

The Writers' Block

Jane Pugh

RESPONSES AND REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19 AND THE LOCKDOWN

Over the last four years we've been developing **The Writers' Block** near Redruth in Cornwall into a place to create and share stories. Redruth and its surrounds is a post-industrial, rural community perhaps akin to the Welsh former mining valleys. Many live with limited, low-waged work and social and economic exclusion. Living in a sparsely populated area, Redruth and Cornwall at large, depend on community-cohesion and collective endeavour and it's this that the Writers' Block both utilizes and promotes. Its aim is to encourage and develop dreams, choices and ambitions and we use creative writing in our dedicated, artist-designed space as a means for achieving this.

So, by March 2020, our summer programme was all in place. Tutors booked, course content designed, promotions out in the world at large. The kettle was boiling, the biscuit tin replete and participants poised to arrive.

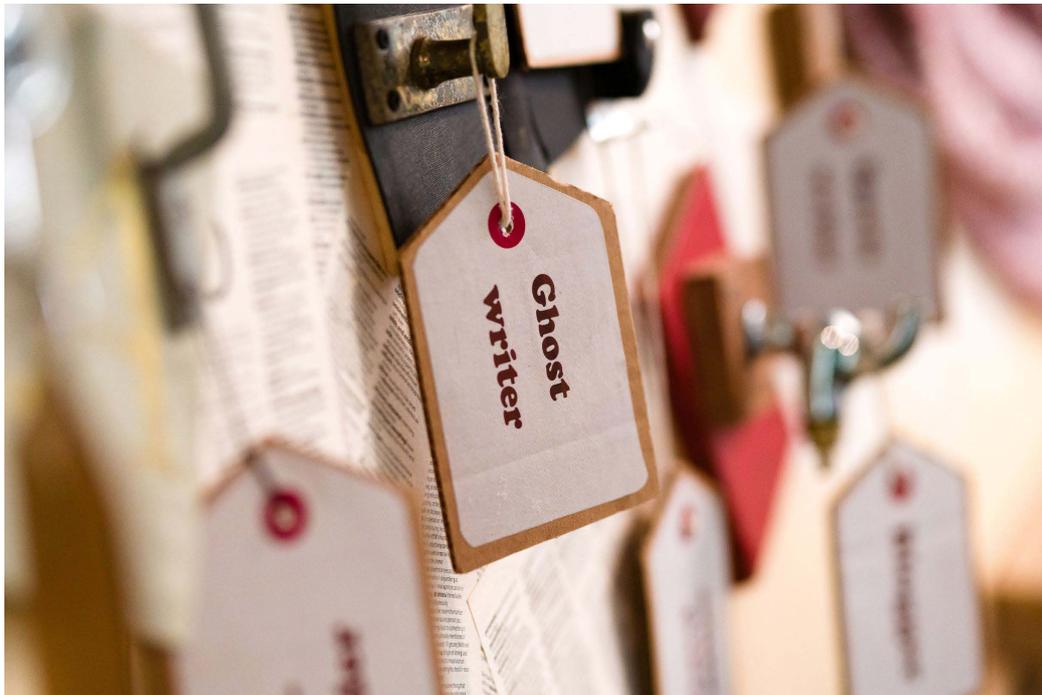
Then the world and our world changed forever.

We held on, but once we understood sharing biscuits from our biscuit tin (a mainstay of our offer, we're not joking) would breach Covid19 protocols, we knew the writing was on the wall. Only, with a very different message, *We're closed, go home, don't come back.*

In Cornwall, arts and culture, contemporary and traditional, provide a rich framework in which to exist. We are producers, participants and consumers and it's possible to argue that people who live in rural areas are social beings, far from 'getting away from it all,' we need to congregate. The Writers' Block is a physical

organisation, irrefutably so. Now in lock-down, we weren't sure how we'd function, how we'd deliver and why. We needed to stay connected to our existing participants and we quickly discovered we could bring different people into our digital fold. Bring out the homebodies, the introverts and those who struggle to or can't leave their homes. Bring out those who live in profoundly rural areas and experience transport issues or those with time consuming and complicated family responsibilities.

Forced to abandon our desks, and, armed with our laptops, we barricaded ourselves into our bedrooms and moved our entire offer online. Fortunately, as a tiny organisation, we have tech-savvy team members, otherwise, truthfully, we'd have struggled. That said, none of us had heard of Zoom, except to describe light aircraft flying by. None of us thought we'd say 'You need to un-mute' or 'You need to mute' fifteen times per day. We do now. As it transpired, it wasn't the technology which proved the greatest challenge, it was the emotional journey - that was the greatest test. How could we digitally offer a secure, creative, productive space for our course leaders and workshop participants? How could we celebrate and story-share when we'd normally produce a production or throw a party? How could we look after ourselves? We were clear that we didn't want our digital offer to be the 'poor relation' to our physical one, right from the start. After establishing protocols and safeguarding strategies, we rewrote content, not from scratch, but to embrace our spaces and circumstances just as we'd formally embraced the Writers' Block. We tried to encourage our participants to see their homes as places of adventure and imagination. And, as we were



all embarking on this Pullmanesque unknown journey together, we sought and used feedback and ideas from participants in order to progress and improve. What we quickly discovered was that participants needed an increased amount of emotional support. This soon proved arduous for workshop leaders so, when possible, we established a buddy-system so writers could support each other. This I'd recommend. Younger participants particularly enjoyed the Zoom sessions, delighting in the option to turn off their cameras at times, so our support for them was more light touch. Those who struggle with social anxiety really enjoyed being online and one, who's moving away, is delighted to be able to continue writing with us.

In pre-pandemic times our participants come from about a fifteen mile radius. Now our Speakeasy, where writers congregate at The Writers' Block to share their work, has gone-global, and our courses, too, reach people in the Highlands of Scotland, Manchester, London, Helsinki and California, with one writer getting up at 4.30am local time in order to join us. Participant numbers haven't noticeably changed one way or the other but the type of participant has evolved.

Face to face is our primary activity but we'll always incorporate a digital offer now, enhanced and improved through a series of mini-commissions by new collaborators - film makers, animators, editors, illustrators, all are contributing to our new way of operating.

Whilst much of our work enables people to beneficially apply creative writing, we also produce courses for established and emerging writers, including Writing for the Stage in partnership with the famous Minack Theatre, an outdoor space literally carved out of Porthcurno rock and overlooking the sea. It has recently reopened on a reduced scale. I'm the workshop leader and, half way through our course, I had to swap from live to digital, adapt quickly and enable our student writers to adapt

quickly too. I was surprised how quickly we were able to do so and have reflected on the reasons why. From my perspective, I've found that artists and writers, wherever they're from, have always needed to be flexible, quick thinking, brave, adaptable and stoic. Just the qualities the entire populace is currently drawing on. Writers often have to be reflective and thoughtful too, so the participants were able to process and articulate their pandemic experiences with relative ease. Writers already have laptops, even if their operating systems are years out of date, and when writers are bored, we'll forever text and Facebook. We are perhaps more likely to have some kind of digital connectivity than other disciplines do. Dancers are surely suffering more. That said, classes were and are interrupted by work, pets, and families who don't understand that when a writer is seemingly doing nothing, they're actually immersing themselves in thought and imagination. It's one of the occasions when we most miss the Writers' Block as a physical, dedicated space of calm and focus.

The pandemic did not impact on the structure or content of the individual sessions or the overall Writing for Theatre course. Writers write wherever they are and as a writer and teacher I've found myself teaching in all sorts of curious spaces.

Our course is structured to allow writers to develop a stage play so, as they were already committed to their ideas, we continued with the process and deliberately chose not to respond creatively to the crisis. We had fun with some warm up exercises, however, using Zoom passwords to generate micro stories, proved popular. This light-touch approach helped acknowledge the existence of the pandemic without allowing it to intrude or disrupt our work.

During this course and subsequently all our online courses, we've needed the support of an online technical supporter and course administrator. This is an additional cost in terms of time and money. Perhaps this will change

as skills and confidence increases but still we need to be mindful of how potentially distracting and disengaging it would be if workshop leaders were expected to solve potential technical problems whilst teaching simultaneously.

Giving live feedback online presented challenges. Careful not to interrupt or talk over each other, it's not possible to generate naturally flowing discussions so the onus falls heavily on the tutor. This is why I initiated the buddy-system which proved popular, purposeful and productive. They sent each other their work by email to exchange critiques during intervening days. Teaching and learning online for two hours is time enough intellectually and emotionally; the 'close up' experience is intensely stimulating and communicating with each other required more concentration. It's worth noting that so far none of our courses or events have excluded anyone with a disability from participating fully with the digital offer and we're staying alert, proactive and responsive to issues which may emerge. Practising brevity and to-camera delivery skills became an instant priority and continues to evolve and improve. I live in fear of delivering a deadly dull pre-recorded lecture. Both myself and the participants also had concerns over questions and comments lacking clarity and focus or that we'd be misheard or misunderstood. Two days in advance of each session we emailed a PDF of all exercises and notes in order to further mitigate against and assuage concerns about audio quality or losing connection. Thousands of existing online courses allow students to dip in and out as their other commitments dictate, but, whilst we mirrored this approach, all the participants valued learning together during a regular time-slot.

As an organisation, we favour relatively small groups, this course had ten participants, because we're keen to develop writers and nurture their individual voices. What we assimilate from existing online offers, is how to actively enjoy digital engagement, flex new brain-muscles and learn new skills and practices. New to our organisation, that is. Again, we're confronted with the need to balance. We primarily exist to work with the people of Redruth and surrounds, as well as the wider rural and coastal context, where creative writing is supporting literacy and as a medium for expression but also developing the emerging writer. On the one hand, and perhaps this is whimsical and certainly unproven, those of us who live amongst nature subconsciously or consciously understand how little control we have over it, and we are, therefore, potentially more accepting of Covid-19. Here in Cornwall we vividly remember the 2014 storms which tore up harbours, destroyed fishing

fleets and flooded and severed the railway so no-one could get in or out. So the enormity of these natural forces push us together into physical spaces with all the more fervour and need. It would be really valuable to learn the thoughts and perspectives of those who live and practice writing in urban areas but here in a profoundly rural area we, in the broadest sense of the word, congregate.

Reframing our goals was a sociological, cultural and creative obstacle to overcome. All our courses end with a sharing and a get-together, Writing for the Theatre participants were working towards the exciting, ambitious and potentially highly rewarding experience of seeing work read by actors on stage at the Minack, in front of an invited audience. Participants had signed up for stage writing, not page or screen writing so, even before we met, this was the outcome they hoped for and subsequently worked towards. How could we replicate this experience digitally? The short answer is, you can't. But, by seeing each other in close-up for the first time in our lives, we could focus on the person, the ideas and the talents of the writers. They were showcased as much as the work. We organised an online script read through with actors, we rehearsed and tech-prepped in advance, we invited directors who gladly came along. To underpin the sense of occasion, we sent out invitations and met before 'non-curtain up'.

In the world of live performance, digital is a critical, complimentary resource, living in a rural area, many of us take advantage of live-streamed theatre, for example, but our live performance goal remains, as does our live participation. As emerging stage writers, Jamie and Ella commented, 'It was a positive, supportive experience that I'm really glad I've had. I was pleased it managed to continue through this madness' to a categorical, 'Bring back face to face courses.' Striking a balance between these extremes will continue for many of us; we've adopted a digital route for now because ultimately we have to. And we are exploring many other alternatives. As a practitioner, a writer, script editor and teacher, I spend my working days considering why we tell stories and why we're fascinated by each other not when life is easy but when life is hard, and why we're able to process, reflect and sometimes learn by engaging in story-sharing. We're yet to reach this journey's end, in fact we're still at the start, we're still living in the inciting incident, I mentioned Philip Pullman at the start of this article and find myself asking 'What would Lyra do?'

www.thewritersblock.org.uk



Jane Pugh lives with friends and her dog by the sea. She writes, teaches and facilitates because her job is to create stories and to help other people create stories too. She is the Community Facilitator and a lead workshop tutor at The Writers' Block, the writing centre for Cornwall. She's working with the National Trust on a series of story discovery workshops across the Southwest. She teaches script writing at Falmouth University and script edits film and theatre scripts.