



How did I get here?

Linda Cracknell: Turning a hobby into a life

Linda Cracknell is a freelance writer of drama and fiction with a published collection of short stories, *Life Drawing*. She also works extensively as a teacher and facilitator of creative writing workshops. She was writer in residence at Brownsbank Cottage, last home to the poet Hugh MacDiarmid for three years until November 2005 during which time she wrote a play about the poet's wife, *The Best Snow for Skiing*, broadcast by BBC Radio 4. She has written other drama and fiction for the BBC and her first stage play *Flashpoint* was selected by Playwrights' Studio, Scotland for a script in hand reading at the Citizens' Theatre Glasgow in March 2006. She won a Creative Scotland Award in 2007 for her project, to write a collection of 'journey-essays' recounting walks which follow human resonances in wild landscapes. She lives in Highland Perthshire.

Where am I now?

I am currently self-employed, with a writing fellowship, various creative projects, and a reasonable income. I have one book of short stories in print, another collection written, and have had two plays broadcast on BBC Radio Four. I'm on draft four of a novel which may or may not go further, and get occasional commissions for articles and broadcast work. My writing-related freelance work has included mentoring African writers through the Lancaster University/British Council *Crossing Borders* project, including a week delivering workshops in Kenya. In 2003 I was a creative writing workshop leader on a boat – a sailing and development experience for teachers - off the west coast of Scotland. In 2004, I contributed to the BBC's *End of Story* 'master-classes', drawing on my own creative process to illustrate the intuitive and deliberate aspects of short-story writing.

I am now completing three years as Writer-In-Residence at Brownsbank Cottage, Biggar, last

home to the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid. My creative work has been supported by a Scottish Arts Council bursary, whilst I spend half my time encouraging others to write, and developing a writing community in Biggar and its wider local authority area. I hope to pursue this creative/organisational duality – to me it is a perfect combination of solitude and sociability; self-expression and helping others; poverty and pay!

My previous working life has included EFL teaching, managing a small educational non-governmental organisation, and latterly I was Scottish Education Officer for WWF, the environmental charity. My work has always been rewarding, and sometimes very demanding. Now I make very little distinction between life and work. I love the diversity and flexibility, and the excitement of discovering new possibilities and forms to work in – a radio script, a poem for children, a play for the stage. There is also a thrill in seeing others develop – the delight of someone's first short story acceptance, or two girls at an after school club astonished to find

they had written the line: 'I wish I could touch the galloping of flowers'.

Stepping Stones

I needed a prompt to put pen to paper in the first place, so in 1995 I went on a residential creative writing course followed by several courses with the Open College of the Arts. I also joined a writers' group, and when my local Writer-In-Residence ran a series of workshops, I took part.

I only had a dim sense of what was publishable, so in 1998 when *Life Drawing* won the *Macallan/Scotland on Sunday* short story competition, I was bewildered. Suddenly I was 'a writer', had £6,000 in my pocket, and the interest of publishers. Most importantly, I had new-found confidence and no longer saw writing as 'just a hobby'. I reduced my working week, had a short story collection published in 2000 (*Life Drawing*, 11:9, short-listed for the Saltire First Book Award in 2001), and was awarded a Scottish Arts Council bursary for a period of extended writing in 2001. It's impossible to say where I would be now, without being thrust from the wings in this way.

The year 2001 seems a significant one in retrospect, partly for the fact that I had six months away from my job at WWF, started writing a novel, and discovered that my creativity flourished with travel, and time to dream, read and explore ideas. I also started to give writing workshops, drawing for the methodology on my past experience as a teacher and facilitator.

In the same year I joined a BBC 'Writers' Lab' for four days, which introduced me to radio drama techniques and the BBC. This important opportunity resulted from a telephone call to Development Producer David Ian Neville, in which I'd muttered, 'I'd like to write for radio'. After the Lab I was much less vague, and got my first commission for an Afternoon Play in 2002. I have discovered through radio a different style and 'voice', and the enjoyment of creative collaboration.

At the end of 2002 I left my job to take up a sustained residency at Brownsbank Cottage. Through this I have gained experience in literature development – producing a newsletter; working in schools (including collaborating with a museum to spark creativity between 5-8 year-olds and original works of art); publishing a small anthology of 'Biggar Little Stories'; working with an adult literacy group; organising readings and workshops; and establishing a monthly night of 'Poems, Prose And Pints' in a local hotel. Secondly, I have had time for creative work without financial worries, and the flexibility to attend workshops, travel, and take opportunities to explore new ideas.

What has got in my way?

Lack of time There never seems to be enough, however well I get organised and am supported.

Self-consciousness The recognition I received so early in my career gave me confidence, but also brought some self-consciousness to my writing – sometimes an inhibiting influence.

Responding to pressure Writing a novel wasn't first and foremost a creative impulse, but an attempt to be taken seriously as a fiction writer. However, I have learnt hugely from the process, and from this 'mistake', whatever the outcome.

Balancing creative work and teaching Sometimes I feel that my life is spent organising and teaching at the expense of my creative work. This niggles at me until I get back into a closed room.

This worked for me:

Win a prestigious competition OK, forget that one, we can't all get lucky. Get work out of the drawer and noticed in any way you can.

Take control of your own time Don't let lack of time become an excuse. Get rid of the TV. Ignore housework. Close (or lock) the door.

Refuse to procrastinate. Be single and/or childless.

Reduce Living costs Live frugally, cram in another lodger, be vegetarian. This converts to more writing time.

Get paid Have a 'day-job' employer who values your development as a writer and will consider flexible arrangements. Apply for Scottish Arts Council bursaries and professional development grants. Get decently paid for readings and workshops through *Live Literature Scotland*.

Network Know who's significant in the field and ensure they know you/your work. Be cheeky. Introduce yourself to people over wine and canapés. Develop antennae for opportunities and grants and get informed through magazines, *the literaturetraining* bulletin, the grapevine.

Get organised Make plans and targets. Save time by keeping a filing system. Meet deadlines. Plan workshops carefully. Develop a reputation for reliability.

Get some business skills – the right way to approach publishers, book-keeping. Publicity and PR skills also help promote what you are doing.

Be hungry for learning opportunities Do courses and workshops such as those provided by Scottish Book Trust's *words@work* initiative. Experience related art forms. Find out how other writers create the right conditions for themselves, teach and inspire. Seek mentors. Follow tangents. Keep experimenting.

Reflect What is your creative process? How do you learn? What worked or didn't work and why? Keep a journal.

Get into a writing community Find allies and support through a writers' group, Writer-In-Residence, supportive organisations, or through attending events. Listen to where other writers find work. Share your own experience.

Get out of the writing community Maintain friends and interests beyond writing – go hill-walking and canoeing, dance, talk to scientists and posties – and keep in touch with what makes people tick. Travel overseas to refresh creativity and brush shoulders with alienation. Use public transport. Watch and listen. Keep asking - Why? How? What if?

Build your confidence Arrange ways of getting feedback. Get something you are proud of to an audience, whether through publication, a reading, blog, or Christmas circular. Cultivate relationships with positive peers.

Say 'no' When you are offered freelance work that doesn't further your aims or pay you respectfully, tighten your belt and refuse it. Resist pressures which go against your creative instincts.

Work hard Keep following the creative tug, even if no-one seems interested. Tell yourself you are practising, improving, exploring, without inhibiting eyes on you. Take it seriously *and* enjoy yourself.

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Useful links

Linda Cracknell
<http://textualities.net/writer-pages/a-m/cracknell01.php>

BBC Scotland Radio Drama
Based in Glasgow but works with writers throughout Scotland and beyond. Mainly produces work for Radio 4, Radio 3, BBC 7, BBC World Service and Radio Scotland.

Contact:
The Development Producer
BBC Scotland Radio Drama
40 Pacific Quay
Glasgow
G51 1DA

Creative Scotland Awards

The Scottish Arts Council Creative Scotland Awards are amongst the richest arts awards in Europe and reward, honour and celebrate established and leading artists in Scotland.
www.creativescotland.org.uk

Crossing Borders

Online mentoring project linking emergent African writers with experienced UK writers.
www.crossingborders-africanwriting.org

End of Story

A new writing challenge held on BBC Three.
www.bbc.co.uk/endofstory/

NALD (The National Association for Literature Development)

The only national body for all those involved in developing writers, readers and literature audiences.
www.nald.org

The National Association of Writers in Education

The one organisation supporting the development of creative writing of all genres and in all educational and community settings throughout the UK.
www.nawe.co.uk

Open College of the Arts

Offers range of tutor-supported home-study courses for beginner and advanced writers.
www.oqa-uk.com

Playwrights' Studio, Scotland

Range of activities designed to develop the skills and experience of Scotland's including workshops, mentoring, script-reading and networking event.
www.playwrightsstudio.co.uk

Scottish Arts Council

Part-funds a network of Writing Fellowships across Scotland and supports the creative development of writers through its bursaries for new and published writers and professional development fund.
www.scottisharts.org.uk

Scottish Book Trust

Scotland's national agency for reading and writing. Manages the *Live Literature Scotland* writer bursary scheme and runs a writer development programme which includes mentoring.
www.scottishbooktrust.com

Story

Information, tips and advice for writers including details of magazines that will accept short stories, competitions and workshops.
www.theshortstory.org.uk