

HOUSE OF WORDS

Keynote | Poetry Ireland Writers-in-Schools 6th Annual Forum

Imagination and the Humanities

Dear creatures! Ladies and gentlemen! Good morning.

Fifteen years ago my ten-year-old daughter, now a young teacher, lounged against the doorpost of my study and observed me tearing my hair out, trying to round off a keynote address.

'Your job,' she said, removing the ends of her red-gold hair from her mouth, 'your job. Have you said how much you *love* doing it? You could end like *that*.'

Precisely so. Or begin like that! Enthusiasm gets one a long way, a very long way. And without it, all is lost. Enthusiasm and its *siblings* – no, I'll not use that strangely unpleasant word – enthusiasm and its brothers and sisters, curiosity, eagerness and wonder, are the mainspring of affirmation. You and I can be open, inviting, welcoming, we can speak the language of yes; or we can say no, no thanks, *noli me tangere*. To my mind, it's always incumbent on a writer-in-school to do the former: in the staffroom, in the library, in the classroom.

With no less enthusiasm, enthusiasm tempered by natural wariness at speaking to so many peers, I stand here now to say something about the power of the imagination, the importance of the humanities, the value of writers-in-schools schemes wherever they may be, and to offer a few practical observations.

I wonder whether you've come across this little poem by the Czech poet Miroslav Holub? It's called '*Napoleon*':

Children, when was
Napoleon Bonaparte born?
asks teacher.

A thousand years ago, the children say.
A hundred years ago, the children say.
No one knows.

Children, what did
Napoleon Bonaparte do?
asks teacher.

Won a war, the children say.
Lost a war, the children say.
No one knows.

Our butcher had a dog,
called Napoleon,
says Frantisek.

The butcher used to beat him and the dog died
of hunger
a year ago.

And all the children are now sorry
for Napoleon.

This cunning, charming poem, almost as simple as a nursery rhyme, full of repetition with variation, makes three points. The first is that children have little or no historical sense – though that's not to deny Joseph Campbell's rather wordy assertion that "the nerves in our body carry the memories that shaped the organisation of our nervous system to certain environmental circumstances". The second point is that children will relate to fact or story where it touches their own experience. And the third is that, in taking it over, they may alter the fact or the story – indeed they may change it completely. They will make it their own.

'In taking it over...' In taking it over, children no less than adults are transforming the fabric, the mix, the dough of the actual by adding to it the yeast of the imagination. And as Leslie Stephen wisely said, 'Originality doesn't consist in saying what no one has ever said before, but in saying exactly what you think yourself.' Exactly what you think, and exactly what you hear yourself think. This is what the American poet Charles Olson meant, isn't it, when he talked about 'the ear following the mind's speech'.

Not that one always knows what one thinks – not to begin with! One writes to find out. Some writers do this, almost miraculously, in their heads, and scarcely change a word on the page. I have a friend who showed me the draft of his big historical book, at least I thought it was a draft. 'Now the real works begins,' I said. He looked at me astonished. 'Whatever do you mean?' he asked. 'No,' he said, he never revised. Well, just a word or two. He did all the work in his head.

And the poet R S Thomas, meanwhile, told me that he never revised because he felt himself to be in a god-given state, a state of raised consciousness when he wrote, and didn't think he could return to that condition when revising. But most of us do work painstakingly through draft after

draft, clarifying to ourselves, cleaning, honing, simplifying. My young Arthur in *The Seeing Stone* observes, 'I need to see what I write to know what I think.' The same is true of his author. And yet, as Yeats noted:

A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

As a small boy, I used to visit my grandparents on the north Norfolk seaboard, where I now live. For as long as I can remember, my and my sister Sally's first port-of-call was Miss Disney. Sheila Disney. She had slightly webbed fingers and webbed feet, and a moustache. She used to tell me she was descended from seal folk. I'd heard the old Orcadian and Shetlandic tales, and saw no reason to disbelieve her. Miss Disney used to catch her breakfast in the creek with her feet. She just trapped any luckless, passing flounder or flatfish with her toes, and swarmed up her rickety ladder to her one room that smelt of fish and seaweed and rope and tar: revolting and fascinating. One day Sheila Disney also told me – so willingly did I suspend my disbelief! – that she was related to the great Walt! I thought that a woman who was related to the seal folk *and* Walt Disney was worth a poem any day:

Easterlies have sandpapered her larynx.

Webbed fingers, webbed feet:
last child of a seal family.

There is a blue flame at her hearth, blue
mussels at her board.
Her bath is the gannet's bath.

Rents one windy room at the top of a ladder.
Reeks of kelp.

'Suffer the little children,' she barks
and the children – all the little ones –
are enchanted.

She has stroked through the indigo of
Dead Man's Pool
and returned with secrets.

They slip their moorings. They

tack towards her glittering eyes.

We are human beings, and what chiefly distinguishes us from the remainder of the animal kingdom is our memory, our imagination, our developed language, our relish of story. I am the story; you are the story; each child we work with is the story. It's our bounden duty and our pleasure to awaken the children we work with to this.

I believe that a commitment to the humanities is crucial to a caring and cohesive community and society. In encouraging children to read, to develop a critical awareness, and to write, we are fertilising their learning skills across the board. We're helping them to develop the use of language to express needs, thoughts, feelings, imaginings. We're helping them to express their own hopes and fears and curiosities and longings. We are stimulating each of them to realise their own potential, each child involved in a solitary act that nevertheless has profound social implications. We can even loftily claim that writers-in-schools have some part to play in enabling children to fulfil their human destiny – and in a way that offers a deep joy, an inner satisfaction: the joy of creation.

We are writers, teachers, librarians, word-women, word-men, but I want to suggest that any pursuit of a cultural whole, of cultural wholeness (and holiness) always implies crossing frontiers, and sharing disciplines and perspectives. If education is to be a means of furthering culture, that is to say of furthering evolution, it must embrace the interdisciplinary – uncomfortable as this often is in practise, on the ground, messing up school timetables and the like. We must step out of our boxes, and recognise (as so many of you do) that the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts.

Two instances. Confronted by a primary school class of 150 children in Malawi, aged from 6 to 15, boys and girls, I said I'd tell them a story if some of them would sing to me – and then I told them a story about the power of song (the *Legend of Knockgrafton*, actually: 'Da luan da mort da luan da mort...') Then the children sang: wonderful four-part singing. After this, I offered to tell them another story if they would dance. Four nubile girls agreed. So I told a story... about the power of dance. And then the girls danced their sensuous dance. 'What was that about?' I asked. None of them answered. 'Well?' Silence. 'I think the girls are rather shy,' the Minister for Education called out from the back of the hall. 'It was a mating dance!'

But seriously, words and song and dance, each reflecting one another... memorable, deeply enriching.

In Minnesota, where I held a chair for the humanities in the 1990s, I made so bold as to put on a version of a passion play. It was enacted in a vast gymnasium. And in contradistinction to the original York and Chester and other in which medieval audiences remained stationary while the

performing wagons rolled past them, I arranged for my unwieldy audience – 900 of them! – to move from theatre to theatre of action. As Christ was betrayed in Gethsemane *amongst them*, as carrying his cross he trudged up the Via Dolorosa *through them*, as he was hammered to the Cross *at their feet* and hung suffering *above them*, as voices rose and fell, as actors in the crowd sang and wept and spat and cursed, as a TV newsman commentated on the proceedings, as life around the periphery went on as much as normal, with street musicians and jugglers and a belly-dancer and the like, the audience willy-nilly (that reduction from the Old English ‘wylle ic, ne wylle ic’), willy-nilly became part of the action.

Wherever it is possible, let our commitment to writing in schools extend to a commitment to the interdisciplinary, expressible as it is in so many ways. That is **the** most fruitful manner in which the adult (whether writer, teacher, librarian, not to mention parent!) can mediate between the child, intelligent maybe but essentially inexperienced, and this brawling, divided, complex world.

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Writers-in-Schools: Opportunities and Responsibilities

The then and now of it! One of the most obvious ways in which childhood has changed in, say, the last fifty or sixty years is that children then used to entertain themselves, while children now require to be entertained.

Not long ago, in the north-east of Scotland (I was there for a small literary festival), I stayed in a home where the youngest son had made and painted little models of some of the chief characters in my *Arthur* trilogy. Yes, I’m aware of wargames and their massed ranks of combatants, but in an old creaky house and in front of a smoky fire, this still felt as if I were stepping back into my own childhood where my sister and I went on long cycle rides, and roamed the beechwoods with our bull terrier Bruce, and climbed trees; where I spent hours and hours in my little shed-museum, examining my fossils and potsherds and coins and the like, examining and dreaming; where I was entertaining myself.

Now, children have the screen – the screen of the television, the screen of the mobile phone, the screen of the internet – and, through them and a whole battery of other technological devices, an endless supply of entertainment provided for them. Their lives are infinitely more sedentary and passive than were ours.

It seems to me, however, that this works in favour of writers-in-schools. Into school they come, unfamiliar faces with expert knowledge and semi-celebrity status. Let us unashamedly take

advantage of this, let us capitalise on it, and then steer children out into deeper imaginative waters.

Writers-in-schools can be significant allies for teachers and librarians. They can align themselves with hard-pressed school staff in recognising that poetry (and prose) are crucial in the present, mean, league-table climate – and here I'm really talking about the United Kingdom, not Ireland which, as our taxi-driver reminded us on our way in from the airport, 'is a country of scholars, and so you're sure of a welcome'.

A few minutes ago, I was claiming that the sky was the limit so far as what writers might help to excite, unlock and develop in children, so now I must also remind you that the visiting writer is by way of a support troop. She or he is there to work in tandem with teachers and librarians and has to attune her or himself to a school's needs.

As Paul Brock noted in a New South Wales educational magazine, *Teaching Literature*: 'But if no teacher is in there, constantly encouraging, probing, pushing, delighting and challenging kids to read widely and deeply within and *beyond* their immediately perceived horizons, who will do it?'

Libraries are the memory-banks of a culture. How are we to excite children without materials and displays? Without making libraries places where children want to spend time, not places where, as is still sometimes the case, they are sent by way of punishment? Places where a wide range of book-related activities are offered, as is the case in Ireland during your quite remarkable Bookfest, lasting throughout this month of October?

When I was a boy, I lived in a little village in the Chiltern hills, near Oxford. The library, in a rickety old wooden barn, opened on Sunday afternoons. I borrowed a book from it. I kept it for four weeks. And that meant that I'd have to pay a fine. So I hid the book. I kept the book for four months. I lied that I'd lost it. I kept it for four years... forty...

When I finally made so bold as to take it back, the library had fallen down. 'What was that to you?' an old man asked me, chewing on a piece of grass. 'That was only books.'

What was that to me? A hole in the heart.

And continuing guilt!

A hole in the heart. Books have become my life. Though how this can be so, given that I read so exceedingly little as a boy, I do not know.

Be this as it may, it seems plain to me that any writer visiting a school has a responsibility to the community of his school, and to the librarian no less than the teacher. We need to understand the budgetary restraints within which the library works. We need to support it with our interest, ideas, maybe with a book or two. Isn't it enough, you say, that we *write* the blessed books that sit on the shelves – and maybe fly off them? No, probably not.

For all its occasional spats, and face-offs in the red corner and the blue corner, the world of writers and writing is attractively and rewardingly *collegiate*: by which I mean to say mutually supportive, in front of scenes and behind it. I know, as you will know, of dozens of ways in which the experienced support the inexperienced without seeking praise or remuneration. The same is by no means always true of the worlds of music or the visual arts.

When I first took up a chair in the Midwest, the university dean said to me. 'I know you'll teach well. That's not the point. Lots of people teach well. I want you to have difficulty in getting into your office because there's always a bunch of groupies hanging around outside it. I want you to be *volcanic*: just the find the fissures and erupt through them.'

Well, he *was* Irish! But the dean's words apply to writers-in-schools, all right. You're not a visiting fireman. You're a visiting arsonist. A word-arsonist. You're a new face on the block, you have purchase, and you can use it. Just a couple of days ago, my wife Linda and I visited the Marino Institute. The words that greeted us, just outside reception, inscribed on a stone tablet beneath a splendid steel flame tree: 'Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.' W. B. Yeats. As a visitor, however, there's plainly a limit to what you can do. You can't ignite a fire in every breast. For this reason, something of a scattershot approach may well be appropriate. Throw around ideas, words, images, music. You simply never what may do the trick. It *may* be a revelation, a moment akin to the historian Gibbon's moment of revelation in the Forum. But it may be something quite small: a single image, the spark of a word, a name.

'Mind you,' said my daughter, now 25, 'I don't think you can be a role model for my fifteen-year-old children'. She teaches in an Inner City college, in Bermondsey, in east London – 80% of her girls are black, 80% of their families lack fathers, and few of them have high aspirations. 'That's exactly why we're paying good money to bring in a successful female Sierra Leonean writer,' Oenone said. 'Is it possible to be a role model for people who are not like you?'

Plainly, variety is the spice of life and desirable, but in so far as budgets are limited, there's a message for teachers and administrators here. One must select a writer likely to fit the bill.

Some teachers are nervous of poetry, and uncertain how to teach it, let alone writing it. How do you cope with a beast which sometimes (to reword Robert Frost) says one things and means another? How do you satisfy Emily Dickinson's prescription to 'tell it slant'? And how do you

convince children that less is more, that showing is preferable by far to telling, and that Horace was right in enjoining us to 'be brief in what you say', and Somerset Maugham no less so in observing that 'to write simply is as difficult as to be good'?

Well, the very heart of our activity as writers-in-schools is to excite in children an appetite for image-making and music-making. And when we do achieve it, we know we have nourished ourselves. So how are we to do so?

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Tricks of the Trade

You've all had experience of the writers-in-schools scheme, as writers, teachers, librarians, administrators, so I hope it's not out of court to describe a few of my own tricks of the trade (and in the discussion and argument following this talk, I hope to hear some of yours).

Children are less apt to be apprehensive of a visiting writer than adults. More than once I've faced a group of adults who've said, 'You're not going to be too hard on us, are you,' and remarks of that ilk, while one old woman memorably told me: 'The knitting class was full, dear, yes, *full*, so I thought I'd give writing a try.'

However, we've all walked into classes containing their fair share of the bleary, as well as the poor lost souls who tell us, wild-eyed, 'I don't know how to begin.'

One way is to ask children to draw a picture of a map of their own childhood. In four minutes! One will draw her own room, one a street map complete with the spots where he meets his mates, one the quiet corner where she likes to be alone... Within these sketches, there is always, always a point of ignition. Ask your children to select one element in her or his picture that particularly matters to them – a goldfish, a tree, a bike. And now to write something about it...

Once, I borrowed – well, nicked actually – an apple from a headteacher's office. I put it on the floor inside a ring of twenty primary school children. The top class. 'I can see this apple is greenish and round,' I said. 'What else can you tell me about it. Surprise me! Isn't that what Diaghilev said to Jean Cocteau when Cocteau asked him for a briefing on a design for the Russian Ballet. "Etonne-moi!" Surprise me.' At once, one girl did surprise me. 'It'll cry if you bite it,' she said. Ah! Would that there were more such moments. Image-making in poetry very often consists in seeing a thing, describing a thing by using a metaphor or simile or kenning. 'It's speckled,' said a boy. 'And freckled,' added a girl. Word-play, yes. 'And like a sphere,' said a fourth child. 'It's got pips,' said a fifth. 'What are they like, these pips?' I asked. 'Dark. Hidden...' she replied. 'Oh! I've got it, they're like secrets.'

So here was this apple on the classroom floor: it wept when you bit it and was speckled and freckled and like a sphere, and it contained dark secrets. Magic!

Metaphorical riddles enable us to see the old and familiar in new and unfamiliar ways. Children, who have so little difficulty in crossing the wavy line between the actual and the imaginary, can with a little direction be skilled not only at answering them but in making them up. And they can provide an excellent opportunity not only for the processes of *hatching* and *forging* into which Seamus Heaney divides the making of a poem, but also of *sharing*.

Riddles have been asked and solved for at least 5000 years. The earliest surviving ones are Babylonian, inscribed on wax tablets. The Greeks, Romans, Saxons, Vikings, they all composed a profusion of riddles. I began to translate the charming, vivid, sometimes witty, sometimes earthy Anglo-Saxon ones when I was still a student. And with the poet Lawrence Sail, I commissioned and co-edited new riddles from one hundred writers. Just a couple to tempt you:

Grab the beast by the horns.
Wrestle it down the narrow streets
till you break its will
to skitter its own way.
Subdue it. Burden its rib-cage.
Let your children ride.
And then let it stray.
Who cares? They'll send
a herdsman to round it up
at the end of the day.

And the answer? A supermarket trolley. That's by Stuart Henson. And don't forget to re-read the riddle after everyone knows the answer. The air will be full of 'Ohs!' and 'I get it' and the like. Another Horatian aphorism is always, always á propos for writers-in-schools: *Festina lente!* Unhurry. Hurry slowly.

And the second riddle, by Kit Wright:

I go through the wood in silence
and come out on to the snow
where I leave my prints
though I have no feet,
where I speak your heart
though I cannot breathe.

'Through the wood in silence... on to the snow' (of a white page). A pencil-lead.

I imagine you all have ways of raising children's awareness of our remarkable word-hoard. So rich, so full of synonyms – not least because modern English largely derives from not one but two grandparents, Latin through Norman French *and* Anglo-Saxon – so colourful. We're not expecting all the children with whom we work to become professional writers. God forbid! But language is the vehicle we all use day-in, day-out, it's the vehicle that's regularly abused day-in, day-out. Our thoughts and feelings are only as sharp as the language we use to define them – 'I fucking love you. I fucking do.' Or: 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day...' Well, which do you prefer? And why? And so we're trying, all of us, to develop our children's language skills, to be alive to the power of image-making, and to the way in which music is part of meaning.

Sometimes I have children excavate a word ('Napoleon', say) and find out how many words they can make out of it, or parts of it. Nap... pole... on...no... lap... aeon... and so on! Or I ask them to write a couple of lines using only short vowels ('a' as in 'hat', 'e' as in 'bet', 'i' as in 'quick') and a couple of lines using only long vowels – ai, ee, oe – and then we discuss their different music. Or I ask them to write a verse to the rhythm of one or another nursery rhyme. Or to write a few lines using only monosyllables. I'm a translator from Anglo-Saxon and virtually all the strong, quick, keen, bright, tough, gruff words come from that ... root. All the words about the stuff of life: womb (wamb), men (mon) and women, earth (eorþ), ship, sea, plough...

Why should we ever, well, almost ever, use long words where short ones will do? And while we're at it, let's do away with adverbs altogether. So often, they're a cop-out. Give a little more patience, the writer will find the verb that renders the adverb – that makes the adverb – redundant, supernumerary? Let's just say: *no use!*

That said, I broke my own rule about long words in trying to describe life on the streets of Jerusalem, perceived by a country girl astonished by the hubbub, the sights and smells, the voltage of it:

Absolving and blessing, caterwauling, dancing, elbowing, fiddling, gawping, haggling, insisting, jeering, kissing, limping, mourning, neighing, ogling, pick-pocketing, questioning, rosary-telling, sweating, taunting, ululating, vowing, wailing, exclaiming, yelling, zither-plucking; zit-picking, yawning, explaining, whistling, vandalising, uttering, tale-telling, shoving, rabbiting, quaffing, pleading, oat-eating, nagging, money-changing, laughing, kneeling, jostling, hugging, gossiping, flagellating, entreating, doddering, chanting, breast-beating and arguing: from the moment Gatty passed under the Fish Gate, side by side with Snout, she was caught up in a bubbling tide of people such as she had never experienced before, not even

in London or Venice. She and her mule were carried almost bodily along the seething streets and swept into the courtyard of the Hospital of Saint John.

I think that what I'm advocating is that we mustn't lose sight of language as play – but we shouldn't forget our early delight in onomatopoeia (well, there I go!), onomatopoeia, rhythm, rhyme, repetition, refrain. And everything else beginning with R:

This little piggy went to market
This little piggy stayed at home
This little piggy had roast beef
And this little piggy had none
.... and this little piggy
went wee... wee...wee...wee..
all the way home.

Such delight, such visceral delight. Let's not, as visiting writers-in-schools, for one moment forget the power of *word-play*.

During my visit to Dublin, I've had an opportunity to say something about story. How irresistible we find story. How socially binding story is. Half my life has been given to trying to tell (and retell) stories, but today I just want to commend one way that I've often used in schools, and with attractive results.

Some years ago, I heard the story of how the medieval town of Dunwich, on the east coast of England, toppled into the sea. And I heard that there was a tradition that the church bell still rings under the waves. There are similar stories about water-bells in Cardigan Bay, and on the Lancashire coast, and at Mundesley in Norfolk... and doubtless in Ireland too.

When I retold this story in the first instance for radio, I thought of it as a kind of 'fractured narrative', a sound-story for a number of different voices, or for one voice taking an number of different parts. It's called '*Sea Tongue*', and it begins like this:

I am the bell.

I'm the tongue of the bell. I was cast before your grandmother was a girl. Before your grandmother's grandmother was a girl. So long ago.

Listen now! I'm like to last. I'm gold and green, cast in bronze, I weigh two tons. Up here, in the belfry of this closed church, I'm surrounded by sounds. Mouthfuls of air. Words ring me.

High on this crumbling cliff, I can see the fields of spring and summer corn; they're green and gold, as I am. I can see the shining water, silver and black, and the far fisherman on it.

And look! Here comes the bellringer – the old bellwoman.

I am the bellwoman.

For as long as I live I'll ring this old bell for those who will listen.

Not the church people; they have all gone. Not the sea birds; not the lugworms; not the inside-out crabs nor the shining mackerel.

Whenever storms shatter the glass or fogs take me by the throat, I ring for the sailor and the fisherman. I warn them off the quicksands and away from the crumbling cliff.

I ring and save them from the sea-god.

I am the sea-god.

My body is dark; it's so bright you can scarcely look at me, so deep you cannot fathom me.

My clothing is salt-fret raised by the four winds, twisting shreds of mist, shining gloom. And fog, fog, proofed and damp and cold. I'll wrap them around the fisherman. I'll wreck his boat.

I remember the days when I ruled earth. I ruled her all – every grain and granule – and I'll rule her again. I'll gnaw at this crumbling cliff tonight. I'll undermine the church and its graveyard. I'll chew on the bones of the dead...

This retelling derives, really, from the idea – commonplace to Native Americans – that everything in our universe, every stick and stone, has its own voice. Each constituent runs with the story and, so to say, passes the baton to the next: the bell, the bellwoman, the sea-god, the dead, the cliffs, the living, the church, the bell-woman and the sea-god again, the boat, the night-storm, the morning, the bell...

To give children the bones of some story and ask them to flesh it out is a lovely way to involve them in an activity that is at once individual and solitary and yet communal; an activity which is short haul to which everyone can make a valuable contribution; and one in which the whole is self-evidently greater than the sum of the parts.

A number of schools have sent me their own versions of '*Sea Tongue*': words, pictures. And some teachers have told me how they also added music and dance to the mix. It may be a method that commends itself to you, and that you'd like to try out yourselves.

You are a story. I am a story. Each child is a story. And we may well encourage children to step into their own lives, to use the springboard of their own experience to begin a story. To begin with the dough of the actual and then add the yeast of the imagination.

A few years ago, I was out walking when I put up an old dog-fox from a thorn bush, the only bush on a high hillside, right in front of me. It lased me with a burning look. It ran. It turned, perhaps one hundred yards away, and looked again. And disappeared. And this is the verse I wrote, a dialogue between an old fox and a young cub about the danger of meetings poets:

Please tell me please. How chancy is it
For a young fox to meet a hungry poet?

A poet! It's time you were properly versed.
Of all our enemies the poet is the worst.

Worst! I thought poets were just amorous,
devious and gaseous, penurious – but glamorous.

They're shape-changers. They dream and devour.
They translate you and take away your power.

Don't tell me please. If he catches me,
What will happen if some poet bandersnatches me?

You'll be locked behind words. Cribb'd; confin'd.
Howling you'll run to the limits of the mind.

Visiting arsonists, yes. But it's important, I think, that writers-in-schools should not be seen as hit-and-run, one-day-stand, here-today-and-gone-tomorrow.

The school, college, institute of other organisation that a writer visits has responsibilities, including scheduling time for book selling and signing. That should always be part of the deal. But as I said earlier, the writer has responsibilities too. To give her or his all in the classroom, with child and student, necessarily implies full prior consultation with teacher or librarian, or both. Maybe the writer will commission children to write a story or poem to a selected brief, arrange with the teacher to free up time for them to do so, and invite the teacher to send on their work, if necessary preselected. It can matter a good deal to children if they understand their writing is being taken seriously in this way. I make it a regular policy to hand down some challenge when making a school visit; to have work sent on to me; to write a letter to the group of children with whom I've worked, naming each of them at the head of the letter; and to send a book or two by way of prizes for the pieces of writing that have interested me. Small things, but they count.

Maybe you can arrange a short session in which you're holding a writing workshop with teachers; maybe you can follow through on some idea or issue with them, or provide them with vital information; maybe you can solicit materials or provide information to the librarian. What is essential is intercourse – not finger-tip but a full-blooded exchange between visiting writer and

children, teachers, librarians, administrators. That, indeed, is part of the point of a day such as this.

I believe what we should be trying to do is not only to develop children's writing and reading skills but to take literature of whatever kind out of its box. To move it into the mainstream so that it becomes part of school's culture, part of its daily bread.

Consider the enlightened Irish policy in which one per cent of new building costs has to be allocated to new public artwork – sculpture, painting, enterprises that raise our shared appreciation of the nourishing value of the arts. In the same way, only more so, teaching right across the board should be encouraged, even required to make use of poem and story; and here, too, the writer-in-schools scheme has a vital part to play.

Earlier this week, I concluded a talk at the Irish Writers Centre about 'story' by quoting Confucius in Ezra Pound's translation. With congratulations to each of you for your involvement in work so crucial and valuable (you know that it is, all right, but you still need to hear that it is!), I've no hesitation to doing so again. Confucius said:

... wanting good government in their own states, they first established order in their own families; wanting order in the home, they first disciplined themselves; desiring self-discipline, they rectified their own hearts; and wanting to rectify their hearts, they sought *precise verbal definitions* of their inarticulate thoughts (the tones given off by the heart)...

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The foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart; the chamber, the Yeatsian tower of the head; your and my home; the theatre of family; the seat of government! Dear friends, each of us on our own, and all of us together: let us build a house of words.

Kevin Crossley-Holland