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WINE, WOMEN, & WORDS

HOW SEVEN WOMEN REBELLED AGAINST UTAH CULTURE IN THE 1990S—WITH A WRITING GROUP

In February 1998, seven women gathered in the home of novelist Kate Woodworth in Salt Lake City. To step away from their domestic lives in that era, in that Utah, was subversive. However, "There was something that we needed to do, we wanted to do, and we were going to do it, and the things around us just needed to accommodate that," Woodworth says.

What they needed to do was write. Daily life became a barrier to the writing life. It isolated them from other literary women and alienated them from their own voices.

They named their group "Wine, Women & Words," or 3W. "The only reason 'wine' was first was the rhythm of the name," explains Susan Sample, PhD, Writer-in-Residence at Huntsman Cancer Institute.

Between them, the women of 3W now have 16 published books, four MFAs, and three PhDs. They credit 3W with creating a foundation for their careers. And for the first time since 2005, 3W will gather in person on June 21, 2 pm, at the Park City Library.

Their panel, "The Generative Power of Creative Writing Communities," nods to a form of connection that is undervalued and increasingly rare today. 3W is the story of how we find or create communities in which we can be ourselves—in which relationships built upon trust, honesty, and love support us in doing the thing we need to do.

3W began inside the public affairs department at the University of Utah, where Sample and Woodworth worked in the late 1980s. Sample, raised in New Jersey and Silicon Valley, completed an MFA in fiction in 1984 but hadn't written creatively in years. "I had two very young daughters, and I was finding absolutely no time to do any writing," she says.

Woodworth, originally from Boston, had planned to become a famous novelist during college. A professor encouraged her to have a plan B, which led her to journalism, Salt Lake City, and the U of U. At first, her writing life in Utah was rich and productive. She co-founded Writers at Work, a writing conference in Park City, and published her first novel, Racing into the Dark, in 1989. Then marriage and motherhood consumed her writing life.

"We were the first generation of women to be professionally in the workforce," Woodworth explains. In addition to 40-hour work weeks, "I had to come home, I had to pick the kids up, I had to fix dinner, I had to do the laundry, I had to clean the house, all of those things."

In 1997, Sample attended a memoir writing conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico—partly because Woodworth (affectionately known as "Auntie Accountability" in 3W) wouldn't let her skip it. The conference showed Sample what was missing in her writerly life. Back in Utah, she asked Woodworth to join her in starting a writing group.

For women in 1990s Utah, a writing group took courage. "How do you--as a woman writer who is a working mother--negotiate the time and the space to do something that is not going to necessarily generate income but is critically important to you?" Woodworth asks. "That, to me, was a really important foundation of what we were doing."

Sample and Woodworth called up writers they knew, who knew other writers, until they found five co-conspirators. They came from strikingly different backgrounds.

Dorothy Allred Solomon was the twenty-eighth child of a polygamist leader who fathered forty-eight kids from seven wives before being murdered. Solomon left that community, studied at the U of U, and in 1984 published In My Father's House: A Memoir of Polygamy. Then everything stalled. "My writing had suffered, and I needed people to believe, against the grain of my family, that my writing mattered and that it was important enough to take time away," Solomon says.

Kristen Gould Case, raised in New England, moved to Park City in 1986 and left a career in corporate advertising to raise her sons. She was working from home as a freelance writer when she first attended Writers at Work. There she met Solomon (coincidentally, her neighbor) and Dawn Marano.

When 3W assembled in 1998, Marano, raised in California's San Fernando Valley, had just resigned her MFA candidacy at the U of U and felt "adrift." The professors demeaned her writing for not fitting their postmodernist dogma. She loathed the sycophantic "guild" culture at the U and suffered for it.

The U of U also felt hostile to Heather Hirschi, raised in Salt Lake City by hippie-activist parents. "There was a sense of being demeaned for wanting to come from the heart," she recalls. Plus, the coursework was obnoxious. "I had to read an entire novel about eating a bowl of oatmeal."

Wendy Rawlings, a second-year PhD student in creative writing from New York, had a similar experience to Hirschi. "I felt I didn't have anybody who was going to read my work on campus. I









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didn't feel mentored. I was almost in despair."

3W offered a haven—away from domestic life, from the U of U, from a literary world that still expected women to write about children and marriage. The group had an unapologetically feminist perspective.

Between 1998 and 2005, 3W met once a month, rotating homes. It began at night, after the mothers (five of the seven) had fed their families. Before each meeting, one writer would distribute physical copies of her work to the others, who would come prepared to discuss it.

The women's prior experiences with judgmental workshops, intellectual snobbery, and one-uppers in academia motivated 3W to be different. Safety—an oft-maligned and misinterpreted word—had to come first.

"I have belonged to several writing groups in my long life," Solomon says, "and this one was unique in our mutual willingness to embrace each other no matter what was going on in our lives and tell each other the truth and be there for each other in moments of vulnerability."

Feedback doesn't come out of a vacuum. The relationship in which it is given, the intentions of the giver, and the quality of the feedback matter. That sense of being supported, not judged, made a difference. "We gave each other some harsh feedback," Solomon recalls. "I think it wasn't experienced as harsh because we came from love."

Love of writing brought 3W together, and in turn, 3W facilitated the act of writing. The women met monthly for the next seven years with ripple effects lasting into the present.

Sample had long wanted to write poetry but didn't because she felt unqualified. Eventually, she pitched 3W a challenge: How about each member write one piece outside their genre? That pretext gave Sample permission to write poems. Woodworth remembers it as one of the few moments in which she witnessed a writer find their voice.

Sample's poetry progressed. She took second in a Utah poetry competition with a collection of ten poems that became her first chapbook, Terrible Grace. That opened the door to launch a writing program for teens who'd undergone heart, liver, and kidney transplants at the U of U. "I didn't realize it, but that was the beginning of a writing community centered on health and the body," Sample says. That community continues to this day.

For Marano, 3W sparked a realization. "What I began to suspect is that I probably enjoyed being an editor or being a mentor, at least as much, if not more, than I enjoyed writing my own work." After working as an acquisitions editor for the University of Utah Press between 1996 and 2002, she founded a developmental editing firm, Dawn Marano and Associates, in 2003. She served over 170 authors of fiction and nonfiction before retiring in 2018. Marano also returned to the U of U to finish her MFA, which she completed in 2005.

3W helped Rawlings endure her isolation at the U of U and publish her first book, Come Back Irish, a collection of short stories. That led to a tenure-track faculty position at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, where she taught creative writing until retiring this spring. In Tuscaloosa, she never managed to find a writing community quite like 3W.

Hirschi went on to teach writing at the University of Utah and published a book: Creative Writing the Easy Way, now in its third edition. Dororthy got back to writing and has published five more books.

"Watching the 3W group all publish books gave me the courage to say yes when Deer Valley and Ski Magazine asked me if I could write their coffee table book," Case says. She wrote Deer Valley: The Quest for Excellence, published in 2003, and served as editor of Park City Magazine for 16 years.

Woodworth moved back to the East Coast and worked as a medical writer—but struggled with her novels. "I wrote far more manuscripts than I would want to really confess to in trying to find the second book," she says.

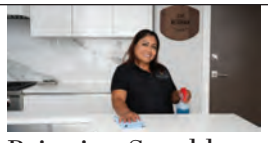
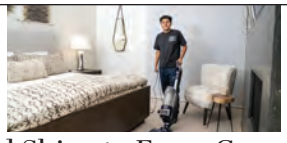
Years later, feeling overwhelmed with workshops, she mentally went back to 3W. "One of the things I really learned from being a part of that group is, I can do it, I can trust myself. And that's when I really found my way through the manuscript to this book that is coming out."

Woodworth's Little Great Island, a work of climate change fiction, was published on May 6.

Why did 3W endure when so many writing groups don't? Trust and safety, it seems, are fundamental to an environment in which critique is perceived as helpful. The most common communities are "faux communities," to borrow a term from Solomon. They form around happenstance, shallow interests, and sometimes coercion. They find their strength in something besides healthy relationships.

The panel on June 21 at the Park City Library will address that and many other topics.

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