



Writing in Education

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Shakespeare at the Castle

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Writing in Education Interview: Sarah Hosking, Open House



WILLIAM GALLAGHER talks with SARAH HOSKING about the lessons learned from applying decades of writing residency work to a new project that gave each of ten writers “a room of their own” for a very special week.

There’s no drama here, there were no calamities, but there is a lot of passion and a lifetime of care. When Sarah Hosking and her team launched the Open House writing residency project for 2023, they did so with immense experience and all of it proved essential regardless of how different the project was.

For ultimately, Open House’s plan to give women writers space to work had a different form to everything the Hosking Houses Trust had done before — but its aim was fundamentally identical.

“When I was about 20 years old, I read Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and was absolutely bowled over,” says Sarah Hosking. It’s the essay with Woolf’s famous line “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”

“Why has no one made it happen?”

“I loved Virginia Woolf,” continues Hosking, “but the people who bring out books about Virginia Woolf, they talk about the servants, they talk about her letters, why has no one ever made it happen? I went off and had

a career in the arts, and throughout my life I told friends that when I retire, if I’m still well, I will make Virginia Woolf’s idea of a room of one’s own come true. So I got to 60, and I did it. It was as simple as that.”

For over 20 years, Hosking Houses Trust has welcomed women writers to its 18th-century cottage in Clifford Chambers village, just south of Stratford-upon-Avon. “I thought near Stratford would be lovely,” says Hosking. “I found a house [for myself] and then the little cottage down there.”

With getting together friends to form the Trust, and getting all the correct charitable status, it took over five years to welcome its first writer. “By 1999, I started fundraising, and we first appointed in 2002.”

Since then, more than 160 writers have stayed in the cottage for weeks or sometimes months at a time.

For this primary role of the Cottage, the writers who stay are all women writers who have achieved publication and some recognition, but for whatever reason now need a helping hand.

Sarah Hosking has a stark term for the writers they usually invite to stay in the cottage: she says they are all “shattered women”.

“We do one thing,” she said. “One thing. We invite older women, we have one cottage and there are twelve months in the year, that is all we have. So we go for shattered women of high ability and achievement.”

Or rather, they did, and will again. But for one, brief, ten-week season across summer 2023, Hosking Houses Trust partnered with Writing West Midlands — “a splendid organization” — to create something new.

Through event producer and artistic director Sarah Mullen, the organization created the Open House project. It would still be for writers, it would still be for women, but they no longer needed to have been published. They also didn’t have to be shattered women, they just had to be disadvantaged writers who would benefit from a room of their own.

“It was addressing people who needed promotion and advice and so on,” says Hosking.

So alongside one of the ten weeks in the cottage, each writer also had the option of a mentor in a field of their choosing, to help them with writing issues they identified. Each writer had six hours with a mentor, and the hours were spread across months but chiefly spent so that the writer could make the most of their week in the cottage.

“it ran beautifully”

Each week, then, a new writer would arrive and be welcomed into the cottage by Sarah Hosking. They’d be shown how everything works, they’d be shown the village and shops, and after a day or so, Sarah would return to check that all was going well. Otherwise, the writers were left alone in this cottage with a studio.

“It ran beautifully,” says Hosking. “The writers were complete charmers, they were wonderful.”

Hosking makes it sound simple, and repeatedly stresses how much of the work of the project was done by her fellow trustees and Mullen, the producer. You’re expecting a “but” now, yet if she were sitting next to you, she would cross out any sentence beginning with “but”, she is so pleased with how it went.

Perhaps she’d allow a “yet”, though.

Yet there were differences from the regular work of Hosking Houses Trust, and there were lessons learned from the Open House project. Most specifically, Hosking now doesn’t think that a week is long enough. “A lot of our [usual] residencies are two months,” she says, and she thinks that extended period is important.

However — she might allow a “however” because it’s important — what it took to do the new Open House project is what it takes to do Hosking Houses Trust’s regular residencies. It’s also what is currently proving to be an increasingly hard issue, and it’s the very centre of what she would say you need to think about before creating any residency, of any duration.



Sarah Hosking

“Money,” she says flatly “If you’re not personally wealthy, do you like raising it? If you don’t like money, don’t do it. Secondly, law. Every action has a legal element, an implication. If you’re going to host people, for instance, you need a gas certificate, you need all sorts of other things.”

“Thirdly, passion, which is a funny word,” she continues. “You simply do not count the hours you spend doing whatever it is. And fourthly, I think flexibility. So really those things, but money first, you have to chase money.”

Emma Thompson is its patron

Compressing Open House into ten weeks did not make chasing money easy. But Hosking says that one thing that came out of it all that has been a boon is Sarah Mullen. “I think she’s exceptional,” she says. “People as good as that coming out of the woodwork in the arts administration are rare.”

Hosking hopes to continue working with Mullen and there are plans for more projects, although “I don’t want to lose our core direction.”

Where the Open House project welcomed ten writers, the Trust’s core direction has seen over 160 writers. Salley Vickers wrote *The Boy Who Could See Death* there in 2012. Joan Bakewell worked on her autobiography *Stop the Clocks: Thoughts on What I Leave Behind* in the cottage in 2014. It’s a quiet space that has helped writers of “high ability”. Emma Thompson is its patron, and Sarah Hosking herself has been made an honorary fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.



Sign outside the cottage in Clifford Chambers village, near Stratford-upon-Avon

Yet Hosking, now 82, says there is so very much more that needs to be done — and no shortage of women writers who need the Trust’s help. “You see, I don’t want to be any better known,” she says. “I’m booked up till this time next year.”

In her typically practical, pragmatic way, Hosking says simply that “We want money.”

Specifically, the Trust is working to raise enough money to buy another cottage. That’s what it needs, that’s what the shattered women writers and the disadvantaged ones of future Open House projects need.

And that is where you can help. The Trust has a JustGiving page where you can donate, and where you can read vividly absorbing comments from women who’ve directly benefited from the cottage, as well as those of us who want to support such a special place.

Donate to Hosking Houses

The impact of Hosking Houses Trust

Books by Hosking Houses Trust residents are to be found in public libraries, prestigious universities – e.g. Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale and Princeton – and major art institutions, e.g. Victoria and Albert Museum, The Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Of the 22 residents we could fully research in the World Catalogue, we discovered that on average, each of the authors is represented in 193 libraries worldwide.

From residency to publication of their books, authors took anywhere from one year to 12 years,

with the average being just over three years. Nearly one quarter of these books have either been winners or shortlisted literary prizes.

Amanda Smyth’s *Fortune* was shortlisted in 2022 for the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction and Sarah Burton’s *The Strange Adventures of H* was shortlisted for HWA (The Historical Writers Association) 2021 Debut Crown Award.

Louise Foxcroft’s *Hot Flushes, Cold Science: A History of the Modern Menopause* won the Longman-History Today Prize in 2009 and Quincy Whitney’s *American Luthier, The Art and Science of Carleen Hutchins* – was recognised by Pen America as one of the 10 best biographies of 2017. It won the Acoustical Society of America’s 2019 Science Communication Award.

Carole Manship, chair of the trust

NAWE Guide to Writing Residencies

Novelist Sarah Butler has written a [comprehensive guide](#) to getting the most from a writing residency – whether you are the writer, or you are the organiser.

It’s a practical guide concentrates on the subject from the perspective of a writer aiming to get a residency. It’s also replete, though, with comprehensive advice for the creator and organizer of a residency – whether it’s in a cottage, or on a ship.

Butler’s guide also has case studies that show how a well-defined residency can be the making of the project.

“[Writing Residencies](#)” is just one of the many NAWA guides to the broad issues affecting us all. Check out the [full list](#) to see advice on mentoring, time management,