

First Two Pages Blog- The Centaur Project, Short Story

by Janice Law

I wrote *The Centaur Project*, published this spring in *Enter the Apocalypse* (Tanstaaf Press) many years ago. I thought it was a good story (I am often under that misapprehension) but while a couple of editors admired it, no one offered to give it a home. By the time I looked at it again, my computer no longer recognized the word processing program and I had to retype the whole thing.

After this commitment of time, I again looked for a home for the story and, happily, found one. Was I just unlucky originally? I begin to think not. When I decided on an animal/human hybrid as my chief narrator, Dolly the sheep and glow-in-the-dark rabbits were nowhere on the horizon, and I suspect that the technical business of creating Kao gave its first readers pause.

Today when biologists are on the far out horizons of science, there is not apt to be such squeamishness. Nonetheless, some difficulties with a mute narrator remain. How does one give speech to the speechless? Does one go stream of consciousness, perhaps selecting a totally unrealistic fluency? Or attempt something realistic that must necessarily remain sub-literary and probably uninteresting?

Two short sections illustrate both the problem and my solution. The first is the opening of the story:

Entry 1: observer, John Prichert, August 3, 2010, first word recognition experiment with genetically enhanced subject 4578. This subject is now eight years old and competent in

Ameslan, American Sign Language. A modified keyboard that produces audio and visual cues as well as large print characters was employed.

BanAnna. ApLe. Watr. Bred.

Clearly subject 4578 has a way to go before he can compose his memoirs. But though one would not want to read more than a few words of 4578's prose at this stage, the paragraph does convey quite a lot of information. We know the subject's age, and, while its species is uncertain we know that it has been "enhanced" and, perhaps as a result, is competent in American Sign Language. The session reports the start of a new experiment, involving subject 4578's learning to type, in itself suggesting higher order thinking.

By the second page of the story we have moved on to Entry 235. We now know the subject is called Kao and that he has progressed to a device with a computer screen. This scene also introduces the most important human character, Paula, a woman Kao finds sympathetic. When she asks him to start work, he responds:

*Kao write. What?
Tell me something. Something that happened in the past.
Happened- past? Kao saw John.
Yes, that's right. Anything else? Another happened- past?
Paula and Kao went into wood.
That's very good.
Tickle Kao.
All right.
Trees tall green. Kao climb swing whooo. Trees swing in
the dark like Kao swing. All green and dark. Kao fall into cage.*

At this point Kao has a certain command of English, although he is not fond of articles or adjectives in general. He is creative enough to make up compound words and he has a strong preference for present tense. By the end of the first two pages, we know that he is very fond of

Paula, that he has memories of a distressing nature, and that he almost certainly dislikes John, the other experimenter. We also know that he climbs trees easily and that at times he is confined to a cage.

From this point on, it was only a matter of developing Kao's particular diction. The simplicity of his vocabulary lent itself to repetition and a certain poetic compression which I hope compensated for the many things Kao could not know and had to leave unsaid.

One might ask why build a story around a creature with such obvious limitations. The positives may be clearer if I mention that *The Centaur Project* takes place at the time of some great disaster, most likely a nuclear attack, and that Kao is as close to an innocent but all seeing eye as I could devise.



Janice Law is an Edgar nominated novelist who also writes short stories and award winning non-fiction. Her most recent novels are *Afternoons in Paris* (mysteriouspress.com), and *Homeward Dove* (Wildside Press). She regularly publishes in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* and other mystery publications.

She lives with her husband, a retired sportswriter and teacher, in eastern Connecticut.

www.janicelaw.com