

Meeting 3 Corsham, October 26 2015 Empathy in Fiction

Novelist Gerard Woodward (Professor of Creative Writing) gave a talk on how he created the character of Kenneth Brill, an imaginary artist who became a camouflage artist in WW2, in his novel *Vanishing*, blending together research on the lives of at least two real artists of the period with more subjective elements of personal experience, and sometimes finding the resulting character surprised him, all illustrated with posts about the book from his Facebook page on screen. The reading from the novel included a meeting between Brill as a child and an adult in uniform: the man at first seems inhuman to the child, a vast presence like a tree, without feeling, but then a moment of empathic connection takes place.

Novelist Maggie Gee, Professor of Creative Writing, presented an imaginary biography of an empathic child whose sense of isolation, plus a fear of being overwhelmed by the physical reality of other people, pushed her towards the imaginary space of art. In a movement that echoes Freud's suggestive remarks about why people become artists, the empathic child thus creates an object which brings in its train real empathic connections with readers and a job in the social world. The paper imagined the space of art as a bubble that can be punctured by real fingers; a film illustrated this. (<http://thekidshouldseethis.com/post/18259002030>, double-click on picture to play). Lastly writing fiction was described as a process where the writer 'becomes' her characters, who seem to invent themselves; but some characters test the limits of empathy.

Discussion: Discussion over lunch moved on to **how, and how far, teaching of creative writing could be an empathic process.** On the one hand, the psychic importance of the creative work to the student had to be respected, so workshop reactions had to be carefully thought about. We must not do harm: students are vulnerable through their creative work. On the other hand, we have to offer technical/craft help, and particularly in large classes and undergraduate teaching, it was impossible to empathise effectively as a teacher with all the students in a class.