

The Pleasure of a Writing Competition.

Thinking back, I guess it was a competition that started my writing career. Sometime around 1970 at the age of 9, I entered a competition on the back of a cereal packet, 'Win a Mini for Mum'. This involved completing a booklet of advertising slogans. The one that sticks in my memory is "**I am a knight**.....Like Dettol I guard and fight." How's that for an auspicious start.

Anyway, I didn't win the Mini, but as third place, I did win a Kodak camera. So I took up photography and although I entered numerous competitions, which sometimes involved coming up with a slogan, I didn't look to writing competitions for a number of years.

It wasn't until 2004 that I got around to entering a creative writing competition. This was called End of Story and was launched by BBC Three. It involved a booklet containing the beginnings of eight short stories written by well-known authors, like Ian Rankin, Marian Keyes and Faye Weldon. All you had to do was complete one of them in fewer than 1200 words. It was the Joanne Harris story that I was attracted to, titled 'Dryad.'

Those were still days of posting entries. I felt very pleased to have actually completed my entry and there was a certain satisfaction as it dropped into the post box. I thought no more about it. A few months later I received a phone call whilst sitting on a windy courtside watching my daughter play netball. I assumed they were doing market research and told them to phone back when it was more convenient!

The overall number of entries across the categories was over 17,000, so I felt proud to be on the short-list. I was videoed at home and work for my appearance on TV and then had to overnight in London for the filming of the final programme. The initial euphoria of being short-listed and videoed for the TV show was quickly eradicated when the panel (on a screen), proceeded to rip apart all the entries (not just mine).

However, on returning home I decided I could either use my experience of the competition to improve my writing or just give up. I decided on the former and joined a writing course. This put in place the foundations for a piece of work that not only was I proud of writing but one which I thought could be a published novel.

In 2007 I sent the first 3 chapters to Cinnamon Press Annual Debut Novel/novella prize and was delighted to be long listed. This achievement motivated me to keep going and I self-published "The Memory of Wood" in 2011.

My next success came after attending a writers' week in Wales with Cinnamon Press. I had taken a piece of writing to share; this was an entry for a Writers and Artists competition with the theme 'Freedom'. I really appreciated the feedback from the other writers on the course, and ended up with a better and more polished piece of work. I was a runner up in the competition.

I also learnt another invaluable lesson from that writers' week, which was that if you are only dependent on competitions for your writing feedback then most of the time you are going to be disappointed and discouraged.

It was time to find a writing group. Again I have Cinnamon Press to thank, because they had their 10th anniversary event in Northampton, which is close to my home town of Rushden. One of the workshops was run by Creative Writers' at the Museum, (CW@M). This group meets at Abington Park Museum, Northampton, and uses the exhibitions and objects to inspire work for a portfolio. The best thing about it was it happened to fall on my day off. (That's how fate works!) I now write regularly on a wide range of subjects and have real people to give me feedback on my writing.

I'm sure being part of that group also led to a short story win, run by Writers' and Artists for Firewords, an independent literary magazine combining art and words. The competition was to write a short story based on a painting. This was exactly the type of prompt I had been using for two years with CW@M. And I won! The prize was publication in the lovely Firewords magazine.

Cinnamon Press have also continued being a central part of my writing. My second novel, "The Kim's Game" was published by them, having been on their long-list for the annual novel prize. And in February 2019 my novella, "the matter" is due for publication having been runner up in 2015.

I continue to love entering writing competitions, especially those with a theme; I can get overwhelmed if I have to start with my own idea.

My latest success was winning the Hastings Lit Fest short story competition this summer. The theme was, 'Conquest'.

The best thing about the win was that for the first time, I actually won a trophy and a prize voucher for a writing course. I also have a free pass to next year's Hastings Lit Fest events. Unfortunately they did not publish my winning story or the runners up which was a shame.

(Hastings Lit Fest is also running a short story competition for 2019; details can be found here, <https://hastingslitfest.org/competitions/2019-competitions/>)

Being on a short list is great, being published is even better, and a prize is a bonus! I may not always win or get a mention, however I do enjoy the feeling when I've put time and effort into a piece of writing and the sense of anticipation that I might just get a positive e-mail.

If I'm at a loss for what to write there's always a competition to enter. Whether it's a mini competition for Cinnamon press, or one on the Writers & Artists websites. Often there are competitions linked to a literary festival or event. The HE Bates Competition is an annual competition run by the Northamptonshire Writers Group.

HE Bates was born and brought up in Rushden, and I often walk in the local park which inspired his famous novel, "Love for Lydia."

At present I've 3 pieces in various competitions. So I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

I hope a competition might inspire you.

Good Luck!