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Mad Libs and Bad Lit: The Fill-In-The-Blanks of High School

“Noun?” My mother asked me as she looked at the small, thin book in her hand with her pen poised to write down my response.

“A noun is a person, place, or thing,” I mumbled under my breath as my older brothers, Michael and Matthew, stared at me impatiently as they awaited my answer.

“And sometimes an idea,” Michael arrogantly informed me when he felt I took too long to answer our mother’s prompt.

I nodded my head as I continued to think of a noun that was just right, as I had already used my favorite nouns: apple and umbrella. Finally, I thought of an excellent noun to give my mother.

“Hot dog!” I eagerly shouted as my brothers, in unison, exclaimed, “Finally!” My mother wrote down the words, but continued to keep the page out of our sights.

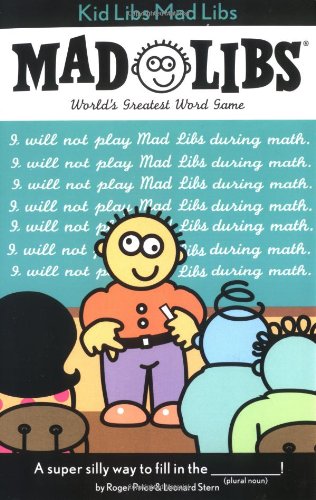
“Alright, Matthew, it’s your turn. Adverb?” My mother asked as she turned to make eye contact with my second oldest brother. At his look of complete and utter confusion, my mother inquired, “Matthew, do you know what an adverb is?”

Matthew shook his head and turned to our eldest brother Michael, who was considered all knowing by the two of us. Michael’s cheeks reddened as he had to admit that he, too, did not know what an adverb was.

“An adverb is like an adjective for a verb. Like, instead of saying someone walked, you could say someone quickly walked. Quickly would be the adverb,” Our mother informed us, as we stared at her in wonder as if she had just redefined the English language with her definition.

“Happily!” Matthew proudly shouted feeling confident he now understood the meaning of the once mysterious word ‘adverb’. Our mother smiled as she wrote down the word, as she had just taught us something new.

“Alright, that’s all the blanks! Now who wants to read the story?” Before my mother had even finished her question, the three of us were jumping up and down and shouting ‘Me! Me! Me! Pick me!” She laughed as she said, “Okay! Michael and Matthew, you’ve already had a turn. Let’s give Cristina a chance to read!” Then she handed the book that was, in my six-year-old eyes, holier than any religious text: Mad Libs.

Completing a Mad Lib was more exciting than being allowed to use the glitter glue on one of my school projects. And I considered glitter glue the best invention to have ever been created. Mad Libs were more than just some blanks in some sentence in some short story. They were opportunity- opportunity to express my knowledge of the English language, opportunity to see how random and bizarre of answers I could give or receive. Mad Libs were my first opportunity to control the story, even in a minuscule way, and to experiment with word choice diversity. Words like *apple* and *happily* became too basic, too commonplace. I wanted words like *agoraphobia* and *haphazardly*- words that represented something more than what I observed in my daily life, words that would conflict with nearly any sentence I placed them in. With Mad Libs, I began to creatively write and to invent stories to match the words I wanted to use.

My parents, my most prominent literacy sponsors, bought me numerous notebooks to fill with my rambling stories and hurried writing, as I attempted to spill my thoughts onto paper as quickly as I could write. My parents bought me a children’s dictionary and thesaurus to help me expand my vocabulary and increase my interest in finding new words to express those same ideas. I became voracious in my reading and craved new fantastical books to allow me to explore others’ imaginations and their ways of writing their worlds. My personal imaginative writing grew and expanded into collections of short stories that somewhat related to each other. From the knight who traveled on a wolf’s back to fight Cyclops to his sister who was the queen to a kingdom of people who all worked to invent all the colors of the world, my fantasy world amassed many new characters and lands.

Oddly, I would sometimes use the Mad Libs layout for writing my stories. When I could not think of the exact word I wanted for a sentence, I would put a blank in the word’s place. Some sentences had blanks for every other word. Other sentences might be one long blank with a scribbled instruction like *transition sentence* or *describe the woods here*. I found the blanks refreshing as they allowed me to continue writing without feeling that I was neglecting something in my writing. A blank was better than shirking into putting a weak, colorless word in place of a much stronger, more vibrant word.

The above dialogue and three paragraphs are false. Though I did read Mad Libs with my parents and brothers, I did not incorporate them into my style of writing. I never wrote creative tales. And I am perfectly content with the simplicity of words like *apple* and *happily.* The charming dialogue and slightly detailed recounting of my childhood writing are an example of my real literacy skill: writing what I believe the teacher wants to read rather than my actual thoughts on the topic. Any assignment that has asked me to reflect on something, to introduce myself, to share my opinion on a topic, to do anything that involves my own personal views has always given me discomfort as I feel my views may conflict with the teachers’, the very people whose views control my grades.

I mean, writing to the teacher is fairly easy in high school. Listen during class and write the teacher’s thoughts on the topic down. *Pearl is more than Hester’s daughter and the woods are more than Hester’s sanctuary; both are symbols of darkness and innocence in The Scarlet Letter.* Find some accomplished person who shares the same views as the teacher. *Al Wright, editor of The Big City Publication, wrote extensively about the woods of The Scarlet Letter and their hidden meaning.* Quote that person. *Wright states, “The shady trees hide the dark shadows of Hester’s shame and secrets and the child Pearl exudes the purity craved by Hester’s peers.”*  Then fill the paper with rewordings of the teacher’s views. Throw in a few more quotes, some from the people directly involved in the topic and some from those analyzing it. Repeat format for any other topic in the future. I am not saying this way is the way most students write their papers in high school, but my peers and I most certainly wrote this way for the majority of our writings- even the creative ones.

If my teacher viewed me as funny, then, when required to share my opinions or reflect, I would inject humor into my writing. If the teacher thought me solemn, then my writing was severe. If he or she saw me as quiet, then I strove for my writing to be bland and forgettable. Even the one teacher who never expressed how he felt about any student influenced how I wrote towards him. My final Advanced Placement English class paper for him, a paper that he said could be published it was so well-written, was nothing more than me guessing 85 % of the time how he would view the poetry I was writing about and expressing my own views about 15% of the time. Throughout high school, I could not help but to –pardon my French- bullshit may way through every writing assignment ever. Whether that was because I went to Catholic school and had to connect everything back to religion, a topic I never had an interest in, for the majority of my classes or because I somewhat enjoyed finding how facetious I could be without my teachers noticing, I will truly never know because reflecting back on anything in my life is not really my style. And in writing reflections I find, like Stephen King, “the sense that you can never completely put on the page what’s in your mind and heart” (307). I prefer to think ahead and write about other people’s lives and stories.

In a somewhat twisted way, my teachers were my literacy sponsors in this specific writing literacy skill. They praised my writing that appeared to beautifully express how emotionally moved I was by classic American novels- novels that I literally fell asleep reading (*The Grapes of Wrath*) or threw across the room because I felt the author was the biggest poser of all (*The Catcher in the Rye*). The more the teachers saluted my work that was, in my opinion, lackluster, the more encouragement I felt to continue with my banal essays. And when I thought I was alone in this writing way, I found my brethren in bullshit: honors students. In high school, I could not find anyone who gave the falsest opinions and the most deeply artificial reflections more than my fellow honors students. We stood together on our mountain of Teacher’s Pet awards and 4’s and 5’s on the AP Literature test and watched as our teachers blindly accepted our writings regurgitating their own views as if we were the gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus and they were the Romans.

I realize that is a mocking and conceited way to view my teachers and writing in high school, as Sherman Alexie writes, “I was smart. I was arrogant. I was lucky” (365). I was smart to assume my teachers’ opinions. Arrogant to think me cleverer than them. Lucky to not have been caught in my falseness. How were they supposed to know my papers were only a manufactured-brand of unique and that almost every personal story I wrote was fictional? On a technical writing level, they were excellent teachers; they taught me how to fairly criticize my writing and to better transpose my “thoughts.” Some did get me to write more genuinely when they left most of the assignment open-ended or allowed me to choose my own topic. Almost all got a part of my real thoughts in my writings, though they would need to gather together all those parts, strewn across four years of English and religion classes, to even glimpse at my inner, cynical soul and to even guess at the deeper stressed, people-pleasing spirit beneath that. All I wanted was to be taught how to comfortably and confidently open up to writing differing opinions from my superiors and to share my true reflective thoughts. But, I suppose, that is what college is for. College fills in the blanks that Bad Lit teachers leave unfulfilled.

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