

I went to a writing workshop this weekend. Yes, I know how much I need it and no, I'm sure you can't see any difference. The tutor might have been very skilled, but no-one is that good!

One of the exercises she did with us was to get us to write a fairy story from the viewpoint of one of the other characters. So you would hear the grannie's story from Little Red Riding Hood, or from the lamb in Little Bo Peep.

I took the view of the wicked stepmother in Cinderella, a woman after my own heart. I imagined having to run a big house, with a useless husband, and three daughters to bring up. I imagined her husband being too tight to pay for enough servants, and how he never supported his wife, leaving her to try & manage a big house on her own. I pointed out that Cinderella would have been the eldest child, and that they usually are given a bit more responsibility than the rest, and inevitably also feel the hardest done by. I wrote that everyone, including the dad, took the side of the pretty daughter over her less attractive sisters, and how their poor mother felt. It was great fun, as these things always are, but inevitably sparked off a train of thought.

Remember when little Madeleine McCann went missing in the summer? It broke your heart every time you picked up a paper, saw a poster or watched the news on television. Everyone went overboard to support the search for her – the press, celebrities and politicians. Only the cynical suspected papers of using the story to increase the sales of newspapers or that the famous were jumping on a publicity bandwagon in the slow-news season. Only the heartless would accuse her parents of neglect, knowing full well we have all put children we have cared for at varying degrees of risk at some time.

The important thing was that an innocent child was might be in danger, and everything was to be done to find her. It seemed almost daily that someone

would spot a child with her distinctive eye; reports came in from countries across Europe and in Africa.

Occasionally you would read a statistic about missing children – some figures put it as high as 3 a day in the UK alone. The truth is, it is easier to find out about missing cars from official sources than it is lost children.

And now what has happened? Another child, only a few years older than Madeleine, but no less innocent, has disappeared. Some boys saw her sitting on a wall crying after school, but since then – no sight or sound.

It appeared at first that poor little Shannon Matthews had only one photograph – a school photo showing a pretty little thing, grinning mischievously for the camera. Her mother, however, appears less than glamorous in the photos that have been published. Her parents are not middle class, attractive doctors. Until yesterday, I had heard nothing of the child's father, only the number of children by different fathers that her mother has. No-one is accusing her mother of anything, but the tone is definitely one of disapproval.

Television is designed for moving images, and there are no videos of Shannon playing with her siblings to be shown over and over as Madeleine's were. Hiring a PR agency to handle the search is not just beyond the budget, but beyond the dreams of Shannon's family.

Who knows what has happened to either little girl? I'm sure those who care for them have gone through a million possibilities, and I hope that some day, if they do not return safe and well, then their families will at least know what has happened to them.

I'm not sure if anyone has counted the published words devoted to each child, or the hours of airtime given to them. I don't even want to consider the balance of police and other official resources given over to each investigation.

Madeleine is an exceptionally pretty child, we can all see that. Shannon too is pretty and has a smile to make you weep. What she doesn't have is a fairy-tale background, or an array of Prince Charmings to do battle on her behalf.

It all turned out happy ever after for Cinderella, but who knows or cares about her less glamorous sisters? Please don't let that happen to Shannon.

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