

WRITING GROUP

Sarasota Fiction Writers thrive on peer critiques

By Dahlia Ghabour

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Six people huddled around a table in a Books-A-Million cafe on a Thursday night in early August. Coffee machines hummed in the background as Elisabeth Stevens read aloud from her newest piece. When she finished, everyone looked up, and one by one began to speak.

"There's a nice desperation in here, Elisabeth, I like it," said Bill Carrigan, the meeting's leader. "But there's a problem on page nine..."

Each member of the Thursday critique group is part of the Sarasota Fiction Writers, a local club for hopeful writers that helps them hone their craft and learn from each other. They meet on the first Tuesday of every month for a speaker event and Q&A at Selby Public Library, with



Members of the Sarasota Fiction Writers gather at the Gulf Gate Books-A-Million for a critique meeting. STAFF PHOTO / DAHLIA GHABOUR

the regular critique meeting on the third Wednesday of every month at the Gulf Gate Books-A-Million.

But there are always more critique meetings happening. Critiques, after all, are the essence of the group, meant

The Sarasota Fiction Writers

The speaker meetings are on the first Tuesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Selby Public Library, with a monthly critique group on the third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Books-A-Million. For more information or to become a member, check thequillguild1.wix.com/sfwriters or email sarasotafictionwriters@gmail.com.

to encourage members to actively write and get better.

"We're very much part of the artistic community, and there's a lot of talent here," said president Jerry Keane. "It's not just Stephen King and Michael Connelly. There are a lot of people writing and writing very well who are right

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in our midst."

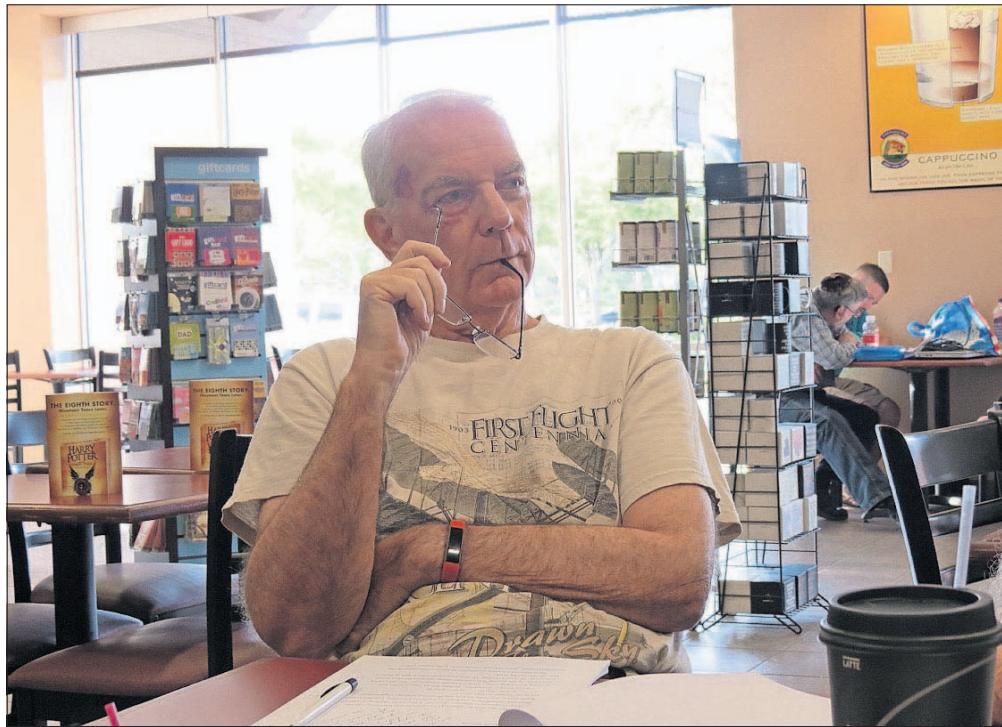
Keane also mentioned that the members' diverse backgrounds help when creating authentic stories. Keane himself is a retired lawyer. Others in the group worked on nuclear submarines, directed and acted in plays, taught high school, and worked in insurance. Each can offer their own experience to the mix.

"If anyone does a courtroom scene, Jerry can tell you what you're doing wrong," said Bob Spitzer, the club's treasurer. "Everyone in the club learned courtrooms by watching 'Perry Mason.' That's not how it happens!"

Spitzer said that one of the critical rules of the club is that members critique and criticize the writing, not the writer. The club stands apart, he said, because it focuses on fiction writing, unlike other writing groups that are more loosely interpreted to include nonfiction, poetry and other techniques.

Another Fiction Writers regular, Pat Gray, said the most important thing writers need to do is believe in themselves.

"If you don't have confidence in yourself then you're not willing to take risks," Gray said. "Every writer needs to be willing to take risks, and to accept criticism for what it is. And if you want to be a writer, you have to write every single



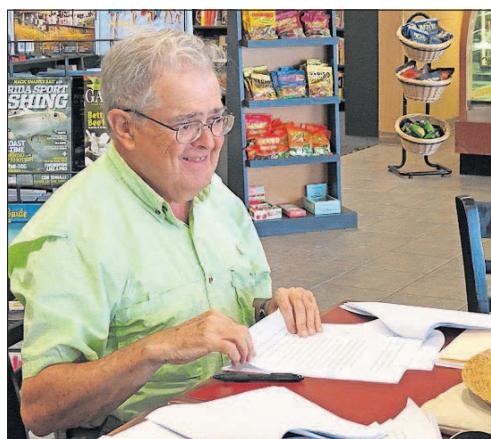
Sarasota Fiction Writers President Jerry Keane listens to critiques of Elisabeth Stevens' short story "Stalker" during a recent meeting of the group at the Gulf Gate Books-A-Million.. STAFF PHOTOS/ DAHLIA GHABOUR.



Stevens listens as a fellow writer offers his critique of "Stalker" in the book store's coffee shop.

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—Jerry Keane



Sarasota Fiction Writers member Bob Spitzer offers his feedback on Stevens' story.



Writers print out their works for others to read during the critique sessions.

day you can."

The Fiction Writers' newly launched website proudly lists each of the handful of members who have published their work and announces meetings. Membership is \$25 a year and anyone is welcome to join.

"I've read a number of books over the last few years that are not as good as the work I sometimes hear at critique sessions," Keane said. "I think the goal is to get published, but you often hear people say it's about the experience of writing. We have a good time with it."