

This experience has reinforced our belief that creativity belongs to all and can be life-changing. Change is one certainty in life, to see it happening in such a profound way is greatly satisfying. The words of 'One Creation', from our forthcoming CD, go further in displaying this:

*Never ending creation, never looking back,  
travelling forward like mist on my window,  
it's proof that I am alive. ■*

# wrestling with attitude

James Woolf

They're the scum of the earth, the dregs of society, the teenage thugs and professional hoodlums who'd sooner wrestle a granny to the ground than see her over the street. The Juvenile Delinquents; the Twoccers and Creepers, Robbers and Dealers, the little shits who get a lift to school only to play hookie and make off with someone else's car. You know the sort: those persistent offenders who 'we should learn to understand a little less and condemn a little more', the self-same ones we lock up by the dozen in Young Offenders Institutions and Juvenile Detention Centres the length and breadth of the country.

'You've been coming here for six months and that's the first fun thing you've ever given us to do!' And what had we just

*You're the only one  
I can talk to about  
this, 'cos you're an  
outsider ... '*

*The CD Spiritual Sunstroke can be purchased, price £5 + £1 postage and packing, by contacting The Writers in Residence, HMP Eastwood Park, Radfield, Gloucestershire GL12 8DB. Proceeds go to breast cancer charities: Macmillan Cancer Relief, and P.A.C. Project (a free counselling service for women, their families, and friends affected by breast cancer).*

done? An exercise in which the guys had two minutes to write a sentence in which every word begins with 't'. And, before that, one in which every other word begins with 'm'. And before that, every third word beginning with 'q'. And, in between, reading the results out loud (of course). The kind of warm-ups typical of my residency. But, then again, this is also a typically sardonic remark from Tom, a twenty-year old from Southend who has been churning out a blood and guts action adventure novel from the moment I met him in May 1998. This is unusual. And believe me it was nothing special to begin with. He sloped in – he's very tall with greasy black hair and moves with all the speed and elegance of a lethargic crocodile – having completed a few pages of one of the General Note Books, and tossed it to me at the end of the group. Inmates are issued with these orange exercise books by the

Education Department, and they have 'Instructions For Prisoners' on the first page, such as:

If you wish to take this book out with you on discharge, you should submit it to the Governor with an application for retention at least twenty-eight days (in the case of prison or youth custody centre) or seven days (in the case of detention centres) before you are due for discharge.

On the train that evening I struggled with Tom's jumbled reconstruction of a burglary at a school – and came pretty close to nodding-off during interminable descriptions of lockers and classroom layouts. I jotted a few (what I hoped would be) vaguely encouraging notes on story development – politely suggesting that we'd rather learn about the relationships between his characters than the relative distances between the desk, the blackboard and the door. I didn't necessarily expect him to continue with it. They very often don't. I throw out a lot of crap that I write too. And I certainly didn't foresee the developments which were to follow. My train journeys to London are now enlivened by Tom's natural storytelling abilities. He's completed seven of those bloody General Note Books, and they are bursting with gutsy teenage life, wild nightclubs, money laundering, car chases, murder, and frequent bouts of gloriously unbridled sex.

## a kind of morality

My interventions have, on the whole, been stylistic. 'Try using short sentences as well as long ones.' Or 'Let the reader discover things along with your main character'; the kind of indispensable gem that it takes years of hard labour in Siberia for most writers to discover for themselves. But sometimes I might question the behaviour or attitudes of the main character. They Tom – how about Jez having a friendship with a woman where they don't actually make the beast with two backs? Or 'Listen Tom, what say Jez really likes a woman but she doesn't give a fig about him! – cos at the moment the babes all throw themselves at him like lemmings

off the edge of a cliff? Because part of the brief for this job, surely, must be to get the guys to rethink their act a little? Isn't it? But then it's hard to know sometimes with this job. It's a 'job without job-description job', a 'turn up and invent your own day job' – and, frankly sometimes, a 'does anybody actually give a flying fuck what we're doing here job?' Nobody from the prison, for example, has ever taken me in a kindly fashion into the corridor and said: 'Okay, James, it's cool to get short stories from these guys, but can you possibly squeeze a little morality out of them at the same time? It's kinda good for the rehab process, know what I'm saying?'

But getting back to Tom, there is a kind of morality that runs through his work, a treat people the way you might wish to be treated by them morality. I'm actually getting to quite like the main character, and to respect him in a curious way, even though he is a criminal. Incidentally, for Tom, this 'treating people like you'd wish to be treated' code of conduct only seems to extend to people he knows. I took a video in at Christmas, and, without wishing to be too obvious about it, was careful to make sure that I still had the tape at the end of the session. (Just to set the records straight, it's a myth that prisoners don't steal things during creative writing groups. I've lost boxes of tea, jars of coffee, pints of milk, bags of sugar, whole magazines, sheafs of paper, and enough pens to supply a small but highly literate army unit. To make matters worse, if the lads aren't nicking things for real they're winding you up by pretending to half-inch your bag, or your jacket, or the ghetto blaster you brought in to play that radio drama). Anyway, Tom saw me looking for the video and suspecting that I suspected him of responsibility for its disappearance, took time out to reassure me: 'It's all right James, I never rob people I know'. Well, that's a start I guess, though heaven alone knows how he manages to rob anything from anyone at the pace he moves.

But we're intelligent people, my job-share partner and I. We know we're not just here to get the lads to write syrupy love ditties, or poems which end with the line 'Crime don't pay' – and hear me good when I say I've seen enough of those this past eighteen months! So we've picked up on some of the attitudes around us, we're sensitive to the atmosphere; hey! – we're writers God-dammit! And you don't need a copy of the prison's Equal Opportunities Policy Statement lodged in your Y-fronts to notice the endemic racism, or that misogyny is being dished up in

Brodingnagian portions. But, alas, there's also a limited effectiveness to making those timely interventions: 'Errm, excuse me Ray, I detect more than a hint of anti-Weish sentiment in your last statement which I find morally offensive, and I'd be most grateful if you'd withdraw it.' Don't get me wrong, I do my politically correct intervening along with the best of them, but is it not better to act, to show, to inspire?

## poetry making waves

With this in mind, we organised what we called our Crucial Poetry Event, inviting two poets from the Windows Project in Liverpool, to come to the prison for a workshop and performance. Having played the traditional 'Time and People Game' with the prison wings (we'll request sixty names to be here by six, and you can send them over in dribs and drabs between six-thirty and seven), we had, assembled in the gym, an expectant and pretty-bloody-well-behaved audience. The prison authorities are distinctly squeamish about large groups of inmates being gathered together but there wasn't a flicker of trouble. I had a brief identity crisis and sat on the benches with the inmates, but then noticed that my job-share partner and the teachers were all in chairs down the side. There was a brief hiatus at the start while one poet presumably had an attack of the non-verbal variety, and then we kicked off. And what a night it was, if I say so myself! The lads responded with whoops of enthusiasm to the streetwise pulsing verse of urban griot Levi Tafari, and the witty and womanly wisdom of Mandy Coe. Levi mercilessly ridiculed one of the screws for his lack of humour (a prison officer with no sense of humour? – never!) and the lads all loved it, while we looked on stony-faced, thinking: 'Christ, this is better than Johnny Cash at San Quentin!' At the end, confirmed bigots did high-fives with Levi Tafari, and we vigorously recruited new members to our groups. A great event, but did attitudes change? Possibly. For how long? Who knows? But was it the right thing to do? Definitely!

And then we moved on to *Making Waves*, our radio drama project (funded through seven-and-a-half grand's worth of Lottery money) in which half a dozen Luwies were ferried into the prison to record eight plays by the lads about bank robberies (not really, there was only one,

honest!) But questions were inevitably asked. 'Is this a correct and proper use of our nation's Lottery money?' 'Why should we spend thousands on a bunch of robbers and rapists?' 'Do you realise that a lot of poor misguided souls gambled away their state benefits for this?' But, as the plays trickled in, we started to smell the scent of raw talent once again. These guys have an original voice, and it can now be heard booming (via tapes in prison libraries) up and down the country. Tom, incidentally, scorned the project, the little bastard. He wasn't interested in radio drama, only novels. But it was great to watch the other writers seeing their plays come alive in front of them, and to see them presented with the finished tapes at a special launch party in the prison visiting room. And if not every play is absolutely marvellous, is that such a disaster? We may not have created best-selling authors or totally reformed characters, but at least we have shown these guys that they possess another means of communication in society, and have assisted them to create something of which, perhaps for the first time, they are truly proud. And for that alone it was worth it.

## chicken and mushroom pie

But steady on a moment, before we get carried away with our success, it should be said that not all events run with the icing sugar smoothness of *Making Waves*, or our visiting poets from Liverpool. Being a Writer in Residence, and having been exposed to almost toxic levels of inmates' work, I decided that it was time for a retaliatory strike, and inflict them with some of mine. *Chicken and Mushroom Pie* is about an offender who breaks into a flat in order to use the toilet, but then has a life-changing experience when he is given a chicken and mushroom pie. The play had appeared briefly but successfully on the London Fringe, and our first thought was to produce it in-house, using an inmate actor and stage manager, and to tour the prison stunning the guys with this sublime piece of surrealism. Rehearsals began, our actor was by all accounts excellent, the Head of Inmate Activities was right behind the project, indeed everything looked set for a glorious opening. Then my job-share partner rang me from the prison: 'You're not going to believe this, but the actor

and the stage manager have both been shipped out. Someone said Dover. We're back to square one.'

Disappointment being the mother of flexibility, we quickly evolved plan B. Far more simple in its concept, far less labour intensive for us, why not bring the original actor in and treat the prison to a slice of professional theatre? A date was set, publicity was duly produced, indeed everything looked set for a glorious transformation of prison to theatrical receiving house. Then the actor rang. 'Bit of a problem I'm afraid James. I've been given the lead in *The Misanthrope*.' Who could blame him for preferring the Derby Playhouse to Onley Young Offenders Institution? And after all, we could always reschedule his visit. So we did.

A few months have now gone by, events have moved on, my job-share partner has finished her half of the residency, leaving me to hold 600 custodially challenged babies. But I'm even more single-minded in my determination to see this damn project through, and to have my name in lights around the prison. My poster campaign has been remorseless, the prison is awash with chicken and mushroom pies, but the jewel in the crown is a nifty newsheet called *Happening Events* which massively publicises this and other forthcoming attractions. Nothing else can possibly go wrong, indeed everything looks set for a *Chicken and Mushroom Pie* extravaganza.

The day of the performance I sail into the prison, smug in my certainty that now, at last, I am going to show them who the real writer is. The Youth Worker meets me in the corridor. He's looking serious. 'Bad news I'm afraid James, *Chicken and Mushroom Pie*'s been cancelled. Lack of officers.' 'Very amusing Dave,' I laugh. He doesn't. Then the Head of Education approaches like a pall bearer at the Queen's funeral, and I know the game is up. Perhaps it isn't meant to be, or maybe I just didn't realise that getting your play staged at HMYOI Onley is every bit as hard as having it produced by the RSC.

I console myself by going round the prison putting up posters advertising the arrival of the *Making Waves* cassettes in the library.

'Hey Mister, I've got to talk to you, sir - I need to have a word.'

'What is it?'

'You're the only one I can talk to about this, 'cos you're an outsider, sir, like a member of the public.'

I'm just making my way off one of the juvenile wings when I

encounter this small kid on the landing - and he really doesn't seem any more than that. This is all I need. 'What is it?'

'It's them sir - them officers, sir - I'm black and blue, sir. We're standing with a group of his mates, and I can feel five pairs of eyes locking on to me. I try to think.

'Er, have you - have you reported this?'

'I can't, sir - that's why I'm telling you, sir. I'm serious, sir.'

It's the kind of situation I dread. There's an uneasy silence. Then they all collapse laughing.

'I was only joking, sir,' the little lad says, putting his arm protectively on mine.

'Yeah right, cheers guys,' I reply, and begin walking away. I'm already over the disappointment of *Chicken and Mushroom Pie*. Things have quickly returned to normal once again. But hold on. If I'm not mistaken, this lad has got talent. Possibly real talent. Maybe I can recruit him for one of my creative writing groups. ■