

Grants for the Arts Case Study

Writer in Residence at The Booth Museum



Image courtesy of Mick Jackson

AMA Associate Editor, Sara Lock, interviews
Writer in Residence, Mick Jackson



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Case Study Introduction

What will I learn and is it relevant to me?

Themes...

- Creative writing
- Museums
- Audience development

Learning...

- Developing new audiences for museums
- Working as an artist in residence
- Engaging a local community

Relevance...

This case study is relevant to:

- Museums keen to develop new audiences
- Artists looking to develop residencies
- Grants for the Arts applicants who want to find out more about funded projects

Mick Jackson is an award-winning novelist and screenwriter. In recent years, he has set up writing residencies at the Science Museum and the Booth Museum of Natural History in Brighton.

Background

Introducing writer in residence, Mick Jackson

Introducing Mick Jackson

Mick Jackson is an award-winning novelist and screenwriter. His latest book *Yuki Chan in Bronte Country* was published by Faber and Faber in January 2016.

Mick studied drama at Dartington College of Arts and attended the Creative Writing MA course at the University of East Anglia between 1991 and 1992.

His first novel, *The Underground Man*, was written in Cambridge and London while Jackson worked part-time as a special needs assistant. It was originally published by Picador in 1997 and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, the Whitbread First Novel Award and won the Royal Society of Authors' First Novel Award.

He has since written three more novels, a novella, a collection of stories and an e-book, all published by Faber and Faber.

He has written and directed prize-winning short films and directed a documentary for BBC2. His feature-length script, *Roman Road*, was produced by Zenith and broadcast on ITV in 2004.

In recent years, Mick has set up writing residencies at the Science Museum, London, and the Booth Museum of Natural History in Brighton.

Writing Residencies

Mick was the writer in residence at The Science Museum in London between 2011 and 2012. He ran weekly one-to-one writing surgeries for the museum's staff, carried out his own research and contributed to in-house publications. The results of that residency contributed to his latest novel, *Yuki Chan in Bronte Country*.

He knew he wanted to do another residency. Prompted by the advice of Arts Council England and an interest in mortality and the Victorian Gothic period, he approached The Booth Museum.

The Booth Museum

The Booth Museum was founded in Brighton in 1874 by naturalist and collector Edward Thomas Booth.

During his lifetime Booth set himself the challenge of collecting, stuffing and displaying every British bird. His collection is unique, not least because it was the first to present the birds in dioramas recreating their natural habitat. It was this collection of over 300 cases that launched the opening of the museum.

In 1971 the Booth became a Museum of Natural History. The museum retains its unique charm of the quirky and eccentric with its focus on taxidermy and fossils, bones and skeletons.

Writer in residence

Engaging new audiences at The Booth Museum

The project

The project was a writer's residency running from September 2014 to September 2015. During the residency Mick ran creative writing workshops in the museum, using some of its rarely-seen artifacts.

He also carried out his own research and plans to write a series of short fictions in response to the collection.

Project aims

- To bring in people that wouldn't normally visit a natural history museum
- To create work that would benefit Mick's writing and the museum
- To get people to see and respond to obscure objects from the stores that wouldn't usually be seen

Target audience

- People who wouldn't normally attend a natural history museum
- Vulnerable adults
- Children in care

The process

Following the success of his residency at The Science Museum in London, Mick was keen to do another residency. He contacted his local Arts Council England office for advice and they suggested a number of museums that would be worth approaching, including Booth.

Mick had previously written a short story inspired by the Booth Museum and its Victorian collection so that felt like a good fit.

Mick contacted the museum and pitched the idea of being a writer in residence. He would bring new audiences into the museum in return for access to the archives and stores for his own research.

The Booth Museum was very positive about the idea and wrote a letter of support to accompany Mick's Grants for the Arts application.

Mick spent the first few months of the residency looking around the archives and getting to know the stores and the people at the museum.

He also contacted community groups, schools and universities to set up workshops and bring new groups into the museum. Some, such as a creative writing group from the University of Chichester, were groups he'd taught before. Others were contacts of Brighton Pavilion and Museums or the results of online searches to find organisations that already worked with the kinds of audiences he wanted to bring into the museum.

Mick arranged the workshops with trip organisers and adapted the content to meet the needs of that group. Although they were creative writing workshops, the main intention was for people to see and respond to obscure objects that they wouldn't normally have access to.

Throughout the residency Mick researched for his own writing, gathering objects that would tell stories. He also issued an open invitation through social media for writers and creatives to contact him and be taken on a personal tour of the museum.

Cost

The project cost £17,200, of which Grants for the Arts contributed £13,900.

Mick contributed to the project himself because he knew his writing would benefit from the research. There was also a small amount of revenue from talks and events throughout the year.

Results and Recommendations

Changing the world one piece at a time

The results

- 150 people participated in workshops
- 400 people attended events
- 18 members of staff took part in writing surgeries
- 10 artists and creatives were taken on a personal tour

Benefits to the writer in residence

It's hard as a writer to buy the time to do research. There were items Mick needed to research and he has been able to do that at the Booth Museum. The residency has provided valuable time for research and reflection.

The residency has given Mick the opportunity to curate objects that tell a story. In an extension of the project, the museum is providing him with a small space to display the artifacts he has been working with.

By teaching a wide variety of groups, Mick feels he has become a better teacher and is now more aware of his own writing process.

Benefits to the Booth Museum

The project has brought new audiences into the Booth Museum and uncovered interesting artifacts from the stores.

Mick's research has uncovered stories of artifacts that the museum had little information about.

The different audiences, artifacts and approach have

also perhaps contributed to the museum opening up its Mezzanine level as more of a public space. Booth now offers tours, which give access to the stores that were previously closed to the public.

Mick's recommendations

- Before you begin a project, talk to your local Arts Council office and ask for advice - it will help you build a stronger application and find the right people to work with
- Once you've found the right organisation to work with, talk to people there and develop support - the Director of Brighton Museums wrote a letter of support to accompany my application
- Ask friends or colleagues for advice and support with your application
- Research the audiences you want to attract and contact groups or organisations that already work with those audiences
- Follow up emails with phone calls and meetings to talk to people about what you're doing and how it fits with their needs or interests
- Build in plenty of time to prepare for full day workshops
- Be flexible in the content of workshops to meet the needs of participants

Find out more

<http://www.mickjackson.com/residencies/>

<http://brightonmuseums.org.uk/discover/category/blogger-in-residence-2/mick-jackson/>

<http://brightonmuseums.org.uk/booth/>