

## **Finding the "Perfect" Critique Partner(s)**

By Sharon Buchbinder

In 2004, three years after passing the half-century mark, I took stock of my life and realized that I had abandoned my first love, writing fiction. With a grown son, a teaching job, and the summer beckoning me, I told my husband that I was going to Florida for a month to write. Dumbfounded, he nodded acceptance—then realized that meant he would be alone in Maryland for an entire month. After negotiations, we agreed on a schedule that would enable him to be with me for fifteen out of the thirty days I would be away. Not the life of a writing recluse, but the space I needed to begin.

My sister and friends in Florida greeted me with open arms—and an open bar. At five in the evening, on the third day of my feverish clacking away at the keyboard, I read them my first chapter. They laughed, they clapped, they asked for more. They, along with my patient husband, became my first critique group, and continue to this day in that role. At this point in my new adventure, I needed the kind and gentle reinforcement of family and friends to keep me away from the whirling eddies of self-doubt and the undertow of my internal editor screaming "YOU SUCK!" At the end of the month, I returned to Maryland, the start of a new semester and the routine of the day job. The

cheering section from Florida continued to send me emails asking for chapters, giving me the encouragement to continue to write. I began an email list with my founding "members," then added others as more of our friends began to read my work. After a year, I completed the first draft of my novel, which was subsequently rejected by eighty-two agents and several publishers. The only agents and publishers interested in my "baby" were ones who were denounced in large red print on numerous websites.

Discouraged, I asked my textbook publisher for assistance, and he referred me to a professional editor. I spent a good deal of time and money on this avenue, and while the comments and suggestions she made were extremely useful and educated me very quickly on the first round, I received diminishing returns on my investment on subsequent exchanges. My last letter from this editor was clearly cut and pasted from another author's critique, signaled by a sentence that began, "As you know Nancy," Those comments are now on the top shelf in my office closet, gathering dust.

I attended a state-wide writers' conference hosted at my university (I didn't have to spend a lot of money on travel!) and signed up for a writing group in my area. Shortly after the conference, I received an email from another attendee inviting me to join a mystery writing group in a local retirement

community. Yes. You read that right. The leader of the group was a retired women's studies professor and self-published author of several books. A witty and fun octogenarian, she gathered the little group of six around her chair at her apartment and regaled us with her experiences in the National Organization for Women, the marches, and the fights for equality. We drank tea, and reviewed each others' work in twenty-page chunks and looked for opportunities for improvement. Then, we began to dwindle. One had an elderly parent and child issues; another had a spouse who was ill, another moved away—and the biggest blow: our fearless leader fell in love! Swept off her feet by an older man, romance, travels and new adventures beckoned her. While I still keep in touch with her, we do not meet any more.

In between work and writing, I found an online writing forum run by a woman in the UK. In this, I learned how to write flash fiction and how to give and take critiques in that medium. Emoticons help with tone, but the forum began to have cliques and sniping attacks which are all too easy when you can hide behind a computer. The downfall of this forum was the lack of clear rules for voting on the best flash of the week. Egos, cut throat antics, and acting out abounded. You would have thought the winner received a trip to the Bahamas! The real prize? Selecting the prompt for the following week's flash contest. I

left that forum after a particularly nasty round of fighting and went back to minding my own business...

That is, until I was invited to join a different online writing forum by another refugee. This one has rules and protocols, public sections, and private sections open only to dedicated critique partners, aka, "critters." It also has a firm, but gentle owner. Is this a romance writers' forum? No. It is a dark fiction group where horror, mystery, supernatural events, vampires, werewolves, and zombies reign. But, they are willing to critique romance, and have been enormously helpful as an additional "set of eyes" for my short stories. I continue to belong to this group, and while I don't spend as much time there as I used to, I know they are always available and valuable.

In between dodging cyber-snipers, a non-fiction writing friend recommended that I join RWA and the Maryland Chapter, MRW. I've been a member for about three years, and have been delighted with the workshops and opportunities to learn more about the craft through online courses and face-to-face conferences. After publishing a story with the Wild Rose Press, I had a subsequent one returned to me by an editor with the strong recommendation that I find a critique group. I put a call out on the MRW loop: **"MF ISO RWCP:** That's right. Married female in search of Romance Writing Critique Partner. Willing to share housekeeping duties on partner's manuscript. Able to spot

problems with others' writing--but myopic when it comes to my own. Constructive criticism gratefully accepted. Interested? Email me at..."

Three people responded to my posting, and we agreed to work on our critiques by email. My preferred mode is to include a cover email with general comments and observations, beginning with something that I really liked about the manuscript: characters, descriptions, dialogue, concept, etc. I like to include resources as attachments that I have found to be helpful. Whether it's an article on formatting, a link to the twelve steps of intimacy, or a listing of great online courses I have taken, I think it's important to share what I have discovered along the way. I also use the comment feature in Word to write on the manuscript, giving specific examples of the general comments. Since I have connected with my romance writing critique partners, I have had two more stories accepted by the Wild Rose Press, including the one (now much revised) which had been returned by the editor.

In addition to my MRW colleagues, I also belong to a face-to-face writing group, which meets monthly. Led by the retired chair of the English department at my university, this group has shown me that it is true that everyone has a story to tell. We have men and women, several English-as-a-second-language speakers, people writing children's stories, memoirs,

action/adventure, southern tales, translations from Chinese to English, and stories that don't fit into a genre. We read our work out loud, which is an excellent way to find echoes, Tom Swifties, and tongue-twisters. Since we are all at very different stages in our writing careers, we have been extremely careful with each other, almost walking on eggs, to prevent hurt feelings. Over the past year, we have begun to mark up each other's manuscripts, because we now *trust* each other to be constructive.

While my first novel still languishes in a drawer, and another one is outlined and awaiting my attention, I do not regret the wandering route I have taken to find the "perfect" critique partners. Each experience has brought a new lesson. Along the way I have made friends across the genres, discovered what to do, as well as what *not* to do. In a nutshell, here are my lessons learned in my search for the "perfect" critique partners:

- Be willing to ask for help.
- Be open to trying new approaches.
- Give as much as, or more than, you receive.
- Be kind, honest *and* constructive.
- There is no one, true way to tell a story.
- Have a good sense of humor.

- Say thank you for the time and effort invested.
- Know when to walk away when it's not working.

While it can be challenging to keep up with reading and reviewing other people's work, *plus* continuing to write your own, I have found it is an exchange well worth the effort. As my writing has improved, I've increased my network of acquaintances, and have discovered some true friends. May you have good stories to write, honest and kind critiques to read, and many HEAs on your path to finding the "perfect" critique partner(s).

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