

The Arvon Foundation

Winter 2003

arvon journal



Introduction

Over the last few months we have welcomed several new members of staff to Arvon, with the result that we now have one of the strongest teams ever. In July, Stephanie Anderson took over from Helen Chaloner as Director; Stephanie has trained as a teacher, worked as a Head of Department in Further and Community Education and as a writer-in-residence in schools, day-care centres and hospitals. She joined Arvon in August 2000 as Education Officer and was then appointed Assistant Director in September 2002. She more than deserves her meteoric promotion, having taken on each new post with great intelligence, efficiency and humour and Arvon is fortunate to have her at its helm. She is now ably assisted by Barbara Lyon, whose background has been in publishing and design and who joined Arvon in September in the joint roles of Assistant Director and Education Officer. Barbara has picked up the many facets of the two jobs with consummate skill and fits perfectly into the Arvon ethos. To complete the new recruits, Steve and Caron May arrived as Centre Directors at Lumb Bank in July; both have backgrounds in teaching and were Heads of Department for

Drama in Secondary Schools before joining Arvon. I would like to pay real tribute to the whole staff team who work tirelessly to make Arvon the success it is.

This edition of the Journal focuses on Arvon's work with schools, which is now a very central and crucial part of our activities. We are deeply grateful to The Wates Foundation and The Tudor Trust for their existing support of our schools courses. With all the current discussions regarding the need for creativity within the curriculum, nothing could provide more cogent proof of its importance than the changes these courses are now making to young lives.

Finally, a word of congratulations to John Lyons, a member of our Lumb Bank Management Committee, for receiving the Decibel award for Arts Achiever of 2003.

I hope you enjoy this edition of our Journal: feedback is always helpful to us and we would welcome any comments you may have. Please send these to Isabel Brittain at the London office.

Prudence Skene CBE
Chairman

When I step out of the world of literature and meet people for the first time I am often asked what the Arvon Foundation is and what we do. I suspect some of these people may regret asking when half-an-hour later I am still in full flow. Yet it is something quite simple and can be simply stated: Arvon creates writing space and writing time.

The Arvon week is a precious four-and-a-half days committed solely to the process of writing. Using the expertise of experienced, professional writers, students commit the time to initiating, shaping and developing their work. It is a time set aside for writing, in a space that is beautiful and stimulating but importantly a space dedicated to writing.

This is an exciting time for Arvon. Our new centre at the Hurst, the John Osborne Arvon centre, is yielding an increasing number of courses for writers and emerging writers to enhance and strengthen the programme we offer across all our centres. Week after week we see genuine talent and passion for writing animate the courses and energise the centres. We know we are doing something right and that the Arvon recipe works, but reflecting on our work we also realise that for this passion and talent to endure we may sometimes need to offer more. One area where this has been the case is our work with schools and this issue of the journal talks about some of that work and the impact of it.

For the past three years we have been providing fully funded Arvon weeks for a number of school groups, thanks to a substantial award from the Royal Literary Fund. These weeks proved momentous for many of the young people, not to mention the teachers who came with them and the writers who tutored. We were delighted that the weeks created the impact they did and that teachers and students frequently

expressed the desire to return. Our only concern was how we might contribute to sustaining the joy and motivation of the week once students returned to their schools and constrained curricula. To this end we explored what was needed and how Arvon might offer more. Through the generosity of The Wates Foundation and The Tudor Trust we are now beginning the first stage of our development plans for work with young people with dedicated schools pages on our website and Arvon writing clubs in schools forming part of that.

In the past two years Arvon has also been able to offer more through the Arvon/Jerwood apprenticeship schemes. These have run successfully for the past two years, with a focus on first fiction then poetry. With further and generous funding from the Jerwood Charitable Foundation they will continue in the coming year with playwriting and fiction. The schemes allow nine nominated and selected writers to take part in a dedicated Arvon week and to receive subsequent mentoring from established and experienced writers to take their work further. The results of these schemes have been thrilling and have proved the importance of the apprenticeship relationship. We would like in the future to offer this extended mentoring/apprenticeship opportunity to more of Arvon's students

We depend enormously on the organisations and individuals who share our love of the written word, who believe that creative opportunities matter and should be available to all, and who commit the funds needed to help us create writing space and writing time.

Stephanie Anderson
Director



“Much of our education system militates against creativity. Productivity and targets seem to be the overriding priorities.

All the more important then that schools come to Arvon, for they will experience an oasis, a calm yet an intensity that will help each child find a writing voice. There is a comfort in that you are not doing it alone, you are supported by peers and then by tutors for whom the blank page has been just as scary. Yes, they can meet authors, have their books signed, go to festivals, all of which can stimulate interest and enthusiasm. But at Arvon it’s the real thing. It’s confronting yourself, finding out, failing, and having the time to succeed, and doing it all together. I know no more focused way for a young writer to begin to explore and expand. It should be part and parcel of every young person’s education. We need several thousand Arvons.”

Michael Morpurgo
Children’s Laureate

Isabel Brittain - Journal Editor

What greater affirmation of Arvon’s work with young people than these words from the Children’s Laureate Michael Morpurgo. Many of you know about our programme of courses for adults. However, few of you will be aware of the courses we run for school-aged children from age 10 upwards. I am delighted, therefore, that this edition of the Journal is devoted to our education work – Arvon did, after all, begin 35 years ago with a group of 16 school children from Devon. We have no doubt that these courses have a positive impact on the children who take part. At its best, Arvon works on a number of levels. If students do not all emerge as ‘writers’ they do return to school with an enthusiasm for writing and heightened self-esteem. Each of the articles in this Journal illustrates the importance of providing space in which young people can express and develop their creativity. The articles come from a range of voices: students, a teacher, a Centre Director, a teacher/poet and two writers.

Next year a total of 22 school groups from all over the country will attend Arvon courses. Our aim is that at least a third of these groups will come from areas of disadvantage. To provide funding for such schools is essential – their children either attend with the funding or they don’t attend at all. A donation of £5000 will pay for a group of 16 students to come on a course at one of our centres and provide four-and-a-half days when, in the words of Susan Hill:

“What we hope to do is sow a seed, show them the magic casement and make them believe that it can, if they want, turn from a window into a door.”

**If you would like to make a donation to The Arvon Foundation, please contact us at
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T: 020 7931 7611, F: 020 7963 0961 E: london@arvonfoundation.org**

As this edition of the Journal will reach you in mid-December we would like to take the opportunity to offer you our warmest wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

Ducie High School at Lumb Bank

by Susan Hill

Some years ago, when skimming through the previous day's Sunday Telegraph, while the kettle boiled, a feature caught my eye and held it, I read on until the kettle almost went dry. I continued reading with considerable interest, over my mug of tea. The article was about the area of Manchester, Moss Side, which had been shockingly in the news yet again, because of the death of a boy in a shooting that was almost certainly gang and drugs-related. I knew Moss Side. Or rather, I had known it in the old days, when it was Coronation Street back to backs. They were referred to as slums and perhaps they were, but the quality of life, though hard and impoverished, had a warmth and a sense of community about it which had gone missing when Moss Side was demolished and, on visits to friends, I watched as it was replaced by soulless concrete tower blocks and walkways. Add to the inhuman environment a dollop of unemployment, divorce, neglect, inject the new ingredient – drugs, season with a heavy dose of poverty. The result was predictable, but terribly sad, nonetheless, to anyone who knew Manchester. The writer of the newspaper article did not know Manchester and was shocked by what she found. One of the people she interviewed at length was Miss Dawn Peters, the Head Teacher of Ducie High, a secondary school bang in the middle of Moss Side. Someone at the sharp end then. My eye was caught partly because Dawn Peters' own subject was English, and I was struck by something she said. The children from a school like hers needed to get out, she said, to be influenced by experiences, places, ways of life, to glimpse opportunities and worlds very different from their own. At one time, this had occasionally been possible. There had sometimes been Education Department funding for outward bound trips to places where the young who had been 'long in city-pent' could swing over rivers on ropes and climb up mountains. Even more vital to her, and, as I read, to me, had been one residential trip on which it had not been bodies which had been stretched but the spirits, and the imagination fed. Dawn Peters had taken a school party of 16 for a week to Lumb Bank, the Arvon Foundation's house in West Yorkshire, a magical place, in the countryside, high up, wind-blown, a Wuthering Heights sort of house – though warmer inside. There, they had read and written poetry,

shared living, views, cooking, friendship, the whole extraordinary week's experience. Ah, well, Dawn Peters said. It had been important. It had been unique. Unique indeed, because there was no money now to fund that kind of thing. I put the paper down and poured another cup of tea.

I was luckier than the inner-city children, of Moss Side or anywhere else. I grew up in Scarborough, on the North Coast of Yorkshire, a beautiful place, whose influence has fed my imagination for a lifetime. I went to a convent school, and my fees were paid for by an unknown benefactor – unknown by me indeed to this day. My family were genteel-poor, desperate to keep up appearances, proud, not ill-educated. My father

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had been to Christ's Hospital, my mother had left school at 14 to be an apprentice seamstress. Both of them read books – from the library, and there were a few in the house. They valued education. It was through education that I escaped, education, via my anonymous patron, and even more through the inspiration and encouragement of one or two wonderful teachers who opened the magic casements for me. How many of us owe everything to teachers like that?

How many of us would still be in a backwater, of one sort or another, had it not been for the view onto other worlds seen through those casements? Books, reading, those magic other worlds of the imagination, poetry, the landscapes of the mind, those both haunted me and spurred me on. I wanted to escape both austerity, genteel-poverty and the confines of a small-town culture. Plenty of others escaped from other restrictive backgrounds via just such means. I have met many since, in adult life. It was not a question of desiring worldly success so much as of knowing that there were other worlds, other values, other things worth living for, other beauties. But still,

we were fortunate. Our childhood and youth was charmed by comparison with that of so many inner-city children now. I turned back to the newspaper article about Moss Side, re-read a few paragraphs and then picked up the phone. The older I get, the more sure I am that if you have an urge to do something, you should do it now. Sleep on it, some would say, but when I do that, sleeping tends to be all I do. Whether it is a dreary chore, a bill to be paid, or this sort of urge to be obeyed, my motto is, don't think about it – do it. Now.

I was put through to Dawn Peters, the Headmistress of Ducie High School, introduced myself, told her I had been reading the newspaper article, and asked her how valuable she thought weeks at a centre like Lumb Bank, reading and writing poetry, would be for some of the children at Ducie. Her reply left me in no doubt at all. You cannot measure the value of such weeks, you cannot quantify them, or put them on a league table beside exam results. But she convinced me, if I needed any convincing, of just what the value of Lumb Bank would be. I offered to fund a week's course there in the following February, for a group of Ducie students, chosen by her in consultation with her staff. Afterwards, we would have a post-mortem, see how it had all gone, what the feedback had been both from the children and the staff and then see if we all thought it was worth continuing the project.

In April 2002 the eighth party of pupils went from Ducie High School to Lumb Bank. There has been absolutely not a shadow of a doubt for any of us that it has been 200% worthwhile, and of inestimable value in so many ways, and not only for the individual groups of young people, but for Lumb Bank itself, for the staff, and for the general cultural life of Ducie High School. Funding these annual courses has been one of the most satisfying and rewarding things I have ever been able to do. The omens were all right, the vibes all positive, from the very beginning. On that first year, it snowed and by the time the coach reached Lumb Bank, the drive was blocked so that the boys had to carry all their bags down the steep slope from the coach. They then proceeded to drop the bags in the drifts, and start playing with the snow, making a snowman, throwing snowballs... Just like little children liberated. And that's what Lumb Bank has been. A revelation. A liberation. Many of the pupils who have been have never left the inner-city, never seen a green field, a hawk, a sheep, a wild hedgerow. Never seen the night sky, as it is in the country, away from

the permanent sodium lighting of a city. Never heard such quietness. In one week, they learn in so many ways that it is hard to know where to start. They learn to live together as a community. To work, talk, cook, eat, play together. They learn to sort out their differences and to get along. They learn what it is like to live in a peaceful place where time takes on another quality. Where there is no pressure, no rush. Where there is quietness.

They learn to relate to their course tutors, all of whom are practising poets, as person-to-person, not as pupil to teacher. They learn a natural respect. But more, so much more. Most of all, I think, they learn that here is a place and there are people in the world, who set such store on poetry, reading, art, the things of the spirit and of the imagination, that they give up their days to those things and know that they are of value. They go into the library and start looking for a poem, any poem, which strikes them and which they want to read later, and share with the whole group. It doesn't matter whether they find that poem within 5 minutes or whether it takes all day, looking, reading, thinking, selecting. Time changes here. The poem is important. They learn that their own poetry matters. That expressing their own feelings, and their view of the world, their relationship with it, describing what they see, things that have happened to them and their reactions to it, are regarded as important things to do,

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that time taken over finding the right words and shaping them into a poem which satisfies them in the end, is some of the best time, the most valuable and enjoyable and important time, they have ever spent on anything. Lumb Bank gives them that time, and space, and quietness, and help. And it opens those magic casements. They get a glimpse of other worlds. Worlds where ugliness, noise, crime, violence, distress, childhood loneliness and fear, parental strife, poverty – and the gangland shootings in the streets outside school – are not only absent, distanced, but set into another context. And at Lumb Bank, some response to these things may be found, via the imagination. Other things come to the fore. The beauty of the countryside outside the windows of Lumb Bank. A tree. A sheep.

A bird. A hedgerow. Mud. Snow. Stars. Silence. Wind. Foxes. What the great poets have written about some of these things, as well as about the mighty themes – war, love, death. Teachers become other people, discovering how to write about what they see and feel and experience, other people sharing the quietness, the elastic time, the beauty of the place, the sense of community. And there is fun, too, and laughter, and rehearsing to a poetry reading and boiling a saucepan dry. Having a snowball fight. Learning about the others in your group, not just as people in the desks around you, struggling with the same maths problems, but people with families, homes, troubles, hopes, talents, feelings, skills and handicaps. They become different people so that when you get back to the ‘real’ world, you are never in quite the same relationship to them again.

For after a week at Lumb Bank, these young people are never in the same relationship to anything. It changes them, of that there is no doubt. In some way – and not always in a way they can explain or others can discern – it is a transforming experience. They will not become professional poets, and that is not the aim of the exercise, but they have learned something of what poetry is and what its power to enrich and illuminate and sometimes to heal may be. They have learned something of the fulfilment of being a creator.

Susan Hill is one of the most distinguished of Britain’s novelists and a well known broadcaster and reviewer. She has won the Somerset Maugham Award, the Whitbread Award for Fiction and has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

What we hope to do is sow a seed, show them the magic casement and make them believe that it can, if they want, turn from a window into a door. I believe passionately, as strongly as I have believed anything, in the value of these weeks. I believe in the power of poetry and that place, to transform. I believe it may affect lives not only in the short term – and there’s nothing wrong with them simply having a happy time – but for ever. All manner of other enterprises may feed the body and stimulate the mind, and those are important. But a week at Lumb Bank for a group of inner-city pupils, such as those from Ducie, feeds the spirit and enriches the soul, via the power of poetry and of words and of the imagination.

I will never, can never, know how far the effect of the week has spread, how deep the influence of it has been, its eventual significance in young lives. You sow seeds, and with luck live to see some of the quick, tender green shoots that sprout up, but the full harvest comes long, long afterwards. I shan’t see it, but that doesn’t change the fact that it will be there.

My relationship with Ducie High School has been a relatively private matter, Arvon has asked me to write about what has been happening over the years in order to paint a picture, and put Arvon’s Education work into the context of real experience and I am delighted to do so.

Charles Causley CBE 1917-2003



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Charles Causley supported the work of the Arvon Foundation with characteristic generosity, particularly in its early years, and most notably so in 1980 when he accepted Ted Hughes’s invitation to join him, Seamus Heaney and Philip Larkin to judge the first Arvon International Poetry Competition. Philip Larkin agreed to do so provided that he would be required to read only the shortlisted poems (as it turned out a total of 1,500). The other three judges undertook to read everything although none of us knew, when the competition was launched, just how many that would be. This picture was taken in July 1980 at the beginning of the selection process. Six months later, Charles Causley, Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney had read a total of 35,000 poems!

David Pease,
Former Director of Arvon

From L to R: Ted Hughes, Charles Causley and Seamus Heaney

The Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award

by Cliff Yates

2003 marks the sixth year of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award, a free annual competition attracting entries from all over the world. Cliff Yates, teacher and poet, discusses his experience of judging the award.

Three years ago, in 2000, I judged the Foyle Young Poet Awards with Kathleen Jamie. In August I took massive Jiffy bags full of poems on holiday to a cottage in Porthmadog and sat surrounded by piles of manuscripts. Many writers had sent in enough poems for a pamphlet, others had sent in just one poem; some had been writing on their own for years, others had been working with a poet and came from schools where poetry was right there where it belongs, at the centre of things. It was a heartening experience: reading the poems I realised that this was the work of the next generation of poets. It simply isn't true that young people can't write as well as adults, as reading the anthologies of winning poems (available from the Poetry Society) will testify.

What is the secret of getting young people to write poems? When I started teaching I wasn't sure. Two English degrees had prepared me for teaching the sixth form but I hadn't written anything creative since O-level (apart from a handful of poems that I've happily lost). My favourite place in school was the Art department; the Art teacher was an artist, she knew how to draw and paint and showed the students how. An Art teacher who can't draw is inconceivable, but most English teachers I meet are in the same position that I was in.



Photo: Tom Claxton

Winners of The Foyle Young Poets 2002 at the award ceremony with Matthew Sweeney, judge (far right), Ian MacMillan, ceremony MC (far left) and Helen Chaloner, former Director of Arvon (centre front).

I decided that I had to learn how to write, but how?

The breakthrough was a poetry in-service training course at the Menai Centre in Anglesey. Pete Morgan played the furniture game with us and during that workshop I wrote the first poem I'd ever felt completely good about. I got back off the course and wrote every night, and I started attending writing workshops. It transformed the way that I taught.

In *Jumpstart Poetry in the Secondary School* I demonstrate how teachers can encourage students to work like writers, for example by incorporating elements of the writing workshop into the classroom and by getting students to keep a writer's notebook. I also recommend inviting writers into the classroom. Every student should have the opportunity to work alongside a writer at least once during their time at school.

The great thing about the Foyle Young Poet Awards is that it brings poets and young writers together. The competition is judged by two poets who choose 15 winners and

85 runners-up. All 100 writers win a stack of books and a year's membership of the Poetry Society. In addition, the 15 winners win a week's course at the Arvon Foundation in Lumb Bank, taught by the poets who judged the competition. My students at Maharishi School are regularly among the winners so I have seen the benefits: when they come back from the course, they see themselves as writers.

There were over seven thousand entries to the Foyle Young Poet Awards in 2002 and the number gets higher every year. I hope it continues to get higher. I hope that one day seven hundred thousand young people will enter brilliant poems and that the judges will holiday in castles with acres of floor space – plenty of room for the Jiffy bags full of poems.

For information on how to enter the Foyle Young Poet of the Year competition please visit the Poetry Society website at:

www.poetrysociety.org.uk

Details will be available in early 2004. To request e-mail notification of the competition email:

fyp@poetrysociety.org.uk

Castle High and St Patrick's - Lumb Bank

17 – 22 November 2003 by Barbara Lyon, Assistant Director, The Arvon Foundation

It was raining as I approached Lumb Bank for the first time. Even in the rainy mist, my breath was taken away by the view over the valley and the sound of the river rushing past. What was going to be more inspiring was meeting Shirley Cole, a teacher from Castle High, a school from a Protestant area of North Belfast, and the group of students she had brought to Lumb Bank.

Shirley had brought a group of mixed fourteen-year-olds on a course in 2002. The course had been intended as a cross-community project between Castle High and a Catholic school in Omagh. However, due to the logistical and financial difficulties of organising a project of this nature, the Omagh school were unable to attend at the last minute. However, the 2002 course proved to be such a successful and unique experience for the Castle High students that Shirley was soon organising another cross-community project between Castle High and St Patrick's which resulted in this year's course.

When I arrived on Thursday morning, over halfway through the course, it was difficult to tell which child came from which school; an indication in itself of the success of the course. Arvon, it was agreed, is a great leveller. I discussed with Shirley the benefit of the course to the students. What quickly became clear was the growth in the students' sense of self through living together with writers as writers. Their work, which often goes into their GCSE portfolios, benefits from the group workshops and individual tutorials. Shirley



Photo: Simon Allen

explained; 'there are things that you can do outside of school, that although they are done in the classroom, they have more effect here because the frame of reference is different. The pupils do not view this as work, because they are living, writing and learning together in an interesting way with writers.' Whilst it is clear to see from the output of the students' the progress they are making creatively, what isn't so easy to measure is the increase in the students self-esteem and confidence. It is in these areas that the course proves to be priceless.

Whilst the students benefit from a package of creative writing initiatives within their schools, there is 'nowhere else like Arvon'. It is the combination of focused writing activity and the responsibility of communal living that enables the students to grow not only in their work, but also as individuals. Shirley took great pleasure in telling me how delighted she is by what she has witnessed: a 16-year-old boy whose parents had said, 'good luck to you he's never even boiled an egg' following the recipe for goulash to feed 20 people.

That evening after supper, we gathered together in the barn where each student read out his or her favourite bit of poetry or prose. The students brought something of themselves to the readings and they gave each other their dedicated attention. The time then came for the students' writing to be read out by the tutors – each student had to guess who the author of the piece was. I expected the students to find having their work read out to be an unpleasant experience, and Shirley confirmed it's something they dislike doing in class, but there was no embarrassment or visible nerves, just wonderfully observed writing and the quiet concentration of 16 students.

The experience was best summed up by Shirley's observation: 'They are taking responsibility. When you listen to children at school, the way they talk to each other with a lack of respect... somehow they've gained respect when they are here in the way they support one another and work with each other; this is the kind of thing you try to instil in them at school, it simply works here.'

Comments and Poems from *Stargazing* produced by the Students from Castle High who visited Lumb Bank in April 2002

“While Mrs Cole was talking to the class about the course I didn’t really listen because I knew that I wasn’t exactly the smartest in the class and didn’t think I would be picked... A few months later Mrs Cole asked 5 boys and 5 girls to come to her class because she had some good news. She told us that we were the ones chosen for the course. I could not believe how fortunate I was.”

“When we arrived at the house the surroundings were breathtaking. It was like a completely different world: so peaceful and still. It was amazing... Later we met the poets who would be teaching us on the course, Robert Minhinnick and Hilary Llewellyn-Williams. It was fascinating to think that real poets would be teaching us. After dinner we listened to them reading some of their work and when it got dark we went stargazing in the garden.”

“When we were travelling through the village of Heptonstall to get to Lumb Bank I realised that it was very different from Belfast. The air was clean and fresh and there was green grass all around us.”

“When I got home I thought about the week at Lumb Bank and knew memories of it would last forever.”

The Ghost of the Garlic

a collaboration by students, their teacher and the tutors

The big, long, bricky, deserted, zigzagged road
Slithery, muddy track, blocks of stone barred.
The road was long, dusty and full of stones.
The ghost of the garlic hunting my fingers.
Small, white wool, it’s a lamb in a field.
Hearing the stream as I walked past it.
Two trees embracing, root and branches arching.
Water trickled down descending black stones.
The trunk of the tree was thick, rough and bare.
The river was peaceful, glowing and calm.
The walk through the woods and climbing the rocks.
Water was flowing down peacefully
It was thick and bent like a boomerang.

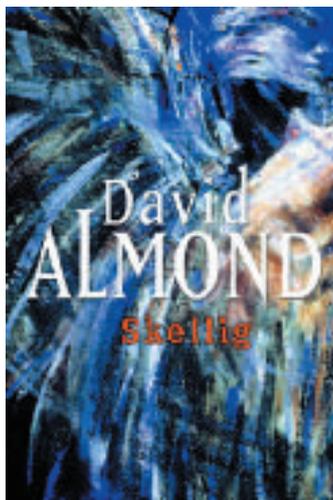
Dinosaur

by Terri Keith

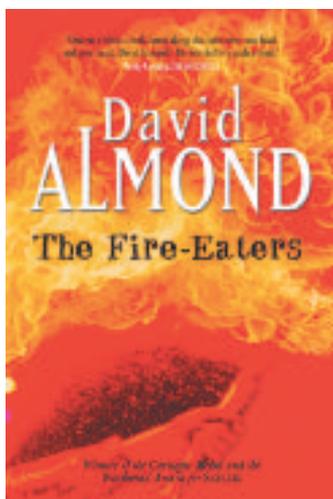
I lie under the sepia soil
spades digging into my grave
as archaeologists try to detect my past
as I am being pulled from my privacy,
my place of rest, I lie in
someone’s hands hard and helpless
thinking back to the freedom
when I used to roam around the
moist green grass of home
unknown hands explore my brittle skull,
brushing dust from my once pearly teeth
finally put into a box labelled RESEARCH
I lie clueless wondering, will I ever
REST IN PEACE

Flying the Cage by David Almond

What a joy to be asked to write a piece for The Arvon Foundation, an astonishing organisation that has been so helpful and supportive in my own career and that has a profound and ongoing effect on literary life in this country and beyond. I first went to Arvon at Lumb Bank over twenty years ago. At that time I'd written a handful of stories, had published nothing, and I was seething with the hunger and insecurity, the searing self-doubts and the precarious self-beliefs of the aspiring author. That week I holed up in a corner of an attic and wrote fervently. I read by the fireside to the other group members (my first public readings!) I walked through the steep wet woods and tested my sentences out against the trees and against the huge abandoned mill chimneys by the river. I stayed up too late, writing in my attic, drinking in the pub, discussing words. Our tutors were Alan Brownjohn the poet and the novelist Rosalind Belbin. They read their work to us. They gave deep attention to our work. They read and listened intently. They nodded and murmured advice that said maybe this way would be better, or maybe this way, and they kept on saying yes and yes and yes. I walked in the garden with Rosalind and we talked about books and the beautiful valley around us and she looked me in the eye and said, 'I think you have something.' I wrote a complete short story that week, perhaps the best I'd written until then. That week, spent away from 'normal' life in a place dedicated to the gentle waywardnesses and tough disciplines necessary to creativity, gave me new strength and confidence. In the



That week, spent away from 'normal' life in a place dedicated to the gentle waywardnesses and tough disciplines necessary to creativity, gave me new strength and confidence. In the years that followed, in moments of self-doubt or disappointment (yet another damn rejection!) I often thought back to that week, to a word from Rosalind, a look from Alan, a nod from another person on the course.



years that followed, in moments of self-doubt or disappointment (yet another damn rejection!) I often thought back to that week, to a word from Rosalind, a look from Alan, a nod from another person on the course. Before that time I think I doubted whether a course in 'creative writing' could be any use at all. Wasn't the writer a solitary being whose fate was solitary struggle? Arvon has proved that I was wrong. There are, of course, awful creative writing courses - often those that will pretend to exchange secret tricks of the trade for lots of your hard-earned cash. Arvon is different. It is optimistic, life-enhancing and totally democratic. It is truly and deeply educational. It shows that words, stories, poems, plays, songs, are tools of exploration and discovery, that in using them with care and boldness we can come to a deeper understanding of ourselves and our world. Arvon's purpose is not to hint at secrets known only to initiates, or to offer ridiculous formulas for writing best-sellers, but to suggest that each of us is naturally creative, and that there are ways to stimulate and encourage our creativity and to draw out the writer in all of us. I've been back to Arvon many times as a tutor. Each time I go I experience again the excitement generated by a group of people discovering and extending their own skills, by individuals suddenly amazed by their capabilities. I have seen aspiring writers make sudden leaps forward, just as I did. I have had the great pleasure of seeing unpublished writers become writers, just as I did. But it is not just about getting published. It is also about encouraging people

to become fully-rounded imaginative beings who are in tune with their own instincts and ambitions, who have a sense of joy in their own language, who can look with fascination at the surrounding world, and who can explore and celebrate it in words. That's why time spent at Arvon can be so valuable in the education of our young people. I've tutored on several Arvon school courses. I've seen the wonderful benefits they can bring. No Arvon week is exactly the same. There is no set formula. There'll be workshops, readings, time to write, time to be alone, time to wonder and wander. Formal education can so easily be trapped in a cage of targets, tests and percentages, predications and progress charts, rigid curriculums

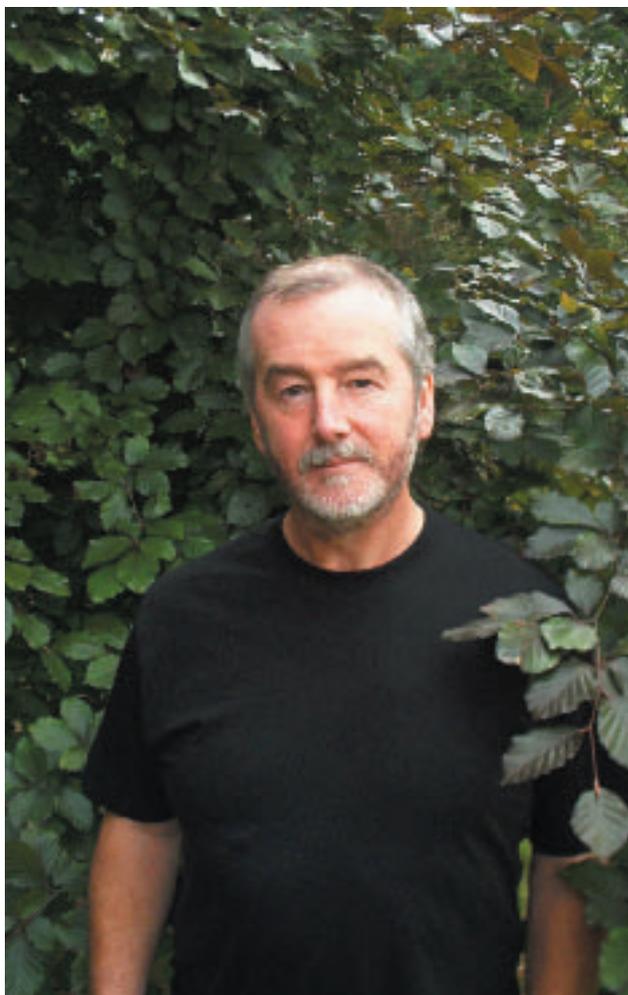
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and tight timetables. And these things maybe have their place. But we all know that there's more to it. I visit lots of schools. I see wonderful creative and imaginative work being done by students and their teachers. I know they often feel frustrated that they can't do more. Both teachers and students relate to Blake's words: 'How can the bird that is born for joy Sit in a cage and sing?'

When I meet these students and teachers, I'll often suggest:

'Why not leave the cage for a while? Why not go to Arvon for a week?'



David Almond was born in Newcastle and grew up in a large Catholic family in Felling-on-Tyne. The people and landscapes of the North East, where he now lives with his own family, form the subject of many of his stories. His first children's book, *Skellig*, won The Carnegie Medal and The Whitbread Children's Book of the Year Award in 1998. The stories and plays for children that have followed have brought him both popular success and critical acclaim. His work is translated into over 20 languages, and he has won prizes and awards from around the world. His sixth and most recent novel, *The Fire-Eaters*, is short-listed for The Whitbread Children's Book of the Year Award. His stage version of *Skellig*, directed by Trevor Nunn, is currently being performed as the Christmas Play at The Young Vic. *Skellig* will be showing until the end January 2004.

Creativity Bursting from their Skin

by Ian Marchant, Centre Director, Totleigh Barton

When I started as an Arvon Centre Director, I felt some nervousness about our first schools course. I knew that the very first Arvon course, in 1968, was run by John Moat and John Fairfax for children from various Devon schools, and I'd heard John Moat read several poems produced on that first course, and thought them wonderful. But the thought of Totleigh full of adolescents filled me with terror. I remembered the school trips that I'd been on in my day. We went to Roman villas in Sussex, the Houses of Parliament, exchange visits to France, Switzerland and Germany; we had art, history and culture, but all me and my pals cared about was Jackie Sinclair (we none of us got anywhere with her, and the memory is still painful thirty years later). And I remembered my daughter's school trip to France. How can I ever forget? As the policeman said to me and the other parents when we picked our shame-faced daughters up from Dover Police Station, fifteen-year-old girls can be a terror. Best to draw a veil over the ensuing scene, I suspect. So when the first busload of school children came down the track to Totleigh, to say that I was 'prepared for the worst' would be something of an understatement.

At the end of the course, all my fears had been laid to rest. For the whole week, the house was full of laughter and joy. The commitment of the tutors and teachers was remarkable, and the standard of work produced in the week was truly extraordinary. And the more schools courses we have run, the more I have come to look forward to them, and to see them as central to what we are trying to do.

Earlier this year, two teachers from Guernsey brought a group of Year 11 pupils over to Totleigh, with children from all the island's secondary schools. Getting to Totleigh is never easy, but this group had to fly into Exeter, even before the tortuous coach journey through the narrow lanes of Devon. Once again, the courage of teachers who are prepared to go out of their way to see that their pupils have a chance to explore their creativity was brought home to me. Look out, in about ten years time, for a spate of seriously talented novelists and poets from Guernsey.

Teenagers, if given the chance, have creativity bursting from their skin. The problem is not that they are not creative, but that they are over-creative, and an

Arvon Schools course, in these days of over-regulated, over-examined, curriculum-based cramming, is one of the few opportunities that teenagers get to express that creative energy. Friday night at Arvon is the night when students read out their work, and on an adult course, that is just what happens. But on a schools course, readings are only a part of a Friday night. More often than not, pupils will have prepared a revue show, with songs and sketches and musical recitals. Most groups decorate the barn; one group from Somerset turned the barn into an atmospheric grotto, with candles and plants draping the beams, and with all the participants wearing masks and face paints.

Although Arvon, for most people, is about writing, for Centre Directors Arvon is a place where you teach innocents how to cook a Middle Eastern Feast for 20. Cooking on the schools courses is always entertaining; one course they all got carried away, and demanded that I get them prosciutto ham and quails' eggs, so that they could prepare some antipasto. And they asked so nicely, and were so enthusiastic, that I acceded to their demands, much to the horror of Monique (my fellow centre director). Arvon is also about coming out into the countryside, and for inner city kids this can be their first experience of real countryside. In February, I stood looking over the hedge at some beasts with a group of lads from South London.

'Ian, Ian... tell me about these sheep', said one fascinated youngster.

'Well, Shafiq,' I said, 'those sheep are cows.'

Children come to Arvon from all over the country, from all kinds of backgrounds. We have schools from the inner cities, and comprehensives from country areas. We have had visits from large well-known public schools, and from small primaries. Groups of pupils who are interested in writing still come from several schools, just as on the first course. They all come here and work in the same way as adult groups, with workshops in the mornings, and one-to-one tutorials in the afternoons. And they are all, uniformly, delightful, creative and exciting. All my fears, and my memories of my own appalling behaviour, have been dissolved by the privilege of working with these talented and joyful young people. Long may teachers shake off the shackles of the curriculum, and bring those busloads of creative children down the track to Totleigh.

Arvon Courses for Schools

‘Everything’s so different now, I don’t know quite what, but it’s like I am not the same person who went away. The week’s really changed me.’

A student from Morpeth School, Bethnal Green, London

Two young poets, John Fairfax and John Moat, started the Arvon Foundation in 1968, gathering a group of 16 Devon school children for a week of living and working together as writers. As the week progressed, the children produced some extraordinary writing and the two Johns realised that they had hit on a magical formula. The guest reader that week was Ted Hughes, Poet Laureate, he recognized the magic: ‘there for the first time I met, what has since become familiar, the indescribable, strange, intense euphoria of a successful Arvon course.’

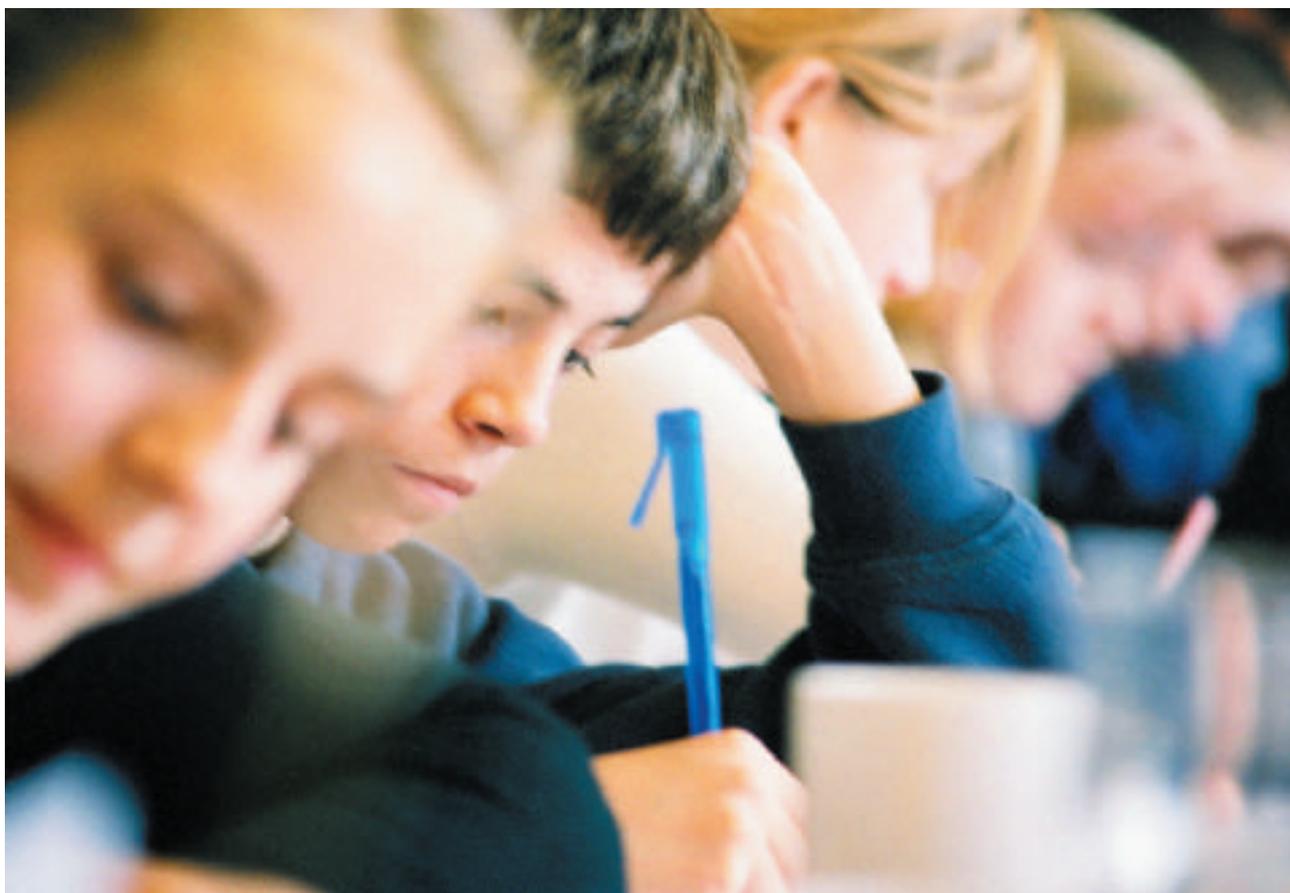


Photo: Simon Allen

Arvon runs courses for young writers from schools and colleges. The courses are open to school-aged students from age 10 upwards. A course usually consists of a group of sixteen students accompanied by two teachers *in loco parentis* who spend four-and-a-half days living with and as writers.

The teachers, writers and staff at Arvon’s centres see the difference the Arvon week makes to the young people, who take back to their schools recognition of their individual creativity and motivation to take their creative experience further. The course fee for schools is £220 per student and there is no charge for teachers.

**To book a course or to receive an information pack
please contact Barbara Lyon at b.lyon@arvonfoundation.org
or telephone : 020 7931 7611**

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Courses for Writers

About Arvon

Arvon runs residential creative writing courses at centres in four locations: Devon, Shropshire, Yorkshire and a centre near Inverness in Scotland which is supported by Arvon but owned by the Moniac Trust. The courses are open to anyone over the age of sixteen who has a genuine desire to write: from beginners to more experienced writers. The centres provide an inspirational space and dedicated time to practise the art of writing, guided by workshops and tutorials with two professional writers. The courses take place over four-and-a-half days and run all year round. The atmosphere is relaxed, friendly and informal. Everyone prepares their own breakfast and lunch but takes a turn in helping to cook one evening meal.

The Centre Directors act as hosts and are on hand when needed. Students who have taken part in an Arvon course describe the ‘magic’ that is present during the week. It is true that the buzz of writing-centred activity, the sharing of ideas, experiences, cooking and eating, all contribute to an intensity of work and emotion that is unique. The course fee for the week, which includes food, accommodation and tuition, is £435.



Photo: Simon Allen

Grants are Available

For further information or to request a brochure visit our website or contact the London Office:

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London SW1W 0RE

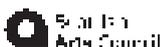
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