



Welcome to our first edition of ‘Sharing Stories’.

One of the greatest pleasures of being an English teacher is helping our young people to develop their writing skills.

Throughout the school year, students from S1 to S6 work incredibly hard to produce a range of writing. From creative stories to factual reports; personal writing to argumentative essays, our students demonstrate creativity and ambition throughout their written work.

But most of this writing is usually only ever seen by the student, their teacher and occasionally a family member or classmate.

As J.K. Rowling once said, “no story lives unless someone wants to listen.” It is especially important

during times such as these to share stories with one another, so that we can remain connected, when we are all physically apart.

This first edition features stories from some of our Senior students. They were originally written for an unknown examiner, to help them succeed in their Higher English qualification. We would very much like to share their hard work with you so that they can find a new audience for their work. Their stories explore life in prison, letting go, and a love of books.

Thank you and enjoy.

Story 1- Maisie

I've always loved books. In fact, I can't recall a time where they weren't the most important part of my life. There's something special about turning worn pages, immersing yourself in a story that removes you from the pressures of reality in a way that nothing else does. When I was little, I used to say that if my house were to erupt in flames, I would save my books first and my teddies second. No matter how dark the tunnel gets, books have always been the light waiting at the end for me; a friendly face at the end of a weary day, a talisman to carry during a bad day, a way to feel less alone.

I spent most of my time before starting school surrounded by books. I was constantly being read to. While most children were glued to Peppa Pig or Ben and Holly's Little Kingdom, I was immersed in the vivid

colours of picture books. My favourite bedtime story was a book about polar bears watching the Northern Lights, which were glittery and twinkled under the soft glow of my nightlight. I used to trace the patches of glitter, hooked on the words of the story. Every night, I would curl up in my bed, listening to my Dad's soothing voice. I still have that book tucked away somewhere safe; I can't bear to part with it.

When I was seven, I read Mallory Towers: my first chapter book. In no time at all, I was hooked. The way I could stumble over words and sound them out slowly, but still form a movie in my mind, amazed me. I was unenthused by children's TV, finding the costumes garish and the storylines predictable. But books, books were something entirely different. They were *real*.

When assemblies became tiresome, I envisioned Darrell by my side, plotting a midnight feast. When I walked the dog with my Dad, the Secret Seven were

begging me to abandon him and go to their meeting instead. I would spend hours trying to make my pencils flit through the air, like Matilda. Reading became so important to me, that when I misbehaved, my consequence was that I wouldn't get a bedtime story.

As I grew older, reading became a much more formal part of school. We read in literacy circles; a laborious group with whom I would set "reading goals" and discuss our homework book with. We complained loudly when we had to do this, however I suspect my reasons for complaining differed drastically to everyone else's. In the playground we would gather like plagues of locusts to whinge about the book and having to read more than two chapters a week. I joined in, pretending to hate Charlie Bone as much as the next person. Secretly, I'd sit and feel violated that I could only read as much as my peers wanted to, longing instead to read as much as my heart desired.

Harry Potter was the first series I read that made me a part of a wider community. My friends and I watched the movies first - a rookie mistake - and were immediately inspired to read the books. To us, those books were everything. They were the catalyst for an endless number of playground games, Book Day costumes and debates. Was Harry really that special? Was Dumbledore really a hero? Was Snape really evil? Harry Potter brought us together like nothing had before. For me, it was more than games and costumes, though. I'd always loved reading, enjoyed school, more so than most of my peers. Sometimes, that got lonely. It was Hermione Granger who taught me that that was okay, normal even.

Books are the glue that holds my relationship with my sister together. Aged 10, she doesn't appreciate having me hovering over her, trying to be a good big sister.

Strong minded and stubborn, she doesn't like being told what to do. She can't stand the fact that our parents treat me like an adult, while she still has a "bedtime" to protest against. This bitterness leads to countless fallouts, where the tension is an icy fog that blinds our reason. But every night, I read to her. I've always read to her, starting with picture books, then short stories, and now full blown novels. Reading to her is a way of bonding, it's something special that we share. In a flash, she will grow up and be too old for bedtime stories, and I will be redundant.

Over study leave, I felt more pressure and isolation than I've ever felt before. It felt like I was living in a loop of revision and anxiety. Each day offered me new things to be worked up about; not seeing my friends, not revising enough, not having the time to do everything, not being able to understand certain topics. Books got me through it, offering me a lifeline.

Each day, I took time to read. The words washed over me, a calm sea offering solace. Reading offered me a glimmer of happiness.

As I grow up, my taste in books has too. It seems funny that I am nearly an adult, about to enter a whole new world. Suddenly, those adult books are within my grasp. Gone are the restrictions of being too young to read them. The days of being unable to read about gory crimes are over. Now, I can read whatever books I want, with close to no restrictions. I could spend all day at the library or a bookshop, perusing shelves of novels. Having the vast array of choice is overwhelming; I will always have plenty of books to read. I will always have something to immerse myself in, a way to escape from the pressures of life.

Reading is timeless. It will always be possible; books will always be written. That reliability is a unique

quality in our modern world, where trends are changing constantly. I'm so lucky to love books, because I will always have something in my life that makes me happy, that brings me peace.

Story 2- 'Let Go' by Connor

Loud silence spreads throughout the dark, gloomy alley. Silence. Except for your coughing heartbeat. Gingerly, you creep down the alley. Your pupils dilate. Your eyes flick to every corner. Every building. Every path. Looking. Searching. Are you safe?

The harsh icy pellets soak your clothes and paralyse your bones. The soft crunch of snow below your boots, quickly becomes the squelch of sludge. The dim light of the moon reflects the puddles of blood, the shards of broken windows, the streams of sewage.

You advance into the night-lit alley. Darkness. The mother of fear and the unknown.

Your shadow has dissipated into nothing. You are alone. For now. You take a step. Then another step. Then another. And another. You stop. Frozen. You see a shattered mirror.

You don't recognise the reflection. Who are you?

You keep going. Picking up the pace a little. But soon, frustratingly, you stop again. Your mind is aching. Your head is pulsing. Your eyes are drunk. Your breathing becomes heavy, rapid, and loud. Your limbs quiver. And your tears stream. You emit loud cries of emptiness. Your soul is damaged.

You collapse.

The past. The mistakes. The fights. The broken dreams.
All engulf you with its clutches.

Who you were and who you are.

What do you believe in? A God? A higher being? Or
nothing?

Your thoughts, your feelings, your love, your hate.
Your misunderstandings and your regrets.

What is your purpose? What is the point of your
existence? To work? To survive? Or live?

Breathing. Slower. And slower. Your eyes become
sober. You are in control again. You stand up, painfully.
You wipe your dried, salty eyes. You continue on.

The squelching echoes of your steps become louder and longer. You stop. You think. Your ears strain. The echoes don't stop. You aren't moving. They get closer. Not echoes. Not you. Your heartbeat become a single sound. A constant hum. You tremble and hope and pray and beg for this all to be over. Your legs, sentient, move. Quick. Run. Don't look back. Whoever is there. Evade them.

But your eyes betray. You look. You stop. You wonder. No-one is there. Nothing but the thick mist hovers at your eye level. You breathe deeply in and out. And sigh. You walk further onward.

You ponder about the echo. You wonder why you were hit with such strong emotions all at once. As you walk you realise something. Something you hadn't thought of before. Why are you here? This event. This moment. This alley. How did you get here? You stare blankly into

the abyss of the unknown. The darkness. Waiting.

Waiting for an answer.

Nothing.

But you came here for a reason. A purpose. You have no direction of safety or home. Your knowledge of your whereabouts eludes you. As you wake up from your empty mind. A puddle of ripples grasps your eyes. You approach and stare into its image. The reflection is obscured and disjointed in the water. You can't see it clearly.

As you somnambulate, the littered cracks in the walls of the alley take the form of the cracks in your identity.

As you advance down the enclosed eternal walkway, a man, sitting on the wet concrete, looks at you. His long, drooping beard shivering in the wrath of winter. His

blood-shot eyes, cracked lips, and crooked spine pierces your sympathy. His mouldy arms and shattered knuckles hold up a small bucket. The rattling of sympathy and generosity speaks to you. You reach into your left pocket and feel the single coin between your shivering fingers. Your honest heart lifts your hands. Your darkened mind lowers it. You think it over. Again. And again.

You decide.

You stand up and peacefully leave the man. You look down the alley once again. You sigh as your legs and knees and feet and toes ache with the temptation to collapse. But you nonetheless take your next steps.

Then you watch as the fabric of light begins to weave into the distant darkness. A shimmer. A glisten. A wisp of hope. Despite your dancing heartbeat and the thin

smile on your face. Your sense of achievement results in falling into a deep sleep. You see the end. You can rest now.

A bang. A sound. A noise. A clash. You wake up and whip your head in all directions. You see nothing. Hear nothing. Feel nothing. You look at the hope. The escape. The end.

It's gone.

You fall into a puddle of self-hatred. You saw the hope and gave it up. But you don't let this get to you. Not this time. You keep going. Again. This time your eyes glare with ambitious intent. The glimmer. You see it. It shouts your name. And you shout it back. You walk. One. Final. Time.

Soon, the gap of hope is wider. But in front is the cloud. The cloud of tears. And you know what you must do. You walk. You run. Your blurred vision warps into a clear perception of identity. And as expected you feel the emotions. The pain. The past. The old. But your tears are that of happiness. You see who you were before.

But maybe who you are doesn't have to be who you were or will become. You leave the cloud behind. And you stand at the edge of your identity. Your next step will leave the alley. The chirping of the birds beckon your smile and the breeze of love and hope whiten it. You stare into the bright abyss, your eyes feasting on the colours. Then you turn around and stare into the cloud. You smile at it. The cloud. Who you were. Who you are. The past isn't scary. Just overwhelming with the mass of mistakes and regrets. But you see through

them. You see the joy. The fun. The ones you love most.

You pierce back into the angelic field of future discovery. The discovery of yourself. And now you must decide.

Stay with what you know. Become everything that you know.

Or leave the cloud, bringing only a slither of the past.

You want to take a step but you fear for the lack of knowledge of the future. All your life you've heard the phrase. The phrase that should help but it is not as simple as a single decision.

It takes a journey down memory lane to see who you are and will become.

It takes a journey.

To let go.

Story 3- Lucy

The night is hazy, and the frigid wind digs into my hollow face, leaving a cold mark. A dim street light illuminates part of the close, scattering fragmented light around the tattered edges of my blanket. The tarnished doorway is as cold as a gravestone, but it is the only thing protecting me from the icy mist falling from the sky. The shadows of the old crumbling tenements around me make the close eerie, and I feel a chill settling in my bones. I shiver, like I have a deadly fever, as my body gives in to the harsh winter.

I listen to the whispers of laughter from the main streets of Edinburgh echoing around me like ghosts

taunting me and I pull the shabby blanket up over my frail body. The once vibrant checkered tartan on the material is fading, now a vague dark red pattern. Taking the few coins out of my damp decrepit hat, I slide them safely into my pocket and begin patting it down into place to reassure myself. I twist the water out of the sodden hat, and lay it back down on the cracked path, in small hope of a few more donations for the night.

Numerous people ignore me as they walk by, as if I am a ghost bound to this stone-cold doorway choosing to call out to passers-by for help, but never reaching them. As soon as they walk away, I disappear. Without a single concern, I feel like I'm already dead. To them I am insignificant, useless and just another piece of litter taking up space on the street. I resent those people. If only I could make them endure the same humiliation and embarrassment that I feel. Make them battle

through hell like I do. Degrade them and let them suffer for judging me and my life.

I reach out, revealing the scrawny skeleton of my hands, and collect the withering sign that no one spared the time to read. The life story that I inked onto the soaking cardboard is dripping off. People think these signs are just excuses to be homeless, and I can only assume that most of them think it is my own fault for being here. My sign, however, is real. My life story, all fitting onto one small piece of cardboard, featuring all 19 years written down about how I ended up here, homeless, on Jackson's Close.

I would not choose to live like this . . .

Who would?

After leaving school, at the first opportunity, I didn't know where to go, no-one wanted to employ a kid without any grades or life experience. Then depression took control of my life and I felt that –

after many years of struggling – I gave up. I was no angel. I constantly tried to take the edge off, by any means necessary. At that point I was too humiliated to ask for help, which meant sleeping on the street became a regular occurrence. There was a feeling of inadequacy when I first became homeless; lost and dehumanized. That feeling will never go away. Most days I end up so miserable, so full of regret and so upset with everything that even the mere thought of finishing the day feels unachievable.

I am now at the stage where I do not care if I am lying in a grave, dead or alive. I have no future to look forward to or think about. I dig into the depths of my dark thoughts, deep underground, where no light can get through. No hope. No life beyond tomorrow. No way out. I feel trapped in this coffin and I'm not worth saving.

A man in a black tailored suit turns down the close; he is not one of the usual tourists or drunks. I can

tell by his expensive clothes and polished boots that are heavily tapping along the old stone path. The man hasn't noticed me, did not even consider looking in my direction.

Why should he bother? He doesn't care about me. Nobody cares that I live in this horrid state, that my basic human rights are being denied or that he has enough money to get me off the street without leaving a dent in his leather wallet. He disgusts me. Never having to face any struggle and not considering the people like me; the people with real problems.

“Any spare change?”

People don't realize that a little spare change could better my life – in an instant – I might have a chance. The man's shadowy figure towers over me, a smirk masking his face. A spark of anxiety ignites and burns down my body turning it into ashes. My mind drags me back down to a hellish place,

sending ghastly thoughts through my head. The man reaches inside his pocket and I flinch as he pulls something out.

I look at his steady hand outstretched with a single smooth note in it. Lashing out, I grab the note, scratching his hand and nearly tearing the money in half with desperation in the process. I stuff it deep into my ragged pocket.

The man, alarmed, stares down at me. Confusion wrinkles across his forehead. Snarling, I kick his leg to communicate my hostility and hatred towards him. His jaw drops twisting into a wide-open frown. I catch his eye and see him shrink back in shock. He shakes his head trying to make sense of my actions, before walking off not knowing how much the money truly means to me.

I shouldn't have to live like this; with the weight of every one of my regrets clinging onto me. A minor piece of paper has never had so much value in my

life. I despise having to beg for it, like a stray dog scrounging for a bone. I'm constantly doubting whether to beg for money or for help. I bring the note back out and stare at it in dismay. A real 10-pound note. *Real.*

Is this as much as I am worth? My own self-worth valued at a single note. It's not enough to change the way I live for more than a day. However, it is enough to buy a chilled can of beer to get me through the rest of this bitter night and the next few to come. What is the point of buying anything else? I know I'll always be stuck here, isolated in this empty loophole, living in fear of my own thoughts, abandoned by society.

Entirely forgotten.

*Thank you very much to the staff and students who
have made this possible.*