

# The new writing groups: More writing, less merlot

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I used to think I'd rather retype the entire John Grisham catalogue than join a writing group -- all that whining about writer's block, trash-talking bestsellers and alternately getting buzzed on espresso and sedated with cheap merlot.

But a new breed of literary collective may have changed my mind.

These groups still provide a forum to share the highs and lows of writing the next great novel (or screenplay or memoir), but increasingly they also tackle the down-and-dirty business of how to land an agent, get published with major imprints and navigate the literary world. Smart and tightly knit, they boost the profile and marketability of all their members.

Meet **SPiN Writes**, a group of Vancouver novelists that includes **Mary Novik**, 61, **June Hutton**, 51, and **Jen Sookfong Lee**, 29.

The trio met at the University of B.C.'s Booming Ground workshop in 2002 and immediately clicked, both personally and on the page.

"We treated ourselves seriously right from the start," Hutton says. "We knew that we wanted to not only finish our novels, but we wanted to get published."

SPiN meets monthly. Its members workshop their writing through an online forum and hold an annual general meeting to set one- and five-year goals. The group has a promotional website (**Spinwrites.com**), and the three often read together in local venues.

Four years in, all three writers are making significant professional headway.

Hutton says agent **John Pearce** signed her, based not only on the strength of her manuscript but also on her membership in SPiN. "I don't think I would be where I am right now without the group."

Pearce is currently shopping around Hutton's first project, a novel titled **Underground**.

Toronto's **Dean Cooke** represents Novik, and Doubleday will publish her second novel, **Conceit**, in 2007.

And B.C. literary agent **Carolyn Swayze** represents Lee, whose first novel, **The End of East**, will be released by Knopf Canada in spring 2007.

The SPiN members' distinctive writing styles and personal interests may be the secret to a relationship that has already outlasted most Hollywood marriages.

"We are so very different," Lee says. "That's what keeps us together."

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If success is contagious, I'm sure non-fiction writers nationwide are jostling to share a pint with Vancouver's **FCC group**. Members **Charles Montgomery** and **J.B. MacKinnon** took home the Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction in 2005 and 2006, respectively. MacKinnon and **John Vaillant** were also finalists for the British Columbia Award for Canadian Non-Fiction.

Members **Alisa Smith**, **Chris Tenove**, **Deborah Campbell** and **Brian Payton** aren't exactly slouches, either. All have published books or projects in the works and write regularly for top magazines.

The group bonded over a passion for true, narrative-style stories and some serious wanderlust. Tenove explains that "we were all lonely freelancers working away in our living rooms and really wanted a support network."

Meetings have become erratic because of members' travel, but they still support one other with valuable advice, contacts and feedback.

(Emily's Monkey events -- the next one to take place on June 15 -- provide an opportunity to meet FCC members. Contact [emilysmonkey@gmail.com](mailto:emilysmonkey@gmail.com) for information.)

The formula for successful writing groups seems clear: less merlot and more actual writing. Literary groups are still a way to tighten your work and stay in the loop, with a new promotional twist. Maybe Tenove puts it best: "We believe that a rising tide raises all boats."

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