

REAL LIVES

► been involved with the Open University while in prison and got to the end of his fourth year with two more to go in business studies. "I came to these writing classes as an antidote to that. I have to think again in creative terms rather than academic terms. I see it as both an antidote and adjunct to the formal writing. Poetry is an interesting way for us to express ourselves. I've written some stuff about things that I've been deeply involved in, so most of my stuff is about sex and drugs. I'm five years into this [sentence] now; it's been a five-year period of enforced sobriety. So you come back to your natural self and I suppose a lot of that gives you time to reflect on what went before and see it for what it is. It's not a lifestyle I'd care to return to."

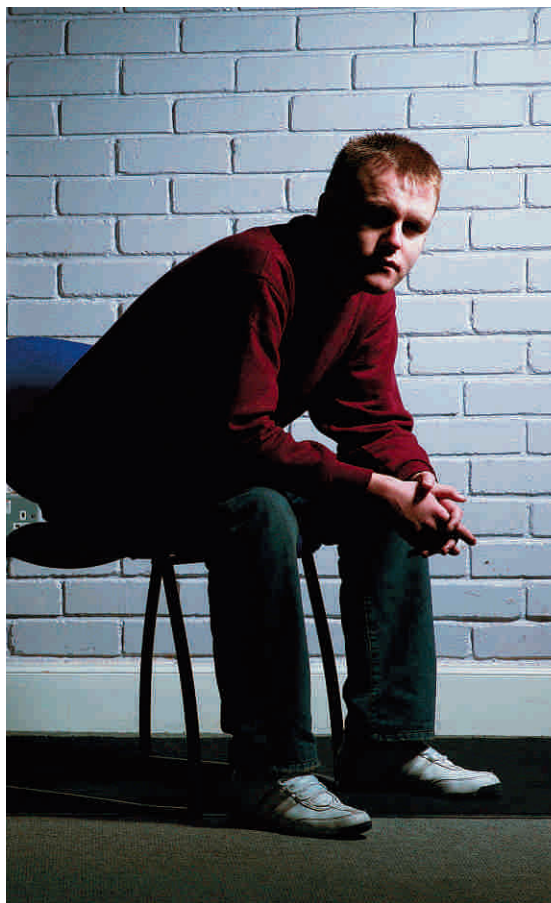
Briefly, he pauses. "From my first sentence I've noticed a huge change and shift in the calibre of prisoners in prison. Even back in the early to middle nineties there was a lot more sort of professional criminals. Nowadays, with drugs being so endemic, the guys in jail are young guys who have drug habits. All they are good at is Playstation and smoking smack. No skills. If young guys like that that can get themselves into education and classes like this, it will be a huge benefit." Paul turns down a request to take his photograph.

While the writing class is a kind of clubhouse where the inmates gather to keep out of the sheds, it also gives them a sense of self. "The writing class stimulates creativity," says McCann. "It also lends an ear, but does so with the belief that there must be a tangible benefit." The men who attend here must want to improve themselves in order that they can return to society as better individuals. The last time Brian McTaggart was in prison was 39 years ago and he is a living bridge to the way the old system worked compared with the new. "I'm 58 now," he laments, "and it's almost been four decades since I was first in. I've got four and a half years for drug offences."

McTaggart loves to talk about Burns, "the good socialist. Always sticking up for the poor." Although he had some education before his arrival 11 months ago, he's eager to take advantage of what's on offer. "There is a lot of guys," he says, "tough men, who actually bloom when they come to the classes. It's been in them, but they haven't actually had the chance to express themselves outside. There's a lot of boys who might not be academic clever or school clever, but are street clever. They might not be great spellers, they might not be great writers, but the thoughts they've got in their heads is unbelievable."

How does he react to criticism that inmates should simply be locked up and the key thrown away? "In some cases prisoners should be locked up and not heard about again," says McTaggart. "In some cases the critics are right. A lot of the mainstream prisoners are sickened themselves by some of the crime that goes on, especially by those who've hurt kids. Lock them up and throw the key away. But you do get guys in who've never really had a chance and they can benefit from what's in here. The education system is trying to break the cycle and rehabilitate them. Before it was only lifers who got education and guys who were in for a couple of years got nothing. But it's changed for the better now..."

The class is finished for the day and the men are escorted back to their cells. The only real sound is the stark applause of keys being turned in their locks, alongside the chatter of guilty men who may have found a place to distil their anger, fear and guilt. And, ultimately, an inkling of a larger world outside. ■



John, 24, is helping a fellow lifer, Billy Johnstone, write a book based loosely on his childhood experiences.

"The class gives you a chance to listen to guys who've got different ideas from you," says Johnstone, 31. Opposite panel: one of the poems in the anthology of writing by Scottish prisoners

'There are tough men who bloom in classes. It was in them, but they didn't have the chance to express it'

As Danny Sits Reading

as Danny sits reading
in that soft almost reserved
tragic comic way of his
we too sometimes
laugh nervously as we struggle
to understand
the unfettered world of prose and literature
metaphors and similes
there is an air of awkward attentiveness
respect even
unfamiliar to commonplace daily intercourse
of fellow classmates
for today
for a few unconditional hours at least
these gentlemen
if not in the literal sense
react!
not in violent confrontations either
but to the exploration of
Yeats and Eliot
and contemporary off beats like
Ginsberg and Bukowski
the latter not unaccustomed to
classmates' traits of
solitary drunkenness and
antisocial activities
who identifiably bares his soul and
his poetic verse to the stars
through an empty glass
then there's our teacher
as we see her
latent, non-conforming of discerning aptitudes
that span both sides of the pond
ever cajoling and considering
in a non-disciplinarian sort of way
opening our doors to opportunities and enlightenment
through the eyes of creativity while
outside the classroom
only some yards and through
the door that's not a door
a somewhat darker enlightenment
of a malevolent and unwelcoming nature
lies awaiting
as Danny sits reading.

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