

MY Most Amazing  
Adventure:

1965-1966

A DIARY

BY Caroline Court



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# **My Most Amazing Adventure: 1965-1966**

## **A Diary**

*Caroline Court*

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## Brian Boru and *Beowulf*

Day 24 of 365 Days

September 14, 1965, Tuesday

Hi Di,

In the third week of school, my guidance counselor, Mrs. O'Brien, Brian Boru's mother, advised me to switch into the honors English class, and I was glad and sad and mad. Sad because I was just getting comfortable with the new kids in my class and glad because I have already read in my old school what they're reading here but mad cause the kids here are kind of dumb. For example, my new teacher told the class that she would like to be addressed as Ms. Ellis.

She asked, "If Mr. designates a man but not his marital status and Mrs. designates a woman who is married, what does Ms. designate?"

A couple kids shouted out, "divorced woman," and no one laughed. They actually weren't sure. I could hardly believe it.

So I raised my hand. At my old school, we raised our hands; here they just shout out.

“Ms. is a title for a woman who isn’t owned by a man.” I knew that from my old school. My sophomore English teacher had given us examples of **figurative language**. She cited a doozie for *simile*. She was showing us a slide show and came to *as cold as a spinster’s breathe*. The teacher was so mad! Ms. did not designate an old maid or a spinster, but a woman who did not belong to a man, she insisted to us. And she told us Ms. in the future would be seen as an **honorific**. Anyway, we were banned from using the words old maid or spinster even though that’s what my sophomore English teacher was.

I think Ms. Ellis liked my explanation, but she added that Ms. was just a title of respect that didn’t confer marital status.

Even so, I’m pretty sure Ms. Ellis is swinging and single cause of stories I have heard about her hangovers and missing school on Mondays and sometimes when she’s writing on the board she sort of dances with the chalk. But even before anyone said anything, I could see by bland facial expressions that all I was doing was demonstrating how an unpopular girl talks.

A girl in a Pompom outfit said, “Why would she not want people to know if she’s married?” I think it was a challenge, like *what is this dork’s problem*. I’m pretty sure I am a dork, but I’m not the one who made up these Mr. and Ms. rules. Ms. Ellis said it has something to do with our culture. No one knew what she was talking about, so she launched into **culture**.

I don’t know what her point was because my mind sort of wandered as it often does. I was thinking maybe I’m kind of depressed because that Pompom girl was really petite and cute and probably popular and reminded me how different I am and maybe kind of fat. Then I was thinking that I’m not fat but what is so bad about fat anyway. Mr. Mosta is fat and he is a fab teacher. Things that are bad are made even more bad by being called fat. A big fat lie is worse than a big lie.

Anyway, another time we were reading part of *The Merchant of Venice* which has a character called Shylock the Jew and the teacher decided to talk about religion. One kid blurted out, “You’re not supposed to teach religion.” What a jerk. Ms. Ellis ignored him. I already knew about Shylock the moneylender and how the Christian characters hate him. Anyway, the teacher asked the class what Jews believe. A couple kids said they believe in God but not that Jesus is the

Messiah. Then she asked “What are the Christian religions?” A couple kids answered “Catholic.” She asked what are the other Christian religions and one kid said “Protestant.” This was getting on my nerves. She persisted, “What are the names of the Protestant religions?” Duh! They couldn’t think of any. This is probably because most of them are Catholics and they think they’re the only real Christians and the other kids in the class are outnumbered. Since I’m an outsider anyway, I raised my hand and rattled off, “Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Congregationalists,” etc. No one looked impressed. Their minds had probably wandered away. I wanted the teacher to talk about why the Jews were moneylenders and why the Christians didn’t like them because those are the play’s **motifs**, but we didn’t go there. I might as well go to a different class because none of these kids like me now and Ms. Ellis doesn’t get the point.

Anyway, Mrs. O’Brien showed me the curriculum of Senior Honors English and it was all new stuff to me, sort of classic literature, the titles you never choose to read but English teachers have **orgasms** over. Like instead of just reading one of Shakespeare’s easier plays, which everyone just gets the *Cliff Notes* for, we’ll read several plays and a book called *Shakespeare Now* about Shakespeare and his plays and the



times he lived...there are no *Cliff Notes* for that. So I feel like I've moved up a little in the scholastic world.

Mrs. O'Brien didn't just tell me to report to Honors English; she actually escorted me there and introduced me to Mr. Mize, whom I already knew from the school newspaper, and then he introduced me to the class. They all said "Hello, Caroline" and I felt real spotted out, everyone looking at me, but there in the back flailing his arms around wildly was Brian Boru. (Hurrah!)

I sat in a desk in the front because it was the only empty one, and Mr. Mize explained that the class is reading *Beowulf*; that's one of those epic poems the size of a telephone book that English teachers love but are instruments of torture for kids. *The Odyssey* freshman year was one of those, lots of slayings and dragons and stupid stuff, but Odysseus the man was the *heroic ideal*... blah, blah.

.....

Now what's unusual in this room is kids are reading it aloud in class, in groups of three, taking turns with the narration. One of the groups is missing a member so I am plugged into the hole. I see Brian Boru reading in another group and wish

I were there since he's the only person I know and I like him plus I think he likes me. Everyone is participating...

I see in one corner of the room a stash of **faux** swords and knives. Mr. Mize tells the class to break out of their groups and prepare for the presentation. One of the groups and a few volunteers are picking up the fake weapons. A sort of Dracula-looking girl, black fingernails, purple streaks in long black hair, black clothes, sort of cadaverous, is standing off to one side of what I think is a make-shift stage, the front of the classroom. She puts a record disc onto a player and tells the class it's *The Grendel Symphony*.

I don't know the Beowulf story, but Mr. Mize assures me that if I listen to the narration, I'll pick it up. I have to get used to strange names like Hrothgar and Unferth, etc.

The gist of the story is the monster Grendel eats people.

In Heorot's Great Hall, which previously had hosted feasting and now serves as sleeping quarters for guys called the Geats, Grendel burst through the doors and

*"...immediately seizes a sleeping warrior, and devours him.*

*...quickly laid hold of*

*A soldier asleep, suddenly tore him,*

*Bit his bone-ribs, the blood drank in currents,  
Swallowed in mouthfuls: he soon had the dead man's  
Feet and hands, too, eaten entirely."*

Until he encountered Beowulf who wasn't so easily munched.

*"The monster is amazed at Beowulf's strength...*

*Stood he up straight and stoutly did seize him...*

*Grendel's cries terrify the Danes...*

*Grendel is sorely wounded."*

If I had had to read those lines silently, I might be sleeping by now, but the intensity of Dracula girl is kind of mesmerizing, and when she speaks I find myself getting used to the strange names and the juvenile monster stuff and getting into the rhythm of the passages. She's pretty smooth with the oral reading and increases volume when things are getting tense for Beowulf. The music she has brought, Mr. Mize says, *gives momentum to re-enactment of a climactic scene from the old epic poem with Christian undertones.* Grendel has entered the hall, and all of the armaments and strength of Beowulf's men are dwarfed by its power and evil.

*Caroline Court*

“The hall groans...terror...

Archwarders raging...

Twas marvelous wonder that the wine-hall withstood then

The bold in battle...”

And about 10 of my classmates are hacking away with their plastic swords and daggers.

*“No weapon would harm Grendel; he bore a charmed life...weapons for victory*

*Swords and suchlike he had sworn to dispense with.”*

Beowulf, the force of good, will surprise the evil monster when it attacks. Brian Boru is playing Grendel the monster. He doesn't talk. All Grendel's utterances are howls, growls, screeches. Brian Boru performs amazing writhing motions—like bacon frying on the floor of classroom—those of us students not in the play slide our desks aside. Some kids are in tears laughing, but no one's mind is wandering. Brian Boru is going nuts with physical contortions. We are still in Heorot's Great Hall; Brian Boru's face expresses **intractable**

pain, agony and despair as Beowulf grips his claw...and Dracula girl is practically shouting.

*"Grendel is sorely wounded...a body wound suffered...*

*His body did burst."*

In the climactic moment, when Beowulf has ripped out Grendel's arm, thus inflicting the injury that will defeat him, Brian Boru crouches behind the podium and slings his right arm over the top where it dangles as Dracula girl reads....

*"Beowulf...the prince of the Geatmen.....suspends Grendel's hand and arm in Heorot..."*

*The arm and the shoulder...all of the claw of Grendel...."*

Everyone bursts into applause. Some kids are giggling, but everyone is watching Brian Boru and listening to the music that was synced to build to a **crescendo** just as Grendel's arm is captured. Even though it's all fake, seeing Brian Boru's arm dangling there does give me kind of a chill.

I am amazed—at Brian Boru's theatrics, at the coordinating of Dracula girl's readings and the accompanying music, at this manner of studying classic literature—I am so surprised because at this moment I have completely forgotten what an

outsider I am, and I have completely forgotten that I am miserable.

Today's Fun Vocabulary:

figurative language: language to suggest a likeness or analogy.

honorific: a title giving honor or respect.

culture: values, traditions, philosophies, etc. of a civilization.

motif: a distinctive feature or a dominant trait in a piece of literature.

orgasms: heights of sexual arousal.

faux: fake.

intractable: difficult to control.

crescendo: a swelling or upsurge.



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