



Carindale Writers Group newsletter

24 March 2011

Present: Beverley, Debby, Hazel, Rolando, Gary, Maria S, Sandy S, Dawn, Chip, Brian, Judith, Jeff.

To begin our meeting today we acknowledged that this is the last one we will hold at this venue, the temporary meeting room set up alongside Carindale Library. We are conscious that members are staying away because of a dislike for this less-than-perfect facility. However, there is good news. Until the completion of a new library in Carindale, the Carindale Writers Group will meet at **Holland Park Library**, 81 Seville Road, Holland Park. (Phone 3403 7756). Our first meeting there is on 7th April 2011 at 10am. (We will not be changing our name to the Holland Park Writers group... smiles!) Morning tea will be provided but please bring your own mugs.

Please arrive at the library early so that we can start our meeting promptly at 10 o'clock. We will try to finish at 1pm but we are permitted to remain in the meeting room until 2pm if our meeting should flow on till then.

Please note also this important change to our meeting schedule: in future, we will meet on the first and third Thursdays of every month. This is to fit in with the availability of Holland Park library's meeting room. Our next meeting still falls two weeks after our previous one.

Following a general question, we had a brief update on members we haven't seen for a while. Some such as Leslee-Anne are away at the moment on holiday, Karen has taken a sabbatical till mid-year to write the food critique book she's been commissioned to do, and others such as Lydia have notified us they've had to withdraw from the writing group for a defined time due to business commitments. Others who were members are now living abroad but still like to receive this newsletter.

A critical observation was made about the current length of 250 words or so for our suggested exercise for each meeting. This word limit was felt to be too restricting. The intention with these exercises is to encourage our writers to write and ANY topic or theme is better than none. After all, writer's write – that's what we do. Most of us would find it easier to write at greater length, so the upper word limit is now increased to 500 words or so. That's about the length of a page if your work is single spaced and written in a common font such as Times New Roman, in 12 point size.

Another suggestion was made to speed up round-table critiques of a featured reader's work, by asking only those to offer a critique who have something new to add over what may have been mentioned before. It's quite okay for a writers group member to pass on giving a critique if you feel you have nothing fresh to add.

Finally, we are encouraged to submit new stories to our website www.carindalewritersgroup.org

Our featured reader today was Hazel Barker. Hazel is writing a memoir from the perspective of a child. She has written over 70,000 words to date on this work. Her story is called *See No Evil: Story of a War Child*.

Hazel's reading evoked Colonial Burma of the early 1940's. Before Hazel began she asked for suggestions to enliven this section. She feels this chapter, the fourth, is somewhat on the quiet side. It comes after some vivid and haunting descriptions of her family fleeing from wartime violence. To have this chapter as a quiet reprieve is, we feel, a necessary oasis in her work.

There is a large cast of family members in Hazel's story. One suggestion to arise was that Hazel might separate out some of these people to characterize them more; for instance, to write a full chapter on just her father, who was clearly a major influence on the family, and then another chapter devoted to just her mother.

There was some disagreement with the above suggestion by others of our writers who believed that, as the characters in *See No Evil* are an integral part of Hazel's family, they must be chronicled in association with one another. Having the father as an ambivalent character, sometimes caring and sometimes violent, brings a necessary tension to the work. However it's done, more background on each character wouldn't go amiss for character development and more dialogue was recommended to bring the characters to life.

We loved Hazel's imagery, especially when she wrote of the colours and scents of the flowers of the countryside. More detail and how the author felt about them could be included to draw out the story. The exotic climate and very different culture was a novelty and a pleasure to hear about in Hazel's reading.

To avoid 'reportage' the author could add more personal emotion to the story; 'show, don't tell', being the advice most often given to writers. Consistency in tense was also recommended. The reader can become easily confused when tenses vacillate between the present and the past.

Hazel should be complimented on how she read aloud, slowly and with clear diction. She also brought along enough copies of the work she would read so that everyone present had their own copy.

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There were some pieces of general advice to arise during our meeting, as always happens amongst a lively group of 'literati!' (again, smiles!) Editing your own work is strongly recommended. In places, one's work needs pruning. In other places it needs elaboration. If what you've written doesn't progress your story you have to ask yourself 'why is it there?' To give the story greater coherence you might have to excise anything that is not taking that story anywhere. If you're onto your umpteenth draft and there is still some point that leaves even one reader confused, perhaps greater description or a few more paragraphs are required. Overall, every author has a voice and that voice needs to be preserved.

Advice to featured writers was this. Don't cut out sections in the work you bring to the table when you're seeking criticism on it. We like to see the nuts and bolts of how you work. If the copy for your presentation differs from your master manuscript it risks presenting us with puzzling jumps from one section to the next and missed transitions, present in the original. What we want to hear from the featured reader is a well-drafted and well-edited piece of work which can be read aloud in about 20 minutes. It's a good idea to bring several copies of this work for distribution to as many of our Carindale Writers Group members as possible. We can then make annotations and suggestions to the work under consideration which will be returned to the author, saving time during the critique process. Having a written copy before us makes it so much easier too for the hard-of-hearing to be party to the reading.

A précis of the entire work by the featured reader/writer of the day would be useful in helping the listeners to place in context the excerpt being read to us. Something on the lines of a book jacket blurb would be reasonable.

Our readers should be commended on the high quality of the work they present at every meeting.

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Our suggested topic to work on for this meeting was *An Unforgettable Character*.

Rolando gave us his story of Martin St. James, a hypnotist, a man with most unusual skills. Even governments feared him at one point. "Are our secrets safe with this man around?" proclaimed the newspapers of the day. St. James' whole desire now is to use his skills to help heal people.

Gary gave us a piece called Brussels Sprouts wherein vegetables were categorized as being funny or not, by a lecturer who simply wanted to inject a bit of humour into his lectures.

Chip wrote a poignant piece about Mary, a science graduate and one of two women who wanted to be more than friends with a good-looking male of their student fraternity. The second woman chased the young man to the point where, despite being gay, he succumbed to marriage with her. Sadly, Mary afterwards took her own life.

Judith read from her mother's memoir. Tall Sandy was eloquently described as a bushman who tangled with a possum. Other characters to appear were the Forbes' doctor and his delinquent son. No matter what devilment the son got up to, the Doctor always paid up on his behalf and never apologised for him.

Bev's unforgettable character was Pop, the man she cheekily chose at age 7 to be her stand-in grandfather. Her story began with Pop's demise then took us back to how kind he always was to his would-be granddaughter. "You'll become what you're supposed to be" was the wonderful advice he gave her.

Deb read *What Became Of Him?* About the rapid rise to fame and equally quick but mysterious end to the racehorse Shergar. He won the prestigious Derby at the moment her first child was born which is what makes him unforgettable in her family.

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Because we had some time remaining to us Brian asked our advice on whether he should branch off in the novel he is writing at the moment. He wondered aloud whether to take his protagonist to Riga in Latvia before returning his character to his English setting. A lot of additional research would be required to add credibility to this section of the story if Brian were to write this in, but the important question was whether or how much it would advance the plot. We couldn't agree one way or the other and would like to see both versions written!

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For our meeting on 7 April, our first in the Holland Park Library, our featured reader will be Jeff Matheson. For the meeting on 21 April, Brian Rowell will read some of his work for us.

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Jane suggests the following writer's websites for you to visit:

What is slang?

<http://www.quora.com/What-is-slang/answer/Jonathon-Green?srid=Ihd>

Copyblogger

<http://www.copyblogger.com/>

Backstory

<http://mjroseblog.typepad.com/backstory/>

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Chip's Computer Tips

Freebie Help By Leo Walks You Through Software Help

You wouldn't judge a book by its cover, and you shouldn't judge a piece of software by its name. Especially when it sports a name like Help by Leo. If you can overlook the hokey moniker, you just might be impressed by this interactive help tool. It's certainly not perfect, but Help by Leo (free for personal use) is pretty darn helpful.

Help by Leo is accessible via a small, floating query bar. Once you enter your search terms, results begin appearing beneath the bar. The free (for personal use only; business users can contact vendor Kryon Systems for per-seat pricing info) app provides interactive help for a handful of applications, including Microsoft Office 2007, Facebook, Firefox, and iTunes. Support for Office 2010 is expected in early 2011, and the company is considering adding support for additional apps, such as Photoshop, in the future.

Once installed, Leo appears as a small query bar, into which you enter your help request, using any kind of language you'd like. Real-time results appear as soon as you begin typing, and the results are refined as you finish typing your query. Each result links to one of Leo's help wizards, which will deliver the answer to your query. For the most part, I found that Leo returned results directly related to the question I asked, and the app was able to provide answers for most of my basic questions.

Sometimes, however, Leo would return results for an unrelated application, even when I included the name of the app itself in my query. For example, when I asked "how do I set up home sharing in iTunes?", Leo returned results for Office 2007 apps, as well as results for iTunes. And, what's worse, Leo couldn't answer this query at all; it offered no information on iTunes' home sharing feature.

When Leo was able to provide an answer to my query, as it was the vast majority of the time, the application really shone. It doesn't just send you to a text-heavy page and require that you dig through paragraphs to find out how to accomplish your task; instead, Leo literally shows you how it's done. Leo offers two options. In one, called "Do It," Leo actually accomplishes the task itself; you don't even have to touch the mouse (unless the application asks for your input). You can sit back and watch as Leo completes a task, such as creating a chart in an Excel worksheet. The other option, called "Guide me," has Leo walk you through the process, showing you where and when to click and enter info.

Help by Leo was indeed very helpful most of the time. It did occasionally stumble, but not so often that I'd hesitate to recommend it. Leo will prove especially useful to software newbies who are intimidated by text-heavy help menus, and would benefit from the application's ability to complete tasks for them. And even advanced users just might find that Leo has a little help to offer them, too.

FN Karmatz