

The bushy and the dictionary

Rees Campbell August 2012 (Tasmania)

His hand rested on the door knob, as he took a deep breath before walking in. A worker's hand - one of those calloused and stained hard working hands - only four fingers, the other just a stumpy knuckle.

And so with trepidation, reluctance and fear - Brian opened the door and entered Sarah's world. A world that had caused him more sweat and pain and nervous energy than working in the bush since he'd been 15.

He was 58 years old, and still a hard working man. A single man now, and forever, it seemed. He lived in a little cottage *up the back of Ulverstone* and mostly earned a small satisfactory living selling firewood. But age was telling on him, the price of fuel was killing him, and he couldn't make ends meet any more. A fiercely independent man, but one who was being squeezed out of a way of life he understood. So he'd applied for the dole, swallowing the sour taste of pride to run the gauntlet of babyfaced bureaucrats wanting to know his private business.

They'd taken his name, and typed it quickly on to their computer screen; then asked the next and the next and the next inexplicable query in the inquisition the government gave them right to. He'd *had a bit of a dorry* at the paperwork his mate had brought home; and knew he'd have a problem there too. So he'd sat red faced and shamed with his failings being thrown at him with all the self-righteousness the young are capable of. Flight and fight conflicted, but he needed the money too badly, and he's spent weeks psyching himself up for this effort; so he *blew his stack and ranted and raved a bit. Did himself no good in the end tho'*. The kid behind the desk was not amused, and called for reinforcements which came in the form of higher salaried and even more self-important *up themselves desk jockies*, who passed judgement.

"What you will need to do Mr Sushames; is to enrol in an Adult Literacy course. You need to be able to read and write to be competitive in today's job market. You are 58, so you still have several years of employment before being eligible for a pension. We have mutual obligations these days, so to receive an unemployment benefit you must demonstrate your commitment to complete this course. If you don't attend, you may have breached your agreement, and your benefits may be suspended. Do you understand and comply? If so, sign here"



Brian had no problem understanding the words tumbling out of the pimple- faced-pigeon- chested boy's dentist-perfect mouth, although he did wonder where the "mutual" obligation was; it seemed to him like it was all on his side of the desk. But the words on the page *just floated there, like bits of muck in the cow trough*; making no sense and offering no help. He knew he wouldn't be able to learn to read and write like these desk jockies. Years ago, when he hadn't been a single man, his wife had tried to explain the mysteries on the page - but that had only ended in rages and tears. As far as he was concerned, that had just proven that *if he couldn't read when he was a kid, and he couldn't read when his missus tried, he wouldn't never learn how.*

But he could read and write his own name, so he did... on the dotted lines
Which is how it came that with trepidation, reluctance and fear - Brian opened the door and entered Sarah's world. The world of the printed word.

On her door was a big sign that read "Adult Literacy and Basic Education", which of course, many people who can't read, couldn't read. Hmmmm And then the joke... Bad spellers of the world untie! ha ha ha Many times she'd had to explain that one; with not many students laughing at it anyway.

Sarah, along with many others; loved reading, and loved the process of writing; loved the power, the magic, the mystery of words. She wanted to share that love with people who came in to learn to read or write. But it's hard to share the love with someone who's been forced to be with you.

And that's the first of many hurdles Brian and Sarah jumped over. It took a while, but he was a decent man who didn't want to be rude; so he arrived at the office when he was told to; and tried to do what he thought would be the impossible. *Look, if it was easy, I'd have learned in school. I was stupid then, and I'm stupid now. You can't teach an old dog new tricks, and I'm way too old to learn what I should a learned when I was still wet behind the ears.*

What Brian could do:

He could fell a tree in crowded bush without damaging the trees around, and without putting himself at harm.

He could split 8 tons (*well it's cubic metres these days*) of firewood in a day.

He could kill, skin and clean a rabbit in a matter of minutes; then take it home and cook it for his dinner.

He could take a phone call ordering firewood, and write down the amount, memorising the delivery address.

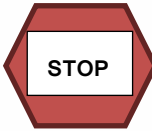


He could fix his chain saw, his lawn mower, his ute... and those of most of the neighbours too.

He thought he was *useful, a proper bloke, a bushy, a good mate.*

But he thought he was stupid because he couldn't spell words he could use. He thought he was stupid and was the only person in the world who couldn't read.

But, of course he could read - some things.

Sarah asked him what  this word was (but told him he would see it when driving)

And he knew it!

She asked him what sort of car he had; then asked him this word HOLDEN, and he could read it!

She then wrote this sentence **I have a blue Holden ute.** And he could read that too. And although Brian dismissed this as *not really reading, like books and stuff*, he was rapt to be able to make sense of things.

This was the beginning of a wonderful time where Brian tentatively explored this whole new world he had previously shunned. It wasn't always easy, and there were many unexpected barriers to overcome; but his natural curiosity and pride prompted him to work hard. Sarah and Brian started from what he DID know, gradually adding to that wealth of knowledge hidden by a life of not using the printed word. Diagrams were a feast of information, because he mostly knew what the elements were, it was now only a matter of *getting a handle on the spelling.*

Another fantastic breakthrough came after many weeks, and spelling had become a real chore. *Nothing makes sense, there's no logic to spelling. There's more that break the rules than follow them.* He was trying to write "beautiful" but couldn't remember it until she mentioned it was French.

English is an amazing language which reflects the world's history. Many have come, conquered, been vanquished and left the British Isles... and all have left their legacy in the language. The bits in brackets after the word in the dictionary suddenly had a value, and the bushy became addicted to the dictionary. Suddenly there was a reason for the crazy illogicality of English, it wasn't just a trap to embarrass and catch out writers. He would read the dictionary, laboriously - word by word; page by page exclaiming with glee



every time he worked out the derivation of a word. He realised once you'd mastered the root part of the word such as "listen" with the idiosyncrasy of the silent 't', you didn't have to learn all the extensions of the word. Automatically "listened, listening, listener" could all be written correctly.

Now, with all the role reversal of Eliza and Dr Higgins, Brian gave Sarah the credit for his burgeoning ability. He thought she was the reason for his success, and was quite dependent on her for prompts to his learning. He was so compliant she wanted to shake him! Every suggestion she made, Brian would thank her as if she'd invented the words and written the books herself.

Sarah knew Brian needed to wean himself from this dependence if he was truly going to use his new found skills in the wild wide world, so she hatched a plan. It was almost a year since he had first come in her door, and his reading and writing were still hesitant, but getting so much more proficient. Sarah was sure Brian was ready to throw away the supports of Adult Literacy. She suggested Brian research and write a substantial article; and as always he was keen but scared of not having sufficient skills. He didn't want to choose a topic, saying he "didn't know enough about anything" so she selected a topic many bushmen are in deep fear of.... Snakes!

Sure enough, Brian, actually shuddered at the idea. His experience of snakes had all been the tales for maximum fear, and he had a high suspicion of them. He had told her many stories of terror in the bush, of dogs disappearing mysteriously; of near misses *and bushies squealing like girls. Oh all right, if you really want me to, but it won't be much chop. What's there to know?*

The next few weeks of research were a revelation to Brian. This was the first time he'd ever been to the town library, but this time he opened the door to a world of words with some of the trepidation, but also enthusiasm and excitement. Sarah had suggested some of the non-fiction for young people might be easier to access the information he wanted.

Brian walked past the stands with brightly coloured books with bold covers. He walked past the rows of serious looking leatherbound volumes. He sidled past the teenagers sitting mutely at the computer screens. He strode past the newspaper readers, some nodding into their open pages, others poring over the small text with round-rimmed glasses. He never knew you could get CDs and videos from a library. He stopped at a reading by the librarian to a crowd of young parents with their toddlers on knees, all entranced by the story. He anxiously asked the assistant at the enquiry desk; and was blown away by the number of texts available on snakes.



He read till his eyes hurt. He read till his brain ached with all he was trying to load it with. He read until it was closing time. And he wrote. Slowly, but with a new found confidence in his ability to make his own reader (*wow, imagine that someone actually reading what I've written*) understand what he was saying. He imagined what his wife of long ago would say of him now. He'd lost touch with her after she nicked off, didn't even know where they lived. What if he found out and wrote her a letter now? *Wouldn't that open a can of worms?*

The article of snakes gradually took shape. He drafted and edited. He looked up the dictionary for words he didn't know. He drew maps of the bush he knew and loved; and where various snakes might be found. He learnt how to drive a photocopier (*never thought I'd do that neither!*).

Finally, he returned triumphant to Sarah's office with his project.

So; she said, hoping to have shaken him into rejecting her idea. "How did you get on with snakes?"

"Well jeez," he said, "you were right! It never is too late to learn, I never realised what fascinating things snakes are. You should see what I found out!"

And Brian read, word by hard fought and hard won word, what he had written.

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