

Improv Writing
March 2009 Write Brain
Presenters: Bonnie Hagan and Chris Mandeville
By Deb Buckingham

The room swirled with activity. Writers of all levels entered, hoping to be indulged with ideas to get writing. Thirty-eight writers, to be exact. It was the March Write Brain, and they called it Improv Night.

Bonnie Hagan, who has been attending an improv night for six years says, “You try and not get involved, you just access your subconscious; go for it.” Chris Mandeville teaches writer’s workshops and says, “Improv is off the cuff, it’s unrehearsed, and it’s flying by the seat of your pants. It’s a safe place to stoke your creative fires.”

I sat on the edge of my seat the whole time, sipping my too-strong Starbucks. The words they used to describe this newfound artistic expression were impressive: “vomit writing”—it comes right out of you. It taps you into the universal truth; it puts you in that last-minute frame of mind; it’s where the magic happens; it gets you in the zone.

If that’s not enough to convince you, the benefits will. Like silencing your inner critic. (Yeah, I’ve got one of those.) What’s more, they tell me, I will get to know my character better and maybe even meet some new ones. It’s an opportunity for exploration. It’s a tool to help push us through writer’s block. It’s about getting something on the page. Chris called it “uncorrected artistic expression.”

And then we were asked to work. Work? I’d been doing that all day! But what the heck—it was the reason I came. Prompt one was given: The door wouldn’t open. We all ducked our heads and wrote like mad, in silence, for four minutes straight. It sure goes by fast when the magic happens and you’re in the zone. We wrote furiously, creating this new beginning-to-something. Or maybe not. But perhaps it would at least be worth picking apart later.

Bonnie and Chris then shared the rules of improv writing. (Rules? It has rules?) The rules were simple:

1. You have to read out loud. It provides that “I’ve got to get something on the page” pressure, to know you’ll have to share.
2. There is no critiquing—no judging— and no self-critiquing. (This was good news.)
3. No censoring when you read what’s on the paper.
4. The prompt is there only to facilitate the spark. Not to dictate where you go with it.

Okay, I thought. I could handle these rules.

Just before prompt two was announced, I froze for a second. I hoped it would come as easy as prompt one—and it did! The prompt: “My first thought was that he lied in every word.”

After a few more minutes of furious scribbling, it was time for us to read aloud. I knew it was coming. I read, along with the other 37. No big deal! It was fun. It made me realize that reading aloud is a valuable tool; it does something to the words on the page, making them come alive.

The best part of the evening was the door prize at the end: an inspirational box filled with objects to inspire improv writing prompts. Guess who won it? Yeah, you’re

right—me.

By the way, did you notice I started off with one of the writing prompts? I can learn. They can teach an old dog a new trick, so to speak. So, how about you? Are you willing to give it a shot? Start your own group, or ask Bonnie and Chris about theirs.

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