**The Prison Writing Competition at Listowel Writers’ Week**

Listowel Writers' Week is a chance for most people to come face to face with their favourite established writers and a chance for emerging writers to showcase their work. It is great celebration of literature on the banks of the River Feale. For some however, Listowel Writers' Week festival means something completely different. That is not to say however, that the festival name doesn't strike excitement in the minds of countless prisoners in servitude all over the country, who take part in Writing in Prisons competitions every year.

The Writing in Prisons concept was born in 1979 when Brendan Kennelly took it upon himself to reach out to prisoners all over the island in an attempt to encourage them to express their innermost thoughts and feelings. It has gone from strength to strength since then. The response has been tremendous. It is very much an outreach programme that is of great benefit to prisoners' long-term recovery. According to Jane Carrigan, Education Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College, Dublin 2009, 77% of prisoners in Ireland have never sat a public exam and 80% had left school before the age of 16.

Prior to entering Prison, it is safe to say, that education and the honour of being recognised for any literary endeavours would have been uncommon, to say the least. At Listowel Writers' Week we have endeavoured to correct this. Working with Irish Prison Education Service, who provides the prisoners with the tools to express themselves, we honour that effort with our prize giving.

We have categories to suit all entrants covering Short Story - Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced. Poetry is also given a platform with a Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced category. There are first, second and third prizes awarded in each category and this year we have added a special highly recommended prize in each category as well. The more people we can encourage by awarding a prize, the better. Since 2005, we also have separate overseas category covering entries from England, Germany and even as far as the United States.
We have been assured by the Prison Education Service that these annual competitions, hosted by Listowel Writers' Week, are of benefit to the prisoner’s long term rehabilitation. Everyone likes to be acknowledged for effort and achievement and for majority the Prison population this is the first time their efforts in education are acknowledged and encouraged.

**Gary Cunningham**

**Participant and Previous Award Recipient at Listowel Writers’ Week**

Below is a testimony from an ex prisoner, **Gary Cunningham,** who is more than happy to have his name used and credits his winning at Listowel with being a big step in his confidence building and rehabilitation.

"Admitting you are a former prisoner can be a little daunting at times- and for me personally, embarrassing all of the time. Yet, it was during my incarceration that I had one of the greatest honours of my life bestowed on me... twice!!! In Mountjoy on scraps of A4 paper, I began to write my experiences in Prison.

I was transferred to Loughan House Open Prison in 2013 and once there, I immediately signed up for classes in the school and secured an ancient PC and began to make hard copies of my writings from Mountjoy. My friendly I T teacher, Conn told me about the Writing in Prisons Competition. I wrote a piece about bringing my son to an All Ireland Final between Kerry and Dublin, where my team Dublin had an emphatic victory. When I realised the Competition was based in Listowel Co Kerry, I thought I hadn't a chance of winning.

A few weeks later I found out I was wrong. I did in fact win and I can confirm it was one of the proudest days of my life. Winning the prize at Listowel Writers' Week had instilled the confidence in me to push forward with my own book. I went on to win again the following year. I used a chapter from my, as yet, unpublished book as my entry.

On release I was feeling much more confident; thanks to Listowel Writers' Week, I finished my first book, *Joy of Joy, Finding Myself in an Irish Prison*. On the outside I was invited by Writers' Week to speak at their YA Festival to 900 young adults. This greatly encouraged me to complete my third book. I was also interviewed by Carlo Gebler during the main Festival –a great honour.

Winning the Writing in Prison competition drove me on to finishing my first book and has continued to encourage me as I've finished four more. I will always be forever grateful to each and every member of Listowel Writers' Week. Not only did they believe in me - a prisoner at the time, but the way they have supported me on my release has left the biggest lump in my throat."

**Tom Shortt**

**Arts Development Officer & Coordinator Listowel Prison Writing Competition**

**Irish Prison Education Service**

As the only dedicated creative writing competition catering for people in custody in Ireland, the Prison Writing Competition, at Listowel Writers’ Week, has a unique place in the annual calendar for many prisoners and in the education centres at prisons in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. Essentially the competition motivates people in custody to undertake personal creative writing projects over a sustained period from January to March each year.

The event is fully integrated with the creative writing programmes offered by teachers, and the writing submitted by entrants is the product of a teaching and learning process focused on the development of the individual student, in terms of writing skills and creative ambition. Opportunities for self-expression are extremely valuable to people in custody and there is a sense of ownership of the competition amongst prisoners – that it belongs to them and that it addresses their situation, and prisoner/writers are attracted to participate and to have their voice heard, in that context and for those reasons.

There is respect for the tradition and the literary heritage value associated with the Listowel competition, amongst prisoners involved in education, and winning a prize is perceived as a significant achievement and recognition of talent and effort. The therapeutic value of the competition can be felt in the entries, participation fosters increased self-esteem and the competition contributes to the development of community spirit within prisons when the success of a writer becomes an occasion for collective celebration and pride. The cross-border, all-island nature of the competition is culturally significant, providing an active link between prison education communities - North and South.

In 2019, the Northern Ireland Prison Service came on board as joint funders, alongside the Irish Prison Service, with the extra funding making it possible to increase the number and value of prizes. The level of participation increased immediately by 40% from 127 entries in 2018 to 174 in 2019, sustained at 176 in 2020. It is understandable that the number of entries dipped to 118, submitted by 66 writers in 2021, as prison schools were closed throughout the critical period of January to March, due to Covid restrictions that made communication between teachers and their students difficult in the prison setting.

In reality, the competition proved resilient and remained popular in the most difficult of times, and this is also a year of innovation, as six new Highly Commended awards, spreading prizes more evenly across the prisons, and certificates for all the entrants - signed by Listowel President Colm Tobin - ensuring that everybody who puts pen to paper is rewarded. Also in 2021 a prize went to a female writer for the first time in a number of years; the switch to digital entries was successful, and the existence of a database now, containing all the entries, opens up new possibilities for the production of anthologies.

In conclusion, it is widely recognized that the arts function as a gateway to education for prisoners, and the Listowel Prison Writing competition occupies an established value-for-money role in the annual programme of cultural events in Irish prison education, with creative writing as an effective vehicle, promoting genuine rehabilitation.

**The Prison Writing Competition at Listowel Writers’ Week**

As the only dedicated creative writing competition catering for people in custody in Ireland, the Competition at Listowel has a special place in the annual calendar for many prisoners with an interest in writing in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. Opportunities for self-expression mean a lot to people in custody and there is a sense of ownership of the competition amongst prisoners – that it belongs to them and that it addresses their situation - and they are attracted to participate and to have their voice heard for those reasons. The therapeutic value of the competition can be felt in the entries, participation fosters increased self-esteem, and winning a prize is seen as recognition of talent and effort and an occasion for celebration and pride. In this difficult pandemic year the competition was a lifeline for sixty-six writers in custody who submitted 118 poems and short stories.

Tom Shortt

Arts Officer

Irish Prison Education Service