

A Perpetual Itch

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HOW THE ITCH STARTED...

I BEGAN my senior year in high school in the fall of 1947. My English and Literature teacher taught the fine points of grammar during the first half of each school year, and concentrated on the world's great literature during the second half. I was familiar with his habit of asking for short compositions, but he surprised the class one day by asking each class member to envision the scene of some significant event and to write a description of what happened as if that class member had actually witnessed the event. This was a far cry from three hundred words on something like "How to Mount a Frog", which I had written last year. I listened carefully as he passed out specific assignments to each person.

"Hugh," he said, "I want you to write about the death of Beowulf." Wow! This was going to require research. I had not read Beowulf since eighth grade. I didn't recall that a lot of detail was given, either. How long did we have to do this assignment? "Three days; turn your papers in on Thursday."

The school's library was modest, and so was the county's. I read all that I could find about Beowulf, but my research left a lot to be desired. On Wednesday night I sat at my small desk in my large bedroom while a thunderstorm flashed and crashed outside. I had not written the first word about Beowulf, and was at a loss as to how it should be properly done. As the storm continued its rampage, I formed the kernel of an idea; Mr. King wanted something dramatic, so why not give him something *really* dramatic? I began to outline an imagined scene of death and devastation. I think the storm's noise added greatly to my speed in writing my "dramatic" account of a hero's death. My fingers fairly flew over the keys of my portable Royal typewriter as I filled the yellow sheets. When all the papers were turned in next morning, mine was the only one that had been typed—and the only one on yellow paper. I was a little self-conscious as I handed the folded pages to the teacher, afraid that he might open them and read what I had written. He didn't.

All that evening I wondered if I had been foolish to write such a paper; The pulp magazine language that I had drawn upon might be a risk that would cause me embarrassment, to say the least. I began to wish that I had not been so impulsive.

My bus was late on Friday morning; we unloaded after school classes had begun. I hurried to my English classroom, prepared to explain that the bus had made me late for class. As I entered the room, Mr. King was speaking, so I slipped quietly into my seat. No one looked at me; everyone was listening to what the teacher was saying. I felt my face turn crimson—he was reading from a *yellow* paper! I heard the familiar words, "It was a dark, dreary day. Ominous, leaden clouds hung low over the countryside and the air was charged with a sense of foreboding evil." His voice seemed magnified as he continued to read my graphic account of man against dragon. When the last lines were read there was silence for a minute, then my classmates applauded and my face was red again.

Fifty-seven years later I smile at my clumsy attempt to write something interesting, but that "dramatic" paper started an itch in me that has continued until now, and shows no sign of going away. I'm glad. #



"When a fire-breathing dragon ravages his land, the aging Beowulf engages it. He kills the dragon but is mortally wounded."

--Encyclopedia of Literature

"The stories of past courage can define that ingredient --they can teach, they can offer hope, they can provide inspiration. But they cannot supply courage itself. For this each man must look into his own soul."

--John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, 1956

"The strongest, most generous, and proudest of all virtues is true courage."

--Michel de Montaigne