

Hold Your Ideas In Your Hands



I'm sure many writers will agree that using a prompt is a great way to develop a story idea and get your writing flowing. So, if a phrase or a sentence or a photograph can stir our imaginations, what about using real objects? In March Fermanagh Writers visited the Northern Ireland War Memorial Museum. The writers' group is working with the Living Legacies project and were asked to create stories inspired by artifacts related to events on the battlefield and in Ireland during 1916. The museum offered us a private 'behind the scenes' tour of the museum. Ciaran Elizabeth Doran, the curator, showed us some pieces from their collection and explained how they obtain the artifacts, record and display them. During her talk, we had a chance to examine First and Second World War artifacts much closer than most museum visitors are able to do.

Since I am writing a series of Short Reads and novels set during the Second World War in Northern Ireland, I was fascinated by these everyday items – such as women's utility stockings and boys' leather boots – very different from today's versions.

My imagination was particularly captured by a herbal remedy first aid kit that had belonged to the curator's father. He used it to treat patients for minor ailments such as diarrhoea on the battlefield and in an internment camp during the Second World War.

Why did these artefacts affect me more than just a photograph of the same items? It's simple really. A photograph can't capture the texture of an item or the weight of it as you hold it. Or the smell of it. Or any sound it may make as you lift and examine it. A photograph, especially an old, faded one, may not record the colour accurately either. I could feel the smoothness of the delicate glass vials and the textured roughness of the leather case that held them. I could hear the tiny creaks the leather made as it was twisted this way and that, and smell a faint musty odour from it. I could also see the powdered remains of the herbal mixtures in each vial and where the penciled labels were beginning to peel away from the vials. I wouldn't have noticed these details looking at a photograph.

Observing these set my mind racing, and I could imagine the doctor on the battlefield. It would be easy to begin jotting a story about the man this item had conjured in my mind. So, for me, getting up close to real objects is a great way to set a story in motion.

Other writers may not share my interest in wartime history – or even history at all, for that matter – but they can still find objects to inspire their writing. A visit to a museum, a planetarium, an art gallery, a zoo, or a park will yield many objects to fuel the imagination.

Here's an exercise to stimulate you: Chose an object and examine it closely. Use all of your senses. Jot down your reaction to it and any thoughts it stirs up. Let your mind roam until a story idea emerges.

Your story may not even relate directly to the object. Maybe its colour or the sound it makes reminds you of something else. Run with the string of ideas the object conjures in your mind until you have a story you want to write.

Try it and see what happens.

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