

Andrew Motion talks to a pupil on his recent visit to George Green's School on the Isle of Dogs



## All you need is your inner self

*Emily Webb*, head of First Story, explains the organisation's work in schools with the RSL

FIRST STORY changes lives through writing. This is a bold statement, and we make it because that is what the young people we work with tell us time and again. Whether our programme of creative-writing workshops helps them to realise that they could go to university, or that they can write in a way they had never thought possible, or simply that they have a safe space in which they can truly express themselves – each student has their own story to tell, and we help them to find their voices and make those stories heard.

There's Mukahang Limbu, thirteen-year-old winner of our National Writing Competition, who writes of travelling from Nepal and landing in England for the first time while 'the sour tang of home still/sits on the tip of my tongue/like the zest of sweet citrus/fizzing'. And Samawado Farah, who dreams of her family: 'In the dream my mother said/"Do not end up like me."/I wake and touch my face, that is so much like her own.' And Eurica Mae Medina, describing the First Story workshops as 'Those therapeutic experiences,/That offered such inspiration./First Story is my silence breaking.'

Through our writing residencies in secondary schools serving low-income communities across the country, First Story

works with students like Mukahang, Samawado and Eurica to build their confidence and foster their creativity. Our writers-in-residence run weekly workshops across an academic year, which culminate in the publication of a professional anthology and a celebratory book launch of student readings at each school.

As part of this writing programme, First Story is hugely honoured to work with the Royal Society of Literature. RSL Fellows deliver talks and workshops in First Story schools, speaking about their own lives and experiences, giving students an insight into what it means to be a successful writer and inspiring the young people to pursue their own passions and dreams.

First Story and the RSL have worked closely together for the last four years to raise the profile of writing in state schools whose pupils do not have access to the same cultural opportunities as their more privileged contemporaries. From the first visit in 2012, at which Sebastian Faulks spoke to a captivated room of sixteen-year-olds at Mulberry School for Girls in Whitechapel, the RSL has enabled over 30 of the most disadvantaged schools in the country to hear first-hand from distinguished Fellows. In the past academic year alone, Sir Andrew Motion, Sir Tom Stoppard, Sebastian Faulks, Kamila Shamsie, Melvyn Bragg, Stephen Kelman, Adèle Geras, Blake Morrison, Sara Wheeler, Colin Thubron, Imtiaz Dharker and Kevin Crossley-Holland have all visited First Story schools.

The value of these visits lies not only in the unique opportunity for First Story students to interact with some of the most celebrated writers of our generation, but in the self-esteem and aspiration such an experience inspires. The students meet writers who have excelled in their fields, who act as role models and who give these young people the confidence and validation to explore their own interests, whether those lie in writing or in other areas. Within the context of the wider First Story programme, the RSL visits complement and enhance the regular writing workshops and give a new platform to creative writing throughout each school.

When Sir Tom Stoppard visited King Solomon Academy in Marylebone in October, he spoke of his life's work, of his journey from being a Czechoslovakian refugee to being knighted. He gave the packed school hall of fourteen-to-seventeen-year-olds a deeper understanding of what it means to forge one's own future. In his words, 'All you need, to be able to write, is your inner self.' First Story encourages every student we work with to explore their inner self, to perceive its value and to express it in their own, inimitable words – and through our work with the RSL, we are enabling more young people than ever to do just that. ○