

The Ghost in the Writer

by Jay Williams

In his most famous piece of advice to beginners, Jack London wrote in his essay “Getting into Print,” “don’t loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club.” The Wolf Club at Sonoma Valley High School, under the expert supervision of Alison Manchester, borrowed the phrase for their motto: “don’t loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a Wolf Club.” Admirable stuff. But let’s look at the advice closely.

On the face of it, the advice seems simple enough. Work hard at your writing and you will become a writer. Hanging out with your friends, drinking, flying kites, fencing, boxing, reading poetry out loud, going to parties, chasing women (or men): these things don’t invite the muse. No, says London (who was an accomplished boxer, fencer, kite flyer, woman-chaser, drinker, and poetry reader), these activities just will not do. You need to sit your butt down in a chair and really work hard at writing. Inspiration is something you chase down with a club, not something you can seduce.

So we get the first part, the negative injunction: “don’t loaf.” But how does the second part actually work as a metaphor? Working hard apparently is the same as going after something with a club. I know if I have a club I’m going to do some beating. Are we supposed to beat up our inspiration? Capture it and kill it like a primitive hunter, a cave person? Is London actually remembering his work as a seal hunter? Are we supposed to beat up our inspiration as if it were a baby seal and then display our stories like seal skins? Is writing bloody, life-or-death work?

This is exactly how London conceived of the creative process. It was difficult, hand-to-hand combat with something inside himself. His muse was a wild, seemingly untameable thing that had to be beaten into submission and domesticated. He may have been remembering his time in the north Pacific in 1893 when he helped slaughter cute mammals. But, given that “Getting into Print” was the very next thing he wrote after *The Call of the Wild*, I think he was remembering that story and his time in the Klondike. If that is the case, the muse is something like Buck the dog, who had to be beaten with a club in order to produce something—income from pulling a sled. London seems to be saying that you can’t get your Muse to pull a sled if you don’t beat it into obedience.

Now the metaphor makes sense. It ain’t pretty, but London was a realist, not a romanticist, and if blood and violence wasn’t involved then the game probably wasn’t worth playing. But there’s a twist. We remember that Buck escapes into the loving arms of John Thornton, who does not beat him with a club and still gets him to pull the sled in that famous contest. And Buck gladly accompanies Thornton on his foolhardy quest for gold (we know it is fool-hardy because most—if not all—quests for gold in London’s stories end badly). However, these aren’t the acts of a working dog-muse. These are the acts of an unemployed individual

who, like the kite-flying drinker, wouldn't seem to have the gumption to produce art. But he does. In fact, Buck seems to have returned to his previous state, that of the porch-sleeping, loafing pet dog in Santa Clara County. He's tougher, leaner, colder, and more worldly wise, but he's just as irresponsibly free in the Klondike as he was in California. In fact, he can sleep with any wolf that comes along and produce baby dog-wolves (stories) without worrying about where his next meal is coming from. And then he becomes the Ghost Dog, the muse that inspires horror stories among the Native Americans.

The creative process, it turns out, demands both hard work and relaxation. To get into print, to start out, you must tame your imagination, train it, make it do what you want it to do, assert control. But at some point, and this is something he couldn't tell the neophyte author, you'll discover that your relationship with inspiration will change. At some point you have to put the club down and see where your imagination takes you. You have to let the ghost of the imagination inside you run wild.

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