



The Duchess of Cornwall wearing Anna Valentine, at First Story's fifth-birthday party in the gardens of Clarence House

HAPPY EVER AFTER

Creativity has its own rich pleasures, which is a lesson

WILLIAM FIENNES is determined to teach schoolchildren.

So how did he and a group of budding writers end up having tea
with the Duchess of Cornwall?

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HENRY BOURNE

A Tuesday afternoon in mid-April, and after weeks in which cold, wet winter seemed set for the long haul, spring has barged in at last, and with style. In the gardens at Clarence House, daffodils and magnolias are in full bloom under a cloudless sky. I'm at a tea party to celebrate the fifth birthday of the charity First Story, which promotes writing in challenging secondary schools. The Duchess of Cornwall, patron of the charity since 2011, moves among teachers, writers, publishers, supporters and teenagers, engaging with each guest in turn, talking about the power and value of writing. Two great plane-trees, 180 years old, lift and sway above us.

I can't believe we're here. In September 2007, a young teacher, Katie Waldegrave, invited me to run a writing workshop at her school, Cranford Community College in Hounslow. I said yes without thinking. I was writing my second book, *The Music Room*, and I was lonely in it, frightened, desperate for any chance to get out of the house. On a Wednesday afternoon I drove west from Hammersmith towards Heathrow, pushed through the outgoing tide of nose-studs, mobile phones and mulberry Cranford sweatshirts, and waited with Katie in a first-floor room, a shopping trolley mysteriously abandoned in the far corner.

A dozen students from years 11 and 12 joined our writing group that day. Katie had asked them all to submit a piece of writing in advance, and my heart had sunk when I'd read these stories – versions of *Harry Potter* and *Grand Theft Auto* and *Twilight* (more vampires than you could shake a sharpened stick at), with no sense of what it was like being a teenager in Hounslow, Southall or Hayes, often living in bilingual households, with grandparents and cousins and sometimes childhoods in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The stories featured characters called Jason, Sophie and Alexander, while the authors' names were Bhavin, Ramandeep, Jaspreet and Manveer.

Trying to hide my nerves, I told them that just as they all had their own speaking voice, so they each had their own voice as writers. I wanted them to forget any idea of what they thought 'writing' or 'literature' was meant to sound like. I said they each had a world in their heads, a mass of memories and experiences and sensations and dreams that nobody else in the whole of human history had ever had before or would ever have again, and that although they might one day want to write about intergalactic wars between tribes of giant space pandas (as Manveer did), we were going to start closer to home.

So Jaz walks down King Street in Southall; Jay finds a cow in the hallway of his aunt's house in India; Anum evokes the fear of a visit to West Middlesex Hospital in a story written only in questions;

Satty visits his uncle Bish in Wolverhampton and sits with his cousin in the derelict car known as the Bish-mobile. The stories sparkled with life. When a student wrote something beautiful or moving or funny (sometimes all three at once), the rest of the group would break into applause. As the weeks went by, it wasn't just that they wrote with more vividness and clarity – they were growing in self-confidence and self-esteem, listening to each other, responding to each other with more openness and sensitivity. 'Writing,' Philip Pullman has said, 'can liberate and strengthen young people's sense of themselves as almost nothing else can.'

In the summer term, we printed the group's work in an anthology called *On a Wednesday*, and launched the book with a reading to an audience of more than 150 people – teachers, students, families, school governors. By now, Katie and I thought we had stumbled across something powerful and important. We wondered what we could do to spread this experience to other schools, especially in disadvantaged communities, so that more young people could have the opportunity to write, to develop their creativity and their love and use of language, to find their voice and know that it has value.

That was the beginning of First Story. We asked friends and colleagues to act as trustees; we applied for grants, and wrote



From left: the Duchess in the Garden Room at Clarence House. In conversation with the student Olatomiwa Alabi. Cutting First Story's birthday cake. Pencils printed with winning entries to the charity's six-word story competition



Left: First Story's anthologies of pupils' writing. Below: the Duchess at the charity's birthday party with the headteacher Sue Croft and the pupil Rukiya Khatun



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been working as First Story writers-in-residence – novelists like Hisham Matar, John O'Farrell, Jon McGregor, Aminatta Forna, Ross Raisin and Tim Pears; poets like Kate Clanchy, Caroline Bird, Salena Godden and Laura Dockrill. I thought I'd go to Cranford just once; I ended up going every Wednesday for three years. The students' delight in language, character, image and storytelling reminded me of my own pleasure in those things, and of why I'd wanted to be a writer in the first place. First Story aims to support writers, as well as students and teachers: in its first five years the charity has given close to £400,000 in grants to British authors.

We started a six-word story competition, and printed the winning entries on pencils. (Joseph Wildman, from Quintin Kynaston School, Swiss Cottage: 'Went to shops. Won Lottery.

Sorted.' Lauren Gacheru, from Oxford Academy: 'Tried being normal. Worst two minutes.') We started a residential summer school – a week-long creative-writing course for students who'd been especially committed to their writing groups. We started an annual Young Writers' Day – a festival to celebrate and promote writing in schools, hundreds of teenagers and teachers converging on Oxford to meet, listen to and write alongside Philip Pullman, Mark Haddon, Michael Morpurgo, Malorie Blackman and dozens of others.

I'd like to see a writing group in every school in the country. At Cranford, I'd ask the group to remember being 10 years old – just dream yourself back into that time for a minute or two, and then write down the taste of being 10, the smell, the sound, the touch, the look of being 10. For Aniq, the sound of being 10 is dogs barking in the outskirts of Lahore at night, holding onto his uncle as he revved the motorbike, his cousins racing alongside, wind on their faces. Fatima remembers the day animals escaped from the Feltham city farm, so that suddenly horses were standing in people's front gardens, nibbling the bushes. Krystal says the taste of being 10 is the fried turkey tails the old lady sold from her trolley outside the school gates in Accra, Ghana. Amarjot remembers how warm the paper was when it came out of the photocopier. Luul sees Miss

O'Sullivan with her yellow 'Best Teacher' mug, Slim Fast drinks and bingo wings. Cyrus has begun a description of an airport: 'This is a place where birds are beaten at their own game. This is where the sky begins and ends.' The images fill the room. It's the beginning of writing, the discovery of voice, and beneath each memory, no matter how simply expressed, you can hear a quiet but insistent 'I am!'

And now here we are, among the magnolias and daffodils at Clarence House. The Duchess' commitment to literacy and creativity is genuine and inspiring. She's talking to Tanzina, from George Green's School, east London, hearing about the anthology called *A Spot of Sly Behaviour* that Tanzina and her fellow student-writers have just published. 'I've gained an incredible amount of confidence with my writing,' says Tanzina. 'I only wish that our school had been introduced to it earlier!' Katie and I look on as the Duchess

meets teenagers from schools in Nottingham, Lambeth, Hackney: Olatomiwa, Nastassja, Sabah, Andrew, Rukiya – each with a world in their head, and a voice that nobody has ever had before, or will have again. □