## Writing Groups Bring Out the Book in People

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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

riting can be a lonely exer- the group leader decides the deadline pull out the keyboard, and wait for in- either email their submissions to the spiration to strike. But it doesn't have entire group, or use a service on the and not come back," she said.

Raelene Van Horn, who for more ally the submission is limited to 10 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 faceto-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 less I had my writing groups," become a better writer from cri- Lenhart said. "Reading other peotiquing 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 what you're working on is working enough time for meaningful cri- or not." tiques.

"We have three or four core people," Van Horn said. "Other writers darn thing in the first place," said for adult fiction and non-fiction, or have come and gone. We had one Jack Champlin of Lafayette, who has young adult, you may email Lenhart person who came and was amazed at attended one of Lenhart's groups for how much time the writers put in to critiquing her work – she couldn't believe it. She wasn't up to putting the

A few days before the meet-up — I lose a lot of it."

cise. Pour a cup of coffee, — writers with new or revised work cloud, such as Dropbox or Google "Writing can be very social," said Docs, to submit to their peers. Usudouble-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 a writer's group," Lenhart said. 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 unple'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

make revisions than it did to write the 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,

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

"We've had people come once "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 "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 "Sometimes it takes me longer to Lafayette group.

> To inquire about writing groups to get on a waiting list for one of her groups at glorialenhart@comcast.net. The same goes for children's books and picture books with Van Horn, can be reached who rdvanhorn@yahoo.com.



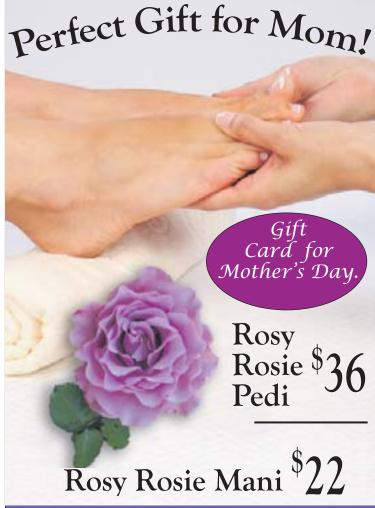
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