2000

The "Sample Scenario": A Technique For Teaching Creative Nonfiction

Simone Poirier-Bures

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Poirier-Bures, Simone (2000) "The "Sample Scenario": A Technique For Teaching Creative Nonfiction," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1367>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

The “Sample Scenario”: A Technique For Teaching Creative Nonfiction

Simone Poirier-Bures

I got the idea for this “sample scenario” exercise from my years of teaching business writing on the workshop circuit. In workshops, you can’t check each person’s writing as you can with regular students, so I came up with a way to help participants assess their own work. I would carefully explain a set of writing goals and strategies for, say, an effective bad news message, then set up a scenario or “writing problem.” I’d provide all the particulars and ask the participants to draft the message. After ten minutes or so, I’d put up a transparency with a “proposed solution.” I’d explain that while a “writing problem” is not like a “math problem” where there is one correct answer and everything else is wrong, some writing “solutions” are clearly more effective than others. As we reviewed my “proposed solution,” I carefully explained my rhetorical choices, why I chose to leave one bit out and include another, why I phrased such and such in a particular way, and so on. Participants could then judge how effective their own versions were, given the goals and choices we had discussed. This process worked well, and at some point it occurred to me that a variation might prove equally effective with creative writing students.

I first used a “sample scenario” in a creative nonfiction writing class. I’m interested in memoir and personal narrative but find that student writings in this area often suffer from a kind of flat-

ness—they explain too much and don’t allow the reader the pleasure of discovery. Often, there’s not enough conscious patterning, not enough of the “creative” part of writing. My class and I were discussing the various forms of creative nonfiction, noting that the term seemed to encompass a whole spectrum of writing, ranging from traditional essays to work that looked very much like fiction. The difference, I pointed out, often lay in how overt or embedded the element of reflection was. They could make their own narratives more lively, I suggested, by using storytelling techniques.

This led to a discussion of the art of storytelling. What were some of the techniques a good storyteller kept in her bag of tricks that might be useful, not only with invented stories, but in rendering actual experience? After some brainstorming, we came up with the following list:

A good storyteller

- Uses suspense. Gradually unfolds the story. Doesn’t tell everything up front, but teases the reader along.
- Builds toward something.
- Shows instead of tells, so that the reader has to figure some things out. Juxtaposes bits of information instead of overtly explaining.
- Sets little scenes so the reader can visualize what’s happening.
- Uses some dialogue to make the reader (or

listener) feel somehow present as a witness (or eavesdropper).

- Sometimes uses a persona. (It may be “I” speaking, but which of the many I’s that inhabit you?)
- Shows change in a character (including herself), rather than just announcing it. (In fiction, an internal change in a character has to be manifested externally. A good storyteller does the same when dramatizing her own experience.)
- Doesn’t always begin at the beginning.
- Grabs the reader’s attention. (A narrative hook is just as important in personal narratives as it is in fiction.)

A few students expressed some skepticism about whether you really could use these “fictional” devices to dramatize nonfictional experiences. To demonstrate that you could, I told them about an actual experience that I’d written about using these techniques. It became our “sample scenario.”

I had a Siamese cat I adored whose name was Caspar. He was partially declawed, but we let him go out anyway because he loved being outside, and we live in the country where there are lots of places for a cat to hide. However, Caspar ended up getting killed by a pair of neighborhood dogs. For a long time I grieved his loss. Some months later, one of the culprit dogs, Nicky, followed me on one of my walks. I was still very angry with the dog and didn’t want it following me, but by the end of the walk, after I’d spent an hour reflecting on both the dog and my cat and the nature of dogs and cats in general, I had forgiven the dog.

I asked my students to imagine that this was their own experience and to consider how they might write about it. I challenged them to transform this relatively small event into a vivid, compelling story using the storyteller’s bag of tricks. Specifically, I asked them to do four things:

- Decide where in the “story” to begin.
- Decide what tense to use (we discussed the pros and cons of both present and past tense).
- Come up with some inventive way to get the

reader’s attention.

- Consider, in general, how they might frame the story, how they might tease the reader along, rather than disclose everything right away.

I gave them fifteen or twenty minutes to begin the writing process. While that isn’t nearly enough time to write a whole draft, it is enough to get them started, to get them struggling with the wide range of rhetorical choices available to them in this writing situation. Afterward, I invited them to read aloud their first few paragraphs. The differences were amazing. Right away the students could see which approaches were effective and which were not. Some, I should note, were quite wonderful and suggested all sorts of possibilities I hadn’t thought of myself.

Next, I read my own version—the complete piece I’d already published—my “proposed solution.” Because everyone in the class had struggled with how to frame and develop the same “sample scenario,” they could fully appreciate the craft involved in shaping the piece. As I read, they could note the choices I had made, the particular storyteller’s tricks I had used, and judge for themselves how effective their own approaches were.

The following is my story:

HE’S THE ONE

Nicky is standing over there by the edge of the field looking at something. He’s the one that killed Caspar. He and his friend Rocco. We can’t prove it though, since no one actually saw them, and we never found Caspar’s body.

He doesn’t notice me right away, then he does, and I watch the way his body suddenly goes on alert.

He stares at me for a moment, and even though he’s still fifty feet away, I can see his eyes. He starts coming toward me, and I stop where I am on the gravel road to see what he will do. As he gets closer, he slows his pace and starts crouching down, his eyes still fixed on me. It’s as if he’s in slow mo-

tion, one leg slowly going out in front of the other. By the time he reaches me his stomach is practically scraping the ground, and his ears are pulled back. It's what they do if they think you're more powerful than they are and they don't want a fight.

He looks up at me now with his weird eyes. One is brown and normal looking, but the other is pale blue, so it looks fake, like a glass eye. I never know which eye to look at.

"Murderer," I say to him. He just looks at me. So I say it again, not yelling, but low and quiet, and icy cold.

He takes this as a sign that it's okay to get up, and he does, though he's still doing his slow motion thing, and his ears are so far back his eyes are bulging. He begins to sniff cautiously at my right pocket.

"Not for you," I say. "Not for murderers." I give him a hard look and continue on my walk up the gravel road.

I have never liked dogs. I'm a cat person. What I carry in my pocket is for my own protection. People are very inconsiderate when it comes to their dogs. They must think people enjoy having a strange animal bark and snarl at them and nip at their pant legs when they're trying to have a pleasant walk or run. I like to keep things friendly, so I always come prepared. It's amazing what a biscuit will do to tame up a snarling dog.

There's a leash law, even out here in the country, but most people ignore it. Most of the loose dogs stay pretty close to home, though. Guarding their turf, my husband calls it. But others, like Nicky, think they own the world.

I used to chase him off our land whenever I saw him. There was Caspar to think about. I'd yell "Go home! Nicky, go home!" and sometimes wave a broom. After a while he'd cringe when he heard my voice, even if I was just out talking to a neighbor and he happened to be around.

I can't believe he's following me now, but he is. He's never done that before. I turn and look behind me and he stops. When I stare at him, he starts slinking toward the ground again.

Once, during our first year here, I looked

out the window and saw Nicky chasing Caspar across the back yard. I ran out on the deck and hollered "Nicky!" just once, as loud as I could, and he stopped right in his tracks. Caspar bolted up the back steps and into the open door. He was three times his normal size, and his heart was pounding like a jackhammer.

He was six months old and already partially declawed when I got him. My husband surprised me with him on my 43rd birthday. His coat was still creamy, and his tips were a pale bluish grey. He would climb up on my chest and put his little paws around my neck and nuzzle and purr and look at me with his blue eyes. On days when we were home alone, he'd follow me from room to room.

But Caspar loved to go outside, and it seemed to me that he had a right to.

Some people think I should have kept Caspar inside all the time, since he had no front claws. But Caspar loved to go outside, and it seemed to me that he had a right to. We have five acres of nice rolling fields full of brambles and wild flowers and brome. I figured if we watched him, and he had places to hide, he'd be okay.

"You're a despicable animal," I say to Nicky, and continue along the road up toward a cluster of houses.

Most of the dogs around here aren't bad ones. Not like Nicky and Rocco. You just have to get to know them a little. Like Juliet here. She starts barking as I approach, but when she sees it's me, she smiles and comes running. She's a big orange thing—I don't know breeds, but she looks like a fat woman stuffed into a thick red fox fur coat. When she runs, she heaves her head up and down, like a work horse straining with a heavy load. Secretly I call her Miss Piggy. She snorts and pushes me a little with her wet nose, and I reach into my pocket and give her a biscuit.

In a moment Basil appears. He lives next door to Juliet. And then Pepper, from the house

after that, comes lumbering over. I give them both biscuits and they chomp them down and wag their tails. By that time Juliet wants another, so I give them all an extra half. Pepper was hit by a car once so he limps. He's allergic to fleas; I can see the scabs on his back where the bites festered. He and Juliet and Basil are pals, and hang out together.

Nicky watches all this from a little way back. He looks like a coyote. At least how I think a coyote looks—dark and wild and sinewy. Except for his eyes. I don't think any coyote has a blue eye.

Nicky is mostly a loner. Except when Rocco manages to get loose. I'll hear some wild barking and look out to the fields across the road and see a black tail and a brown tail moving fast above the tall grasses. In a little while a head will come—Nicky's or Rocco's. Once I saw them in a field up the road playing with something. They were throwing it up in the air and catching it in their teeth and having a grand old time. Then I saw that it was a groundhog. I shuddered, wondering if it was dead yet.

I give Basil and Pepper and Juliet a pat and then I continue up the gravel road. When I turn on to the state road, I see that Nicky is still following me. As I go up the tarmac, he falls into step beside me. I can hear his hard leathery paws and nails clicking on the pavement.

It's dangerous on this state road, and whenever any of the other dogs try to follow me, I tell them to go home, and they do. Brownie used to live on this road, and she was run over by a car last year. She was a nice dog.

But I don't say anything to Nicky. He wanders out into the middle of the road and just barely gets to the other side when a car whizzes by. Then he ambles over to the yellow lines in the middle sniffing something, and barely moves when another car comes. The driver gives me an ugly look. I wish I had a big sign I could hang around my neck that said: This is Not My Dog; I am Not Responsible.

I wonder for a moment how I would feel if Nicky was hit. I used to tell my husband that if any dog ever killed Caspar, I would load up his .22 and shoot the dog. If I had caught them in the act, I

would have, too. As it was, I only saw their tails and heads above the weeds in the back field one morning. I thought it was a rabbit they were hunting. I yelled, and they went loping down the road to someone else's yard.

When Caspar didn't come home that night, I hunted all over for him, and called and called until my voice was hoarse. I even put on my tall boots and started over to where I had seen Nicky and Rocco. But it was full of blackberry brambles and thorny wild roses and I had to stop. It may be just as well that I didn't find what I'm sure was there.

It's been five months now, and sometimes I still hear him.

Nicky has found something on the side of the road that interests him, and he's sniffing at it enthusiastically. Dogs have amazing noses. I often wish I had a nose like that, although what I smelled would probably disgust me.

Caspar used to sit in the golden rod and Queen Anne's Lace for hours watching and smelling things. Sometimes he brought back birds and baby rabbits and ground squirrels in his mouth. I don't know how he ever caught them without front claws, but somehow he managed. I always scolded him, and tried to take whatever he'd caught away from him. But he'd run off and eat it. I fed him plenty, so it wasn't that he was hungry. It's what cats do, my husband always said.

I reach the stop sign, which is as far as I go, and I turn around and start back. Nicky turns with me. I can't believe he's come this far. We must be two miles away from where he lives.

When Caspar disappeared and I called all the neighbors to ask them to keep an eye out for him, I found out something interesting. Caspar used to go to the neighbor's a quarter mile away and stroll across her deck. He was quite a character, my neighbor said. I had no idea.

It's been five months now, and sometimes I still hear him. Only last month I got up in the middle

of the night and ran down to the back door. It must have been a trick of the wind.

When we get back to the gravel road, Nicky goes on a little in front of me. I can see a callous on his right foreleg. It's dark and hard-looking, like the crust on an old wound. He sniffs at something and I pass him. I feel him notice, and pull himself away from the smell to continue behind me, as if we are together. Suddenly this makes me very angry. I turn to face him. His body goes on alert again.

"Stop following me!" I yell in my strongest voice. "Go home!" He slouches down at my feet, and rolls over, exposing his stomach, the way dogs do to show submissiveness. He stares at me steadily, unblinking. I look first at his blue eye, the same blue as Caspar's, and then at his brown one. I wonder suddenly what it would feel like to sink my shoe hard into his soft belly. But looking at him there, stretched out as if to say, "Go ahead if it will make you feel better," I don't feel angry any more. Just kind of sad.

I suppose it's possible that it wasn't Nicky at all. It could have been a groundhog. Some huge ones live around here, and Caspar may have gotten a little too nosy with one of their burrows. It may even have been a fox. Or, who knows? Someone might have picked him up and taken him home. He was a such a beautiful, loving cat.

I put my hands in my pockets and turn to go. There's still half a biscuit there, and my hand falls on it. I take it out and offer it to Nicky. He slinks forward and pauses, studying me, as if to say, "Are you sure?"

Then, with his eyes still on mine, he takes the biscuit delicately from my hand.

Though my piece reads very much like fiction, it is not. I changed the name of one of the dogs ("Pepper" became "Rocco" to enhance the attention-getting beginning), but other than that, I invented nothing. The "art," I explained to my students, was in the telling, in the gradual unfolding of the story, the "leaking in" of background information juxtaposed with observations about the dog, the arrangement of details.

We were all delighted with the results of this exercise, and I've used it several times since then with equally good results. While I suspect this approach could also be used in teaching fiction writing, it seems particularly effective with nonfiction because it opens up possibilities for shaping personal experience in ways that many students have not previously considered.

About the Author

Simone Poirier-Bures is the author of *Candyman*, a novel set in her native Nova Scotia; *That Shining Place*, an award-winning memoir of Crete; and *Nicole* (forthcoming), a blend of memoir and short fiction about growing up in Nova Scotia in the '50s and early '60s. Her work has been included in eight anthologies and in numerous journals in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Poirier-Bures is a member of the English faculty at Virginia Tech.