

Retirement: Write On!

By Bruce Harris



Many older people, and perhaps especially the retired, consider themselves 'out of touch' and find the idea that anyone might be interested in whatever fiction they might attempt as probably a little far-fetched. This assumption can sometimes be in spite of the fact that they have lived long and varied lives and may well have done and seen much more than many younger people have.

I think the most telling way of encouraging those who think it is too late for them is to refer to my own experience.

Retirement can be an ending or a beginning. Some people have become so immersed in their work that finishing it feels like an amputation; others who have worked to live see a golden age of opportunity to do the something else they've always promised themselves. An occupational pension eased my way to a decision in 2004 to end a thirty-six year career in education and see what I could do as a committed writer of fiction and poetry.

The prospects were not promising. True, I had published articles for the national educational press, but they were research-based interpretations of factual material. At fifty-five, I had yet to publish a single word of poetry or fiction. The unsuccessful juvenilia ground to a halt in my mid-twenties, and the cliché about artists doing their best work in their youth suggested that I might well struggle now even more than I did then.

Nevertheless, something inside me wanted to try. Creative writing courses were possibilities, but they were not as widespread as they are now, and I felt doubtful, not just about the expense. Can people really be taught to write, or are their expectations massaged to make them believe that they can?



Experiments and blind alleys provided me with some useful information. Approaching publishers directly with the Great Novel supposedly heading straight into the bestsellers' lists is a waste of time. Most publishers, then and now, will not accept unsolicited material; they only look at the offerings of literary agents. Some agents will not accept unsolicited material either, and those who do prescribe what is acceptable – the first fifty pages, or the first three chapters, with full return postage, or a preliminary letter before sending anything. And it is made clear that people with no publication record would probably not even be considered.

By trial, error and reflection, I decided on a three-pronged approach.

Firstly, I expanded and updated my reading. It seemed logical that anyone who is attempting to write modern fiction needs to know something about modern fiction.

Secondly, I needed to send poems and stories to established magazines. There were more print magazines then, though they are giving way now to the more viable and easily distributed 'e-zines'. 'Submitting' proved to be an arduous and often frustrating business. Fortunately for me, the tide of rejections or no-responses did begin to wash up the odd acceptance or two, and I was able to experience the very particular thrill of seeing something I'd written appear in print – egotistical, perhaps, but not just that; if you are seeking to communicate, it does help if someone is listening.



Thirdly, the bullet of writing competitions had to be bitten. Whatever the flattering comments of relatives and friends, their approval is not necessarily going to be shared by those in the writing business. Most of the competitions ask for a few pounds entry fee and offer a prize structure with first prizes ranging from one to five hundred pounds. Even the open competitions run by local writers' groups regularly attract at least three or four hundred entries. The bigger ones, such as the Bridport Prize, with its top prize of £5000, have entries upwards of six thousand; the Bristol Prize, with a more modest prize structure, nevertheless attracts entries in thousands. Usually, the money prizes are confined to the first three, or at most, the first five; a short list of the last ten or twelve will usually be published, and those who don't make it to the prizes will win 'commendations'. So even those people who have only made it to the short list are probably in the top 3% and might well even be in the top 1%.

To say I found success easy to come by would be both arrogant and wildly inaccurate, but it did, gradually and with a lot of sweat and toil, start to happen. One of my prize-winning entries had been in a competition organised by the Sentinel Poetry Movement, and in late 2012, they approached me about producing a short story collection. They advised me to include as many stories as I could which have won prizes, commendations or shortlistings. By this time, I had enough such stories – twenty-five- to fill the volume. The book, with the collective title 'First Flame', was published in September 2013 by SPM Publications – <http://www.spmpublications.com>. See also www.bruceharris.org for the Kindle version and a subsequent volume now out of successful poems.

Perhaps some people need extra maturity to bring out the writer in them. For anyone who's decided fifty plus is too late to start, think again - your best might be yet to come.

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