

Short Story #56: 'George'

This is the first story I've written in over two months ... it feels good writing fiction again. George is a totally fictional character, although I did have a grade ten student once who behaved the same way. She was a 'lump' like George, and I never managed to get through to her.

I continue to follow the advice about 'writing about what you know' ... hence the classroom setting. Although I do have a good story in mind about a hair salon

George

I don't believe in rewarding misbehaving students for good behaviour. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I expect my students to be on their best behaviour all the time. Why should I reward them for things I expect them to do?

Don't get me wrong. I believe in positive reinforcement. I use it all the time. But when my students show me that they are trying to do the right thing, I *tell* them how proud of them I am. I praise their good behaviour. I don't give them prizes for it.

At least, I never used to. Until I met George.

I've been teaching grade three for all of six months now. As a first year teacher, I've had the usual ups and downs. My students are eager to learn, and their enthusiasm helps me to do the best job I can, despite being overloaded with things to do and meetings to attend. Unit plans are hard work ...and my principal is a slave driver!

Last week I got a new student. His name is George. George is sort of ... unusual.

The other students in my class are full of energy. They move from task to task with an eagerness that astonishes me. They try every new thing with enthusiasm, and smile with satisfaction when they show me what they've learned. And they've learned a lot ... I'm a good teacher.

But George ...George has no energy at all. He sits in his desk and does nothing. He answers questions with monosyllables, and when I ask him to show me what he's learned, his standard answer seems to be 'I don't wanna!' He won't open his books when asked ... I have to do it for him. He refuses to participate in anything. And I've never seen him smile.

George is a lump.

I remember students like him when I was in high school. Kids who didn't want to be there, and who steadfastly refused to do anything that even remotely resembled work. They just slouched in their desks and stared at the wall. They drove the teachers crazy.

After a few days of George, I knew I needed help. No amount of cajoling on my part would rouse him from his lethargy. My pleading with him to come join in the fun at recess fell on deaf ears ... he just continued to sit on the step and stare off into space. Or he would wander to the back of the playground, all alone. He did that a lot.

George wasn't overweight. He seemed healthy. But his eyes held a dull vacant look, as if he was never quite there with you. Nothing seemed to interest him ... he didn't want to learn anything, wasn't interested in games or reading, and seldom said anything, even to other students ... who mostly ignored him after the first few days. I couldn't blame them.

Of course, I called his parents. I was wondering if his lethargy was due to some debilitating illness, or perhaps a learning disability. I'd studied lots of those in college. Or maybe there'd been a death in the family, and he was overcome with grief. Maybe his dog had died.

I quickly learned that none of these things were true.

"Mrs. Bascomb, I can't get George to do anything. He just sits there!" I wanted to tell his mother that he just sat there like a lump, but I didn't think she wanted to hear that. "What is George like at home?"

"George is just a lazy good-fer-nothing. He sits around like a lump ... won't do nothin'".

So much for respecting her sensibilities.

"What does George like to do? Does he have any hobbies? What does he do for fun?" I was desperate for information. Surely George couldn't be like this all the time!"

George's mother was quite blunt. "He just sits there on the couch watching TV with his no-account father. Don't go outside. Won't do no chores. Been like that ever since we moved here."

"Does he ever get in trouble? Is he well-behaved?"

She snorted. "Got into his father's rye whiskey last weekend. His father whupped him good for that. You give him a whuppin too, if he causes you any trouble."

I couldn't picture George getting into trouble at school. He'd have to get up out of his desk for that.

I talked to the assistant principal about George. He came down to my classroom that afternoon to observe George, who, true to his nature, didn't stir out of his desk, or raise his hand, or do much of anything during my lesson. Although he did pick his nose once. I wasn't sure whether or not to consider that a sign of progress.

I talked to the Assistant Principal after the class went out for recess. “Do you see what I mean? He’s been like that for two weeks now. He never does anything, won’t participate, won’t do any work, and hardly talks to anyone. He just sits there like a ... well, like a lump! How can any kid be so ... inert!?”

The Assistant Principal looked at me quizzically. “Is he causing problems? What’s he doing that’s disruptive?”

“Nothing. He does absolutely nothing! That’s the problem!”

“Did you talk to his parents?”

“Yes, I talked to George’s mother. She wouldn’t let me talk to his father ... apparently he’s a ‘lazy, no-account ...’”

“Sandy! That’s not very professional!”

“Those were her words! I’ve never met the man!”

“Well, OK. But I don’t see the problem here. George isn’t causing any problems. If he doesn’t want to do anything, we can’t force him to learn. There’s not much we can do for kids if they don’t want to be here. If he causes you any problems, let me know.”

And he left.

Did I mention that our Assistant Principal is not a very good teacher? Actually, for someone who’s supposed to be an instructional leader, he’s not very effective. But maybe I’m being too harsh. He’s a nice guy. And he’s probably a little overworked, what with our Principal being out of school at meetings so often.

I just wish there was someone who could help me get through to George.

Like I said earlier, I don’t believe in rewarding students with prizes for good behaviour. But in George’s case, I was willing to make an exception.

I’d become a little desperate to find anything in George’s day to point to, so I could say to him, “George, I’m really pleased with the good job you did with such-and-such.”

I’d considered “*George, I really admire the way you sit so quietly when I’m teaching*”, or maybe “*George, I’m really pleased that left your book open, after I had to walk all the way over here and open it for you*”. But I was grasping at straws.

And then one day at lunch I found George’s weakness.

I was sitting at my desk eating my own lunch. George was still at his own desk, stuffing the remains of his sandwich back into his lunch bag.

As I finished my sandwich and pulled out the chocolate bar ... I know, it's not healthy, but elementary teachers need an energy boost wherever they can find one ... I noticed a flicker of interest from George. He was staring at the chocolate bar.

"Do you like chocolate bars, George?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I really don't want this. Would you like it?"

He didn't say anything. But he got out of his desk and came over to where I was sitting, and took the chocolate bar. He mumbled something that I chose to interpret as 'Thanks'.

'You're welcome, George.' I always tried to model polite behaviour for my students.

That evening I called George's mother.

"Mrs. Bascomb, I gave George a chocolate bar today at lunch. Is that OK?"

I didn't want her to think I was pushing unhealthy snacks on her son. But I needn't have worried.

"Don't matter none to me. Give him whatever you want. He don't get none of that crap around here ... can't afford stuff like that. Got to keep food on the table."

Judging by what I'd seen of George's lunches ... mostly peanut butter on two slices of bread, and occasionally a can of pop ... George's mother didn't spend a lot of the food money on healthy lunches for her son. But at least he *had* lunches.

The next day I came prepared. I figured an 'O Henry' bar would be an irresistible temptation for George. And I was right.

"George, we're going to do some math problems now. If you open your notebook and try a few of them, I'll give you a chocolate bar ..."

I know what you're thinking. Such a blatant example of bribery; I should be ashamed of myself.

But I gleefully watched as George opened his notebook and actually picked up his pencil. I hadn't even been sure he *had* a pencil.

After George had copied a few questions off the board and reluctantly written answers for some of them, I couldn't help myself. I rushed over to his desk, looked at what he'd

written (the answers were all correct!), and plunked the chocolate bar down in front of him.

“Excellent work, George! I’m proud of you!”

George stuck the chocolate bar in his desk drawer. And didn’t move again until noon.

All right, if this was going to work, I’d have to be smarter than George. I wasn’t worried. I had a college education! That Educational Psychology course would finally pay off!

The next day I talked to him quietly, at his desk . I told him that I’d have a chocolate bar for him at the *end* of the day if he managed to do some work in every class.

I have no shame. But, miracle of miracles, it worked!

George managed to do a little bit of work in every class. He didn’t show much enthusiasm ... but he was doing something. Finally.

You might be wondering what the rest of my students thought of my unabashed attempts to bribe George into somewhat half-hearted participation.

To tell you the truth, they were pretty good about it. I’d talked to them the previous afternoon while George was in the washroom. I’d explained that I was trying my best to get George to join the class, and that chocolate bars might motivate him to do something. They acknowledged that this might be a good thing.

To their credit, not one of them asked me if they could have a chocolate bar too, for doing some work. I was so proud of them!

After the first week of bribery ended, I took stock of what I’d accomplished. George had written things in his notebooks. He’d answered several pages of questions in math, read (or pretended to read) two chapters of the novel we were studying, and built a castle from Popsicle sticks. All this had cost me \$7.50 in chocolate bars.

A small price to pay for success ... although pedagogically, I think I was on pretty shaky ground.

I did notice something unusual, however. Despite George’s avid interest in collecting a chocolate bar at the end of every day, as a reward for doing some work, I’d never actually seen George *eat* a chocolate bar.

Maybe he was eating them at recess. The next day I followed him outside, expecting to see him pull one out of his pocket. But instead, I noticed him heading towards a stand of trees at the rear of the playground, one he’d visited before. And he was moving pretty quickly.

I'd never seen George move quickly, ever. He generally shambled from place to place. I hadn't known that grade three kids *could* 'shamble'.

I followed George into the bush. I could see him crouched over, near the base of a large tree. His back was to me.

"George? What are you doing?"

George turned to me. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. He was actually smiling. He motioned me to come closer, putting his finger to his lips to indicate that I should be quiet.

In a small depression at the base of a tree was a little nest, partially hidden by a fallen branch. A large squirrel and at least three baby squirrels were sitting there, taking bits of chocolate bar from George's fingers.

"George! What are you ... why aren't they afraid of you?"

"They like me, Mr. Jackson! And they're hungry. Look, the mother has a broken leg. She can't feed her family herself, so I've been bringing them food."

Sure enough, the larger squirrel seemed to be favouring a back leg.

"I was bringing them my sandwiches, but they like chocolate bars a lot better!" He grinned.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. George had just spoken more words to me than he ever had at one time before. And he seemed ... alive. Awake. Excited. Just a normal kid.

I smiled back at him. "I'm sure they do, George. But it's probably not very healthy for them. Would you like me to buy you some seeds and nuts?"

"That would be really good, Mr. Jackson. I can't afford to buy that stuff. Besides, my mother would kill me if she ever found out I was buying food for squirrels. She wouldn't understand."

"How long have you ..."

"I found the nest a couple a days after I started school here".

George and I left the squirrels to their high-calorie lunch, and we went back into my classroom. I sat down with him and asked him the question that I just had to ask. He was still looking happy. I guessed it was because we had shared something important.

“George ... why are you always so ... quiet? Until I started giving you chocolate bars, you weren’t doing anything in class. You just sat there ... you didn’t seem very interested in anything. What was the matter?”

I wasn’t sure he would tell me. But George decided to talk. He told me how his family used to live on a farm, but that they’d had to move into the city so his father could try to find work. They were living in a small apartment.

“I hate it!” George was nearly in tears. “I can’t go outside. There’s no animals or nothing. I always liked to be outside ... never liked being inside, in school. I want to be a vet!”

Apparently George was suffering from culture shock. His sullenness was simply a reaction to being cooped up in a classroom all day, with nothing to look forward to but more of the same at home.

“Please, Mr. Jackson ... don’t tell my mother, OK? And can I keep feeding the squirrels? Please?”

What could I say. We’d feed the squirrels together every lunch hour. And do some schoolwork together too. But I’d have to bribe him.

That’s how our classroom came to have a cage with two rabbits, some hamsters, three white mice, and a lizard. George is our zookeeper ... when he isn’t working on his math problems!

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I’m hooked on short-story writing; having finally found something I’m good at, this past summer (after a not-too-successful attempt at teaching myself to play the piano), I managed to write over fifty short stories. Some are action-adventure, some are humour, but most of them are about teaching, some with a Christian perspective. I even managed to sneak one in about a young pastor and his wife that’s thinly disguised fiction about someone I know.

I know two Emilys who are truly excellent writers (one is my daughter, the other a grade 12 student) and both tell me they like my stories. I value their opinions, so I guess I’m doing a pretty good job. It’s fun, anyway.

If you missed the earlier ones, you can read them all at <http://www.worsleyschool.net/stories/stories.html>