

How About a Writing Contest?

Writing a Parody

It Was a Dark and Stormy Night

Since 1982 the English Department at San Jose State University has sponsored the Bulwer Lytton Fiction Contest, a whimsical literary competition that challenges entrants to compose the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels. The contest was the brainchild of Professor Scott Rice (source: <http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>) [look here for good samples]. **The goal is to create a parody of the original dreadful offering and write the worst opening line for what could prove to be an equally dreadful story.**

The Inspiration for the Contest

“It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents — except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.” — Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, Paul Clifford (1830)

Mary Shelley’s Dreadful Offering

“IT WAS on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet.” -- Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

Samples

“She sipped her latte gracefully, unaware of the milk foam droplets building on her moustache, which was not the peachy-fine baby fuzz that Nordic girls might have, but a really dense, dark, hirsute lip-lining row of fur common to southern Mediterranean ladies nearing menopause, and winked at the obviously charmed Spaniard at the next table.”



“India, which hangs like a wet washcloth from the towel rack of Asia, presented itself to Tex as he landed in Delhi (or was it Bombay), as if it mattered because Tex finally had an idea to make his mark and fortune and that idea was a chain of steak houses to serve the millions and he wondered, as he deplaned down the steep, shiny, steel steps, why no one had thought of it before.”

“The wind dry-shaved the cracked earth like a dull razor--the double edge kind from the plastic bag that you shouldn't use more than twice, but you do; but Trevor Earp had to face it as he started the second morning of his hopeless search for Drover, the Irish Wolfhound he had found as a pup near death from a fight with a prairie dog and nursed back to health, stolen by a traveling circus so that the monkey would have something to ride.”

I actually emailed the contest originator, and Professor Rice sends us the following encouragement: *“I learned early on that our contest liberated people from many of the pressures that create writing blocks. In fact, I concluded that writing “badly” liberates the imagination. When writers, especially young writers, and trying their hardest, they are more likely to be conventional, to play it safe and avoid exploring new territory.”*

Here in English class, we would like to pay homage to this wonderfully awful contest by introducing our own version of the “Dark and Stormy Night” Contest. So, here goes. The rules to our first fiction contest are easy and as follows:

- Each entry must only be one sentence in length.
- Sentences may be of any word length, BUT I STRONGLY RECOMMEND THAT YOURS NOT GO BEYOND 50 OR 60 WORDS. Proper punctuation please.

Your job is to write your sentence and then submit to me. When you are finished with that, try another one, who knows this kind of intentionally bad writing may just improve your writer’s craft.

