

# On the **write** path

The official charity of the 2016 London Book Fair is a writer-in-residence scheme in its infancy that hopes to spread its substantial impact further across more of the country's most deprived schools. **Roger Tagholm** reports



In the late Barry Hines' novel *Kes*—so memorably adapted for the big screen in 1969 by Ken Loach—there is a scene in which the young hero, Billy Casper, stands at the front of the class and talks with great excitement about the kestrel he is raising. Looking after the bird has clearly unlocked a wellspring of confidence, creative energy and passion in him, and he can barely contain his excitement as he talks.

It is that same unlocking of self-expression—in this instance through writing—that First Story (Stand 1A30), the London Book Fair's Charity of the Year 2016, seeks to achieve.

First Story has a rotating team of professional writers on its database who are paid to be writers-in-residence in state secondary schools. It runs weekly workshops for up to 21 students in which it encourages young people to use their own experiences in their writing in order to give them confidence, a platform for self-expression and a sense of the value and validation of their own lives and memories.

"Our programme is an opportunity for students to express themselves in a safe, nurturing environment, one in which they can experiment and play with words and find their

own voice," says First Story's interim executive director Emily Webb. "First Story encourages the use of concrete detail in writing, to root the students' poems and stories in specifics and make them even more evocative—both for the reader and the writer."

The focus is on schools in which more than 50% of pupils are considered "deprived" (according to the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index) and/or in which GCSE results fall in the lowest third of the national distribution. "We work closely with schools to target the

students that they identify as having the most need," adds Webb. "We ensure that we match the writer-in-residence with a school to best meet their needs and bring the specific expertise of each writer to the students that will most benefit from that expertise."

At the moment, the charity has 39 writers-in-residence, among them YA author Juno Dawson at Skinners' Academy in Hackney, London; performance poet Kate Fox at Feversham College, Bradford; and novelist Ross Raisin at Cranford Community College in Hounslow.

As well as those who join the scheme by invitation, individuals can apply to be First Story writers (they are asked to prepare a 90-minute creative writing lesson plan). The charity also hosts events and produces anthologies of students' work. "Our writers use a range of brilliant exercises to encourage students to engage in writing in this way and to create a space in which students feel safe to explore their own emotions and memories," says Webb.

"Juno Dawson asked her First Story group to write a thank you or a sorry letter to a loved one and in the readings of these letters there were tears from both students and teacher. One of

## FIRST STORY

Changing lives through writing



the most powerful aspects of First Story is that sense of equality, where teachers and students are all writing together and sharing their writing as equals."

### FINDING A VOICE

The charity was founded in 2008 by Katie Waldegrave (daughter of Conservative politician William, now Lord, Waldegrave) with William Fiennes, author of *The Snow Geese* and *The Music Room* (both Picador). She was Cranford Community College's head of history when Fiennes first began visiting her school and together they hatched the idea for the charity based on their weekly workshops.

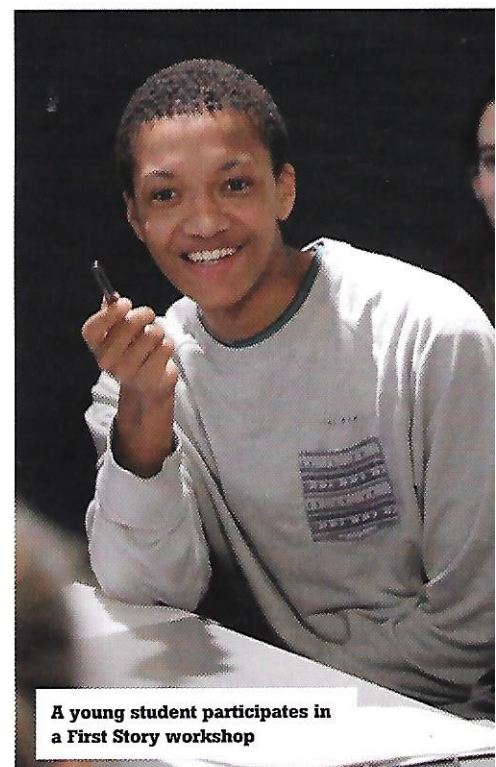
The hope now is to expand the charity with the help of a major Arts Council England grant. The funding will enable it to extend its programme of residencies in the north and to branch into the south-west, serving an additional 1,500 young people directly in these regions and a further 10,000 young people

through other national and regional First Story events and activities.

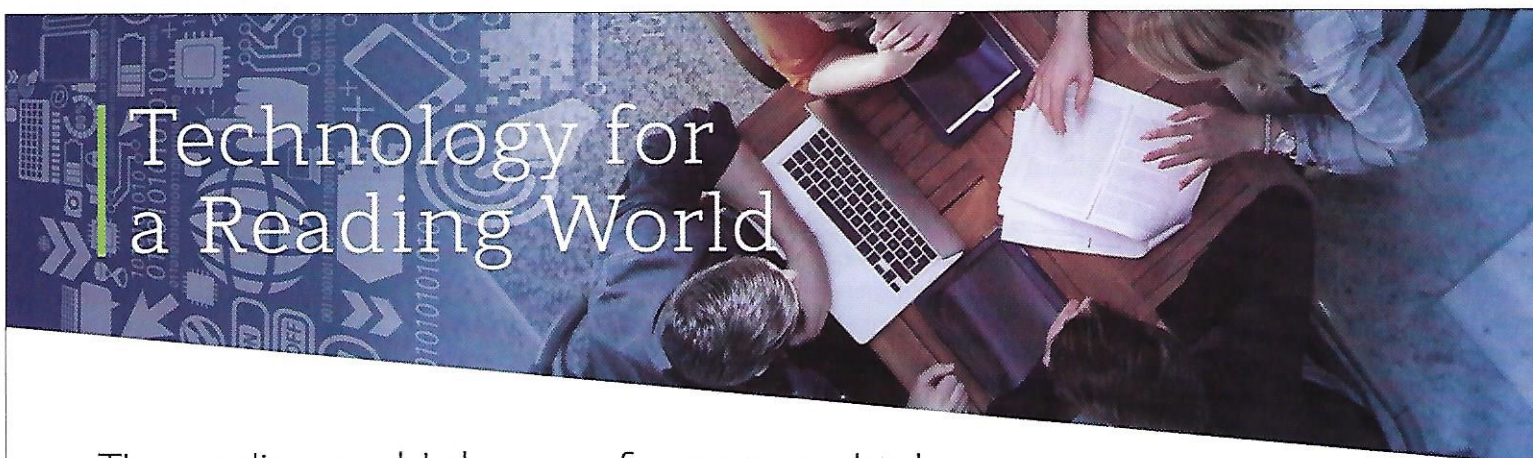
"We also plan to launch a national writing day," says Webb, "to encourage every school-age child to engage in creative writing and create a real buzz around writing and to amplify the awareness of creative writing on the national arts and education agenda. We're excited about the possibilities this day holds... at present, there is no day focused specifically on writing and we hope this will complement existing initiatives such as National Poetry Day and World Book Day."

The effect it has on some students is powerful. Eurica Mae Medina, a 15-year-old student, took a First Story course at Wembley High Technology College. She recited a poem about the experience at the charity's annual gala, it reads: "First Story is my confidence/The reflex of my hesitant arm rising/Desperate to share, to be heard... First Story is my silence breaking".

Children's author Roland Chambers will host the seminar **First Story: How You Can Change Your Life Through Writing** on Thursday 14th April, at 10 a.m., in the Children's Hub



A young student participates in a First Story workshop



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