

Ryerson Today

At Sister Writes, everyone has a story

Ryerson English professor Lauren Kirshner celebrates seven years of the community-based creative writing program

By: Will Sloan

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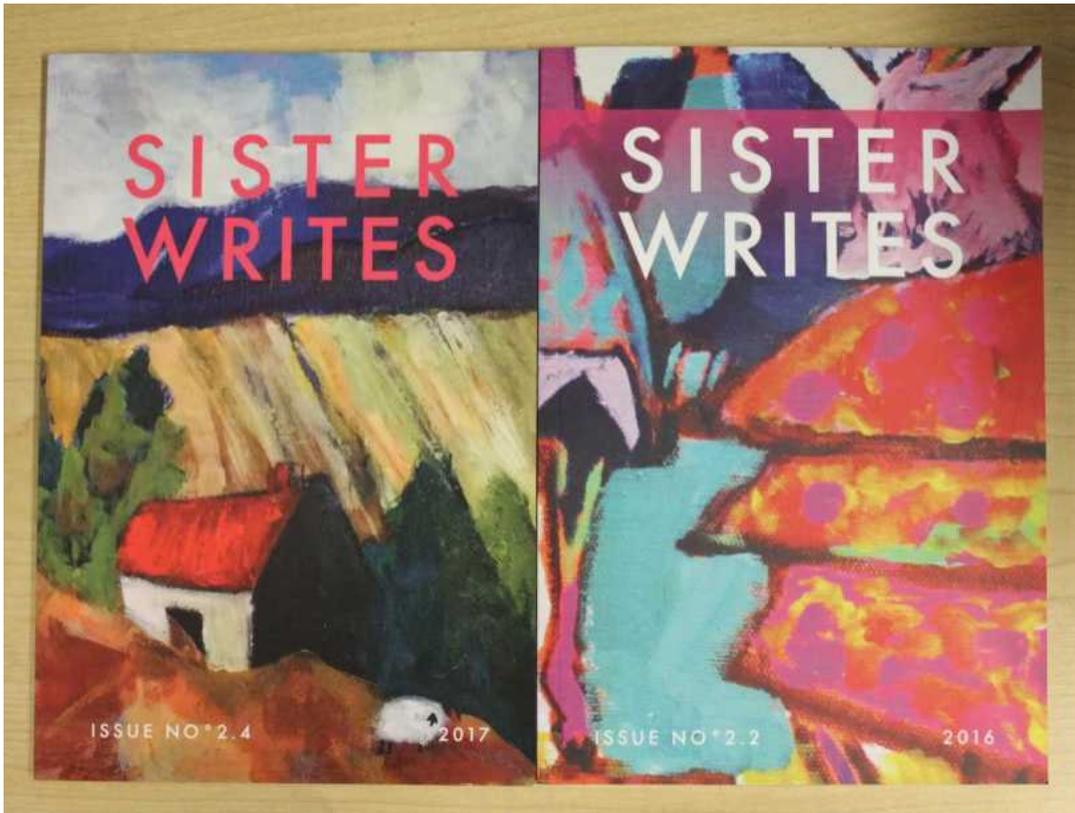


Photo: The community-based creative writing program Sister Writes has published seven issues of local women's stories.

No matter where you're from, everyone has a story to tell. For the past seven years, novelist and Ryerson English professor Lauren Kirshner has led [Sister Writes](#), a community-based writing program for local women to tell their stories.

Sister Writes connects women from a range of experiences (including participants affected by poverty, social isolation, trauma, mental health issues, and extraordinary life circumstances) and backgrounds (including women from over 20 countries, ages 18 to 75) with professional women writers. Launched in 2010 as a six-week pilot program through a modest grant from the Ontario Arts Council, Sister Writes has grown from a small group with four participants to encompassing more than 200 workshops, numerous public art events, and seven magazines sold at bookstores and circulated at Toronto Public Library branches. On December 7, Sister Writes launches its seventh issue.

Participants develop story ideas in workshop settings, with feedback from peers and mentors. They learn skills in writing, editing and publishing. "They've come to the program sometimes having carried a story for a long time," said Kirshner. "Just being able to read that story out loud and see other faces nodding and accepting the story, there is a sense of

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belonging and acceptance—not only as creative writers, but as community members. They feel that, ‘Yes, there is someone who wants to hear this.’”

Some participants have even taken responsibility for running recent workshops—but the ethos of Sister Writes has always been that the women co-direct the program. “They choose what they want to write and I don’t put any limitations on them,” said Kirshner. “I’m there to guide them, and use my skills to help them. A lot of the stories are personal, but to give our group the necessary artistic distance to talk about and critique their work, I never assume it’s their story.”

Pamela Chynn, who has published in two Sister Writes magazines, credits the program with encouraging her to take her writing a step further. She is now enrolled in the novel-writing certificate program at George Brown College.

“I find it gives me much more confidence to express myself as a writer, especially with some of the things I’ve gone through in the past,” said Chynn. “I’ve had negative experiences in other groups involving sexism, and I find that having a creative group just for women is very empowering. Everyone is treated equally regardless of our background, and there’s no judgment.

“There’s so much creative talent and so many interesting stories,” Chynn added. “The reason to buy a Sister Writes magazine is because it’s supporting the voices of women—some of whom have gone through quite incredible experiences, and who aren’t given enough of a voice in our society. You’re not only buying some incredible writing, but you’re supporting women to be vocal about their life experiences.”

Sister Writes’ new issue [launches](#) December 7, 6 p.m. at the Bloor/Gladstone Library. For more information, visit [SisterWrites.com](#).

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