

Competitive Writing - Route One

by *Bruce Harris*



Creative writing courses proliferate, publishers and agents still complain of 'slush pile' inundation, and magazines aimed at aspiring writers fill up with self-publishing and critique-providing advertisements. Many people obviously feel that the application of enough time and money could coax their creative spark into flame.

As the options are weighed up and the sums calculated, what are the chances of getting into print without straining the bank balance? Can you learn how to write? Can you buy writing success?

Ten years ago, I had never published any 'creative writing' at all. During a career in teaching and research, I had written reports and published research-based articles in the educational press (Independent, Guardian, T.E.S.), but no fiction or poetry had ever appeared in print.

When work circumstances allowed me to leave education in my late fifties, I felt the break needed to be clean. Like many people, working life consumed most of my time and energy, but I still believed that the creative writing impulse which had produced juvenilia novels and teaching material would flourish when time and opportunity became available. It was time for me to call my own bluff.

Two areas needed thinking about. One was the need or otherwise for a creative writing course. The resources were available if necessary, but I felt a careful look should be taken at what was on offer and other people's experiences of it before risking money - and hope.

Secondly, I had heard what many editors and publishers say is the bane of their lives - people who've hardly read any short fiction or poetry for the last forty years submitting work in imitation of long dead authors; people who have never published anything sending in lengthy manuscripts; people sending in stories and poems to magazines which make it obvious that they've never read an edition of the magazine.

I looked into the realities of approaching agents and publishers. Even writers with lists of published works will not automatically get into print. Sending full length novels to publishers or agents when you have never published anything is, to be frank, a waste of everyone's time. Submissions from unpublished authors are up against it even with small magazines or e-zines.

After almost three years, I hadn't drawn a complete blank; four poems and two short stories had made it into small magazines. But I had accumulated a formidable collection of curt and unhelpful rejection letters and e-mails. I felt that I simply didn't have this sort of time; something needed to accelerate the process.

I chose competitions rather than courses because competitions are, in the last analysis, the acid tests; if the writer has genuine ability and the material is good, results will come, even if slowly at first. If several years draws a complete blank, then facing reality, cruel as it may be, is probably better than lavishing expectation and cash on a dead-end alley.

Some scam-awareness is necessary; the bandits are out there even in this field. Most competitions charge a modest entry fee of a few pounds, and it is clear from their prize structure where most of the money goes. If the entry fee is hefty and the prize structure modest or non-existent, the competition is best avoided, and likewise if there is little or no information about judging methods or when the results will be available.

In my experience, established competitions with well-defined structures are almost certainly entirely legitimate, and I should say that, although I have 'scored' in a number of competitions, even the ones where I haven't are, generally speaking, well-organised and fairly run. Writer's Reign maintains a comprehensive list and I have yet to come across any 'duds' on it.

Last October, 'First Flame', my collection of 25 stories which have all won prizes, commendations or listings in fiction competitions, came out courtesy of the publication wing of the Sentinel Poetry Movement - www.spmpublications.com

To put something back, as it were, I've set up a site with the aim of helping people interested in writing successful short fiction. It is offered entirely free of charge at writingshortfiction.org

Good luck!

Bruce Harris' short fiction and poetry awards list includes Writers' Bureau (twice); Grace Dieu Writers' Circle (five times); Biscuit Publishing, Yeovil Prize, Milton Keynes Speakeasy (three times), Exeter Writers, Fylde Writers, Brighton Writers (three times), Momaya Press, Wells Literary Festival, Wirral Festival of Firsts, New Writer, Segora, Sentinel Quarterly, Swale Life, Southport Writers' Circle, Lichfield Writers' Circle, Cheer Reader (three times), TLC Creative, 3into1 Short Story Competition, Meridian, Five Stop Story (three times), JB Writers' Bureau (twice), Red Line (twice) and Bridport Prize and Bristol Prize longlists. Listings and samples at www.bruceharris.org

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