

The Writer`s Tale

JACK TREVOR STORY

Author of (inter alia) "The Trouble with Harry" and "Live Now, Pay Later", one-time Guardian columnist, TV personality – Jack really needs no introduction. So we'll just let him have the last word. . .

I came to Milton Keynes in January 1977 with an Arts Council Creative Writing Fellowship. My appointment was the first in this country. Usually writers in residence are attached to universities or colleges, mine was the first writer attached to a town. I was supposed to serve all the local schools and colleges and also look after the residents generally. What a year that was after zippy Hampstead with Liz Taylor and Dicky Burton living next door and Dud Moore popping in for moans. Here I was stuck in the mud or running around in my scruffy little banger like a mid-wife, delivering scrawled-over memoirs to little old ladies. The fellowship was officially for one year, but it is still going on unofficially after seven years, seven years and a bit.

Last week the phone rang and it was another would-be historian: "I'm blind and my husband is dead and I want to write about him. He was a psychopath and used to show his genitals to children." I said: "Oh, yes." She said: "That is Mr. Story isn't it? Could you read what I've done and advise me?" I told her I couldn't. I said that my wife always insisted that I was a psychopath and I show my genitals to pretty doctors and anyway I'm not interested in helping people to write books like that. Nor any books. Alan Edwards never gives up and Ricky Paris has been pushing short stories and novels under my nose for years. He's a very good writer but I can't get publishers and editors to even reply or return the postage. Writing today is an impossible business for beginners and also a distressed area for literature. My only area now is Radio 3.

During my official year I discovered what I could and couldn't do. I could not organise writers' workshops for instance, because I dislike them as time-wasting and depressing. Nobody can learn to write by going and mixing with dumb-clucks like themselves reading their own rubbish to each other. They are not aiming at editors and publishers. They want the ignorant to applaud them. Oh it's nice, Gracy. Why don't you make it a bit longer? Amateurs have no idea what writing is. They think it's something they learnt to do at school.

Oh That`s Nice Gracy

I held some poetry meetings but only because I was pressed. My wife said recently – she once worked for the Development Corporation – "The Corporation was very disappointed in you." They never tell you to your face but it wouldn't have mattered much anyway. David Crewe, press officer for M.K. about that time, once told me that my lousy television and radio and press pieces about the city had brought more publicity than the whole of his expensive department. I've met people since then – there's a black guy that works in the Post Office in the city centre and he said: "You

made that terrible T.V. film about Milton Keynes, driving around the roundabouts and saying what a terrible place it is. We lived in London then but we laughed at that time and that's why we came here." The place sounds so ghastly that you simply have to try it. It's like emigrating to Australia.

I met Bill Billings. He's a good writer in the vernacular manner – also Robbie Burns was. The noo. Bill breaks all the rules. He's an anti-poet and I'm an anti novelist. I love his attitude to poetry and prose and share it. Poetry buffs sit at the readings and listen to John Silkin and Ted Hughes and are not allowed to clap until the end of the cycle, darling. I once cross-examined Silkin about this and he explained the reason, though I've forgotten it.

I've been here in Milton Keynes as I've said for about seven years, but I don't know anybody. If I go to the pub I take a book with me. There is nobody I want to have a drink with here. Having done all that I have done in the media, I have established the wrong kind of fame. The extent of communication is some stranger crying: "Hello Jack!" I cry: "Hello, um ah!" I know about a thousand um ahs. None of them knows who I am or what I do for a living. "What are you doing now, then?" Or "When are you coming on the box again?" They're all telly idiots and think television spells success for all those doomed heads they watch every night. Television is oblivion for performer and audience. Then you get the serious, thoughtful, intellectual, sober Milton Keynes people. They are much worse than the thickoes and a bigger threat to the precious second of your day. With them you have to be grown-up.

A Marvellous Greek Temple

My *real* friends – Harpenden, Hampstead, Kent, London, half a dozen friends, eight kids – would never dream of boring your arse off with cultural conversation. With good people who last a lifetime you have crazy talk, girl crazy, boy crazy, sex crazy, but always cosmic, never specific. We live after all, not in Milton Keynes, but in the universe. I have never had a friend of even roughly my own age. My present wife is twenty-nine. Getting older, better look around. She was sixteen when we started living together in 1972.

In my television programme about Milton Keynes I talked to people like Fred Lloyd Roche. I like Fred, he's terribly formal and afraid of what you are going to write about him. I said: "I think you've got quite a good city here. Well it will be when it's finished and landscaped. What ruins it, surely, is all the scruffy people coming in. Don't you get fed up with all these bloody slum-types living in all your houses?"

"That's a very emotive thing to say." He replied, as though it was none of my business to say things like that. I said: "I went round the city centre (which I did) and thought it was a marvellous Greek temple full of dwarfs dragging their shopping baskets."

Trying to steady my mind for a last look, I think what we have here in M.K. is a very good piece of landscaping, now we need some houses to follow. There are no real houses, they're terrible places. Have you seen this new estate? Boxes with houses

painted on them to make it look as if they`ve got wooden beams. They look like Elizabethan manors, but when you get close you can see it`s all shit. My son came to visit, he saw these and said: "Whatever are they doing over there? Is that a film set?" I couldn`t believe that, I said: "That`s a place where people are going to live." And it`s the same all over. If you go to that village, Little Woolstone I think it`s called, It`s a very good concept, they`ve made it look like an old English village but everything`s too small. They`ve done what film people do. They`ve scaled everything down to save cost. They`ve cheated like they cheated Portmeirion, the village in `The Prisoner`.

I find the shopping centre okay though I prefer Mr. Lavidge on East Road, Cambridge, who cycled our whole week`s grocery on tick right out to Chesterton, like four miles. Waitrose will not do that. There are no pubs here – well two. Most of them, like Milton Keynes shops and social services, are run by pushy charladies. "Wot chew `having, luv?"

He`s having one of those nasty turns.