

Spreading the Word

Background

Tom Corbett had worked for many years as a writer, national reviewer and in education prior to becoming involved with a small group of Norwich writers. The group came together regularly in a local café to share their work and provided a medium by which established writers could offer support and guidance to the dreams and aspirations of new writers.

Yet as the group gained momentum, it involved an onerous responsibility for committee members tasked with booking venues, co-coordinating events and organising catering facilities. “One of the inherent dangers of committee membership is the personal responsibility for financial irregularities or loss, which we felt was starting to hold us back as we wanted to plan new and more adventurous events and activities,” says Tom. The group initially approached The Guild looking for a mechanism to spread liability and limit their personal responsibility.

Clarifying objectives

“Our most important task was to bring clarity to the group,” states Sally Kelly, Principal Consultant at The Guild. “Once we had clarified their aims and objectives, we were able to recommend a legal structure which could accommodate those objectives, in this instance a company limited by guarantee. We then had to ensure that everyone involved understood the limitations and opportunities that this step could offer. In particular, the structure adopted meant that no one individual was in the position of having to assume personal liability or responsibility for any aspect of the group’s activities.”

“I believe the process of establishing a limited company gave focus to their activities and has strengthened the group’s commitment by alleviating worries and concerns that people were starting to have,” she adds.

“The Guild showed us a clear route forward and how to create a legitimate and more credible platform for our work,” continues Tom Corbett. He believes that the business skills passed on by the Guild have helped to create a strong and vibrant enterprise, which offers an inclusive gateway for all aspiring new writers, irrespective of their age or educational background.

“Many creative people struggle to get to grips with the importance of legal structures and business planning, but Café Writers offers an excellent example of how to create a much more secure route for harnessing and channeling creative energy,” he adds.

Café Writers evolves

Café Writers became a company limited by guarantee in July 2006. There is now a solid framework in place by which established writers can help new and aspiring writers to realise their potential. From a small, informal group, the enterprise now has a database of 300 active members and hosts numerous readings, competitions and literary events, acting as a focal point for creative writing in Norfolk and increasingly further afield.

Members are kept up to date through a high quality website, which showcases the best new writing and also acts as a valuable information resource on literary events and the local training and educational opportunities relevant to aspiring writers.

Tom is meanwhile focusing on another new enterprise which has evolved out of the original concept. Gatehouse, a publishing house dedicated to new writing, especially poetry and short stories, was established in November 2006. It is also a company limited by guarantee following advice by The Guild.

Promoting new writing

After a long professional career in writing and literary endeavour, Tom is acutely aware of the difficulties encountered by new writers struggling to make their voice heard. Mainstream publishers and agents only want to deal with established names, but how does one establish that name and reputation in the first place? Gatehouse is envisaged as a means by which new writers can gain all important exposure and also seeks to encourage latent talent through monthly online writing workshops.

Undercurrents, an anthology of work by graduates from UEA's creative writing course, was published early in 2008 and sold out in three days. In 2009, the company anticipates publishing its first novel with a cash prize of £5,000 for the best new work put forward. Gatehouse has also been chosen to publish work by the celebrated Hungarian poet and translator George Szirtes, seen as an acknowledgement of the extremely high quality standards it sets.

As an adjunct to Gatehouse, there are also plans for another online platform for new writing in the form of www.new-writing.com, which will be a showcase for the work of university students across the country. "We have developed a comprehensive database of agents and publishers who will be made aware of the site with the aim of ensuring that new writing gets noticed where it matters," he says.

The University of Southampton will be the first academic institution to use the site, followed by the University of East Anglia. Several northern universities have also expressed an interest in using the site to profile and disseminate the work of students. "Good writing is also an interactive process. Universities are interested in each others work and this is a way in which new writers across the country can see what others in the same field are doing. Also, if we see writing that we really like, we will consider publication through Gatehouse," he adds.

Social Impact

As professional and cohesive social enterprises, Café Writers and Gatehouse are much more strongly positioned to support new and emergent writers and allow established writers to share their skills and knowledge more effectively.

Both organisations are raising the literary profile of Norfolk and East Anglia with a wider national audience. Tom also points to the inclusive nature of their work. "It is one of our objectives that the encouragement of new writing and fostering of talent does not focus exclusively on UEA, but is available to everyone with a passion for creative writing."