



Writers' bloc

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a place to work -- alone yet together

By Anna Griffin

Page 8



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On an oddly sunny winter afternoon, the little brown house perched at the edge of downtown St. Johns sits silent except for the muted clack, clack, clack of laptop keys.

Upstairs in a low-ceilinged nook, Kristin Thiel works on a short story. Downstairs, in the airy main room, Jeffrey Selin crafts his novel.

It might not look like it, but as they work, hunched over their keyboards and their thoughts, they're also building a community, one of several that has emerged in Portland in the past year or so among artists reaching out to one another.

That may seem counterintuitive: Artists, especially writers, are notoriously solitary and sometimes downright antisocial creatures. Putting thoughts into words and words to the page is not the kind of work that usually benefits from a crowd. The Algonquin Round Table and the literary expatriates who crowded French cafes in the early 1900s are perhaps the exceptions that prove the rule.

But as Portland's universe of writers, artists and musicians grows, so do efforts to find some sense of shared purpose.

The market is responding. In the past year, creative-minded entrepreneurs have opened communal office space in Northwest Portland and the Central Eastside. The city got involved with a condo/workspace called Milepost 5 on Northeast 81st Avenue.

And in the far North Portland of St. Johns, Selin has used his brother's generosity to turn an old church rectory into what he's calling the Writers' Dojo, a collective workspace for professional writers and amateurs who treat their work as a job rather than a hobby.

Selin, 36, moved to Portland from New York six years ago with his wife, Rachel. He's managed to escape a career in advertising copywriting to write full time. She's an actress who helps pay the bills by selling real estate.

They moved to Portland, in part because they heard it was such a haven for artistic types.

"It really is the rain," Selin says. "It drives people inside and forces them to work."

Selin found fellow writers here but no central meeting place. He wasn't exactly lonely, but he was eager to find some communal space.

Last year, he started a blog devoted to the topic of writing communities, drawing on the examples of the Grotto, a San Francisco collective; the Writers Room in Greenwich Village; and similar projects in Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles.

The predecessor to them all is the Loft in Minneapolis, another city where the weather, along with reasonable rents and a progressive mood, fosters a creative culture.

In some of these spots, writers get shared space and little else. In others, such as Portland, there's a concerted effort to build a sense of shared energy, of "we're all in this together."

"I could work from home and meet other writers once a week for lunch or coffee. I could have everybody over for drinks or take them out for beers or whatever. But that suggests I'd work up the nerve to actually do those things," says Po Bronson, a San Francisco author and essayist.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

Room to write

Writers' Dojo: Learn more about the dojo and Portland's literary scene at Jeffrey Selin's blog, www.writersroompdx.blogspot.com

Similar spaces in other cities: Minneapolis, www.loft.org; Santa Monica, Calif., www.theofficeonline.com; Chicago, www.up-townwriterspace.com; Boston, www.writersroomofboston.org; New York City, www.writersroom.org; San Francisco, www.sfgrotto.org

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

He's one of the founders of the Grotto, which began with three guys on the upper floor of an old Victorian and now hosts 38 writers, documentary filmmakers and other artists in a large downtown commercial building.

"Here, I can run into somebody in the hall. I can meet them on the way to the bathroom. I can have those conversations that might spark something without making any effort."

Water cooler talk, it turns out, is important for more than just discussing last night's scores or the latest loser on "American Idol."

"A lot of people hear about a writers' space and just assume it's a bunch of creative types partying," Bronson says. "It's an office. I drop off my kid at school, and I go to work."

That's the idea in St. Johns, a blue-collar neighborhood on the edge of the city that's being transformed by young families, hipsters and others in search of Portland's real estate frontier and a small-town feel.

Selin and his brother, Michael, are part of the transformation. Two years ago, Michael turned an old chapel into a martial-arts studio. He knew his brother was looking for his own space, so he also renovated the rectory next door.

The result: the dojo, a word that usually refers to a martial-arts training studio but in this case references a more intellectual sort of battle.

Downstairs, a wide-open main room features exposed beams, hardwood floors, three tables and a sitting area of sofas and comfortable chairs. One bookshelf holds works by Pacific Northwest authors such as Chuck Palahniuk, Raymond Carver and Katherine Dunn. A corner shelf features inspiration of various strains: reference books and poetry anthologies, a little Shakespeare alongside a collection of science fiction. The small attic space features a desk, armchairs and cushions.

Members pay \$120 a month for space, Wi-Fi access, coffee, water and snacks. They're also paying for something less tangible — the sense that even in this most bohemian of crafts,



Kristin Thiel works in an upstairs room at the St. Johns dojo. Thiel, who writes short stories, commutes by bus from her home in Sellwood. "The space holds me accountable," she says. "Even when I'm the only person here, I'm not tempted to do other things."



Dojo members Dana Speer (left) and Kristin Thiel confer on a grammatical question. The dojo offers a sense of community for people in a solitary pursuit.

they must get up every morning and physically as well as spiritually go to the office.

"The space holds me accountable," says Thiel, a short-story writer. "Even when I'm the only person here, I'm not tempted to do other things. It becomes its own character, sort of another person who expects you to get to work."

Thiel commutes to the dojo from Sellwood, an hourlong trip that takes two buses. The trek from her apartment has quickly become an important part of her writing process — a journey away from the laundry and

dishes and other distractions.

Thiel moved to Portland two weeks before Wordstock 2006. A bubbly brunette, she knew she had to network in her new hometown. She wasn't shy about handing out business cards for part-time editing gigs or calling up other authors. But schmoozing — as vital to freelance writers and would-be novelists as a way with words and a fruitful imagination — isn't the same thing as sharing.

"When there are several of us here, and we're all clicking away, there really is something magical," says Dana Speer, a screenwriter who moved to Portland from Southern California

three years ago.

So far, Selin has recruited 15 members and hopes to welcome one new member a month. He's not making any money and says he doesn't plan on turning a profit — "That would require more members than we have space" — although he would like to reach a point where he's not relying on credit cards and a second mortgage to pay the bills.

He talks about eventually becoming successful enough to open a bigger center downtown with enough space for public meetings and room for writers of all stripes — amateurs, published authors, children, people who write for the sheer pleasure of it.

For now, however, he's trying to be strict about membership, requiring references and an application. He wants to open the dojo as a public space to writing groups and book clubs, and he hosts several outside gatherings a month, but he is also selective about what kinds of programs he accepts. For example, he recently declined to rent space to a group studying how to turn dreams into fiction.

Writing isn't therapy here at the dojo, despite the soothing colors and the jazz playing softly over the stereo. It's a craft as much as a science — hard, adult work.

But it is a little less lonely. ■

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