



Learn English Through Stories

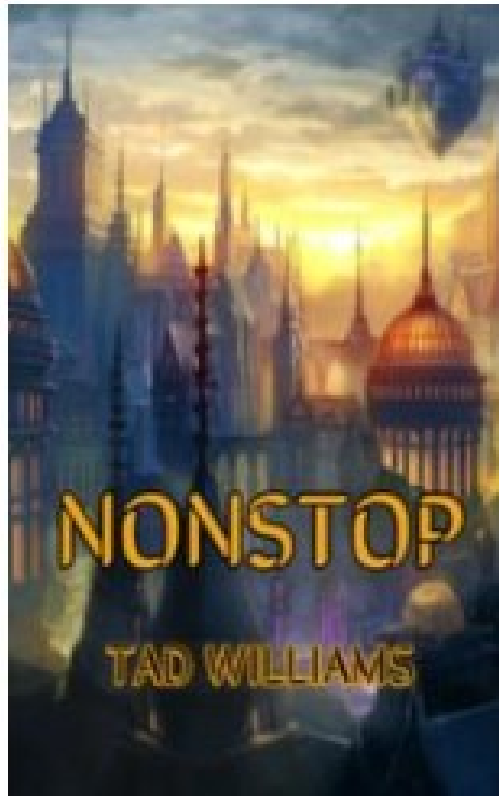
B1+ Novels and Stories

Intermediate Level

Adapted and modified by

Kulwant Singh Sandhu

<https://learn-by-reading.co.uk>



Nonstop

By Tad Williams

Henry Stankey hated flying. Actually, "hate" was perhaps the wrong word. Hatred implied anger, active resistance; hatred was a type of control. Airplane flight filled Stankey with the kind of helpless despair he sometimes imagined must have poisoned the air of Belsen and Treblinka; he only felt anger when he looked around the boarding area at his complacent fellow passengers, slumped in identical airport chairs like an exhibition of soft sculptures, their faces bored, uncaring, flattened into shadowlessness by the fluorescent lights. As he stared, he could feel moisture again between his hand and the chair's plastic arm. He ground his palm on the knees of his corduroys and was miserable. Why hadn't Diana come?

Stankey hated himself for needing his wife this way - not for herself, but as a handholder, a nursemaid. When she had told him that her boss was out sick with strep throat, that they couldn't do without her at the office and that he would have to go to Dallas by himself, he had wanted to reach out and shake her. She knew he couldn't cancel out this late; he'd already paid good money to ship his artwork to the hotel. He'd also used his scant funds to pay convention fees. He had to go. Diana knew how much he hated flying, dreaded it, yet she had chosen to stay and help out her boss Muriel rather than him.

The night she told him, he had not slept well. He had dreamed of cattle herded up a ramp-eye-rolling, idiot cattle bumping against each other as they were prodded into a dark boxcar.

The Thursday afternoon flight out of San Francisco was terrible. He almost took a couple of the Valium hidden deep in his pocket in a twist of Saran Wrap. Only the compelling thought that the plane might catch fire on the runway, that the panicking crew and passengers might leave him behind in drugged sleep, prevented him from taking the tranquilizers. Instead, as he always did, he clutched the lucky talisman hidden beneath his shirt-he was ashamed of it, really: a hide bolo tie Diana had brought back from New Mexico, where her aged parents lived in a trailer camp-clutched it and willed the aircraft down the run-way. Sweaty hand clasped on chest, he forced the plane up off the tarmac through sheer force of mind, dragging it aloft as the other passengers stared unconcernedly out the small windows, or read gaudy paperbacks, or slept (slept!).

Once the jet was in the air, he began his terrified drill: smoothing the turbulence, wishing away dangerous crosswinds, tensing his legs so as to put the minimum amount of weight down on the cabin floor and avoid the laboring vibrations of the plane's underpowered, overtaxed engines. Fortunately, the passenger by the window-Henry always got an aisle seat-was one of those nerveless clods who dozed through flights, and did not have his window blind open. Stankey was spared the additional stress of watching the plane's wings dipping and bucking crazily, straining to break free from the fuselage.

No one who did not feel as he did about flying realized what a strenuous job it was: three hours in the air, head flung back and eyes closed, white-knuckled hand wrapped around the hidden bolo-charm, forcing his mind through an endless circle of airy, buoyant thoughts-helium, swans down, drifting dandelion puffs. At every bump or shudder his heart began to speed even more swiftly; he had to redouble his efforts to smooth interference away, to guide the plane back once more to the path of least resistance.

The landing was the worst part.

As the captain's (infuriatingly bland) voice announced the beginning of descent, and the plane nosed downward at a sickening angle, Henry Stankey pulled back on his seat arms until his wrists ached. The pitched whine of the engines mounted to a panicky scream, and he felt himself gradually lifting from the chairseat, gravity in temporary abeyance like that time - the one and only time - he had ridden the old roller coaster at Playland-by-the-Sea. His heart climbed into his chest, his stomach pressed against the bottom of his lungs - but the man across from him was reading a newspaper! Calmly extinguishing a cigarette! Henry closed his eyes again.

The seemingly endless fall ended at last. There was a momentary sensation of leveling out; the wheels touched, lifted, then hit the ground once more with the full weight of the plane upon them. At once, an even more terrible squalling started up as the pilot desperately tried to stop the hurtling plane before it skidded off the end of the runway into the terminal, to explode in sun-hot flames.

It didn't explode this time, but rather rolled down the Texas tarmac to a final stop. The distorted voice of a woman on the PA system gabbled something at the unheeding customers, who were already up and shouldering their luggage

down from the overhead compartments, laughing and chattering and pushing up the aisle. Back. Stankey hung limply in his chair. His shirtfront was creased and sweat-stained where he had clutched his lucky bolo - but it had worked! Again, somehow beyond all hope he had gotten through, kept the plane up, then lowered it once more to the stable earth.

As the panic began to recede, he sensed the high-water mark of his fear; although he had struggled to hold it back, the terror seemed to have crept higher than ever before. He felt as though he had been beaten up and left lying on a downtown sidewalk.

Damn Diana for deserting him! Damn her!

After getting into his hotel room and showering the sour odor of perspiration from his body, he slept for an hour - a dark, heavy sleep that nevertheless smoothed some of the cramping from his limbs and back. By the time he got to the conference room where the art show would be, ascertained that his paintings had indeed arrived and began to set them up in his assigned corner, a feeling of mild elation began to well inside him. He had made it by himself, without Diana, and now could look forward to tonight, Friday, and Saturday before he would need to begin thinking about the flight back. A tiny smile worked at the corners of his mouth as he tacked his paintings into their frames and fussed with the arrangement; it was good to feel good again.

These conventions were important to him (of course they must be, he went through Hell to get to them); they were a priceless opportunity to have his artwork noticed, to touch base with people who could steer jobs his way and help him to break through. He had been just getting by for too long - that was the worst thing about free-lancing: the never-knowing, the waiting... waiting for an offer on a cover-bid, waiting for calls back, waiting to see if a project would hold together long enough to get him a guarantee, a kill-fee... He was grateful for the lightening of spirit he was suddenly feeling; it was hard enough to make a living without scaring people away on top of it.

It turned out to be a fairly good convention. Several people praised his work; he sold two small paintings, a large pen and ink, and a few smallish sketches. Roger Norrisert of Lemuria Press dropped some large hints about an upcoming cover-and-illos possibility for a projected special printing of a Manly Wade Wellman book.

Thursday and Friday passed quickly in a blurry montage of handshakes and nametag squinting and several cheerfully tipsy conversations in the hotel lounge. Both nights he slept deeply, dreamless interludes that did much to restore his normally affable outlook. Eating breakfast at a table splashed with Saturday morning sunlight, he remembered that there were indeed things he liked about conventions.

That night Stankey went with Norrisert and a couple of writers to a Cajun restaurant downtown where they sat up late, swapping stories and drinking beer. Henry got pretty tight, and did not wake until late Sunday morning.

It had not been a pleasant night. He had tossed and twitched, pulling the sheets loose from the mattress. Waking sometime after four in the morning from a dream of choking (faulty oxygen mask, hole in the hose, smoke everywhere), he had found his lucky New Mexico string tie twisted tightly around his neck, bruising his throat. After worrying it, loose with sleep-clumsy fingers he had pushed it into the pocket of his jacket, which hung on a chair beside his rumpled bed.

Later, after dawdling around the hotel for a couple of bleak hours watching the Cowboys and the New Orleans Saints play an endless game of exchanged turnovers, and after laboriously packing and labeling his flats, he found himself with nothing to do for an hour and a half until the shuttle bus, like Charons ferry, would whisk him away to the airport. To the waiting airport.

The hotel bar was almost empty, the last knots of conventioners clumped around small tables, luggage at their feet. Stankey saw no one that he recognized; he could think of no excuse to introduce himself, to join a conversation and enlist support in his battle against reflection. The prospect of the flight home had risen from its temporary grave and was groping for attention with clammy fingers. Against his better judgment- needle-sharp, reflexes were vital in combating the treacherous, gravity-embracing tendencies of airplanes - Henry ordered a vodka tonic and nursed it as he sat in a corner seat trying to read a Ramsey Campbell book.

The drink was a good idea. It soothed the ragged edges of his thoughts; he felt it working like aftershave lotion on a just-shaved face, stripping away the heat, quieting scratchy nerves - well, after all, aftershave was alcohol, too. He thought, a little cavalierly, of just ordering another drink, but he knew that was

the lulling effect of the first one at work. He could not afford to be that relaxed: he was needed, even if the other passengers never realized it.

Still, the one drink had been a good idea. The Campbell novel had not. The dank, depressing Liverpool setting and the hopelessly phobic thoughts of the characters made Stankey feel a little sick. He put the book down after thirty pages or so and stared out the window at the hotel parking lot, toying with the slowly melting ice in his glass.

The bus came. It took him, tightlipped and silent, to the airport, and left him there. On the walkway outside the terminal he could already feel the acid gnawing at his stomach, the placating effects of the vodka-tonic evaporated by harsh lights and disembodied, inflectionless voices, by the chill, echoing vastness of the place. He carried his hand luggage to the boarding area - no massive suitcase in the hold for him: why make the plane any heavier than it had to be? - and stood in line between a Mexican woman with a screaming child and a boy in a baseball cap who, except for his drooping, morons mouth, could have been a Norman Rockwell character. Some of the other passengers were talking about something he could not quite catch-the flight? - But he would not be distracted. At last, he reached the front of the line, put his ticket on the counter, and was told by the female mannequin in the royal blue vest that the plane was delayed: it would be an hour and twenty-five minutes late taking off.

She might as well have hit him with a hammer. His defenses were keyed up, he was wound tight as a mountain climber's rope- and now this! He wanted to shout, to screech at this incomprehending woman with her twinkly Rose Parade smile. Turning hurriedly, he lurched to the high window where he leaned against a pillar and willed his heart to slow down.

He-would-be-calm. He-would-be-calm.

When he felt a little more in control, he went to the payphone to call Diana, to tell her he would be late. No one answered at home. It was hard not to feel betrayed.

So he sat, staring out at the now-darkening sky, trying not to watch the technicians scurrying like parasites beneath the bodies of the big jets. This was the last time, he vowed to himself. Never again. Other artists and writers got by without having to leave home. He could take the train if he really needed to

go anywhere, even though it took days. It was ridiculous to scourge himself this way. Nothing in life was worth this kind of sick fear.

An announcement about his flight crackled over the PA system. The message was hard to make out, but he was positive he had heard the words "mechanical difficulties." When he demanded to know what had been said, the woman at the counter-looking a little amused - confirmed that he had indeed heard that numbing phrase, that such in fact was the reason the jet had been delayed in Atlanta. But, she told him, it was in the air now and would arrive soon. Under sharp questioning about the nature of the "difficulties", she professed ignorance, but assured him that everything was being taken care of. This time he went back to his window even more slowly, like a man mounting thirteen steps to the gibbet. The counterwoman favored his retreat with a condescending smile.

Damn the bitch. And damn Diana too, for good measure.

At last, the plane arrived. Stankey, squinting suspiciously through the high boarding area windows, could see nothing overtly wrong - but that, of course, meant nothing. He would never see the loose bolts that would vibrate free and drop the engine like a stone, never detect the fault in the landing gear that would snap the wheel off on contact and send the jet sliding to flaming oblivion. He boarded, a stale taste in his mouth, and found his way to seat 21, near the back of the plane. After stowing his shoulder bag, he sat down and promptly fastened his seat belt, then reached his hand up to his breastbone to feel for the lucky bolo tie hanging beneath his shirt.

It wasn't there.

He checked the pockets of his jacket, which disgorged keys, wallet, ticket folder, receipts, and matchbooks... but no good-luck talisman. In a growing panic, he unbuckled his lap belt and sprang up, nearly knocking over the crew-cutted businessman seating himself across the aisle. Stankey jerked open the overhead compartment and levered out his bag, opening it across his lap to rummage through the carefully folded shirts and socks. The Mexican woman in the seat before him shifted her wet-mouthed baby to look over her shoulder at him as he cursed to himself, emptying the bag with trembling hands. The bolo tie was nowhere inside. Henry could dimly remember taking it off in the night and putting it in the pocket of his jacket - but he was wearing that jacket now. He searched the pockets again, fruitlessly.

As he sat in the wreckage of his meticulous packing, a pert-faced stewardess leaned over to ask if he needed any help. Unable to speak, he shook his head and began to stow the clothing back into the bag, dislodging a stack of convention giveaway magazines, which slithered to the floor. He excoriated himself and his disability as he crouched on the cabin floor picking them up. A middle-aged woman in a parka waited impatiently for him to finish so she could get past to the window seat. As she slid by, he forced the repacked bag into the compartment, then slumped back into his chair.

What could he do? The damned bolo must have fallen out on the hotel floor, must even now be in the pocket of some maid, or lying unnoticed behind the bed. He knew how much he needed it. It had gotten him through every miserable one of the dozen or so flights he had taken in the last five years - even the one to Wisconsin where the turbulence had been so bad the seatbelt sign never went off. It had gotten him through Thursday's flight, the first one he had ever taken without Diana. Now he had neither his wife nor his lucky talisman.

He thought seriously for a moment of simply getting up and walking off the plane, but he knew that was a foolish idea. He would still have to get back to San Francisco somehow, the expensive airline ticket would be wasted, and he would miss the Monday afternoon meeting with Janicos from Beltane Books... No, he would have to stay on the flight. Again, he cursed his poverty, his childish fears, his treacherous wife.

The final passengers had boarded, and the doors were being shut. The compact thump of the vacuum seal sounded like the coffin lid of the Premature Burial. He could see the stewardesses walking down the aisle, checking to make sure the compartment doors were closed - trim, blue-skirted death angels, hair shining in the cabin lights. Henry unbuckled his belt again and scrambled out into the aisle, moving quickly to the lavatory.

In the narrow room, scarcely even a closet, he felt the surge of claustrophobia. Why had he come back here? His face in the small mirror looked pale, haunted; he turned back toward the door. It all felt like a terrible dream, a grinding nightmare which he could not shut off.

He remembered the Valium in his pocket.

Maybe I can take one of these, he thought.... No, better yet, take two, take three or four, sleep through the whole damned flight. If it catches fire on takeoff, so what? I'll never know.

But how would the plane stay aloft? He knew, somewhere in his fevered thinking, that planes traveled every day without him on board - lifted off, flew, and landed without Henry Stankey's straining intercession. It could fly while he slept, just this once... couldn't it?

Yes, planes did that, but he hadn't been on one that had. He had always worked like a dray-horse to keep them aloft, pulled them along through the turbulent winds that sought to batter them to the ground like badminton birds. Could he relinquish that control?

He had to. Otherwise, he would never make it - he knew that as a certainty. Without Diana, it had been nearly impossible; without either wife or talisman, it was flatly inconceivable. And if he couldn't manage the strain, wouldn't it be better not to see the last moments coming? To sleep a narcotized sleep through the screeching final seconds? He was disgusted by his own spinelessness, by his desertion of his fellow passengers who (although they didn't know it) would be deprived his valuable assistance in keeping the plane safe and themselves ignorant and happy... but there was no alternative he could see. None.

Hands moist with fear-sweat, he unpeeled the plastic-wrapped pills and plucked two out of the jumble. After a moment's consideration, he took up another pair, then downed them all with a swallow of water from the tiny sink. Wrapping the remainder, he stumbled back to his seat. The plane was beginning to roll, heading toward the takeoff site. As he wedged himself into place and cinched the belt tightly across his lap, he wondered if the pills would take long to kick in. He knew he would have to get through at least the beginning without help.

The jet gathered speed down the runway, engines howling like late-night-movie Indians bent on massacre, and Stankey's hand rose reflexively to his chest. There was, of course, no charmed bolo tie to grasp. He clutched his lapel instead, crushing the material into a wet, wrinkled knot. Straining, heaving, the plane forced its way upward. By some miracle, it broke from the ground's cruel pull and mounted up at a fierce angle to the waiting sky.

Henry Stankey, tendons stretched like violin strings, waited for either the sickening lurch of lost altitude or the now desperately- awaited onset of drowsiness. Drowsiness won. By the time, the aircraft had leveled out six miles or so above the earth's hidden surface, he could feel languor beginning to creep over him, as though a warm, wooly blanket was settling over his body. His muscles unknotted. His breathing slowed. The woman sitting by the window a seat away looked at him sharply, questioningly. Henry, growing groggier by the moment, was even able to muster a thin smile. The woman turned away. The drone of the airplane made him feel as though he rode the night in a great, glowing beehive...

It seemed that he had to claw his way up from sleep. The tarbaby grip of the Valium held him back, but a part of his mind knew that he was urgently needed: even as he clambered up from unconsciousness he could feel the plane lurching and rocking, the cabin rattling like a toy in a child's fist. He opened his eyes, fighting for wakefulness... and knew he had been right. All his fears were now confirmed - he should never have taken those pills, never have relinquished control! He moaned, straining to dislodge the tendrils of sleep.

The faces of his fellow passengers told all. This time no one was reading unconcernedly or chatting with neighbors. Like Stankey, they gripped their seat arms and stared straight ahead as the plane bucked and swerved. Eyes stared darkly from pale faces. The Mexican woman clutched her sobbing baby; Henry could hear her voice moving in the urgent, rhythmic cadences of prayer.

A sudden lurch and the plane plummeted, a drop that seemed to last minutes, like the freefall of an amusement park ride. One woman's voice rose in a brief, muffled shriek. The plane bottomed out, climbed a moment, stabilized. There was none of the usual nervous laughter; the heaving and the battering side-to-side swaying continued. Above the tense muttering of the passengers, Stankey heard the voice of the captain on the intercom. Even as he spoke, the stewardesses hurried down the aisle to the back of the plane.

There was another sickening plunge, and a meal tray tumbled out of a passenger's grip to carom down the aisle, scattering food everywhere. The flight attendants did not even look down as they made their way back to their own seats to strap in. To Henry, this was the grimmest proof of all.

Was it too late? He strained outward with his mind, murky thoughts wrestling with the shivering plane and its staggering attempts to defy gravity. For a

moment, he thought he could do it. The lights blinked on and off, the captain's voice gargled through the cabin... fasten seat belts, stay calm... turbulence... Henry concentrated his will, fighting treacherous sleepiness; the plane seemed to settle a bit, its passage momentarily smoothed. The shuddering became less. Almost without knowing Stankey relaxed - just a little, the most minute's concession to the downward drag of the medication - and lost it.

The plane heaved like a gutshot dinosaur and rolled to one side. Several of the overhead compartments burst open, vomiting luggage on the shouting passengers. Suitcases somersaulted down the aisle in slow motion; a blind man's cane, folded in segments, accordioned out from his seat to fly end over end through the cabin like a bizarre albino insect. The airplane hung for a moment on its side: Stankey felt himself dangling across his seat arm, sliding toward the gap-mouthed face of the woman by the window. The glass behind her looked out on black, formless emptiness. The plane nosed down so steeply that it seemed to Henry the passengers near the front of the cabin had fallen down a hole, a hole from which he was being dragged by some fierce power, pulled back against his seat, chest and lungs crushed in a giant's grip. The cabin was suddenly a lively Hell of flailing arms and flying objects. A woman's faint voice screamed: heads down heads down heads down...! The turbine shriek of the wind buried all other sounds; the mouths that gaped and worked without words joined their last cries to the panicked roar of the plummeting airplane. Sound cutting through his head like a jigsaw, Stankey screamed too - screamed out his despair and terror, screeched out wordless curses at what fate, his wife, his own fear had done to him. He struggled to force himself up against the shocking, smashing pressure of pitched descent. It wasn't fair! He had tried everything! He had to take the pills,

couldn't have kept the plane up this time! Why?! Why?!
Whywhywhywhywhywhywhywhy...

Impact

Time... is... stopping.

Henry feels himself standing at last... a man at last... on his feet. He is thrown forward - his flight as inexorable but unhurried as the slide of a black-ice glacier (time now creeping as slowly as eroding stone)-forward like a stop-motion film of a plant growing, unfolding, hurtling forward but barely moving... The passengers around him are a frozen flash photograph, eyes bulging... suitcases

hang in the air like corpuscles in the clear ichor of a god's arteries. The walls of the plane wrinkle, contract around him, surge toward the nose; the seats fold forward like a row of dominoes, the passengers folding with them - slowly, slowly, like a child's pop-up book being carefully closed.

Stankey, unfettered, is passing through them all now, flowing remorselessly forward, sliding through the dividing substance of passengers and objects like a bullet tumbling through a sand castle. The way opens before him, a kaleidoscopic mandala of blood and bone and fabric and torn metal - a succession of slow-blooming, intricate flowers through which he tumbles like a bee in melting amber. His journey to the crystalline heart of the petals takes millennia.

Slower now, slower... matter bunching up, molecule on static molecule...

Dense.

Denser.

Densest...

>

...Until Time itself falls behind his ultimate slowness, until only the remembrance remains, the memory of the light years of waiting before the next tick of atomic decay and then he is through...

The morgue attendant slides the drawer back in. The widow is led out by friends; her shoulders heave.

When she is gone, he pulls the drawer out again and stares at the body. He twitches the sheet aside to look at the bruised pelvis, the mottled black and yellow bars where the victim broke the seatbelt across his own body struggling to rise from his seat.

The airline says that the victim had slept through the whole flight until the last descent, when he began to shout and writhe in his sleep, in the depths of an unbreathable dream. Unwaking, he had struggled with the seat. With gravity, with the belt itself until he snapped it loose - the heavy canvas torn by a near-incomprehensible strength - and had stood shouting in the aisle, eyes shut. When the wheels touched the runway, the airline representative said, the man had screamed once and fallen forward, dead.

The attendant looks the body up and down and shakes his head. He slides it back inside on near-silent rollers. A heart attack, they say. Extreme shock and terror, they say.

So, the attendant wonders, why is the corpse smiling?

...he has come through - and Henry Stankey is no more. He is a mote of light passing through a radiant universe, speeding through unending brightness.

And flying is a joy.

- THE END -