

## HIGHLANDLIT AGM: CHAIR'S REPORT

2019 has been another successful year for HighlandLIT: we continue to offer a wide variety of events for HL members and the public and hosted an outstanding Writer's Holiday over the summer. Once again, we look forward to building on these achievements in 2020, which promises to be a productive and exciting year.

Author events and workshops have been varied, rich and genuinely inspiring and I would like to acknowledge the generosity and professionalism of all of our speakers, including Helen Sedgwick, Kenneth Steven, Fiona Rintoul, Hafida Latte, Barbara Henderson, Mandy Haggith, Merryn Glover and Vee Walker. Our regular open mic evenings have also been very popular and are attracting new voices as well as top-notch contributions from regulars. The Christmas dinner and ghost-themed open mic session brought the year to a successful conclusion. For all our events, we continue to hold a sound relationship with the Glen Mhor and Waterside who provide our venues.

The highlight of this year for many members of HighlandLIT (both old and new) was the residential writer's retreat, which was held in July at the Old Brewery in Cromarty. The event was hosted by the environmentally committed poet, Helen Moore, and was entitled *Writing the Land: Writing the Sea*. We couldn't have hoped for a more inspiring few days or a more capable tutor and facilitator. Sessions drew upon a wide variety of writings (imaginative, philosophical and political) while also taking advantage of the surrounding countryside as a means of triggering writing that drew upon geology, local culture, history, personal time and deep time. Many of us left the sessions feeling encouraged and revitalised.

Membership and attendance for events is currently stable and healthy and we continue to draw a wide-ranging and inclusive range of people interested in books and writing. We also continue to hold a firm presence on social media: we have a web-site ([www.highlandlit.com](http://www.highlandlit.com)) and very active Twitter and Facebook accounts (currently, we have 1,215 followers on Twitter and 412 are signed up on our Facebook group). In the New Year, we hope to build links with the University of the Highland and Islands (especially for those on the Creative Writing, Literature and Drama programmes) and are planning a joint open mic event (to be held in March).

The Sunday Book Club at Waterstones also continues apace and we have a number of dedicated attendees. Over the year, we have had a number of fruitful discussions and an eclectic mix of authors (from Stephen Hawking's speculations on the origins/ ends of the universe to Junichiro Tanizaki's novel about a love triangle plus cat).

Finances remain healthy. That said, we did make a loss on the residential writing course and have not been as successful in fundraising this year, such that we are closing the financial year with a deficit. These factors make it all the more important for us to locate additional sources of funding in the year ahead and to elect a committed funding Co-ordinator.

Two of our committee members will be altering their roles this year. Drew Hillier, our programme co-ordinator, will be standing down from his full role within the committee, although he has kindly agreed to continue helping with publicity and mentor the new co-ordinator (to be elected in January). It is worth noting that Drew has provided a vast amount of work and commitment in ensuring the success of HighlandLIT over the last three years. As well as inviting speakers and co-ordinating a lively and varied programme, Drew has provided artwork and illustrations for posters, has shared his broad skills in editing and publishing and has been invaluable as an advisor. Jayne Austin, our secretary, is also going to stand down from her full role but will put herself forward for the election of Secretary on a job share basis for one more year. Jayne has also put a huge amount of work into publicising HighlandLIT evenings, liaising with writers and exploring fundraising opportunities. She is also the creator of some rather delightful origami bookmarks and book holders, which are currently on sale at our events. I would like to thank both Drew and Jayne for their outstanding contributions.

It is, additionally, a delight to mention that Malcolm Timperley and Cathy Carr are going to stand for election at the committee AGM in January.

In the year ahead (first of a new decade), we have some unmissable author events lined up in the calendar plus further writing workshops and open mic sessions. I do look forward to these and to the invaluable and continued support of all our members.