

I first found out about the Mairtín Crawford Award through a writing newsletter which provided a round-up of events, competition and opportunities. Usually I scroll quickly through these, mentally talking myself in or out of applying to things, based on how much writing I've been doing, and how confident I'm feeling. The Mairtín Crawford Award though, instantly had a special appeal to me as a prize founded and awarded in Belfast, administered by the Crescent Arts Centre and the Belfast Book Festival. I had lived in Belfast as a student at Queen's University; in my first year I walked past The Crescent every day on my journeys between halls and lectures, the library. I was intensely happy there, and I miss the city, and the particular quality of that happiness, fiercely. I was drawn to the prize's history, as well, to the life and work of Mairtín himself as a significant, catalysing figure in Belfast literary life, up until his death in 2004.

Beyond the personal significance, I liked that the awards give you the opportunity to enter not just one but a selection of poems, as a kind of portfolio. I often worry that a single poem its own isn't equal to the burden of being judged, so the opportunity to present a slice of your poetry, to show style and theme a little more expansively, is a welcome one. It's important, as well, that the awards describe themselves as being for writers, both published and unpublished, who are "working towards their first full collection of poetry, short stories, or a novel". Again, there's something that feel generous about that; that these Awards are about recognising a direction of travel, not just a single output.

### **Writing life: what's changed**

Like a lot of writers, I suspect, I have a complicated relationship with writing awards. They are important things; they can winkle out talent, and put a spotlight on it; they are a kind of validation that can otherwise be hard to find. They can also be a source of much-needed financial support—a win or a shortlisting can, quite literally, buy you some of the time you need to create work which, that same win implies, is worth creating. Winning the Crawford Award did much of this for me. The literary landscape is strange terrain, though, and while the bright lights of prizes and ceremonies give it urbane significance, the more distant and less easily categorized territories can be just as worth exploring.

I think it's too simple to talk about external events, like awards, creating watershed moments for your writing. But they can certainly act as waymarkers, indications that you may well be on the right track, a sustaining flame that keeps you going. Over the past few years, whether for reasons of geography, or the day job, or lack of resources, or plain old diffidence, I have often felt that I've stood outside of the literary community, in the many ways it can be configured, looking in.

Winning the award felt like I could be on the inside of things; it was important in keeping that larger flame alive.

I've become more conscious of the sense that the ability to write creatively is a valuable facility, one that needs to be cultivated, and practised with regularity. I continue to write poems, as well as prose, to read widely, and to critique work. I've made progress with all of this in the past year: my first prose manuscript was shortlisted in Mslexia's 2019 Novella Competition, and my criticism has been published in *The Observer* and the *TLS*. I've also now had my first pamphlet of poems, *Animal Noises*, published by Green Bottle Press, among which are included those that won the Crawford Award, and some that were honed during my stay at the wonderful, otherworldly River Mill Writers retreat, in County Down, part of the Award's prize.

All of this feels like a definite shift, and is ballast for me, in terms of how I think about my creative practice. I have always written slowly, hesitantly, and although self-employment has given me more flexibility to concentrate on poetry, it also means that the bleed between work life and writing life can become ever more difficult to manage. When you feel like you're struggling to produce good work, or just any work at all, the memory and the knowledge that you've done it before, and can do it again, is quiet, but fierce fuel for your energies.

### **Submitting to competitions (and elsewhere) – some thoughts**

Submitting to prizes and competition takes time, headspace, and, more often than not, money. Many prizes are increasingly offering a limited number of reduced or free entries to writers on low incomes, which is encouraging, but the cost of submitting will still inevitably be a barrier to many people whose work deserves to be read.

So: it's important to know you're submitting work you really believe in, to a competition or prize that is significant for you. That might be because of its prestige, or what its prize offers—money (poetry and money don't go together often enough!), a writing retreat, mentoring, publication—or because you've admired the work of previous winners. It might be because you think winning, or being shortlisted, or being published, will help your work to be read by more people, and build an audience. It might represent a stepping stone to a larger goal—publication, readings, a place on a course or programme.

There might also be times when you just feel restless to get work off into the world, to tick another entry off your submissions spreadsheet (I'm not ashamed to admit I have one of these, in glorious, many-tabbed technicolour). But flinging a handful of less-considered poems into a few different submission windows is far less likely to pay off than choosing one or two things you

really want to enter, and working carefully on these as individual submissions. The judging of writing competitions is, it goes without saying, ultimately a subjective undertaking; you can't second-guess what sifters and judges will like, and rejection doesn't mean you haven't submitted a fine piece of work, for which you may well find recognition elsewhere. There are still pieces of homework worth doing with any submission, however: if it's a prize or award, reading about its history and ethos, and its judges (and their work), as well as the work of previous winners (winning poems and stories are often published on prize websites). This can also help you to work out whether this is something for you—some things you'll feel a sense of affinity with, other you won't, and those are the ones it's probably not worth your time submitting to.

Social media can be a good way to find out about opportunities, and about the work and activities of other writers, but I also sometimes find it can be a bit of despondent place; you can all too easily get trapped in a bit of an echo chamber that gives you an unrealistic view of a world where everyone is having marvellous successes and slapping each other on the back, while you're wondering how to elbow your way in. So, don't get too hung up on measuring what you're doing against what's happening online.

It's worth saying that there are many other ways, beyond submitting to prizes and to magazines, to have you work read, listened to, and valued. Be wary of putting too much emphasis on the one aspect: these things can be a valuable part of your writing life, but they shouldn't unbalance it. I spend so much more of my time reading, and writing—often straggled, half-formed things—staying very much within my own head, than I do trying to get those things out into the world, and I'm happy enough with that balance.

Work out what feels most comfortable for you; the precarious juggle of time for reading, writing, editing, submitting, waiting. If something feels off kilter, look again at that balance, and see what you might be able to tweak to refresh your practice, your confidence, and your sense of self as a writer. Possibly the most important thing to remember, and something I still struggle with, is that if you are diffident about your creative practice, everything is much harder. Being able to cultivate self-belief, being the number one advocate for your work, whether that's just to yourself, or to the wider world, is the most sustaining thing.