



Reading explores writings of Queens' female writers

by Jennifer Khedaroo

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Last Wednesday, the Astoria Bookshop held an event in coordination with the Heightening Stories Workshop entitled "Diverse Women's Words," which is based on some of the readings from the Diversity Writing Project.

Everyone in the Diversity Writing Project workshop is either writing fiction or non-fictional pieces that relate to race, ethnicity and cultural identity. While most of the pieces are works in progress, some readers found it helpful to read their work aloud and in front of an audience.

"It helps for a writer to be in front of an audience because many times we are alone," said Nancy Agabian, founder and instructor of the Heightening Stories. "Nervousness helps with the reading

because it's energy that you work with and it really reminds you that you're in the moment. It's exciting because you're creating the moment as you read and as people hear your words."

Presenter Ashwak Fardoush, found that reading in front of an audience is a useful way to work outside of her comfort zone. While in the past she hasn't been able to let people in on her work unless it was completely finished, reading her work has allowed the audience to be included on her literary journey. It's a form of engagement with creativity that is instrumental in the development process.

Fardoush, along with Agabian and two other readers delivered a rich, eclectic presentation of readings. In an industry largely comprised of the literary works by white males, it was refreshing to hear the stories from these diverse women.

Fardoush's detailed story focused on a young woman's exploration of her identity after she moves from a rural village to an urban city in Bangladesh. Agabian's love story was a glimpse into her work "The Fear of Large and Small Nations," which was honored as a finalist for the 2016 PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction. Doreen Wang's emotional pieces discussed everything from snippets into her grandparents love affair to nearly all the tragic (and powerful) events leading to the meeting of her friend Adolfo.

Agabian's longtime friend, Catherine Kapphahn, instructor and author of "Stories You Never Told Me," also read a piece exclusively written for the reading. Kapphahn recently won the 2015 Christopher Doheny Award from The Center for Fiction. Her story, battling depression after the sudden passing of her father due to cancer, virtually brought the entire audience to tears. For those looking to workshop their work, Kapphahn will be Agabian's workshop on Saturday, April 16.

The success of the readings has convinced me and many others that workshoping your writing is worth it if you are looking for an experience that will draw out the very best of you. Members of Agabian's workshop feel the same way.

"Once I was in the workshop, I understood the power of being in an intimate space where you get to really open up," Fardoush said. "We don't just talk about writing, we also talk about our personal lives and struggles that impact or hinder the writing process. To come every Saturday to Nancy's living room with five other women, it's magnificent, it's really a treasure."

As the readings boiled down to an end — even with the hurriedness of running late and having to leave the bookshop before we became unwelcome — there was a moment where the audience realized what they had just witnessed. There were incredible stories told, and the

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women themselves came from all walks of life, and it was all perfectly brought together for a reading in a Queens bookstore on a Wednesday night. It was magical.

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