

## WRITING THERAPY, by TIM ATKINSON

### CHAPTER ONE

This is not a real book; not really. A real book tells a story. A real book starts at the beginning and it has a middle and an end, and I should know - I've read enough of them. I read so many books that one day I woke up as a character in one. I'm there now, trapped between the pages in the story of a young girl who drops out of school, who reads more than is good for her and ends up in the loony-bin. And she is not the only one here stuck between the covers: there are other characters, like the nurses for example: Ted and Monica; and there are other patients too, like Debbie and Jason and Lizzie. And, of course, there's Dr Grimshaw, my psychiatrist.

'So we're all just characters in a book then, are we?'

That's him now, psychiatrising me. He asks me questions that he thinks he knows the answer to, and I sit here and tell him what he thinks he already knows. That's our therapy; that's the treatment. That is what we do. That, and take the tablets that he gives us.

'Yes we are,' I told him.

'That's interesting' he said. 'So who is the narrator?'

'Me, of course.'

'And you're the author?'

'Yes.'

'And we're now in the middle of the story?'

'Absolutely! Yes. I know exactly what to do, you know.'

'Of course you do.'

'Yes. First of all you start off with a plot hook, and then begin the story in the middle – in medias res, it's called. You can use time-shift; write habitual behaviour; slowly build your characters. I know all the tricks, you know – tricks used in a proper book, a book that's written by a proper author.'

'But you're not a proper author, are you Frances?'

'No,' I said. 'One day, though – maybe? I would like to be, if only everyone would let me.'

'I'm sure you would' he said, and smiled. 'But first of all you must complete your therapy.'

Of course he didn't mean my therapy at all, oh no. He meant his therapy: his talking, tablet-giving, asking questions-type of therapy; the sitting-in-the-silence-wondering-what-to-say-next type of therapy.

'And in order to do that,' he went on, 'you must start at the beginning, Frances. Not 'in medias res' as you put it. You should know that well enough by now. If you're ever going to make a full recovery we must go right back to...' and he gave a little snort '... the first page of your story.'

I sat and scowled at him.

'It all makes sense you know,' he added, smiling like a vicar.

Sense. It all made sense; it was the sensible thing to do. But no, it didn't and it wasn't. I can see that now. Why should it make more sense to do things his way? Whose story was this, anyway? Mine. So why wouldn't it make sense to do things my way? Yes, that's right - there was another, better way of understanding what had happened to me. There was a different kind of therapy: research therapy. That was it! My life to date – the mess I'd made of everything, the dropping out of school and all of that – well, it was all just research

for a book. It had to be; it was. Either I was just a loony in the loony-bin like all the rest of them, or this was part of an enormous literary plan: my plot, my writing therapy.

‘Look, Frances,’ he continued, ‘don’t misunderstand me. This is quite a good idea.’ He lifted up the blue school exercise book that I’d been writing in. ‘Will means well, I know, but...’

‘Yes, I know. He’s just the student nurse...’

And you, of course, are the psychiatrist - the boss, the fat consultant, the enormous ego. But he wasn’t. To be honest Dr Grimshaw had been something of a disappointment. For a start there’d been no couch for me to lie on, or even a comfy chair to sit in. And he didn’t wear a three piece suit or have a gold watch on a watch-chain stretched across an ample stomach. He didn’t have a stomach. Or a waistcoat. He wore brightly coloured jumpers. His consulting room was bare - a desk, two chairs; a plastic box of toys – no more. I had expected so much more of a psychiatrist. I thought at least he’d have a tiny beard. And I’d expected him to make me to lie down on a couch while he read out random words and I responded with whatever came into my head: you know, like ‘school – teacher’, ‘book – story’, ‘fantasy – reality’ etc. I’d expected him to do all sorts of things. And most of all I had expected him to cure me. But here we were, months later, doing all the same things that we’d done so many times before.

‘Will means well,’ he went on. ‘But he’s got some strange ideas. And anyway, he won’t be here for long.’

‘He doesn’t need to be,’ I said. ‘He’s already done much more than anyone to help me. Look there – see that? See - those comments in the margin? Marginalia. Nota Benes. That’s him writing in the white space of my story. He’s more like my editor, really. He helps me get the words down on the paper. But I’m still the author. I am the omniscient narrator. And I’m the central character.’

‘Ok then,’ Dr Grimshaw sighed, deciding to indulge me. ‘Tell me what kind of character you are.’

He looked down at the file of notes that he’d been making and he started reading: Frances Nolan – that’s me - is a girl who’s done more reading than is good for her, and now she thinks that she’s an author. She’s really just a schoolgirl - a sixth-former – studying literature, or at least she should be. But she hasn’t been to school for months. She left one day, quite suddenly, for reasons that are as yet unclear. At first she hid the fact that she’d been sent home, from her mother. She got up every day as normal, got dressed, left the house, and went off the public library. There she spent the day behind the stacks, reading fiction alphabetically, until...

‘Until? What happened then?’ he asked.

‘I got as far as J’ I said.

‘Ah yes.’

‘And that was when you found me.’

That was the day that everything had ended, or the day that everything had started – I don’t know. Who does? Some things can be hidden, even from the author. Some days, for example, Dr Grim could ask me questions and I’d know the answer. But at other times we’d simply sit in silence listening to each other breathing, listening to the typists typing in the typing pool next door, or listening to cars and buses driving past the door; the church clock chiming.

‘Look,’ he said eventually. ‘I’m not sure that this is working.’

I could have told him that before. I knew all about the problem – conflicting narratives: there was creative tension lying like a snake between us. He wanted me to write a

different kind of book but I resisted. In his narrative I was just a girl refusing to face up to what was wrong with her. I wasn't co-operating with him; I was withholding information, even from myself.

'Why don't you want to talk to me?' he said. He looked hurt.

'It's not just you,' I told him, 'I don't want to talk to anyone. The characters in my book are all more interesting. It's their conversations that I'm listening to.'

'Maybe,' he replied and sighed. 'Although I really think it's time we knew now what was happening. There has to be some action soon or else people will stop reading.'

'Perhaps,' I said, 'but I not just yet – we're only on page six,' I told him. 'If I get to it too soon then it will spoil the surprise.'

'Perhaps,' he muttered, turning back to his untidy pile of notes. 'Although I think I might have one for you.'

There. He'd done it now: he'd stopped the story right there in its graphite tracks. And I had no idea where to go from here. I had to hand it to him. I suppose I should have seen it coming. As we sat there on that late December afternoon I should have known he would demand a new, dramatic twist: some action, progress, resolution – at the very least a change of setting. Even I knew that we couldn't simply stay in his consulting room forever. Every Thursday he would meet me at the big front door of the town's Child Guidance Clinic. He would smile and turn and lead me down a corridor, past the typing pool and into the converted kitchen at the back where we sat scowling at each other for an hour. On the wooden desk were photographs of smiling, blond-haired children. His, I thought they must be, even though his hair was dark and wavy, trailing slightly on his open collar.

'You are taking all the tablets I'm prescribing Frances, aren't you?' he would always start by asking me.

Yes, I was. And then we'd sit in silence for a while.

'You do want to get better don't you, Frances?'

Actually, I don't. I like being depressed. It's good fun hurting all the time. I like not being able to get out of bed each morning. And I love the constant washing – can't you smell how clean I am? That smell - like bleach without the fumes? Can you smell it? Can you? No. Of course he couldn't. I just nodded.

On the wall behind him was a poster that I used to look at. The Psychiatrist is... IN, the sign said. Charlie Brown was sitting looking glum: 'Sure you're depressed' sneered the girl, Lucy. 'We're all depressed. Get over it.'

I sat and watched him breathe; I heard his wristwatch whisper. Along the corridor the typists might observe a brief ceasefire. If I strained hard I could just catch fragments of their conversation: boyfriends, diets, new contraceptive methods. How come they found this so easy? How come they could talk about it all so openly? And then I realised they were reading from the script – the letters they sat typing, typing, typing, all the words dictated through those stethoscope things that they plugged in to Dr Grimshaw's Dictaphone. But there was no script for me here in the consulting room; no prompt; no words; no clue. And I didn't have the confidence or the experience to ad-lib.

'Look Frances. Talking therapy is successful in over 80% of cases. It's how we do things nowadays. It is how you and I will gradually discover what is wrong with you. It's how you will get better.'

I nodded, even though I disagreed.

'This isn't really helping,' he went on.

'No,' I said. 'It isn't.'

'We're going nowhere. You've been seeing me for over three months and we're still no nearer finding out what all this means.'

'All what?'

'All this...' he held the manuscript for me to see. 'All the writing that you're doing and the washing – everything. The Health Authority is making cuts, you know. I might not have as long as I would wish to go on sorting out your story. We need to get things into order. And I need you to co-operate. We've got to get to the bottom of what's troubling you, Frances – and to do that you will have to talk - to me; to someone; anyone.'

I suppose deep down I knew that, too. But there was nothing more that I could tell him. Nothing that I'd not already told him. I had told him everything; I'd taken everything that he'd prescribed. I had been coming here and seeing him for three months and the pain was still there buried deep inside, impossible to ignore.

'Of course, at first you would only have to be a voluntary patient.'

I looked up and I saw that smile again.

'That would have to be the basis on which you would be admitted.'

What had I admitted? What had I volunteered?

'I think time as an in-patient would be useful at this stage' he went on. 'At Lowood Lodge, I mean...'

I stood up suddenly. This wasn't in the script.

'Isn't that... you know... ISN'T THAT THE LOONY-BIN; THE FUNNY-FARM; THE SPASTIC FACTORY?'

Silence.

'Does that worry you?' he asked, and put his hands together. Outside, the late December sky grew dark; cold air hissed like gas through small gaps in the window frame. The Venetian blinds were buzzing for an answer.

'Lowood Lodge is not the same as Cranford Hospital, you know. It's in the grounds of the hospital, of course...' he went on, shifting slightly in his chair. The working day was coming to a close. Soon, those typists would be going home. For once, he didn't want a long discussion. He wanted a solution. What he wanted was a happy ending. He wasn't satisfied with the resolution I'd provided for him.

'Yes - it's in the grounds...' he went on 'but it isn't really part of Cranford Hospital at all. It's different. It's a place for young adults like you, you know, who need to spend some time away from family and school, away from all the stress of everyday life. That's all. It won't need to be for long. You just need a little time to sort things out, that's all'.

Time? To sort things out? I had the narrative worked out by now; I knew the characters and the plot. The details might have needed more work, sure - but the basic structure was already sliding into place, or so I thought.

'Oh, I know exactly what you're thinking,' he was interrupting.

Oh God, I thought. Is that true? Can he see inside my head? Does he know what I've been thinking all along? Is that what psychiatrists can do?

'You're worried, aren't you?'

That was true. I was.

'You think that everyone who goes there must be mad,' he said.

I did.

'You think that if you go there, it must mean all the things that people have been telling you, and all the names that people have been calling you at school – it's all true: that you belong there; that you're like them – that you're mad, too.'

True. Perhaps he did know everything that I was thinking? That would be exciting - suddenly, an independent character emerging - someone capable of taking the story in a new direction.

'I'm going to tell you something now,' he told me 'and I think you'll be surprised.' He leaned towards me confidentially, and beckoned me to come a little closer; then he put his mouth close to my ear. I felt him take a breath, and then he spoke.

'You know,' he whispered followed by a pause. 'There's no such word as mad.' He smiled at me - a small, triumphant smile - and sat back in his swivel chair.

'I know' I said. 'I read that in a book somewhere when I was in the library - the word was *amad*, then we lost the a.'

'What? That isn't what I meant,' he said.

'It isn't?'

'No. I mean - there's no such thing as madness' and he drew quotation marks around the m-word with his fingers.

'What?'

'There's no such thing as madness' he repeated.

'But that's crazy.'

'Maybe,' he replied. 'But true.'

And then we had another silence. Someone shouted 'see you tomorrow' and the front door closed.

'So?'

'So?'

'So what do you think of what I've said?'

'Well,' I started. 'Well - ok, then: if that's true, and if you're right and if there's no such thing as madness... well, I don't know...well - what is there, then?'

'No Frances, what I meant was...'

Yes I know, I know, I thought. I know exactly what you meant. I know what you were thinking. I could read him like a book.

'Will you come to Lowood Lodge?' he asked again. 'After Christmas, I mean.'

I didn't bother answering. It didn't really matter. By then, another story was already being written. Nothing ever happens till it's written down, I once remember reading. In a moment Dr Grim would have the words all safely typed out on the paper in a letter to my mother:

*Dear Mrs Nolan*

*Further to our earlier discussion I now feel it would be useful to admit your daughter Frances to the Adolescent Unit. This will allow her treatment to continue more intensively. Although, of course, the final decision rests with both yourself and Frances I would add that - in my clinical opinion - her admission to Cranford Hospital needs to be done as a matter of urgency...*

And that was it. So simple; so straightforward - an opening, a conflict, and some exposition. Now for the setting.