



The Beacon

Your guiding light for writing and publishing

Number 24, Summer 2005

Writers' Groups – should you join one?

Why is it so many published authors belong to writers' groups and so many unpublished writers don't? Is this phenomenon telling us something? An essential truth, perhaps? Without a doubt....

Half-a-dozen best-selling novelists and non-fiction authors I know, who earn royalties in the six figure range, still attend their groups. Most manage it via the Internet but they continue to benefit from their colleagues' assistance with difficult passages and critiques of their works-in-progress. Some published authors belong to more than one writers' group.

I have attended my group off-and-on for about fifteen years, only taking time out reluctantly due to unavoidable conflicts. Since I joined it, I have had two books published on Canadian naval history, with a third about Anglican bishops due out next spring. Benefits vary from writer to writer but here are a few:

- Editors/agents are reassured when unpublished authors belong to a group.
- Writers gain much support from other writers – groups are a place to celebrate and commiserate.
- Members discuss the 'business' of writing, such as query letters, proposals, synopses, taxes, Public Lending Right, copyright, etc.
- Writers develop their craft in a non-threatening environment – practice, critique, editing, etc.
- Groups are highly motivating and often fun. Friendships often form to mutual advantage.

Writers' groups come in all shapes and sizes. Some are free and others charge a fee; some have experienced leaders and some do not; some are just for poets and others are for all types of writers. You get

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Writers' Groups	1
From the editor's desk	1
Platforms	2
Forthcoming events	2



From the editor's desk

Listening to editors and agents discuss aspiring authors is always illuminating. The best place for writers to eavesdrop is at writers' conferences though it is not that easy for delegates to achieve.

As a presenter I often hear their conversations at mealtimes or in the bar. There are two recurring themes:

1. I wish every writer belonged to a writers' group; and
2. Aspiring authors should learn to talk about what their books are about and not why they wrote them.

This quarter's lead article tackles the first on the editor/agent wish list. The September issue will address the art of the pitch...again.

With summer almost upon us, some will stop writing and others, like me, will ramp-up their time at the computer. Whatever your tendency, keep reading. The spring lists are out, the awards won, and the reviews of the latest books are published – try some of the new offerings. Tackle books you wouldn't normally read; invest in new grammar book; borrow a book on marketing your writing. Learn something new and put it into practice.

But above all, get in the outdoors and enjoy your reading!

Julie H. Ferguson

Platforms...they are not a shoe style!

A **platform** is proof that your non-fiction book will sell – built-in marketing appeal. Heard most commonly in the US publishing industry, the term is occasionally used in Canada. US publishers are insisting that unpublished authors demonstrate that they already have a ‘following’ to guarantee the sales of their first book. Proof of a following might include having your own radio or TV show, leading seminars, or being a renowned expert, etc. Today, when approaching big publishers, authors need to a) have a platform, b) make sure it applies to the market the book will be competing in and c) ensure it is accurate and compelling.

Platforms are also business plans and include a market and competitive analysis, a realistic estimate of sales in each market, the promotional campaign that the author will undertake, and the credentials that prove their ‘following.’ A written platform is now a required component of a book proposal. The bottom line: big publishers may no longer publish books for which a solid economic argument cannot be made.

More hoops...!

Forthcoming events for writers

(For registration details, visit

www.beaconlit.com/schedule2005.htm)

- Sep 30 – **Word on the Street**. Free for writers and readers, around the Vancouver Public Library, 11am-6pm. See website for events: www.canada.com/national/features/wots/van_events.html.
- Sep 28 – **Crack Open Your Creative Channel**, 6:30-9:30pm; for all writers at Vancouver Community College
- Oct 1 – **Crafting Irresistible Query Letters**, 9am-4pm, for writers of books and articles; Vancouver Community College
- Oct 5 – **Getting Published in Canada 101**, 6:30-9:30pm, for aspiring authors; Vancouver Community College
- Oct 12 – **Writing Online**, 6:30-9:30pm, Vancouver Community College
- Oct 21-23 – **Surrey International Writers’ Conference**. Join Julie for two workshops (TBA) and meet Julie in the Blue Pencil Café for an encouraging chat about your writing career and work-in-progress. Visit www.siw.ca for details and online registration.
- Oct 26 – **Brainstorming Brilliant Bios** ensures your bio sells your writing; 6:30-9:30pm at Vancouver Community College
- Oct 29 – **Crafting Irresistible Query Letters**, 9am-4pm, for writers of books and articles, Surrey’s Creative Writing Diploma Program.
- Nov 24 – **Brainstorming Brilliant Bios**, 6:30-9:30, Surrey’s Creative Writing Diploma Program.
- Nov 30 – **Writing with Power!!** 6:30-9:30pm, Surrey’s Creative Writing Diploma Program.
- Dec 7 – **Writing Online**, 6:30-9:30pm, Surrey’s Creative Writing Diploma Program.

Writers’ groups....

the picture. I favour a live group, rather than virtual, that has a multi-faceted membership of published and unpublished writers, poets, novelists of different sub-categories, non-fiction authors, and freelancers. A mixture exposes a writer to techniques one might otherwise not know about. I need a group that is highly demanding but constructive in their criticism. As groups differ, a first timer needs to try out more than one if possible and see which one suits.

Finding a live writers’ group can be a challenge. The best ways I know are to ask those who instruct writing programs in continuing ed departments, ask a local librarian, mingle at book signings or open mic evenings, or join the local writers’ association – you’ll get their newsletters and make contacts.

The **essential truth** is therefore – attend a writers’ group in person or online to enhance your writing career.

Previous issues of *The Beacon* are archived: www.beaconlit.com/beaconli/newsletter.htm



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