

To the aspiring fiction writer,

When I began writing fulltime in 2019, I read somewhere that I should join a writer's group. How was I supposed to do that when I was living in Switzerland? It's not like I could jog down to the local library and ask around. Sure, there were writing groups in Switzerland, but they wrote in German, French, or Italian.

I moved to southern Switzerland in December of 2019, and by February 2020 a strange new virus was making the rounds. The next two years of Covid led me to depend on ZOOM: a chance to choose from the ever-expanding range of online classes, and the opportunity to meet with Americans across the ocean while sitting in the comfort of my own living room. We take it for granted today, but six years ago, ZOOM came as quite a blessing for my isolated situation.

I think I took my first online class already in April of 2019 with Stanford University (see my blog about online writing classes if you want my opinion on which to take first). I chose that particular class because it was called "Writing through Struggle" and provided a supportive community, daily prompts, and literary samples to help writers find meaning and healing. My husband was dying at the time, and that challenge was fueling my writing but also getting in my way. If I remember right, that is when I met the first members of my current writing group.

But I'll let them tell their own story. Currently, the Taste Life Twice Writers include seven people at varying stages in our writing careers with interests ranging from poetry to memoir, flash fiction to novels. We meet once a month via ZOOM for about an hour and a half to discuss a chosen monthly theme. Mary is our organizer, and after she chooses our next theme from a hat at the end of our Zoom, we send the group any related articles we come across in the following month, along with potential subjects for future meetings. Here are the other members of my writing group:

Mary Clements Fisher



Born in California a Navy brat, then a Midwest preacher's kid, for years I wandered from one small town to another with my family. A demon student, a passionate sweetheart, an impulsive bride, after graduating from the University of Iowa in 1971, I taught high school Speech and English. In 1978, I gave birth to a miracle. By 1980, I joined Crate and Barrel and grew into a business team leader, moving for the company from Illinois to California where I began.

Now retired, a grandmother of another miracle, a lover and friend to my husband of 55 years, a traveler when time allows, in 2012 I morphed into a sporadic but sincere student of writing and psychology in Stanford's

Continuing Education Program. Caregiving for my daughter and her only child after my daughter's severe birth injury in 2014 catapulted me deeper into writing about trauma and tragedy. Writing provided me a place to mourn, to recover, and to find peace. During Covid shutdown, I wrote. When my mother-in-law died, I wrote. After my brother died, I wrote. I write about the struggles and saving graces of friends and family and imaginary characters.

Imagery of poetry seeps into my prose, poetry flows out of prose gone rogue, and memoir gains from creative nonfiction rigor. Practice in one genre feeds another. And psychology courses force me to consider the fears, joys, and reluctant truths of my characters and myself. I wander in a different landscape—writing.

A reader from youth of Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, E.E. Cummings, Pearl S. Buck, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, I immerse myself now in the writing of Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Mary Oliver, Jane Smiley, Barbara Kingsolver, Kristin Hannah, and dozens of writers who never won nor ever will win a Pulitzer Prize. Reading remains the foundation of decent writing. Balancing the two is my daily challenge.

A member of two writing groups—Taste Life Twice Writers, where we five women and two men support each other’s writing and publishing goals, and a trio of nonfiction writers, Daughters over the Decades—I learn from these talented people and share ideas with abandon. Even after more than a dozen publications, self-doubt casts a shadow over my shoulder when I overhear my husband on the phone telling a friend he’s breakfasting with *the author*. But I sit up straighter. Even if I wander off course when discouraged, I return to the writing path because it feeds my need to inspire insights into the familiar.

Believe in yourself: If you write, you are a writer. Please join me @maryfisherwrites and maryfisherwrites@squarespace.com

Wendy A. Miller



It’s a myth that writing happens in solitude. The acknowledgment pages in any book quietly prove otherwise—good stories are shaped by many hands. Fate smiled on me when I met two members of my writing group in my first online class at Stanford University, *Writing through Struggle*.

I had always wanted to be a writer, but I never believed I was talented enough to be published. I loved the process—the shaping of a story, the search for the most compelling way to tell it. My career in public relations required constant writing, yet I rarely felt confident in my words. That changed when I had cancer. Cancer stripped away my hesitation; it made me feel like I had nothing to lose. Writing about my experience became a way to process what I was living through. Finding a supportive writing group gave me the courage to keep going.

Now there are seven of us. We edit each other’s work, share resources, meet monthly on Zoom, celebrate publications, and steady each other through rejection. I’ve learned that accepting critique requires trust. Seeing my writing through discerning eyes stretches my thinking and strengthens each piece. I’m deeply grateful for this writing community.

Wendy A. Miller is a nonfiction writer based in Oregon whose work blends personal narrative with cultural reflection. Her essays have appeared in *The New York Times* (*Tiny Love Stories*), *Under the Gum Tree*, *Literary Mama*, *Sweet Tree Review*, and more. www.wendyamiller.com

Suzanne Colttrell



I’m an Ohio buckeye by birth, but I’ve been living with my husband in central, rural North Carolina for the past fifty years. Teaching and family life limited my time for writing. I hold a B.A. in history from East Carolina U., a M.A. in history from Virginia Tech., and a M.Ed. in special education from NC State U. After teaching history and special education for 35 years, I retired and finally had time to devote to writing. Initially, my writing consisted of letters and short poems. It wasn’t until I took a writing/journaling class at our local senior center that I began submitting my writing for publication. In July, 2016, *Nailpolish Stories*, a *Tiny and Colorful Literary Journal* published “Sole Mate,” a 25-word story, and my published writing journey began.

I write primarily free verse poetry, short fiction, and personal narratives. I’m the author of three poetry chapbooks: *Gifts of the Seasons*, *Autumn and Winter*; *Gifts of the Seasons*, *Spring and Summer*; and *Resilience*; as well as a hybrid book, *Nature Calls Outside My Window*, *A Collection of Poems and Stories* (Kelsay Books). My writing has appeared in

numerous online and print journals and anthologies. You can read more about my writing journey at www.suzanneswords.com.

An optimist, I find joy, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, in life. My hobbies and interests are reading, writing, hiking, knitting, Pilates, Durham Bulls baseball, college athletics, and music. I'm passionate about nature, which is the focus of most of my writing.

An advocate for lifelong learning, I enjoy new learning opportunities: classes, conferences, workshops, field trips, etc., as well as and researching a variety of topics. While taking an online writing course through Authors Publish, I met Tanya Schmid and Wendy Miller, who were members of the same writers' group. Tanya extended an invitation to join their group, which I gladly accepted. I appreciate the diversity of the Taste Life Twice Writers' group. Everyone is so supportive and encouraging. They provide honest, constructive feedback and share resources, which continue to help me become a better writer. Besides the Taste Life Twice Writers' group, I'm a member of the North Carolina Writers' Network, The North Carolina Poetry Society, and the Women Fiction Writers' Association.

I'm grateful for the supportive networks of family, friends, and writers. I encourage people to persevere and pursue their passions, knowing the road will sometimes be bumpy, but the joyful moments are worth the ride.

Akira Odani



I never had a strong interest in numbers and sciences, and didn't do well in math, physics, or chemistry at school. My grades were better grades in languages, classics, and social studies. I wasn't particularly artistic, but enjoyed painting, singing, and listening to classical music. As an essayist in college, I won prizes in contests. My focus on mastering the English language enabled me to obtain scholarships and to pursue a broad education in the United States.

For many years, I earned my living as a conference interpreter. The job gave me the chance to travel the world and meet world-class leaders in arts, politics, and business. I had fancied becoming a best-selling author for decades, either in Japan or in the USA, but being bilingual was not necessarily an advantage since that can hinder one's sensitivities in either language. It took several decades before I decided to choose English as my primary medium.

I joined the Florida Writers Association when I moved here and discovered the pleasure and the challenges of aspiring to be a writer. Most importantly, I learned that I must explore human life with all its possibilities and the infinite depths of the universe if I am to be a credible writer.

Attempting to do so, I've been fascinated by the play of opposites between East and West. For example, Americans value open and candid communication. They value individualism. Japanese, on the other hand, favor more formal, structured, and indirect communication. They pay more attention to group harmony. I am currently working on a memoir, the story of a father struggling with his two children as they grow up in the crossover from Japan to the United States.

Several years ago, my writer friend, Tanya Schmid, invited me to join a writers' group which has grown into the Taste Life Twice Writers, seven individuals from across the world. It has been an absolute delight to be a member of this community. I grew as a person as well as a writer with the help and wisdom of these members.

Annette L. Brown



A poem I wrote in the 6th grade hangs in my parents' home office. Even as an eleven-year-old, I loved words. The way sounds could slide into each other or bounce off one another, the way words could make me cry, laugh, wonder, hope. I felt their power before I could articulate their effect.

I have written poetry for years—not with great success necessarily. I'm more of a poet storyteller. I especially loved writing poetry about my two sons as they grew. It was fascinating to see the world anew through their eyes and to feel with the intensity I have only known through motherhood—and I'm a passionate person!

Not until 2021 after I had retired, did I really start writing with any dedication to studying and refining my craft. I took a poetry class through *Author's Publish* and met Wendy, who invited me to join the Taste Life Twice Writers. I was delighted to be invited and even more delighted to be accepted as a member.

I've since realized that poetry is not really my jam; it's creative nonfiction. Flash length usually. I'm in and out of events rather quickly most often. I have enjoyed some success with publication and have created a website of those works (annettelbrownwriting.com). The Taste Life Twice writers have become writing friends who challenge me with honest feedback and thoughtful questions, who support me through disappointment or frustration when a piece isn't working, and who celebrate with me when something works. The group is a lovely gift in my writing life and I'm ever grateful that Wendy thought to invite me to play.

Cris Aboobaker



I started writing fiction in the summer of 2024, shortly after being released from the hospital. I was being treated for a severe electrolyte imbalance; I recovered fully, but the experience upset me. I spent the next few months speaking regularly with a social worker.

Therapy these days is very directive. I was told that I could not spend my time sitting around and worrying about my condition. I must find a hobby. It could be painting, sculpting, doing ceramics...pick something. I chose writing because I love to read. With the encouragement of my therapist, I took a writing class at the Gotham Writer's Workshop.

I've taken two Gotham classes since, and developed a daily writing practice. I work for two to three hours a day, along with a daily reading session. For a retired person, it helps structure the day and provides a sense of purpose. I am not just consuming, I am creating.

To be clear, a lot of my writing time is not spent writing. I may be re-reading, editing, or sometimes just sitting in front of the keyboard, daydreaming about the story I want to tell. It is all part of the process.

I write fiction because I feel it gives me range to exercise imagination. My stories are like quilts, pulling colorful pieces of memory from the pocket of my mind and stitching them together with make believe. Along the way, I am processing my experience of life and trying to make it vivid for readers, so they can experience it too.

My pieces are short, generally 2-4K words. One day I may work on more sustained narratives. But I first want to feel proficient with the short form.

I am interested in the internal lives of my characters. I have an MA in psychology, worked briefly in inpatient psychiatric facilities, and spent most of my life in market research, employed by ad agencies and media companies. All concerned with what makes people tick.

My market research career required a lot of technical writing. Though different from creative writing, it helped develop the joy of constructing sentences and paragraphs into narratives that touch readers. I love trying to make language sing.

I was lucky enough to meet Tanya in one of my Gotham classes, and she was good enough to invite me to join the Taste Life Twice Writer's group. Every writer, I think, needs a writer's group; no one can work alone. I now get feedback on my stories from more experienced writers, read other writers' work, provide feedback, and observe how pieces develop toward publication. The monthly meetings provide an ongoing program of study, even when I'm not taking classes.

To date, I have had no work published. I hope to publish someday, if only to share my worldview more widely with readers. In writing, as in life, the journey is the destination.

So, that's our group! It has been my experience that the best number for a writer's group is between five and seven members. Less than five and you tend to fall apart. More than seven and the requests for edits grows too big and the chance to speak at meetings is too small. Choose carefully. Choose people with big hearts who take words seriously. People who respect that each of us has different goals and ways of doing things. Because, if you are as lucky as I have been, they will be your support group, your cheerleaders, your inspiration for many years to come.