The Sandal Scribblers

Often out of necessity, writing is a lonely business. There is no escape from the writing desk or keyboard for the aspirant writer, somehow, words on the page have to be produced. This often means long periods of solitude, of singular commitment to the writing task and of earnest endeavour. Having accepted that though, the next consideration is for support for those writers. Where and how can moral support be garnered? How can developmental criticism be achieved? Left alone in his freezing garret, the beleaguered writer might well go crazy.

Okay, this might be an extreme image I've offered, but the fact remains that writers do need a social milieu in which to flourish. Mutual support is needed with which to face the challenges of putting the best words on the page in the best order.

For poets, creating a network of support is relatively easy as they are dealing with a product (poems) which comes as handy artifacts. Find your people, find your space and then allocate time on an equitable basis so that each member gets an opportunity to present a poem, read it and consider the resulting comments. Prose writers find life much more difficult. It is not easy to read say, 2,000 as quickly as a poem. Short stories are very often much longer than 2,000 words, likewise novels and chapters from novels represent a much more formidable task.

This is the situation I faced when, with a number of short stories under my belt, I looked around for some kindred spirits who could help to create and environment where the short story format could be considered, where aspects of short stories could be analysed and where creative responses from such a group could be discussed. Where, in fact I could set up four or five meetings and bestow the title Workshop upon them. And I was lucky in this regard because locally, I had links with individuals and groups who were active somewhere within the sphere of creative writing. I approached around half a dozen people who I knew to be pursuing prose projects and I was pleased when their responses indicated we had a viable group. We found a room in a local Community Centre in which to hold a two hour meeting on four successive Fridays where we shared responses to exemplar texts and attempted some writing exercises after analysing examples of description, dialogue and characterisation. And then, after a lengthy break, we gathered again to read the short stories which had arisen from the group itself. This final meeting was at a local library and in order to make the room booking, under some immediate pressure, I jumped at the name Sandal Scribblers, a name which paid homage to the area in which we were meeting but also slightly undermined the seriousness of our approach to producing the written word. Our work was not the result of scribbling, but an alliterative effect can rarely be denied.

But we got there, we reached our target of each of the members completing a short story.

Given that we all went through the same process, reading the same exemplar texts, mulling over the same discussion points and accepting the same writing prompts, it is remarkable that we came up such a varied range of stories. Historical ghost stories, mysteries, a dispute amongst musical creatives, a Postal Worker remiss in their duty and a licentious nun, they are all a pleasure to read and they all represent a reward for the efforts of the writers. That they all reached this stage is largely down to the fact that the writers themselves approached the meetings in such a professional manner. Yes, there were many laughs to be had but each of the meetings was marked by a high level respect shown to each other and the process of writing itself. Discussion was always courteous and considerate. Those huge writing egos? Well, we had to leave them at the door. Let the Scribblers scribble!

John Irving Clarke