

The Boy in the Tangled Forest

Tom Kunz¹

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Introduction

The following paper comes from a class where students were asked to write something related to class content but in a creative, risk-taking way. This assignment called for the students to explore a topic or a range of topics related to writing where some form of change in thinking had occurred. In addition, students were asked to imagine scenarios, in which class content can be presented in a fun, accessible way.

Keywords: Generative writing, peer review, proof-reading.



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¹ Correspondence: tckunz@ualberta.ca.

EXT. CAMPFIRE - NIGHT

A campfire smoulders in the foreground as we see a stick poking at some of the embers. The camera zooms out to reveal the STORYTELLER, dressed warmly with a steaming mug at his side, sitting in a comfortable chair, holding the stick.

STORYTELLER

(with a folksy lilt, like a grandfather)

Well, hey there, I'm glad you could make it out here. Beautiful night ain't it? I don't think you could have asked for a better night to be sitting here under the stars around a campfire. You know, the stars in these parts, at this time of year, can be a lively folk. They have all sorts of stories to tell. In fact, I think I see a constellation up there that has just the right story to tell us tonight.

STORYTELLER points to somewhere off camera. Pan over to an actual constellation. The camera comes back to STORYTELLER.

STORYTELLER

There is a story that I was told way long ago, and that star formation over there reminds me of it.

A short pause.

STORYTELLER

"What is the story?" is that what you just asked?

(a hearty chuckle)

Well, it's an old fairy tale that I haven't told in years. It is about a young man, in the reaches of a Northern realm called Academia, and his journey for enlightenment. It didn't come without a bit of struggle, of course, but we'll talk about that in the tale. If I could just remember how it starts now...

He trails off as he strokes his chin. A moment later he snaps his fingers and perks up in his seat. Wagging his finger at the audience, he starts to remember details.

STORYTELLER

Nobody really knows how the story began, but this tale is absolutely riveting without a proper beginning anyways! It tells of a young protagonist who goes on a strange journey through a new

land and winds up miles away from where he started. It goes like this:

In a faraway land, deep in the reaches of the northern realm of Academia, there lived a young boy. This boy was many things: a jokester, a singer, a sport, a goof, and many other smaller things that make him relatable. In this story, he is a student.

Now this boy, he was in pursuit of one very special thing at the time of this story. He was in pursuit of a 'Degree.' This magical artifact was a document that would grant him access to things like jobs, and social clubs, and massive amounts of debt.

One of the requirements that the boy needed to fill out for the degree was an elective class. He was silly while choosing and made a random selection which helped his schedule look pretty on the magical colourful website.

The peril that the boy had just enlisted himself in was presided over by the great Villainess of the North. This woman was so great and mighty in her conquest that she had not been satisfied to stay in the Great Eastern realm and had to come to a new faraway land to do what she wanted to do.

The first day of the class came quickly. The boy sidled into the class and sat down, not knowing what to expect.

The Villainess explained the plan for the semester of this class. She spoke the following, in her strange, eastern, authority:

“Those of you who do not know grammar right now will die! Or you will learn something new about grammar.”

The boy began to shake, but stifled it, just in case his shaking was a sign of poor grammar.

“Your very first assignment will require you to traverse the spooky forest of generative writing! It is a journey through this pathway that will reveal to you the treasures that this class has to offer! You will recognize the places along your path, but you must look at your footsteps with new eyes each time you do.”

The Villainess distributed weathered parchments containing the details of the assignment, and the class dispersed! The rest of the students went quickly out of class and headed towards the forest.

Off the young boy went as well. Parchment in hand and a fuzzy sense of direction, he found himself at the edge of the forest which began with a crossroads. The crossroads held the trailheads to paths which led in 14 different directions. There were signposts above each road that let him know the direction he would be travelling.

From far off down each path, the boy could hear a strange kind of music emanating. Like the crashing of metal, and breaking of bones, each tune came to him. The boy chose to travel down a path where the noises scared him the least. He headed towards what sounded like loud drums, and even louder mumbling into a microphone.

The path was marked 'SEPULTURA,' and the boy set out towards the source of the noise.

A little way down the path, our hero came to the musicians who were making the great ruckus. He unfurled the parchment given to him by the Villainess and read its content.

The voice of the instructor echoed in his head as he read,

“you will be creating an artifact that will help out this band. This artifact will be a poster, which is meant to tell people from far away lands about this new music which you now hear.”

The boy looked back up to the band. They were between songs, standing around, quietly menacing their surroundings. One of them stifled a small cough. The bassist thought he saw a field mouse and growled at it.

The boy shrugged, then announced to the band,

“Okay, I will do this artifact for you.”

The members of the band gave an enthusiastic “GRRRH!” raised their instruments and went into another round of the strange rhythmic song.

The music receded into the background as the boy travelled on down the path. Trees and shrubs began rising over the edges of the path as he walked along until the entire path was covered by foliage as he went along.

Eventually, there was a tiny clearing in the forest. A sliver of light poked through the canopy and lit up a small box. The boy had to walk up close to see what was written on top of the box, just below a small slot that was in the middle of the top.

It read,

TURN AROUND

He spun quickly on his heel and the Villainess astonished him. She stood there, smirk, and said,

“I am glad you have found the submission box. Put everything you have done for the artifact in there now.”

“But I am not at the end of this journey! The things I have done are not worth looking at yet!” he was worried and did not want his poor work to reflect badly upon him.

The Villainess looked sternly at him and repeated,

“Put everything you have done until now in the box.”

The boy did so, and the Villainess nodded. She waved her hand at a clump of trees, and they receded, revealing a path. Spiders and snakes skittered away from the faint light which now trickled onto the narrow footway.

“Continue this way, if you wish to complete your assignment.”

“Yes ma’am,” squeaked the boy as he started down the hole.

It was not even a five-minute walk before the boy found himself heading towards another clearing. It was peculiar to him. It seemed like the exact same clearing as before, but he had been walking in a straight line. How could it be the same one as before?

As the boy got closer, he could even see the exact same submission box as he had put his work in.

The boy crept into the open, wary of what he might find. From another direction, he could hear footsteps approaching. Another student entered the clearing but did not seem to notice him. In fact, it was as if he were invisible to them as they crept towards the box as he had and read its inscription.

Before the boy could warn his classmate, once again the Villainess appeared behind the student, and said,

“I am glad you have found the submission box. Put everything you have done for the artifact in there now.”

This student was much braver and did as she was commanded easily. The same path appeared, and the other student left. Now the Villainess turned to the boy and said to him,

“Go. Open the box. Take your fellow student’s material and leave this place once more.”

Now the boy was getting wiser to what was going on, but still acted based on his fears.

The box contained a beautifully inked scroll of artwork and an accompanying text which described the saga which had led to it.

“Look at these two things with a critical eye. Then use *these* to mark down what is good, what is bad, and what is revealing about your peer’s work.”

The boy was given three strange pens. One of gold, one which smelled like rotten onions, and one which shone the brightest yellow.

“Do you understand, boy?”

He nodded in affirmation.

“Then travel once more down your path.”

As the boy walked, he looked over what his classmate had done. He marked down the things that the Villainess had instructed. The text and the artwork were all marked up when he came to another larger clearing. This time, more of his classmates had all somehow made their way to it.

A large sign was posted saying,

GIVETH BACK TO EACH PERSON THEE DRAFT

UPON WHICH THY PEN HAS MARKED,

and a great exchange took place between the classmates. The boy found the classmate whose work he marked and was also given his assignment from another.

The paper he got back smelled significantly of onions. Upon closer inspection, there were also many marks of the bright yellow and a few tiny marks of gold throughout the draft.

The Villainess appeared amidst the great exchange that was going on and began directing people down the next path through the forest.

The boy looked over the marks on his draft as he set out along his path. His classmate had revealed a lot of the flaws that he knew, but also many flaws that he might have missed. By correcting these things, the draft got stronger and finer until the boy began to feel happy about it. He knew it was not perfect, but the draft was certainly better than when he began.

There was another clearing now. The Villainess waited in the open this time, with the same box as before. She leaned over and patted the top of the box saying,

“Put your new draft in the box. It will be tested with fire this time!”

The boy gulped, but once again put his draft in the box. The feeling of giving up his incomplete work was still foreign but starting to ease up.

Once again, the boy was also given a classmate’s draft and instructed what he was to do with it.

“Take this candle,” she said, as she handed him a small candle. The candle was fashioned out of ordinary beeswax but burned with a curious blue wisp that seemed to dance on the wick.

“It is the candle of *proof-readicus*. If you hold the candle’s flame up behind the parchment as you read it, it will burn a special fire. The cinders will highlight all that is unclear. The flame does not care about the ideas on the page, but it will burn away the structures that hold back an idea from being expressed fully. One last *very important* thing; you must work the flame from the bottom of the draft upwards. Just as a flame rises from the bottom, so too will the flame of this candle work up the draft in order to burn what it must.”

The boy understood what he was told and nodded. The Villainess pointed to a path through the very darkest nettle and told him to go onwards.

The candle’s flickering light licked at the back of the draft as he walked and ignited the unclear words just as the Villainess said it would. The small flames tossed their faint glow on the path and illuminated where the boy had to go. Just as he worked the candle to the top of the draft, he came to a new clearing with his classmates.

The smell of charred paper filled the air around the students as they chatted and found the owners of the paper they had just burnt.

The boy got his draft back, now full of ash, and little squiggly lines burnt under many of his words. He knew he would have to fill those in better than they were before to make sure the next draft was strong enough to resist all flame.

The Villainess appeared one last time. Hovering just above the crowd, she commanded them, “Go one last time through the woods. Take the path which leads up towards the top of the hill in the center of the forest. In the very center, you will discover the place where your assignments will find their ending.”

In a dramatic puff of smoke and light, she vanished from above the crowd. The murmurs among the crowd left, along with all the students setting out toward the end.

The boy mended his draft full of holes quickly and sped on into the woods.

It was a much faster walk than he had anticipated. He crested a hill and came upon one final clearing. This one, unlike the rest, was as large as a football field, had flowers growing, dogs playing, and cows contentedly grazing all around. The boy spied in the middle of it all the submission box. He was intrigued, because he had assumed that the box would be at the highest peak of the tallest mountain, yet there it sat.

He ran towards the box but stopped just shy of it. He had to glance around one more time to make sure there was nothing trying to surprise him.

The boy knelt, and ever so gently put his final mended draft in the box.

When he stood up, he was face to face with the Villainess. He jumped back, startled.

“Blazes!” he exclaimed, “why do you do that?”

“Because,” she joked, “it is fun to use my powers; magical, grammatical, and otherwise. I also have one last thing to tell you.”

“... and what is this one last thing you want to tell me?” the boy asked, cautiously.

“Travel to the high point of the hill. Gaze back on your path. You will see once more why I have asked you to do this entire assignment.”

The boy squinted upwards. It would be a moderate climb, but he saw where she meant for him to go.

The hike was easy without the burden of his assignment, and he ascended quickly.

He came to the place where he could stop and rest. There was a squat boulder that he sat on and caught his breath.

As calm entered the boy’s mind, he looked up and began to observe all that he could see. The trees did not grow here, so he had a panoramic view of the whole forest now. The paths he had just travelled sprawled backwards through the trees towards the place he had come from.

The paths were vast. They spiralled round and round, connecting back to themselves often. At each place, a path crossed itself again, and he could see other travellers on the paths exchanging drafts and getting theirs back. On the long narrows, he could see students responding to what their peers had left on the drafts.

He traced each of the squiggles. All of them led to the center of the forest, where people were submitting more and more assignments.

The boy remembered all he had done to complete the requirements of the assignment and the cryptic message that was given to him from the then Villainess at the very outset of his journey.

“You will recognize the places along your path, but you must look at your footsteps with new eyes each time you do.”

Her words made sense now. She was only a Villainess then because she opposed the usual straight and narrow journey the boy was used to. If he had done this assignment the way he usually did, by walking in one straight line, it would have failed. He would not have known

about all the onions, gold nuggets, and unclear ideas in his work if it were just him travelling in a straight line towards the end of this assignment.

The great Villainess who had spooked him so much on his journey was not a villain at all. She was simply the guide through new territory that he had no way of recognizing yet.

The boy had completed the assignment. More importantly, the boy had learned to traverse the forest of generative writing and come out on the other side with a stronger assignment than when he had started.

EXT. CAMPFIRE – NIGHT

We are back at the campfire. STORYTELLER is sitting in his chair, staring up to the skies and smiling. He looks back to the audience and begins.

STORYTELLER

A pretty good story, eh? The boy, he learned that in order to get the most out of his journey, his path was not one that was a straight line, but one of a squiggle. A squiggle that loops back on itself a few times.

STORYTELLER draws lines in the air with the glowing tip of his fire poker.

STORYTELLER

His journey did not look like the beautifully lined up belt and broad shoulders of Orion, but the odd and tangled up cluster of stars you see all over the night sky. If you want to create a story, you don't just trace a straight line through some stars that seem nice; you just need to pick a clump and start making connections. One thing leads to another, and boom, you have a pretty shape. Anyways, I think I'll hit the hay now. Hope that story was as fun for you as it was for me. And you want to know how I know this story is true? Well, the boy is ME of course!