

Creative Journeys alongside the Red Brick

'I was twenty-two when I came in with my sister and a priest. My aunt asked for me to be brought in and they drove me in a Volkswagen Beetle. I remember going up the drive, didn't know where I was going – I wasn't told where I was going. I had often passed by and seen the building, flying by in my brother's car. I didn't think I'd end up there. Not there...'

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For fourteen years, I worked as Writer-Facilitator of the award-winning *Arts Ability* creative writing programme at the training centre attached to St. Senan's Psychiatric Hospital in Enniscorthy. Between 2006-2019, many older people contributed stories, creative non-fiction, poems, monologues and flash fiction, to a series of publications.

From the outset, I loved this work. Most of the service-users, or writers, were from the countryside, towns and villages of county Wexford. These people and their stories had a life-changing impact on me, as a person and as a writer. A steep learning curve, involving many challenges and obstacles, *Arts Ability* offered me the opportunity to encourage words from those who often felt their voice didn't matter and lacked the confidence and courage to put pen to paper.

Those who chose to attend the writing workshops were fragile and tough, emotional and stoic, angry and witty, heartbroken, lonely and

wonderfully kind. Together, we undertook a creative journey which broke new ground with the unique publication of stories and photographs *Climbing Mountains in our Minds*. (It was launched to coincide with the closure of 'The Red Brick', as the hospital was affectionately known by some of the patients.) This image of mental toil symbolises perfectly the daily struggle faced by people with psychiatric problems. For the older participants, the battle was compounded by feelings of isolation and mounting physical frailties.

Trust - the key ingredient for a successful residency - it hung in the balance on day one, when staff made the introductions while participants eased themselves into blue plastic chairs. The windows in our room were too high to see out of. Asbestos lurked behind the ceiling tiles. I glanced at the alarm bell which had been pointed out to me before the workshop began. Nicotine-stained fingers twirled the biros I distributed; dim eyes stared at the blank white pages I laid before the group. One person established that I wasn't from Wexford. Writing reminded another person of school - bad memories. A gregarious participant obsessed about not knowing what to write about. Then a nurse interrupted to call someone for bloods. Quickly, I turned on the music and everyone wrote without speaking for three whole minutes.

Except for one older man, who did not lift his pen. Literacy was an issue, along with memories of being persecuted at school over correct spellings and neat handwriting. We created a solution: he talked and I

wrote, editing it together afterwards. Of those who described themselves as 'getting on a bit now', all were eager storytellers but reluctant writers. Pressure is a constant in the realm of mental ill health. So the work took place slowly and gently; writing purely for the sake of writing, with no specific outcome mentioned.

Eventually, poems and stories were brought up to *Fighting Words* in Dublin and participants had an opportunity to share and speak about their creativity. Later still, a series was published in *The Enniscorthy Echo* newspaper, bringing the work to a far wider audience. It was launched by 'veteran' broadcaster Anne Doyle at the Presentation Centre and some of the older cohort of writers, mainly men, joined her on stage.

From the Hill of the Wild Berries was our first anthology, published at the end of the initial three-year cycle. A selection of stories, poems, monologues and creative non-fiction, the foreword was by playwright Billy Roche. Compiling this book, it emerged that people were extremely nervous about seeing their words in print. However, after three years' work, most opted to take the risk of going public.

As the launch got underway with family, friends, staff, dignitaries and the local press in attendance, the participants stood around anxiously. Wearing their name tags, with *Writer* emblazoned underneath, they were sporting their best clothes, looking proud. Staff commented in astonishment at the change in body language and willingness to communicate that came over people they had known for decades, as

merely service-users. Here they were, signing books and speaking to photographers and journalists, basking in the buzz and good vibes of a momentous occasion. Momentous, because it was a key turning point on the creative journey for these writers. Now, they came to me wanting to know when our next book launch would be happening and suddenly all four Tuesday workshop groups were at maximum capacity.

With support from Shine, (formerly Schizophrenia Ireland) we went on to make a CD of recordings from the anthology, with the writers reading their own work. The CD was made available through Wexford Library Services and the haunting quality of these voices, in a diverse range of local accents, drew many compliments.

It was suggested that we should follow up all of this creative output by holding a public reading and I remember baulking at this. Fear of what could go wrong, the pressure on individuals, the anxiety it would inevitably entail... Yet those who decided to take part felt a huge sense of achievement. None had ever set foot inside the Opera House. Yet up on the top floor, looking out past the microphones and members of the press, towards the pine trees on Raven Point and the sands of Curracloe, the writers felt like they owned the place. That day, was another major leap forward for the programme. Participants felt they had become genuine creatives and merited the opportunity to express their artistic side publicly.

Loneliness and isolation frequently go hand-in-hand with mental illness. So the writers decided to link up with other Writing and Active

Retirement groups around the county. For example, when participants gave public readings of new work, a 'read alongside' element was incorporated. This happened in the libraries of Gorey, New Ross, Bunclody and Wexford town where participants felt more comfortable being joined in the limelight by other likeminded individuals.

Our final collection *Darker, Later* was launched by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, with a foreword by Jane Clarke. Included in this collection, was the work of several writers who had aged over the fourteen years of my time as Writer-Facilitator, the 'Young Old' cohort. Some drew inspiration from the impact of mental illness on their own lives, in pieces such as *The Pressure of being a Patient* or *We're all a bit Cracked*. Others preferred to write about the past, in pieces like *When I was a Crocodile, Sailing out towards the Saltees* or *Washing my Father's Feet*. New writing with a particularly Wexford tint included *The Strawberry Car*, *The Heron by the Slaney*, *In the Gripe*, *Pilgrimage to Our Lady's Island*, *Night Shift at Chivers*, *Chip Shop Stop* and the wonderfully-evocative *Making Jelly with my Granny for the Sunday*.

By this stage, the writers had contributed to several exhibitions at County Hall, collaborating with other artists and feeling confident that their writing had earned its place alongside the visual art on display. Curator and writer Catherine Marshall included a Poetry Corner in the exhibition *Rainbows and Bandaged Skies*, which she curated. Featuring the work of several older participants, fond memories was a recurring theme, cropping

up in poems such as *The First Cortina*. Likewise, when artist and educator Dominic Thorpe curated *Crocodile Sky*, his selection took us to more remote parts of the county, with *The Life of a Hollyfort Farm Worker*, or collaborations like *Easy Prey*.

Working towards these biennial exhibitions brought the writing to another level again. The sheer scale of the space at County Buildings, catapulted the group out of its comfort zone while also offering new creative opportunities. For example, the poetry selected for *Crocodile Sky* was displayed using vinyl on glass, in a dramatic take-over of the office windows facing the interior of County Hall. Some remain in situ to this day, a permanent reminder.

The changes I witnessed among the writers at both exhibition launches, were tangible and lasting. Increased self-confidence, improved ability to communicate with peers, professionals, artists, writers and others in attendance was noticed and remarked upon. People's physical bearing literally changed, they stood taller beside their work, looking delighted. Instead of shying away from the press, they agreed to be photographed and interviewed. The benefits of engaging with the creative process continued well beyond public events, with writers displaying a new ability to produce work alone and to continue being creative in their leisure time. During workshops by visiting writers, for example Dave Lordan, participants were now eager to ask questions. When Joe Rooney performed, he was besieged by several writers, all keen to hear more about his creative

process. Most significantly of all perhaps, many group members now felt confident enough to delve into more challenging themes in their new poetry and prose.

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Returning to the man I quoted at the start of this essay, I remember so clearly the time he joined a workshop to announce 'Tonight will be my first night sleeping outside the Asylum in donkey's years...' He followed this by suggesting that if I would do the writing, he had a few stories to tell about the decades he spent living in St. Senan's. And so began his contribution to *Climbing Mountains in our Minds*. What follows, is how his piece ends:

'I have one ghost memory. Can't remember what ward, but there were seven or eight of us in it. All in the bed. The light was on – a long, bright light. Even in the middle of the night. So I woke up anyway and I saw this woman standing in the middle of the room... staring at me, wearing a brown cardigan and a white dress. A tough-looking woman... very cold in the eyes. She didn't frighten me. Then slowly, she disappeared into white. From the feet up, she just disappeared... I talked to a few of my brothers about her. My father, who was alive that time, often spoke to me about things he saw, walking home in the dark... There musta been around five hundred patients in the hospital that time. All the staff were very good and helpful – but I wouldn't like to be in there again.'