

A thousand points of light

A talk given at Greenbelt 2008 by Simon Morden

Introduction

A story first, as to how this talk came about. Last Christmas, I was being asked by my parents the usual question as to what I wanted for a present. I normally reply 'book tokens' – because I like books, but that answer always makes my mum and dad groan. That time was different. I'd heard of a book by an American academic which had piqued my interest, so I said I'll have that please. I ended up ordering it off Amazon myself because it was both American and obscure, but that's what the internet is for.

The book is Diana Pavlac Glyer's *The Company They Keep*, a close and illuminating analysis of the writing group that CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien, amongst others, belonged to: the Inklings. It advanced the thesis that their membership of the Inklings was not incidental to their success, but that it played a pivotal role.

It occurred to me as I read my way through that if she was right, then there was something to be learned here. The way the Inklings worked together could be used as a template for a writers' community. So I proposed this talk to Greenbelt, sketched out what I wanted to say, and sent a draft copy to Doctor Glyer.

Her response was that I had fallen squarely into her trap – that her purpose, besides the love of academic investigation, was to encourage writers to form communities that could work together and be as productive as the Inklings. So I must admit at the outset, that a great many of the ideas I'm going to present today are not mine alone; certainly none of the good ones are. The blame for their interpretation and presentation remain entirely mine, however.

The Writer

There is a common stereotype of the lone author, writing feverishly at their desk, refusing all social interaction and creative criticism until their work is done. The reason for this stereotype is that it is mostly true.

I'm going to argue not just that it doesn't have to be this way, but hopefully will be able to persuade you that it is better – better for you the writer, better for other writers, better for those non-writers who you have a relationship with, and chiefly, better for the final piece of art – not to lock ourselves away, but to make use of the artistic community we have around us.

That I am calling it a community will give you some idea of the kind of relationship we need to have with our fellow artists: it is not that of some vampire, needily sucking the life out of others while growing stronger ourselves. A community – a proper, working artistic community – is one based on mutual interdependence, where all play a part in supporting and encouraging one another, and where the chief aim of that community is the actual production of art.

I'm going to take as a model – imperfect and incomplete as my understanding of it might be – the Inklings. Who were the Inklings? They were a group of writers, all men, academics for the greater part, and all friends or acquaintances of CS Lewis. For some seventeen years during the interwar and post-war periods, they met weekly in Lewis' rooms in Magdalen College, Oxford, and although nineteen men are usually included as being members, a typical meeting would see six or seven turn up.

The format of each meeting was the same: the Inklings would attempt to find somewhere to sit – Lewis' book collection having long since been taken over; Lewis' brother, Warren, would brew heroically strong tea; and with pipes lit, Lewis would say to the assembled group, "Well, has anybody got anything to read us?" Manuscripts would be produced, and read from. Any Inklings could interrupt at any point, and listening to drafts and offering feedback took up most of the meeting.

It was a meeting of working writers, not a social or debating circle. As Warren Lewis would later say:

"We were no mutual admiration society: praise for good work was unstinted, but censure for bad work – or even not-so-good work – was often brutally frank."

The Inklings produced a significant body of work with enduring appeal, but that both Narnia and Middle Earth were nurtured and flourished within the same four book-lined walls was no mere accident of history. The Inklings managed to provide an environment that was not just conducive to good art, but one which actively challenged its members to create it.

The object of this talk is to try and learn from the Inklings, to see how they managed to forge such an environment, and perhaps try and apply some of those lessons in our own writing lives. I hope, however, that I will be able to take you further, and inspire you to create your own communities, based on mutual respect, a care for the craft of writing, the determination to produce finished works, and an acknowledgement that there are few things finer than to be in the company of other writers.

So, how is a writers' community supposed to work? What is it that you're supposed to do, and what is it that you're supposed to get out of it? I'm going to try and explain what I believe to be the strengths – and the possible weaknesses – of a writing community in four headings.

These four headings are: support, opposition, editing, and collaboration. None of these areas should be taken in isolation, as they all overlap and interact in interesting ways.

Influence

Before we can consider how writers influence each other, we first have to address this question: does it actually happen? Does being in a community of writers influence a member's work? There has been a considerable amount of academic discussion on how much influence, if any, Inklings members had on each other. I don't intend to

open that particular can of worms at this moment: suffice to say, that despite their individual protestations on how pig-headed and blinkered they all were, I don't believe them. I'm not retrospectively calling them all a bunch of liars, just that writers are a generally curmudgeonly lot who never like being told they're wrong.

I don't think it's in question that they tried to influence each other, in both subtle and overt ways. They challenged each other to write, they encouraged each other to finish, they made comments and suggestions on how they would improve a script, they were forthright in their criticism. That they succeeded in influencing each other is shown in the letters and papers where they admit that their fellow Inklings made their work better – better as in more coherent, more readable, and more publishable.

There is a further question here, though. Should a writer be influenced by others? Does it dilute the writer's vision to have other voices intrude? Does it weaken the creative process to continually have suggestions and changes pressed on the writer as they are in the very act of creation?

Let's face it: writing is actually quite difficult. It requires the luxuries of time and space which are in short supply. It requires determination and talent, which are also in short supply. We don't need anything else that might discourage us from writing.

Learning writing is very much like learning any other artistic craft. You have to, at least mentally, serve an apprenticeship. Apprentices are both protected from the harsh realities of the marketplace, and nurtured in a caring environment where they can train and become competent at their craft. No one expects an apprentice to be able to create a masterpiece until they are trained – no one except the apprentice, of course, who will be continually frustrated by their lack of success. That the apprentice has to learn the techniques and skills that go with their craft will come only as a surprise to them.

If I'm labouring this point somewhat, I apologise. But I was there once. Only when I realised that I wanted to be in this infuriating, baffling, quixotic business for the long haul was I actually in the frame of mind to learn. And if wisdom is learning from the mistakes of others, be wise.

Decide now that you will always be a writer who will listen to others. I'm not suggesting that you should be at the mercy of every passing comment or criticism, but some writers have deemed themselves uneditable. Their manuscript must not be touched by another mortal hand. It has descended whole from the heavens and not a single word must be changed. I think they are making a grave mistake, as are the publishers and editors that allow this to happen. No one should be above taking advice. Certainly, none of us who call ourselves children of God should ever have such monstrous egos that we will not sit at the feet of our teachers and listen.

No. There will always be something to learn. It is an adventure. It is a journey, and at times you'll need a map and a compass, a chart or a guide. You can lose your way, and you might not be able to find the path again without help. Those best placed to help you are other writers and professionals.

To take another tack, if I were to ask you, "who are your influences?", I'm reasonably certain you will all be able to give me a list of writers, living and dead, whose work

you admire. It would indeed be a brave soul who said that they had none, that their writing was entirely uninfluenced by anything they had ever read.

So bearing that in mind, if you could gather together your literary heroes, what would you talk to them about? Would you be asking them how your favourite book came to be written? Would you be discussing the mechanics of publicity and marketing? Would you perhaps dare to suggest that you read some of your work aloud and listen to their feedback? Would you then incorporate that feedback into your work and determine to impress them more?

If our answers to these questions are “yes”, then there should be nothing stopping us from learning from other writers either. Nothing but our pride, at least.

I hope I have made the argument that writers both can and should be influenced by each other. I want to now break the nature of that influence down further so that we can see what a community of writers should be able to offer each other.

Support

The most basic function of a writing community is that it offers support to its members. Who else is going to understand the pain of rejection, the joy of acceptance, the black monolith of writers’ block, the urgency of writing when the words come faster than they can be written? Who else is going to encourage you in this monumental waste of time, but someone else who feels the same way you do?

Granted that this is hyperbole for rhetorical effect: there will be people around you who don’t write with whom you will be able to share the highs and lows of writing, and I’d consider it essential to have friends and family around you to stop you disappearing up your own arse. But your writing support network is not the same as your social support network, and it’s important not to confuse the two.

CS Lewis started off every meeting of the Inklings with: “Well, has nobody got anything to read us?” The chief business of the Inklings was writing, not socialising. That many of the Inklings were friends, shared the same faith, drank together, was something that grew out of being an Inklings, and not an end in itself. So, your writing community should also have writing as its chief business.

Support can come in many flavours: praise for good work is obvious, as is pressuring someone to persevere with an unfinished work. But what of challenging your colleagues to a contest, or suggesting a subject to write on? What of being accountable to them for deadlines and for writing prose that is accessible and not opaque? What about being someone who models the behaviour and habits of a successful writer others can learn from? What of providing practical support to another author, or promoting their work?

All of these models of behaviour were shown by the Inklings at various times. Their praise for each other’s work – where it was warranted – was unstinting. Charles Williams was particularly known for his enthusiastic praise, and others responded in kind.

Warren Lewis, CS Lewis' brother, never thought of writing until he became involved with the Inklings. He was able to say, late in his life:

“Since I began writing in 1953 my earnings come to a total of £9766-10. Not bad for a complete amateur who was over fifty eight when he turned author!”

CS Lewis all but demanded that Tolkien finish *The Lord of the Rings* at a time when he had completely stalled on the project. *The Lord of the Rings* was started in 1937: by 1942, due to a number of factors, including the conscription of Tolkien's sons, the story was faltering. By 1944, all work on “the new Hobbit” had ceased. Lewis' deliberate and sustained pressure persuaded Tolkien to start writing again. I for one, am very glad of that.

The story of how *The Lord of the Rings* finally came about is a subject worthy of a talk all by itself – one I am afraid I am ill-equipped to give. It is, however, an object lesson on how one writer can be helped by many.

Take, for example, the simple fact of reading each chapter aloud to the group. Being writers does not automatically confer us with good speaking voices. Tolkien was recognised by his students and his fellow Inklings as having a weak, indistinct delivery that was at sometimes unintelligible. His son, Christopher, often read to the group instead of his father.

Tolkien was immersed in the myths and languages of Middle Earth. What prevented *The Lord of the Rings* from being like the *Silmarillion*, was that its intended audience was not himself. One was read aloud to the Inklings, the other was a much more private, insular affair. For *The Lord of the Rings*, the Inklings insisted that Tolkien stick to the narrative, to make the reader the focus, and not the writer. Whenever Tolkien digressed into a philological aside, they instructed him to strike it out and get back to the plot. The first draft of *The Lord of the Rings* was some seven feet high (well over two metres in new money). It is due to the influence of Lewis and the other Inklings that the finished trilogy, while it stretched the printing technology of its time, was able to be published at all.

I need to say something here about the role that close family, especially spouses, partners, significant others – call them what you will – can play in supporting a writer. I freely, joyfully admit that I wouldn't get anywhere near as much writing done if it wasn't for the support my wife gives me. Thanks to her, I don't have to have a ‘proper job’, and I can concentrate a greater proportion of my time on writing. I don't have the financial pressure of earning a living at writing, which I still don't manage. I have someone who will read everything I write, will correct my bad spelling and dodgy grammar, will ask me whether what I have written was what I meant to say, and will tell me what she thinks.

She is not alone in her task. Charles Williams' wife had this to say:

“He had a habit of waking me at any hour of any night when he was writing a book. I would wake from sleep to hear him saying “What about

a cup of tea, darling, then I should like to read you what I have written this evening.”

Perhaps you might assume that she'd kick him into the middle of next week, but no:

“I loved those nocturnal readings and the ritual that went with them. Making tea and cutting wafer-like sandwiches to refresh my tired husband. Then the reading and discussion, and of course, more tea making. I spend a considerable time in making tea.”

I don't suggest that you try this at home. I would say, however, that without the support of your loved one, or at the very least, a benign indifference, you will find it very difficult if not nigh-on impossible, to write successfully.

Opposition

It may seem more than a little strange to suggest that opposition is a positive quality to be fostered within a writing group. It can indeed become destructive – it most likely destroyed the Inklings in the end – and you're going to have to take great care to make sure that it doesn't happen to you.

But if the only feedback you ever received was how wonderful your writing was, how would you ever learn to write better? Charles Williams said:

“No mind was so good that it did not need another mind to counter and equal it, and to save it from conceit and blindness and bigotry and folly.”

CS Lewis often spoke of “the Second Friend” for whom he had great enthusiasm:

“He has read all the right books but has got the wrong thing out of every one. It is as if he spoke your language but mispronounced it ... When you set out to correct his heresies, you find that he forsooth has decided to correct yours!”

Whatever our relative degree of success, or apparent lack of it, we all need to be challenged to do better. If our writing is unclear and ambiguous, we need to sharpen it, not assume the reader is an idiot. If it's pointed out to us that there is a plot hole the size of the Moon in our current work, we need to plug the gap, not hope that no one will notice. If a strong book is let down by a poor ending – my particular sin, I admit – then we have to damn well go back and do it again until we have it right.

If you are to be subject of robust criticism, then you must return the favour. You can allow yourself the luxury of being swept along by the narrative drive, but then you must go back and unpick the words carefully. Is this surprise turn of the plot justified, or is it ludicrous? Does this piece of dialogue do anything – does it advance the plot or show character? Be honest and forthright in your criticism, but never be vindictive. While it is all too easy to let our personal prejudices colour our opinions, we have to go back to our core value: that a community of writers is primarily concerned with writing, not socialising. You do not, on a basic level, even have to like everyone in

your writing group, though it's going to be much harder work for all of you. What is essential is that you must respect them enough to work with them and learn from them.

Tolkien disliked allegory with a passion. That he could never enjoy Lewis' Narnia books was a source of distress for him, but he, along with some other Inklings, was uncomfortable with any of Lewis' religious works. He felt that as Lewis was neither a theologian or a clergyman, he had no business writing popular apologetics.

When Lewis first showed Tolkien the first chapters of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Tolkien essentially trashed it. That it was allegory was bad enough, but worse still was Lewis' haphazard mashing of northern and Greek myth for which Tolkien had such high regard.

That Lewis subsequently read the same chapters to Roger Lancelyn Green, warning him that Tolkien had disliked it intensely, and asking "was it any good?", showed just how much regard Lewis had for Tolkien's opinion, and how hurt he was by the exchange. Green pronounced what he had heard "more than good", and the finished manuscript was ready by the end of the month.

The Lord of the Rings suffered considerable opposition too, chiefly from Hugo Dyson, who will ever be remembered as "the guy who didn't like *The Lord of the Rings*." So intense was his dislike that he – against the wishes of the rest of the group – attempted to veto its reading. Things eventually became so bad that Tolkien would not read if Dyson was present, or if he was in mid-reading and Dyson entered the room, he would stop. It is believed that by attacking the core value of the community, he fatally weakened its spirit. Within three years of Dyson beginning to exercise his veto, the group fell apart.

On the other hand, we can look at the genesis of Charles Williams' supernatural thriller, *All Hallows' Eve*, for the positive effects of opposition. He had completed the first three chapters of a story called *The Noises That Weren't There* and had shown them to his wife, Lewis and Tolkien. None of them liked it, and he put them aside, saying:

"three quarters of my mind is delighted that we are so at one about my discarded chapters; the other quarter is sad about the wasted work."

He started over a few weeks later on something very similar but vastly superior, called *All Hallows' Eve*. It was read to the Inklings, commented on and nurtured by the group. *All Hallows' Eve* is not just a testament to the positive effects of opposition, but a brilliant example of Morden's First Law of Writing – Nothing is ever wasted.

The Inklings were robust in their criticism, yet for the very great part managed to maintain their humour and compassion. If you are to criticise another's work, it would be well for you to do the same, and receive criticism in the same manner.

Editing

An editor is not working as an author. It is not their job to rewrite the text as they would have written it, but to suggest to the author changes that they might make. As I've mentioned earlier, the Inklings would often comment during a reading, and the reader would often incorporate their remarks in any subsequent revisions.

That many of these informal comments ended up as marks on the manuscript brings us to another important point about writers' groups. It is vital that the work submitted to the group for appraisal is open to substantial change and real revision. If it is 'finished', then reading it to the group serves little or no purpose. What's more, the group knows this – that any input they might give will be ignored, and there is no point in them being there. They will be demotivated and discouraged, and it will be the death of the group.

But what of the more formal editing process on a completed draft? Who amongst your colleagues would you trust to do that for you? To ask the same question a different way, who of you send a short story or a novel to a publisher without another living soul having seen it? I would respectfully suggest that it is not the best way to proceed.

The editing process ought to be an object lesson in humility. Your perfect prose is, in fact, riddled with simple errors of spelling and grammar. Your most exquisite passages are laughably overwritten. What you see as clear, your editor sees as opaque. What you see as a cunning plot twist carefully foreshadowed for ten previous chapters is either so obvious as to be signposted in letters a metre high or so preposterous as to be plucked from nowhere.

Simply put, the more hands you can put your manuscript in before it goes somewhere important, the better. There will be fewer spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. There will be an increase in the clarity of your writing that your first draft lacked. You will, perhaps for the first time, address not the concerns of the writer, but of the reader, regarding the quality of the plot and the believability of the characters.

Again, this is not to say that a manuscript should always stay in draft form, undergoing constant revision without ever being ready. Neither should you always accede to your editor's suggestions. What you should be able to do is defend the choices you made without being petulant, and be as professional as possible. It is possible that you see editing as something that happens after you're finished, but I believe it's a truism that only when you've written your first draft does the real work begin. Editing is hard work – both for the editor and the edited. What emerges at the end is better, and it is worth the struggle.

The instances of one Inklings editing the work of another are many. Tolkien on Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis on Tolkien's *The Lay of Leithian* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Owen Barfield on Lewis' *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* are just a few examples. That changes, major and minor, were made to the texts of all of these, is testament not only to the rightness of submitting to the editing process, but also to the acknowledgement of the authors that they rarely got it absolutely right first time.

Collaboration

The fourth way that writers can influence each other is by collaborating on projects together. Collaboration goes beyond encouragement, criticism or editing, though true collaboration will obviously include elements of all three.

The most obvious collaboration is joint authorship. The most obvious place for this to happen is in a collection of essays or an anthology of stories or poetry. The Inklings often contributed to collections, known colloquially as Festschriften, to mark some event or occasion. Most notable were the *Essays presented to Charles Williams*, begun to celebrate his return to London after the war, and finished to commemorate his untimely death and to raise money for his widow. When Tolkien was seventy, a festschrift was published by his friends, including four Inklings essays.

The work carried out jointly by JRR Tolkien and his son Christopher on the tales of Middle Earth has to be considered a collaboration, too. Christopher Tolkien was a full member of the Inklings after the Second World War – but his work with his father started before that: Tolkien used to send new chapters to him, on active service in South Africa, and wait for his comment. It was Christopher that devised the maps that Tolkien later relied on to iron out inconsistencies in the plot. He worked on making the *Silmarillion* a coherent whole.

Possibly the ultimate act of collaboration is the shared story, where two or more writers explore the same world, sparking off each others ideas' and generating something that is unique to that collaboration. CS Lewis and his brother did it as children, amalgamating their separate fantasy lands into a single world. Later on, after Lewis had completed all seven Narnia stories, he often urged his younger readers to write their own stories set in Narnia, to fill up the gaps in its history. I don't suggest you all rush off and do this now, though. I imagine the Lewis Estate might have something to say about it.

Do your own collaborations. Start small. See what happens. It doesn't matter if it doesn't work out the way you anticipated, because that's the whole point.

Conclusion

I want to conclude this talk with both encouragement and a challenge. The encouragement comes because we are all here. We have come together, in this tent and at this time, not for you, I'm certain, to see a heavily-built, unshaven, forty-something science fiction writer regale you with anecdotes about a bunch of dead Oxford dons, or on my part, to entertain you for an hour in the hope of flogging a few books. As delightful as that might be, what I hope is happening is that we've come to learn from each other, to explore the way we do art and how we might do it better.

The challenge is now to decide whether or not this way of working together I've described is for you. It was for the Inklings. In a surprising, twenty-first century way, it is increasingly for me, too. The opportunities we now have mean we can create communities that are no longer restricted by geography. Because we can belong to

online groups that transcend even national boundaries, we are no longer the only writer we know.

Subway is a mostly-online writers' group that was born here at Greenbelt, brought to life by some far-sighted people who saw the need for a collective of writers and poets who were happier identifying as 'writers who are Christians' than 'Christian writers'. That it has persisted shows that the need is a continuing one. I've benefited enormously from belonging. I've discovered that my work improves the more I allow other writers to see it and comment on it. I've discovered that their opinions are always worth listening to and they can be invaluable in critiquing early drafts of my stories. I can share my successes and failures with them. I can discuss technique with them. I can, as I have done with my new novel, *Equations of Life*, even arrive at a decent title with their help.

The whole purpose of me being here today is to show you what I have discovered: we don't have to work on our own anymore. We have our choice: together, or apart. I hope you will choose together.

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