

## Kentucky Book Mafia strikes again

Is it a crime to love writing? The book-club members of KaBooM say no



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The Courier-Journal

- **Start your own writers group**

*"Only a writer who has the sense of evil can make goodness readable."*

— *E.M. Forster*

LEXINGTON, Ky. — They call themselves KaBooM — the Kentucky Book Mafia — but they considered their motive more noble than evil.

Obsessively fastidious store managers doubtless took a dimmer view of the four mild-mannered, middle-aged moms who conspired to make the good works of their fellow Kentucky authors more readable.

Or, at the very least, more findable.

"We had sat around and griped and griped and griped about how poorly Kentucky authors were treated, even in Kentucky," said KaBooM member Mary Alexander, 54, a fiber artist from Harrodsburg. "Bookstores didn't take us seriously, so we started going around and reorganizing their shelves."

With permission?

"Not necessarily," Alexander said. "That's why we called it the book mafia."

The KaBooMers are straighter than uncooked spaghetti these days. They abandoned their life of reorganized crime to refocus on the original intent of their alliance.

KaBooM is a writing group in which six Central Kentucky women push each other to be better known, better paid and, above all, just plain better at their craft.



KaBooMers, clockwise from left, Janet Isenhour, Normandi Ellis, Lynn Pruett and Susan Christerson Brown, reviewed one another's work.

PHOTOS BY STEWART BOWMAN, THE COURIER-JOURNAL

**"It's about encouraging each other but offering tough critiques as well."**

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"It's about encouraging each other but offering tough critiques as well," said Susan Christerson Brown, 42, a creative writing teacher who lives in Lexington. "We realize it's no kindness to say, 'This is wonderful just like it is!' We're supportive and positive, but at the same time we work really hard to articulate what's going to make the work stronger."



-- Susan Christerson Brown

KaBooM held its first meeting in January 1998, but the wick was lit the previous fall when Brown ran into her friend Pam Sexton, 58.

"We were both in a place where we were ready to get a lot more serious about our writing," Brown said, "and we knew we needed some support to do that."

KaBooM started with three members — Brown, Sexton and Alexander — and soon added novelist Lynn Pruett, who taught fiction at the University of Kentucky from 1996-2001, and Crystal Wilkinson, a poet and short-story writer who dropped out of the group when she took a teaching job at Indiana University.

Two more women joined in recent years: Normandi Ellis, 50, who has published five books of fiction and nonfiction and is director of the Kentucky Arts Council's Youth at Risk program; and Janet Isenhour, 54, executive director of the Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning in Lexington.

Writing groups aren't uncommon among the arts-and-letters crowd, but KaBooM is unusual with respect to its consistency and commercial bent.

Most groups meet monthly. KaBooM meets from 10 a.m. to noon every Tuesday at the Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning in Lexington. The time is spent reviewing one another's work, updating the progress of pieces discussed at previous meetings and doing writing exercises.

"That's pretty rigorous," said Pruett, whose well-received first novel, "Ruby River," recently came out in paperback.

Writers are infamous procrastinators and excuse-makers. With weekly meetings, KaBooM members are held accountable on a regular basis. They gently push one another to finish their stories and essays, and to tackle the arduous, emotionally charged process of getting their work published.

When the mail brings rejection letters, they commiserate. When it brings checks and contracts, they celebrate. Last Tuesday, they toasted Brown for having an essay accepted by a new literary publication, the Branchwood Journal.

Brown e-mailed the essay on a Friday; a contract was in the mail six days later. It happened



Susan Christerson Brown listened as fellow KaBooMers reviewed writing. The club meets every Tuesday at the Carnegie Center in Lexington.



so quickly and easily that Brown was suspicious.

"It's typical of writers to doubt their good fortune," Isenhour said with a knowing smile. "When Susan told me how fast this all happened, I said, 'Wow! They really wanted the piece.' She said, 'Yeah, either that or they are desperate.'"

The KaBooMers' attention to the business side of writing is unusual too. They decided four years ago to take a more proactive approach to getting their works into print. Their first big step was a foray to New Orleans for the annual Words and Music Festival.

"Since literary agents weren't going door-to-door looking for writers in Kentucky, we understood we had to go to them," Pruett wrote in "The Writing Group Book" (Chicago Review Press, 2003).

"I don't think any of us are natural self-marketers. But as a group, we have accepted the need to make our work public. We honor our writing by shepherding it into the public sphere."

In New Orleans, where Pruett, 44, met the agent who helped her publish "Ruby River," the Kentucky Book Mafia swore off its life of crime. No more reshuffling bookshelves to promote the works of others. They focused on promoting their own — and it worked.

In addition to Pruett's novel, KaBooM members have since published a variety of poems, essays and short stories.

"We've come a long way," Brown said. "And it's because we decided that good things weren't going to just happen for us. We were going to have to make them happen, and we have a better chance of doing that together."

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