


<i>The Sound of Blue</i>		
<b>Author:</b>	Holly Payne (2005)	
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### Traveler and Stranger: The ESL Teacher Narrative

The lure of teaching English abroad is a fantasy for many--especially for those trapped in unfulfilling jobs or failing relationships, or for those experiencing disappointment, tragedy, or simply boredom. The "exotic" entices, drawing the damaged soul to foreign lands and escape from the routine.

The foreign teacher abroad presents a situation teeming with storytelling possibilities. It fulfills both conditions of the adage that there are only two types of stories--a person goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town. In what we'll call the ESL teacher narrative, in fact, the teacher is both the traveler and the stranger.

Author Kelly Payne indeed has embodied these alternate personas in Sara Foster, the protagonist in *The Sound of Blue*. First, Sara has suffered failure; she is not admitted to Harvard Law School. And, by sheer chance she is led to teach English:

A job posting blew off a kiosk while she waited and caught around her ankle. She tracked it inside, annoyed, regarding it as if it were a damp leaf stuck to the bottom of her boot. She thought it was a joke. Teaching English in Hungary. (p. 6)

In fact, we learn earlier that "teaching was not Sara Foster's wish. Or her dream for that matter" (p. 4).

But, once she decides to leave her disappointments and failures behind, the idea of teaching has appeal. She embraces the idea of the exotic, contemplating the job in

Hungary, and her potential students:

Good students, sons and daughters of businessmen and ambassadors. Children in starched uniforms. Sara imagined a school near the Buda castle with a view of Fisherman's Bastion and enough cake and tea to get her through the winter. . . . She would take lunches along the Danube, spend the evenings in cafés where poets and politicians gobbled cakes and cobbled history, mixing ink with icing, calling it sweet. (p. 7)

As with most idealized adventures, however, things do not go as planned. Instead of Budapest and businessmen's children, Sara finds herself teaching Balkan refugees in a camp far from Budapest in every way. She begins with a modicum hope in her teaching assignment. Since the refugees typically already speak English, "Their jobs were not so much to teach English as a Second Language, but to foster the hope that learning English inspired the hope of starting a new life in the West and eliminating their burden on the country they had fled" (p. 19).

However, unlike the trajectory of many tales of teachers, even that hope fades as Sara absorbs the reality of the refugees' lives. She loses faith that English is the answer to the problems the refugees face, and begins to see the underlying absurdity in the situation:

In the beginning, she had instructed them to use only the present tense. . . . The refugees had no choice but to abandon the past. . . . English had become a game show, and Sara was the host. Round robin, role play. (p. 109)

Her futility is confirmed, when Sara encounters a vendor in Dubrovnik, he echoes her same lack of faith in English: "'We speak English,' he snapped. 'We do not need English lessons. We need country'"(p. 214).

By stressing Sara's disillusionment, *The Sound of Blue* avoids the cliché of what we might recognize as the typical "teacher narrative," one in which the plucky but naïve teacher is hired by a school, faces unmotivated and undisciplined students and succeeds against the odds, elevating his or her own life as well as the lives of students, parents, and communities. Sara Foster is not plucky, nor does she succeed at elevating the lives of the refugees. A Red Cross worker considers Sara when she first arrives at the camp: "To work in a refugee camp was to survive it, but Sara Foster did not appear to be a survivor of any kind. She was a tourist, this girl, with the long red curls" (p. 25).

And there's another detour from the expected: As Sara loses faith in the power of the English language to fix the problems of the refugees, the story becomes less about teaching English, and more about the curative powers of music for the three main characters: Milan, the epileptic composer, Luka, the drummer boy (reminiscent of Gunter Grass's Oskar Matzerath in *The Tin Drum*), and Sara, herself a refugee from a past with dark secrets.

There are very few novels featuring ESL teachers and their work as main characters or themes: Anchee Min's *Katherine*, about an American teacher in China, and R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* come to mind most immediately (though the latter is

not the story of a foreign teacher of English abroad, but one of an Indian moving away from the teaching of English under the British Raj and towards Indian spiritual practice and the education of children). Kelly Payne's *The Sound of Blue* is a worthy addition to this small collection, as it avoids presenting teaching as a simple heroic act, but rather as a complex human activity that is part of a larger social tableau. In this case, it is set against the backdrop of multiple tragedies caused by war and destruction.

The story, seen through various eyes, is very much a jigsaw puzzle, as the different backstories of the characters unfold. And, like putting a jigsaw puzzle together, it is a little slow in the beginning. The first part of the book lays out the pieces, and it requires some patience to work through this stage. But as any jigsaw puzzle devotee knows, the pace will quicken as each piece is put into place, and the end is worth the work as the entire picture is revealed.

In the end, *The Sound of Blue* is inspirational not in its presentation of heroes and heroic acts, but in its honest portrayal of the act of teaching against the backdrop of war and personal devastation. One has to wonder how many other untold experiences of ESL teaching abroad--of expatriates and adventurers--follow Sara's path, at least in its general details. How many have sought to escape their own realities for an alternative world of glamorous adventure through teaching, and teaching English specifically? It seems likely there are many more stories to be told, by the countless numbers of travelers and strangers among us.

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### **An Interview with Holly Payne, Author of *The Sound of Blue***

**Maggie Sokolik, Editor, TESL-EJ:** *The biographical notes for The Sound of Blue indicate you've taught English internationally. What were the circumstances of these travels, and the circumstances of the teaching situation?*

**Holly Payne:** My interest in international travel goes back into my childhood. I grew up in Amish Country, Lancaster, PA -- a very conservative, faith-based community. Though I attended a public school, I longed for more diversity and fantasized about being a foreign exchange student, or hosting one. I loved meeting those students and interviewed them for our high school paper to get insight into the cultural differences they were experiencing in Lancaster. Then during the fall of my senior year, the Berlin Wall fell. My oldest brother was serving as a chemical officer in the Army and stationed in northern Germany so my family and I left the country for the first time and traveled to meet him and his wife.

On Dec. 23, the Brandenburg Gate opened in Berlin and we found ourselves there on New Year's Eve, partying with East Germans who were literally crawling over the wall (while we were taking pieces of it with us in our suitcases!). I took a notebook and interviewed some of the East Germans and how they felt about their new freedom. It

was really a magical moment and a defining one for my career. I wanted to live in Eastern Europe, specifically a formerly communist country at some point in college, and the opportunity presented itself during my senior year when my roommate saw an ad in the paper for English teachers in Hungary. I had no knowledge of Hungary or its customs and secretly wanted to work in Prague, but I applied and got the job and decided to go.

I was as wide-eyed as Sara Foster, the protagonist in *The Sound of Blue*. When I arrived in Budapest, I met my boss and her husband who loaded my one duffel bag into their Ford Fiesta and drove me four hours south into the great plain of Hungary to Ketsoprony, the village with one dirt road that went five miles into nowhere and ended in a sunflower field on the edge of a communist farming cooperative. I was definitely in shock. I couldn't have been further away from Budapest, but it ended up being a deeply introspective and healing place for me that I wouldn't have had in a big city. I worked for a woman whose vision was to bring English to the children in the village. She had somehow found a way to fund the English program through the craft foundation grant she received. I did not work for the school in the village. The English program was supplemental education and all my classes were taught in the late afternoon and early evening for the parents of some of the students. I didn't have my certificate to teach. I only had a degree in journalism. I'll never forget the day I walked into the classroom and realized there was no evidence that a teacher had been there before me. I thought I had made a huge mistake and that I'd never be able to teach these children English, but somehow I did and a few of them email me now in English!

**MS:** *How have your travels informed your writing overall?*

**HP:** My travels have been the most influential factor in choosing not only subject matter, but also periods in history. There's a quote I keep handy by St. Augustine; he said, "The world is a book. Those who do not travel read only a page." I keep it as a warning and as inspiration! Sometimes I get panicked, thinking that there are so many places I want to see that I'll not have enough time in this life. I realize that every time I travel, my hunger to learn more and connect more with other cultures only intensifies. I guess it's insatiable wanderlust. But the irony is that when I finish a big trip, I'm usually longing to get back home to the [San Francisco] Bay Area and sink into my routine. I actually am quite a nester, so maybe my need to travel to far-flung places in the world is a way to balance that rootedness? Maybe it's the presence that travel affords me.

I don't like to travel with a minute-by-minute itinerary. It's much more fun to be open and spontaneous--a luxury to me for living in a culture dictated by schedules. So travel actually brings me home to myself, and broadens my view of the world. There's nothing more regenerative to experience the kindness of strangers, and it is because of these unsuspecting people that I have been able to write two books in places I knew very little about before I had visited them. Everyone I meet, everything I see, ends up mixed into the canvas of these stories.

**MS:** *Do you think there is a plot type we might call the "teacher narrative"? If so, how do you think *The Sound of Blue* might fit into this structure?*

**HP:** I'm not so sure I've heard of a teacher narrative, but I do understand the

education plot. There are so many great films like it: *The Graduate*, *Dead Poet's Society*, *Good Will Hunting*, etc. There's always a clear arc in both the teacher and the student, a coming of age for the younger character and a reckoning for the mentor/teacher. There's a bit of a reversal in *The Sound of Blue* where Sara, though a teacher on the surface, is actually a student. Luka and Milan are teachers for her. Luka is the greatest teacher of them all because he is teaching himself about the power of faith to overcome some of life's worst tragedies.

**MS:** *As the saying goes, there are only two stories: a hero goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town. The Sound of Blue seems to be both those stories. What pleased you most about these two stories? Or, do you see more than two stories?*

**HP:** You're right. *The Sound of Blue* is both a hero's journey for all three of the characters, but it is also about the relationships that shift as a result of a stranger coming to town. I'm not sure Sara Foster, Luka or Milan ever believe they are meant to be heroes. They're moving in a way to meet their needs. Sara needs to escape her shame (not getting into law school, and the secret she keeps about her cousin's relationship with her), Milan moves out of Dubrovnik to save his own life during the war, and Luka moves away from anyone who looks like they might put him in an orphanage because to do so would be to concede that his mother is dead.

All these characters are fighting internal and external demons (which is a component of the mythic hero's journey)--but it is Luka's story I most enjoyed learning and writing. He is the only fictional character in the book. The others are composites of people I knew in real life, including the director of the refugee camp in Hungary. I'm always surprised to hear that Luka resonates the most with readers. They remember him. I think he haunts them, as he haunted me while I wrote the book. I knew that his journey had to be rewarded, that his faith had to end with something happy. Not just for me, but for the readers. I know people get nervous reading the last scene and wondering if he survives.

**MS:** *Music is a key 'character' in The Sound of Blue as well. What challenges did you face when trying to write about music as a major theme?*

**HP:** I have always been fascinated with the gift of composers. To hear music and have the language to express that kind of pure emotion must be almost spiritual. I know poets long for that and storytellers like myself are about as curious as this 'hearing of music' as people are with how we see characters and are able to interact with them. I played piano when I was a little girl, up until high school. I regret I didn't continue to study it because it would have been useful to me to write the book. I guess the hardest part for me was to understand that spiritual quality to the composing of music, which I hadn't had myself. I read a lot of books about this mystical side of music to make those sections more accurate, but I guess I had to apply that magical feeling that happens when I'm in the zone writing a story, and pretend it was a symphony.

**MS:** *What challenges do you think face teachers who want to interpret their personal experiences into fiction or memoir?*

**HP:** Finding the story and staying authentic. Often the list of events in a person's life do not make for an interesting read. The task is to identify those particularly

transitional moments--those that changed the course of a person's life, that make for good narrative and give a story its structure. Also finding a way in--where's the portal for the memoir or this particular story? It's hard to be objective about your own life and make decisions about omitting something because it's simply not the kind of connective tissue you need to build the body of the story (though your great aunt Elma would be disappointed to know that the way she braided your hair in the third grade wasn't making it into the book). Also, there's the whole issue of how much to say of what really happened. Many writers are afraid to share a moment that was true for fear of hurting someone's feelings, or offending them. Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man* is a wonderful, candidly written account of his teaching in the public schools of New York before he became famous for writing *Angela's Ashes*. Also, the movie with Hilary Swank, *Freedom Writers*, is another example of memoir from a teacher whose experience wasn't all that wonderful at the outset. It takes a lot of courage to share experiences that might not always shed the greatest light on others, or on themselves especially if the form of the memoir is an admission or confession. Finding that courage to get it on the page is probably the hardest first step.

**MS:** *There's a quote from Hemingway: "Never write about a place until you're away from it, because that gives you perspective." Does this apply to your writing?*

**HP:** So true. You never really know home until you leave it first. You need the journey of the leaving to give you the perspective to see how a place has changed (or not) in relation to how you have changed as a result of your experience away from it. Though I don't write much about living in California, I spent the last three years writing about where I grew up back east.

I needed that distance and time to give me the perspective I needed to tell a story about a subculture I respect and admire, but would have probably been oddly too close to see clearly while I was living beside it. Though I have to say I do a lot of writing when I'm traveling--journaling from observations I make when I'm alone. I have written some of the most detailed accounts of people and cultural phenomena as a result of being submerged inside the place with its particular rituals, smells, tastes, sounds, weather patterns and light. That's one of the reasons I travel there in the first place, to experience and to know a place better than I could from only reading about it.

**MS:** *Finally, what are you working on now?*

**HP:** I just finished my third novel, *Big Ugly*, which takes place in my hometown, Amish Country, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I was struck by a drunk driver when I was 22, the same year I ended up going to Hungary (though I couldn't walk when I did). I wanted to find a way to forgive the man who almost killed me, so I created a fictional character whose journey to forgiveness could help me with my own. That's how Eli Yoder, the 16-year-old Amish kid came to life in the pages. He learns the identity of the man who killed his five sisters in a hit-and-run buggy accident in the early 70s and must find a way to forgive him. I've dedicated the book to the drunk driver, and also to my own father.

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## About the Author



Holly Payne is a novelist and screenwriter living in San Francisco. She is the author of two novels, *The Virgin's Knot* and *The Sound of Blue*. Published in eight countries, *The Virgin's Knot* received critical acclaim as a Contra Costa Times Book Club Pick 2003, a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Selection 2002, a Border's Original Voices Book 2002 and was nominated for The First Novelist Award by the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program of Virginia Commonwealth University. Payne's second novel, *The Sound of Blue*, reviewed in this issue, takes place during the Balkan conflict, chronicles the heroic journeys of three strangers who find refuge in music and each other. She has just finished writing a third novel, *Big Ugly*, set in her native Amish country.

Payne is on the faculty of California College of the Arts and the Academy of Art University, where she teaches screenwriting and story development. She is the founder of the Skywriter Series Fiction Workshops and Skywriter Ranch, a summer fiction workshop held annually in Crested Butte, Colorado. She received a MFA from the Master of Professional Writing Program at USC. She is currently starting research on her fourth novel, which will take place in the Middle Ages.

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