



Letter to my Teachers

Maria McCann

DEAR TEACHERS,

Other professionals we engage with as adults; and our perception of them is an adult one. If we have children, we meet *their* teachers; but our childish impressions of our own are usually fixed.

I worked in education so I now understand, as an insider, aspects of school which once baffled me. Yet my impressions of you remain, mostly, as they were. In this, I'm like everybody else.

The things that distinguish you in my memory are kindness, fairness and respect — or the lack of them.

So many teachers I could write about! But I'll confine myself to three.

Hello, Miss Grey! I'm not sure that was your name, but it suits you. You must have died by now, so you won't mind my saying that with your tweeds and wire spectacles you embodied the spinster schoolmarm beloved of cartoonists. Unlike most popular teachers, you were neither young nor fashionable. Your quiet voice was unsuited for shouting down unruly kids. You taught at a school serving a tough council estate. Some of your pupils were *challenging*, to put it mildly. Nevertheless, you were loved. Even the fiercest, toughest girls responded to your unfeigned kindness, your motherly affection for us. There's sadness in remembering that, because with hindsight I see how much you would have liked children



of your own. Miss Grey, I don't know if you ever realised how important you were. You radiated a gentleness we rarely saw at that school; some of us rarely experienced it at home either. Ten out of ten.

Step up, pious Mrs Thomas, the kind of Catholic convert *dreaded* by cradle Catholics, ever eager to hold forth on Baby Jesus but even keener on the torments of Hell! You should know that when you insist on being handed a needle blunt end first, then return it to a girl by jamming the point into her finger, she remembers. So much I could remind you of, dear Mrs Thomas! That time when you ignored my asthma, forcing me to continue playing sport. You even made sneering comments in class about 'silly people who think they have asthma' — despite my parents having explained my condition. I was only nine when I suffered you; I knew you were mean. Now I realise you were a card-carrying sadist. Nought out of ten. Unfit to work with children. I suspect *you* had a nasty surprise at the Pearly Gates.

I can't sign off without mentioning you, Miss Winrow, who got me into an amateur dramatic group and first told me I was intelligent. I know that I was often absurd, a mass of teenage conflicts and affectations, but you took me seriously; you understood my difficulties and had patience with the unformed, struggling thing that I was. You died before anything of mine was published, but I feel you wouldn't have been surprised. Ten out of ten for you, along with my heartfelt thanks.

Yours,
Maria