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# The hottest writing group in Portland

In sharing work with peers, writers get feedback that can lead to striking results

By **JEFF BAKER** | THE OREGONIAN

It's Thursday night in inner Southeast Portland, after hours at an office that has a kitchen, a foosball table and, most importantly, a conference room with a big table. Eight writers, one man and seven women, sit down and open bottles of red wine. They talk easily about kids and sports and weekend plans, then get down to the matter at hand.

Who has pages?

Diana Page Jordan has two. Cheryl Strayed has five and a half. Lidia Yuknavitch has eight “with dialogue.”

Strayed, whose 2006 novel “Torch” got great reviews, starts reading a scene from her memoir “Wild,” to be published next year by Knopf. The rest of the group make notes on the copies she's passed out as Strayed reads with a quiet intensity.

## NORTHWEST WRITERS AT WORK

Strayed recently got her manuscript back from her editor and is working hard on final revisions. She's written a section about how her life and her first marriage broke down after her mother's death, and she knows she'll receive an honest, supportive critique from the group she joined three years ago. They're familiar with her memoir and start asking ques-

tions as soon as she finishes reading.

“Is this the first time we get your sexual self?” Suzy Vitello asks.

Yes, Strayed says. Her editor at Knopf asked her to make that part of the story more prominent. Vitello thinks that's a great idea but says she's a little confused about what's going on in one paragraph. What kind of sex is this?

“Can you tell us what base you got to?” Chelsea Cain asks.

Vitello says she likes an anecdote Strayed wrote about how Strayed and her ex-husband were in their New York apartment one morning and heard meowing from their closet. They realized it was coming from the ceiling and ripped a hole in the plaster. “(A) moment later two kittens covered in plaster and soot

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emerged to stare at us, starving and lost for God knows how long in the ducts of the building.”

Strayed didn’t say what happened to the kittens in her piece, and everyone wants her to make them a more prominent part of the story.

“You could use it as a framing device,” Chuck Palahniuk says.

After some good-natured teasing about Strayed’s unlucky experiences with animals, there are more thoughts on what she should do. (Cain jokes that the best solution would have been to stuff the kittens back in the wall and putty it up.) Palahniuk asks about an incident when Strayed met author Grace Paley.

“That was in another piece that’s not in the book,” Strayed says.

“He never forgets anything,” Vitello says.

Cain says it’s all about choosing scenes. Yuknavitch (“a word junkie”) makes a few suggestions. Mary Wysong-Haeri makes a point about Strayed’s ex-husband. Monica Drake thinks Strayed’s writing was “lovely but it had a summary feeling, like you were skating along instead of pulling the reader in.”

Strayed thanks everyone and collects the marked-up copies. She’ll take them and work them into another revision, but right now she sips some wine and turns her attention to Yuknavitch’s manuscript.

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This is how it goes every week in the hottest writing group in Portland, and in dozens of other writing groups around the city. People bring in what they’ve written and share it with their peers, looking for feedback and a sense of community. The idea is to help each other get better, and the results can be striking.

“I knew nothing about writing fiction (before joining the group),” says Cain, whose three novels all have been New York Times best-sellers. “I was not sure I could be published at all, definitely not at the level I did. Chuck and Suzy, in particular, gave me a master class in writing fiction.”

Not every group has as much talent and experience as the Thursday night group. Cain and Palahniuk, the author of “Fight Club” and a dozen other books, are the big names, while Drake (“Clown Girl”) and Strayed have published novels. Yuknavitch, who teaches writing at Mt. Hood Community College, has published several collections of short stories and has a memoir and a novel due out in the next two years. Jordan completed a memoir that she is shopping after joining the group, and Wysong-Haeri is working on a memoir about her years in Iran. Vitello, who has published short stories in magazines, is “the best writer without a book in Portland, Oregon,” according to Strayed.

The group’s longevity and level of commitment make it stand out more than its commercial success. Palahniuk, Drake, Vitello and Wysong-Haeri are veterans of Portland novelist and teacher Tom Spanbauer’s Dangerous Writing workshops and have been part of the same group off and on for more than a decade. The others joined more recently and appreciate the challenge of bringing their work to a table of sharp minds.

“The pressure is on to bring in pages,” Jordan says.

“You want to do good when you go in there,” Yuknavitch says. “You want to bring your best. It’s all about the writing. You rise and fall on the writing.”

Writing groups are an informal version of the workshop method that has been used in creative writing programs at colleges for the last 50 years. The basic idea of a writing workshop is a peer critique, led by an instructor. Students read and evaluate each other’s work and improve (or so they hope) by writing regularly and through trial and error. The instructor often introduces and explains writing techniques and assigns exercises as part of the workshop process.

There are differences between what this group does and what happens in graduate school. Vitello organizes the meetings, locates an office and finds out who’s bringing pages in her role as “the house mother,” as Palahniuk says. “She creates the space.”

Unlike most workshops, where peer writing is handed out a week before the critique, these participants see the pages for the first time on Thursday nights.

“All the work takes place at the table,” Strayed says. “There’s an immediacy to it, and it doesn’t feel like homework.”



Photos by TORSTEN KJELLSTRAND/THE OREGONIAN

**Diana Page Jordan talks about the chapter of a manuscript she just read to her writing group as Chuck Palahniuk makes notes and Cheryl Strayed listens.**

Graduate writing programs can be competitive and don’t always foster the kind of collegiality and confidence so important to a developing writer. Drake, who has a graduate degree in creative writing, appreciates being able to share her writing with her friends.

“It’s so great to work in a supportive way,” she says. “Grad school could be really petty. People would try to prove their intelligence or look smart in front of the teacher.”

A workshop with a teacher or a writing group with a strong leader can be crucial for those who are just starting to learn the craft. The best way — the only way — to become a writer is to read and write as much as possible. When successful writers become teachers, they naturally use their own experiences as a model for how to get it done. What works for Toni Morrison might not work for Agatha Christie (and vice versa). There is no right way to write; any rules are made to be broken.

“It’s not about craft or word choice,” Vitello says. “This group is good at bringing out the passion. There’s no pressure to write a certain way.”

Cain initially felt intimidated bringing her “really cheesy, über-commercial thriller” to the group and was pleasantly surprised when “they sat there and listened to me read about serial killers.” She absorbed the critique, sharpened her manuscript and sold her first novel, “Heartsick,” to St. Martin’s Press.

Yuknavitch came to the group out of the experimental corner of the literary pasture. She loved William Faulkner’s “The Sound and the Fury” and Gertrude Stein as a young writer and was part of the seminar taught by Ken Kesey at the University of Oregon that produced the group novel “Caverns.”

In graduate school, Yuknavitch had an enjoyable affair with deconstructionism, the theoretical wasteland where good stories go to die. She calls her first book, “Her Other Mouths,” an “in-your-face psycho-biography.” Her next two books came out from FC2, an author-run publisher of artistically experimental work. When Palahniuk, a casual acquaintance, invited her to join the group, she was “isolated in Corbett and writing out of grief” over the death of her mother. What she thought was “a 400-page prose poem” became two books, a novel and a memoir, that will be published by Hawthorne Books of Portland. She and her husband, Andy Mingo, have just finished a literary satire of vampire novels called “The Last American Vampire.” She’s on a creative roll.

“They very gently brought me back to the form and shape of a story,” Yuknavitch says of the group. “I’m really excited because of the state I was in. They brought me back to the world.”

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Yuknavitch is reading something different on Thursday night, a chapter from a novel called “Loving Dora” that’s a modern re-telling of the relationship between Sigmund Freud and his patient “Dora.” The story is told in Dora’s streetwise voice, and the chapter Yuknavitch reads is dialogue-heavy and involves Dora listening to a tape of Freud being pitched for a reality show in which his case studies would be scripted and re-enacted, with Dora (“your teen little monster girl”) as the season finale.

It’s an edgy, technically difficult piece of writing. Before Yuknavitch starts, Palahniuk asks if there are any set-ups.

“Yes, two,” Yuknavitch says. “A couple of reveals, a couple of set-ups.”

If there are three acts, he asks, which one is this?

Good question, Yuknavitch says. It’s the end of the first act.

“I’ve taken the whole Viagra scene and moved it,” she adds.

There’s a chorus of praise from the table when Yuknavitch finishes reading. After two weeks of hard work, writing and rewriting the scene, she’s thrilled and relieved at the reaction and laughs when Cain says she loves the reference to the children’s classic “Heidi,” because when she was a little girl she wanted to be Clara, Heidi’s friend.

“It’s so difficult to have a scene that’s mostly dialogue and you pulled it off beautifully,” Cain says. “I really think it’s working. It propelled me forward.”

Palahniuk is impressed and has “a whole lot of stuff to consider.” He makes specific, constructive suggestions about how Yuknavitch can improve the dialogue, how she should use attribution, how she might contrast the activities within the scene and how she might end it sooner.

“I want to hit it out of the park,” Yuknavitch says.

“We all do,” Strayed says.

Vitello looks at Palahniuk.

“Are you done?” she says.

“Am I ever done?”

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When Palahniuk went on tour for his new book “Tell-All,” he threw inflatable gold statuettes into the audience and had people compete to see who could blow them up the fastest. The winners received an autographed plastic Thanksgiving turkey. He read a story called “Knock Knock” that was built around a string of the most offensive jokes he could think up.

His fans might not recognize the instigator of such organized mayhem at the Thursday night group. Relaxed and soft-spoken, Palahniuk concentrates intensely on the pages in front of him and examines each sentence from every angle. His comments are on point and practical, reflecting his understanding of what works and what doesn’t in a piece of writing.

“Chuck has a laser mind,” Yuknavitch says. “He remembers characters or lines you wrote two years ago. His technical wizardry is amazing. I’ve met a lot of writers and teachers of writing and he’s the best teacher and coach I’ve ever known.”

Palahniuk’s fiction might appear to be barely controlled anarchy, wild ideas that jumped out of his imagination and onto the page. There’s some truth to that, but it obscures the amount of thought he gives to what he does and the hard work it takes to write 13 books in 14 years while handling the demands of literary notoriety.

“His process hasn’t changed,” says Vitello, who’s known Palahniuk since they started in Spanbauer’s group in the early 1990s. “He’s the most disciplined person I know.”

The Thursday night group doesn’t have a leader, but Palahniuk clearly is the hub of the wheel, “the engine of our group,” Vitello says. Through his generosity and by not making a big deal out of himself, he allows the others the space to develop their own work.

“Chuck definitely carries a lot of weight because of his success, but everybody has valid ideas,” Drake says.

“Nobody is bedazzled by him,” Strayed says. “There’s a range of accomplishment and fame, but the table is good at judging work on its own terms.”

There have been times in the past when someone was in the group for something other than writing or was star-struck. When it happens, Palahniuk says there is a way of dealing with it that’s a little like a reality show, only sneakier and more subtle.

“Those people self-select. They vote themselves off,” Palahniuk says, “and what we do is say we’re dissolving the group. Then we start again in a new location the next week and we don’t tell that person about it.”

Everyone in the group mentions Palahniuk’s ability to remember a character or a phrase they wrote years ago. He shrugs it off as “a minor form of Asperger’s” and says when something works “it’ll stay in my memory for years and years. It’s a hallmark of good fiction. My memory is pretty good, but it’s better for other people’s work.”

Palahniuk says he only attends about half the time — he left for Spain the day after the meeting — and says he enjoys the interaction with other writers after long days working alone. He brought “Knock Knock” to the group to have them listen for the laugh lines and rhythms in the story and got something more when Cain asked a simple question: Where’s the mother? A story about a son visiting his dying father and telling crude jokes as a defense mechanism opened into something more. Playboy will publish the story in its December issue.

“People see the connections in work I haven’t made,” Palahniuk says. “It’s shocking the difference a

little tweak and a fresh perspective can make. That’s the magic part.”

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By the time Yuknavitch finishes, the evening has taken on a loose, mellow glow. Fueled by the wine and fired up (according to Palahniuk and others) by the presence of a reporter and photographer, the group is full of laughter and good spirits. The last reader, Jordan, introduces her two pages by saying she’s just getting back to her story after “a series of life disasters” and a busy stretch that included organizing the Willamette Writers Conference.

Jordan is a journalist who has worked at several Portland radio stations and now does voiceovers, media coaching and a variety of other jobs. Her show, “Open Book With Diana Page Jordan,” is a podcast that’s available on iTunes. Jordan has interviewed hundreds of authors and joined the group four years ago at Palahniuk’s invitation after she told him she was procrastinating about writing a book. She’s completed a memoir, “BookMark: Life-Changing Secrets I’ve Learned From Interviewing Authors,” and is looking for a publisher.

She reads from a novel-in-progress called “Wait ‘Til the Midnight Hour,” a ghost story that’s set partly in the old KWJJ studio. Her ex-husband worked the midnight shift, and the station was said to be haunted. Jordan says she just came back to the material after not writing for months. Everyone understands.

“I’m glad to see this again,” Drake says, then makes a suggestion about bringing the voice closer.

Palahniuk thinks maybe Jordan should “throw a bunch of verbs on the page, because we’ll watch.” He makes a comparison to the scene in “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” when Holly Golightly gets dressed.

Nothing really happens, but the audience is transfixed.

Cain returns to the Cat Night theme by pushing for a greater role for an observant cat in Jordan’s manuscript. Then Cain provides a little tough love.

“You’ve forgotten everything we’ve taught you about point of view,” Cain says.

“I know,” Jordan says, putting her hands over her face.

“You know how to do this,” Cain says. “It’s an opportunity. You know how to do point of view and this isn’t it.”

“Look what the bad dog did,” Palahniuk says.

“I think it’s a great character,” Cain says. “It’s a marketable book. This scene isn’t working.”

After some more jokes about the cat (it could start sleeping with every character, Palahniuk says), Yuknavitch gives her opinion.

“I think it’s a throwaway chapter,” she says. “You’re just trying to get back in the book. It’s time to make a chapter that’s funky.”

“We’re all so excited you’re back in the book,” Strayed says.

“We’re all so engaged in the book,” Palahniuk says. “That’s why we’re bullying you.”

Jordan says later that she has no problem with the critique and loves “all those different intelligent voices giving you something.”

“There’s never any sniping at all. Everyone’s so generous, and so vastly different. No one’s writing the same thing.”

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**Chelsea Cain (in hat) mixes laughter with more serious critiques at a writer’s group meeting in Southeast Portland. Mary Wysong-Haeri (left), Lidia Yuknavitch and Monica Drake (right) wonder what Cain will say next.**