

Turning Another Page

Encouraging writers – Highland Literary Salon

Debbie Ruppenthal

Debbie Ruppenthal looks at how the Highland Literary Salon acts as a hub for established and new writers in the region, offering a place to come together to make connections and share ideas and inspiration.

About the author

Debbie Ruppenthal was given her first typewriter at the age of 11 and has been writing prose, poetry and short stories ever since, publishing her first article in 1979. Born in London, but now living on a hill overlooking the Cromarty Firth, near Inverness in the Highlands, Debbie was one of the founder members of the HLS. She has spent the last decade in the third sector, supporting disadvantaged young people in self-advocacy groups, and latterly training volunteers in supported friendships with vulnerable adults. An enthusiastic blogger, along with writing, Debbie enjoys photography, arts and crafts and growing veg, and is a keen proponent of all things 'green'.

The Highland Literary Salon (HLS) was formed in 2009 by a small group of writers who attended a creative writing group at Eden Court, and then formed their own 'small group' to critique, support, and encourage each other with their writing. Although formed in the traditions of the 18th Century French Salons, the HLS is neither a debating society nor a gathering of aristocracy (and, for the record, we don't sit about drinking absinthe!) The aim has always been to provide an arena where writers of all types, ages, and at all stages of their writing careers, can meet to network; listen to seasoned writers, and publishers, and ask questions – of everyone.

New people and new writers have always been welcomed. Although part of the original set up, I have never been confident talking about 'being a writer' in public. The salon provides an atmosphere of support and generosity, with more established writers sharing knowledge and offering encouragement to emerging writers. No one screws their face up and nods, embarrassed, when you tell them you write poetry!

Over the last five years, we've had a variety of fine writers, publishers, small press owners, and other writerly types come and speak, often taking a workshop before the main event. The workshops are an ideal opportunity to engage with the invited guest on a more personal and practical level, and invariably they offer useful, hard won hints and tips on a particular genre, topic, or method. These sessions are fertile ground for ideas and inspiration, and are good at getting me actually doing something, rather than talking about doing something. When I look back at my notebooks, a workshop has often encouraged me to look at a character in a new way, re-visit a poem to make it 'work' better, or kick-started a new idea.

The current HLS committee try to run two retreats a year, one tutored and one untutored, and this has been an important feature from the outset. We are lucky to be close enough to Moniack Mhor, the Arvon Creative Writing Centre, to be able to make use of this fantastic resource. Setting time aside to actually write, encourages us to take ourselves seriously as writers. Taking time away from family can put a stake in the ground that says 'this is important to me'; it can help others to see us as people who write, rather than just mum/dad, wife/husband/partner, daughter, carer, etc. The physical act of taking ourselves out of the often frenetic activity of the everyday can create valuable mind space, and act as a catalyst for inspiration and creativity. I can write pretty much anywhere, but being away in the wild weather-beaten Highlands, with like-minded people, can prove especially motivating, and feel very inspirational. This is backed up by the fact that the untutored events gain as much support and positive feedback as those led by a tutor. Last year's retreat during National Novel Writing Month (NANOWRIMO) produced tens of thousands of words by participants – a sure indication that people not only felt inspired, but were motivated to channel that into something concrete – writing.

The retreats have proved to be a great extension of the salon – a safe and supportive environment in which to relax and allow yourself to be inspired and vulnerable. (Personally, I always feel vulnerable when sharing my work, and at least I now know it's not something peculiar to me!) Fundamentally, I feel that the HLS is about connections: connecting writers with writers, with publishers, with anyone and everyone who can offer advice, support and encouragement, in what is generally a very isolated activity. By nature I am a solitary creature. A few people collaborate when writing, but the majority of writers sit with a pen, or a laptop, and scribble and tap away, ignoring the phone, and the doorbell; not lunching or having coffee mornings with friends, but hiving themselves away until an article, book, poem, play or other work of genius is completed.

It can be a lonely existence, and it's easy to lose touch with friends who may not understand your anti-social behaviour. When time and circumstance allow, I try to get to the HLS, although it's more than an hour away by car. It's important for me to mix with people who understand the writing life, whom I don't need to explain myself to. And there's something about the HLS, a creative frisson, which makes you want to be there. You rub shoulders with all sorts of people whom you'd be unlikely to meet in the normal run of things: established writers and emerging writers, and everyone in between; people who write for pleasure, and those who write for profit – and every genre is represented too. Being part of such a diverse group is inspiring; there's a kind of creative osmosis that goes on which engenders a positive, productive outlook. I always come away buzzing, even if I've been at work all day. For an hour and a half – or more if there's a workshop – you can cocoon yourself in all things writing. No one is going to distract you, make you feel guilty, belittle you or ridicule you. Everyone has the same focus: writing, pure and simple.

We've had, and continue to have, a varied programme of guest speakers and events, thanks to a dedicated and hard-working committee. The turn-outs vary, and some speakers seem to be more popular than others. In my view, it has been worth going to hear any of the guests, even if superficially they may be talking about a topic or a genre that is not one I'm especially interested in.

Take the February salon, for instance; we had a panel discussion about 'Crime Writing in Glasgow', with Alex Gray and Denise Mina. I don't write crime fiction, and apart from reading the odd Agatha Christie (aged nine, when I got my first adult library tickets,) I've not really read any. You might think that such a discussion would not be of interest to someone who predominantly writes poetry, short stories and non-fiction, but you would be wrong. Writers, whatever genre they favour, have to create characters and plot; they have to weave facts and ideas into a coherent whole. Writers can discuss how they work, what inspires them, how they write about place and what their journey to publication was. Whether you write romantic fiction, crime fiction, historical fiction, or any other sort of creative form, the knowledge and practice of other writers is invaluable material for your own writing journey. It has certainly proved priceless for mine. (And I might even be tempted into reading a bit of modern Scottish crime fiction!)

There's a generosity of spirit at these meetings that's difficult to quantify. You'd expect writers to be a competitive bunch, guarding their ideas and secrets jealously, not wanting to encourage rivals. That's not been my experience. There's a real sense that we're all in the same boat, trying to do the best we can; trying to get our writing –that personal piece of our own psyche we're so keen to share – out there. We want to be read, and will use what means we can find to achieve that.

Apart from the occasional 'slam', where people perform their pieces to an audience, and of course the retreats, we don't routinely share work with each other – there are plenty of writing groups on the scene that do that – instead the HLS offers a unique hub of talent, enthusiasm and support to everyone, no matter how tentatively their toes might be in the creative water. I say we're 'unique'; there are other salons in Scotland, and in fact we spawned a sister Salon in Skye. The ripples are spreading, and wherever you're based, there may be something similar running close to you. If you get the chance, do come along to the HLS in Inverness, or visit one of the other salons in the central belt, or the one on Skye. You'll get a warm welcome, and you never know what connections and inspiration you will take home with you.

© Debbie Ruppenthal
2014

Turning Another Page is a professional development programme for writers living and working in Scotland presented by NAWA (National Association of Writers in Education) with investment from Creative Scotland.