

Young Writers Project

2018 to 2021

Kids' Own Publishing
Partnership
with
Associate Writer
Mary Branley



Bryonie
Reid



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs



INTRODUCTION

Kids' Own Publishing Partnership embarked on a project to support and nurture young writers in 2018. Writer Mary Branley, a Kids' Own associate, had spoken with then Creative Director Jo Holmwood of her desire to develop a long-term writing project with young people. Supporting this vision, Kids' Own secured funding from the Reconciliation Fund, administered by the Republic of Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs, An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha. The project was designed on a cross-border basis, to bring together young people from Derry and Letterkenny and their hinterlands to work with Mary. Partnering with Donegal County Council Library Service and NI Libraries, Kids' Own established a group in Letterkenny and a group in Derry, and the two were brought together to launch the project. Mary carried out eight further sessions with each separately. Mary explains that the Letterkenny-based group joined the project already writing, and took to the process she offered easily and enthusiastically. By contrast, the Derry-based participants were not writers. They were recruited from a youth group in nearby Strathfoyle. Mary recalls, 'there were a lot of things going on' for these young people, and they were preoccupied especially by the high rate of suicide in Derry¹. Many people took their own lives by jumping from the Foyle Bridge. The bridge was the young people's main route into Derry's Cityside, and Mary saw how sensitive they were to its other uses. As she notes, 'we couldn't get off the bridge for the entire eight weeks'². The Strathfoyle group struggled to commit to sessions, and to write. In the end they produced messages for the bridge and letters

to their local MPs and MLAs, contributing these to a broadsheet publication of work from this stage of the project.

For the next iteration of the project, Kids' Own and Mary partnered with Derry Central Library's education officer, who was able to focus on recruiting young writers through relationships with the local schools. The Letterkenny-based group continued, and the new Derry-based group met for the first time in early February 2020. This time, Mary says, the young people 'took off writing the minute they got in the door'³. Unfortunately, only three in-person sessions took place before the first coronavirus-induced lockdowns came into force in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Google Classroom and Google Chat groups were set up so that Mary and the participants could keep in touch. Mary offered one-to-one sessions to each of the young writers, but these were not a satisfactory substitute. As Mary says, 'if a group is a group, it can't work when it's splintered'. Eventually, in September 2020, sessions were resumed via Zoom, an online meeting platform enabling participants to attend virtually from their own homes. Mary developed a consistent format for the sessions, whether online or in-person. The young writers arrive, briefly chat with Mary and each other, write privately for a set period, come together again and read their work aloud, give and receive feedback, chat some more, say goodbye and leave. Though Zoom was 'better than nothing', it was 'not as good as the meet-ups'.⁴ Nonetheless, Mary points out that the one great advantage of the online platform was that it brought the groups together week after week.

¹ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 27th May 2021.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 9th November 2021.

In the almost three years the project has been running some young writers have stepped back, other young writers have joined, and despite the challenges to meeting and connecting presented by the global pandemic, the group remains close, cohesive and active. In summer 2021 I was asked to carry out research on the young writers' group. I talked and listened to Mary and the participants and observed live and recorded sessions.

Those who facilitate and participate in a project can tell rich and nuanced

stories of how it came about, how it operates, what works and what does not work and what it means to them. Those are the stories I was privileged to receive and which I pass on here. The purpose of this report is not only to present findings, but to reflect.

I present the stories under themes which emerged as significant in the listening and observing process, and offer some further thoughts about the strengths of the project in conclusion.

A SAMPLE SESSION

Isatinonasessionoftheyoungwriters'group on 27th May 2021, and give my description of it here as a preliminary to reflecting on the project as a whole.⁵ This session was conducted via Zoom. When I am admitted, Mary and several of the young writers are talking. Kids' Own Project Manager Ciara Gallagher is present, providing and administering the Zoom space. She offers Mary strategic, structural and practical support throughout the project. Having been involved from the start, she knows the young writers and they speak easily with her. There is a lot of laughter. Mary asks what writing (if any) the young people did during the week. Louise wrote between classes. Anna is working on a poem, some short stories, and three long pieces which are probably novels, she says. Rebecca tells everyone she has begun a part-time course in customer service. Mary breaks off to introduce me, suggesting I will present another way to look at and understand the young writers' group. She speaks of how the group kept going, 'somehow or other', during

lockdown, maintaining an 'extraordinary output'. She quips, 'when we're not writing we like to talk about writing', and explains, 'we get to know each other through the writing'. Mary appreciates the longevity of the project, since, as she says, 'we're only really getting to know each other after six or eight weeks – and then the fun starts'. Ciara steps back once the session has got going, turning off her microphone and camera. She will reappear if needed, but as it happens remains quietly in the background until the end, coming back then to say goodbye and close the session.

Mary asks the young people to take their writing time, and they disappear behind switched-off cameras and microphones. While we wait, Mary and I talk. I ask whether I am preventing her from writing alongside the young people, and she says no, she does not write when they do. If she was facilitating an adult group, she would write with them, but when facilitating young people, she keeps her head clear

⁵ All quotes and reported speech in this section were noted from listening to participants on 27th May 2021. Where pseudonyms are used, participants chose them.

of her own work. She recalls handing out journals and pens at the first session with the young people from Donegal and telling them to get writing, which they promptly did. She notes that many of them channel their creativity in multiple ways: as well as writing, they might make music, or film or visual art. We move to talking of the challenges of lockdown. When the time Mary was contracted to offer the young writers ran out, she kept the Zoom sessions going from November 2020 to March 2021 of her own volition, three per month. She points out that during lockdowns, 'there's nothing going on in my life, nothing going on in their lives'. After Mary and I have been chatting for around half-an-hour, the young people begin to return, switching on microphones and webcams again and appearing on-screen. As they filter in, Mary asks them how they have got on with the writing today, and a very thoughtful and sophisticated discussion is had about the nature of writing and the specifics of each writer's process.

Mary mostly prompts analysis and reflection through questions, but offers an insight here and there, such as 'having had a piece published, it makes you think more about how to finish it'. She gives some gentle reassurance and advice about the importance of waiting for what will emerge while writing, based on her own experience. When everyone has come back and had a chance to be heard and receive a response from Mary, she begins the next part of the session, asking one writer after another to read what they have written in the previous half-hour.

I find the reading compelling. The writing ranges far and wide in terms of content and form, and is read very ably and expressively by its authors. The richness of their imaginations and the seriousness with which they approach exploring and

communicating their ideas is immediately evident. Feedback comes through questions about and interpretations – emotional and intellectual – of each piece. The young people share both verbally and in the Zoom session's chat function.

Comments are consistently encouraging and kind, and there is a strong awareness of everyone's vulnerability as writers and readers.

Rebecca forewarns the group a couple of times on the chat that she has written something 'weird'. When she reads it, Mary's initial response is, 'I am wondering who is speaking, because there's such a strong, powerful voice there'. Then she muses, 'Rebecca always seems to write from a very high dimension', and Rebecca agrees, explaining, 'I'm floating constantly'. Louise describes the piece as 'hypnotic', while John detects 'a kind of mystical mystery to it'. Mary asks some questions, on whether Rebecca's pieces join together and if she knows before she begins what she is going to write, and based on the answers reflects that Rebecca seems to receive a voice and write what it says without stopping to question herself. Then Mary asks Rebecca to direct the feedback, so that she can get what she needs or wants from sharing the piece. When Anna and John read, Mary reminds them to go slowly, 'so we can get every word'. Patchy internet connections cause the audio to fail from time to time for some participants, and Mary has to ask John to repeat his final couple of paragraphs. As well as asking each writer to seek the feedback they need, Mary asks how they feel after reading their work. Louise's writing is heavy with dialogue, and her voice and accent shift as she channels each character's words. Mary tells her, 'I thought that dialogue was superb... you really used that dialogue to gallop forward and explain things'. AJ laughs as she lets Louise know how much she enjoyed listening. The group

agree that Louise's use of strong language was sensitive: appropriate, sparing and properly shocking. Louise says, 'I always do feel... better after I've read a piece out', half-joking that 'people have to listen'.

When it comes to AJ's turn to read, she is in fact still writing and asks for a few minutes to finish. The group chat while they wait. Mary reminds the group that they will receive new members shortly, and discusses how to welcome them. Meeting on Zoom means they cannot share sweets or cakes, as they used to, nor the journal and pen Mary brings to in-person sessions for each writer. John suggests posting each new member a box of tea, and Rebecca says maybe just a few tea bags. Mary reiterates the group's process – 'we meet, we chat, we write, we read, we feed back' – and the young writers chime in with 'you get feedback and you don't feel awful'. Louise notes that though she feels very self-conscious meeting new people, she knows that they can be put at their ease by being asked about their interests. Mary wonders

whether a discussion of influences would be a way to break the ice. This has been done before, successfully. She points to John's ability to detect influences in other people's writing, beginning his feedback with 'that reminds me of', and generally being exactly right.

AJ is ready at last, and reads her piece with vivid expression. It is a long piece, taking more than 10 minutes to read out loud. Louise's feedback is very engaged and enthusiastic, demonstrating close involvement with the plot and characters. AJ explains how the piece came together, beginning without knowing what she was going to write and finding flow. She knows it needs editing, but looks forward to that. She is palpably energised. Mary sees it is seven o'clock and asks if anyone wants to share other news. When no one does, to finish the session Mary asks Anna to read the poem she wrote last week. AJ says she would like to hear that poem every day, telling Anna, 'it makes me so happy hearing your poems'.

MARY BRANLEY

It is clear that Mary, in her person and practice, is foundational to the young writers' group. Mary is a writer of prose memoir and poetry. As a long-standing associate of *Kids' Own*, she has been involved in writing 30 publications with children, as well as serving as writer-in-residence at the Glens Centre in Manorhamilton, County Leitrim.⁶ She has published two volumes of poetry, *Martin Let Me Go* (Summer Palace Press, 2009) and *A Foot on the Tide* (Summer Palace Press, 2002).⁷ She first joined a writers' group herself at the age of 28. The group used the

Amherst method, picking a topic out of a bag, writing on it and then reading that writing out loud. She found she started to develop flow through this method, pointing out, '[it] doesn't matter where you start, if you're facilitating your own flow, you keep going'.⁸ Her writing practice is fed by daily journal entries, through which, when the time is right, a narrative voice will emerge whole and complete. She deliberately brings nothing of her own work to the group, reluctant to force engagement with it and provoke comparisons. In fact, she explains,

⁶ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 27th May 2021.

⁷ www.marybranley.com, accessed 17th January 2022.

⁸ Ibid.

'I'm actually quite blank' during sessions.⁹ Nonetheless, Mary's writing practice informs all she does with the young writers. Her central tenet is that 'to be a writer you write'.¹⁰ Therefore, just as she writes each morning, she requires that the young people write at each session. From the beginning of the project, writing – not just talking about writing – has been the aim. Having moved from teaching, where she struggled with systems she describes as 'so inadequate, so broken', to working as a writer with adults and young people on long-term projects that have become her 'greatest joy', being a writer matters to this work.¹¹ As Mary puts it, her own writing practice 'add[s] something of my personal experience... like a footprint', to her facilitation of other writers. Noting that 'I know my own practice and my own process', Mary explains that her work with the young people is not 'teachery', and not about pushing them to produce.¹² When there's a pause or a block, she tells them, 'oh, you're stuck with that, let it go... creativity doesn't work like that'. In writing regularly, she knows, eventually flow is regained.¹³ Further, 'writing is a lone practice', and working with others fulfils something of the need for rapport, communication, an audience.¹⁴ While she does not share her own work in terms of content, she does share her methods and what she offers the young writers is suffused with what she has learned in her writing life.

Mary holds open a space for the young writers to be writers, to write and to share their writing safely; but further, she holds open a space for the young writers to be young people and to be seen and heard and

nurtured. A key element of Mary's practice as a mentor, or facilitator, is her gentleness. Having been mentored herself, she is aware of what worked for her, and explains, 'I know that it benefits young people to have that light attention, soft focus'.¹⁵ Rather than leading from the front, Mary steps back in order to quietly foster the young writers in developing their own practice.

As she notes, 'this isn't school, I'm not teaching anything – I don't want to get in the way of [their] learning'. The process is not based on Mary 'handing out wisdom', but on a two-way sharing in which Mary's role is largely to enable.¹⁶ This is not to downplay the significance of that role. Its power comes at least in part from the restraint Mary exercises: it emerges from her but is not 'about' her. She rightly points out, 'there is a whole skill in holding the space' while remaining 'as low impact as possible'.¹⁷ Because of this the young writers have a protected arena in which to grow and gain confidence in their own work.

Mary says that 'service to others' is central to her life's work, and a serving ethos is evident in her mentoring of the young writers. She pays open and warm attention to each young writer as a person and a writer. Her interest in them and in their work is tangible. As she says, 'I learn about them through what they write... it's like tracking their internal world'.¹⁸ She provides a framework within which to write, and to read out loud, without criticism or judgement. She models deep listening as a means of validating creative work (on which more later). She allows and engages with a range of emotions and states

9 Personal communication from Mary Branley, 3rd June 2021.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Personal communication from Mary Branley, 27th May 2021.

13 Ibid.

14 Personal communication from Mary Branley, 3rd June 2021.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Personal communication from Mary Branley, 27th May 2021.

18 Personal communication from Mary Branley, 3rd June 2021.

of mind. She is responsive to the young writers' wants and needs and adapts her facilitation accordingly: for example, early exercises in playing with the writing, cutting it up into excerpts and reassembling, were met negatively and Mary dropped them. Though the relationships between the young writers are key to the group dynamic, Mary's presence is important. She explains, 'it does create that level of safety'.¹⁹ Mary works hard to be present – one reason why she does not become absorbed in her own

writing while the young people become absorbed in theirs – and to sense the moods of individuals and energy of the group. She is 'curious' when 'things feel out of tune', and 'if I thought someone needed a wee interim connection' would make contact with that person between sessions. Describing her process as 'working the group and building this space', Mary identifies her three principal tasks in the project: to listen, to hold and to reflect.²⁰

WRITING

As Mary points out, writing is the foundation of being a writer, and writing is a large part of what happens in each meeting of the young writers' group. The young people themselves want to write – that is, the Donegal group and the second Derry group. Several of them recall beginning to write at a young age. Cas found it 'an outlet' for communicating when speaking was troublesome, and a means of creating 'a different world'.²¹ Rebecca found writing 'fun little things' kept her 'entertained', especially at a time when she had difficulty sleeping. Further, though, 'it makes you feel good when other people like what you write [and s]ometimes you... chase that feeling – to make other people feel something'.²² Anna grew up in a remote rural community with no other children²³ nearby, and because of this 'loved stories'. Soon she realised she could make her own stories, thereby exerting a satisfying level of creative control. She muses that what is called 'creative' writing at school tends to 'follow strict

rules... it's very rigid, how they want you to do it', and the demand that a piece of writing 'make[s] sense' is discouraging to children. Like Anna, Ellie peopled her rural world with stories from a young age. Echoing Cas, Theo describes writing as 'a huge emotional outlet', especially when verbal expression is a struggle. More than that, writing is 'a social thing', a way of connecting with other people, in itself it is 'a big emotion', and it is creative. In writing, Theo is 'making something'.²⁴ For Louise, writing is a means of communicating with herself, establishing a dialogue between different perspectives, thoughts and feelings which becomes 'therapeutic'. She enjoys the control she has over her characters in writing, which enables her to inhabit opposing viewpoints. Louise sees the writing process as playful, a way of exploring, testing and revising versions of her inner self.²⁵

When asked whether their writing practice has changed as a result of the young writers'

¹⁹ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 27th May 2021.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Personal communication from Cas, 17th June 2021.

²² Personal communication from Rebecca, 17th June 2021.

²³ Personal communication from Anna, 17th June 2021.

²⁴ Personal communication from Theo, 23rd September 2021.

²⁵ Personal communication from Louise, 23rd September 2021.

group, the young people offer various insights. Several of them note that the discipline of writing at a set time is helpful. John explains:

As a person, I desperately need... deadlines to get stuff done on time, and I'd say, over lockdown, I got so little writing done and I was really upset about it, but when I returned to the writers' group I realised that I just constantly had ideas, and I'd been putting them down, and it's just helped me... expand my previous ideas and come up with new ones, and just write, in general, and it was a really nice experience having... other people, who... also write, and who share that love of writing.²⁶

Theo concurs, noting that 'when I used to write I never wrote with consistency', and the pattern of meeting and writing regularly has been very helpful. She goes on to mention the inspiration she takes from others' work as a significant benefit of the writing group:

Because I'll hear... a piece that someone says, and my little plagiarism brain is just like, ah, that's a great idea, take it!... So, it always... inspires you to try pieces differently... I always just used to write novels, with a lot of dialogue and action, but ever since joining... the group I've been more into... poetry and prose, and trying to be more descriptive, because everyone else has been inspiring me with their pieces.²⁷

Cas says that she has learned to edit, and that a piece of writing can improve through editing and does not have to emerge perfect and complete to be worth keeping. Relating to Mary as a poet, she has expanded her idea of what poetry is and can be, and gained confidence in writing it. Cas used to confine her work to a genre, most often fantasy. Now, she writes about 'real aspects', 'mental health, or... rights', and tries new genres, inspired by the work of her fellow young writers. Writing a love story, 'it didn't work... [b]ut that was okay', because her next piece, drawing from Louise's Generation Z version of Greek mythology, 'worked'.²⁸ John has been encouraged to move away from dialogue that had become 'really boring', to 'try to paint a picture of what the world is like around the characters', stimulated by the 'descriptive language' of others' 'beautiful' work.²⁹ Ellie says that since joining the young writers' group, 'I've written way more, and they've made me love writing even more'. She appreciates the freedom the group offers and feels the feedback process has refined her style.³⁰ Anna finds that the group has made her more focused, setting goals for word counts or time when she writes and thereby developing internal discipline.³¹ Like some of the others, Louise thinks that the structure provided by meeting and writing together week after week has not only motivated her but considerably improved her work.³²

²⁶ Personal communication from John, 17th June 2021.

²⁷ Personal communication from Theo, 23rd September 2021.

²⁸ Personal communication from Cas, 17th June 2021.

²⁹ Personal communication from John, 17th June 2021.

³⁰ Personal communication from Ellie, 17th June 2021.

³¹ Personal communication from Anna, 17th June 2021.

³² Personal communication from Louise, 23rd September 2021.

WORKING WITH PROFESSIONAL WRITERS

I asked the young writers what it meant to them to work with Mary as a professional writer. Cas recalls, ‘whenever she’s like, oh, we’re doing this poetry reading thing and they’re reading my poem, we’re... so excited for her’, explaining that:

[Y]ou’re always told that... you can write, but it’s not going to lead you anywhere... You can do it as a hobby... And then, just seeing someone who it did work for, you’re like, oh my God, maybe it can work for me! And... I was in Waterstones, and I saw her book, and I nearly started crying... [Mary is] definitely someone I really look up to.³³

For Ellie, ‘it’s just nice... to have someone that... has more experience [to] give you input’. Like Cas, she sees real value in having writing modelled as a career:

It’s nice to see [a professional writer] ... especially when you’re younger, because... it’s one of the first questions that you ask kids... in conversation, when they’re small... what do you want to be when you’re older?... Older people even when talking to kids might think... creative jobs... like being a writer or an artist, [are] silly, oh, you’re not going to get any money at that, ha ha, just as a joke, but... it does make quite a negative impact, when you’re small.³⁴

Anna appreciates the understanding that is always-already there from another writer, especially an older and more experienced writer. While parental support is vital, often ‘parents... don’t really get it... you

show it to them and they’ll be like, oh, that’s good but I don’t understand this part’. A writer, however, tends to intuit what sort of response is needed. As Anna specifies, it is not that another writer will tell you ‘what you want to hear’, uncritically, but that they share ‘the thought process that goes behind telling you what’s going on’ with your writing.³⁵ Like the others, she is grateful for the introduction to writing as a career option:

When you’re younger... you’re kind of pushed to do something your parents want you to do... they want you to be a teacher or a doctor or something, they want something steady and practical. Which isn’t... unreasonable, but... you don’t have any input from anybody else. Just having the experience of being with someone who has done it, and just to know that it is an option.³⁶

Even those young writers who have no intention of becoming professional writers benefit significantly from being mentored by a professional writer. Mary and Kids’ Own staff arranged for playwright Bob Kelly, short story writer Louise Kennedy and poet Ella Frears to carry out sessions with the young writers in July 2021. Theo explains that she will not write for a living because ‘I’d hate for something that I love so much to be turned into... a job where I’m forced to sit down and write’. Nonetheless, the writers Theo has met through the group are ‘hugely... inspirational’. More than that:

³³ Personal communication from Cas, 17th June 2021.

³⁴ Personal communication from Ellie, 17th June 2021.

³⁵ Personal communication from Anna, 17th June 2021.

³⁶ Ibid.

*They're always so casual as well, they're so friendly... I was expecting at least one of them to be kind of haughty and like, I'm so... great because I'm an accomplished author, but they never are. They just seem like, you know, one of us. And it's so cool. It's so cool.*³⁷

Louise too was surprised and glad to find that Mary and her fellow writers are 'just down to earth', more or less grown-up versions of the young writers themselves.³⁸

Time with other professional writers was planned into the project from the start. The young people agreed that it was a good idea, but though Mary and Kids' Own staff expected the young people themselves to suggest writers to approach, names were not forthcoming. Mary and Kids' Own staff decided, therefore, on inviting engagement from Ella Frears, who 'had a very good way of interacting with young people'; Louise Kennedy, as a Sligo-based (though Belfast-born) writer who began publishing in later life; and Bob Kelly, 'kind of an all-rounder... highly energetic and... great fun'.³⁹ Though the intention was to meet in person, the spike in Covid infections in their planned venue location in July meant that the sessions were shifted online. Mary asked Ella, Louise and Bob 'to have a conversation, to talk about your life, talk about your process, your practice... answer questions, and maybe... read a part of your work', as well as offering an activity or two for the young writers. Mary is clear that the purpose of the sessions was at least in part 'propaganda':

*That... our young people would have a chance to meet professional artists and writers... who are surviving in the arts, and that... are really saying yeah, this... really works for me, I love it, I love being in this... role... We need creatives, we need to encourage creatives, and I thought this was another way for our young writers to meet a whole other pile of people in the arts, who are getting on with their lives fairly well, thanks.*⁴⁰

AJ explained that this contact with 'world-famous people', from whom she had felt 'detached', opened up the idea that writing as a career 'is a real possibility'. She mused, 'I guess it's kind of like seeing a future version of yourself... very like-minded people'.⁴¹ Mary acknowledges that 'the routine of getting together, having the chat, everybody writing and sharing' is precious to the group, and introducing a session with other writers perhaps felt like an intrusion or interruption. She could feel 'a sense of reluctance from some of the young people'. However, she and Kids' Own pressed ahead, confident that benefits would come from that contact, even if not immediately perceptible:

*[There may have been a] burst of... stimulus... from like-minded people, and something like... oh, there's more of us in the world. This is a comfort zone, rather than... we're the odd people. No... here's the tribe, of the creatives, and oh, I have a sense of I fit in here...*⁴²

³⁷ Personal communication from Theo, 23rd September 2021.

³⁸ Personal communication from Louise, 23rd September 2021.

³⁹ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 9th November 2021.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Personal communication from AJ, 9th November 2021.

⁴² Personal communication from Mary Branley, 9th November 2021.

READING

Mary has built reading out loud into the fabric of the sessions with the young writers. From her experience of other writers' groups she knows that reading one's writing to other writers enriches the writing process. When the time for writing has finished, everyone puts down their pen or device and turns their attention outward. There is a change of pace and energy. As Mary puts it, 'it stops all the busyness of the mind'.⁴³ As each writer reads, 'with that level of intent, you'll hear what isn't working in the writing', and in fact, 'you'd easily edit from reading aloud'.⁴⁴ Thinking about what reading writing does for a writer, Mary offers the image of 'the mirror': in moving from the mind and page into the voice and audience, the work is reflected back to the writer differently and often more clearly. That experience, Mary believes, 'brings people into a deeper level of trusting their own voice'.⁴⁵

When asked about their experience of reading out loud, several of the young writers admit that it was new to them, and initially daunting. John says:

*I don't really share my work, too much, because it's awkward, but then I decided, you know what, I'm going to give up that life and I'm going to share my work, and then... this has helped me... get out there.*⁴⁶

Rebecca, who describes herself as 'reserved', points out that Covid-induced lockdowns have made it harder for many people to 'still be social and open up to people'. Reading out loud is a challenge, but 'it gets a little easier,

I guess, with each... session, and you want to create something that the others will enjoy'.⁴⁷ Cas agrees that reading out loud is not only of value for the internal processes it sparks – the fresh perception of one's own writing, the identification of necessary edits – but for the responses of listeners. She finds the practice of reading out loud motivating, telling herself, 'I need to finish this piece for Thursday because they want to hear the end of it'.⁴⁸ When she wrote only for herself, she would leave months between writing sessions if she was not feeling inspired. She goes on:

[I]t's given me... more confidence to read my writing and share my writing... Because I was always scared of it, I'm such a perfectionist, I need everything to be perfect, but that's not what writing's about... It's not about it being perfect, and I've learned that now I just scribble down what I'm thinking and maybe edit it... [a]fterwards... Now I'll be... sitting in maths and think of something, and I'll write it down, because I think, this'll be good, even if it's bad, at the start.⁴⁹

It is evident from what Cas says that the process of reading aloud, and hearing her fellow writers' work being read aloud, has changed the way she writes. Not only is she able to share her writing, she has been freed to write more spontaneously because she trusts in how it will be received. Rather than the entire process of writing, from conception to editing to (even provisional) completion, taking place inside the mind of the writer, some of it, if not all, is taking place between the mind and voice of the writer

⁴³ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 27th May 2021.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Personal communication from John, 17th June 2021.

⁴⁷ Personal communication from Rebecca, 17th June 2021.

⁴⁸ Personal communication from Cas, 17th June 2021.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

and the minds and voices of the listeners. That seems to make the process more fluent and more productive. For Anna, reading enables the writer to retain ownership of their work:

I do like it. Because I think one of those like nervous things about writing when

I was younger was... if you tried to show someone, you had to hand them the piece of paper? But they never wanted you to read it to them, so it was really freaky, giving up that control over what... you've done... [In the group] you can say what you wrote.⁵⁰

FEEDBACK

Mary is keenly aware of the doubled potential of feedback. She knows that 'a voice could be silenced with a million small cuts'.⁵¹ With this in mind, in the first iteration of the project, with the Donegal group, she limited each session to chatting, writing and reading aloud. She explains that in the context of reading aloud, 'your feedback is this deep listening', the concentrated attention of the listeners.⁵² Further, having no feedback eliminates the idea of 'writing for the teacher', that is, writing what an imagined audience might want to hear. Mary was conscious too that '[there's] pressure if everybody feels they have to say something', and wanted the young writers to relax into the process.⁵³

When the group was well established, Mary put in place a framework for simple feedback in each session. She specified that feedback could be a request for clarification of something the listener did not understand, but if it took the form of comments on the piece, it had to be highly positive. Further, the person reading their work could direct feedback by asking for their listeners' thoughts on particular aspects of the piece. Targeted feedback would help the writer to

progress. As Mary indicates, 'these were all things that benefited me in writers' groups', knowing that 'you do have to protect your writing, you do have to be careful with new work'.

Therefore, her focus is not on 'creating critical review', but rather building up and supporting the young writers.

The young writers speak favourably of the feedback element of their sessions. Rebecca says:

The writing group's very supportive. And... I feel like... there's not a lot of judgement, if you don't want to read, or if you don't want to read right away, and wait for other people, because I think a lot of people in the group understand, a little bit more than how maybe other people would – that it can be hard, just talking... and sharing things that could be quite personal.

The fact that everyone receives as well as gives feedback means that vulnerability is shared and everyone understands how to protect and encourage each other. As Cas puts it, 'you know the feedback you want, and what to give feedback on, and it's easier

⁵⁰ Personal communication from Anna, 17th June 2021.

⁵¹ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 3rd June 2021.

⁵² Personal communication from Mary Branley, 27th May 2021.

⁵³ Ibid.

to give feedback to other people'.⁵⁴ Theo echoes Rebecca, explaining:

And to get the feedback – and it's never bad feedback, I don't think I've ever gotten like rude feedback, or feedback that's made me upset, I don't even notice if it's like constructive criticism, because I don't

*notice it being criticism at all.*⁵⁵

For Louise, feedback plays an explicit role in improving her work: occasionally fellow writers' curiosity about background, or appetite for expanded description, spur her to revise and enrich her pieces.⁵⁶

LISTENING

Reading aloud elicits listening, and the deep listening advocated by Mary is another pillar of the young writers' group. Mary says, 'I think they love... the being listened to'.⁵⁷ As she explained in relation to feedback, the experience of being closely listened to is in itself a profound validation. Mary models that focused, generous attention, and the young writers follow suit.

Several of the young people make clear that this way of listening did not come naturally. As John points out, 'you listen to people all the time, but you never really hear them'. Therefore, being supported 'to sit down and focus on one story and... get pulled into it' has been revelatory. Further, fellow writers 'do the same for you as well'.⁵⁸ Listening gives to the reader and gives to the listener too. Cas comments that 'it's so easy to listen in our group because everyone's such amazing writers that you just... get pulled into the world they're creating for you'.⁵⁹ Theo and Louise compare the listening process to having a good audio book or a podcast, and Rebecca concurs, though she suggests there is an added and enjoyable dimension

to listening to each other, identifying 'sometimes a bit of excitement in people's voices, when they read, if they're happy to share'.⁶⁰ Theo explains:

I've always struggled with listening... not intentionally... but I find it hard, sometimes, to understand words, or... to pay attention a lot of the time? So having the writers' group is really good for me because it's... taught me to have more patience and to listen better. And it's also nice... You get to listen to... a person who's your friend, or like your colleague, or whatever you want to consider them... Because each piece of writing is like a little part of them, right? A little piece of them, so you get to know that person better through their writing. I don't know, it's special.

*It's also taught me to talk less... and to listen more. Because I discovered very quickly that all I ever do is talk and I don't really listen.*⁶¹

⁵⁴ Personal communication from Cas, 17th June 2021.

⁵⁵ Personal communication from Theo, 23rd September 2021.

⁵⁶ Personal communication from Louise, 23rd September 2021.

⁵⁷ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 25th May 2021.

⁵⁸ Personal communication from John, 17th June 2021.

⁵⁹ Personal communication from Cas, 17th June 2021.

⁶⁰ Personal communication from Rebecca, 17th June 2021.

⁶¹ Personal communication from Theo, 23rd September 2021.

Louise goes on:

Listening for me has definitely improved. Since actually joining the writers' group, I haven't... read as much as I used to, and that might just be a coincidence, but... I don't mind it too much because I get to hear these like tidbits of everyone else's story, and they're so detailed and thought out, they're so defined, that listening to them

*is much more calming than like sitting down on the sofa with a book... I... zone out way too easily, and the writers' group has definitely helped me to zone in – you don't want to miss what someone's saying... More often than not it ends on a cliff-hanger, so you need to remember everything, to over-analyse and figure out what's happening!*⁶²

RELATIONSHIPS

From what the young writers said about the listening process, it is evident that their relationships with each other play a significant part in their will to listen and in the benefits they receive from being listened to. Mary explains that many, if not all, of the young people view the mainstream social worlds of community and school somewhat from the outside. They share experiences of distress, anxiety, melancholy and alienation and as a group are keen to address mental ill-health. Mary supports such discussions, knowing the part they play in normalising and reassuring individuals in pain. The connections the young writers have developed with each other matter deeply, Mary says, seeing that 'they all avidly want to help each other... the peer support is of critical importance here'.⁶³ Although the group has been established as a safe space for the young writers, they are willing and able to open that to new members. As Mary puts it, they are 'expecting more of themselves to arrive'.⁶⁴ John tells me:

'I like... how social it is, because... I don't really meet too many people who write. And

*so being able to sit down in a room, or [on] a call, with everybody, and you know that they're writing and creating something, and that you're creating something too, it's just a really nice feeling.*⁶⁵

Anna reflects on her initial experiences with the young writers' group:

*I was really freaked out about it because I'm not very good with... new people... but I decided to do it anyway. And then I was still really freaked out after the first one, but... no one was like mean or anything... I was like 12 or 13, so I was really scared that like it would be really terrifying... I was really scared that there'd be... a lot of older people, because... I've always done a lot of summer camps... [where] there was always people who were much, much older than me... But [in the writers' group] there were only like one person or two people who were older than me, so it was nice, it was everyone my own age, I was a lot more comfortable. And it was a place to do what I liked doing, so I kept coming.*⁶⁶

⁶² Personal communication from Louise, 23rd September 2021.

⁶³ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 3rd June 2021.

⁶⁴ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 25th May 2021.

⁶⁵ Personal communication from John, 17th June 2021.

⁶⁶ Personal communication from Anna, 17th June 2021.

Ellie explains, 'it feels like a nice community, to come to, every Thursday, and just something to look forward to, or a place to do what you like, and share what you like'.⁶⁷ Common interests have created bonds and a sense of safety, and Anna expands on this:

*I'd agree with Ellie, it's definitely just the people... It's not that you would always agree or anything, but... there's a lot of common ground, just on the fact that... you like to write, and it's just having that common ground all across the board is very reassuring.*⁶⁸

Theo concludes, 'it's so amazing to find a group, and everyone's so different, but also so like-minded'.⁶⁹ A key aim of Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund, connecting young people from different areas and backgrounds across the still-significant Irish border, has been accomplished all the more effectively because obliquely.

The young people do not meet to learn about each other's differences nor to discuss politics, but in writing together and sharing their writing with each other, Mary and collectively with the wider world, they are connecting across multiple borders in deep and long-lasting ways.

The young writers' relationships with Mary are just as important as their relationships with each other, though in different ways. Mary is not neutral. Her obvious openness to connection and ability to sustain the connections made is fundamental to the young people's sense of being cared for and being safe. Mary's relationship with each young person enables and sets the tone for their relationships with each other. She sincerely enjoys the young writers as

people, remembering that after the first session with the Donegal group, 'I was high as a kite with the kids I had met... who were all just writers, and great craic'. Mary is the adult in the group, but still, she is inside and not outside of it. She says, 'we just love each other's company'.⁷⁰

She is sharply aware of young people's vulnerability and deeply empathetic and supportive. In her words, as young people and as writers, they go through 'nearly storms of experiences'.⁷¹ Mary's extensive experience of teaching, in primary and secondary schools and special education, in Ireland, America and England, has developed and refined her ability to connect with young people, and she initiated a parental consent process to enable appropriate direct contact between herself and the young writers. In her role with the group she is conscious of the responsibility she assumes for monitoring their wellbeing and mental health. She mentions that one young writer produced a poem about coming round after a suicide attempt and another a piece about suicidal ideation. Not knowing whether these were creative imaginings or reflections of experience, Mary was worried, and made sure to contact the authors of the works and gently probe their mental state. On other occasions she has received messages, sometimes late at night, that make clear a young writer is struggling. She thinks carefully about how best to reassure and support each of them. Again, she holds open a space for everyone, present at sessions or not, so that they can come and go according to their capacity and need and yet maintain the sense that they belong and are welcome. She carries the weight of her affection and concern for them, and a significant part of her work with

⁶⁷ Personal communication from Ellie, 17th June 2021.

⁶⁸ Personal communication from Anna, 17th June 2021.

⁶⁹ Personal communication from Theo, 23rd September 2021.

⁷⁰ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 27th May 2021.

⁷¹ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 3rd June 2021.

the group is ‘keeping these lifelines open.’⁷² Theo tells something of this story from her own perspective:

When I found the writers’ group I was actually starting to fall out of writing, and I didn’t write as much. And it reminded me how much I loved it, and it actually made it a bigger part of my life... Because I started when I was... a first year, and... at that point in my life I was quite lost, and I didn’t know what I wanted to do, or anything, and my mum approached me and was like, hey, I found this group in the library, and I said, no, I don’t want to go, I really don’t want to go, I don’t want to talk to people, I don’t want to look at people, and she said... just give it a try, and if you don’t like it you don’t have to go again, and well, here I am... I can’t put into words how amazing it’s been for me, really. It’s so cool.’⁷³

Mary reiterates that the long-term nature of the project – soon to enter its fourth year

– is meaningful in terms of relationships.⁷⁴ Meeting with the same people for the same process year by year enables a more layered and profound knowledge of each other. As a result, connections are not only made, but built on and strengthened.

Adolescence is a time of intense flux, and Mary is a steady presence alongside the young writers as they grow and develop personally and as writers. This attunes Mary to their emotional weather and reinforces the sense of security and validation she can offer them. Rebecca describes Mary as ‘just a very nice person’, someone who encourages and eases every challenge presented within the group, whether to do with writing or relating to others.⁷⁵ For Cas, Mary ‘has set up a really supportive system’. She is not only ‘my favourite person ever’, but ‘you can have a laugh with her as well’.⁷⁶

CONCLUSIONS

At one point Mary describes the experience of running the young writers’ group as ‘profoundly spiritual’.⁷⁷ I can see why she uses this term. From what I have seen and heard, what looks like a straightforward outworking of a simple idea – bringing writers together to write – actually functions how it does and means what it does because Mary and the young writers bring something deeply of themselves to each session. Mary brings a radical openness and presentness, both giving and erasing herself

moment by moment and week by week. The young people first of all bring a willingness to meet, to explore and to share. Following Mary’s example, then, they have built up over time to bringing their own openness and presentness, their vulnerability and their trust. Trust is palpable.

The young people trust Mary (and each other) to attend to them, to see and hear them and to treat them and their work with kindness.

⁷² Personal communication from Mary Branley, 9th November 2021.

⁷³ Personal communication from Theo, 23rd September 2021.

⁷⁴ Personal communications from Mary Branley, 27th May 2021.

⁷⁵ Personal communication from Rebecca, 17th June 2021.

⁷⁶ Personal communication from Cas, 17th June 2021.

⁷⁷ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 3rd June 2021.

I see the trust Mary offers the young people, meanwhile, as very significant. Unusually for an adult, she trusts them to do their own learning and their own growing.

She not only holds open, but holds back, imposing neither her writing expertise nor her life experience. She knows that the young writers do not need criticism to hone their craft. Space, time and support are more effective. Cas notes that the group is not like school, yet deep learning happens there.⁷⁸

Possibly that deep learning happens because the group is not like school, where learning tends to be predicated on the passing of information from teachers to pupils. The emphasis on listening is – again – about space, making space for a voice to hear and understand itself and grow from that experience. When space is made, emergence is enabled. Mary trusts that she and the group will be able to handle what emerges.

In November 2018 Kids' Own published a selection of the young writers' work in broadsheet format, launched at An Grianan Hotel, in Burt, between Letterkenny and Derry. There are clear differences in volume and form between the two groups of young people. The Donegal group's contributions are fluent and imaginatively wide-ranging, while most of the Strathfoyle group's short pieces fix on the bridge and radiate anguish. In their repetition, hesitations and occasionally stilted brevity they say much more than at first appears. In March 2021 a second and more substantial publication appeared, *On the Brink*. Short stories and poems from 11 of the young writers, from Derry and Donegal, appear, alongside artworks from participants Louise, Theo, John, Rebecca and Katie. The collection was

launched online. After introductions to the project and group from Jo Holmwood, Trisha Ward of NI Libraries, Rory Gallagher from Donegal County Council Library Service, and Mary, the young writers read excerpts of each other's work and participated in a panel discussion. According to Mary, the experience of writing and editing for publication, and launching the publication, was deeply validating for the group. It is, she thinks, what helped them re-engage in the group with fresh energy and enthusiasm later that year.⁷⁹

The reason for the group to exist, however, is not publishing but writing. I find this interesting, because it is about writing as a process, and not writing as an outcome. There is no requirement for the young writers to complete this or that work, and much of what they say about the writing, reading, listening and feeding back they do in each session demonstrates the benefits for their process and practice rather than discrete stories or poems or novels. While funding often demands that specific outcomes be achieved as measures of worth or success, the requirement in itself often distorts and derails the process needed to produce any kind of meaningful outcome.

Mary and Kids' Own have, therefore, held another space open, the space for process to be followed and outcomes to be deferred and undefined. This enables the young writers to be true to their own practices, to investigate, respond and adapt.

Removing the notion of set outcomes means removing the (false) spectre of failure from the discourse. Again, this is about allowing the young writers to be and become themselves. While the project produced publications, and they are important as representative of experience and output,

⁷⁸ Personal communication from Cas, 17th June 2021.

⁷⁹ Personal communication from Mary Branley, 25th May 2021.

they are not as important as the processes from which they emerged.

I will close with a comment from Louise, who, when asked what she likes about the young writers' group, brings together a number of elements that stood out to me as an observer:

The thing I most appreciate is definitely... Ciara and Mary and... everyone else who... put so much effort into making [our] meetings and everything... You really notice it... It's really awesome how hard they work to make sure that the writing group is a safe space and is a very... uplifting space... [Kids' Own and Mary] really do go above and beyond... to make sure that everyone's comfortable, that everyone is writing to the best of their ability at that time, and... that they encourage everyone, they make sure that everyone encourages everyone else... it's a very nice circle of encouraging... I really appreciate that and the energy that they create.⁸⁰

