

Western Tale Spinner

Spring 2007 Volume Two Number One



A newsletter published by the Western Canadian Chapter of the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Information published in this newsletter does not constitute an endorsement by SCBWI and/or SCBWI-Western Canada.

Note from the Editor:

Welcome to the spring edition of the Western Tale Spinner. Although we are small in number, we have a good sized volume to read this time around, full of writing tips, great news, insight, and events to come. Thanks to all who contribute, and please keep sending your articles to me at dragonfly3@telus.net

If you are a member of SCBWI and would like to submit an article, or have an idea of something you'd like to see in the newsletter, please let me know. We can never have too much to read!

The newsletter is in need of cute illustrations. Can any of you draw? I've been using old clip art for our past copies of the Tale Spinner, but I'm sure you'd all like to see something more modern for future editions. Does anyone have any ideas for clipart? Send them to me!

Happy writing! *Loretta Houben*

Copyright Notice: All articles contained herein are the property of the authors. Please do not reprint without permission.

What's Inside:

Editors Page.....	1
Grammatically Speaking.....	2
Good News.....	3
Bits and Pieces.....	5
Novelty Books.....	6
A Writer's Headspace.....	8
Event Horizon.....	10
Grouping for Words.....	12
SCBWI Info.....	16
Photos submitted by L Houben	

Grammatically Speaking

Little Things Mean a Lot

By Diane Jones

Technically speaking, this is more a spelling issue than grammar, but it's a problem that gives a lot of trouble to a lot of people. And it's such a little thing – an apostrophe!

The apostrophe has two jobs: to indicate when something is missing, or to indicate possession. It should be easy, but it's not. One job the apostrophe does not have is to indicate plurals, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let's start with the indication that something is missing, as in "Let's" meaning "Let us...", or "o'clock" meaning "of the clock". This is an area that rarely gives trouble. In our story or article writing, we probably use this only in dialogues. If you want to use it in the narrative part of your writing, you should check with other writings put out by that publisher to be sure they accept that. It's a matter of style.

Then there's the second use, that of indicating possession. Here, it helps if we remember that this applies to nouns only. That way we don't fall into the trap of wondering if we should write "it's" or "its". If this is one of your bugaboos, remember that "its" is a three-letter word closely related to "his". We don't say, "This is he's book", it is of course "his book". Similarly, we can't say, "This is it's cover" when we mean "This is its cover." Replacing the pronouns with nouns, we have, "This is John's book," and "This is the book's cover." No problem, right?

Okay, what happens if we now have plural nouns? My own surname is often problematic, which is too bad because it's such a common name. Test question: What is the plural of "Jones"? You'd be surprised at how many members of my own family can't answer that one! The problem is that the pronunciation throws everyone off. The plural of Jones is Joneses. And it's pronounced with two syllables, just as it is spelled. How often have you complained that you have to "Keep up with the Joneses"? (Just think how hard it is for the Joneses who have to keep ahead of everyone! Other Joneses, not me.) Now, here's another test question: What do you do when you talk about things that those confounded Joneses have been buying? If we're talking about one person named Jones, we

say "This is John Jones' book" and some folks will give "Jones'" just one syllable and other folks will give it two. I can't find a definitive answer for which one is correct, but I personally give it two syllables, just because to me it sounds better. What do you do? When we say that "This is the Joneses' house" we pronounce that plural possessive noun the same way, with just two syllables. Why? Because adding another "es" sound would be ridiculous.

Now we come to one of my pet peeves: using the apostrophe to indicate plural numbers. Why would anyone want to do that? If we say "She went to school in the 1970s...", just adding an "s" as we would to any other plural, surely that's enough. Why do some folks want to say "the 1970's...."? What's missing that requires an apostrophe? Nothing! What does the decade called the nineteen seventies possess? Nothing! So what's the apostrophe for? Nothing! If you really have trouble with this, my advice is always to write the numbers out and you won't need any extraneous apostrophes.



GOOD NEWS

Compiled by Joan Winter

Applause, bells and whistles sounding for all our members with "write" good news!

In November 2006, Ken Kilback received a letter and certificate from *Writers' Digest*, advising him that he had won an Honourable Mention in the 75th Annual Writing Competition in the children's category for "Benita Mah and the Biggest, Baddest, Meanest Teacher in the Whole World!" Is that good news or what? Congratulations,

Ken. *Writer's Digest* competitions are tough, with thousands of entries. Ken placed 65 of the top 100 in the children's category.

Ken also reports that he finally had the song "There is Santa in the Sky" published by the *Piano Press* in their piano music book anthology, "My Christmas Fun Book Level 1." Ken has also been doing picture book reviews for *Resource Links*. He receives no payment, but gets to keep the books or share them with others. Starting in February, he'll be doing some picture book reviews for

Children's Book News, the publication of the Canadian Children's Book Centre. This one offers a flat fee payment of \$25.

Wow! That is a LOT of good news, Ken.

Gloria Blanchard had this good news to report: I have an article posted on *Reading Writers, The Verb*, November issue (Chalkboard) if anyone is interested in reading it at www.readingwriters.com/TheVERBhotp.htm. This was an assignment from my first course with ICL for descriptive writing. Even nicer than Elizabeth Guy accepting the article for *The Verb* is that a reader from Australia e-mailed a positive comment and we've begun a nice little correspondence.

Way to go, Gloria! Lovely that you made a new writing friend, too.

Gloria Singendonk won a six month subscription to *Children's Book Insider* when she came in 3rd in the *Write to Win* contest at *Smart Writers*.

Congratulations, Gloria. CBI is an excellent newsletter. Gloria also reports: My short story "The Skater" which appeared in *Listen Magazine's* November 2006 issue, has been resold to *Grace Notes*. This is a Christian website which has stories that help teens with issues like alcohol, drugs, faith, sex, suicide and more.

Sally Rogow's book "They Must Not be Forgotten" is being favourably reviewed in Catholic newspapers.

Good to hear that your book, and its important message, has not been forgotten either, Sally, and is still receiving rave reviews.

Lois, from Anacortes, WA, had this good news to report: "Look for my article in the April issue of *Hopscotch, The Magazine for Girls*. The title is "Lavender's Blue." It tells how the pioneers used lavender and provides activities for girls to use the fragrant herb."

Double congratulations to you, Lois, -- for your article in the April issue of *Hopscotch*, AND for your book, *Mary Cassatt: Impressionist Painter* (Pelican Books, Oct. 2007) due out in October.

It's nice to see so much GOOD NEWS, a good start to the 2007! Keep it up everybody. Your success is the inspiration that keeps us going.



BITS AND PIECES

AND

.....a small word that's been bothering Gladys for a few years.

By Gladys Swedak

“And... added to, together with, a word that joins words, clauses or sentences.” This is what the dictionary says the word means. Nowhere does it say anything about beginning a sentence. Am I of the “old” school and is “and” just a joiner word? It seems I am because when I am reading anything lately “and” seems to start a sentence after a period. Come on writers, let's get with the program, “and” does not start a sentence! It does not have a capital A and it does not start a paragraph. Where and when did a lot of writers go to school? Has school changed so much in the last 25- 50 years that “and” is now a noun, verb, adjective or adverb? It wasn't when I went to school. We should write as if we know what the English language is, not what we want it to be. Maybe we can get back to where “and” is just a joiner word, like it should be.

Why I Like Clowns

By Sally Rogow

Clowns are fascinating. A clown is a comic character. With their make up and ludicrous antics and buffoonery they hold a mirror to human foibles, misadventures and humanity.

For thousands of years most cultures had clowns. In many kingdoms, there were court jesters who often were the only ones to speak out against the ideas and policies of the rulers. The earliest ancestors of clowns were present in ancient Greece. In the late middle ages, clowns emerged as professional comic actors. In the 16th century, the Commedia del Arts began in Italy and portrayed comic characters of masters and servants. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, clowning in England became a form of theatre art. Shakespeare portrayed clowns in his plays.

Clowns teach us about the value and importance of humour. In a world of sadness and tragedy, the clown's voice and antics give us a true perspective. Laughter provides relief. Today there are many groups of clowns who go to hospitals to bring some happiness to people who are suffering or in pain. Hospital clowns bring laughter and fun to lonely children confined to their beds.

Clowns teach us about the importance of humour in bringing peace and joy in sad times. Carol Burnett said that “Comedy is tragedy plus time.”

The Art of Writing Novelty Books

By Ken Kilback

You've seen them—as lift-the-flaps or pop-ups; in the shapes of pumpkins, cars, or fish; with CD's, keyboards, or interactive elements, with different cloths and fabrics, with googly-eyed animals, with soft fluffy things attached to them, or with sparkling glittery stickers; and many, many more of similar creative kind, the designs limited only by the interplay between the imaginations of their creators and the safety standards of governmental agencies. These are, of course, various incarnations of novelty books.

For a brief moment, you may even think to yourself, *Hey, I could do something like that!* And you'd be right—as long as you keep in mind the following information.

While publishers indicate on their websites whether or not they're open for author or illustrator submissions, there is typically no information on those sites concerning how to submit ideas for novelty books. That's because most ideas for novelty books come from two sources: book packagers and the publishing companies themselves.

Book packagers are companies that develop a book idea, package it themselves in some way—whether as a manuscript draft and idea or a completed product—and then sell this package to a publisher.

When book packagers have an idea for a novelty book, they will develop the idea and then find someone to write the manuscript for them. Usually this person is someone in-house—someone who already works for the company—or sometimes the person is a writer-for-hire. In a work-for-hire agreement, the writer neither owns the copyright of the manuscript nor earns royalties on the number of books sold. The writer is paid a flat fee (a one-time payment); or, in some cases, the writer may be paid 5% of the wholesale rate (as opposed to the retail rate, substantially less money than what a writer would receive for an original manuscript). While this fact may seem disconcerting to you as a writer, it is still a way to get into the book writing and publishing business and it may yet provide some kind of steady income for you if you're hired to write on a regular basis.

By the way, writing for book packagers does not have to mean writing novelty books. It can mean writing fiction (including such children's book series as *The Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew*, *Sweet Valley High*, and *The Babysitters Club*) or it can mean writing non-fiction (including books on gardening, cooking, and other areas of interest or expertise). However, if you want to approach a book packager as a potential writer-for-hire, you need to sell yourself as an experienced writer—not necessarily published, but experienced—and as someone who can meet deadlines; in the case of non-fiction, you need to identify your areas of expertise.

As with book packagers, publishing companies often develop an idea for a novelty book themselves. The writer may be the editor, or the editor may approach a writer to sign on in a work-for-hire agreement. Once the writing is

completed, the editor contacts an illustrator to do the artwork. Design engineers also create a template of the proposed book and that template is sent off to the printers. Print runs may run from 12 000 to 15 000 for novelty books in the United States and less in Canada.

While it may seem as though there is not much room for anyone outside of book packagers and publishing companies to create a novelty book, there is in fact a third source of ideas for these books: you and me. Some novelty book manuscripts do come from the slush pile. Keep in mind, though, that publishers are looking for new—original—ideas.

Ideas! Whether you have a story manuscript (in which case, you still need to write well) or a list of vocabulary words, it's actually the idea that sells in novelty books. You cannot send a publisher a list of words or a manuscript and say in your cover letter that your text would make a great novelty book. You must show the publisher your idea for the book in addition to the words or manuscript you submit.

There are two ways you can show your idea. One way is to submit a professional dummy. This professional dummy can take on a variety of forms depending, of course, on the particular idea you have. The more intricate your idea, the more intricate the dummy. And you don't have to create every detail yourself; you can make use of found or bought objects. Some people, for instance, went to a dollar store, bought a stuffed animal figure, cut it into pieces, and then glued the head portion onto one piece of cardboard and the rear portion onto another piece of cardboard to illustrate the front and back of the book with the particular idea they had in mind.

If you're worried that you're not artistically inclined in any way and you can't even slap some things together with glue or make a few cuts with scissors or make a few folds with your fingers to make a professional dummy for the publisher, and you still have a wonderful idea that you want to submit, then don't despair! There is another way you can show an editor your artistic idea and that is to describe it in as much detail as is necessary when you submit the manuscript. Remember, though, that your professional dummy may not be "professional" in the strictest sense. It may in fact be quite crude and that's okay. The important thing is not your artistry, but your idea; and the idea isn't so much in the story as in the concept itself. A visual, tactile presentation is a much better submission than a text-only submission, no matter how unprofessional you may think your skills and talents are in that regard.

What is most important here is not any of the actual materials you use or the level of your artistic skill, but getting your idea across to the editor. You don't even have to worry about possible choking hazards or other safety-related concerns at this point. If the publisher likes your idea, then the editor will pass your dummy along to design engineers who will make their own sample or template of the proposed book. These design engineers will follow all established safety rules that govern the production of novelty books for children to see whether your idea is feasible using appropriate materials and whether it's viable in terms of what the book will cost to make compared to what it needs to be sold at. Publishers have a maximum price at which they are willing to sell

novelty books. The actual price may vary from publisher to publisher, but each one does have a maximum. Despite the attractiveness of the idea, if the proposed book cannot be sold at or under that maximum price, then the editor will have to decline making you an offer. However, if the design engineers determine that the proposed book can be sold at or under that maximum price, then you may get that offer from the editor.

As with anything else you want to submit, you have to research which companies publish novelty books and whether they're accepting queries or unsolicited submissions. Remember that there may be no information at the websites other than that they are accepting queries only or unsolicited manuscripts for picture books; guidelines for submitting novelty books are hard to find. You must also make sure that you save a master copy of your idea; you don't want to lose your creation or forget how you made it.

And of course, in many cases, your idea for a novelty book may not fit into a flat envelope. But that's another story.

A Writer's Headspace

By Theresa Moleski

I sit on the sidelines at another writer's conference, sipping my coffee, watching and waiting.

The cycle is renewing itself once again. Secretly, I take pleasure in soaking up the various degrees of excitement, bottled anxieties and renewed hope and nearly flogged dreams of the writers that fill the front foyer.

I watch. I listen. I laugh.

I laugh because HE doesn't affect me one way or another. HE is the New York agent.

He walks through the corridors, leaving behind him whispers from eager writers.

They want him, just to be beside him, all for them, hoping to believe that they are worthy enough to be in the presence of such an influential man, a man who has the power to change the course of an aspiring writer. The craving is strong. They yearn to have him devour every word they've painstakingly typed on paper.

Would the New York agent love them? Would he be rocked right off his chair? Would he be stunned into silence wearing an, astonished smile? Or would they be just another statistic walking away with the message, "You need to write some more because your main character doesn't move me. I'm sorry."

I've seen it. I've heard it.

He slides the manuscript back to the young writer who fights to hold a positive demeanor as the news sinks in. Thanks are given and sometimes a handshake is offered. The writer clutches his manuscript that has more layers of

polish on it than anyone will ever know and walks away. A gust of air silently expels from his exhausted form. Facial muscles begin to relax with each long stride he takes.

The writer's first impulse is to find a corner far away from everybody and everything and begin a long drawn out sacrificial torching ceremony. His dreams appear to have gone up in smoke that only the writer can smell.

I watch. I listen.

The writer's friend approaches with the same look of eager anticipation he wore only a few short minutes ago.

She carries her manuscript like a flimsy shield over her heart. She's going in, hoping to gather some last minute encouragement from her friend. She reads the look on the deflated face that moves towards her.

"Did you see the New York agent?" the friend asks.

"Yeah. He's good. Good luck, eh," he calls over his shoulder as he continues down the crowded hallway.

The scene ends only to repeat. But wait, something changes. I watch. I listen.

The manuscript is slid across the table and is picked up. Read.

The New York agent nods his head. His black eyebrows rise just above his spectacles. Pages turn, one after another. He looks up at the writer across from him, smiles and nods. He steals a few more moments, sweeping his eyes across the crisp white pages.

"This is good. I would like to see the first three chapters."

The writer's eyes grow large and her face turns bright red. Instantly she wipes her hands on her slacks and grips her knees. She smiles and watches the New York agent scribble instructions on the back of his card on how to get his attention in New York. He tells the writer he looks forward to reading more of her work.

Again, another handshake is offered but this time it's firm and full of life. The writer leaves, holding onto the business card as though it were the winning lottery ticket. Success is born. The writer's steps are quickened, her chest is puffed out, and her head sits high above her shoulders.

She can barely organize her thoughts as the words come tumbling out.

"He wants to see more!" she tells the ladies at the front table. Her steps are short but quick. She adds, "The New York agent wants to see my first three chapters. I'm to send it right away!"

Hushed cheers of "Congratulations, you've worked hard," are echoed in her wake. Whispers of anxious enthusiasm fill the air.

Yes, the cycle is alive and well.

Event Horizon

By Ken Kilback

If you missed our Fall Event back in November, then you missed presentations by two people who are involved in children's publishing in different ways. Maggie de Vries is a freelance editor with Orca Publishing, and is also an author of several children's books and adult books, including *Tale of a Great White Fish*, *Chance and the Butterfly*, *Once Upon a Golden Apple*, and *Missing Sarah*. She talked about a variety of things, including answering specific questions, but she focused on cover letters. She said that we need to keep our cover letters short, clear, and—of course—well-written. In her case, she tends to read cover letters after she's read the manuscript. However, there are many editors who read cover letters first and have been known not to read a manuscript because of a poorly-written letter. Susan McGuigan is the manager of Kidsbooks at the North Vancouver location. Her presentation focused on gatekeeping, the variety of ways by which particular stories do not make it to the shelves of bookstores. Gatekeeping involves everything from rejection letters publishers send authors to book banning to customers simply refusing to buy particular books. One trend that is of concern to writers is the big book stores; if these stores are not willing to commit themselves to buying enough copies of a given book, then publishers may decide not to publish that book even if they love the manuscript.

The Vancouver Children's Literature Roundtable is once again hosting some popular events this year. On Tuesday February 6 is AuthorFest at the Hebb Theatre, UBC, from 4:30-6:30 p.m. Featured guests include: John Wilson, author of such books as *The Flags of War* and *Flames of the Tiger*; Dan Bar-El, author of *Alphabetter*, *Things Are Looking Up*, *Jack and Things Are Looking Grimm*, *Jill*; Deborah Hodge, author of such books as *The Kids Book of Canadian Immigration*, *The Kids Book of Canada's Railway*, *Salmon*, *Bears*, and *Lily and the Mixed-Up Letters*; and Cynthia Nugent, author/illustrator of *Francesca and the Magic Bike*, and illustrator of such books as *Mister Got to Go* and *Arnie*, *When Cats Go Wrong*, and *Goodness Gracious Gulliver Mulligan*. This event is free.

Deborah Ellis is appearing somewhere in Vancouver on Thursday February 22. She is the author of *The Breadwinner*, *Parvana's Journey*, and *Mud City*. The location and time are unknown at this point, but you can check the Roundtable's website closer to the event (see below).

Vancouver Children's Literature Roundtable is also celebrating 25 years of their annual Serendipity event with a special two-day celebration of children's literature. Featured speakers will be: Jeannie Baker, author/illustrator of *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* and *Window*; Ian Wallace, author/illustrator of *The Huron Carol* and *The Name of the Tree*; Janet Stevens, illustrator of *Epossumondas* and *Plaidypus Lost*; Elizabeth Bicknell, Editorial Director of Candlewick Press; Stephen Biesty, illustrator of *Cross-Sections Castle*; Sarah

Ellis, author of *Ben Overnight* and *The Queen's Feet*; Naomi Shihab Nye, author of *Come With Me: Poems for a Journey* and *A Maze Me: Poems for Girls*; Anthea Bell, translator of *Asterix* and the Cornelia Funke novels; and Cornelia Funke, author of *Dragon Rider*, *Inkheart*, and *Pirate Girl*. This event is on Friday May 4 from Noon to 9:00 p.m. and Saturday from 8:45 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. Registration costs \$190 for members and \$195 for non-members until February 15th, and \$200 for members and \$210 for non-members after February 15th. This cost includes a juice break and supper on Friday, as well as coffee/muffins and a light lunch on Saturday. There is also a special Gala Dinner on Saturday evening, but this is an extra \$45. Limited accommodation is also available on the campus. Registration forms can be downloaded from the Roundtable website at www.library.ubc.ca/edlib/table. Hope to see you here!

On Saturday March 3, Western Washington University in Bellingham is hosting its annual Bond Children's Literature Conference. Featured guests include David Weisner, author/illustrator of *Flotsam*, *Tuesday*, *The Three Pigs*, and *June 29 1999*; Lois Lowry, author of *The Giver*, *Gathering Blue*, *Messenger*, *Number the Stars*, and *Gossamer*; Pat Mora, author of *Dona Flor*, *The Desert is My Mother*, and *Listen to the Desert*; and Candace Fleming, author of *Muncha! Muncha! Muncha!*, *Boxes for Katje*, and *Tippy-Tippy-Tippy Hide!* Not all details are available at this time, but based on previous events it will likely run from 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. The university is also hoping to have a Meet the Author Reception on Friday March 2, possibly from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. Registration costs \$75 until February 19th, but \$90 thereafter; however, if you're a full-time college/university student or a retired teacher, then you get a discount of \$35. Check out www.wwuclc.com for more information as it becomes available.

While geared to writers of literary and adult fiction, the Writers' Union of Canada is sponsoring a one-day workshop on tour across Canada entitled "How to Get Published and Survive as an Author." This workshop runs from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at each location and the cost of \$45 includes lunch. This one-day workshop will be in Calgary on Tuesday March 6 at the University of Calgary, in Kelowna on Wednesday March 7 at the Grand Okanagan Resort, and in Vancouver on Friday March 9 at SFU Harbour Centre. For more information, check out www.writersunion.ca.

Remember: aside from reading and writing, one of the most important things you can do as a writer is attend workshops and conferences and connect with other writers!

Cheers!

Grouping for Words

By Raymond Nakamura

Writing can be lonely. A writing group can be a great way to get feedback and encouragement on your work, to hear interesting stories, and to reflect on the craft of writing. Since 1999, I've been in a writing group called the *Depraved Haberdashers*. This is how we do things. Maybe they will work for you as well.

Number

We have about ten people. If you have too few, it feels like you have to present your work too often. If you have too many, the critiquing takes too long and becomes redundant.

Time

We meet every Monday, except on holidays. If you spread it out too much, you lose momentum. Setting a regular date and time is important, so you don't have to reschedule every week. We chose Monday because it seemed less likely to conflict with other social obligations. We meet from 7 to 9:30 p.m., after dinner, but not too late. You need people who are committed. If they're away too often, it sucks energy from the group and puts unfair pressure on everyone else. Mind you, it's hard to boot someone out for something like that. You just hope they eventually get with it or have the decency to go away.

Location

We rotate hosting duties to distribute both the obligation to get snacks and the opportunity to stay home. Some people can't host for whatever reasons, and this has not been a problem. Going to a restaurant gets expensive and is not as comfortable. Using the library is a hassle and is not always available when you need it. Ideally, you all live in the same area, although this has not happened in our group. When possible, we carpool to visit the other people on the fringes of civilization. This can make time for some great conversations.

Agenda

For each meeting, three people are scheduled as designated readers, with one person as a back-up, just in case someone has to bail. Ideally, this is

scheduled a month in advance, but often only one or two weeks in advance. We have a fellow who is handy with web sites, so he posts the schedule and we can check if we miss a meeting or forget who's up to bat. We don't prohibit people who aren't online, but they do complicate things.

At the beginning of the evening, we choose a leader, someone who is not reading or hosting and who has not been a leader recently. That person's job is to figure out the order of readers and critiquers. After two rounds, we break for about fifteen minutes, depending on the timing. It's important to respect the timing or it can be frustrating for people who have to get up in the morning. Since the host needs to prepare the snacks, they should not be the second reader and should be the first critiquer of the second reader.

During the break, we chat more socially. The rest of the time, we try to stay focused on the reading and critiquing to make it a useful experience. If people just want to socialize, they should join a social club.

Reading

The designated reader reads their writing to the group. We don't distribute copies of the piece ahead of time, because it's too much work for everyone involved. As a reader, you need to read slowly, so people can figure out what you're saying. Some people are so good at reading, it's more of a performance, so it can be hard to focus on the words. People should only read their own work. Some might want to bring in some published author to practise critiquing. Leave that for a book club.

Our members work on stories of all kinds, fiction and non-fiction, long and short. A reading is about 1,000 to 5,000 words. People working on novels read a chapter at a time and summarize what has gone on before, so even if you come in part way through, you can eventually get caught up. We discourage poetry because of the difficulty in critiquing it.

Critiquing

As a critiquer, you just listen and take notes. This way, the comments tend not to be about formatting and punctuation, but the story, the language and its impact. Some people might find this direct feedback intimidating, both to deliver

and receive. You need to make sure you have mature people in your group, who recognize it is a discussion of the writing, not of character, content, or politics (although in our group, right-wing perspectives tend to be trounced quickly). Critiquers give their impressions of what they have heard. The author should just listen, not defend their work. This can take some discipline and the leader should moderate this. Some readers want critiquers to tell them how to change things, but the value of the exercise is in finding out whether people are hearing what the writer is trying to say. Writers need to figure out how to write for themselves.

When the reader is done, the leader chooses who critiques next. The leader moderates exchanges and keeps track of time. In theory, they have the last word. In practise, they at least have the last critique.

Critiquing is a fine balance. If everyone is too complimentary, it's not that useful, unless you have such low self-esteem you need that kind of thing. Of course, if they just trash everything, that can be disheartening. You might keep in mind the sandwich rule of a slab of something you liked, a slab of something they could improve, and then a slab of something else you liked. You need to develop trust in one another. It's good to have variety in the group — age, gender, culture, left-brain, right-brain dominant. This makes for a more interesting range of stories to hear, as well as more perspectives on your own work.

These are, of course, just guidelines. On the evening I read this piece to the group, we only had four people and two readers. The third reader missed her ride and the back-up went to a writing festival event instead. The second reader didn't want us to critique her because she had gone ahead and self-published the work anyway. But in general, the system works.

Parties

As a change of pace, we have seasonal parties — summer, winter and sometimes, Halloween. We each write something short on some theme, like murder, or decide on some opening line. Then we put them anonymously in a pile and take turns taking one out at random and reading it. We try to guess who wrote what. You might think you could pick out people's style, but some of that tends to be related to what they choose to write about. Some people intentionally

imitate someone else. Some write two stories, or submit one even though they are not attending, just for the sake of subterfuge. At Christmas, we bring guests and do a convoluted exchange involving wrapped used books, random numbers, and strategic stealing.

Recruitment

Our group began when Anne, who was teaching a short story writing course I was taking, recruited some students to form a group. She had been in a group before and knew how to organize one. She and I are the only ones left from the beginning. She has been able to recruit more people through courses she teaches. Others have also recruited people through their own connections, such as through courses they have taken or conferences they have attended.

Moving On

Evenutally, you might feel the need to move on. I spoke to some former members about this. Chris, who is a newspaper reporter, said, "I left because I realized my true interest was non-fiction. I loved the group, the format and the camaraderie it provided. But I simply found it not as well suited to my passion, which is journalistic-style non-fiction."

You might find a group takes too much time or you might just outgrow it. Debra said, "I wanted to work on my novel but didn't necessarily want to workshop it. The process would have taken too long and I didn't want to feel compelled to keep producing short fiction so I could workshop it."

The good thing about a group is they can provide you an audience, which can be a good motivator without being published. The not-so-good thing is that you might not push yourself to go beyond that. "I felt the need for access to people who were more experienced than I with submitting, publishing, markets etc.," said Debra. "I wasn't getting that from the DH group and didn't feel that most of the members were that serious about publishing."

If you are already strongly motivated, you might not need a group. Jennifer talked about, "a need to stop workshopping and get back to my own inner editor, if you like. Whether that's been a good idea or not, I don't know, but after two and a half intensive years of critiquing and being critiqued, I just felt too concerned

with audience and not enough connection to muse.”

Joining a group might depend on your personality and also where you are at in your writing career. All the former members I spoke to did say it was a worthwhile experience. I don't know if the group has improved my writing, although I do use more dialogue in my stories than I used to. I'm still with the *Depraved Haberdashers* partly because I enjoy listening to stories, partly because I enjoy hanging out with the people, and partly because I like the snacks.

Our local critique group for SCBWI members and non-members in the Vancouver BC area, meets monthly on the last Saturday. The location is different each time, so please contact Diane Jones at angelslodge@yahoo.com for more info. Our next meeting is on Sat. February 24th, 1:00 – 3:00 in Diane's home.

Are you interested in becoming a member of SCBWI, the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators? Please visit the SCBWI website at www.scbwi.org for further information. Join the fun!

Please visit our website at: <http://scbwicanda.org/west/> to learn more about our Canadian West group.

