

Water Story

by Bev Schofield

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Water Story is a search for written experience either involving or simply inspired by water. The benefits to health and wellbeing that precipitate from regular creative writing are widely documented, but this project has taken that experience to another level.

The group of writers that first joined this group in September 2016 had been begun writing together at a Maggie's Centre in Glasgow. The introduction of a limit to the number of sessions writers could attend truncated an important writing journey for these people, all of which have worked with long term conditions including cancer, MS, osteoporosis, mental ill-health and fibromyalgia. It was decided at the outset that this project would endeavor to keep places open for regular attendees, so nurturing a sense of belonging and ownership of the group. This longer term group dynamic has yielded increased benefits to the individuals both on their health and their written journeys.

Apart from the Words Work Well for All anthology, several of the writers have had works published, one has co-produced a mainstream documentary, one gained second prize in the national poetry slam championship in January 2019 and yet another has found her feet as a dinner speaker in some relatively challenging male-dominated environments! All writers feedback the benefits of regular Water Story meetings on their evaluation forms:

- *feel less aware of pain when absorbed in writing*
- *helps me to reduce pain levels and manage stress*
- *my physical health is static but psychologically I'm greatly supported by writing; I feel very lucky to be part of this group*
- *gives life structure*
- *I feel better equipped to process, deal with and resolve problems*
- *weaning myself (with aid of GP) off depression medication. Anxiety lower and more coping against panic attack. Love the friendship, compassion, love and laughs in between prompted and expressive writing*
- *physically still the same but (despite) exhaustion... making an effort to attend regularly. I am so comfortable with my Water Story fellows that I can be completely myself... enjoy the discipline of writing then and there... I write my best... no distractions and demands (that there would be) in the house.*

Research in this group demonstrates benefits that can be described as self-worth, mindfulness and inspiration. However, the overriding benefit seems to be connectedness and interest in each other, and we believe that this is the advantage of carrying a group on

much longer than is usually possible.

Water Story writers have benefited tremendously from inspirational Live Literature guests and they are always eager to get writing done on the day and, just as importantly, to hear the voices of everyone in the group. The collective journey is as important as the individual ones. This moving piece from one writer gives a sense of how water plays a part in the writing that comes out of these sessions:

Post Mortem

by Giovanna MacKenna

*When the pathologist cuts me open, salt
water will run from my veins. The crack
in my skull will require an extra twist
to loosen the barnacles from my cave of bone*

*Scalpel on skin, a bold strike down, torso
torn back, a wondrous rock pool appears!*

*Rubied anemones wave in alarm at the
rolling waters. Limpets lock to my
deflated lungs, sweet shining seaweed is
caught around the stillness of my heart.*

*The waves lap over my broken skin washing
the tiled floor free of its hospital smell, filling
the room with a soft sea breeze. Gulls cry
overhead. There is the sound of waves, crashing.*

*Rubber boots are removed, hospital greens
rolled up. The pathologist goes paddling*

Weather might be considered a challenge to a boat based operation and certainly, extreme conditions tended to reduce attendance, particular by participants with mobility issues. However the woodstove warmth of the barge tended to transcend the discomfort of venturing out, providing evocative inspiration on days when the canal was iced up or the weather too hostile to allow the barge to leave the mooring.

Several Water Story events took the Glasgow writers further afield to passenger vessels on Loch Lomond. Although this allowed larger writer numbers and was a delightful variation on the Water Story theme, we have discovered that the familiarity of the barge as a regular venue is as important as the possible adventure of new boating experiences.

The greatest Water Story challenge has been the fixed number of places on the barge (the usual venue), these being limited to 12, at a push, but 10 comfortably. On sunny days some writers can move onto the bow of the boat, but in winter there is a crush in the cabin if we take more than 10. Couple this with the health demands on individuals in the group – sudden illnesses or hospital appointments – there are often late cancellations which means that places are wasted; we cannot invite more than 12 in case they all turn up. However it should be noted that, in the event of over-subscription, it is the writer with best attendance who is given precedence. This encourages writers to turn up when they say they will.

Despite the repeat visits by regular writers, the project has hosted 46 different individuals in 366 session places (24 and 162 respectively between June 2018 and March 2019). We have found that water, as an environment, lends fathomless inspiration and prompts memory and creativity.

In short, our Water Story learning for creative writing facilitation:

- boats and water offer disproportionate inspiration to writers
- comfort and safety present particular challenges in the boating context so careful preparations must be communicated to ensure attendees are warm and safe
- during the writing event, the sharing of a boat trip or, indeed any social activity, lessens the emergence of different capabilities among writers (the best rope hand may not write the best poetry, the baker of the best cake may not have the most exciting piece of prose)
- careful attention must be paid to the group dynamic and, where possible, harness it to extend the benefits of connectivity
- longer established groups require occasional return to group's self-determined ground rules (including confidentiality)
- be sure to allow all voices to be heard and ensure that some are not heard too much – the latter being a problem that diminishes with longevity of the group
- make sessions as predictable and regular as possible to develop a sense of holding and continuity
- take great care to ensure all are welcome, even though some may need to be excluded when uptake is high and there are not enough places for all – be sure those left out are first on the list for the next session
- always have cake on the table and water in view!