

Don't write them off

Authors are teaming up with disadvantaged pupils to help them find a voice

By Irena Barker

A FORMER Teach First teacher has launched a ground-breaking creative writing scheme that twins acclaimed authors with teenagers in challenging schools.

First Story, a writers-in-residence project, aims to give opportunities to GCSE and A-level pupils whose creative writing may have fallen by the wayside because of exam preparation.

Pupils will enjoy fortnightly creative writing workshops with the authors, talk about their work and have their stories, poems and plays published in small anthologies.

The project is open to schools with 30 per cent or more pupils on free school meals and/or less than 25 per cent gaining five A*-C grades at GCSE.

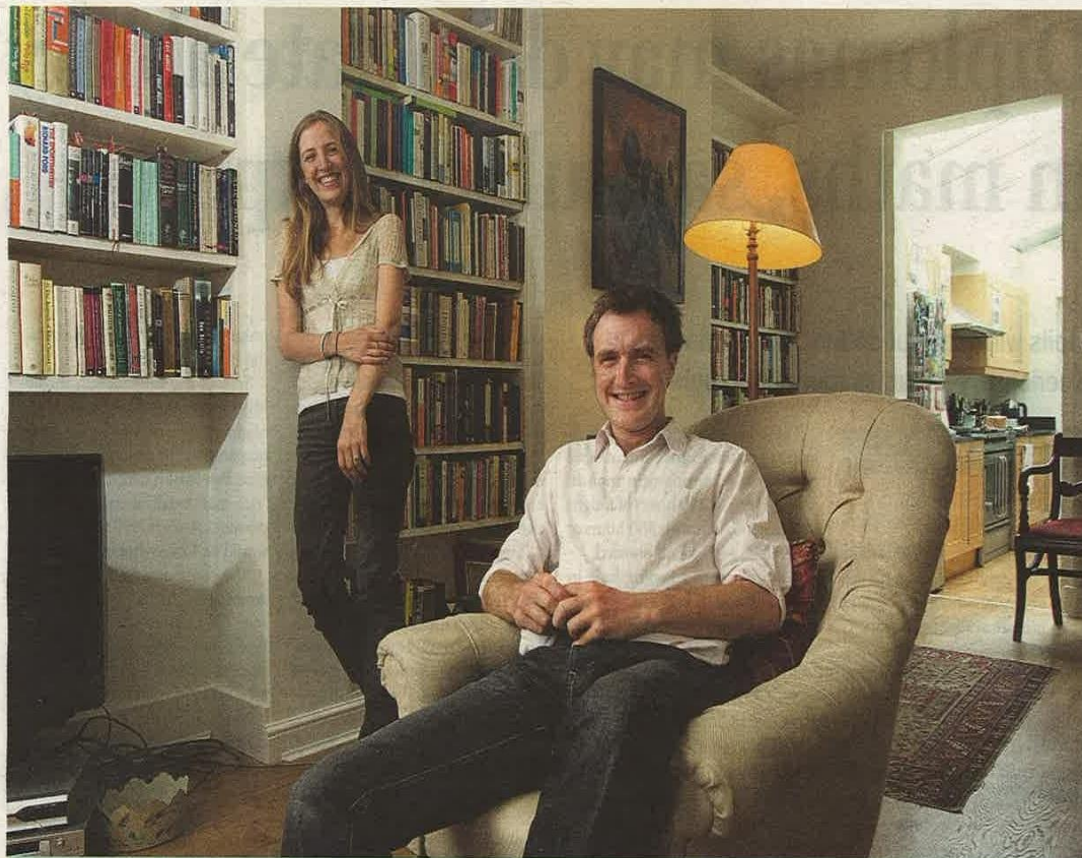
It has already won the backing of bestselling authors Philip Pullman, Mark Haddon and Zadie Smith. And Katie Waldegrave, executive director of the project and daughter of William Waldegrave, the former Conservative cabinet minister, has persuaded key media and political figures, such as broadcaster Jonathan Dimbleby, to join the advisory board.

Along with co-founder William Fiennes, author of *The Snow Geese*, she has already run a successful year-long pilot of the project at Cranford Community College in Hounslow, where she taught history for five years.

"I was being paid to do a similar thing at The American School in St John's Wood, where you would go in and pupils would be debating which of Cormac McCarthy's novels was the most successful," said Mr Fiennes.

"At Cranford, I was worried no one would show up, but they did and it was amazing. I was only supposed to come in every fortnight, but I found myself missing the children and came in every week.

"At first the pupils' pieces had



Katie Waldegrave, former teacher, and author William Fiennes are the brains behind the creative writing scheme.

Photograph: Neil Turner

glimmers of talent, but they were all genre works – basically, either *The Da Vinci Code* or *Harry Potter*.

"But I tried to encourage them to see that their own lives were interesting. They started to write with their own voices, and you could see their confidence and self-esteem grow."

Initially, eight London schools will benefit from the project, starting in September. But it is hoped it will expand as interest grows from schools and authors, who will be paid a grant of £4,000 per year.

Miss Waldegrave, who admits shamelessly using her contacts to launch the scheme, said: "We want it to be sustainable, and hope that teenagers who have benefited will mentor younger pupils and eventually help them change the whole culture in their school."

As well as her work on First Story, she is writing a biography of Dora Wordsworth and Sara Coleridge, daughters of the poets.

All 120 participants in next year's programme have been invited to the 2009 Hay festival, where some will be encouraged to read out their work alongside leading authors. Sixteen students will also be sent on an Arvon creative writing course.

The charity has received substantial backing from Old Possum's Practical Trust, TS Eliot's estate.

● The project's website goes live later this month at www.firststory.co.uk

Writers in residence

Kamila Shamsie
Peter Hobbs
Romesh Gunasekera
Frances Wilson
Helen Simpson
Louisa Young
Aminatta Forna
William Fiennes