

**Talk given by the author, Philip Chatting,
at the launch of his second published book, *The Snow Bridge and Other Stories*
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CONSIDER, if you will, the prospect of Shakespeare, Dickens, or Dostoyevsky in a room filled with the characters they have created. Prospero, Falstaff and Bottom the Weaver; Uriah Heap, Mr Podsnap and Miss Havisham; Rashkolnikov, Myshkin and the Brothers Karamasov.

If writing fiction offers any consolations to compensate for the solitude, irregular meals and unreliable pay, it is the existence of a magical parallel universe filled with an array of people in whose lives the author cannot help but be immersed. Not for him the single dimension of just one existence, when, without letting go or diminishing anything, he can transport himself into another world, a place of the mind conjured up from the farthest corners of his imagination. This is where he becomes his own Alice in Wonderland following the White Rabbit into a warren of ideas and acquaintanceships, where he will not only meet the Queen of Hearts and Mock Turtle, but – godlike, and with nothing to guide him but his own invention – give form to people, stranger than truth. Who else, other than fantasising children creating images lost at the moment of conception, or stage performers, whose carefully rehearsed words disappear onto the air with every anguished breath, is blessed with such power, influence and discovery?

In the warren’s winding make-believe passageways and over the Snow Bridge I followed my rabbit’s white scut until it fell from sight and I tumbled after it into resplendent halls, where, on a high table in front of me, I found the unmistakable bottle with a label at its neck bearing the famous injunction; “drink me”.

I took a tentative sip and followed with the deepest draft that neither shrank me to the size of a mouse, nor inflated me until my head banged on the ceiling as had the contents of Alice’s bottle. Instead, and without the aid of keys, doors flew open around me showing the way into this other realm, where, during the course of writing, new people and places became as real as the man lighting his cigar on the number 73 bus and Sally, the chatty woman stacking our Saturday-morning trolley with groceries purchased at the local supermarket.

Travelling alongside the characters inhabiting my stories as they trip and stumble through their uncertain relationships, independent of worldly constraints, becomes an act of almost total intimacy. I knew these people better than I knew myself. I knew what was in their minds, I knew their motivations, their flaws, excesses and excuses and, when they stood bewildered at a crossroads, which direction they would ultimately take, because not only had I given them birth, but conceived them in every particular, right down to every trembling fibre of their being.

Not that character creation delivers soul-mates, far from it, few if any of the characters in my tales have hints of salvation about them. But they are mine. And when their tangled lives are frequently the stuff of my waking thoughts, food, sleep and hygiene will take second or third place and their story move forward with a momentum entirely of its own, leaving me, the author, as either participant or witness in their tragic, comic existences.

So, who were the characters in *The Snow Bridge* and its companion stories and where did they come from? Even writing, which appears wholly imaginative, has its origin and inspiration in an event or in something the author has seen or felt.

Curiosity about human nature and observation, more than the journeyman's skill of rendering a situation into words, are the essence of character creation. A writer doesn't set out to observe, but inevitably commits incidents to memory or note-pad – all authors have a note-book; some have even made a business out of publishing their notes – but note they must, and various distillations of those sightings will find a way into our stories.

Why, when that woman spoke, did she choose exactly that form of words? What was the significance in that man's choice of clothes or hair style? Why does she walk that way? And what does a particular facial expression imply? Didn't Yasser Arafat wear sun-glasses because he wanted to hide excitement showing in the dilation of his pupils, rather than because they made him look good or he had defective eye-sight?

For someone who isn't a writer of fiction, or a psychologist, a delayed train or wait at a bus stop will often be a frustrating and time-wasting experience. But for the story-teller there is hidden gold in watching and speculating on the complexity of personalities and relationships in the crowd. At the foot of an escalator or by an open doorway, raw material is delivered in a flood.

Is everyone as he seems or does he have another self kept from sight behind a curtain? Does each person lead a contented life revolving between the routines of home, work and family, or is that lady, leaning on the hand rail, consumed by melancholy, longing and jealousy? Which of those people is a hero; which a coward? What tales of honour and sacrifice have they known; what lusts and

perversions gnaw their hearts? What hope is there; what despair? What reason and what madness?

Does that woman moving two steps ahead of her partner love or despise him? Is the separation significant? Have passing years welded that other couple's lives together, or do they simply have nowhere else to go; nowhere to be free? Is that man with the smile much sought after by friends, or is he an irredeemable bore to everyone he meets? Has that perspiring couple arrived behind time, or have they been fornicating in the car-park? Did that adolescent pay for the chocolate bar he's eating, or was it shop-lifted from a confectioner? Is that well-dressed woman a business executive, or a hired escort? Is that dark-skinned man with the beard an actor, terrorist, hippy or fashionista? Are these people presented in a manner that proclaims their condition, or are they taking care to avoid identification? Which of them are gangsters, money-launderers, thugs and drug-dealers and which are plain honest folk?

Replacing the now empty bottle on its high table and brushing away leaves that had blown in through the doorways, I picked up my note-book and moved away from the bottom of the escalator to think about the curious people and times I had imagined and how I missed the company of all those characters I had created and to whom I was bidding farewell with the completion of my book.

But hush! Was that a voice I heard crying out from near the tree where Alice had fallen asleep and did it say, "Stop! He's murdering the time; off with his head!", or was that too something I had imagined? ~~~

The Snow Bridge and Other Stories, published by Proverse Hong Kong, is available in Hong Kong and worldwide from the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, www.chineseupress.com. It can also be ordered from amazon.com as well as the UK amazon.

It is available at or by order from Hong Kong bookshops and also bookshops in the UK. ~~~