

Sandra Schor

THE SHORT HAPPY LIFE OF MS. MYSTERY

ABSTRACT: *This article describes an experimental summer intensive course in basic writing conducted at Queens College, CUNY by the author, two colleagues, and twenty-eight students. For six weeks, she assumed the identity of "Ms. Mystery," exchanging weekly letters with each of the students, excerpts of which are provided and analyzed. In reflecting on this experience of twenty-eight separate correspondences, the author considers the nature of letter writing (and reading) as an effective pedagogic tool.*

The intensive summer encampment of motivated students is an ideal occasion to depart from conventional time schemes and methods, and at the same time to focus collaborative faculty spirit on literacy through interdisciplinary and innovative syllabi. I recall the summer of 1975 in the Total Immersion Program at Queens College as one of the two or three highlights of my teaching career.

Along with my colleague, the poet Marie Ponsot, who met the class nightly, and the late Betsy Kaufman, then director of the Academic Skills Center, who administered to the organizational needs of the class in her own wise and loving way, I became the class's unseen correspondent, Ms. Mystery.

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Students in the class numbered twenty-eight; they were self-selected among a larger number who, because they scored lowest on the College's June placement exams in reading and writing, were invited to stake a segment of their summer on intensive daily practice and instruction in reading and writing before enrolling in September classes as freshmen. These twenty-eight accepted, and I ought to add at the outset that attendance for the five-a-week meetings from 4:00–9:00 p.m., for six weeks of July and August, was almost perfect. The Ms. Mystery correspondence could have taken place only in such a class whose members were immersed in hard and rigorously planned work, hope, and a steadily mounting self-esteem. For the first time in their lives they were engaged in a kind of regular literacy as habit forming as eating dinner, nightly writing and reading informed by a clear curriculum based on the idea that sound writing adheres to whole structures, and inspired by the literary practicality of Marie Ponsot's radiant and structuring intelligence.

The syllabus, invented by Marie Ponsot, emphasized writing in familiar forms (fables, parables, family stories, essays), which enabled the writer to identify those elements in our thinking—and in our narratives—that are abstract and concrete. The syllabus also prepared students to have something cogent to say about what they read—both student writing and published writing were viewed as literature. The syllabus taught students the critical difference between making observations of what a piece of writing says and drawing inferences from those observations. Students read two books a week, one assigned in class, and one selected freely from a ready library of 200 available volumes. Aesop's *Fables*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, *World Harvest of Folk Tales*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Hamlet* were the assigned works. Grammar instruction came regularly in the form of positive teacher comments on writing, often by red-penciling *completed* sentences and *successful* verb forms rather than errors; in programmed workbook exercises that students did at home nightly; and in highlighted discussions in class. Tutors from the Writing Skills Workshop assisted in the classroom, as they had been doing in our basic writing classes since the start of Open Admissions. (For a complete survey of the content of the Total Immersion class, see Marie Ponsot's essay in the *Journal of Basic Writing*.)

I suppose my involvement began for two reasons: one, while I try to make it a habit not to teach summer school I could not resist getting in on this project; and two, I have often used the letter as a form for beginning writers because it reduces the abstractness of writing. Without a clear audience, the first few essays tend to be

quite bloodless. If you address your thoughts to a specific person, by name, you reach to fill the shape your own name calls into being, you exchange confessions, pose and answer questions, thus reducing the risk of a destructively bland institutionalization of writing that severs writing from its connection to the life outside. After all, a real correspondent wants to know everything. He or she has the same needs you do: plain facts, true feelings about nights and events, exact times, ambitions, street corners, historical events, doubts, fears—in short, no abstract escapes.

In a recent review of Erich Heller and Jurgen Born's new collection, *Letters to Felice*, Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times* writes about Kafka the serious correspondent as fanatically complicit in the life of his alter ego, as uncompromising as any of my twenty-eight correspondents, for example, and as relentless but unhurried as any of my precocious and inexperienced zealots in Total Immersion.

Kakutani writes, "He complains incessantly about his ill health—his headaches, his insomnia, his nerves, then turns reporter, bombarding her with questions about her work, her habits, her personality: 'What exactly happened at your house on Sunday?' 'What do you wear at the office? And what does the main part of your work consist of?' 'What is the meaning of you having had a backache during the day and of you not feeling very well when you wrote on Sunday evening?'"

"The answers to these questions were important to Kafka," Kakutani writes, "not so much because he was in love with Felice Bauer, but because he needed to reinvent her within his own imagination. . . ."

Too often, classroom work bypasses the imagination. In English classes, as in other disciplines, assignments are tailored to classic disciplinary needs, in this case formulating an idea, writing it as a thesis, constructing solid paragraphs, composing readable, grammatical sentences that defend previous and successive sentences, opening attractively, and concluding memorably. Imagination takes up residence only within the fortune and genetics of the rare, sometimes heretical, student. In Total Immersion imagination moved in on everybody. Since I was engaged in twenty-eight separate weekly correspondences, the principals of which had never met, we each had to "invent" the other; as a byproduct we reinvented ourselves. This reinvention of self at the same time reinvented the institution, gradually draining away the resentment for school that had built up over the years in students who were, typically, dystopian and nonachievers. At its worst, resentment was temporarily put aside to make way for nightly negotiations in

literacy with a small kickback in hope. At its best, resentment was displaced by “college” with its own kind of legitimate pension plan in the future. Skepticism lingered, but hope was no longer corrupt.

One hot July night Marie said, “Okay. You are each to write a letter to a mystery correspondent, someone you may never get to meet.” She divulged, finally, that it was a woman, and Ms. Mystery materialized. Letters were tucked and sealed into envelopes and run back and forth across Long Island to my house for six weeks, for twenty-eight students each time. Students began on faith. My job was easier than theirs: I was writing to real people, with legal names—Curtis, Lenore, Peter, J.J., and more. But *they* had to take a deep breath and write squarely into the mystery, and they wrote, honestly, and with a kind of genius, for that was the climate in that class. You never knew whose letter would be packed with feeling, suspicion, withdrawal; reeling with curiosity; or full of the unprecedented obsessiveness of self-revelation to a captive reader.

They wrote suspiciously:

I hope this is not a joke. It is hard writing to someone you don't know and never seen.

optimistically:

I hope that we could meet and become friends. We would be able to go to the beach in the mornings.

apocalyptically:

School is a drag. Life is a drag, but what can I do but live my dragged out life. Jesus I don't know what to write. Well, I'm glad that I graduated high school on time. I didn't get a regents diploma because I failed the English regents. That pissed me off. I took 7 regents and passed 6 and I don't get a regents diploma. Well that's life. I guess I'll live. The blinds in the room are shaking from the wind.

and pragmatically:

In your letter tell me how you look, good or bad, what ever, because I want a woman I can talk to. It would help me get in school work because I would not have to give so much time to women. I am looking but I think I've got bad luck. Either she had a boyfriend or tells me she had given up on boys. I know my spelling is bad but I am working on it. Your friend,
U.S.

P.S. Maybe next week I will tell you my name.

And I replied, accepting in unblinking pedagogy their matter-of-fact dazzlers. I wrote to each one every week, exploring the specific letter I had received. No two letters I received were the same, and no two they received were the same. I assumed my trust with responsibility; the purpose was to use our letters, reading them and writing them, as a daring basis for revealing ourselves, even constructing ourselves, responsibly, to each other. I did not "correct" student writing; I responded to it. But I was no pen pal. That is not what our basic writers, our lowest scorers, our pissed-off failers needed. Although I had several secret personae in play, I was above all a writer—a writer-teacher.

A writer is nothing if she is not individual; while students began by comparing the letters they had received as a token of camaraderie, I was told they soon wandered off into corners to read, recognizing that the received letter individualized them, overcoming their habitual public bravado, and rediscovering the self-esteem located in what was private. I was no pen pal because my purpose was to teach, encouraging a durable confidence in the larger person each was, the whole and teachable person, providing pleasure along the way in the personal attention the written word guaranteed. I was not merely gossiping, offering my wistful persona as a kind of writerly summer romance. Summer romances rarely come off. I demanded follow-up letters that clarified a vague statement. I insisted that students replace inexact gush about the course with precise feelings, vague observations about their vans with colors, lengths, angles; I encouraged development. I craved speculation. I highlighted their own ideas and then begged them to realize their ideas, not by supplying one-word replies to my questions, but by describing, reminiscing, considering, reentering, comparing, and by confronting the question *why*.

These twenty-eight low scorers, nonreaders, and hapless writers were nonetheless the twenty-eight who voluntarily appeared, tentative as most college students on a summer day who wish they were elsewhere—"upstate" or "at the beach"—to see for themselves what this project was all about. It was always necessary that we looked forward to the weekly event of the letters—as an army looks forward to its mail. I tried hard to retain my correspondents' friendship, along with their interest, because without these I could not expect my own letters to serve in the pedagogical way I planned—as indirect models of directness, concern, confession, precision, syntax, figurative expression, and high interest in people as human beings with human, often graceful, things to say.

Our optimistic forays paid off. Interest in the letters mounted. We managed to sustain and educate the imagination. Conventions of

discourse gradually became models for imitation. I didn't have to be Cicero. These writers quietly settled their rhetorical needs into the available ways of expression. Their subtle acts of imitation gave them a hold on the ropes of writing. Their own acrobatics sprang off of acquired courtesies and pressures. Students wrote me long letters and perhaps didn't quite know what to make of the personal responses they received from an unknown, unseen woman, who somehow functioned—and this is important—within the institution, this new uncertain but tempting environment called Queens College. But assisted by the escalating experiences in their groups and classwork, their letters expanded, escaped the institution, and took on an identity they were all the while constructing. Northrop Frye says about the myth of the Bible, "Its imaginative survey of the human situation . . . is so broad and comprehensive that everything else finds its place inside it" (111). Although our letters did not survey "the human situation" they did survey a limited universe of the student situation, within which twenty-eight self-determined writers sharpened their minds and mythologies and found expression for them in words.

In retrospect, the key strategy for this experiment was to render the imagination a necessary classroom hazard. The key ingredient in our exchange was that one of the two has a reliable literary perception and extends as a donee the gift of good prose. The crossing of these two destinies—the almost wornout learner's and that of the experienced and esteemed correspondent who writes not only personally but privately—released a certain energy. Ms. Mystery was no gimmick. She was secretly and at all times teacher and writer.

The letters themselves were good; the students wrote at length, their stance shifting from hesitant to charming, from furtive to philosophical. They wrote about their parents, their jobs, their disappointments, each other, their tutors, Marie, their desires, and chiefly their discoveries of a new and rising power.

From Philip Gonzalez:

Dear I don't know who you are

I'm writing to you because I feel I'm doing something different. Everything I've been doing in this course has been different. I love this course because we're doing things that I never been involved with before. The people are great and Marie Ponsot is really something else. I'm so involved for the first time in my life that it seems like a dream. . . .

From Ms. Mystery:

Dear Philip,

I loved reading your letter. . . . For one thing I like your directness. You are willing to say what you think, in plain language, and you have the energy to go down a little distance into yourself to think about your feelings and your expectations. In your next letter perhaps you can exercise these same skills a little more fully on some piece of your life that takes most of your time. What, outside of school, takes most of your time? Job? Friends? Car? Sports? Tell me about one of these things as if no one had ever described it before. Pretend I am slow to understand. Explain very carefully and in detail, but be sure to include the essentials, the things you think about in bed at night after the car is in the garage, or the job is over for the day. I'm not prying, Philip. You needn't reveal anything you'd rather not. But the matter that rests with you long afterwards is usually the most interesting to others as well as to you. . . .

From Philip:

Dear Mysterious Friend

The first thing I have to tell you is that the letter I received from you made me feel great. I'm really feeling optimistic about writing you a second letter. In your return letter you advised me to write about my outside life in detail. You wanted me to pick a topic in which I spend my time. Well, most of my time is spent at the racetrack where I work. I work from 6 AM to 9:30 AM everyday. What I do is very easy and very interesting to me. I work as a part time hot walker and part time trainers aid. As a hot walker all I do is walk the horses that come from training at the main track. The reason you walk them is to cool them off. As a trainers aid I do most of the work the trainer is supposed to do such as putting the sore horses in ice and in bandages. To me my job is not only a job but a great past time. I love horses and I love to take care of them. The other day one of the greatest horses if not the greatest had to be destroyed because of a broken leg. To me that was a great loss to the whole racing world. Someday I would love to become a trainer not only for money but for the love of horses. Horses to me is like a part of my life which gives me a great feeling inside.

In your reply to my letter you said that you were prying. My dear friend you will never be prying as far as I'm concerned. You said what was on your mind which I try to do as much as possible. You said something about my directness

in your letter which made me feel good about myself and about you.

From Bobby:

Dear Ms. Mystery,

Hello! What's going on. What am I supposed to write to a person I never met before. First I'll ask how are you feeling. Hows your family and all that stuff. My name is Bobby. It's a beautiful day out. I wish I could have gone to the beach, but I had to get paid at work. So I didn't have time to get there & to get back home. College is O'k. I did all my homework last night. It wasn't that hard. I'm in a different group today. Dominick is head of the group. Valerie was head of the group I was in yesterday. I'll probably go broke this summer, I found the pin ball machines. I lost 50 cents today. I got one free game. Big deal. I still don't know what I'm doing here, but I'll come here for 22 more days. My mother went away yesterday and is coming home Monday. A whole week with just me & my brother Marc in the apartment. What new with you?

From Ms. Mystery:

Dear Bobby,

... Your last letter was indeed long. In a few weeks you'll be mailing me pounds of writing each time. I'm still hopeful you will stick to a subject for a few sentences so that you can develop your ideas and find out how complex some of them are. Try, perhaps, to confine yourself to an idea for five or six sentences before you turn out a new paragraph on another idea. For example, you suggested that you and your brother Marc in the whole apartment alone represented a novelty to you. WHY? What would you do about chores? Cooking? Cleaning up? Having friends in? Go into some of the details of this "odd couple" arrangement and put them down in order so that I can have an orderly sense of what that week alone might be like. Think of yourself as a movie writer, describing a scene for a new film about two brothers managing temporarily on their own. What would you include? What would you omit? You appear to be an observant fellow and might find, to your surprise, that you can make a scene come to life. Good luck. Stick to your subject. Try to tell the whole wicked truth, as if no one had ever told it before. . . .

From Joe:

Dear Ms. Mystery,

. . . Suppose I feel like writing to you after this course is over, what will I do then. Maybe, if it's all right with you, I can meet you at Alley Pond Park. Wow what a good Idea. I tell you what. I'll set a date and time and if you can't make it or don't want to, let me know in your next letter. How about the 24 of this month at 9:30? Look for the van in the back left corner of the lot. . . .

Joe, who had written profusely on his van, including draftsman-like diagrams of his proposed airbrush paintings for it, met me on the last night of class. But more about that later.

Programs such as our Total Immersion experiment with its Ms. Mystery component are especially suitable to prefreshman summer programs designed to promote competent preparation in writing and reading at a time when students are willing to concentrate on skills. Twenty-eight students in separate, conventional writing and reading classes normally justify three to four instructors. Our Total Immersion class had two instructors, one appearing nightly, one not appearing until the final meeting of the class. Assistance for the single instructor came from less-costly student tutors placed in the classroom. Administrative power might be replicated through a college's writing center. For the writing center and its satellite programs often ease the cold shock of the institution, a stupefying chill on many students, and certainly on those defenseless students who have performed marginally in high school.

The depersonalization of a 200-student lecture, the injury of a "conference" with a professor who doesn't remember your name, the one-sided instruction that fatefully passes for education—these are the barriers to come which a summer of Total Immersion anticipates. Intensive work day after day or night after night among tutors and faculty promises a trusted environment in which to learn. The privacy of letters between an experienced writer and an inexperienced correspondent continually returns writing to the real world and connects what is learned in the classroom to the individual life lived between subway stops and part-time jobs.

Our program is surely replicable for other disciplines—history, anthropology, biology, or, for that matter, any course in which writing and reading occur. A collaborative effort in literacy promises increased competence in all courses. An informed sequence of assignments reinforces what it means to learn how to write and read; and the immediate application of those skills to a chosen field, a career, may in the lives of many of our students be the first inch of progress toward graduation from college.

At the end of that summer I did appear, finally, in class; my eagerness to meet my letter writers led me to risk it.

The night before my appearance, I was up and down to the bathroom twenty times. I couldn't sleep. Wasn't I pushing a good thing too far? Surely by now they had all sorts of illusions about me, that "you are really one of the tutors in this class," and "I can tell you are a serious lady, an older woman of twenty-five." And what about my illusions of them? As a teacher, I was unencumbered, and here is another requisite for quality teaching, especially of the inexperienced. I had none of those ritual, and often sinister, little prejudgments to go on, based on a student's shyness, arrogance, T shirt, slouch, race, face, eye contact, or fifteen-week complete failure to make eye contact. In most cases I had only a first name and a lot of handwriting, which we all learn to ignore as one more prejudice.

On the final night I arrived, and everybody clapped. I shook hands all around and had no trouble with their names because their faces just fell into the slot you unconsciously leave for a face when you know so much more. I asked them what they had imagined me to be like, and they asked me what I had imagined them to be. Playing the scholar, I quoted from their letters, but they caught on and quoted from mine. A couple of exchanges had proved quite salty, and shaking the hands of these writers I told them, smiling, that I was glad that round had ended. I ran into my correspondents on the campus for a couple of years afterwards, who greeted me with "Hey, Ms. Mystery!" And I remember now that my identity as Ms. Mystery is probably one of the most professional and glamorous images a teacher has ever been privileged to carry.

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