

Residential Writing Courses: Trick or Retreat?

As Chalk the Sun tutor/writer Ardella Jones and student/police officer Hafiz Younis set off for Italy last September, they asked themselves how valuable writing retreats really are...

The Tutor: 21st September 2012: At dawn tomorrow, I embark on our annual writing retreat. Bleary-eyed tutors and students, old and new, from such far-flung places as Putney and Perth, will be converging on Stansted at 5 am, clutching their regulation-size cabin baggage. Only the ordeal that is Ryan Air stands between us and sunshine, seafood and inspirational red wine

Our destination is a fortified farmhouse, Masseria Impisi of *Grand Designs'* fame, set amidst the ancient olive groves of Puglia and presided over by sculptor David and artist Leonie. Here, by the natural rock pool in the shade of the Romanesque colonnade, we all feel that we will think more creatively, write more fluently. Writers' block will melt away like Leonie's homemade gelato; procrastination will be replaced by surging creative can-do. Poems will get composed, short stories polished, novels completed.

But do writers really need to retreat in order to write? Of course, we will have more time and more mental space without ringing phones, screaming kids or whinging partners but if you really want to write, you will do it anyway anywhere; T.S. Eliot managed to knock up *The Wasteland* (1922) whilst working full-time at Lloyd's Bank in Westminster.

The Student:

21st September 2012: My grandfather died in Pakistan last week just as I got a few days off-duty after a month of double shifts covering the Olympics. I rush up to Rotherham where I spend a few solemn days with my family saying prayers and greeting streams of mourners, then rush back just in time to check-in online, pack a bag, grab my laptop and jump in a cab. Am I really going to find the energy or inspiration to write? I ask myself, as we head for south London to pick up my co-students, psychologist, Dr. Fiona and Glasgow Jim, a retired steel erector. Maybe I'll just sleep in the sun for the whole trip. I yawn as we drive through grey suburbs in the half light and wonder what the newbies on the trip will be like. They better be fun!

The Tutor: Day One: We reach Masseria Impisi a little frazzled: Hafiz is drained by work and a bereavement; Lexi, the children's writer, arrived from Bari where she'd spent two days alone in the B & B from hell (grubby bed, no breakfast); Kate, the vet, came from Cheshire via that weird, sterile limbo the airport transit hotel; Dawn, the actor, who works in an outback mine, came from Australia via London. We are all short of sleep and hungry.

After lunch, we send the students off to explore the quirky buildings and beautiful grounds of the masseria with its mosaics, pergolas, unexpected bird-man sculptures, bridges over dry river beds, paths which lead nowhere, doors which lead to a pre-Roman tomb and a cavern eccentrically equipped with a dart board and pub tables. The newcomers are entranced and the regulars fall in love with the place all over again. Everyone - except Hafiz - finds something inspiring to write about.

At dinner, we gorge on spicy salamis, the softest, palest mozzarellas, the freshest green olives, Leonie's miniscule, melt-in-the-mouth ravioli (the woman is an artist in every sense). The wine flows and we learn that another student has been bereaved recently; our Anglo-Italian publisher Simona Sideri has worked a week of 18-hour days to meet an editing deadline; someone's had minor but painful surgery. We are all a bit fraught and fragile.

The Student: Day One: I hate missing sleep. I hate budget airlines. I hate Italian drivers. The most miserable driver in the world picks us up at Brindisi; I thought Italians were jolly and always singing light opera? Things perk up with lunch but I'm too knackered to do the workshop so I chill by the pool and tell my roomie, Jim to fill me in later. Dinner is even better and, although everyone is tired, once we start on the organic red from the local wine co-op we all get a second wind and stay up until 1 am. The newbies are an interesting mix so that's OK. We play a therapeutic game of Anglo-Italian prejudices devised by Ardella and Simona. Guess what? The Italians think Brits are violent, chip-eating drunks and the Brits think the Italians are smarmy spaghetti-eating Romeos. Those stereotypes!

The Tutor: Day Two: The sun wakes us early and fills us with optimism. We do a workshop on subtext; we have one-to-ones and define our personal goals; we sunbathe, swim, read in the shade, write in the pergola, grab bicycles and freewheel downhill to the beach. Exhilaration is not the province of cyclists alone; we all feel a new energy.

At sunset, we sip our peachy, prosecco bellinis on the roof and the new students read their first pieces; they're brilliant. The old students read theirs; the second drafts are gaining fluency and cohesion. At dinner, Leonie produces a light, creamy cake, complete with candles, for Dawn the Aussie's thirty-second birthday. We swap stories, jokes, even writing ideas until after midnight. I think our little group have bonded.

The Student: Day Two: Jim's up like a lark ready to write. I sleep. This isn't good. Ardella tries to get me in a workshop when I emerge for coffee about 11 but the Adriatic is calling and I head off for a swim. I need it. We go up on the roof; it's a tradition by now as are the bellinis – well, Hemingway drank them. There's some really good work read and I feel guilty but it's Dawn's birthday so we have to party. We all stay up late again. I still haven't so much as booted up my laptop.

The Tutor: Day Three: Our morning workshop is on the symbolic and cultural significance of food. It's a universal topic and by noon the new students are all scattered around the olive groves in hammocks writing about their best and worst ever meals while the novelists are typing away on the terrace revising food scenes.

The tutors skive off for seafood anti-pasta in Villanova AKA 'an off-site meeting'. Simona orders local specialities in her fluent, idiomatic Italian so for once we get exactly what we want. We dissect our students' progress and plan their next one-to-ones over homemade pannacottas; both are a luxury. "You never get time to really think about a student's work at a college," says UCA lecturer Jo, toying with a sliver of dark chocolate, "Let alone get two second opinions." We walk off lunch on the beach, debating how to get Hafiz writing and what to do with Dr. Fi's internal logic. We take a dip and return to Masseria Impisi looking very unlike women who have been in a meeting all

day. The pre-dinner readings about food wet our appetites – well except for Sally’s horrific account of cooking tripe – and at last Hafiz has risen to the challenge with a hilarious account of police canteens.

The Student: Day Three: The workshop today proved to me that the simpler the topic the more you can discover stuff about it. I was quite pleased with my analysis of canteen culture and the culinary hazards of The Job. I feel the energy to write returning. After all, I’ve been buzzing with ideas for months, frustrated by lack of time and then when I get the chance I’m too knackered. I have to make the next two days count. I still want to hear Dawn’s mining tales and Kate’s sick sheep stories over a few drinks though; it’s material – you don’t meet many miners or farm vets in south London.

It’s our night off so we take a taxi into the nearby town Ostuni and wander round the narrow, medieval streets stopping every half hour for beers, gelatos, prosecco, pizza, wine, cakes, coffee and grappa. On our return, the hardcore sit in the den talking until 2 am and yes we do open another bottle.

The Tutor: Day Four: The morning is silent and industrious (or maybe hung-over?): women in swimwear scribbling in notebooks, Dr. Fi in her ‘office’ on the terrace, Hafiz on the sun-lounger with his laptop, Jim in shorts composing a poem for our vet’s fortieth birthday which we’ve discovered is tonight. Simona does a Q & A on publishing before lunch. She doesn’t sugar the pill but by now everyone is so focused on their work they understand the need for rewrites and they are enjoying the process so much the idea of a rejection slip no longer scares them.

We spend a quiet afternoon reading all the work that’s being produced. The tutors feel good. We don’t kid ourselves that this creative growth is all down to our teaching; we cannot deny the inspiration tranquil Impisi offers, the freedom from work and family, the benign effects of peer approval but we congratulate ourselves on finding this place and helping new writers find their muses.

Our hosts excel themselves at dinner by conjuring up fireworks and an *il postino* hat for David to wear as he delivers Kate’s birthday cards. We settle down for our annual short story competition. We have a secret ballot which

Dawn wins hands down with a witty account of a fraught family Christmas dinner in which her South African grandmother chooses to share her wisdom on race. The birthday girl reads some beautifully observed poems dedicated to the house cats, Missus and Vita, Lexi enthral us with the exploits of Brad the Badger, even though we are somewhat older than her intended audience, and Hafiz reads the first chapters of his gritty crime thriller, which are stunningly good.

The Student: Day Four: I made up for lost time today up on the roof watching the sunrise, thinking about sub-plot/theme then straight on the laptop with breakfast. Made Jim fry the eggs. Simona talked lots of sense and I was glad to hear there's a huge demand from publishers for genre fiction. I talked plot with Ardella as she's into crime. A fellow Elmore Leonard fan.

Watched fireworks against the black sky from the dining terrace then another fabulous meal, ending with homemade tiramisu. The stories and poems showed an amazing range. I couldn't believe some of the newbies had never written before. Fascinating what people's imaginations contain. Needless to say, we had a late night congratulating each other on how talented we are and swapping addresses.

The Tutor: Going Home. We linger in the sun drinking our espressos, a final treat before we go back to the cold and humdrum. I really do think the retreat worked; it's been a joy watching students unwind, work, grow. The tutors too have learned from each other and from the process. We will all take a distillation of this creative camaraderie back to warm us through the winter and our next drafts. We will still need discipline and determination but the inspiration of Impisi has made it just that bit easier.

The Student: Going Home. I feel like a different man and I have two chapters, a thought-through plot and character notes. And I am not going to let it drop. I only get a clear spare hour or two to write once or twice a month but that's a luxury and an excuse! If I've got ten minutes waiting for a train or a girlfriend I am going to write, edit or make notes. My only criticism is that five days isn't long enough - I needed three just to chill. I want a week minimum

next year after that I'll probably have the Pacific beach house next to James Lee Burke to write in!

Ardella Jones, is director of the creative writing organisation [Chalk the Sun](#) which runs workshops, distance-learning and residential retreats. Hafiz Younis is a Metropolitan Police Officer and long time chalk student.