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Hamilton Spectator

CLAIRMONT: Words are the way to recovery

Authors at Womankind are launching their second book of creative writing

By [Susan Clairmont](#)

Good writing makes you think.

Great writing makes you feel.

I dare anyone to read the poetry in *A Woman's Write: Strong and Free* and not feel something. It will break your heart. It will inspire. It will startle and soothe. It will take you to the despair of addiction and the stuttering hope of recovery.

"I want to write about my experience at detox.

I came in and don't recall what day or time I arrived.

I must be really sick with this disease." — Sarah A.

The authors are women — our women — who have entered the Womankind Addiction Service creative writing program at St. Joseph's Healthcare.

It's been well over a year since I was first introduced to the writers at Womankind. Our friendship began when I was asked to join an advisory board overseeing the program. An earlier group of Womankind authors had published a book of their writing in 2009 and hoped to do so again. It seemed like a nice fit for me. I often write about addiction in my columns. But before I could commit to the role, I wanted to see first-hand what the program was about.

And so, on a Monday night I sat around a table in a sparse basement room at Womankind in west Hamilton. As we went around the table introducing ourselves, the women told their stories:

I was so high I fell on the tracks and the train ran over my arm.

I have gone three days without drinking.

I want to make my children proud of me.

I drink and I have a learning disability. I do not know how to write a poem.

Most of these women had little in common other than their addiction. Yet, they were so incredibly kind and supportive of each other.

The class was led by its founder, Gail Mercer-Mackay, a tour de force, a superb writer and a recovering alcoholic. For an hour, she led us through creative writing exercises and was supportive and constructive as we shared our work aloud.

At the end of class I had a request. Would the women allow me to come back? With my notebook?

Six months later, *The Spectator* published a five-part series on the women called *Words to Live By*. Photographer Scott Gardner and I profiled several of the authors. There was Sarah, who dropped out of McMaster University to be a sex worker on the streets of Hamilton to support her crack habit. Justine, who grew up among the wineries of Niagara-on-the-Lake and downed vino on her high school lunch breaks. Allie, who battles mental health issues on top of her alcoholism and bares the scars of many suicide attempts. Karon, who got hooked on crack while stripping, but soon realized she could make more money as a dealer. And Carolyn, whose remarkable creativity is born of her struggle with addiction and mental illness.

These women — and quite a few more — have poetry in the new collection.

*“Sitting with women in recovery.
Writing with women in recovery.
Something so safe, our common bond,
Fodder for exploration, creativity.
We have each earned our chair, our right to voice.
I’m allowed to be here ...” — Michelle V.*

The book features [stunning and haunting photography by Carolyn](#) as well as a beautiful painting by April Anderson, who says: “Nobody really has God on speed dial. But if I did, He would tell me to get out and push.”

These women push. Some push to get through the day, others push to put the past behind them. They push for forgiveness and strength and acceptance. And they push words around on pages in an effort to find meaning in it all.

***Susan Clairmont’s commentary appears regularly in [The Spectator](#).
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Sidebar

BOOK LAUNCH

A Woman’s Write: Strong and Free

When: Oct. 10, 4 to 6 p.m.

Where: Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Pavilion at the Art Gallery of Hamilton

What: Several authors will read their poetry.

Tickets: \$25, which includes a copy of the book. They are available from Lynda Barry at St. Joe’s, 905-521-9591 ext. 235, or at the door.