

Reflecting on a Wonderful Spring Day in Paris - PDF Transcript



Hello listeners,

How are you? I hope you're doing well.

This episode is called **Reflecting on a Wonderful Spring Day in Paris**, and as the title of the episode suggests, I'm going to be reflecting on a day I had the other day, describing the day, things I did, how they caused me to remember some moments from my past including a few teaching experiences I had nearer the beginning of my career, and what I learned from them, and I'm also going to tell you a few stories later in the episode, including a short story I read in a book and also some other things I experienced the other day - just one of those days which you don't realise is going to be lovely until you are experiencing it, and it kind of takes you by surprise and you think "Oh, I'm having a lovely day. Is this going to be the whole day or just a moment during this day?"

I don't know how long this will be. I have a feeling that it will be very long. I've decided to keep it as just one single episode, even if it is 3 hours long. You get 100 bonus points and a special gold medal if you listen all the way to the end of this, even if you don't do it in one go and you choose to break it up into shorter sessions of listening. If you get to the end - 100 points and a gold medal. If you don't listen to the entire thing, that's ok. Stick with me for as long as you like. It's completely up to you.

Also, I have an appointment at the barber's at 3.30PM my time, and some of you are thinking "I'm glad to hear that Luke. Frankly, you could do with a hair cut". Well, I have an appointment to get my hair cut and that includes the hair on my face (I'm going to get my beard trimmed too) but if I am not finished by then I will continue recording this when I get back, and you will be able to enjoy experiencing both versions of me in this episode - the hairy version and the slightly less hairy version.

Also, I expect this episode has been published in July or perhaps August, but I am recording this in May. I have a queue of pre-recorded episodes which I have to publish, and then this episode will be published, and by the time this episode has been published, I think that my wife will have given birth to our second child.

The child is due at the beginning of July. So, as long as everything has gone well (touch wood) while you are listening to this, I will probably be at home with my family, looking after our newborn son. Fingers crossed.

Just in case you weren't aware - I'm Luke. I'm an English teacher from England, which is in Britain, which is in the UK. I currently live in Paris, in France. I teach English as a foreign language to classes of adults. I do stand-up comedy in English in the evenings sometimes, and I do this podcast which is here to help you improve your English. My aim is to make it easy and enjoyable for you to get more listening practice into your everyday life. I try to present you with English as it is really spoken by a human, in this case, that human is me. Hello.

Just put on your headphones or switch on your speakers, press play, listen to my words, let me take you somewhere, you can get a bit lost, but find yourself again and ultimately live in English, with me, for a while.

I had quite a good day, the other day. I taught an English class in the morning, then I had lunch in a restaurant in the centre of Paris and then I sat in a small park in front of an interesting fountain and read a book for a while. The book really caught my imagination. It's one of those books which you continue to think about even when you're not reading it.

After reading the book in front of that fountain for a while, I had to go to a big underground metro station in another part of the city, to pick up my daughter's travel card, which was being held in lost property in the information office, because she must have accidentally dropped it the day before. So, I did that, and then I went home.

It doesn't sound all that exciting, does it? Well, sometimes even what seems to be the most ordinary day from the outside, can, on the inside, be full of feelings, thoughts and both satisfying and slightly disturbing moments.

The whole day inspired me to do this episode. Maybe I'm addicted to doing this podcast now, or to sharing my thoughts with people, and I can't simply experience things, even everyday things, without wanting to then talk about them to an audience. I suppose I could just keep this to myself, or just tell my wife or something, or write it in a diary that nobody will read, but instead I've chosen to share it all with you.

This is a rambling episode then, except that it's rambling episode that has (mostly) been written down in advance.

That sort of breaks the rules of the rambling episodes that I usually do, or at least one of the rules, which is: Speak spontaneously with no script.

But when I wrote all this, I was rambling, but with my fingers. A "fingeramble" you could call it - a ramble with my fingers, meaning that I typed it all out pretty much in one go, let my mind wander and just tried to put it all into words without stopping.

I wrote most of this the next day, when I wasn't in my office and couldn't record anything. It all came out in one go, and it is rambling in the sense that I let myself move from one thing to another and it might seem a bit disorganised. It's like a stream of consciousness, which is the spirit of rambling episodes. I try to let my thoughts tumble out and hope that you can follow my words as an exercise in listening practice (for you) and self-expression (for me).

So this is a finger-ramble. An episode that I wrote down, rather than an episode in which I am just speaking spontaneously.

You can find the text for all this on the page for this episode on my website.

There will be some parts where I don't read from the script, and when that happens I will add a note in the script by writing "*Luke rambles off-script for a while" or something similar.

But if you check the page for this episode, you will find most of my words written there, so you can go back and read this in your own time, read it out loud, read it with me while you listen, or just scan it for words and phrases that you have heard while while listening to this episode.

So, let me re-cap my incredibly exciting day again. This was last week some time. I think it was a Thursday. One of my favourite days of the week. Nearly the weekend, but still a work day. Thursdays have always been a kind of orangy-red colour in my mind, for some reason. Thor's day. I have always liked Thursdays. I don't really know why.

I taught a 3-hour English class to a group of adults at the British Council in the morning, then I took an eBike to another part of the city where I picked up a package (my daughter's new UK passport) from a delivery company. Then I had lunch in a Korean restaurant. Then I sat on a bench in a lovely little square next to a fountain to let my food go down, and I read a book for a while. Then I went to collect my daughter's travel card (which she dropped on the metro the day before) from a huge labrynthine metro station, and then I went home.

Again, a normal day, but it was lovely actually. Having been on holiday for the two couple of weeks before, I felt quite fresh in my head, and the weather was fresh, and the world seemed fresh around me - other people seemed to be in a good mood and I just had a lovely time.

It was one of those days when little things seem to go your way, someone smiles at you, the air meets your nostrils in a friendly way and you feel lucky.

There were lots of thoughts and sensations swirling around me and I managed to catch a few of them and bottle them, in the form of this writing which I did very hastily the next day.

Now I want to share it all with you. I hope I can keep your attention here, because it's good for your English.

So I invite you to come on a little journey with me now. Just follow my words and try to picture the things I am describing.

As I said, you can check the script for most of this if you like. It's on the website page for this episode. Link in the description. I hope you enjoy this.

— haircut —

Let's continue...

I had finished work and I was free.

The lesson I'd taught was good. It went well. I didn't feel a bit exhausted, which can often happen after teaching intensely for 3 hours or more.

It was a good lesson about "losing and saving face".

It was nice to be back in the classroom after over two weeks off.

The lesson was about losing and saving face. Let me explain that a little bit.

*Luke talks off-script for a while about these things:

- Losing face
- Saving face
- To lose ~~your~~ face

Related vocabulary:

- Embarrasement / feeling embarrassed
- Feeling ashamed / making people feel ashamed
- Reputation
- Status and social status in a social group
- Diplomacy and politeness

Before the lesson started I was feeling slightly rusty and that period just before the beginning of the lesson is often a bit stressful because you never quite know how the lesson will go.

What kind of students will I have? Will they be responsive? How can I avoid one of those frustrating lessons when things just don't go right and everyone seems to be millions of miles away from you. I haven't had a lesson like that in a while, but maybe that's because I always work hard to prevent that from happening.

I've been doing this (teaching English to adults) long enough now (22 years) that maybe I shouldn't get stressed before lessons any more, but I can't help it, or at maybe I have learned from experience: Fail to prepare, prepare to fail!

A certain level of stress is there when your preparation time is short, and of course in this life when time is in such short supply, there is never quite enough time to prepare, but as I said, I've been doing this for some time now.

If you fail to prepare, then prepare to fail. This is true in teaching but also in everything; preparation is key, but also, you can never prepare for *everything* and you should always be willing to expect the unexpected, meaning - be ready, willing and able to respond to things as they happen in the moment.

With experience you learn how to improvise while teaching, or should I say *extemporise* and then things can flow really well. Prepare, but be prepared to throw the plan out of the window (not literally).

So it's a mix of preparation and then going with the flow.

Preparing for an English lesson involves many things:

Of course, the lesson plan; knowing the language point, the students and their needs, and the activities you are going to do in the class, but also:

Getting the material printed and ready to be presented (unfortunately it's still paper based in our school but I always try to do it double sided to save paper and also the paper we use is recycled - nice brown recycled paper) and...

Setting up the technology - getting the IWB ready, getting my BC laptop, connecting it, signing in to all the things I need to sign into, making sure everything is open, calibrating the white board and, crucially...

Setting up the *space* the students will sit in.

I had 11 students, so I spent time arranging the tables and chairs (this is when things get physical - I had to shift some fairly heavy tables around, stack some extra chairs, drag things here and there) so that the students had a fair amount of space, that they would be able to see the board, that they were encouraged to sit in the right places, that I would be able to move around, visit their tables, stand at the board etc without bumping into things or being too awkward.

This is really important. The physical space can define how the students interact.

You're setting up the parameters for social interaction, and for how the students will feel during your lesson.

It's not all about sitting positions, but this is one part of the puzzle.

For example, I always like to position myself so that I can see the faces of every single person in the room and they can see mine. This means finding a position where all the faces are visible.

This is probably sub-conscious for the students I think, but it means they always know I am there, always know I am listening, always know I am available, and always know that they're not being ignored. It keeps people engaged and happy.

If I have my back to any of the students for a long time, this somehow causes them, even slightly, to feel abandoned, ignored, not heard, and they might start to drift off and think about something else, consider checking their phone, start speaking French to another student or something like that.

Maybe I'm over-analysing all this, but no, I'm not. I'm speaking from experience. At a rough estimate I think I've done at least 20,000 hours of in-class teaching. It could be a lot more in fact. Yes, I am bragging. Look how experienced I am.

I do feel quite proud to have done a lot of something, to have stuck at it for a long time. Is that a reason to be proud? I don't know really. Whatever, the point is that when you have done something again and again and again and again, you start to learn how to do it at an intuitive level and you refine it in lots of different ways. One example of that is understanding how your standing position as a teacher can make a big difference to how your students feel.

One point I should make: It's not all about the teacher, it's mainly about the students, but the fact is, the teacher sets the tone, and so yes, of course it is important that as a teacher you make a conscious effort to control everything you do, including the way you stand. It's like a performance.

I remember saying that once, when I was first training to be a teacher.

I was in a feedback session with my teacher trainer and some other novice would-be teachers. We were talking after they'd observed one of my teaching practice sessions - one of my first attempts at teaching English to adults. I was not good at the start, of course. I didn't know what I was doing and felt incredibly self-conscious and had no confidence. My nervous body was in charge, and inside my head I was very frustrated and ashamed.

I wanted to say that I needed to express myself better while teaching my lesson plan - in my voice, my choice of words, my

movements. I was struggling to explain how I needed to do it. I said to my trainer “My performance wasn’t good” I meant it in the sense of a sporting performance, as much as a theatrical one.

The trainer was harsh with me. She told me very strongly “It is not a performance. Teaching is not a performance!”

Clearly she thought it was very important to make me realise that we are not performers, performing to our students. She really emphasised this point to me and was very serious. I felt quite bad and even more frustrated. She didn’t really understand what I was trying to say and decided that she definitely had to kill any possibility that I would be one of those annoying teachers who doesn’t listen to their students and who just uses the attention of a class of students to put on a show to satisfy the ego.

I’m getting so sidetracked here. What I’m trying to say is, that the teacher should not just use a classroom to show off, BUT teaching can definitely be considered a performance in the sense that you have to be in control of yourself and understand how your movements and your communication can influence the class profoundly. I suppose in a way, all of life is a performance when you think that your actions and words make a difference and therefore you need to learn to control them, like an actor. Ooh, how profound. “All the world’s a stage and we are all actors upon it” to paraphrase Shakespeare (is that Hamlet?)

So, going back to me, sweating and hastily moving chairs and tables in my empty classroom just minutes before my lesson was due to start. I might have been swearing under my breath a bit, because that’s what you do when you’re a little bit stressed, you

don't have much time, and you have to move loads of tables around.

I should mention my managers at this point. Emily, and Richard, who are in the teachers' room downstairs. They are friendly and helpful and I could have gone to ask them for help but honestly, it was fine. I could do it myself and it was easier if I did it myself. (Just in case you were listening and thinking "But surely Luke there is someone at the school whose job it is to move those tables!" It's fine.)

Preparing the space is important for creating the right conditions. I also need to be able to access each student (stand close to them to listen or talk to them) so I arrange tables with some space between them. I make islands so the students can sit in small groups around them. I also like the horseshoe arrangement.

Sometimes I can't access all the students depending on where they are sitting. By "access the students" I mean move closer, squat next to the table, bend over to listen and help if needed. Sometimes it's not possible because the room is too small. This is rare at the British Council to be honest.

Teaching in a real classroom (rather than online) really appeals to me still because the physical space adds a whole other element to the way I can communicate. I use my body (and my face a lot) and I really enjoy this. It allows me to use some acting skills and also some stand-up comedy skills.

By using my body I mean moving this way or that way to engage attention, to help me highlight something, to show that I want someone to speak, to show that I'm asking a question, to show

that I'm sure about my answer, to show that something is ambiguous etc - shades of meaning or maybe added context which helps to give a more complex message more efficiently.

Body language also helps me give encouragement or make the students correct themselves without me having to actually open my mouth and interrupt them.

Communication isn't just the words and grammar - it's the way you use your voice (pausing, emphasis, intonation) and your body (facial expressions, gestures, positions, movements).

So, the room is so important - in terms of my having space to move, the students having space to move, and also making sure the students are in the right positions so they can easily talk to each other and other things that will encourage and allow a good group dynamic rather than being an obstacle to that.

Luckily at the BC, most of the rooms are good. I have had some horrendous rooms before, which really compromised my ability to teach effectively. Also, earlier in my career I didn't know how to arrange the room properly and I'm sure my lessons suffered. I am still slightly scarred by some lessons which must have been pretty bad, in some ways.

I think for a while, in the early days, I held on with just enthusiasm and energy, where my teaching skills were lacking.

I still do this sometimes, to be honest, and I don't mean to suggest that all my lessons go really well these days. I still have a lot to learn.

But, I remember once being observed by a teacher trainer, not at the very start of my career but about 15 years ago when I was doing my DELTA qualification and had already been teaching for about 5 years.

I was observed by one of our course leaders, who visited my school, sat at the back of room, watched and took notes. He was an older man with decades of experience, something of an expert in this whole thing, and he was both assessing me and trying to help me become a better teacher.

I was stressed and struggling, frankly, especially with him watching me. To paint the picture - the school was on Oxford Street in London. The room was on the second floor probably. You could hear the sounds of traffic in the street, music from shops, people shouting outside, the bells from the Hare Krishna temple next door.

Inside the room I had about 15 students and I was feeling a lot of pressure. I had some experience, but I hadn't mastered the subtle arts of teaching. I was like Luke Skywalker in Star Wars episode 5, maybe, perhaps after he's been defeated by Darth Vader, or maybe while being defeated.

I wasn't so sure of myself. I often struggled with the teaching. I also struggled with the students, often just getting by on sheer charm and enthusiasm. Also, it was sometimes hard to maintain the full respect of the students I think.

Maybe I'm being harsh on myself there, because actually, thinking about it now and being fair on myself, I do remember being a popular teacher, but I think that's probably normal. Most teachers

are popular with their students as long as you're not a complete bore or a nasty piece of work.

Anyway, I remember doing the lesson which I had spent hours and hours planning meticulously (ridiculous for just a 1 hour session) teaching my plan very awkwardly, my body and mind still being dominated by stress, and after the observed lesson had finished, I went back to the classroom after a break, and the students seemed a little bit peeved. They weren't entirely responsive. They were probably quite stressed too and my uptight demeanour had just made them feel a bit embarrassed. They probably felt uncomfortable, seeing me all red in the face.

Conversation at the start of the next session turned to the observed lesson we'd just lived through before the break, and the experienced teacher trainer who had been sitting at the back of the class, watching me seriously and writing things down, while I tried to teach.

One of the students had chatted to him during the break, and had immediately noticed his depth of experience and of course assumed that this guy was a real teacher, unlike the virtual amateur who was actually running their class (me).

The student then told me, in front of all the other students, that he wished that this older guy was their teacher, and not me.

It was something like, "I spoke to John. He's so experienced isn't he? Oh I want *him* to be my teacher!"

Yes, maybe this student was being a dick. Maybe. He said it in a jokey way, but the humour in his voice was barely enough to mask

the fact that he really meant what he said. He meant it alright. He thought I was some kind of apprentice who didn't know what he was doing, in comparison to the jedi master who was observing me. Maybe he was right, but did he need to say it? I don't know.

This student probably liked me, but perhaps only as someone to go for a drink with in the pub. He genuinely would have preferred the other guy as his teacher, and he suddenly became aware of my limitations and apparently he needed me to know this, and all the other students too. I lost face in quite a big way.

In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't that bad, was it? It was just a teacher feeling awkward in a mid-priced English language school in London, one morning in 2006. It's not exactly going to make the history books, but I died inside a little bit, and I haven't forgotten it.

I don't think I was all that bad, honestly, but sometimes it's all about perception. If the students perceive you to be a good teacher, then they'll interpret your actions as those of a good teacher, but if the perception slips and they see you struggling, then you lose face as a teacher and your status drops and the students can lose faith in you.

It can be hard to get that back. It can happen by degrees. Just little things. Lots of little things. They all add up to a bigger picture. You learn to master those little things with the bigger picture in mind.

But I do remember these dodgy moments in my teaching career, and these are some of the things which play on your mind when you are quickly getting a lesson ready on a Monday morning.

By the way, I passed my DELTA and I learned a lot during that course. It was a very important experience in my career and therefore in my whole life. We have to learn from those difficult moments, and they make us a bit stronger. This is why it is important to step outside your comfort zone.

I was quite sensitive then. These days I am a bit more armour plated. Maybe it is scar tissue.

Anyway, the particular lesson at the British Council that I taught on Thursday last week, 15 years later, was good.

I was able to rush around and get everything ready first, make sure I knew the lesson materials, language aims and exercises properly, have specific ideas of activities I could do, and then rely on my ability to extemporise during the lesson, and we all had a LOT of fun. Everyone laughed a lot, while also practising and learning specific things. There was laughter, which I do think is important.

I also have to say that my skills as a stand up comedian are very useful. I know that teaching should not be a performance, as I said before. The teacher should not be the centre of attention. This is about the learners, and their learning. But the fact is, in a group scenario, there are times when you have to stand up and talk to them all, maybe to get the lesson started, to do feedback on exercises, to answer questions, to do board work and so on, and in those moments, being able to make the students laugh really really helps.

Humour can be the glue that holds it all together, or perhaps it is a kind of magic sauce which keeps everything sweet. It makes people feel good to laugh, and feeling good is an important magic

factor in promoting motivation and reward in the learning process, which can be an embarrassing experience for students as it is filled with error.

Basically, it's all about creating the right atmosphere in the classroom. It's about facilitating the learning process. It does require energy, effort and experience though. Sometimes I feel exhausted after teaching, and I fall asleep at my desk in the afternoon, when I should be working on podcast stuff.

Anyway, on this particular Thursday afternoon I was feeling energised, even though I had just done 3 hours of intense English teaching. As I said, having had 2 weeks of holiday certainly helped. My family and I had spent 7 days at the seaside breathing lovely salty air and getting sunshine.

After finishing the class and doing my admin, I took a bicycle through some of the streets of Paris in order to pick up my daughter's passport from an office in the 2nd arrondissement of the city.

She's 5 now and so we needed to renew her UK passport. She has a French one and a British one. To be honest, we could just use the French one each time, but we like to have both, there it is. We'd applied for a new one and had the application accepted and now the brand new passport was waiting at a DHL delivery office for me to collect, which I did.

It was a slightly rainy but warm day, with patches of blue sky. The temperature was just right. No rain actually fell on me while I was out and about that day. Maybe a few spots here and there, but somehow the rain only chose to come down while I was indoors.

I was able to cruise comfortably through the streets on a rented eBike, pick up the passport with no problems (it was a kind of electronic automated locker), have a look at it and pick a place to eat lunch. There is something very satisfying about being the first to see a brand new passport, especially when it is your own child's. You see the photo, you get to see how cute she is, even in a dodgy passport photo where she isn't allowed to smile, you get to enjoy the fresh pages, imagining which places we might visit in the future.

Then I had lunch in a Korean restaurant just off Rue Saint-Anne, the street with all the Japanese and Korean restaurants on it. It's a favourite area of mine. There are supermarkets which sell proper Japanese green tea, including the favourite of my wife and me - genmaicha - a mix of green tea and roasted grains of rice. It's delicious, comforting and healthy. I could have picked up a fresh supply at the nearby supermarket, but we already had loads at home.

The Korean lunch was delicious, comforting and healthy. I chose chicken bibimbap and it was served in the right way - in a hot stone bowl, with the ingredients sizzling inside. What a delicious and balanced meal! Tasty, spicy chicken, rice and a range of different vegetables, kimchi and other pickled bits and pieces.

Then, to let my food go down, I walked just a few steps around the corner to the nearby Square Louvois, named after a woman who fought in World War 2 as part of the resistance movement against the Nazis who were occupying the city at the time (you know your history don't you?)

I didn't realise this when I first went in and sat down, but after spending 40 minutes having a wonderful time just reading a book, I stood up and noticed the sign behind me which told me about the woman who's name had been given to this lovely spot.

It's a small green square with grass and trees, just next to the National Library of France, and in the middle there is a gorgeous and rather large fountain, made from cast iron, as a tribute to the four great French rivers - the Seine, the Garonne, the Loire and the Sarone.

The rivers are represented by four scantily-clad women (topless but with loin cloths covering their lower regions), and there's water pouring down, cherubs, and fish with water jetting out of their mouths.

I sat in front of the "La Sarone" statue. She holds a pot with water flowing out of it. "The water is like thoughts pouring out in the form of words" I thought, or maybe I didn't. Maybe I just made that up now.

It's very pretty and a great place to sit for a while. I had never visited it before this particular moment.

It was wet on the floor and there were puddles, but it wasn't actually raining. I found an empty bench and sat myself there.

By the way, this happened in May (which I think must be my favourite month) and so, as I said before, the temperature was just right and the air was fresh even in the middle of the city.

Spring was in full bloom. There was blossom on the trees above me. There was birdsong in the air. Sparrows fluttered around. There were pigeons wandering around too, which I could shoo away without too much trouble by wagging the end of my foot at them, if they wandered a bit too close. They're a bit grotty, you see.

In my pocket I had a book, my daughter's new passport, my phone and my headphones. I could have switched on a podcast or just scrolled through social media, looking at the screen but I've been trying to avoid too much time on my phone lately. I don't think it's very healthy.

Sometimes you have to stop, and appreciate what is around you. I've also been trying to read more. I find it much better for my general mental health. I can read a bit, stop and appreciate the moment, and continue. I find social media is probably engineered to hold your attention in a way that is probably not very good for our eyes, our brains, our feelings, and so I opted for the book in my jacket pocket. The book is called - Selected Short Stories by HG Wells, the British writer of science fiction stories from the late 19th century. He wrote The War of the Worlds.

The copy that I had with me was one I had picked up in England, in a Sainsbury's supermarket. I hadn't bought it - (don't worry, I didn't steal it either). Actually at this particular Sainsbury's supermarket near my parents' house they have a bookshelf where people can share books. You can leave old books there, or pick ones up that other people have left there.

A few weeks before I'd been doing some shopping and I'd spotted this book as I was leaving. The orange spine with the Penguin logo caught my eye and I wondered what the title was.

Usually in these situations, when I'm in charity shops, I keep an eye out for Sherlock Holmes books, which I have a soft spot for, but this one was HG Wells and I immediately picked it up, shifting the heavy bag of shopping to my other shoulder.

I love *The War of the Worlds*, also by Wells - not because I love war or anything, of course not. War is hell. But *The War of the Worlds* has always fascinated me. I read some extracts from it in a few podcast episodes a couple of years ago (episodes 734-736 if you're interested). It's about an alien invasion. As far as I know, it's the first alien invasion story ever written. One of the things I like about it, is that the aliens choose South East England as the focus of their invasion.

I love the vivid descriptions, the brilliant level of imagination HG Wells had, and the sense of adventure and action.

This book was called "Selected Short Stories" and it was an old copy. I checked the publication date. The stories were all written about 100 to 150 years ago, but this particular copy was from 1969, so the book was older than me, and the stories much older.

The pages of the book were all yellow and aged, and the cover even began to crack and disintegrate slightly in my hands as I opened it.

Now the cover has gone completely but otherwise the book is in good condition and is definitely fine for reading. In the supermarket I was curious about it. The short stories included *The Time Machine*, perhaps HG Wells' most celebrated story, which I hadn't read. There were also about 20 other stories for me to enjoy. I took

it. I must go back to that supermarket next time, and leave a different book there, in order to please the god of lending libraries.

So this is the book I had in my pocket. It was perfect for the occasion. I had already read a few of the stories and found them brilliant. I notice with short stories like these, written at this time, that I'm always a bit confused at the start and don't really know what's going on, but with some perseverance, the story sort of opens up and pulls me in. I expect it's the same for everyone.

These stories are short works of science fiction, but science fiction from the late 19th century. 1894, 1895, 1896 etc. These are some of the very first "science fiction" stories. If you are turned off by the term "science fiction", maybe it would be better to call them "Tales of imagination".

People often say about HG Wells that he had great imagination and also very good vision - he was able to look at what was happening in science and society and then imagine how things might be in the future, or how changes in technology or scientific breakthroughs might impact society, or at least he could take a scientific idea and then add a bit of imagination to it and create an adventure story which is both fantastical and realistic at the same time. Many of his stories are weirdly prescient. He managed to predict a lot of things that have actually happened.

I don't know if it would be your cup of tea or not, but for me this book of short stories is amazing. I feel like it's the late 19th century equivalent of Black Mirror, the Netflix TV show. Each episode, or each story in this case, tells a scary, amusing, ironic or satirical tale, which can be slightly disturbing, exciting, wonderful and full of surprises.

The story I started there in front of that fountain, just yesterday (as I type this) was Aepyornis Island.

— End of the day. Time to go home! —

Luke continues the next day...

I was talking about this book, “Selected Short Stories” by HG Wells, written in the late 19th century, published in 1969, the year of the moon landing and other historic events.

The specific story I read was called Aepyornis Island.

The writing style is a bit old fashioned of course, and it’s clearly from a different era.

As I said before, the first few pages of stories from this era can be a bit tricky, but I read the whole thing on that bench, with the sound of the city around me, the water from the fountain flowing in front of me, and a few people milling about talking and smoking, pigeons bobbing about on the floor in front of me.

I read the whole story sitting there. It’s not a long story. It took me about 30 or 40 minutes to read. I’m not an especially fast reader and sometimes my mind wanders while I’m reading and I lose the plot and have to go back and read again to make sure I’m getting it. But I love this kind of writing.

Just to give you an idea of the style of writing, other writers from around the same period are Arthur Conan Doyle (the Sherlock Holmes stories), Oscar Wilde (The Picture of Dorian Gray), Joseph

Conrad (Heart of Darkness), Bram Stoker (Dracula), and Mary Shelly (Frankenstein).

I was saying that I love this work. It describes a world which I don't know personally - the world from about 130 years ago, during the late modern era, near the end of the old colonial days.

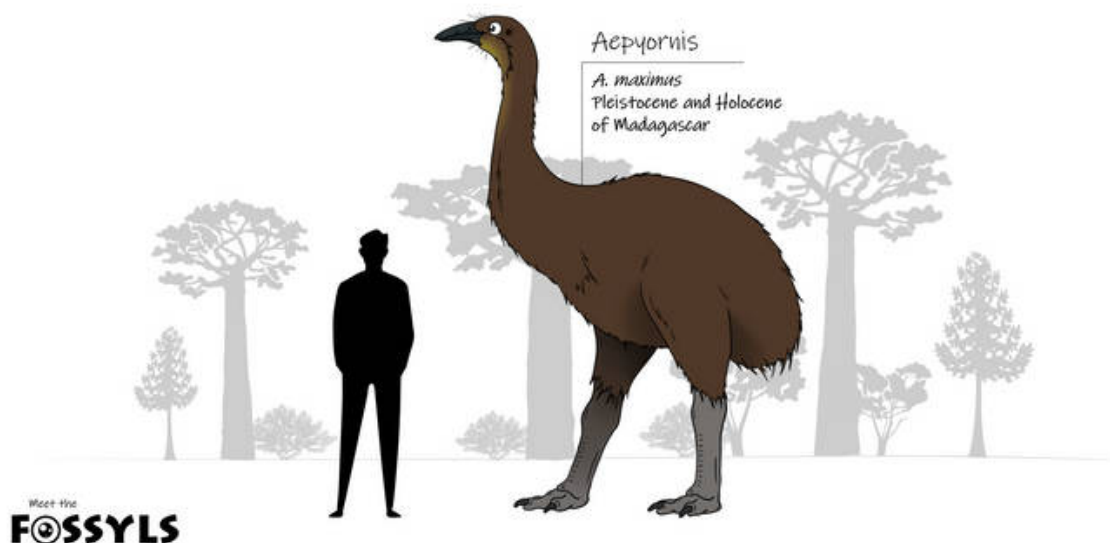
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Luke talks without a script about the story which he read, called Aepyornis Island

The Aepyornis is a type of “elephant bird”, a huge flightless bird which went extinct probably about 1000 years ago.

They're not dinosaurs, but they're in that direction!

They were massive. The height of an elephant.



They could be found in Madagascar, and I think relatives of them existed in New Zealand as well, interestingly.

They're closely related to the Kiwi, a flightless bird which still exists now in New Zealand, but the Aepyornis was much, much bigger.

Now, what's the point here? The point is only this. I did not know what to expect when reading this story. I started reading it and suddenly I found myself completely captivated by it. It took me a while to work out what was going on, and then suddenly there's action. This would make a fantastic film. I enjoyed it so much I needed to share it. I told my wife that evening, but she looked at me a bit strangely, I think because she had other thoughts in her mind and there was her husband standing in the living room talking about massive extinct birds and I don't think I had her full attention. Maybe the baby was kicking and she was distracted. Or maybe it's just because this is absolutely not her cup of tea.

Maybe I will have a bit more success with you, now, or maybe you'll be like my wife and you'll hear these things: science fiction, extinct birds, dinosaurs, a desert island and your mind will wander to other things. But I hope not.

How can I draw you into this story?

Well, let me just try and re-tell it to you and hopefully the story will do its job and you will be entertained, we will see.

But remember, if you want those 100 points and a gold medal at the end of this, you need to keep listening! Just a thought.

By the way, there aren't actually any points or a real gold medal, just to be clear.

I'm not like one of those YouTubers who gives away millions of dollars of real money. I'm not giving away actual gold pieces or anything. I don't know how that works and I don't have that kind of money, so there. These are imaginary points and an imaginary gold medal - or is it imaginary? Maybe I have a real reward for you at the end of this episode. Actually I do. You'll have to keep listening in order to find out what it is.

Aepyornis Island by HG Wells

I can't do this justice! It's written so well. I would like to adapt the text and make it into another episode (Learn English with a Short Story) but it will take some time.

The original text might just be too difficult for most of my audience. I'll work on it.

At one point while reading I saw something out of the corner of my eye. I saw movement on the floor just in front of me. I thought it might have been a raindrop and that that would be the end of my lovely moment of peace in front of the fountain.

I had a little look at the ground and noticed it was a green caterpillar which had dropped from the tree above me. It wriggled across the floor, arching its back amusingly as it made steady progress towards my bench.

I thought that at any moment a sparrow would flick down and grab it, to feed to its young probably in a nest somewhere, but the caterpillar wasn't interrupted.

I decided to just watch it calmly as it crawled along the floor and under my bench. I don't know where it was going or how it knew it should go that way, but off it went on its little adventure.

I wonder if it managed to eventually metamorphise into a moth or a butterfly or if it did get taken by a bird, one of the small ones which live around us all the time in this period of history that we currently inhabit.

Going to Chatelet Station to pick up my daughter's travel card.

I decided to walk. That's a lovely way to get around Paris, if you have the time, and if you don't mind having to deal with sometimes crowded pavements and the dangers of crossing the road.

What happened?

It's not all that eventful, like most of this day. This is more about how it felt to be doing these things and going to these places.

*Luke talks off script, 'briefly' describing his trip to Chatelet metro station.



I wrote some notes on the metro home from my ordeal in the station.

I thought I could turn these notes into a stand-up comedy routine, but I'm not sure they're quite right for that.

But I'll read them to you now. I was trying to express the experience of having to navigate my way through Chatelet station, which is very crowded, confusing and stressful.

I think I was influenced by the HG Wells which I had been reading, and it made me write in a consciously literary and slightly old-fashioned style, as if I was describing a visit to some kind of

hidden underground kingdom in a far away land. I enjoyed writing this.

Chatelet Station

My daughter's navigo had been found and was being held at lost property in this place called "Châtelet".

Châtelet

What is that? Do you know? When I first came to Paris, I heard about this place. I heard stories. Chatelet, I thought. What is it? A tiny castle? I was wrong.

But then I noticed the way the local people would talk about it. They would blow air from their mouths and make noises that sounded like this "oh putain châtelet c'est linfer" and I thought, hmm that seems negative.

Little did I know.

I should have taken heed of their words, for 'tis a hellhole.

Somehow, someone had dropped my daughters navigo and it had ended up at Chatelet station. All things end up at Chatelet eventually.

*Another mission then.
One last job, I thought.*

Chatelet station.

A confusing labrynth.

First of all, there are actually two stations there or is it three?

There's Chatelet. There's Les Halles. And then, there's Châtelet Les Halls.

What is this chimera? Who designed it? It seems to be a metro station which is trying to escape from itself.

I arrived at Les Halles. This was my port of entry.

The entrance seems simple. The area around is quite open these days. Green spaces, a cathedral.

Inside there is another world, under the ground. It is a subterranean citadel full of evil spells and sinister magic.

The place is inscribed with confusing symbols and numbers all pointing in different directions.

There are numbers, which appear quite randomly 1, 4, 7, 14. What is the solution to this maths puzzle??

There are also letters, A, B, ... C?

No.

There is no trace of C.

Disturbingly, The sequence moves from B to D. What is this dead alphabet??

What is this place??

There are people down there in Chatelet who may have not seen the light of day for decades. People, it seems, live in these artificially-lit caverns.

Businesses operate there. Some prosper, while others fail and are replaced.

Whole lives are lived in those sweaty chambers.

And trains. Smelly metal worms which clatter through rat infested tunnels. 'tis a strange place.

Confusing it is, full of trickery.

Yes there are signs, but not all can read them. Only the learned can navigate its clotted arteries.

You may observe maps which appear to provide some assistance, giving indications of your final destination - Exit 16 or Line 7, or information desks, of which there are many, but no indication is given of the location of "Objects perdu" - lost property. I conclude that lost property is everywhere. We are all lost here.

You walk down twisting, turning corridors. People blunder past you. Fellow passengers, also lost, move this way and that way. There is no order, for the unprepared visitor to Chatelet.

You continue through the rambling chambers and passageways, hoping for some sign that you are on the correct path.

Overhead messages suggest that your destination is just around the corner, but when you turn that corner - oh no, a cavernous tunnel stretching as far as the eye can see.

Yes there are moving walkways but some are treacherous and refuse to move.

I walked along a moving walkway that was not moving, if that is possible, and I passed a woman standing completely still, like a statue. As I passed her I turned to look at her face. She looked ahead impassively.

How long has she been standing there, unaware that the walkway was no longer moving?

There are signs on the walls that appear to direct you to your destination. But they lie.

You are searching for line 7. And you scan the walls for clues. Next to the mouth of a smaller corridor there is a sign. Line 7 it says, inviting you in, but as you walk down and down the stairs to arrive on the platform you quickly discover that no, this is not line 7, this is line 4 or possibly line 14.

Some do not realise this treachery and board the wrong train, and are never seen again.

That sign! You retrace your steps moving in the wrong direction against the crowd as countless travellers push past you.

“You are going the wrong way! Turn back!” they seem to say, with their faces, but you press on.

Finally you get back to the spot where you took your wrong turn only to realise - ah, it is this whole corridor that will lead to line 7.

Line 7 - this corridor - THEN WHY IS THE SIGN HERE next to this left turn?

Evil magic and darkness... in Chatelet...

OK, maybe that made no sense to you! I don't know!

The end!

That's more or less the end, except it wasn't the end of my day of course, because I did a spot of food shopping, went back to the flat, started cooking, my daughter and my wife came home after school and work, we ate dinner, we talked about lots of things including my daughter's made-up games and some questions about the upcoming arrival of her baby brother.

Anyone with little kids knows, these moments are all a bit of a whirlwind. We got her ready for bed. My wife and I collapsed on the sofa. She's more than 7 months pregnant. We slept. The day was over as quickly as it had begun.

Thank you for listening.

If you made it to the end - 100 points and a gold medal.

It's not a real gold medal I'm afraid.

But also, I hope you can see that the reward for getting to the end here is also that you just heard about 8,000 words there in English.

All those words went in. Your brain heard every single one of them. This is important. Some of them will stick. Some of the combinations will stick there. You will find, that those words and phrases might be more readily available for you when you next speak English. The words will just flow a bit better than if you hadn't heard this at all. 8,000 words from me to you.

Thanks for listening and I will speak to you next time, but for now - goodbye...

