What if our story characters judged us?

"Welcome to the five thousandth and sixty-seventh sitting of The Institute for the Preservation of Quality in Fictional Literature. I now hand you over to your chairman, Miss Havisham."

"Thank you Controller and good day fellow fictional literati. Today we are going to explore the world of the amateur would-be authors who inhabit the curious and arcane world of Writers Circles."

"It is my contention that they are generally clueless when it comes to creating us – the outstanding characters of what they see as the Fictional World. I have been approached on behalf of a member of what is known as the Pinelands Writers' Circle who has, not for the first time, been lumbered with an assignment that is seen as "good" by the majority of the Circle members."

"My understanding is that it is known as a "Three Word Story". I shall now attempt to convey my understanding of the process by which these "Three Words" are arrived at. Apparently one or more members of the Circle pluck a number of words out of the ether and collate them into three groups. These groups are identified as, "People", "Places" or "Things". Apparently each member must have one each of "People", "Places" and "Things" and they are to craft a story around these three "words"."

"I have no difficulty in assuming to understand the meaning of "People" and "Places" but I am at a loss to immediately see what is meant by a "Thing". I have discussed the last mentioned with the Institute's Lexicographic Sub-Committee who have pointed out that they would appreciate being informed as to which meaning of "Thing" is meant by the Circle's description of "Thing".

Firstly, does it refer to "possessions or effects"; "whatever may be possessed or owned or be the object of a right": "an article of clothing" or "equipment or utensils especially for a particular purpose"?

Secondly, may it be "an object or entity not precisely designated or capable of being designated"?

Lastly, does it encompass "a detail or point" or is it "a material or substance of a specified kind"?

"I think you will now appreciate the difficulty that some budding writers have with an idea such as this. Surely, at this stage, the individual has spent so much cranial energy that he or she may be incapable of beginning to formulate characters for the story – and characters, dear fellow members, are the REASON for stories."

A Chorus of, "Hear, hear," floated across the room before an Honourable Member asked, "I agree, surely they must realise that your first requisite to writing is to create your characters?"

"Perhaps vainly, but I should hope so. The plot comes after you have brought your characters to life."

"Now in the example that is before the Institute this morning is a story that is required to effectively use the following random pluckings: the "Person" is "Imam"; the "Place" is "Makapan" and the "thing" is "Wagon Whip"."

A collective mix of groans and exclamations of astonishment rumbled through the collected members of the Institute.

"We have already discussed the word, or concept, "Thing". Now let us look at the given representation of "Thing" – it is described as a "Wagon whip".

"A perusal of the Primitive Computerised Library, or PCL, used by mortals and which they quaintly refer to as the "World Wide Web", variously describes this "Thing" as "a whip with a sewn cover over a core of leather strips"; a "Wagon whip in rail order" [heaven knows what this is supposed to mean]; a "Hopper Wagon Whip"; a "Corsa Wagon Whip" and a "Volvo Wagon Whip".

"Now I ask you, what is a budding writer to make of this mess of pottage?"

Murmurs of assent rumbled through the assembled throng.

Miss Havisham continued, "A perusal of the PCL indicates that the "Corsa" and "Volvo" reports refer to motor vehicles but they give no clue as to what the "whip" in those contexts may be. Furthermore, the "rail order" and "hopper" reports seem to refer to items that pertain to railways but once again the reports give no clue as to what the word "whip" might mean in those contexts."

"Does the assembly remember the confusion over the word "countback"?

The members nodded gravely.

"At the time that the question was raised none of the dictionaries carried the word but a search of the PCL eventually pointed to the utterly useless and senseless game of golf. This golfing term eventually found its way into the odd dictionary where one now defines it as "a system of deciding the winner of a tied competition by comparing earlier points or scores."

"Words must be created in dictionaries before being tossed into general use, not the other way around."

This assertion was roundly applauded.

"Thank you. Now, be that as it may, let us now focus our attention on "Makapan", the name assigned to "Place" in this assignment. A search for the "Place" "Makapan" in the PLC merely comes up with "Makapansgat" which is explained as follows, "Makapansgat is an archaeological location within the Makapansgat and Zwartkrans Valleys, northeast of Mokopane in Limpopo province, South Africa. It is an important paleontological site."

Our search also revealed the town of Mokopane – also in South Africa - and which is named after a Ndebele chief, Mokopane (also known as Makapan). To add to the confusion, the town was previously known as Potgietersrus. It was apparently named after what is known as a Voortrekker leader, one Piet Potgieter, who was fatally wounded during some campaign against Makapan in 1854."

As an aside, Miss Havisham mused that that was six years before the great Charles Dickens had created her.

Pulling herself together she continued, "Given the name "Makapan" and the suffix "gat" sent us on another wild chameleon chase.

"Pardon, Miss Havisham What is a wild chameleon chase"?

"I'm glad you asked, it is a colourful experience that gets you nowhere fast."

A titter ran around the room.

"Back to "gat". This appears to be a word in what is known as the Afrikaans language and which is variously translated as "hole", "opening", "pit", "arse", "bottom", "anus" and a "fool".

Sharp in takings of breath broke the ensuing silence.

Miss Havisham continued, "However, one gets the impression that they were attempting to describe this as the "cave" belonging to Makapan or Mokopane, as you wish. Why then, in the name of all that is holy did they not use their senses and use perfectly good Afrikaans words as suffixes to describe a cave and perhaps choose between "Makapansgrot"; "Makapansspelonk" or "Makapansaardholte"?

Murmurs of agreement once more.

"I am sure that you will all agree that everything so far leaves the budding writer in a state of consummate confusion, not to mention blind panic. And we are only two thirds done."

More murmurs of assent rent the air in that august gathering.

"Lastly we come to the "Person" described as "Imam"."

Miss Havisham read from her notes, "Once more reference to the Primitive Library of the Mortals tells us that, ". . . an imam is an Islamic leadership position, often the worship leader of a mosque and the Muslim community. There are, however, two branches of Islam, the Sunni and the Shi'a. The Sunni branch of Islam does not have imams in the same sense as the Shi'a. Furthermore, this term is also used for a recognized religious scholar or authority in Islam."

Pullease," she intoned dramatically, "If the followers of the religion cannot even agree amongst themselves what the word describes, then what chance has our budding author have? "

Miss Havisham laid down her notes and surveyed the assembled throng, "So exactly what is an imam?"

A collective look of utter bewilderment reigned on all the faces of those present. [We cannot vouch for those not present].

"Now, I ask you, with tears in my baby-blue eyes, what is this poor budding writer to make of all the confusion above?"

A cacophonic flood of questioning voices was raised:

"How on earth would you define characters in the above context?"

"What about a story? How could you create a story out of that muddle of confusion?"

"Never mind characters and story, how could a plot evolve from all the above?"

Fortunately for the Institute - and unfortunately for the budding author - the august gathering was summarily interrupted by a breathlessly agitated Scanner of New Fiction bursting into the august gathering and shouting, "emergency, emergency", while waving a Guardian Review in front of the Controller, "Look at this utter drivel. How can the reading public be so gullible? I quote, "Fifty Shades of Grey, a tale of bondage and domination, has been lapped up by the public. An erotic novel has become the fastest-selling book of the year, beating well known authors to the top of the charts this. The book sold more than 100,000 copies in its first week. The reviewer writes "There's fun, there's escapism – but it's such a badly written book it's hilarious . . .."

"How preposterous," snorted Miss Havisham, "This type of nonsense is an insult to our creators such as Dickens, Scott, Austen, the Bronte's, Eliot, Shakespeare and so forth. Would we want to mix with the type of character created in books such as these? I say a resounding "NO"."

A roar of approval met her statement.

She continued, "This also gives us an opportunity to place this confoundedly confusing "three word story" question on hold until it be investigated more thoroughly. This meeting is dissolved until the five thousandth and sixty-eighth meeting when we will discuss this new development."

"Messenger, go, at once, and purloin sufficient copies of this apparent drivellous twaddle for the Institute to study. If we find it to be of the calibre we suspect, we will summarily execute all the characters in the book thus rendering it unreadable."

And so, dear reader, the budding writer's request was laid by the wayside. Then, without any definitive assistance from the august Institute for the Preservation of Quality in Fictional Literature, the budding author is likely to remain as confused – perhaps more so now – as before.

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