

Circular Storytelling

An international creative writing project

Three Engineering students from TU Delft and three French students from Université Lumière Lyon 2, Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3 and Université Paris 8 explore the world from the animal perspective while becoming first-time authors. An exercise in storytelling, creativity and empathy. Here are their stories.

Creative Writing Workshop held during the **International Forum on the Novel** (Lyon) by Matthew Neill Null, author of *Honey from the Lion* (Lookout, 2015) and *Allegheny Front* (Sarabande, 2016)

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Lemming Squad
by Aube Mézières (Université Paris 8, Political Science)

A feeling of emptiness invaded his body. Nothing above, nothing below. He looked down: the void. He looked up: the sky. All his landmarks were blurred. His hair was upwards. The air flattened his ears along his face. He tried to slow the movement down with his small paws but only looked like a flying squirrel.

The fall lasted forever. He could see some of his mates in the air, or already spread on the ground. A rain of stones knocked some of them over. How to avoid the rocks? How to avoid the final crash? Everything had gone so fast, timing was running off, he had no time to think, he had no time to understand. No one had ever hunted him like this.

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The film director entered the conference room. An oval table throned in the middle of the room. Around, ten men in suits. These were the men he ought to convince. Financiers, movie producers, Hollywood business executive. Today was the day, his heart already raced.

He repeated his speech once again in his head: « my documentary unveils an urban legend, it conveys a message of general interest ». No, it was not only an Indian rumor and he meant to prove it: lemmings were mass suicidal. He remembered his fist hike in the Glacier National Park when he was 12, where he saw three dead lemmings along the trail. At sunset, his dad had lit a fire and told him about the lemmings. To escape predators they migrated to death in group.

His intern had brought him research too: lemmings offered themselves to predators, they let themselves die of hunger, they dived in large rivers, they collectively jumped off a cliff.

The world had to see this. He already knew how big it was going to be: replays on the National Geographic channel, nomination in the best documentary festivals. For once his talent was about to get recognized.

He shook a last hand and slammed the conference room's door. In two months, he would be shooting in the Hardengar National Park in Norway. Partners agreed to fund his work. He pictured the movie poster on every billboard – “Suicide Squad”.

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It was a long day. He tirelessly scratched the snow, looking for its grass stocks. Everything else had dried around. An incredible heat hovered. The wind and sun had fully raked this mountainous plateau located at 1800 meters. Some patches of snow were still visible, but most of the panorama looked like a faded fresco. He was unused to this weather, his winter reserves were almost depleted and therefore he had to travel miles to feed. However, the grass was not really greener elsewhere.

It had not rained for two weeks. The whole alpine ecosystem did not adapt well to this brutal and sudden climate change. Deer had returned to the forest edge, a few hundred meters below, of the snails were only left their shells, predators like foxes were thinning day by day, even raptors got tired of soaring.

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The movie team painfully climbed the polished rock. Although they carried heavy and fragile materials, the director had refused to charter a helicopter.

Their last trip was a total disappointment; they had not seen any dead lemmings. In fact, the latter had mocked them during the all week of spotting, very much alive.

Once they got back to the hotel, the film director summoned his entire team. He ought to find a solution. No way he could renounce this project and give back the money to the producers. They believed in his talent, in the values he carried out. He could not let them down.

After exposing the situation, his team remained silent for a long time, eyes looking deeply at the ground. Then the first "assistant cameraman" said:

"Why don't we suicide them ourselves?"

"Meaning?"

"Well, first we could capture a bunch of lemmings and create a gloomy scenario that we would shoot. Like, we could release them by throwing them out of a cliff. "

A moment's silence again. Some thought it a joke and sketched a grin. The director stood up abruptly and yelled:

"That's an excellent idea! Yes, yes! Thank you! "

The next day at breakfast he briefed the team:

"I thought about what we discussed last night and I built up a plan. So, I ordered materials to create a centrifugal table that we'll dispose at the tip of the cliff. We'll set up cameras in different angles and leave the cameramen do their job whereas the rest of us will form a hunting crew. We'll rake the tundra in direction of the cliff, with a tight net to prevent animals from escaping. They won't have any other choice than to jump in the void. Ok? Did you all understand? Great! See you in five days. "

He really wanted to soak up the mountain, test his limits by engaging in a trek of tree days, nine hours of daily walking, 13 kilos on his back. His team was not trained; fortunately the four technicians who carried the heavy metal parts of the table were rather sturdy. They closed the march of this slow ascent.

At the end of these three days, the team had established their camp a few hundred meters from the sumptuous cliff. It fell steeply for 200 meters, directly overlooking a small stream. Technicians had set up the table without trouble in a few hours. Everything was ready for the morbid masquerade.

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Holed up in a thin out bush, he witnessed an odd scene. A lizard was facing him. He had never crossed one in such high altitudes. However, temperature had never reached such peaks.

The lizard jumped out of the bush, a snail without a shell in its mouth. He began to devour his prey. It was truly ferocious, carnivorous: the lizard's paws tore out snail parts as much as possible, his whole jaw working on crushing that already soft body.

Sometimes he fed with small insects or mollusks. Though, most of snails he had recently seen were empty shells. He kept staring at the lizard with interest and lust, not confident enough to try neither to steal his prey nor to attack him, although he was about 10 times his size.

Then everything froze. The lizard stopped abruptly, mummified. The ground was shaking. He looked in all directions. Nothing except a whiff of far off smoke. He was now alone.

He could feel something was wrong, so he stayed hidden in the bush, waiting for a change.

The roar grew louder. He heard steps, lots of steps, closer and closer. What could it be? He had never heard such a noise. It ought to be a big animal, drawn to this altitude because of the heat.

Another lemming passed in front of him, running for his life, so scared he didn't even see him. Was it time to migrate? So far he had always felt safe in this tundra. He had learnt how to ruse with foxes, how not to be seen by hawks.

Now, dozens and dozens of lemming, mice and rats ran in the same direction. Then he understood why.

He ran with all his strength through the tundra. He skidded on the gravel, sometimes tangled up in the muddy puddles, but he never stopped. He was on forced exile.

They came from everywhere, filled up all his field of view. About fifteens giant silhouettes hastened, bound by a web of threads. The view tightened. He could read the panic into his fellows' eyes; a huge noise burst all their landmarks. It was not the same grumble as before, when he understood what danger was coming for him. It seemed like an unnatural noise. Strident squeaks mixed with an earthquake. The more he ran the closer he was getting to the monstrous sound. The ground vibrated so much that he was projected in the air. Suddenly, a sort of huge, greyish, creaky rock rose before him. The awful squeaks came from it. He had no escape, the giant predators encircled him completely and he had no choice but to imitate his congeners and jump on the rock. He got immediately swept into the sky by a centrifugal force against which he could not fight. His legs flew off the ground in a split second and he was thrown into space. He understood he was on a high-speed fall. The cliff, his tundra, his natural habitat, his life: it was all behind.

- "Cut! Cut! Ok guys, that was great! I think we're all good! I look at the rushes tonight but I'm pretty sure we won't need to shoot more tomorrow. Let's uninstall the centrifugal table".