

Writing Groups Bring Out the Book in People

By Chris Lavin



Gloria Lenhart critiques a chapter from Jack Champlin's maritime novel at their regular writers' group at the Lafayette Library. Photo Chris Lavin

Writing can be a lonely exercise. Pour a cup of coffee, pull out the keyboard, and wait for inspiration to strike. But it doesn't have to be.

"Writing can be very social," said Raelene Van Horn, who for more than a year has run two groups at the Lafayette Library that focus on children's books. "It can be fun."

Throughout the area, writers are meeting regularly over coffee or elsewhere – at least six groups meet regularly at the Lafayette Library in space provided by Friends of the Library – to review each others' work, and to make suggestions and provide encouragement. Some groups focus on adult fiction or non-fiction, others on genres such as young adult.

"When you meet someone face-to-face every month or every week, you are dedicated to writing," Van Horn said. It provides writers with deadlines that aren't self-imposed, and keeps writers writing. "And you become a better writer from critiquing other people's work."

Here's how they work: Six or fewer writers agree to meet at a regular time at a regular place. Meeting rooms at a library work, or a coffee shop. Group leaders agree that having more than six writers doesn't work; one meeting wouldn't provide enough time for meaningful critiques.

"We have three or four core people," Van Horn said. "Other writers have come and gone. We had one person who came and was amazed at how much time the writers put in to critiquing her work – she couldn't believe it. She wasn't up to putting the time in."

A few days before the meet-up –

the group leader decides the deadline – writers with new or revised work either email their submissions to the entire group, or use a service on the cloud, such as Dropbox or Google Docs, to submit to their peers. Usually the submission is limited to 10 double-spaced pages. Group members mark up the work, and the writers take them home after the critique.

"There isn't time to go through more than 60 pages per meeting," said Gloria Lenhart of Lafayette, who has been leading writing groups for years. Lenhart is the author of "Planet Widow" (Seal Press 2006). Now she is writing a historical novel set at the turn of the century in San Francisco, and also recently completed a successful Kickstarter campaign to publish a series of guidebooks that focus on San Francisco's most famous neighborhoods. Her writer's groups have critiqued them both.

"My writing wouldn't exist unless I had my writing groups," Lenhart said. "Reading other people's work and hearing what other people think makes an enormous difference. Sometimes I find that I miss something major, or the suggestions I get make it so much better. But you don't have to use the suggestions, either. It's always good to hear whether what you're working on is working or not."

"Sometimes it takes me longer to make revisions than it did to write the darn thing in the first place," said Jack Champlin of Lafayette, who has attended one of Lenhart's groups for more than a year. Champlin also is writing a historical novel, a maritime tale laced with black magic. "I find if I don't make the changes right away, I lose a lot of it."

Lenhart is quick to point out that writing groups aren't for everyone.

"We've had people come once and not come back," she said. "Sometimes it's too much for them. You have to have a thick skin. I think we do a really good job of being kind with our critiques – no one is going to say, 'This is a piece of crap!' But some people have a hard time taking any criticism at all."

Conversely, sometimes the group doesn't fit with a new writer.

"There's definitely a dynamic to a writer's group," Lenhart said. "What we try to do now if we have an opening is let the writer know there's a tryout period. I'll tell them, 'Let's meet a few times, see how you like it, and we'll decide whether it's going to be a good fit for us, too.' It can be hard to tell someone they're not quite the fit we're looking for. But people have to be willing to hear that. There's nothing more frustrating than making the same suggestion over and over again, and the writer keeps submitting the same piece with nothing changed. That just doesn't work."

And people in Lafayette's groups are getting published. Aline Soules wrote "Meditation on Woman" (Anaphor Literary Press 2011), and Corina Vacco's young adult novel, "My Chemical Mountain" (Random House 2013) was hatched in a Lafayette group.

To inquire about writing groups for adult fiction and non-fiction, or young adult, you may email Lenhart to get on a waiting list for one of her groups at glorialenhardt@comcast.net. The same goes for children's books and picture books with Van Horn, who can be reached at rdvanhorn@yahoo.com.

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