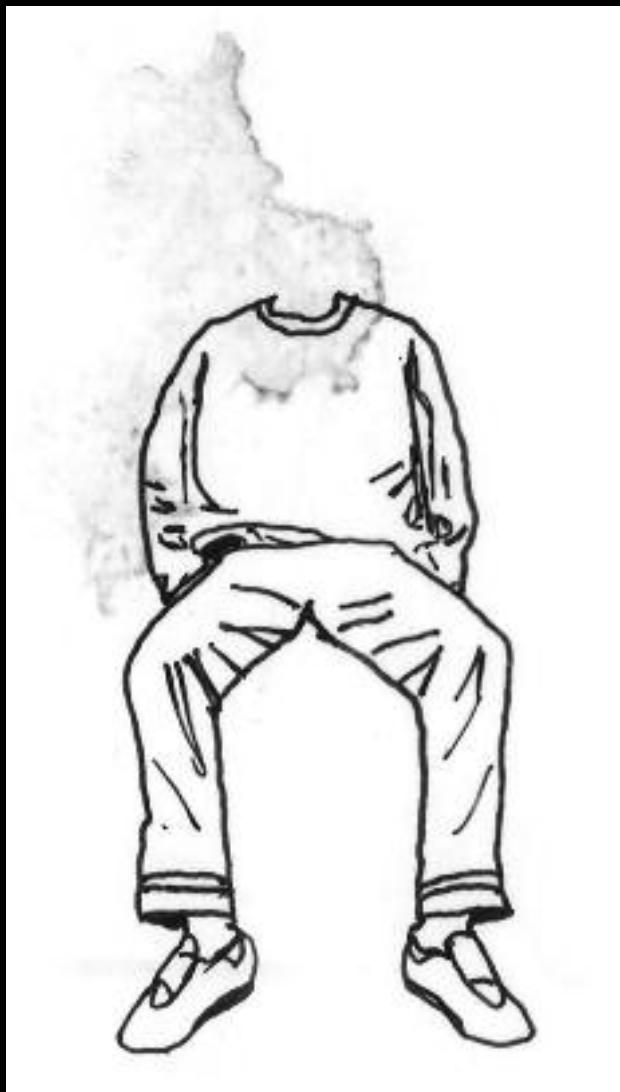


# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

July 2014 No 214



*Special Edition*  
**The Prison and the Public**

# Chapter and Verse:

## The Role of Creating Writing in Reducing Re-offending

**Michael Crowley** was Writer in Residence HM YOI Lancaster Farms (2007-2013) and is author of Behind the Lines: creative writing with offenders and those at risk (Waterside Press, 2012).

*People benefit because it's a way to unlock hidden emotion. It's a way of being understood. It's a way to get out of this world and into another where anything can happen. I've tried to write from a victim of crime perspective, and the truth is, I've never thought like this before. I've never even bothered about people I don't know. I've always thought, if I don't know someone, why should I care? Writing from their perspective makes me think about their lives.'*

Michael, (Prisoner) HMYOI Lancaster Farms<sup>1</sup>

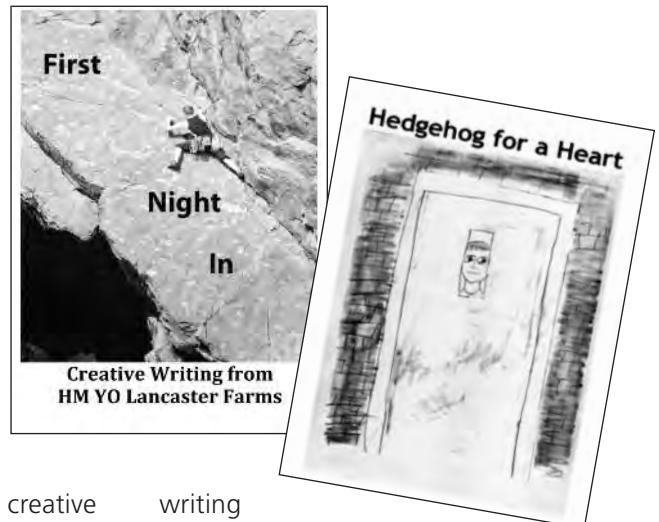
I was writer in residence at HM YOI Lancaster Farms for over six years; before that I worked in youth theatre, before that I was a youth justice worker in Greater Manchester for seven years, before that I worked in an open YOI. This is an article about getting people in custody to write, and about writing with them and what that teaches us both. It is about how creative writing can be used as a means not just for self-expression, improved literacy and concentration, but also for assessment, for developing moral reasoning and empathy, for tackling pro criminal thinking; as a means for a number of interventions and as an intervention itself.

That creative writing can play a part in the process of desistance I believe is now widely accepted in prisons and probation.<sup>2</sup> What is less well established is a closer scrutiny of the methods involved, the deliberate development of a practice of applied creative writing, an examination of what works and what doesn't.

*You cannot be a writer and a thug. To describe how someone may be feeling in a situation shows you have empathy or an understanding of how actions affect other people, you are sensitive. I think writing really helps to make people more compassionate and thoughtful.*

Jack, HMYOI Lancaster Farms

In my six years at Lancaster Farms I worked with a lot of young male prisoners (lads) and produced a lot of



creative writing anthologies; memoir, fiction, poetry and book reviews. We also wrote short plays together for stage and radio, performed them and even took on a few scenes from Othello and Macbeth. Always there was an underlying moral purpose and if it wasn't expressed in the writing or drama session, it was because I believed it was self-evident enough to occur to the lads anyway. To be interested in a prisoner's writing without any regard to how the process might change their thinking and behaviour to me seems pointless. This meant discussing crimes, grave crimes in detail; writing and rewriting about them; the planning and motivation; the commission of the offence; the aftermath on all concerned; their meaning. It is remarkable how little opportunity or requirement there is upon prisoners to discuss the significance of what they have done, particularly in a young offender institution. In my experience writing or text based work is all too marginal in the rehabilitation of offenders. Whilst written work isn't for everyone on community orders or in custody, it can certainly be employed for more people than are currently engaged or have the opportunity to take part. Neither is it an occupation that merely indulges the person who has satisfied themselves through crime. It can be a more exacting and detailed means of asking people to face up to what they have done, as well as a means to spell out a path for the future.

1. All quotes of prisoners' writing from Crowley, M. (2012) *Behind the Lines: creative writing with offenders and those at risk* Hampshire, Waterside Press.
2. See particularly Albertson, K. E (2014) 'Realising the agency, empathy and reflexive capacities that contribute to desistance narratives', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, Special Edition: Arts in Prison (February 2014). Also Arts Alliance report Bilby C, Caulfield L, Ridley L 2012 *Re imagining Futures: exploring arts interventions and the process of desistance* [www.artsaliance.org](http://www.artsaliance.org).

## *Tom's Life*

By Tom

*I laugh in the face of the police*

I admit it. I've done wrong

*Who gives a fuck about life?*

Keep your head up. There's more to life. Just give it time.

*I will carry on doing what I'm doing now.*

You can get a job. It won't be a good job.

Working in a shoe factory or making socks. It's a job.

*I wish I was never born*

Life gets better in time. Give it time. It gets better.

*I run riot around this school*

Education helps me out in life.

*I live with my mum and that's it. I don't even respect her.*

I got two letters off her on Saturday.

*My dad threw me across the room*

He won't be able to do that now

*I buzz off my area because we kick off every day and fight every day*

It's a bad area to grow up in. When I get out, I'm moving away.

It is never difficult finding prisoners who want to write. From the first morning I walked onto a wing (What do you do boss?) until my final day, I was never able to meet all the requests or read all the work handed to me. One or two inmates appeared to believe that writing was the purpose of their imprisonment. That doesn't mean that the dominant ethic within prison fosters or even tolerates individual expression. The job of the prisoner in a YOI is to be enduringly on guard from oneself. Lads are bullied for writing; some demanded my confidence and some left their cells with manuscripts tucked down their pants. Not surprisingly it was the prisoners who were serving the most time that were the most open and productive. The trouble though, at least with much of the unsolicited prison writing, is that it tends to portray either sentimental conversions or a reaffirmation of the code, though some it has to be said is testament to a quarrying for solutions.

*That's all I ever want off people: their car. I appreciate cars. I understand them. I see the reason why every drop of sweat that has hit the ground during the engineering of a car has done so. I love cars. The way they look, the way*

*they smell, the way they sound, the way they feel, the way they drive, even the way they hurt when they are abused. It's almost as if they talk to me. I take care of them, look after them, drive them the way they like to be driven, wash them when they are dirty and sad, fix them when they are broke and mad. I can understand why people think I'm crazy. They are right, cars don't have feelings, you can't make a car happy. What was I thinking? Some people call it an obsession, some people call it an illness. Most illnesses have a cure. I think the only person who can cure this is me and I'm far from a doctor.*

Michael, HMYOI Lancaster Farms

To help prisoners to write well and to write thoughtfully, we need not just rapport and discussion, but writing exercises. Tailor made tools to initiate and to develop writing. *Tom's Life* is a response to an exercise Letters to Myself. I began developing exercises when I was a YOT officer and continued when I was working in theatre. I hoarded them whilst working at Lancaster Farms. I will often begin with someone with a warm up exercise such as *Today My Hand*<sup>3</sup> and *Once My Hand*, which requires people to think about five physical actions from the present and the past.

### **Today My Hand**

- Draw around a hand. In each finger write a sentence concerning an action; ordinary or otherwise, beginning *today my hand...*
- Connect a feeling and a thought to each action. It may be an unrelated thought.
- Repeat the exercise using *once my hand, one day my hand will, another's hand once...*

*today my hand wanted something else to do. I felt bored.  
once my hand put money in a charity box.  
once my hand held shopping for my mother.  
once my hand pulled a trigger.*

*Today my hand turned on the TV, made my bed, wrote an exam. It did these things in prison, for stealing from cars. In the future my hand will cook for my family, will work and clean and write.*

Liam, HMYOI Lancaster Farms

3. An exercise adapted from playwright Noel Greig. See Greig, Noel (2005) *Playwriting a practical guide* London, Routledge.

It's an exercise that exposes the limitations of life in custody. When applied to an offence, it centres on the physical nature of what has been done; slows it down, cuts to the bone in Anglo Saxon English from out of the cover of abstract Latinate terms such as *assault*. It's much the same with walking. The prison has a 'regime' and it includes movement. Deviation in any direction is not an option. Most lads cope with jail. Some cope a lot better in jail than they do on The Out. Many argue that things are working out for them. They felt sorry for me on my residency income — prison is fine and they would have a few years left in them yet. Listing the places they walk to and the tasks their hands perform is one way of passing the penny that they might drop one day.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Body Self Exercise**

Draw around your feet. Let one foot represent the past and the other the present. Write down the places you have been; the key moments that have weighed each foot down and put a spring in its step.

- What's made the foot strong, what's made it hurt?
- Draw a future foot. Fill it with things you want and believe you can get. How will that foot walk in five years' time?

Like most of the rest of us, most prisoners begin by writing memoir. In the context of criminality this is at the same time potentially both problematic and useful. You could be feeding an ego in desperate need of a diet, but also beginning to put it in its place. Last year I decided to put together an anthology entitled *Why Are You in Jail?* When I began to ask the question, some inmates talked about the last offence, the failed appointments that led to recall; others talked about domestic violence, parent's drug addiction, or parents dying and their memoirs often covered the surface of years. The choice of instrument suggested itself.

#### **Why Are You In Jail?**

- Think of a particular day connected to why you ended up in jail. It does not have to be about your crime.
- Think of a particular hour within that day. A time; less than an hour. Where were you, who else was there, what was happening?
- Imagine you are back there. Write what is happening in the present tense. Start with your age.

*I am seven. I am very worried and confused. I haven't been told why or where we are going. I know I am going to Wales on a train. Looking across at my mother her face is all bruised and looking very upset and scared. My older*

*brother isn't that bothered. I think he thinks we're just going on a holiday. I don't think this is a holiday. I am seven but I know some of the pieces. I know my mum is unhappy because my dad is a violent person and has been violent to my mum and she's scared and now she is so scared that we have to run away from the violence. When we arrive in Bangor my mum gets a postcard and sends it to my auntie to let her know where we are. A couple of days later my dad finds the post card and finds us. On the way back home me and my brother are in the back seat of the car and every time me or my brother say something my dad yells 'shut the fuck up.'*

James, H M YOI Lancaster Farms

Conversely instead of starting from an event one might begin memoir work by beginning with an emotion.

#### **Emotion into Memoir**

- Write a list of seven different emotions.
- Choose one.
- Think of a time when it was dominant.
- When, where, who was there?

And with a new writer it will often take a combination of exercises to form the basis of a piece.

#### **Remembering the Senses**

- Write the five senses down the side of the paper.
- Write a response to each of the senses, as in, *I remember...*
- *I remember the colour of..., I remember the smell of..., I don't remember the sound of..., I remember the taste of..., You will remember..., They will remember the sound of...*

The two exercises above, as well as the *Today my Hand* warm-up exercise formed the basis of a poem by a lad.

#### **Two Sides**

*I remember the royal blue seats and the deep brown wood*

*the perfume of the woman who handcuffed me while I stood  
in the court. My hands sweating.*

*I remember the rustle of paper above the silence  
the taste of the tasteless tea, the ink leaking*

4. The Body Self exercise has been adapted with kind permission from an exercise by poet and fellow writer in residence Pat Winslow.

*off the indictment onto my hands.*

*I don't remember the judge's speech after the verdict.*

*I saw tears in the jury's faces.*

*They will remember me asking them why they were crying  
when they had just found us guilty.*

*You were going to sacrifice your freedom for me  
I told you not to.*

*We will remember the smiles on the police officers' faces  
the handshakes and the claps, after the verdict.*

*Today my hand turned on a television. It wanted something else to do. I felt bored.*

*Once it put money in a charity box  
held shopping for my mother,  
pulled a trigger.*

*I felt like the lowest of the low, the bottom of the pile. When I look back at what I've done I regret doing it. It wasn't just the bike. It was the anger inside of me. A lot of bad things happened to me as a kid. Violence. A lot of crime around me. I started joining in with it when I was eleven. It made me angry because I wanted a good upbringing. A normal one. With no violence. To live a good life like my mates had. I was jealous. I wanted what they had. I was jealous of everything. I need to make my life a better life.*

Darren, HM YOI Lancaster Farms

In writing a narrative about oneself you begin to put yourself at a distance, if you want anyone to read it, you have to plot a cause and effect to the events. But not everyone who writes a memoir wants others to read it. Lads would fill exercise books with their unhappy life stories and then hand it to me with no wish for it to be published or returned. There is a therapeutic writing exercise where participants are invited to write a letter to the cause of their suffering and then place it in a sealed envelope and leave it somewhere. I was a walking envelope for six years.

Getting people to look realistically at their own narrative enables them to better imagine and appreciate the narrative of those they have harmed. In youth justice we would ask children who had offended how they imagined their victim felt, before they were scarcely able to express or comprehend how they themselves felt about what they'd done. The database required snap assessments on *emotional intelligence* and *victim empathy*, that and much else on the basis of one meeting. Commonly an absence of contrition or even the ability to express contrition assumed an absence of empathy. There was also I thought an implication that these notions are static. Exploratory autobiographical writing is not just about oneself. In the context of criminal justice it is about self-examination, but it is also the basis of thinking long and hard about oneself in relation to others. Paradoxically it is essential in preparing people for and reflecting upon a restorative justice process.

Not everyone wants to write about themselves. For some people, the last thing they want to excavate is their own life. I unlocked the cell door of one lad who had been sentenced the previous week, he swung off his bunk: *I don't want to write anything about crime, anything to do with gangs*. He wrote a short story set in the Manchester rag trade. It amazed other gang members and lads on the

I remember the royal blue seats and the deep brown wood.  
I remember perfume of the warden who handcuffed me  
while I stood in the court my hand sweating  
I remember the rustle of paper above the silence  
I remember the taste off the tasteless tea  
I remember the ink leaking off the

Of course the title *Two Sides* is the wrong one. It's only one side and it doesn't begin to look at why he was in court in the first place. All the same I liked its sparseness and put it in the next anthology of prisoner's writing. It convinced him he should be off the wing and in education: a start possibly. I'd met the lad once before, when he was thirteen. He had been convicted of a burglary and I was trying to set up a restorative meeting with the victim but it proved too risky. Seven years later he was beginning a long sentence for gang related crime. I met a lot of former YOT clients in Lancaster Farms. Boys I knew at ten and eleven had grown into young men, grown into prison cells.

How can memoir work be rehabilitative? Fundamentally, 'it is the placing of the person, not the treatment or criminal justice professional, at the heart of the process.'<sup>5</sup> Most of the lads I worked with had never taken the time to think through their backgrounds, the emotional topography of their lives. Helping them to articulate what happened to them and what they had done was empowering. Disempowerment, all corrupting powerlessness, was always rearing its head in the prison and in the journey to its gates.

5. Albertson K E (Op. Cit.).

wing, who unlike him aren't serving fifteen years. There is freedom and fun in fictional characters, whatever happens to them. Perhaps rather crudely I have exercises on creating characters from the outside in and the inside out. *Working from Image; Working from Objects; Character as Trait; Character as Motive.*

#### Someone like You

Think of a face that is familiar to you. It could be from the present or the past, but it has to be someone to whom you have never spoken and know virtually nothing about; you just know the face. Draw the face, *with your eyes shut*. Spend a few minutes on this, imagining you have a close up camera. Think about the eyes and teeth, their hair. What do they tell you about this person's life? Now build a biography of the individual: Give them a name; write down three facts about their parents. Who in their life are they closest to? When they were young (maybe they still are) what did they want to be? Who was the first person they ever kissed?

Improving the ability of participants to imagine the emotional and psychological experiences of other people is the most important work that can be done with offenders. This can be approached both through fictional and real lives, indeed one may usefully lead to the other. Character and empathy work is fundamental to effective offence focused and victim awareness interventions. Although restorative conferencing is now accepted practice in the community, it is still an exceptional event in custody. Face to face meetings are often understandably undesired by the victim, or otherwise impractical. As a necessary substitute, practitioners sometimes employ role play: hot seating the offender as victim or asking the offender to write to the victim whom they cannot meet. Thus rehabilitative work involves looking at the world from inside someone else's skin; often real, sometimes imaginary. As such, drama practice that explores different perspectives is not uncommon in criminal justice work. For example there is the excellent work of Geese Theatre and Theatre in Prisons and Probation, but there is clearly also a place for employing writing exercises to help participants articulate the consequences of their behaviour. As such I had a role to play on Lancaster Farms victim awareness course, helping inmates build character profiles of people that had been burgled. Having spoken to hundreds of burglars over fifteen years of working with offenders, it has always struck me how many attempted to read the premises, to work out something of their victims' lives from the possessions and surroundings. So I designed some writing exercises around imagery encounters using dialogue.

#### Who Wasn't There?

Ask the participant to describe in detail, a house or premises they have burgled.

Ask them to envisage who lived or worked there and to create at least one realistic character. Then to write the scene where they were burgling the property in conversation with the victim who is demanding that they justify what they are doing.

Excerpt  
By Ryan

- David** They said my alarm would go off if someone did that.
- Brian** Not if you cut the power. Now shut up.
- David** Don't tell me to shut up in my own house. What are you doing?
- Brian** What does it look like I'm doing?
- David** How can you behave like this?
- Brian** I don't think about that stuff. I need money, can't get a job, this is the only way. Stop asking me questions...

Ryan said the exercise was the hardest thing he'd been asked to do since being sent to prison.

#### Who's to Say?

Ask the participant to consider the commission of a crime and to write the internal dialogue as they work through what they are about to do. Then to write the dialogue that opposes committing the crime; as if it was also their point of view. Then to write the dialogue from the victim's point of view; before and after the event.

(Excerpt from an exercise)  
by Liam

A bungalow a patio  
Double glazing double garage  
Big garden, I've seen  
The children's trampoline  
*Burglary is a stupid thing*  
I'm only fifteen  
And I buzz when I do a graft.  
*Does this feel right to you?*  
It doesn't feel like anything to me  
Go in through the back door  
Go up some steps go down some  
Go for the car keys

The money the jewellery  
*It's not your property*  
*It's not your stuff to touch*

A TV and a laptop  
 It soon will be  
*There's a family photo*  
*Playing football on a beach*  
*Wedding pictures on the wall*

They're insured aren't they?  
 Job done for another day  
**Why us?**

Perhaps the strength of writing as an intervention is that it is difficult to fake.

*'It's different from Offending Behaviour Courses, because this is not a course — it is a moral discussion. The Offender Behaviour Courses — you get to know what you need to say to get them to tick the box, whereas here, you have to be honest and genuine — you can't hide here.'*<sup>6</sup>

Writing is also the one thing in life where we get to cross out the mistakes and start again. When we speak or when we act we cannot. It is an act of communication and expression that demands forethought. Furthermore it requires the considered use and exploration of language. This is important in prison, important in desistance. Prisons and prisoners have their own vernacular. It's often harsh, sometimes inventive but generally poor fayre. Vocabulary shrinks in prison to suit the confinement. Eloquence is taken as weakness and what few words are used are compressed before they're out. Pro-criminal language is a cloak of malice; emotionally one sided and amongst men increasingly misogynistic. My experience over the last six years is that many of the relationships in the lives of the young man are in crisis, but particularly those with women. What writing can do is ask the lad to begin to see it through her eyes. The poem below is the product of an exercise of shuffling nouns and verbs to find surprising combinations and using two voices, one is the imagined voice of a girlfriend. As is often the case the poem is the product of much useful discussion and imagining.

*Letter to Natalie*  
 Daniel

Another night and another day  
 The exercise yard is lazy and peaceful  
 My television hammers my brain cells  
 Medication touches my bloodstream  
 Soon I'll be dancing out the gates back to you

*Your freedom threatens me*  
*My fear is you have a key to here*  
*You moan down the phone*  
*My sleeping tablets are scared they'll*  
*All be eaten.*

Can't wait to make it up to you

To broaden vocabulary I gave away dozens of dictionaries and thesauruses. Someone's response to new language can be an indicator to a preparedness to change on a more fundamental level. Lads who want to speak differently want to be thought of as different. Asking someone to look at how they use language in differing contexts is an important part of the new narrative. Then for prisoners to see their work published in anthologies doesn't just raise esteem, more importantly it challenges the existing esteem with one based on something else. Widely circulated anthologies in a prison can challenge the prevailing ethic with one that employs and cries out for a deeper sensibility.

The desistance process is divided by criminologists into primary and secondary desistance. Primary desistance is about stopping offending and secondary about taking on a non-offending lifestyle. My experience has been that it is lads who are at least at the stage of primary desistance who are the most receptive to writing creatively. But then they are most open to interventions generally. Often they are pursuing open conditions or are sure the forthcoming release will be the last time. They were lads who sought me out or who were referred by another agency such as National Offender Management Service or Society of Voluntary Associates (a mentoring programme). There are obvious advantages to receiving referrals: one gets some background information and there is a receptive reader at hand but 'good lads' don't always make for productive writers, in memoir or any other form. Sometimes the lad for whom the segregation block is a familiar refuge, who is not even at the stage of primary desistance, will make a very engaged writer.

My final lengthy project was with a prisoner who was notoriously problematic for both staff and other prisoners yet who wrote, largely under his own steam, a fairly lengthy short story that became a popular publication in the jail. The story bordered on the pro-criminal and consequently had a limited run but the writer, who finished the piece whilst in segregation, had an implacable sense of narrative. He knew instinctively how to create expectation then subvert it. The plot lines were all his, my role was largely confined to diction, punctuation and typing. Good storytelling is not the dominion of the law abiding and I believe it is worth cultivating for the sake of the seeds that are planted. Instead of writing with a prisoner I would sit and read

6. Albertson K E (Op. Cit.).

with them, reading aloud, a page each at a time. The text was then discussed. *Do they get it, where's it going, is it convincing?* It should be very basic critical reading whilst remaining an enjoyable experience that they will come back to. They were texts that obviously or implicitly raised moral questions and choices of action, which most literature does, and I mostly reached for Steinbeck and the short stories of Raymond Carver. The publishers Barrington Stoke produce short easy to read fiction that works well.

First changes in lads, in all of us perhaps, are subtle and unconscious. Instrumental change proscribed by the individual themselves to say, find work, stop drinking, comes later, overlaps and is incremental. I am very sceptical about self-proclaimed overnight change in anyone, especially offenders. The louder it is heralded the less likely it will arrive. Personal growth, particularly when circumstances and background are unfavourable, is a war of attrition. In six years I never met a prisoner who I felt would ever be a writer but I did work with a number whose work was published beyond the prison and for whom writing was a ladder to other things, mostly further education. I stayed away from asking prisoners to produce magazine journalism. I understand what it can do, but it is not my field, there are always piles of *Inside*

*Times* toppling off tables and more than anything I wanted lads to write emotionally, for themselves, for others.

Where now for this work? In 2012 Waterside Press published my text book, *Behind the Lines, creative writing with offenders and those at risk* which has around eighty writing exercises specifically designed to support change in offenders. It is my ambition and my belief that creative writing can be integral to reducing reoffending work. My experience as a writer in a prison and as a criminal justice worker confirms that there is much to do. I hope to be continuing my work and researching more closely its impact on a specific cohort of prisoners. More widely I think there needs to be a continued move from both writers and other artists working in custody and from prisons and agencies to develop this work. Writers and other artists need to actively share reducing reoffending objectives, to be willing to challenge offenders more and accommodate less. From the prison's point of view, there is a background and foreground of financial restraint and perhaps it is the contracted agencies such as substance misuse, mentoring, mental health, education etc. that could be called upon to fund writers who could support their work.