



Rittenhouse Writers: Reflections on a Fiction Workshop

James Rahn

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James Rahn has led the Rittenhouse Writers' Group since he founded it in 1988, making it one of America's longest-running independent fiction workshops. Hundreds of writers and would-be writers have sought out the group for its remarkable level of instruction and collaboration. *Rittenhouse Writers* is Rahn's memoir of the workshop and how his own evolution as both a teacher and a writer—and as a son, husband, and (somewhat reluctant) father—has been intertwined with the establishment and growth of the RWG. In addition, Rahn includes ten short stories written by current and former members of the workshop.

Rahn graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and earned an MFA at Columbia. He then began to imagine a future that included more than just writing, one that would also tap his aspiration to offer other writers support and motivation, tough but gentle—his self-described "Iron Fist in the Velvet Glove" approach. After all, as he says more than once, "Writing is hard."

Over the years, James Rahn has witnessed every imaginable writing-group scenario, from awkward flirtations to suicide scares, catty critiques, near fistfights, and of course the satisfaction of watching someone's writing soar. With insight gained through years of observation and participation, and a discerning eye for amusing detail, he takes us along for the journey. Rahn's struggle to perfect his role as instructor runs throughout the narrative, as does his effort to balance that role with the friendships he forms in the group, and to keep up with his own writing while still giving the group the attention it needs to flourish. Through his eyes, we catch the spark of the workshop's spirit and get to meet various spirits who have invigorated Rittenhouse Writers' Group.

Rahn cuts back and forth, reflecting, not only on the workshop, but also on his days as a high school dropout in Atlantic City, dead-end jobs and hopeless moves, the difficulty of his mother's decline and death, and his own unexpected plunge into parenthood—when, at age 51, he and his wife took on the responsibility of raising her two young nieces.

His memoir serves, in a way, as an introduction to the short stories that follow; and the stories—as surprising and varied as the writers Rahn describes working with—stand as a fitting coda to Rahn's tale and offer another window onto his life's work.

"James Rahn, Jersey boy and Philadelphia treasure, has written a moving and insightful book about what happens when you create something vibrant and necessary and stick around for the long haul, whether it's teaching, writing, friendships, or love. The answers aren't always simple, and Rahn explores them with the same gusto, honesty, wry humor, and generosity of spirit he brings to his fiction and his famous workshops. This book is a powerful reminder of the importance of community and mentorship in the making of literature."—Sam Lipsyte

The 10 short stories included in *Rittenhouse Writers*:

"On Fire" by Gwen Florio

"Mother—6/7 Months" by Romnesh Lamba

"Moon Penitent" by Diane McKinney-Whetstone

"The Last Confession" by Tom Teti

"Ivory Is Wrong About Me" by Caren Litvin

"The Conference Rat" by Samantha Gillison

"Dropping a Line into the Murky Chop" by Saral Waldorf

"What She Missed" by Lisa Paparone

"Kingdom of the Sun" by Alice Schell

"The Letters of Hon. Crawford G. Bolton III" by Daniel R. Biddle

James Rahn has published stories in many literary magazines, taught for fifteen years at the University of Pennsylvania, and has an MFA in Writing from Columbia University. His first novel, *Bloodnight*, was published in 2012.

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