



## **workshop**

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I think that one of the defining characteristics of artists is humility. All of the artists I've ever known—writers, painters, musicians, (perhaps, *not* filmmakers)—have been extremely self-deprecating. I assume this is because of the insecurity that comes along with constantly displaying our creations, publishing our intimate thoughts, and exposing ourselves to critique.

You know that dream you've often had where you show up to class or work completely naked? Yeah. That's exactly what a writers workshop is like.

I arrive on Monday at 6:00 pm, one week after submitting 15 pages of my novel. My professor and 8 classmates have had 7 days to read it. That's enough time to read, *re-read*, analyze, critique and tear apart each and every hard-earned word. I make small talk with a few of my peers as we wait for class to begin, but what I'm really thinking about is all those hours staring at a blinking cursor on my computer screen, and whether that time will be proven a waste.

*You are talented.*

*Your writing is not crap.*

*Your classmates do not dread reading your work.*

I tell myself these things over and over again as my professor arrives, makes chit-chat, and teaches a mini-lesson, about writing, which came to him while building a wall of stones. Then, we turn to our stories.

They always start off very politely:

*I enjoyed reading your story.*

*I really like the child-like tone in the Greyhound scene.*

*The ending was heartbreaking, powerful.*

I nod as I write all this down. It seems appropriate to take notes and, besides, it saves me from having to make eye contact. I'm pleased with the positive response, yet I don't let myself get too excited. I'm preparing myself for the "buts".

But...I don't have a sense of how the narrator is feeling about what's going on around her.

But...I don't understand why Tabitha hates her stepmother.

But...I feel the first scene is heavy on dialogue.

But...I feel Michael's character is underdeveloped.

*I don't like the beginning.*

*I don't like this description.*

*I don't like this story.*

*I don't like you.*

OK. So, maybe they don't say that, exactly, but that's how it feels. It feels like I'm under attack with only my notebook as a shield. It's not only this chapter or short story that's in question, but everything I've ever written in my life. It's as if they're reviewing whether I even deserve to *be* here. It's as if they're deciding whether I deserve to call myself a writer. I'm so grateful when it's over and we can move on to someone else.

You'd think it would get better as the semester progresses. It doesn't. Every Sunday before submitting, I spend all day re-reading my pages, making small changes, trying to somehow shape it into the masterpiece of which I once believed myself capable. Every Monday, when I pass out my pages, I'm tempted to offer a disclaimer to make the writing seem less unfortunate, such as:

This is a rough, rough, *rough* draft.

or

I was drunk when I wrote this.

or

I know this sucks.

It isn't until November that I start to get a better perspective on the workshop process. I run into a classmate at a computer lab, one Monday before class, and she expresses how nervous she is about the response to her story. I'm surprised because I think this classmate is a truly gifted writer. I especially like the story she's recently submitted and can't understand why she would feel self-conscious about it. Sure, I have a few questions about the main character's motivation. And there *are* some language issues that I want to bring up. Yet, all in all, I really enjoyed reading it.

Then, it hits me. I'm not the only one who feels inadequate at times. I'm not the only one who feels vulnerable. This week, she's me. And she's afraid of the "buts", as well.

I think about all of the suggestions I've given over the course of the semester. I never once thought about how that made other writers feel. I just assumed that everyone else was secure enough with his or her work to take the critiques. I just assumed they understood that my intentions were good, that I was only trying to help. After all, that's what a workshop is all about, right?

I realize that I've already learned my lesson for the day. I'm reminded that a workshop is a place where one learns to be a better writer. The purpose of a workshop is to polish unfinished work, not to show off how skilled you are. No one expects you to be perfect, otherwise you wouldn't be there. You'd be published already!

I wish I could say that I'm no longer nervous about submitting my work. I don't think I'll ever be completely confident in my writing. However, I think that may be a good thing. It means I'll never stop trying to improve. I still feel, sometimes, that my efforts are crap, but at least I know that I'm not the only one who feels this way. This insecurity is a badge all writers wear. I'm part of the club. I *do* belong here.

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