

Introduction

Thirty years ago, just after I graduated, I started training to be a teacher. As far as I remember, it was because I wanted to change the world, and a state school seemed the best place to start. Certainly, it wasn't a compromise or a stopgap career: I had no thought of being a writer, then.

Soon I was much too busy to write even if I had thought of it. Teacher training is hard, a crash course not so much in the study of education, but in the experience of school: in the taking of the register and the movement of chairs from room to room; in the flooding sounds of corridor and stairs; in the educational seasons, from the tempering heat of exam week to the crazy cosiness of Christmas; and above all in the terrifying confidence trick that is classroom discipline. It's a bodily experience, like learning to be a beekeeper, or an acrobat: a series of stinging humiliations and painful accidents and occasional sublime flights which leave, you either crippled or changed. If you are changed, you are changed for life: your immune system will no longer raise hives when adolescents mock you; you may stand at

the door of a noisy classroom with all the calm of a high-wire walker, poised to quell the noise with a twirl of your pole.

Now, I can still confidently tell rowdy adolescents to behave on the bus; still enter a classroom and look at the back row in the indefinable, teacherly way that brings quiet. I still want to change the world and think that school is an excellent place to do it. I have never got tired of classrooms, and have always, except when my children were very young, been employed in some capacity in a state school. Soon after I got my second teaching post, though, I also started to write in my spare time and holidays. A few years later, I began selling some journalism and cut down on my teaching hours; and when I was thirty, I published my first book. Suddenly I found that if I introduced myself in my new guise as a writer I'd be asked what I wrote about, and how, and listened to with a care that seemed exaggerated, even silly. I realized I was accustomed, when I talked about my work, to hardly being listened to at all.

Because everyone tells schoolteachers their jobs: everyone from politicians in parliament and journalists in newspapers to parents at the school concert and pensioners on the bus. The telling ranges from the minutely pedagogical – how we should set, mark, and test; to the philosophical and psychological – how to punish and reward; all the way to the religious – church schools, mindfulness; and politicized issues, such as the reintroduction of grammar schools. The tellings come in the form of laws, political manifestos, editorials, crazed comments in online

forums, and – amazingly often – a conversation with someone you have just met. Partly, this happens because people are so interested in schools – most of us were formed there, many of us have children there – but it is also because people feel free to set about a teacher in a way they never would a doctor or a lawyer.

For teachers have a lower social standing than other professionals. This isn't just because we are paid less, as I found out when I entered the even less well remunerated, but far more prestigious, profession of writing. And it isn't just because of the messy, practical nature of teachers' work, either: laymen do not tell a vet how to go about birthing calves, or a gynaecologist where to poke. It may be because so many teachers are women; or perhaps because we work with poor children; and it is certainly because so few of us are posh ourselves (teaching has always been the profession of first resort for graduates from working-class backgrounds). It's because of gender and class prejudice, because, in short, most teachers are *Miss*, as working-class pupils call their female teachers in England.

Miss: I have heard so many professional people express distaste for that name, but never a working teacher. Usually, the grounds are sexism, but real children in real schools don't use 'Miss' with any less (or more) respect than 'Sir'. *Miss* grates only on the ears of those who have never heard it used well: as it grated on me, as a middle-class Scot, thirty years ago. No longer: *Miss* is the name I put on like a coat when I go into school; *Miss* is the shoes I stand in when I call out the kids in the corridor for

running or shouting; *Miss* is my cloak of protection when I ask a weeping child what is wrong; *Miss* is the name I give another teacher in my classroom, in the way co-parents refer to each other as ‘Mum’ or ‘Dad’. *Miss* seems to me a beautiful name, because it has been offered to me so often with love.

I would like more people to understand what *Miss* means, and to listen to teachers. Parts of this book, therefore, are a sort of telling-back: long-stewed accounts of how teachers actually do tackle the apostrophe; of how we exclude and include; of the place of religion in schools; of how the many political changes of the last decades have played out in the classroom; of what a demanding, intellectual, highly skilled profession teaching can be. These confident answers, though, are short and few, because mostly what I have found in school is not certainty, but more questions. Complex questions, very often, about identity, nationality, art, and money, but offered very personally: questions embodied in children.

These questions, and the piercing moments when they were presented to me, make up the bulk of this book. It is structured around them: first around the child and the dilemma she brings, then in a wider grouping of related topics, and finally, loosely, around the course of my thirty years in schools, because it is me, not the children, learning the lessons here. I am in each story, clearly delineated, so that you will know what sort of person is doing the listening and filtering, and, I hope, be able to put my views aside and see the kids more clearly. I want to show you us, children and teachers, ‘Kids’ and ‘Miss’, both in groups, as

if in a long school corridor, and then close in, so you can see the stuff we have brought with us from home, so you can hear some of the things we say.

These are not biographies: they are partial views of young people absorbed in their circumstances, on the move, on the cusp, on the turn. But, even in a snapshot, children have the right to privacy just as adults do; and, more strongly than adults, the right to leave their old selves behind them. So, even where the stories are the most admiring, and when individuals positively wanted to be identified, I have detached these accounts from their original names, times, and places. Some stories need more privacy, and I have provided that with occasional very extensive blurring of identity. I have quoted one or two poems, and named two poets, from the anthology of my students' poems, *England: Poems from a School*, and used, with express permission, one real name from my past; other than that, no named individual here should be identified as any particular living person. I hope, however, that offence would not be given even if a general identification were made, because I have included nobody, teacher or pupil, about whom I could not write with love.

There is so much to love in school. I am writing this in September, school's New Year. I am snug in my study, writing: I would rather be in school. Teaching has taken me a long journey out of my class, and my nation; it takes me, every time I go in, out of myself. Today, the corridors are full of the young, of new pupils, and of old pupils renewed. Things have happened to them over the summer: they are different, experimental people, full of themselves,

eager to tell me about it. The register is fresh with names; the exercise books are crunched open at the spine, the pages blank and smooth as Larkin's spring leaves. *Begin afresh*, they seem to say. *afresh, afresh*. I fall for it, every year. You come too.