

Hannah Bardell was a Pushkin Prizewinner in 1997.

She has been a great supporter of the Prizes ever since. Here she explains why.

Trying to work out how to convey in writing what's in your head is always so hard. I'm trying to do it just now in the hope that what sounds really good in my head will come out just as well in print, but it doesn't always work that way....

But that doesn't mean you should stop trying, you know. I nearly did.

I was an unruly 13 year-old when my English teacher, Mrs Arjat, suggested that the story I'd written about a family being cleared off their land as part of the Highland Clearances was good enough to be entered for a writing competition. Of course, I was really chuffed. I wasn't best pleased when she then said I had to write another story... but I found I even enjoyed that; I wrote about my granddad who had died the year before.

It was the editing that I hated, having to go back over things I'd written and change them, and make things *grammatically* correct. It was no fun and at the time I really couldn't be bothered. But Mrs Arjat, thank goodness, took a firm hand.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Well, not quite. Winning the Pushkin Prize was actually the beginning of my future.

Back then, the prizewinners went on an all expenses paid trip to St Petersburg for a week. At 14 I'd never been abroad (my mum liked camping holidays) and I'd only ever been on a plane once, to fly to London. To me, St Petersburg was like a whole different stratosphere!

Now I could go on for pages about my week there but I won't because you'd be here until next week - I suggest you visit the city for yourselves instead!

The most poignant memories are not of the breathtaking architecture or the afternoons wandering the grand palaces, gardens and sights; although these were beyond comprehension. My favourite memories are of the people, and their warmth. I went laden with pot noodles as I'd been warned to expect minimal food,

but our hosts laid the tables full even though they had very little to spare. They welcomed us into their hearts and homes - my memories of that week offer a constant reminder of the link that I feel Russia holds with Scotland.

Winning the prize wasn't just about going to Russia, it was about recognition and for me, legitimacy. Suddenly I realised that all those ideas and notions I had spinning around in my head might actually mean something to someone else as well. The idea that I'd won a prize just for writing down ideas and stories that were in my head seemed impossible, yet it gave me confidence and a will to continue writing.

I suppose the unfortunate thing was that after The Pushkin Prizes, I didn't really get a chance to develop my writing. At school everyone was so worried about exams and grades that I felt there was no room for creativity.

Last May I spent a few days with the twelve 2007 Pushkin Prizewinners and their tutors, Catherine MacPhail and Gerry Cambridge, at their creative writing hideaway in Cromarty.

I'm sad there isn't a trip to Russia any longer and would love to see, finance permitting, the trip re-instated. However, seeing first hand the young people being tutored and getting support and encouragement made me realise just how worthwhile the new prize is. It's a week away from parents and teachers, out in the country where you can roam and wander, an opportunity to work with real live writers and make loads of new friends. I saw first-hand how many of the young people forged friendships and were lit up with excitement, creativity and confidence at their own and shared talents. What better way to encourage the writers of tomorrow?

I found myself feeling quite envious.....

I've gone on to be, as I always say, 'lucky'. I went to University to study Film and Media, English and Politics. I got a job at GMTV and worked in London for a while. And now, partly due to a conversation about The Pushkin Prizes I've ended up working for Mr Alex Salmond.

My mum tells me you make your own luck - I think I might be starting to believe her, just about.

The Pushkin Prizes gave me a boost and a confidence at an early age that helped me be determined and inspired in whatever I do, qualities that I think, I may not have acquired in such abundance had it not been for Miss Arjat's encouragement to prepare my folio of creative writing.

So what's to be learned, and where to go? At High School I missed those early days of getting to 'write what you like'. They got lost in the 9 month dash for Highers when we learned our few texts inside out. Of course, there is a place for examinations and grades. But aren't we in danger of squeezing creativity and ideas out of our young folk? Scotland has produced so many famous writers - perhaps we could do more to encourage future generations.

The Pushkin Prizes are doing just that. So for those of you who read this, my plea is to keep the prize going. Get involved, write for the prize, introduce it to your school, donate to the fund.

Preserving this great opportunity is a vital way of ensuring young people of the future get the opportunity that I did, and that I'm so eternally grateful for.

Hannah Bardell

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