

Vermont Writers Meet at The Writer's Hotel in New York City

by Cynthia Close

Author Jessica Lipnack describes Vermont as “like a soft pillow for writers.” Nancy Jainchill went to Bennington where she found validation as a writer, and Jenny Grosvenor writes and lives in Stowe. And all traveled to New York City (along with this writer) to attend The Writer's Hotel, seeking to further their writing careers and goals. It was at this weeklong conference, held annually in June, where we met for the first time. The Writer's Hotel is described, on its website, as a hybrid writers' conference offering a “mini MFA.” Founded by Shanna McNair, with Scott Wolven as consulting director, the conference holds workshops and readings at four hotels in midtown Manhattan: Bryant Park Hotel, Library Hotel, Algonquin Hotel, and Cassa Hotel. The conference draws people from around the world, as well as around the country.

There was intense preparatory work before we even arrived at the conference. As The Writer's Hotel website notes, this is the only writers' conference with a preconference manuscript reading and consultation built into the programming, with writers receiving and comments and edits before the conference begins. The most astounding benefit was the sensitive, detailed critique and initial edit of my entire manuscript—a memoir of over 90,000 words—by The Writer's Hotel editorial team. All the participants were offered the same level of attention. That service alone was worth the price of the conference, setting the professional, encouraging tone that was the earmark of the entire experience. Lipnack, Jainchill, Grosvenor, and I are not beginners, either in life or in our careers as writers and varied paths had brought us to the The Writer's Hotel.

Networking

Lipnack started at age 16 as a reporter for the *Pottstown Mercury* in Pennsylvania and was smitten by the writing life. She went on to be an editor of her high school newspaper, assistant editor of the *Antioch Review* in college, and a freelance writer for *Boston After Dark*, now known as *The Phoenix*. Lipnack balances her journalism and tech writing with more personal commentary and has published in *Ars Medica*, *Global City Review*, *Mothering*, and *The Futurist*, among many other publications. She has also written for a number of newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Seattle-Post Intelligencer*, among others. She's written for The Brookings Institution, where she has lectured, and was an early contributor to the landmark feminist publication on women's health *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, first published in 1971.

Going as far back as 1979, Lipnack had an interest in the concept of networking, which has now become ubiquitous as we find ourselves drowning in the possibilities offered by social media. Few people truly understand how to be successful utilizing these myriad options. Lipnack says that networking “is how I think of the many people I've met around the world, working on comprehensive solutions to complex problems. We're all in the

same very large, indescribably imaginative network of thinkers, artists, doers, hard-workers, and so many other important -ers.”

Together, with her writing partner Jeffrey Stamps, she has published numerous popular trade books on technology, networking, and virtual team building that have been reprinted in several languages. Six of those titles are currently available on Amazon. Stamps was her partner in life as well as in business. They came to Vermont, fell in love with each other and with the state, and decided to settle here permanently. They wrote books together for 39 years. He was 64 when he died in 2011.

Today, Lipnack’s writing studio looks out on Bread Loaf Mountain, home of the highly touted Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, hosted at the Ripton Campus of Middlebury College and held every summer since its founding in 1926. It is in this idyllic setting that she is working on a novel. It was on a whim that she submitted the first 78,000 words of her novel to The Writer’s Hotel, was accepted, and spent a rewarding week in New York City workshopping her manuscript with her peers.

Lipnack was placed with a group of fiction writers, and I was meeting with nonfiction writers, so our paths didn’t cross until we met at the Cornelia Street Café, a well-known hangout for literary types on Fourth Street in the East Village. We were both scheduled to read selections from our manuscripts on the same Saturday night, another wonderful opportunity to share our work. What a confidence builder to say you had now read in an historic public setting, a heartbeat away from the publishing world we sought to join in New York.

Camaraderie & Validation

Nancy Jainchill lives and writes in Woodstock, New York, where she is also a practicing psychologist specializing in the field of adolescent drug use and the subsequent treatment of drug abuse. On 9/11 she was living in New York City and working in the South Tower of the World Trade Center. No one in her office died but all was destroyed. This catastrophic event caused many people to reevaluate their lives and take stock of where they had been and what they really wanted to do with the time that remained.

Jainchill took a step toward making her childhood vision of becoming a writer a reality when she decided to apply to the low-residency graduate program at Bennington College. It was the only school where she applied. She was accepted, and in 2013 she added an MFA in writing to her long list of degrees. Jainchill said, “It was one of the best things I have ever done and validated my identity as a writer.” Founded in 1994, Bennington’s Writing Seminars was one of the first low-residency writing programs in the country. Jainchill cites Bennington instructors Sven Birkerts, author of *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Phillip Lopate, who also teaches in the MFA graduate programs at Columbia and the New School, and nonfiction author Dinah Lenny as having had the most influence on her development as a writer. Jainchill is still in contact with Dinah Lenny, as she continues working on her memoir of “braided essays,” which earned her acceptance to The Writer’s Hotel.

Jenny Grosvenor received her MFA in writing from Bennington in 2012, the year before Nancy Jainchill. But she acknowledges that she had “always been a writer, long before she moved to Vermont in 1988.” Grosvenor does credit the inspiration she gains from Vermont’s “beauty, solitude and even the long hard winters” that nurture her writing spirit. She also teaches in the English Department at the University of Vermont. It was her UVM colleagues—poet Major Jackson and writer Tony Magistrale—who encouraged her to apply to the Bennington program, and it was also thanks to the support in the form of professional development funding she received from her department at UVM that enabled her to attend The Writer’s Hotel for the first time last year.

Grosvenor was initially drawn to The Writer’s Hotel because of its central Manhattan location where she had a writing career with *Life* and *Sports Illustrated* magazines prior to moving to Vermont. She found the camaraderie of her fellow workshop participants, as well as the caliber of their writing, led to an extraordinary writing experience. She was motivated to attend again this past June. To help defray costs, she applied to be a teaching assistant to Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, the award-winning American memoirist, playwright, and fiction writer who led the nonfiction workshop. It was here where Grosvenor, Jainchill, and I first met.

Community, Confidence, Contacts

Each workshop attendee was required to submit the first 5,000 words of their target manuscript to the editorial team several weeks prior to the conference. These documents were then bundled and sent to all the other participants in your workshop group. In the nonfiction group, that meant 13 of us had each read the others work in progress. We were asked to read and comment and type up at least a full-page assessment of each writer’s work to bring to the conference. These comments would then form the basis of a group discussion during the week of daily sessions.

Being a writer, particularly of a memoir, requires a certain fearlessness. To be good, and honest, a writer must be willing to be vulnerable. To be a successful writer you must venture out beyond your comfort zone. Vermont has been and continues to provide that nurturing, comforting environment, making a creative life possible for many writers. However, writers need readers, and Vermont is a very small and some say insular place. Many have realized that finishing a manuscript is not the end but just the beginning. Now the hard work of editing, revision, and publishing starts. The challenge can be daunting. The Writer’s Hotel offers one option of meeting the challenge, bridging that gap, providing a safe place where, as Lipnack states, writers can find “community, confidence and contacts,” which we all hope will help us achieve our personal objectives to find the right audiences for our work.