

Women Who Write is a growing literary group

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Is writing a craft that can be learned? There are at least 100 women in Morris and surrounding counties who think so.

Women Who Write, a non-profit collection of writers based in New Jersey, has now reached the 100 mark in membership. Officially located in Madison, the organization consists of 11 small groups that meet in a variety of locations for the purpose of reading and critiquing one another's work.

Through the process of sharing observations and evaluations in a supportive setting, members receive concrete help in improving their writing skills as well as encouragement from their peers.

Women Who Write began in the early 1990s, according to its president, Pat Weissner of Madison, to "reach out to writers as a support organization for them, to help them learn their craft through a writing group." Beginning under the name "Mothers Who Write," it was incorporated as a non-profit organization under its present name in 1994.

Weissner had just begun to write at the time - for children and young adults - and was looking for a group that would look at her writing objectively. "I hoped they would tell me how I could improve. I found it very worthwhile, so I joined the board." Weissner is now approaching the end of her second

term as president. The incoming president will be Phyllis Gibson of Mountain Lakes.

Unlike many writers, Weissner did not always think she could write. "I avoided all writing as a young person," she said, "I didn't want to write. But in my late 40s, I found this overwhelming story inside of me and I started sitting down to write." Encouraged by friends, she submitted a story to a competition at Montclair State University and it won. "That's when I began looking for a group" to help hone her skills.

Many people begin writing early in life, while others, like Weissner, come to this means of expression much later. This is reflected in the widely-ranging age span of the members of Women Who Write. "In my group," Weissner said, "we have a member who's 26 and another one who's 80." That kind of variation is common within the various groups, though the organization limits membership to those 18 or older.

Weissner says that some members with children in sixth grade and higher have expressed an interest in developing a young writers group, "to encourage them, because we find more and more that our children are writing." The organization's current newsletter is asking for input from members on this idea.

The members of Women Who Write work in a wide variety of genres and for a variety of reasons. On

the organization's schedule, available online at www.women-who-write.org, are groups specializing in poetry, writing for children, fiction, prose in general and mixed genres. Generally, groups are limited to 10 members and some of them are currently filled. However, there are openings in a few groups and new groups are always forming. One new group now seeking members is dedicated to the art of haiku, a Japanese poetry form that is limited to 17 syllables.

Weissner said that some members have requested a memoirs group. She explained that many people begin in a mixed genre group and gradually begin to feel the need for a more specialized group to critique their work. The organization is flexible in trying to satisfy the needs of members. "The memoirs group," she said, "will be located where most of the members live."

Several groups meet at the Madison Community House. Others meet in members' homes, in Chatham, Denville, Mountainside, Murray Hill, Parsippany and Essex County. The website indicates which groups have openings and offers contact information.

Some members write only for themselves and their personal gratification, while others want to have their work published. There have been numerous works published among the members. This is a short sample of some

recent publications:

Michelle Cameron of Madison recently published "In the Shadow of The Globe," a novel in verse inspired by the life of Shakespeare.

"Falling Into Place" is a chapbook of poems by Blanche Gruen of the New Vernon section of Harding Township;

Diana Tuorto of Madison has just published "Let the Horses Die; Poems of Longing, Love, and Loss from 1997-2005."

Another poetry offering is "Grave Rubbings; New and Selected Poems" by Ann De Venezia of Mountain Lakes.

One avenue of publication for members is "Goldfinch," the organization's annual literary magazine. "Goldfinch" publishes both prose and poetry in its print edition and has recently launched an online edition as well. Submissions are read "blind," that is, not identified as the work of particular authors, to guarantee objectivity in judging. Women Who Write also sponsors periodic contests for members, such as a recent one for "writing from a prompt on short notice."

Entrants submitted either a poem with fewer than 30 lines or a piece of prose of 500 words or less, inspired by the phrase "The cruelest thing I did..." One winner was chosen in each genre and winning entries were published in "Goldfinch."

The organization also offers other activities.

"We have two readings a year,

one in the spring and one in the fall," explained Weissner. "Our spring reading is coming up on Saturday, April 8 at the Reeves-Reed Arboretum in Summit." This event, which is free and open to the public, will feature members reading their own work, and refreshments will be served. Scheduled from 2 to 4:30, it has been underwritten by a donation from Marjorie Ticknor and the Thomas Glasser Foundation. For more information, call program chairman Lisa Brock at (973) 377-5973, contact her by e-mail at lisabrock@aol.com, or check the website.

"We also offer a poetry workshop in the fall and a prose workshop in the spring. The spring one, which is on Saturday, March 25, will be at the Madison Community House," said Weissner. Also supported in part by the Thomas Glasser Foundation, it will feature author Marina Budhos. It will take place from 1 to 4 p.m. and costs \$25 for members and \$35 for non-members. For more information on the workshop, check the website.

"This workshop closes quickly," Weissner said, "and is limited to 20 participants, but we're not there yet." Budhos, a professor at William Paterson University in Wayne, will be discussing "the inner and outer life of a story."

Anyone interested in joining Women Who Write should contact membership@women-who-write.org.