

by **LESLIE GORDON**

“HI, MY NAME IS LESLIE, AND I’M A GREAT WRITER.”

I say this without the bravado of a winning trial lawyer or the humility of an addict. I say it because I’m in the Red Room, and I have to.

A haven for amateur writers, many of whom are lawyers by day, the Red Room is not a class (homework is forbidden) or a critique group (no one reads anyone else’s writing). It’s simply a studio where group members come to keep their commitment of writing one hour a week. A recovering lawyer and now a freelance legal journalist, I’m at the Red Room working on my second novel, a family drama in the spirit of authors such as Sue Miller and Jodi Picoult.

The Red Room is a strange and lovely commingling of old and new, with iMac wires tangled in power strips beneath an antique dining room table. It is located in the former Archbishop’s Mansion (now a bed and breakfast) near San Francisco’s historic Alamo Square, known throughout the world for its depiction of a row of classic Victorian houses on tourist postcards. Hot hors d’oeuvres

THE *Red* ROOM

A place for lawyers to write





Ivory Madison, the guiding spirit behind the Red Room's weekly writing studios, gave up a law career to follow her dream. (Lawyer Mark Segelman and Chennette Hanks are in the background.)

photograph by DALE HIGGINS



and tea are served just outside the mansion's parlor, making lawyers and other aspiring writers feel as if they've left behind the world of work and entered a previous century.

"Most writing programs are in fluorescently lit elementary schools or in someone's living room," says Ivory Madison, a law school graduate and the Red Room's founder. At the Red Room, writers are surrounded by chandeliers, flower arrangements, and beamed ceilings. The hum of laptops melds with the din of street traffic, creating the artist's perfect white noise.

A few members-only writing spaces have sprung up recently in New York, Boston, and Los Angeles. And you may spot a few lawyers in writing classes at Vroman's Bookstore in Pasadena or at various University of California Extension programs, although in those classes teachers dole out assignments and students critique each other's work. But at the Red Room, writers work on their own self-directed projects, and no one reads anyone else's material, which, along with the number of lawyers who participate, is what makes the Red Room unique. In my particular weekly studio hour, I am joined by a perfumer and a museum-studies doctoral student, among others. But the number one profession among Red Room participants, Madison says, is law.

"Attorneys are smart people who want to be writers but are scared to take the emotional and financial risk," she says. "They're in a profession that pleases their family, in which they get to write. That fits our profile to a tee. It's inside of them to be writers. They have an attachment to language, and they have to channel that," which is how they wind up at the Red Room.

Madison, 34 years old, blond, and bespectacled, is not just the Red Room's founder, she's its soul. Named Ivory after her grandfather Irving, Madison is a Bay Area native and a high school dropout. She moved to New Orleans where, barely out of her teens, she became a restaurant owner and the first president of the local NOW Chapter. She then returned to San Francisco to attend the New College of California School of Law, where she became editor-in-chief of the law review. During law school she externed for the Civil Central Staff at the California Supreme Court. After working as a law fellow with Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a legal advocacy group in Washington, D.C., she realized it was time to stop putting her lifelong dream of becoming a writer on hold.

Madison looked for a program that would force her to write and also provide emotional support. She didn't want writing lessons, and she didn't want someone reading her drafts. She scoured the country and couldn't find any class that fit her criteria. So she founded one. Already familiar

with the Archbishop's Mansion bed and breakfast, Madison approached the owners about renting one of its public rooms, saying she could afford to pay only a fraction of their normal fee. They agreed. "The owners love the arts and support us with low rent," she explains.

Three and a half years and 300 writers later, the Red Room is thriving. Writers can choose among five weekly studios. The Red Room also hosts monthly weekend writing marathons—six hours of pure writing on a Sunday.

"It sounds like a very simple concept," says Philip Kearney, an assistant U.S. Attorney specializing in organized-crime prosecution, "but without the structure of the Red Room, it's so easy to do other stuff after work—have dinner and a glass of wine, watch TV." Kearney is on the fourth edit of his book, *Off the Carousel*, a memoir of his experience as a United Nations war-crimes prosecutor in Kosovo. "As lawyers, we compartmentalize our time really well. Once a week, I know I'm going to write in a stunning physical environment. It's not a plastic-chaired Hilton conference room with bad lighting."

An hour a week doesn't sound like much, but according to Madison the average person types about 1,000 words an hour, so it takes just 75 hours to complete a novel-length manuscript. Since the Red Room's founding, its writers have started and finished screenplays, dissertations, and law review articles there. Several have published short stories and essays and landed agents and book deals; others have launched full-fledged writing careers.

Madison begins each studio with a transitional half hour of talk and food. And although she abhors "pretentious literary conversation," she sometimes reads brief inspirational quotes. All participants—usually around eight people—comment on how the quote relates to their own project or writing process, after first introducing themselves and declaring, "I'm a great writer." According to Madison, most would-be writers fail not for lack of talent but because of procrastination and perfectionism. "All art," she assured members at a recent studio, "is created by imperfect people."

Part of the appeal of Madison's approach is that she's sitting at her laptop silently writing alongside everyone else. "I'm not an instructor who's already 'done,'" she explains. (Madison currently is working on a children's book called *The Mice of the French Laundry*, a story about two mice that open a restaurant inside the baseboard of chef Thomas Keller's famed Yountville eatery. She is also writing a comic-book series for DC Comics. She anticipates completing these projects in the Red Room, as she did her unpublished novel and several short stories.)

Madison wants writers to see the creative process in three distinct phases: writing, editing, and marketing. She encourages brand-new writers to focus solely on writing,

Leslie Gordon (leslie.gordon@stanfordalumni.org) is a freelance writer in the Bay Area and a former lawyer.

Her philosophy is that people are writers if they write.”

—MARK SEGELMAN, JUDICIAL STAFF ATTORNEY, CALIFORNIA SUPREME COURT

pushing ahead to finish a draft—no matter how sloppy—without rereading a single word before the editing phase.

“Rereading stunts forward momentum,” Madison says. “Don’t delete anything. If you hate it, just put it in brackets.”

Madison urges Red Room members to avoid the feelings of inadequacy typical to new writers by setting reasonable goals, such as simply showing up at the Red Room once a week, and acknowledging when goals are met. More important, writers shouldn’t look to publication as the ultimate reward. “Write your thing your way,” she instructs.

Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe associate Eleanor Lumsden signed up for the Red Room five minutes after hearing about it from two Orrick coworkers. She especially liked that it wasn’t a workshop where people just talk about writing. “I wanted to be forced to write,” says Lumsden, who is writing a humorous memoir about single life in San Francisco. A member for about a year, she sees the Red Room as a luxurious sanctuary where no one is competitive—“not like being in law school,” she says. Lumsden skipped one week recently and, she says, “I really missed it. With people writing and typing around you, it’s addictive. Plus, it’s good to have structure. This is the one hour during the week that I write.”

The Red Room helps Lumsden appreciate her day job. “When you realize there’s something you want to do and you’re doing it, it makes you feel better about going to work the next morning,” she explains. It’s Lumsden’s salary as an attorney that allows her to afford the Red Room, which costs \$225 for four studio sessions a month and \$135 for each Sunday marathon. Madison also offers scholarships. “It would mean a lot to me if I had no money and someone said, ‘I believe in you and in your writing. You can come here for \$20 a month,’” she says. Madison earns a modest monthly income from the Red Room, but the bulk of her income comes from one-on-one coaching and editing consultations with writers. Her private clients include *San Francisco Chronicle* editor Phil Bronstein, as well as Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the former legislative counsel for the ACLU in Washington, D.C.

Kearney, of the U.S. Attorney’s office, has hired Madison outside of his weekly studio to help him edit his memoir, and he’s found her methods extremely effective. Specifically, she suggested he read the manuscript aloud to her so they could determine where the language is stilted and formulaic (dare we say, lawyerly?).

Recent law school graduate and Red Room member Huntington Sharp drafted his law review article—about

local San Francisco politics and the media—in the Red Room, thanking Madison in his acknowledgments. He’s now working on a memoir/novel and a teleplay. Sharp, who calls Madison “a great organizer of communities of different people,” believes the Red Room program is the only way he can get his writing projects done in a measurable amount of time. He likes the no-frills, no-gurus approach. “It’s about nothing other than writing,” he says. “Plus, the food is really good.”

Sharp believes attorneys are drawn to the Red Room because they tend to like writing and reading but become dissatisfied with the overly formal nature of legal writing. “Attorneys feel limited and want to find another outlet,” such as creative writing, he says.

Madison, for her part, loves “rescuing lawyers” and has no plans to practice law. When she’s not writing or editing, she sings Duke Ellington standards at the Plush Room (a San Francisco cabaret), serves on the organizing committee of Litquake (a nonprofit literary festival at which three Red Room writers appeared last year), and takes ballroom dancing and tango lessons.

Mark Segelman, judicial staff attorney at the California Supreme Court and another Red Room member, appreciates that Madison “doesn’t measure writers by whether they’ve been published, whether they make money from writing, whether they do it full time, or even whether what they write is good,” he says. “Her philosophy is that people are writers if they write.”

Segelman has written all but a couple of chapters of a novel in the Red Room. The novel explores why hearts break and how they heal, with a lawyer as the protagonist. He describes it as a story “about a lawyer who falls in love, which makes it science fiction.” Segelman also wrote a long poem and a short story in the Red Room. “What I like most about it is I’m making a commitment to my writing. I could do it at home, but I wouldn’t,” Segelman says. “If the Red Room does nothing else, it permits people to do a solitary thing in the company of other people.”

Madison rarely advertises the Red Room, preferring to rely on word of mouth. Consistent with her progressive politics, Madison’s ultimate goal is to make the Red Room more accessible and affordable. Specifically, she hopes to someday launch an online Red Room, at a lower cost, that’s available, with a facilitator, 24/7.

“I want everyone worldwide to get one hour of writing done a week. I want people to feel entitled to write,” Madison says. “Even if it *cost* me money to run the Red Room, I’d still do it.” **CL**