

Bisbee writers build community through critique

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Gretchen Hill looks over Ruby Odell's poem. Hill said she believes the feedback helps the writer. "I think critiquing other people's work usually improves your own," she said.

Photo by: Leeann Thies, Herald/Review

BISBEE — Gretchen Hill always knew she was a writer.

From the time she was 6 years old, Hill dabbled in fiction, prose, songwriting and poetry. Today, at 51, she's a published author, and has plans to have her work printed once a month.

But she doesn't do it alone.

Getting a piece ready to publish in a magazine not only takes an assortment of drafts, but also a thoughtful editor — or maybe a community of them.

Through the Poetry Critique Society, Hill can get just that: a roundtable of peer editors and fellow poets who gently comment on one another's work. The group, which meets once a month, is a free program run by the Copper Queen Library in Bisbee to help poets of all levels and genres refine their work.

From haikus, prose, epic poems and everything in between, writers of all forms can weigh in on another's work.

"It's really helpful," Hill said. "Because, otherwise you feel like you're shouting in a well. ... I think critiquing other people's work usually improves your own."

The Poetry Critique Society was begun two months ago by Alison Williams, the assistant library coordinator. Williams, who is a poet and writer herself, wanted to foster a community of fellow authors who could edit one another's work in a safe and comfortable environment.

The goal, Williams said, is to get a writer's work ready for submission to a publication.

"We wanted to take the next step from a writing workshop to being a supportive, interactive environment where writers can safely examine their work and give feedback," she said. "The goal being to learn more about the editing process, taking risks with editing, and making the poem print-ready."

Poets meet once a month in a small room toward the back of the library. They sit at a long table and get to work.

While one writer reads, the others listen intently and scribble their notes and critiques.

As Hill read her chosen piece, "Approaching the Bacon Poem," to the group during Monday's meeting, she had a lightness in her voice laden with a hint of humor. She smiled as she read each stanza, line by line. By the time she was finished, her audience was smiling, too.

Afterward, everyone got to work.

For Hill, the peer-editing process is a way for authors to bring their work out of solitude, creating a community of writers.

"It's really exciting. There's a level of trust, because when you give people your work to critique, it can be pretty scary," she said. "It's such an individual activity; it's really nice to have a community of people to share work."

Though some writers come to the roundtable as strangers, after each society meeting Hill said there's a growing sense of community.

"Not everyone goes every time," she said. "But I feel like people are making jokes a little more and maybe even being a little braver in critiquing other people's poetry."

“I feel an increased level of comfort in the room as we get to know each other.”

That’s exactly what Williams hoped for when she started the program in January.

“We’re creating an active, working community of writing poets,” she said. “The process of workshopping inspires us to go home and write more so we can have new work to bring the next time.”

To Williams, the poetry society reminds her of something Tucson-based poet Logan Phillips tells writers.

““A poem is not born until it’s printed in a publication or spoken aloud and performed,”” she said, quoting Phillips. “I really love that concept. To me, when we read our poems, that is a work in progress aloud in this group.”

“It’s like shepherding it into the world in a safe way.”