

# TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 24

## With Reference To

Application forms from candidates can often provide moments of frivolous charm. References from outsiders can provoke guffaws of exquisite comedy. Both are usually unintended consequences....although some, one suspects have a certain self-contained malice. These were usually where previous Heads had been really put out by his/her colleague but dare not admit this openly in print. Such references could be revealing in mysterious ways. And if the language of some candidates' applications does not always help the candidate's chances, the innuendo in some references can seal the deal...one way or another! 'Comedy gold,' headteacher Marcus Brampton used to call them

Marcus recalls one (it is the complete letter) which rivals any for succinctness...and relevant information.

*'Dear Mr Lowe,  
Mr X arrives at 9.00am and leaves at 4.00pm. What he does in between I have not yet discovered. Yours sincerely'*

The next one he pulled out of his folder was more enigmatic. Perhaps a 'not' had got missed out along the way!

*'I have been a friend of Mr X for 15 years and am sure you are likely to have many better candidates than him.'*

This was followed by a reference for a first teaching post in textiles. It got a grade A from Marcus - for enthusiasm about the candidate.

*'Miss Y enchanted us last year with her attractive exhibition of underwear. This year she has done some fantastic things in boots.'*

It conjured up an image that Marcus considered unworthy of himself. He wanted to interview her - but was dissuaded by more circumspect colleagues. Hers were not the skills they wanted apparently.

Then for a junior post which required a bit of administrative experience Marcus received this accolade.

*'I am not sure that Mr X has had the requisite administrative experience you are looking for. A colleague has reminded me that he was responsible for the student union bar three nights a week. But I suspect this might not be what you are looking for.'*

And one similar to the above was the following.

*'Miss Y shows promise as a drama teacher. She got fully involved in student activities and had the responsibility for decorating the hall for the annual student ball.'*

One of Marcus's colleague Heads sent him a copy of a reference from a candidate's neighbour at home, which demonstrates the danger of asking any old neighbour or friend for a reference. Best to check what they are going to say before they send it.

*'Mr X worked part-time for me before going to university. I do not know whether he will make a good teacher, but he did a jolly good job of cleaning my car. I imagine he has the right attitude for a teacher.'*

His colleague sent others, too. They bore a marked similarity to the ones he had been taken by already.

One read.

*Thank you for your request for a reference for Mr. X in relation to his application for the post of Head of RE. I would love to be able to write on his behalf, sadly I can't.*

Another lamented:

*Mrs. X shows excellent teaching qualities so long as she is not in the presence of pupils.*

References from abroad can be paragons of carefully thought-out support, but the reader does often have to be skilled in interpreting the nuances. Marcus remembers this one from the war-torn Vietnam, before Saigon's name was changed.

*Esteemed Sir or Honoured Lady,  
This is a statement of the qualities of Mr John Doe whom I remember well at the International Fine Arts Academy in Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City. when he was in my department for a few, very long, months.*

*He was a well-travelled person, always finding a fresh impetus to move on, as you will have noticed from his application. He went on many courses, too, which we were glad about, as some of them had relevance to his teaching.*

*Saigon was full of trouble at that time. The school had many unruly pupils, whose fathers were away fighting, but they rarely got him down – except for one occasion when they tied him to a desk. This strained his sense of humour and sense of vocation. They had nothing against him personally as he is a very likeable person, but he did seem to inspire high spirits in the young.*

*Anyway, his response to this indignity was to set upon his own initiative temper-control therapy groups. They did not work because the older students refused to give up their rifles and grenades.*

*Although he was engaged to teach art he often strayed into the challenge of teaching teenagers the psycho-philosophical political analysis of cryptic socialist depiction. Sadly it tended to be a bit above the heads of our students for whom English was a second language.*

*I would expect him to make his mark on your school as he did ours, and to leave it largely as he found it.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Head of Art*

*Marcus had felt....for a moment....that he would like to meet this character-ful man, but suppressed his curiosity when he was reminded by the school bursar of the price of a return ticket to the Far East.*

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