

Salon proving to be just the write stuff

LITERARY salons have a long and venerable tradition.

It was at one such gathering in Enlightenment-era Edinburgh that a young Walter Scott, according to legend, met his fellow giant of Scottish literature Robert Burns.

The modern day Highland Literary Salon, held monthly in Inverness, cannot promise literary lions of quite that calibre.

What it does offer is the chance for published and aspiring authors to get together for support and inspiration.

The salon has its origins in a creative writing class held at Eden Court Theatre.

"We all wanted to stay in touch afterwards," co-founder Kristin Pedroja explained.

"I had been involved in literary salons when I lived in Prague, Seattle and San Francisco and I saw how one could work here."

Thanks to funding from the Highland ARTs Programme's literature grants scheme, the Highland Literary Salon, which meets on the third Tuesday of each month at the Glen Mhor Hotel in Inverness, has been able to attract some visitors from further afield, as well as more local guests.

They include not just authors such as Cynthia Rogerson, Angus Dunn or Keith Gray but others involved in the business of writing such as Sharon Blackie, from Highland publisher Two Ravens Press, and successful Edinburgh literary agent Jenny Brown.

Pedroja, who is originally from Wichita, Kansas, acknowledged the salon was geared towards writers rather than readers.

"We have had some people who just dabble in writing but I don't think it's for people who are just into reading," she said.

The salon has already resulted in the creation of two spin-off creative writing groups and several members — some of whom come from as far as Skye and Wick — to attend meetings, have submitted work to the HI-ARTs Work in Progress mentoring scheme or even been published.

"I've actually been delighted with the way things have come out," Pedroja said.

"We have all sorts of ages taking part. We have a couple of women in their 60s and 70s who have begun to write novels

because they have started coming to the group. It's quite inspiring.

"We have also got a really good mix of men and women. Salons can be quite female heavy, but half our steering committee are men. There are two or three male writers on the Black Isle who have just moved up to the area and a tutor from the college.

"Some people are working on fiction, some are interested in poetry and some in putting together short story collections.

"I'm trying to keep it as open as possible. There are some people who have been published, so we have writers at different stages of their writing careers."

Pedroja, who describes herself as attempting to write a novel, revealed the salon was about more than just talking about writing. Thanks to demand, workshops are a regular feature of the monthly meetings.

"The workshops tend to be for the more serious writers who are thinking about publication," Pedroja added.

The Highland Literary Salon's 2011 programme continues tonight with a visit from award-nominated Edinburgh author Sara Sheridan, who writes for both adults and young people and has recently published "Secret of The Sands", a historical novel based on the true story of 19th century explorer James Wellsted.

She has also ghost-written the bestselling autobiography of Inverness charity worker Judy Westwater.

Before the talk at 7pm, she will also be hosting a workshop starting at 6pm on story construction and development, though like most workshops this is likely to be oversubscribed.

The salon's next guest, on Tuesday 22nd March, is crime writer Lin Anderson, who has a home in Carrbridge.

After that the salon's future is slightly less certain. "Our Highland ARTs funding runs out on 31st March, so beyond that we are not sure," Pedroja said.

"If we don't have funding things will probably change a lot because it is expensive to bring authors up here, but we will continue in some form."

For more information on the Highland Literary Salon, see www.highlandlitsalon.com

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