

Working with Words: Advice to Teens on Careers in Writing

By Jennifer Wake



Authors Elizabeth Koehler-Pentacoff and Sarah Wilson discuss comedy writing tips at the Young Writers Workshop at the Hungry Hunter in Lafayette

Photo Jennifer Wake

They say the best jobs incorporate something you love to do. For young writers (or those just young at heart), a career working with words could be the right fit. But how do you get started? And how do you build the tools you need to succeed?

As a child growing up in Orinda, author Jessica Barksdale Inclan was a voracious reader, and thought there was nothing more amazing than a book. “Books were magic – books were art, escape, and imagination. So I wanted to write one,” she said. “Of course, I had no idea how to, so I started spinning short little tales, quite horribly, when I was about 12 and then as I grew older, wrote when I should have been doing other things (like algebra, in algebra class).”

She tried taking a writing course at the local community center, but since she was the only young student in a class of adults, she was intimidated. “I felt exposed and stupid, so I quit.”

But she didn’t quit writing. In 2001, Inclan published her debut novel, “Her Daughter’s Eyes,” and has since published nine books, as well as many short stories and poems.

She also teaches writing courses at Diablo Valley College and for the UCLA Extension.

Inclan believes taking extra curricular courses offered at a community college, or workshops offered through local writing groups, can be a great way to learn the rules of writing in different genres.

Several organizations throughout Lamorinda sponsor writing workshops and contests each year, offering teens a chance to submit poetry, essays, and short stories for review.

Last weekend, 6th, 7th, and 8th graders from throughout Contra Costa County honed their writing skills at a comedy writing workshop sponsored by the California Writers Club, Mt. Diablo Branch. During the 3-hour workshop, students learned tips from local authors and participated in writing exercises.

This spring, the Orinda Junior Women’s Club (OJWC) will sponsor its annual creative writing contest, Youth Ink, for Orinda middle school students and the Mt. Diablo Branch of the California Writers Club will sponsor their Young Writers Contest where Contra Costa County 6th, 7th and 8th grade students can submit po-

etry, essays and short stories.

“We believe when adolescents have a healthy outlet, such as the arts, and receive recognition and validation for their talents, they are more likely to build positive self esteem and make healthy and constructive choices in their lives,” said Maureen Brown, president of OJWC.

One of the rules of the Young Writers Contest is even if you don’t win, you need to keep writing.

Inclan agrees. “What would I say to myself at 17, to that young woman sitting in the community center class filled with adults who seemed to know what they were talking about? First, just write. Write all the time,” she said. “Don’t feel unnerved going to a community center or a community college, where high school students can enroll concurrently. A beginning writer is a beginning writer, no matter how old. Find a friend who likes to write and have a one-on-one writing workshop. Invite others who are so inclined. Talk to your favorite English teacher—maybe that teacher will agree to read your work (but don’t ask during finals week. Not a good time). Sign up for a summer writing intensive at a local

university.”

It is important to find a good teacher. “You need to learn the rules about whatever it is you are writing,” Inclan said. “Stories, poetry, screenplays, plays, essays have rules, conventions, structures. You need to learn these. You can be as experimental as you want, but if no one gets it and you actually do want to communicate to the world through your work, you have to—again—make it available to readers.”

A recent U.S. News & World Report article listed editor and ghostwriter as two of 35 “Best Jobs for 2008.” People with these jobs not only need to write well, and quickly, but must have the grace to accept criticism and move forward.

Creating some distance between you and your work is an important component to any job involving writing. “Don’t take personally what people say about your dialogue or imagery,” Inclan said. “You don’t have to believe all that they say, but you need to stay a little detached.”

If you do choose to pursue a career in writing, Inclan says there can be great emotional and psychological rewards, but it does not come without hard work.

“There are about five geniuses on the planet who can write a first draft and have it be perfect. I don’t know who these geniuses are, but they exist,” she said. “They irritate me beyond belief because I am not one of them. Most of us slog along until we finally learn, finally get it. If you are like me, you have some work to do!”

Entry deadline for Youth Ink is March 1, and the deadline for the Young Writer’s Contest is April 1. Youth Ink entry forms are available at Orinda Intermediate School, the Orinda Public Library, St. Perpetua School, Orinda Academy and Bentley School administrative offices and English departments. For information about the Young Writers Contest, visit, <http://mt-diablowriters.org/youngWriters.html>.