

## **Shaun Mulvenna**

### *Is Anybody Listening?*

They say the most important part of a story is the first few lines, and most writers today have perfected the art of capturing the reader's attention.

So how am I going to set about writing an essay, which will captivate you all from start to finish? After all I do not want this essay to end up shoved in some old cupboard never to see daylight again. No I want everyone, grown ups in particular, to hear all about the lives and times of young people in Northern Ireland today.... What? You're interested? Yes I thought you might be, because it seems those who don't inhabit our emerald isle hold the opinion that Northern Ireland is a war zone, a blemish on the map of the world, and as for the under 18s, why, they should all be gathered up and transported to a remote island (preferably without food and water) and left there. After all, we are nothing more than a bunch of abusive, aggressive and brainless animals that would not look out of place alongside the monkeys in Belfast Zoo. Aren't we?

Well believe it our not, we don't all mug grannies in the street or leave our chewing gum on the cinema seats. Some of us even put it in the bin (don't look so surprised!) Yes I feel we youths have a hard time in this modern day and age. Do not mistake me for the moody 16 year old who answers in grunts and complains that I need more "space". No I speak for

all those people who are misjudged and misunderstood and most offensive of all, misrepresented. I am not defending the lost causes that are the explanation to the graffiti on walls, the tangled swings in the park or the increase in cigarette sales. The only positive aspect is, that these people are in the minority.

The rest of us are sent to the “lunatic asylum”, the grey haired ones like to call ‘school’. Over the years I have mastered the art of eating my toast and marmalade whilst pulling on my trousers and running for the bus all at the same time. As for the journey, well it is no plain sailing, free seats these days are a luxury and I highly doubt those scrawny seats were designed to hold two people, never mind three extra (many of whom are not...shall we say “strangers” to a McDonalds “Big Mac”).

However, I dare not mention this to anyone who was old enough to remember England winning the World Cup (a long, long...long time ago) because I know I will be met by a thick ear and the lecture I have heard all too many times, how the old fogies; ‘were made walk ten miles to school, barefoot, come rain hail or snow!’ No, mastering the art of sitting on an ‘edge’ is a feat in itself. Perching on a prefabricated seat would bring tears to the eyes of even the most hardened of travellers.

One thing I constantly puzzle over during my trips to school is why Northern Irish athletes rarely feature in the weight lifting contests at the Olympics. I feel that with the weight of the modern day bag (around the same load as a new born elephant) we could give any Russian strongman a run for their money. Who needs gym membership when you own a schoolbag!

We sixteen year olds don't have it easy in school either. The teachers may as well brand the letters GCSEs onto our foreheads with a hot iron! There is no time for eating or sleeping, it's work, work, work! It would seem the only people who prosper at this time of the year are the shopkeepers who can expect an increase in sales of red bull and coffee for all those late night studiers.

As well as balancing school life with household chores (yes we *can* actually work a vacuum cleaner!) most of us have part time jobs. And to think you had the cheek to call us lazy! The next time you order a meal or buy your frozen curry, take a look at the polite teenager in front of you, slaving away for £3.45 an hour. No wonder most employers these days look so happy. Pocketing half our wages whilst doing minimal work...what a life!

Our one escape from the trials and tribulations of school life and part time work can be found in the form of the glorious Internet. Not only can we numb our brains by playing pointless (but extremely enjoyable) games but also we can gossip to our mates on chat rooms, which unlike an hour on the phone, doesn't cost quite as much. Anything to save a grilling from the parents! Yes MSN, Face Book, and My Space have become a favourite for teenagers everywhere, however the number one website for creating a 'virtual you' would have to be Bebo. At the very mention of the word I can almost hear the grown ups tearing out their hair. It means hours spent trying to wrench your child from the computer (Believe me I have been the rope in the tug of war!)

The ancient ones simply haven't realised just how important this website is. It allows us to talk to our friends whether we are two houses away or in different countries and yes, I admit it is hard to keep your

conversations private when they are broadcasted for all to see but when it comes down to it...we don't care!

Bebo basically allows you to create a page all about yourself with a section showing your top sixteen friends your uploaded videos, the groups you have joined (in my case a page dedicated to Manchester United) and any other important information you wish to include. I am saying this to inform all you adults out there because it would be easier to find a fire-breathing dog with nine legs than a young person who doesn't know about Bebo. I agree that there are a select few out there who abuse the site by using it to bully but these are the same people who turn pencils into dangerous weapons and put fireworks through your letterboxes...idiots in other words. They exist in every walk of society, and just because they misuse the site doesn't mean it should be banned for everyone else. You simply have to log on and explore to find tribute pages to victims of cancer, road accidents, and natural disasters. So there, we aren't all a bunch of scandal loving gossips!

As well as being criticised for being lazy, violent, moody (the list goes on), it seems even our very dress sense is being frowned upon. I ask you, what is wrong with the 'hoodie'? Surely you have realised that the fashion industry has moved on and woolly cardigans with matching caps aren't exactly the latest fashion. Which brings me to another point; designer clothing! So much pressure is put on teenagers in Northern Ireland today, to have the latest Nike trainers or the most expensive Replay jeans. Large companies take advantage raising the prices higher and higher, its daylight robbery and nobody will do anything about it.

Phew! I think I have put across just a *few* of the many hurdles, we 16 year olds must overcome in our quest for adulthood, but believe it or not, it's

not all bad. They say, “Life begins at forty”. Of course it doesn’t! That saying is for the man who, looks in the mirror and discovers a balding patch and a few extra wrinkles, yet reassures himself, all is not lost. No life begins at 16. It is then we open our eyes to the world (once we have slept in till one in the afternoon that is!)

At 16 we are young adults, the future bankers, milkmen, and shopkeepers. (Don’t look so afraid.) I am glad to say some adults realise this and slowly but surely start to treat us with a little more respect and value. I am sure I not only speak for myself when I say we begin to appreciate more in our lives. In my case, I look forward to nothing more than getting up at seven in the morning, to get a bus up to Lisburn to play football. This simple pleasure makes up for the growing amount of maths homework and the dirty looks from pensioners!

Even in my own school there are simple pleasures to be found. Past the dungeon like classrooms where the geography teacher jabs dangerously at the map, beyond the perplexed maths tutor who struggles over one of his own questions, there is hope in the form of friends. Friends who will give us a ham sandwich when our mum has made cheese. Friends who let us copy their homework (let’s face it we all do it!) when we leave our own on the bus. Friends who will always pass the ball, even if we play like an elderly donkey. Yes they are the ones who make certainly my school life a lot more bearable, because without them, it all seems too much to bear.

For this reason, I feel particularly sorry for those people the same age as myself who don’t have a mate or companion, because they are more likely to be targeted by bullies. Even in my very own school, in the very middle of the countryside, there are people who aren’t happy until they’ve made someone else’s day miserable. Why do they do it? The

answer: a difference in appearance, looks or even accent. Little things, that should no longer matter. However, how many of us, myself included, can say we would jump in and stop this? The numbers wouldn't exactly put a smile on your face. The reason? We don't want to interfere in case the abuse is redirected towards ourselves. For most 16 year olds in Northern Ireland, keeping in with your crowd matters, and most of us steer clear of anything that could jeopardise this.

Another topic that creates tension between teenagers in Northern Ireland is religion. The old Catholic, Protestant; Celtic, Rangers; Linfield Glentoran argument. Being from a mixed village I never really caught on to the hatred between the two sides until I went to my first football training session and witnessed a boy being sent home for wearing Celtic socks. At the time I thought, yes those socks are bright, not something you would parade on the catwalk but were they really that shocking to justify being sent home for? The thought did not occur that those socks could have led to a fight amongst my team members, and the one thing the coach was trying to promote was religious integration. Times have moved on however, slowly.... very, very slowly but even within my team, I have noticed subtle changes. Any shirts of this sort are banned, and the only fighting that takes place, is over the last Jaffa Cake at half time!

Well up to now, I have tried my best to alter your view on those who are a long way off reaching your prehistoric age. Next time you go to tip the waitress a measly £1.25, shout at those youths for kicking their ball into your petunias, or whinge to your friend about how the Internet is ruining the children of today, take a step back. They have enough problems such as school, relationships and 'the parents' without having to worry about

everyone else. Teenage life isn't simply a thick slice of happiness with a garnish of fun. In Northern Ireland however, for the first time in many years, we adolescents have a bright future to look forward to. Let's go for it!