

My Koestler Story: Jason

I didn't think I'd win anything, but the Koestler Awards lit a spark in me.

When a teacher in a prison education department suggested I enter the Koestler Awards, I entered with the mind-set of 'people like me never win anything.' Being dyslexic and raised by a single parent below the margin, I had no confidence in my ability to write anything. However, I entered and later received both a commendation certificate and cheque. Ambivalently, I half believed I was 'just lucky', but inside a spark had been ignited.

The following year, when I achieved another award, that initial spark was fanned into an inferno and I began taking writing seriously. I borrowed the Writers' Year Book from the prison library and set about sending different forms of writing to organisations in the post. From then on, writing inside prison became both a coping mechanism and a way of moving forward.

While learning to grasp nuances of the craft of writing, my understanding of written English also grew and enabled me to gain diplomas in business, counselling, mechanics and IT, among other qualifications and skills which I utilise today.

In 2010, after writing a novel while mentoring in HMP Birmingham's education department, I won a Platinum Award, and an extract of my novel was included in Koestler's Arrow in The Blue exhibition at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

In 2013, when I received another Platinum for my poem To Score, which was read at Southbank Centre, I danced around my prison cell.

You can imagine my joy at achieving Platinum and Gold Koestler Awards in 2018 and then being invited to read at the London Literature Festival at Southbank Centre for Koestler's Voices from Prison event. Reading my work there allowed me to see how far I have come and appreciate just how valuable the arts can be within people's lives. It also marked firmly closing a door on my past and the beginning of a walk into the future.

After finishing a prison license I started working as a Community Support Worker for the Probation Service, using my experiences to help others move forward and grow in confidence by sharing my journey and demonstrating the power of the arts to spark change.