



Mens Temporum .uk

The Reluctant Writer

Once upon a time early in the twenty-first century, exactly when I can't remember, I awoke one morning with an apparently original children's story screaming at me in my mind. I had no idea why as I had no children to tell it to and no use for such a thing. Disregarding the actual content, it seemed to be an encouragement to children not to fear their dreams but see them as opportunities to explore the realms of their own imagination. I did nothing with the story but it continued to buzz noisily around in my head for months, years even, like a bluebottle unable to find its way out of a bathroom.

During my working life I developed computer software. This entails holding much complex information in mind until it is safely consigned to files within a computer and can be forgotten. Maybe that story stayed in my mind for that reason, that I had not passed it on to another destination. Therefore when in 2009 another story similarly materialised in my mind while I was trying to concentrate on getting a software project finished, I immediately decided to document it to purge it from my thoughts. This story was far more mature, science fiction about a detective who was given strange cases where the background information never matched up to reality. Eventually, during the eleventh such case, he witnesses reality change before his eyes as though someone has changed the past history of a man's life. The man explains to him that somehow he was in contact with people in the past who did this for him. Being no fiction writer I simply documented the story in the only way I knew, as a letter from the detective to the solicitors employing him for undisclosed clients. I had written plenty of letters to solicitors, so this came easily to me. I filed the letter in my computer and did nothing more with it.

Unknown to me that letter already contained clues to what lay ahead. I arbitrarily named the detective "David Enstrum", but the unusual name "Enstrum" is itself contained within "Mens Temporum" if some of the letters are removed. The man who was transported back in time to influence the past I named "Marcus" and in early 2011 at the time that I began to write my novel I encountered the only man with that name that I recollect when he sat on the other side of a railway carriage from me typing on his laptop and then said into his phone, "It's Marcus here. I've got some copy to go to Andrew by eleven." Even that number eleven was mentioned and he was evidently a writer. Much as with the characters in my novel later I had apparently transported an encounter with a real person back in time to create a character who was himself transported back in time within my fiction, a bizarre process which I can only think of as covert metafiction. At that time in 2011 I only regarded the encounter as an amusing coincidence as I hadn't yet noticed the regular pattern of such "coincidences" that was emerging.

In 2010, having given up the voluntary work that had kept me busy during my retirement so far, I looked into the feasibility of building a replica of a 1960's mainframe computer. That project is now documented on another website of mine, honeypi.org.uk. One thing hampering me in particular was that I did not have the right entirely obsolete magnetic core memories for the task. I had a few that could theoretically be adapted to the purpose, but it would take a lot of work and not be ideal. I shelved the project wishing that I might find the right memories somewhere in the future. Maybe my unconscious mind misinterpreted that desire and embarked on a far more remarkable task of which it was capable. However, in practice it did fulfil my intended objective as it kept me occupied in other activities until the time was right to resume my computer project at the end of 2012.

To fill my time I resumed my search for my family origins, my grandfather having appeared out of nowhere in London in the late nineteenth century. To this end I contacted a researcher at the US National Archives in Washington DC. He turned out to be a university lecturer in English literature and an Anglophile as well, so

eventually after much casual correspondence I mentioned my solitary short story to him and he asked to read it. He said that he saw possibilities for expanding the story into something far more ambitious but mentioned no details. Nevertheless that was when the story that would become the novel materialised in my mind just as the previous stories had, virtually overnight, or at least a series of nights. It wasn't a novel though but a television series and that was a problem for me.

Morning after morning I awoke with a new story in the apparent series crowding into my mind and to add to the idea of it being a television series there was a regular introduction that plagued me day after day. This involved the idea of the three clocks depicted on this site (bearing in mind that I do not visualise such things in my mind but only conceptualise them because of my aphantasia) together with a monotonous voice reciting the words that I would eventually include in the frontispiece of my novel as follows. (My aphantasia only inhibits my mind's eye but not my mind's ear.)

**Three clocks hang on the office wall.
The white one has stopped. The black one keeps ticking on.
Above them the red one is going backwards.
The fairy tale has started.**

It was as frustrating as someone telling me about an intriguing television series that they were watching but I could not. I so wanted to see this series that I wondered how I could move it from my mind into reality, but writing a script for such a thing was quite beyond my abilities, so in desperation I wrote to a professional scriptwriter to ask his advice. He told me that my problem was that collaborative works are seldom successful and that the only way that I could achieve what I wanted was to attempt to write it myself. Years later I would discover the real television series that had apparently inspired my thoughts. As with many of my experiences synchronicity was involved. In February 2011 when I was being plagued by the stories in my head the American company CBS took on the pilot of a potential television series entitled *Person of Interest* written by Jonathan Nolan and this was broadcast in the USA in September 2011. Even when the series was first broadcast in the UK my wife and I didn't watch it and it was only some years later that I bought the first three seasons on DVD to watch. Certainly the monotonous voice reciting the opening words was there over the titles and what was said about a machine that effectively predicted the future paralleled the eventual plot of my own novel. The series regularly used scrolling visual timelines to represent movement backwards and forwards in time whereas my story used the device of multiple clocks for a similar purpose. On watching *Person of Interest* in those later years I discovered just how similar the basic plots of that series and my novel were, but there was one big difference. In the television series the machine predicted future events from observation of present ones whereas the machine in my novel made it possible to discover actual future events directly.

To overcome the scriptwriting problem I decided to write a novel instead making the episodes of the perceived series into chapters in the novel. I had two motives in mind in doing this. One was, as with the original short story, simply to purge the thoughts from my mind and the other was to make it possible for me to read the story as these thoughts were coming so fast that I was in danger of forgetting the earlier ones. As I had never written any fiction before I had no ambition ever to have the final work published and this was never a motive so, having read all the advice about how to write a novel that would sell well, I made my best efforts to appear to break as many of the conventions as possible just to test my creative ability. For example, the opening lines of any story are considered extremely important to get the reader's attention, so I opened the first full draft of my novel with the words "THE END", the most unpromising opening that I could think of. If anything I wrote the novel as a challenge to other readers to keep reading it rather than an enticement to do so to ensure that any critical readers merely following the conventions would give up quickly assuming that I was incompetent. Although I disregarded most of the advice about writing books that I had read I did find one book particularly interesting and that was about the psychology of reading, which may explain why my writing tended to manipulate the reader's thoughts rather than just recount the story.

Despite my inexperience I had no trouble writing the whole thing, as though I was simply taking dictation from the real author elsewhere. I did do some research to support the details that I used in it, but even then I did it *after* I had written the relevant part of the story just to confirm that I hadn't made any mistakes, which I never seemed to. The fact that even this research seemed to be superfluous puzzled me but now the anachronism makes more sense to me. I still had no idea where the extensive story was coming from or even what it really meant, but eventually I had a draft written, which I gave the title "Never Upon A Time (about something else)".

I added those words after the title as I was sure that it wasn't what it appeared to be but embodied some other story that I hadn't yet detected.

In February 2012 I sent the draft to my literary friend in the USA, who had agreed to read it and comment on it, possibly during the summer, given that he was the one who had effectively prompted me to write it, if only in a passing comment about the short story. While he was doing that the story continued to evolve in my mind and I drafted out some more key chapters of what might become two more novels if I chose to write them. However, my initial irrational enthusiasm for fiction writing was waning and towards the later part of 2012 I went back to my computer project and surprisingly found a source of the incredibly rare memories that I needed for it. Consequently I then spent much of my time working on that and put aside the fiction writing although I did join an online forum for novice writers to try to put my novel into perspective against other people's efforts. There didn't seem to be anybody like me there though as they all seemed to be working hard to construct their stories whereas mine had been predominantly free writing with little consideration of conventional structures. Apart from writing the odd short story to post on the forum and improving on some chapters of my draft novel I wrote little and eventually moved over to reading and commenting on other people's draft novels, a task in which my wife joined me as her taste in genres of literature differed from mine. Eventually though we left the forum and my brief writing career was effectively over although the consequences of it would probably remain with me for the rest of my life.

To me now this current story of how I came to write the novel is far more intriguing than the novel itself although I had to write the novel in ignorance of its eventual significance first to make it so. The characters that I created to take part in it continued to live out their lives and experiences within my mind long after I had given up writing and I am now so well acquainted with their story that I no longer have any need to write it down. In a way though I have now placed any reader of this account in the same situation as I found myself in 2011, of being told about a story that they cannot witness themselves as I will most likely never write it all. I truly do not have the time, competence or inclination to do so though, so *Never Upon A Time* is now a perfectly appropriate title for it. By the way, just as the original draft started with the words "THE END" the words "never upon a time" were the last words of the draft last chapter of the last novel in that potential trilogy to bring the story full circle.