



SPRING 2010 • VOLUME 15 • NUMBER 1

# WHISPERED SORCERY

JAMES CARTER

# A WAY WITH WORDS



## WHISPERED SORCERY

James Carter introduces the main theme of this issue – the importance of writing in interpretation.

Writing is sorcery. Make a few squiggly marks on a piece of paper – like the ones you’re reading now – and you conjure images and ideas in your reader’s mind. The magic trick works because the squiggly marks represent sounds, and the sounds are words, and the words are linked to things, actions, thoughts and feelings. It’s amazing the system works at all; that our brains are capable of skimming the marks so quickly while making the abstract connections between them, the sounds they represent, and the shapes and dreams for which the sounds are just symbols.

RIGHT:  
**Written interpretation can spark  
 a conversation between visitors.**  
 © James Carter.



## THE RIGHT WORDS

In trying to conjure clear images, or powerful ideas and emotions, it's tempting to write with a breathless enthusiasm that we hope will transmit itself to our reader. But, there's a fine line between being enthusiastic and telling the reader how to feel. The right words often give the reader space: words are symbols, and symbols are powerful largely because of the personal meanings we attach to them. Powerful writing can often look deceptively simple.

## WITCHCRAFT AND ALCHEMY

If the chain of abstract symbols and associations that makes writing work is witchcraft, interpretation adds another layer of alchemy. The impressions we create through the text on panels, in exhibitions or on screens colour the reader's experience of a place. It's as if we're conjuring a pair of spectacles through which we invite the reader to look for a while, and that will let them see the place in ways they might not have thought of.

## WHISPERED WORDS

But all this conjuring has to be quick and subtle. Our writing isn't going to be studied in depth while the reader digests complex arguments: they'll skim across our words in a few moments and move on. We need to offer ways of seeing that will add to our reader's experience, but do so almost unnoticed. After all, visitors come to see the place, not to read our text. If our words get in the way of their experience, we've failed. At its best, interpretation is a whisper in the visitor's ear. It suggests ways of looking, plants seeds that may take root in the field of a visitor's own thoughts, while leaving them free to explore for themselves.

'THERE'S A FINE LINE BETWEEN  
 BEING ENTHUSIASTIC, AND  
 TELLING THE READER HOW  
 TO FEEL'

That means that interpreters really do have to be alchemists. We must weave common vocabulary and everyday language, words that can be scanned quickly and easily by a wide cross-section of readers, into a singing filigree of gold – writing that evokes ideas and impressions and makes this place, this moment, interesting.

## GOLD OR BASE METAL?

All alchemists dream of making gold, but interpretation too often has the dull thud of base metal. In an attempt to make sure their interpretation works, many organisations try to codify it. They write instructions for their alchemists, rule books designed to ensure the end result is precious. Text must have a reading age of x; it must follow the criteria developed by the Plain English Campaign; it must contain tangibles, intangibles and universal truths (a recommendation by the National Association of Interpretation in the USA).

These strictures have some value, but they are no guarantee that the spell will work. Reading-age tests are blunt instruments, useful for getting an impression of how complex text is but no way to gauge its likely effect on the reader. Plain English criteria remind us that writing must be easy to follow, but they were developed to make official publications more accessible: they have no room for the unusual, for rhythm, for the flash of inspiration that can really make a place come alive. Working with tangibles, intangibles and universal truths sounds great, but it can also be a recipe for text that sounds pious and twee. And it's an awful lot to ask of 200 words.

## GO WITH THE FLOW

If we want tests for what makes interpretive writing work, I think we need to look at qualities that are both less regimented and more demanding than any of the rules commonly applied to it. We also need to remember writing's roots as a way of representing speech. In the few moments that interpretation has to work its magic, text that could live as speech has more chance of making the connections we want. So, try reading your text out loud. Better still, give it to someone else to read out loud and listen carefully to what happens. Where do they stumble over the sense, or have to go back to check how a paragraph is unfolding? Writing that doesn't flow, that has no sense of rhythm or light and shade, is unlikely to live in your reader's mind.

Second, concentrate on how your words colour the way your reader will see the place. What sort of experience does the text invite them to have? Listen especially for words or phrases that are hollow, or trying too hard to make the visitor feel the way you do. Too many adjectives are a common problem here: use them carefully! Writing interpretation is like whispering a spell into your reader's ear – and every word in a spell needs a purpose.

**James Carter is an AHI Fellow and  
 Committee Member. He works as an  
 interpretative writer, planner, trainer  
 and photographer.**  
[james@jamescarter.cc](mailto:james@jamescarter.cc)