

The C Word by D.V. Berkom

I've seen the word strike fear into the hearts of many beginning writers and those well-seasoned. The bad can leave you writhing in agony. The good is worth its weight in gold.

Yes, I'm talking about critique groups.

The first thing to know about critique groups is it all depends on who's doing the critiquing. Unless you have masochistic tendencies, DO NOT give your first attempt at a fantasy novel to a librarian who prefers hardboiled mysteries, friend though she may profess to be (I still remember the red ink- as though blood streamed across the pages, pooling at midpoint...)

Alternately, you should run like the wind if the person to whom you were thinking of handing your opus says something along the lines of, "I normally don't like to read, but I'd have a go at your stuff..."

You'll want to carefully vet those you allow first access to your babies. Make sure they have at least one of the following qualities before taking the critique plunge:

- They're well-read, preferably in more than one genre. If not, they're never going to understand why you can't make your international thriller involving Al Qaida operatives a sweet little romance...
- They should know the difference between the following lines: "You could drive a truck through this freaking plot hole" and, "The plot could use a little more clarification here" or, "You might want to rethink this section because..."
- Knowledge of the Oreo cookie style of critique: indicate where their writing needs work and why (the cookie part), add something praiseworthy (the delicious filling), followed again by mentioning something that needs fixing (cookie again). Note: this style of critique has been described where praise is the cookie part, but in my experience too much nice doesn't work.
- It helps if they're writers themselves, as they'll understand the torture you put yourself through in order to write a coherent sentence
- A person with access to a chef or well-stocked wine cellar is a huge plus and may trump any the above

You might be lucky enough to find a group of writers at varying levels of mastery who will be as vested in your work as you are. It's possible. I'm living proof.

My critique group consists of four writers. Each delves into different genres: one writes sweet, romantic short stories, erotica and full-length paranormal. Another prefers Christian and contemporary romance. The third writes time-travel romance and thrillers. I write mystery/suspense and thrillers, with a little satire thrown in for good measure. We've been together for years and have gone through several metamorphoses. Discussions are interesting, to say the least.

Unpublished when we first came together, we are now all published, either with an e-press or self-published, and all are selling well. We've seen each other through rejections, acceptances, good and bad reviews, deaths, financial struggles and everything in between. They're the first to read anything I write and I value their input enormously. Where else will someone tell you, "You can't kill them like that. Here's how I'd do it..."

The cohesiveness of the group didn't happen overnight and we've had a couple of other members come and go, but the four of us have persevered. Discussion can get pretty heated over things like description, character motivation and backstory, but in the end, everyone cares and that's what counts.

When you find a group like that, the dreaded c-word isn't quite so dreadful.