

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

From mutual book promotion to providing advice and accountability, supporting other writers can help your own career bloom.

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN



Writing can be a lonely venture. Our time is spent in our heads creating the perfect sentences, paragraphs, poems, and stories. Minutes and hours slip by as we get lost in our own world or agonize over a single word or phrase.

As much as we love it, there's always a push and pull. Some days we claw our way to our writing space, knocking over anything that gets in our way so we can sit down and let our words flow. Then there are the days in which we find ourselves cleaning the grime from our ovens instead of writing.

Then add the business side: Finding an agent, dealing with publishers, querying magazines, promoting books, pondering whether to self-publish, updating social media and websites...the list goes on and is enough to make your head spin. Yet we stay in the game, striving to achieve the success we have defined for ourselves. We want our words to resonate with readers.

So when writers come together to support each other, we help everyone. There are more than enough readers to go around and connecting with others in our field keeps us engaged and on track. It can be as simple as checking in with someone on Twitter or as involved as being part of a full-fledged organization. Regardless of the structure of that community, the important thing is to find or create a place where you receive and give support, encouragement, and advice.

Here are some popular communities to take inspiration from – or join.

#5amwritersclub: A Twitter community for early birds

While hanging around on Twitter, I came across the hashtag #5amwritersclub. I dug a little deeper and found a not-so-secret community of people who get up early to write. Many have full-time jobs or families to take care of, so this is their one opportunity to write before they start their days. Participants check in on Twitter with the group hashtag before they begin writing. This concept seemed simple enough to me, but I wondered if it would have any impact on my own productivity.

By nature, I am a morning person, but 5 a.m. seemed early even for me. Regardless, I was determined to participate for a least a few weeks. The first morning was a little rough. After getting my tea, I sat down at my computer around 5:20. I scrolled through the group's hashtags to see who else was there. Funny GIFs, words of encouragement, and people sharing what they planned to accomplish filled the page. I checked in with my tweet and got to work. There was something comforting knowing others were out there writing too.

As the mornings passed, it became easier to get up and check in closer to 5:00. I'd get my tea, get situated on my writing couch, and create my check-in tweet and find a fun GIF or image to go with it. I'd scroll through and see what others posted, like their tweets, and leave comments. This took only five to 10 minutes and became a way to engage my brain before working on my writing. I checked the feed again when I wrapped up my time or needed to stretch. I could see the likes on my post and connect with others again.

After a few weeks, I found if I skipped a day, I really missed that quiet writing time. I also enjoyed seeing the familiar faces pop up in my feed and the chance to connect with them, even if it was only for a brief time. There were quirky little nuances about the group that I began to see over time. (Apparently, Friday is donut day, so lots of donut images are posted.)

The #5amwritersclub hashtag has provided support since 2013. Michelle Dayton, who writes women's fiction and contemporary romance and is the author of *Fast Ride*, *Strange Tango*, and *Wicked Stage*, has been showing up to the group since February and says it is the sense of community and accountability that gets her out of bed when the alarm goes off.

"I noticed that words were getting written (as basic as that sounds)," she says. "I had a book contract due in March and was freaking out at how I was going to get it done around my full-time job and two small kids. But spending the first 60 to 90 minutes of my day writing did just that. I easily made the deadline."

Dayton says there is something fulfilling about dedicating her first hour of the day to something that she loves. "I often joke that I'm starting my 'third shift' when I get to the office – after my writing time and mommy time. The fact that I put what I love to do first...it's very satisfying," she says.

Kimberly Mach, a children's writer from Connecticut working toward getting published, has attended the group for a few years and recently

joined an online critique group formed with other “club” members.

“My [online] partners give great feedback and have helped me solve problem spots in my stories that my ‘in-person’ group hadn’t seen because they were too familiar with the work,” she says.

She also says the online community has helped her grow because it keeps her consistent. “I can usually only get that one hour in each day. Over time, that one hour adds up to a lot of writing. The constant support I get from knowing others are out there writing keeps me going,” she says.

“In short, it has made me a more productive writer. When I review at the end of the year what I have accomplished, I know it stems from the daily time logged at #5amwritersclub.”

The Tall Poppies: Mutual support, mutual success

A couple of years following the 2016 release of her first book, Ann Garvin, author of *I Like You Just Fine When You’re Not Around*, knew she needed to do something different in regard to book promotion. She learned quickly that authors have a larger role in publicity than she ever imagined. It was a challenge for her to put herself out there, find readers, and marketing her book, all while working full time and being a single mom.

With her next book release on the horizon, she realized she had to figure out a new plan or risk wearing herself out and never achieve the writing career she dreamed about. She sought other women authors in Wisconsin area to discuss collaborating on book promotion and offering mutual support: *I’ll talk about your book, you talk about mine*. She wanted a female-only group because she felt women’s voices can get lost, and this would be a way to raise each other up. The others she approached loved the idea, and together they went to work creating a website.

They named the group the Tall Poppies, and they set out to find other woman authors with the same general readership to join. “In the beginning, we were this super loose group,” says Garvin. “It was a ‘do what you can’ group. But then it grew, and our goals changed. It wasn’t OK to have some people working really hard and others not doing anything because they didn’t know what they should be doing.”

Today, all “Poppies,” as members are called, have a job or expertise. There are members in charge of the Twitter account, the book club group, the website, and someone who acts as a guest author coordinator. Outside of their individual jobs, all Poppies are expected to engage on social media.

“It’s so much easier and more fun together. I’d much rather talk about other writers than talk about myself. We all really love each other’s writing,” says Garvin.

In addition to their public web presence, the Poppies use a private Facebook group to stay connected, share ideas, celebrate successes, discuss challenges, and talk about all aspects of writing.

“We really are a dynamic group of women writers,” says Garvin. “This benefits me as a writer in many ways. If I have a question about marketing, plotting, or need a dose of inspiration, I take it to the group. Everyone is always ready to help each other.”

Last year, they started the Facebook page “Bloom” as a way to connect with their readers, get to know them, reward them for being part of the community, introduce them to authors they may have never seen, and provide a home to talk positively about books. Garvin describes it as “the friendliest place on the internet.” Nearly 7,000 fans follow this page to interact with the Poppies.

Tina Ann Forkner, author of *The Real Thing* and four other books, became a Poppy a few years ago when she acquired a new publisher after being away from writing for a few years. “I was writing again,” she says, “and ready to really dive back into the writing community. What better way than to join a group of amazing women writers?”

The group holds steady at around 45 members, which Ann says is the perfect number to manage. Sometimes Poppies leave and openings become available. Women interested in joining the group need to fill out an application on the Tall Poppies website. When a spot opens up, the current Poppies search through the applications for writers with a generosity of spirit, true hunger for writing, two traditionally published books, and the willingness to be an active participant in the group.

For Forkner, the best thing about being a Poppy is the community. “I love the wisdom and hard work of the Poppies, but I really love having a group of women who get what it’s like to be a woman and a writer. We are there for each other. The Poppies have become dear friends to me.”

DEBUT GROUPS: SURVIVING YOUR FIRST YEAR IN PRINT

Publishing your first book can be an exciting time, but it can also bring some apprehension and uncertainty related to marketing, promotion, and expectations. Debut book groups can help authors navigate the terrain of a debut year and provide support, encouragement, and assist with promotion. Here are a few well-established groups nurturing first-time writers.

Debutante Ball

Since 2007, the Debutante Ball has celebrated five debut women authors, or “Debs,” each year. Lara Lillibridge, a current Deb and author of *Girlish*, says the purpose of the group is to provide a support system for authors during



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their debut year, offer a social media collective where the Debs promote each other, and share insight into life as a debut author for emerging writers. At the end of their debut year, the current Debs are responsible for choosing the next five Debs who are traditionally published in a variety of genres. They are committed to diversity and actively seek applicants of various colors, sexual orientation, and faiths. Authors who are willing to help promote each other, have the time to commit to a weekly blog, and who have a community spirit are top on their list.

Like the Tall Poppies, each member of the Debutante Ball has a specific job in addition to the common responsibilities shared by everyone. There is the Tech Guru, Contest Maven, Guest Coordinator, News Flash Organizer, and Social Media Maven. In addition, each Deb is expected to:

- Write and announce a weekly post on the Debutante Ball website
- Respond to comments on their weekly post
- Comment daily on each other’s posts and on guests’ posts
- Promote the blog on their own social media
- Keep the Facebook/Twitter sites active

For their own emotional support, they have a Slack channel to communicate with each other, and there is a private Facebook group for all the past and present Debs. Lillibridge says the former Debs have made themselves very available

via email, phone, and messenger to answer any questions or offer support in any way.

Past Debs found the group to be an invaluable asset to their debut year, and they continue to support and encourage each other today.

For Jenni L. Walsh and her debut novel, *Becoming Bonnie*, the Deb Ball was so much more than a promotional opportunity because of the other women involved. “They were my emotional backbone each step of the way. The debut year for any author can be challenging, but I had four other women by my side who genuinely wished and pushed for my success,” she says.

Jennifer S. Brown, author of *Modern Girls*, found comfort in the community during her debut year. “By giving me four amazing women going through the same process, I had an instant inner circle who understood exactly what I was going through. Before your debut publishes, no one tells you that there can be some real downs. After mine launched, to be honest, I was a little depressed. It seems contradictory – my dream was fulfilled and I was blue – but it also turns out to be very common. Having a community of writers to both validate this and support me through it was helpful beyond words. And in return, now that I’m on the other side, I can help others get through that difficult first year.”

Because of the weekly blog responsibility, author Crystal King says that the group helped her further hone her regular writing practice. “And best of all, I expanded my network far beyond my own, giving me the chance to meet and work with authors I had admired for years, authors whose success has been a real inspiration. I am immensely glad I had the opportunity to be part of the Deb Ball,” she says.

Sweet Sixteens

For author Kathy MacMillan, the road to publication proved to be a lesson in patience. She started querying her book in 2005, got an agent deal in 2009, received a book deal in 2013, and her book *Sword and Verse* was finally released in 2016. She knew the importance of building a readership for her book and began researching debut YA author groups. She found the Fearless Fifteens, a blog authored by young adult (YA) and middle grade (MG) authors debuting in 2015, and in February of 2014, she put the wheels in motion to start a similar 2016 YA debut author group.

After creating a website, MacMillan put a call out to fellow authors. “They started to flock.

Debut authors are usually terrified and are looking for support,” she says.

By August of 2014, she had a 16-member administrative team. They spent a few months deciding the vision for the group, setting up social media accounts, creating their blog, and starting a members-only forum, the Members Clubhouse. “Many authors think their debut year will be all sunshine and roses,” she says, “but there are a lot of disappointments that happen. Having a place to share and go through that together is helpful.”

As with similar groups, the Sweet Sixteens wanted to provide support for each other and cross-promote their books. This group, run by all volunteers, focused on traditionally published YA and MG authors with debut books being released in 2016. When they opened the virtual doors, they had no problem attracting the attention of authors and eventually welcomed 175 new authors to the group. Each member was asked to read at least 10 books from other Sweet Sixteens over the course of the year, committees were formed, a release calendar was created, and they were ready to debut.

The day before a member’s book release, an email was sent to the group announcing the book’s publication. Authors were asked to provide pre-written tweets about the novel so other Sixteens could easily post those on Twitter. Then the books would gain traction on the network because nearly 200 people were tweeting about it on release day. Even though their debut year is now over, the members still continue to support each other via this simple cross-promotion strategy.

Members also worked together to set up special events, do panels at conferences, or hold talks in their geographic areas. In 2016, the American Library Association (ALA) held its big winter meeting in Boston. The Boston Sixteens went in full force to rent out the bar at the conference hotel. The Sixteens chipped in on the costs to cover the event, and the group hosted a special invite-only event for librarians to mix and mingle with 25 debut authors and win prizes. The group considered the event a huge success.

Some authors became best-sellers, won awards, and have released other books, and many still keep in touch with their fellow Sixteens.

“We did a good job with our priorities in providing a place to support debut authors, connecting them with each other and setting up systems that allowed them to help each other through their debut year and beyond,” says MacMillan.

Interested in starting your own online group like the Tall Poppies or the Sweet Sixteens?

Ann Garvin and Kathy MacMillan provide advice:



GARVIN'S ADVICE:

- Grow slowly
- Be clear about why you are doing [this] so you can communicate that to the people coming in
- Pick people who have skills that you don't have in order to spread out the workload for everyone.

MACMILLAN'S ADVICE:

- We did not actively recruit. We felt that we wanted people who really *wanted* to be here. So, having them find us and applying was a big part of that.
- We developed very simple, clear criteria for membership and stuck to them. Other debut groups have gotten into hot water because they started making exceptions for some people but not others, but we have been strict about following our criteria, and that has saved us lots of headaches.

CREATE COMMITTEES

MacMillan also recommends setting up committees to ensure there is a coordinated and strategic effort with the various subgroups.

1. **Alternative Media Committee:** Works on getting traditional media, like *Publisher's Weekly*, to cover the group. **SUGGESTED ACTION ITEMS:** Poll membership for contacts at a range of influential newspapers and trade journals, contact and propose story ideas.

2. **Conference Committee:** Develops proposals to lead workshops at SCBWI conferences, book festivals, etc.

SUGGESTED ACTION ITEMS: Create and circulate a potential conference schedule and have membership indicate interest in representing members as panelists, session leaders, or otherwise, initiate threads in the forum for brainstorming workshop ideas.

3. **Meetups and Retreats Committee:**

Coordinates regional meetups and social events for group members.

SUGGESTED ACTION ITEMS: Create calendar where members post travel and conference plans, poll members to determine interest in possible retreat(s).

4. **Contest/Giveaway Committee:** Coordinates contests and solicits giveaways to use as contest prizes.

SUGGESTED ACTION ITEMS: Poll membership to request donations (signed arcs, gift cards to bookstores, free critiques of manuscripts or query letters), organize and coordinate giveaways and monthly contests.

5. **Book Tour Committee:** Coordinates multi-member book signings.

SUGGESTED ACTION ITEM: Survey membership, asking people about their travel preferences and preferred timing. The goal is mainly to see if a core group wants to make some appearances together.

6. **Launch Party Committee:** Coordinates launch party info for members.

SUGGESTED ACTION ITEMS: Create a repository for information members gather on launch parties. Eventually, this is how everyone knows the dates and where to go to support each other. Explore multi-author/regional launch parties for authors debuting at the same time (possibly in concert with the Meetups and Retreats Committee).

Writing organizations and groups

For writers who don't have a book out yet or are looking for a more face-to-face community, consider joining a local writers organization.

Back in 2008, after actively writing for about 10 years, I wanted to create a community where writers could connect, support each other, and share resources. There was nothing in my local area, so I decided to form Northern Colorado Writers (NCW), a member-based group for writers of all levels and genres. Over the course of the eight years I was director, the group grew to nearly 200 members. In addition to our annual writers conference, NCW offered workshops, monthly coffee meetings for members, a newsletter, resources, a yearly retreat, and, most of all, support. It was amazing to watch writers grow in their confidence and skills and support of each other. Under the direction of the current director, April Moore, NCW continues to be a strong community with over 250 members who encourage and help each other on their writing journeys.

But groups such as NCW exist in every state, such as The Willamette Writers in Oregon or the Detroit Working Writers. Most were started by people looking to build a community so they wouldn't have to navigate the writing world alone. A great resource for finding a group near you is Writer's Relief (writersrelief.com/writing-groups-for-writers). Also look into national organizations, such as the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, that have active local chapters where members get together on a regular basis.

For more casual in-person groups, you can always go to Meetup.com to see if there are writers in your area who get together to talk shop. This is a great, low-commitment way to connect with those who have the same passion for writing as you do.

There are so many ways to connect with other writers online or in your community. If you can't find something, then create your own group.

Writing doesn't have to be a lonely venture or an industry with a *me versus them* mentality. Coming together to support and encourage each other makes us *all* better writers. 

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