowed his personal life for the past six months.*

However, in the next chapter, Daly wakes to an icy landscape of frost, and encounters a set-back in his investigation. Remember setting, weather, landscape description must be combined and integrated with character and plot.

**Writing Exercise**

**Return to your writing exercise in Workshop One, in which you created a landscape that you know well. Now describe a scene in that landscape with your favourite weather and in your favourite season, using as much detail as possible and engaging the senses. Imagine that there are characters in the landscape. How does the weather and season make them feel and behave?**

**Now write a scene in the same landscape with a form of weather or season that you really hate or are frightened of, eg. thunder and lightning, relentless rain, gloomy winter. Again, use as much description as possible. How does this form of weather or season make your characters feel and behave?**

**Workshop Four**

MAKING YOUR CHARACTER FEEL AT HOME

Houses and buildings can become as famous as characters in many stories. Famous fictional houses include Wuthering Heights, the house in which Emily Bronte’s novel of the same name is set, and 221b Baker Street in the Sherlock Holmes mysteries. The kind of objects and possessions people have in their homes and what they do with them can describe a lot about their character. Some people are careful with their possessions, keeping them neat and tidy, while others are chaotic and careless. You can use possessions and objects to connect characters to the past and convey information about their earlier lives: a shell on the mantelpiece collected at the beach on a childhood holiday; a painting inherited from a grandfather; a ring that belonged to a mother.

Read this extract from Wuthering Heights and try to describe the impression it gives you of the owner, Heathcliff.

“... Above the chimney were sundry villainous old guns, and a couple of horse pistols: and, by way of ornament, three gaudily painted canisters disposed along its ledge. The floor was of smooth, white stone; the chairs, high-backed, primitive structures, painted green: one or two heavy black ones lurking in the shade. In an arch under the dresser reposed a huge, liver-coloured bitch pointer, surrounded by a swarm of squealing puppies; and other dogs haunted other recesses.”

Heathcliff’s front room in

*Wuthering Heights.*

The interior of the house, with its darkness creates a sensation of threat. The smooth white stone adds coldness. However, the narrator does not stop there. She uses interesting verbs to make the mood spooky and sinister. Chairs *lurk* in the shade. This is a good example of personification – giving a human quality to an object. Dogs *haunt* recesses. Again, the idea of ‘haunting’ is one we normally associate with ghosts than with dogs. Even the adjectives carry hints of menace: *villainous* guns. More personification here. Imagine if the author had described the scene in the following way: ‘Chairs repose in the shade and dogs roam in the corners’, but this would immediately take the threat out of the description. She points the reader towards a single mood with carefully chosen verbs, adverbs and adjectives.

A story with a strong sense of place takes readers out of their own world and into another reality.

As the story unfolds make sure that you never leave your reader without a sense of place, reminding them is the scene taking place outside or inside, and what time of day it is. Settings help make a story convincing and engaging.

Always tell them where every scene is set.

Describing a place is hugely important for creating a mood. The location itself is less important than how your characters feel about it.

You can create impact and variety by taking characters to other contrasting locations. The change of location can alter the mood of the story and change the pace dramatically.

A well described setting can also evoke a great deal about the character that chooses to inhabit it.

Remember you can reveal character through details of the space they inhabit and the possessions they have chosen.

How we see the places in our lives reveals who we are and how we feel at any given moment. A church or a river will feel very different to you on a day when you are attending a funeral, as opposed to a day when you’ve won the lottery.

Read through the description below. What do you find interesting? How do the possessions in Harry’s bedroom help describe his character and create a sense of mystery?

**Reading Exercise**

**Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire**

**Chapter Two**

Harry lay flat on his back, breathing hard as though he had been running. He had awoken from a vivid dream with his hands pressed over his face. The old scar on his forehead, which was shaped like a bolt of lightning, was burning beneath his fingers as though someone had just pressed a white-hot wire to his skin.

He sat up, one hand still on his scar, the other reaching out in the darkness for his glasses, which were on the bedside table. He put them on and his bedroom came into clearer focus, lit by a faint misty orange light that was filtering through the curtains from the street lamp outside the window.

Harry ran his fingers over the scar again. It was still painful. He turned on the lamp beside him, scrambled out of bed, crossed the room, opened his wardrobe and peered into the mirror on the inside of the door. A skinny boy of fourteen looked back at him, his bright green eyes puzzled under his untidy black hair. He examined the lightning bolt scar of his reflection more closely. It looked normal, but it was still stinging.

Harry tried to recall what he had been dreaming about before he had awoken. It has seemed so real….there had been two people he knew, and one he didn’t…he concentrated hard, frowning, trying to remember….

The dim picture of a darkened room came to him… there had been a snake on a hearth rug… a small man called Peter, nicknamed Wormtail… and a cold, high voice… the voice of Lord Voldemort. Harry felt as though an ice-cube had slipped down into his stomach at the very thought…….

Harry took his face out of his hands, opened his eyes and stared around his bedroom as though expecting to see something unusual there. As it happened, there were an extraordinary number of unusual things in this room. A large wooden trunk stood open at the foot of his bed, revealing a cauldron, broomstick, black robes and assorted spellbooks. Rolls of parchment littered that part of his desk that was not taken up by the large, empty cage in which his snowy owl, Hedwig, usually perched. On the floor beside his bed a book lay open, he had been reading it before he lay asleep the previous night. The pictures in the book were all moving. Men in bright orange robes were zooming in and out of sight on broomsticks, throwing a red ball to each other.

**Writing Exercise**

Returning to your landscape story, pick a house that has a special significance for your character. You can write about your own home, or that of a neighbour. Focus on the physical details of the house, and any memories that are associated with it. Starting from the outside, have your character walk through each room in the house, describing how he or she feels in each one. Think about the following.

What is the character’s favourite room?

What would the character most like to change about the house?

What are the possessions of your character, the furniture, books, toys, etc? What memories does each object hold?

Think of some other locations in your landscape, that feature strongly in your character’s life. For example, a school, a forest that they play in, a shop, a river, etc. Write a paragraph describing your character in each of these settings.

**Workshop Five**

EMBODYING CHARACTERS

Readers engage with your story through characters so you must make sure that even in a crime novel or thriller, your characters, including the minor ones, have some sort of emotional depth and complexity. Avoid at all costs one-dimensional villains.

Your characters should have a history - a back-story which has shaped and moulded them.

Build up your characters’ backgrounds extensively – you don’t have to share all the details with your readers but knowing your characters intimately will help you make them more convincing.

One of the most effective ways of adding depth your characters is to give them memories.

Memories bring the past to the present of your story and add layers of complexity to your characters.

However, keep your memories short, vivid and relevant to what is happening in the story.

Long slabs of memory can be fatal to the forward momentum of your narrative so keep flashbacks short and specific.

Consider creating a timeline of your character’s life to keep you from confusing the reader and yourself. Even though your book may not be about their childhood or adolescence, knowing when their key life experiences occurred is very helpful.

Be specific and particular when imagining your characters. The more grounded your stories are, the more they will illuminate the human condition.

Example 1

**He was a forty-year old, public school educated man of considerable wealth who got very upset when his daughter decided to do voluntary work overseas.**

Packed with information, but who cares. We can’t see or feel anything. The characters are mere types and the action is hidden.

Example 2

**Nigel downed a tumbler of claret very fast. Emily was going to live in some dump of a country full of typhoons and terrorists. He marched upstairs and yanked her designer clothes out of the wardrobe. “Won’t need these, then, will you, Princess?”**

Now we have subjectivity, action and setting. Everything is personal and particular.

Conflict is at the heart of stories and comes from within characters as well as from without. People have opinions, traits, desires and inclinations which are at war with each other. We need to capture these inconsistencies to make our characters credible and complex. These contradictions generate dilemmas or obstacles for the characters to deal with.

There are five main methods of portraying your characters:

**Interpretation**

The writer tells us about the character, summarising their past, motives, mistakes, etc.

**Appearance**

Physical details can act as an index to a character’s psychology and values. Characters can seem like ghosts unless they are vividly embodied with some physical description.

**Action**

For example, habitual behaviours with provide insight into a character, or decisive actions made by the character which generate dilemmas.

**Thought**

Fiction can render the inner world of the character, their mental and emotional processes, either directly or indirectly.

**Speech**

A character’s speech reveals personality, opinions, attitudes, educational level, social class etc.

As well as embodying a character by describing their facial characteristics, size, gait, and habits, consider using the objects that surround them to flesh out their character.

**Writing Exercise**

Take a character you have been working on and present him or her in a scene, including *an interpretation* of what the character is like, their *appearance,* and combination of *thought, action and speech.*

**Proust’s Questionnaire – Hot Seat/Role Play Exercise**

Think of the main character or hero in your story. Pretend you are asking them the following questions and try to come up with possible answers. This is a great exercise to find out more about your character and flesh them out in your imagination. Don’t worry if you can’t think of appropriate answers – just spending the time considering what your character might say will help you know more about them and eventually create a convincing character on the page.

1. What is your idea of perfect happiness?

2. What is your greatest fear?

3. What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?

4. What is the trait you most deplore in others?

5. Which living person do you most admire?

6. What is your greatest extravagance?

7. What is your current state of mind?

8. What do you consider the most overrated virtue?

9. On what occasion do you lie?

10. What do you most dislike about your appearance?

11. Which living person do you most despise?

12. What is the quality you most like in a man?

13. What is the quality you most like in a woman?

14. Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

15. What or who is the greatest love of your life?

16. When and where were you happiest?

17. Which talent would you most like to have?

18. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

19. What do you consider your greatest achievement?

20. If you were to die and come back as a person or a thing, what would it be?

21. Where would you most like to live?

22. What is your most treasured possession?

23. What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?

24. What is your favourite occupation?

25. What is your most marked characteristic?

26. What do you most value in your friends?

27. Who are your favourite writers?

28. Who is your hero of fiction?

29. Which historical figure do you most identify with?

30. Who are your heroes in real life?

31. What are your favourite names?

32. What is it that you most dislike?

33. What is your greatest regret?

34. How would you like to die?

**Reading Exercise**

Look at the introductions below of the child heroes, Annika from The Star of Kazan, and Huckleberry Finn. Let’s discuss how the authors grab the reader’s sympathy for their heroes, while giving the reader lots of information without telling them directly, through the use of dreams, family relationships and physical descriptions. What hidden depths do the authors hint at?

**The Star of Kazan by Eva Ibbotson**

**(Annika lives as a maid in a grand house in Vienna and longs to discover the mother who abandoned her as a baby.)**

As soon as she awoke, Annika opened her attic window and looked out onto the square. She did this every morning; she liked to see that everything was in order and today it was. The pigeons were still roosting on Gerard Brenner’s head, the fountain had been turned on, and Josef was putting the café tables out on the pavement, which meant it was going to be a fine day….

Nearly twelve years had passed since Annika had been carried into the kitchen of the professor’s house. When the typhus epidemic had come to an end, and the Convent of the Sacred Heart had sent word that they were out of quarantine, Eillie had bundled up the baby, and she and Sigrid had gone upstairs to seek out their employers.

“We’ve come to say goodbye,” they’d said. “We’ll find some way of providing for her, but we can’t give her up.”

The professors were deeply offended. They were puzzled. They were hurt.

“Have we complained about the baby?” said Professor Julius stuffily.

“Have we made any objections?” asked Professor Emill.

“I’m sure I never said a word,” said Professor Gertrude, blinking and looking stricken.

Sigrid and Ellie looked at each other.

“You mean she can stay?”

Professor Julius bent his head.

“We shall of course expect her to be *useful*,” he said.

“Oh, she will be,” cried Ellie. “She shall be the best-trained child in Vienna.”

And she was. By the time she was seven, Annika could bake and ice a three-tiered chocolate cake, and bring a roast to the table. She could cut cucumbers so thinly that you read a newspaper through the slices, and when she was sent to do the marketing, the stallholders brought out their best vegetables and fruit because the little girl was famous for her eagle eyes…..

But neither Ellie nor Sigrid had taught the child how to dream. The ability to disappear into her own head had come from the unknown parents who had abandoned her.

**Introduction to Huckleberry Finn in Tom Sawyer**

Shortly Tom came upon the juvenile pariah of the village, Huckleberry Finn, son of the town drunkard. Huckleberry was cordially hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town, because he was idle and lawless and vulgar and bad—and because all their children admired him so, and delighted in his forbidden society, and wished they dared to be like him. Tom was like the rest of the respectable boys, in that he envied Huckleberry his gaudy outcast condition, and was under strict orders not to play with him. So he played with him every time he got a chance. Huckleberry was always dressed in the cast-off clothes of full-grown men, and they were in perennial bloom and fluttering with rags. His hat was a vast ruin with a wide crescent lopped out of its brim; his coat, when he wore one, hung nearly to his heels and had the rearward buttons far down the back; but one suspender supported his trousers; the seat of the trousers bagged low and contained nothing, the fringed legs dragged in the dirt when not rolled up.

Huckleberry came and went, at his own free will. He slept on doorsteps in fine weather and in empty hogsheads in wet; he did not have to go to school or to church, or call any being master or obey anybody; he could go fishing or swimming when and where he chose, and stay as long as it suited him; nobody forbade him to fight; he could sit up as late as he pleased; he was always the first boy that went barefoot in the spring and the last to resume leather in the fall; he never had to wash, nor put on clean clothes; he could swear wonderfully. In a word, everything that goes to make life precious that boy had. So thought every harassed, hampered, respectable boy in St. Petersburg.

**Workshop Six**

USING IMAGERY AND EDITING

**Symbolism – images, metaphors, similes**

Our deepest experiences can be intensely personal, but they’re also common and universal, birth, death and powerful emotions such as love, anger, hate and joy. However, these emotions often feel inexpressible, and the words we use to describe them can feel empty and powerless. Fortunately, there are literary devices such as symbolism to help us express them.

Using particularly vivid, concrete imagery allows the reader to feel the experience as though it’s happening to them. Or it may help them recall sharply a memory of that particular experience.

You can create a powerful effect in a piece of writing by stepping back and describing an object or an experience as if you’ve never experienced it before. The purpose of this is to make people see and hear the world afresh, as if for the first time. You can challenge their way of perceiving the world and provide new insights into human perception and behaviour.

Symbolism needs to be used carefully in prose. It can draw too much attention to itself – look at how clever I am – and lifts the reader out of the story. Be wary of clunky metaphors and similes and over obvious symbols. Used wisely they can add great depth.

Using concrete imagery in your writing is the surest way to connect readers with the deeper, often hidden aspects of themselves, and to make a piece of poetry or fiction meaningful.

**Writing Exercise**

Choose three of the abstractions below and write three concrete images to describe them. I’ve included three examples to give you an idea of what you have to do.

ability

achievement

adoration

anxiety

apprehension

artistry

awe

beauty

belief

belonging

bravery

brutality

calm

chaos

charity

depression

despair

determination

disappointment

disbelief

freedom

friendship

frustration

goodness

gratitude

grief

happiness

hate

hatred

hope

hurt

imagination

independence

knowledge

laughter

law

**Eg.** **Anxiety**

I strap a helmet to my six year-old son’s head

before allowing him into the soft play area.

So many toasters to choose from in the home goods aisle

– colour, size, energy - efficiency rating –

I stand there for an hour and end up leaving with none.

Behind the sofa, I curled up tightly and

started biting my nails

**Eg. Calm:**

The gentle sway of trees, as their leaves whisper in excitement,   
The evoking words of a book with the steam that brews from a hot cup of team.  
The gentle sigh from soft lips as the worries disburse.

**Eg. Death**:  
Sympathy cards echo “sorry for your loss”, sitting on the table beside the casseroles that they forgot to refrigerate.   
  
As the months go by, your flesh reduced to just the bones that you were underneath.   
  
Books and albums are sifted through for the photos that we think represented you best.

**Reviewing and rewriting your story**

Most writing is rewriting. Think of your first draft or your initial efforts as the raw material you need in order to start putting your story together. During the first draft you’re getting to know the characters and their stories, capturing their voices and the moods of the different settings.

Rewriting requires a different mindset to drafting. The first draft requires letting your imagination go and writing spontaneously, while rewriting requires a more analytical mindset. You now have to put on your editor’s hat and be more critical. That’s why it’s always good to leave your story aside for a number of weeks or months.

**Read through your story with a detached eye. Imagine you’re a reader coming to the story for the first time. Take a pen and start marking the following:**

Where the text doesn’t hold your attention

Where your mind wanders off

Where the story is muddled or unclear

Where you spot obvious errors

Where you see a loose end or an unnecessary scene

Where scenes go on for too long

Where something’s missing or you need to expand something

Where the story is too simplistic or predictable or where you need to add more mood or suspense

Places where you might divide the story into chapters or sections

**Ask yourself the following questions and try to answer them in one or two sentences:**

What is my story about?

What is the overall goal for my main character? Is the goal made clear to the reader?

What forms of conflict or obstacles have I placed in the way of my main character?

**At this stage you should be prepared to:**

Cut scenes

Write in new scenes you think you might need

Shorten scenes that go on for too long

Extend scenes or move scenes around

REVISING FOR STYLE

Remove unnecessary adjectives and adverbs. Be brave and cut away description leaving just enough to evoke in the reader’s imagination the scene.

Remove ‘intensifiers’ such as ‘really, very, extremely, exceptionally’

Remove overworked similes such as ‘green as grass’

In all be prepared to cut several hundred words from the first draft of a short story!

**Common pitfalls**

**Mistakes:**

He seemed rather tire and was lying down, raising his head only to drink something form a vessel.

**Vagueness:**

He seemed rather tired and was lying down, raising his head only to drink something from a vessel.

**Images that don’t work:**

She leaned on the bar and stirred her drink. The ice cubes collided together like fighting bulls, clattering and punching.

She leaned on the bar and stirred the ice in her drink.

**Repetitions:**

Can you redraft the following piece of writing, removing the repetitions?

I needed a job. I reached for the newspaper and

snapped it open. But, as everybody knew, there were

never any jobs in the newspaper. No job you’d apply

for anyway. I threw down the newspaper, I’d have to

look elsewhere for a job.

**Avoiding Cliché**

It was raining cats and dogs.

It was pouring from the heavens.

Once you’ve finished the writing exercises, and if you would like me to offer some feedback and tips on what you’ve created, send the writing to me at [anthonyjquinnwriter@gmail.com](mailto:anthonyjquinnwriter@gmail.com). I’m looking forward to reading lots of exciting stories about landscape and setting.

**Biography**

Anthony J Quinn teaches creative writing at Queen’s University and in local schools and colleges. His nine novels have received critical acclaim from The Sunday Times, The Guardian, The Independent, The Financial Times, The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, The Sunday Express, Der Spiegel, The Irish Times and the Irish Independent.  His debut novel *Disappeared* was shortlisted for a Strand Literary Award in the United States by the book critics of the San Francisco Chronicle, The LA Times, The Washington Post and other US newspapers. It was also listed by Kirkus Reviews as one of the top ten thrillers of 2012. After its UK publication in 2014, *Disappeared* was selected by the Daily Mail and The Sunday Times as one of their Best Novels of the Year. He lives in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, with his wife, Clare, and their four children.