

DRUNK CHICKENS IN BOOK BATTLE

007, a Bond girl and a celebrity foodie may offer some stiff competition but writer Mary Smith hopes the region's readers will get behind her book which is in the running for a prestigious national prize. **Carol Hogarth** reports



Mary Smith's *Drunk Chickens and Burnt Macaroni: Real Stories of Afghan Women* has been selected for the non-fiction category of the People's Book Prize, the winner of which is chosen entirely by public votes. Also in the running are Roger Moore's *Bond on Bond*, Fiona Fullerton's *Dear Fiona* and *Life on a Plate* by Masterchef presenter Gregg Wallace.

"I'm absolutely delighted; chuffed to bits, that my book has been selected," says Mary, who is also a poet, freelance journalist and former staff writer for *Dumfries & Galloway Life*.

"I'm not thinking it will get much further but I just have to wait and see and hope people will vote for it."

Drunk Chickens, entered into the contest by Mary's publisher Indigo Dreams, offers an insight in the real lives of the women Mary met while working in Afghanistan, where she set up a programme for women and children and trained groups of health volunteers: "I quickly realised

how guilty I was of swallowing all the stereotypes about Afghan women being shadowy figures, behind the veil. It was fantastic working with these women in rural areas who had not been educated but who were so bright.

"Yes, there was a war going on and horrible things happened, there was poverty and lack of health resources, but these women just got on with life."

Scottish novelist Margaret Elphinstone said Mary's book "gets behind the news bulletins and shows what it is really like to be a woman in Afghanistan".

Since leaving the staff of *Dumfries & Galloway Life* in December 2010, to concentrate on her own writing projects, Mary has had her first poetry collection, *Thousands Pass Here Every Day*, published; she has been to Slovakia on a learning journey to explore the country's biosphere reserves; she has been working on a prize-winning collaborative writing and art project, *This Galloway*, with Laurieston photographer Phil

McMenemy; has been asked to collaborate with fine art photographers Ted Leeming and Morag Paterson on a poetry project about Galloway Forest Park; is currently reading at public performances of *Red Rose, White Rose*, a dialogue by Powfoot writer Vivien Jones about King James IV's women; and is working on what she hopes will be her next book: a biography of pioneering engineer Dorothee Pullinger. All this while still freelancing for *Dumfries & Galloway Life*.

"I have been involved with the magazine from its very first issue, so it has a very special place in my heart," she says. D&G

■ You can vote for Mary's book, *Drunk Chickens and Burnt Macaroni*, at www.peoplesbookprize.com before the deadline of February 28.

■ *Red Rose, White Rose* is running at the Theatre Royal, Dumfries in the Hopkins Room, on Saturday, January 26 at 4pm as part of the Big Burns Supper festival programme, after which it will tour nationally.