



"I'd never read a book of short stories or poems before," says Montgomery. "I started getting into listening what other people were saying, it opened my mind up. I never gave myself a chance at school with education."

Lee McHarg, a 22-year-old from Glasgow in prison for culpable homicide, sits alongside Montgomery. He nods in agreement. "I'm a bit like Scott, because I came here for a skive but then I enjoyed it. I'm doing an Open University course in business and advanced higher maths. I like complex questions and trying to work them out. With books I used to just think, 'why don't they just tell you what they mean?' But this class has helped show there's other way of thinking about things."

Back and forward they go over the merits of Burns and the Scottish author James Kelman, who has visited their class. Besides Kelman, Louise Welsh, Mark McNay, Des Dillon, Liz Lochhead and Paraig McNeil have all attended the learning centre. "I cannae read the kind of language I speak," says Montgomery. "Slang. It has to be normal language or I cannae understand it. I cannae understand Kelman's writing. I cannae write the way I talk."

The class fills a demand and a void. But progress, as always, is a mixed bag. In February figures showed that Scotland's prison population had broken through the 8000 barrier for the first time. While the amount of offenders in Scottish prisons is on the increase, the authorities want jails to move away from being "punitive" to a system where inmates are encouraged to become healthier and more motivated so that they can have a positive outcome when they return to society.

According to Stephen Murphy, Glenochil's Head of Offender Outcomes, the success of the writing classes, among other things, has shown how offenders can develop. "We're not moving away from the fact these men have offended and are being punished, but we're trying to be more creative with their rehabilitation. It's a springboard for them for learning and improving."

Currently there are more than 600 offenders in HMP Glenochil. Part of the unique feature of the establishment is that they look at the local labour market in order to address what skills are needed for each offender. These include pastoral care through integration, intervention and opportunities for offenders, learning, training and employment.

"What we have done is a normalisation agenda. There should be no differentiation between in here and out there. The brain is like any muscle: once you stop using it it becomes weaker. It's no different from your legs, arms or whatever. We're seeing more use of it now. The motivation levels are much

higher because more of the prisoners are on board."

Not unexpectedly, confinement magnifies the need for some kind of qualification upon release. McAlpine, who serves as a kind of unofficial lord mayor of the group, seems happiest when he's studying, writing or reading. His cell is neat and uncluttered, with a photograph of his partner's children taped to the wall. In many ways, through letters, photographs and visits, the prison system becomes part of the texture of outside life. "When you're outwith prison you have a multitude of identities," he says. "In prison you have nothing. Everything is stripped bare, right down. Your soul is bare so, aye, there's plenty of time for reflection. You dream about getting out, think about what you'll do. Then you get out the jail and it's culture shock. Everything is brightly coloured, whereas here it's just grey. The writing helps me see the colours again. In prison you've nothing to do but think. With the writing group it takes you somewhere else. I make up kids' stories for my partner's wee girl and we keep it going. I write a bit every week. It cheers the wee girl up and it's my way of keeping my wee bond with her."

Talk with any of the men here and you get almost the same response. They never had an education, had never really been interested in one until they were sent to prison for their crimes. Only then did they realise that they could have been contributing more. They don't use this to excuse their crimes; it's simply a fact. Billy Johnstone, 31, from Edinburgh, is serving a life sentence for murder. "You see the importance of it now," he says, shaking his head. Another inmate, John, who is 24, arrived in Glenochil a month before Johnstone and is also doing life. "There's a lot of the guys that aren't fussed about education," he says. "A lot of the guys are heroin addicts, junkies, eh. All they're interested in is getting their next fix."

Johnstone, with his gym-honed physique and round face, nods in agreement. "To be honest with you, the Burns stuff doesn't interest us all that much, but it's still good to look at different writers. John's helping me write a book. I've done about half. It's based loosely on things in my life, growing up in Edinburgh. Ruby thinks it's excellent. When I was outside I was a straight peg [hadn't been in trouble before] and John's helping me with a wee bit of the other stuff, eh. The class gives you a chance to explore other things and to listen to guys who've got different ideas from you."

A short time later 34-year-old Paul, from Aberdeen, sits down. "Having got the 10-year sentence," he says, "I've run out of steam. You don't get reformed, you just run out of steam." Paul, who gained five higher at school, has ▶



Clockwise from main: Scott Montgomery joined the group for a "skive", but now eagerly debates the merits of James Kelman and Liz Lochhead; HMP Glenochil, where inmates are compiling an anthology entitled *The Man Inside*; the prison's creative writing class is cited by prison official Stephen Murphy as a "springboard for learning and improving"

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