

Mr Breeze

Leonardo DiCaprio stood facing the wall in the dingey room. Next to him, Isla Fisher and Carey Mulligan smiled smugly at us - they had the privilege of being able to see. There wasn't a lot else to look at - a faded carpet, notice-boards framed with brightly-coloured paper, work pinned to the slightly-torn backing, rows of desks and an interactive white-board, the height of school technology back then. This was my Year 8 English classroom. Of course, Leonardo DiCaprio wasn't actually there. He was a cardboard cut-out, which Mr Breeze had 'borrowed' from his local cinema. Apparently, Leo was too distracting for us, which is why he looked at the wall. Isla and Carey presumably didn't disrupt our learning.

Mr Breeze was my slightly mad, but extremely enthusiastic English teacher. He taught me for two years and his lessons are some of my favourite memories from secondary school. His style of teaching was exciting, if a tad terrifying, but it worked. Once he'd started on a topic, he would bounce around the class, full of readiness to fill our young minds with literature. We were never quite sure what we were going to get when we walked in the door each day. It could be a fun-filled lesson of playing Scrabble, or learning how to decipher a Shakespeare play. Or, if he was in a bad mood, our lives would be made a living hell for that hour.

As many 13-year-olds with short attention spans do, myself and my best friend, Chloe, whispered a lot during class. In hindsight, this would drive any teacher mad. Because we were sat at the back of the room we thought, stupidly, that Mr Breeze couldn't hear us. Unsurprisingly, he could. That moment when the teacher says your name in that particular tone is terrifying. He called on Chloe and myself, moving us to a table right next to his desk. Why he didn't separate us, I have no idea. However, we were very hesitant to whisper again.

Mr Breeze's teaching is one of the main reasons that I decided to pursue a career in writing. He taught me to love my work and be confident what I'd written. For example, when we studied 'Jaws' for a term, we looked at how the dramatic scenes are portrayed in comparison to how they could be written on paper. These were by no means my favourite classes, as I hated watching any form of horror or gore and still do. However, what made this a pinnacle moment in my life was when I asked Mr Breeze for his opinion on my opening sentence, after re-writing a scene from the film. He disagreed that it was the best option and gave me an alternative. As a tie-breaker, he wrote both sentences on the board, then got the other students to vote for which was best, without saying whose was whose. Mine won. Mr Breeze proceeded to tell the class that I was an amazing writer and was better than he was at my age.

I sound extremely narcissistic and I'm sure the rest of the class didn't care how good of a writer Mr Breeze thought I was. Nonetheless, Mr Breeze was someone I looked up to and admired, so I didn't really mind how my friends viewed me in that moment. To receive such high praise from him gave me the confidence to believe that maybe I could make it as a writer. It planted the idea in my head, which grew into a plan for my future.

At the time, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I was 13 and more concerned with getting a boyfriend and wearing my hair the right way than what I was going to be when I grew up. I'd always written short stories as a hobby, but never considered taking it anywhere. Of course, I'd have loved to have been the next Jacqueline Wilson. I cherished her books like they were the Bible.

But I never thought I could actually do it. I felt that nothing I wrote was of any consequence. When Mr Breeze read my work, those thoughts changed.

The first short story I finished and was actually proud of, I gave to him to read. It was a horror story about a girl who was involved in a car crash and was haunted by the ghost of the boy who died because of it. It was pretty dark stuff for a young girl to write about, but that was what my brain came up with. I will never forget the feeling of sitting down with Mr Breeze and receiving feedback on this story. He was so happy that I'd decided to write beyond what we did in class and extremely passionate when giving his opinion on it. I've read through this story recently and have picked up on all the mistakes and inconsistencies within the plot. However, when I first wrote it, it was the only story I'd ever completed, so it was my prized possession. Mr Breeze saw this and, rather than criticising it, encouraged me to be a better writer.

One of the best things Mr Breeze did whilst I was at secondary school was set up the 'Creative Writing Club'. We met after school every Thursday in his classroom, where he would give us writing exercises, which we'd then share out loud. This was my first experience reading my work to someone who wasn't a teacher. I was sharing my made-up worlds with the harshest of critics - my peers. At university, I read my work aloud all the time. Taking a Creative Writing course means you have no choice but to share your work. It became normal, but back then it was terrifying.

My favourite exercise we did and by far the most effective for gaining inspiration, was creating a story based on a photograph. Sometimes, this was a picture of a misty road or a house in a forest. I've always had a dark writing style, as seen from the plot of the first short story I wrote. This meant that a setting in the woods came naturally to me, as it can quite easily turn into a horror. Mr Breeze encouraged us to be as unique and wacky with the exercises he gave us as we wanted, so I felt very at home. It helped not only with generating ideas, but also was a huge confidence booster when we gave feedback around the group.

The only people prior to this who read my short stories were my parents. Even then, they had only seen a small snippet. I guess I was worried that people would think I was crazy or judge me for the things I came up with. I may not have liked watching horror, but I loved writing it. I still stick mostly to this genre, except now I know that everyone thinks their writing is weird to begin with and that's normal. Mr Breeze's Creative Writing Club helped me to realise that I shouldn't care if someone thinks my writing is strange. In fact, that's a good thing.

I look back on these lessons with Mr Breeze now and see how much he influenced my decision to take a degree in Creative Writing. Writing short stories had always been a hobby - even back in primary school I wrote. Of course, I thought it was easy to get something published and become famous when I was only 5 or 6. When it came to later in secondary school and I seriously considered career paths, I had no idea how to actually become a writer, or if I was even good enough to get published. It was Mr Breeze and his after-school club that gave me the confidence to believe in my own work and take the steps towards the career that I so eagerly wanted.