Standard English

by Martha J. McNeely

When I was very young, I was able to travel to England whenever I pleased, and live the exciting life of a child in London. I was able to do this, thanks to Noel Streatfield and her books, Ballet Shoes, Theatre Shoes, Skating Shoes, and Circus Shoes. I never had to leave my town in Southern California. I simply hopped on my bicycle and pedaled to the local Public Library.

My own mother was a first-generation American, her family having sailed past the Statue of Liberty, into Ellis Island, in the 1880s. It was exciting to me to live in the land of my forebears, where there was culture and tradition not available to me in Southern California.

I was even introduced to a “new language,” English. In English, the article “a,” “an,” or “the” was often dropped—a person was “in hospital,” not “in the hospital.” A young person (much like myself) might “go on holiday to the seaside for a fortnight,” rather than “go on a two weeks’ vacation at the beach.” The elevator was a “lift,” the kindly policeman was a “Bobby,” and the ever-present alarm clock was an “alarum.” The grammar, however, and the figures of speech, the vocabulary, and the spelling—yes, even the spelling—could cause some problems in school. Teachers insisted I made mistakes I could not identify. I understood that we all learned “English,” so how could my grammar, my vocabulary, and my spelling be wrong? I reasoned that, since this was an “English class,” I should be learning “English,” and not “American.”

Over the years, I’ve learned that I can’t ever really get the young bookworm out from the pages of the adult writer, and maybe I shouldn’t even try. I can use these extensive travels and exciting experiences of my childhood to enliven and enrich my writing, not to suppress it. And the lucky thing for me is that, in the Writing Center today, I can do just that.

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