

Preface by Torey Hayden

Mike Marlowe and I met in a serendipitous way. It was 1998, and the Internet was just finding its feet. A friend at work mentioned to me that the night before she had been playing around with Alta Vista, then the most sophisticated search engine, and had put in my name. Following the links, she came across a message board for a university she'd never heard of, but there were a lot of my fans there, discussing my books.

Curious, I went home and did what we all do at some time or another on the Internet—put my own name in to see what was there. I found the message board my friend had been talking about. It belonged to Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina and had been put up by a professor of reading in the Department of Reading Education and Special Education named Dr. Gary Moorman. He'd created the forum for his students to discuss course work, and in this instance, they were talking about books that had inspired them to become readers. Someone mentioned one of my books.

The eerie aspect of the Internet took over at that point, because, of course, while such web pages often feel like local, private corners of the universe, the truth is, one never knows who's happened across it. Readers of my books from Sweden, France, and Japan, as well as other parts of the United States, started joining in with questions and comments, and soon they had

monopolized the message board. By the time I came across it, both the course topics and the university students for whom the message board was created had long since been squeezed out.

While it was good fun reading the lively discussions, I was embarrassed to be inadvertently responsible for swamping some university professor's efforts to go about his academic business. Seeing an e-mail link at the bottom of the page, I sent a few lines to Dr. Moorman and apologized for what had happened to his forum. He wrote back, bemused. He had, in fact, forgotten all about the web page. He'd set it up for a class the year before. The course was long since finished, the students departed, and he'd simply neglected to take it down. That it was now so active with my fans was as big a surprise to him as to me.

At the end of his e-mail, almost as a postscript, Dr. Moorman said, "We have someone here at the university who will be very interested to hear I've received an e-mail from you. He's a professor in special education, and he's written four research papers based on your books."

That was my introduction to Michael Marlowe, that e-mail response from his colleague to my apology for having accidentally filched his internet space. Since that unexpected start, Dr. Marlowe and I have had many discussions about educational methods, trends, and philosophies, both in the teaching of teachers at the university level and in the special education classroom itself. These discussions finally culminated in a two-day conference in March 2005 at Appalachian State University wherein I talked about how my real-life classrooms had been set up and shared video footage of my work and various examples of my students' work.

I am humbled that Michael Marlowe has given my books such a meaningful application in the field and pleased he has been able to show the efficacy of using these kinds of stories in teacher training. However, I wish to avoid imbuing my books in hindsight with a gravitas they do not have. They are not and never were academic or biographical records. They are narrative nonfiction, written for people who have had little experience of

special education and with the sole intention of sharing what I found to be an extraordinary world.

Narrative nonfiction is a subjective story based on true events, unlike academic, biographical, and autobiographical work, which are literal and hopefully objective records of events. What this means in regards to my books is that while the stories are based on real experiences, they are told from my perspective. It also means that in the process of telling the stories, I alter names, dates, chronological order, and location. I also reconstruct dialogue and details, and, occasionally, I composite characters. As a consequence, this means I too become a composite character in the books.

There were several important reasons for choosing to write the accounts this way, as opposed to straight autobiography. Some are philosophical. I wanted to open up what was then, more than 35 years ago, a very hidden world. Friends and acquaintances had reacted with surprise and occasionally horror to my decision to work in special education, and I was often asked why I wanted to “waste my talents” on defective, rejected children who would never amount to much. My first books were written in response to this comment. I endeavored to open this world up and give wider access to some genuinely very beautiful people by writing in an accessible, narrative fashion. Later books were more issue oriented. Choosing incidents from my own experience, I attempted to exemplify the challenges and complexities surrounding certain topics in a way to which general audiences could relate. For example, I wrote *Ghost Girl* in the mid-1980s, when false memory syndrome, satanic cults, and such were at their height, because I wanted to illustrate just how hard it is for professionals to make an accurate assessment of a child’s behavior and how easily cultural influences can skew our interpretation. I wrote *Beautiful Child* because I wanted to show just how easy it is even for caring and involved professionals to miss child abuse.

Another reason for choosing to write narrative nonfiction is that it makes the legal issues more straightforward to deal with. While it has been my practice to get signed consents and

to give main characters the option to proof my manuscripts, the fact remains that some people do not want to be portrayed and refuse permission. There are also complex legal issues related to writing about minors. Narrative nonfiction allows people to be left out of the account entirely, when necessary, and the story reconstructed around them.

In other instances, people will give their consent to be portrayed but only if they are not in any way identifiable. As events in the stories occasionally render everyone directly involved easily identifiable, it is then necessary to composite characters in order to meet this legal requirement.

The other major reason for choosing to write narrative nonfiction instead of autobiographical nonfiction is the ethical consideration surrounding this kind of story. When one is hired as a teacher, there is an implicit expectation of confidentiality about what happens in the classroom. This is particularly important because the majority of those involved are children and not capable of giving informed consent. In this era of reality television and celebrity gossip, we're no longer clear about what constitutes privacy and what constitutes exploitation, but as someone in a position of trust, it is important to be very respectful of these boundaries.

In addition, while I present the classroom experiences as my perspective of what happened, and this thereby gives me some degree of ownership of these events, the fact remains that unlike stories in the *pain memoir* genre, I am not writing about my own abuse, emotional distress, or affliction. My stories are about other people's suffering. It is a very fine line between sharing worthwhile experiences for the greater good and exploiting others for personal gain, and I do not want to cross over it.

A further ethical consideration is the ongoing impact of the books. I worked with vulnerable children in public school situations. These children had no choice about being in my care nor about being taught by me. Several were still minors when I wrote the books that included them, so they were still incapable of signing informed consents for themselves and had no real

choice about whether they appeared in my stories. Many of the events in the books are of a highly personal nature and often related to significant suffering. In real life people grow, change, and move on. We acquire new ways of coping; we outgrow childish behaviors; we gain insight; we learn how to move past painful experiences; and consequently, we progressively mature into different people. This doesn't happen to characters in books, however. They are permanently trapped in their 300-page worlds, their experiences as new and raw as when they happened. It is common—and normal—for a new reader to feel as if the events in the story have just taken place, because to him or her, they have. Readers typically react as if the people in my books are personally known to them because they themselves have been personally affected. So it is necessary to provide a protective space around the 6-year-old character in a book so that readers' enthusiasm does not unintentionally wound the 40-year-old person she's become.

The other important distinction between narrative nonfiction and academic nonfiction is that ultimately it makes me more a storyteller than an educator. I did not write any of the books to illustrate my prowess at teaching, to give a literal blueprint of my experiences, or to suggest that I have special techniques that others should follow. My formal career as an educator was only 12 years long, whereas my formal career as a writer has spanned more than 30 years. While I like to think that I was a good teacher during my time in the classroom, and I also like to think that my teaching career continues to this day in the larger classroom-without-walls of my readership, there are many, many teachers out there who are as talented or more talented at teaching than I am. I know. I've seen them at work. The real difference between them and me is that I can write. That is my true gift, that ability to bring an audience with me and let them experience what I experience. It is crucial readers of this book are able to discriminate between these two skills—teaching and writing—and thereby understand that at no time do I claim special mastery. My books are just stories of life in the classroom. There are millions of classrooms out there, millions

of earnest, committed teachers working in them. The only thing that really distinguishes me is that I have a voice.

Dr. Marlowe has done a remarkable job of distilling a consistent methodology from my stories. He, however, is the true architect of this approach. I am both astonished and humbled that he could see what gave me heart so clearly and create from it a substantial, verifiable process. I am honored to be part of this process and hope that with it we can in some small way signpost a viable path through a complex and often disturbing world.