

REAL LIVES

► prison, was set up in November 2006. “A lot of the guys here are very smart and creative,” she says. “They just need direction.”

In 2004 Scottish Book Trust began talking to the Scottish Prison Service about the possibility of writer residences in the nation’s prisons. It was discovered there was no precedent for this kind of activity in Scotland, unlike in England where there have been more than 100 residences of between one and three years long, run by the Writers in Prisons Network. In March and August 2005, the trust and the prison service collaborated on two pilot “mini-residencies” at HMP Glenochil. On both occasions a writer spent a week doing creative workshops with a group of men, culminating in the publication of a short anthology of their work, the recording of a CD and a showcase event for staff and other prisoners.

The Scottish Book Trust applied to the Scottish Arts Council and in September 2005 was awarded funding for a one-year residency at the prison. It was to be based in the learning centre and delivered as a partnership between the trust, the prison service and the college. The first writer recruited was in post from January to June 2006, followed by McCann, who began her residency in November 2006. According to Sophie Moxon, programme head at Scottish Book Trust, it was intended as a non-traditional, less formal way into learning. “Ruby has had amazing outcomes that fit well with the learning centre. We’ve got ambitions to go to other prisons and have a nationwide programme so that every prison who wants a writer in residence can get one.”

McAlpine, his skin pale and grey, worries his pockets for a handkerchief. “Mine’s a long story,” he says, sighing. “I was on a bus defending a woman from racist abuse from two louts and” – he pauses – “stupidly I pulled a knife on them and then nicked their jewellery.” His eyes grow large. “I should have been congratulated on my civic duty.” He’s serving four years and nine months. “Not everyone’s comfortable reading out, but it’s no’ a problem for me.”

The 48-year-old, who was in prison before, more than 10 years ago, was recently asked to be a peer tutor to some of the less confident inmates. In HMP Glenochil, illiteracy is as common as boiled potatoes. “It can be intimidating sometimes for some of the guys. Some of them might not be too bright so you’re just teaching them the basics.”

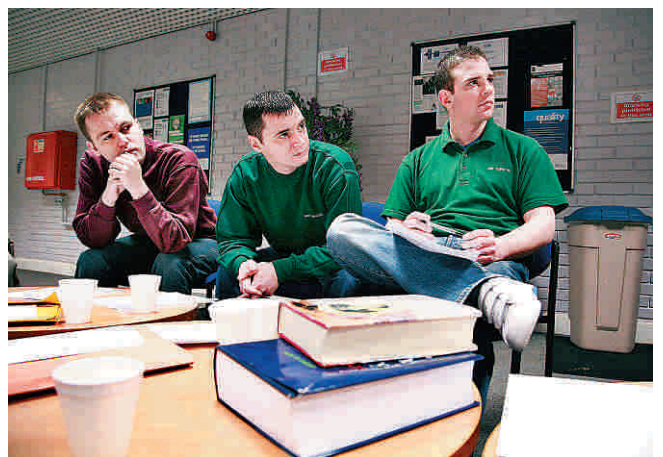
McAlpine is one of about 75 offenders from throughout the prison (not just those attending the learning centre) contributing to the latest anthology of prison writing, *The Man Inside*, to be published in April. He has cancer in his right lung, has had two strokes and a heart attack, and suffers from angina. “So my health is bad. The sheds [prison work areas] won’t employ me. My other choice would be locked in a cell all day seven days a week watching brain-dead people on television being paraded in front of a camera, so I’d rather be in the class. Another of the poems in the anthology is by a guy [now transferred to another prison] writing about me. When I first came in the class everybody was self-conscious about reading. The poem is about that and how it takes me and him away for a couple of hours.”

Although HMP Glenochil is formidable – from the outside the Ochil hills stand mute in the distance overlooking the grey, razor-wired prison – the setting is perhaps the most spectacular of any prison in Scotland. Inside, the halls buzz with excitement, loud voices and a little tough posturing from the inmates. In the learning centre life is more relaxed.

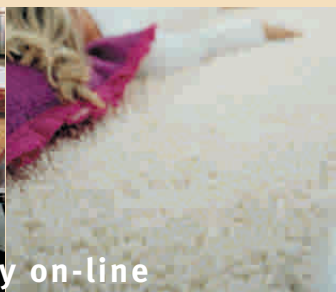
“You get caught up in discussions about Robert Burns and other writers and about stuff you wouldn’t think about normally,” says McAlpine. “You kind of forget where you are. You don’t forget what you’ve done but you forget where you are, you know. You walk through that door at lunchtime into the halls and stuff and it’s back to reality. Bang, you’re back in prison. So the group gets your head away, stops your brain vegetating.”

‘You get caught up talking about Burns and others. You forget you’re in prison’

Scott Montgomery’s scarred face, stitched as carefully as a sail, tells the story of a man accustomed to violence. He’s serving four years and nine months for serious assault and has been in and out of prison over the past 15. When he first heard about the writers’ group, the 29-year-old readily admits, he joined because he thought “it would be a right skive”. Nine months later he’s surprised how much he enjoys the discussions and the class as a whole. For those who don’t attend the learning centre, most of their time is spent in the sheds or their cells, wondering if they will receive answers to letters they have floated into the world. Or they congregate on the landings, watching the minutes tick by. Time and routine are the axis upon which their days and weeks and months and year revolve. Meanwhile, all of their movements are monitored by cameras and wardens.



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