

A Birthplace for Novels and Essays

By HELENE STAPINSKI MARCH 1, 2017



The main writing room at Paragraph Workspace for Writers, on West 14th Street in Manhattan.
Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

When you open the door to 35 West 14th Street, you're presented with one of the more challenging staircases in [New York City](#) — three stories in one long, steep shot. At the top, however, is a quiet, comfortable haven filled with dozens of complex worlds unfurling side by side, just feet from one another, and only occasionally colliding.

There is the messiah and her religious cult caught up in a dystopian nightmare. Nearby is a man who is taking a trip along the Ganges River, encountering priests, drugged-out hippies and everyone in between. He sits just feet from the woman embarking on [a five-decade journey through the art world](#), with cameos by Laurie Anderson and John Cale. Across the room a gay judge with a double life has been murdered, just inches away from [a group of teenagers in fashion school](#).

This is [Paragraph Workspace for Writers](#), where there may be a higher concentration of works in progress than anywhere else in the city. Novelists, essayists, memoirists, poets, playwrights and screenwriters who are members are here at the 40 cubicles, lost in worlds of their own making, with the occasional break to say “hi” to the person who has been typing at the next desk.

“When you come in here, you're sitting next to somebody who's a Y.A. novelist, or a poet or a playwright or whatever,” said [Jessica Seigel](#), a freelance journalist writing a piece on the neuroscience of existentialism. “This is your community.”

Ms. Seigel, like other Paragraph members, doesn't come just for the peace and quiet. She can find that in her apartment in Greenwich Village. “As a writer you can shut yourself off from the world,” she said. “You get isolated, and you can understand why Van Gogh cut his ear off.”

Twelve years ago, Joy Parisi founded Paragraph with a friend after they graduated with masters in fine arts from the New School. “We wanted to recreate that community we met through grad school,” Ms. Parisi said, “and support ourselves simultaneously.” Back then, she said, she knew of only two other writers’ spaces in the city. Now she can name four, as well as the dozens of co-working spaces that have recently cropped up in all five boroughs.

Membership ranges from \$120 to \$205 a month, depending on how much time is wanted. Though you don’t need to be published to be a member, you do need to be a serious writer and provide references.



Joy Parisi founded Paragraph with a friend 12 years ago. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Professional writers with deadlines, clips from The New Yorker and book contracts are spinning their own stories furiously, with the occasional trip to the nearby kitchen to rifle through the omnipresent candy bowl.

The 2,500-square-foot space is mostly taken up by the silent writing room, which includes the cubicles, a couch and two comfy chairs, houseplants and worn Persian carpets. There is an adjacent locker area and the kitchen, with coffee and tea and a few tables where talking is not only allowed but also encouraged.

“It’s an office without the politics,” said [Robin Eileen Bernstein](#), who was working on an essay about being a landline lover in a cellphone world. “You’re sitting in a room with other people, and their typing motivates you. It’s about seeing other humans.”

New York Today

Each morning, get the latest on New York businesses, arts, sports, dining, style and more.

Enter your email address

Sign Up

Receive occasional updates and special offers for The New York Times's products and services.

I'm not a robot



[SEE SAMPLE](#) | [MANAGE EMAIL PREFERENCES](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[Laura Stampler](#), a young-adult novelist, has made true friends here, going to weddings and socializing outside the space. She used to call the people at Paragraph her “fake co-workers.”

“But now I think they’re my real co-workers,” she said.

Her first book, “Little Black Dresses, Little White Lies,” came out this past summer. She

is now freelancing for websites like Teen Vogue and figuring out her next book.

To encourage the sense of community, Paragraph holds readings every month for its members at the KGB bar in the East Village. “Sometimes you go to see a friend,” said [George Black](#), a New Yorker contributor writing a memoir about his travels through India for St. Martin’s Press. “Sometimes you don’t know them from Adam, and it’s really serendipitous.”

There are also agent round tables to help writers who are just starting out. Eric Bernat, who doesn’t yet have an agent or a publisher, is working on a follow-up to a murder mystery called “[The Dancer](#),” self-published on Amazon a couple of months ago, which unfolds during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

Six months ago, he finished his forensic psychology master’s degree at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and decided to switch gears. “I was writing my thesis and thought: This is dumb. I don’t want to do this for a living.” So here he sits, pounding out the novel.

[Sophie Jaff](#), who is working on the messianic dystopian thriller, the third in a trilogy scheduled for publication next year by HarperCollins, said she shared her fears and complaints with other writers. “Most days I’m torn between writing the great American novel and writing the great airport novel,” Ms. Jaff said. The others around her laughed and nodded in agreement.

Correction: March 1, 2017

An earlier version of this article misstated when Paragraph Workspace for Writers in Manhattan was founded. It was 12 years ago, not 16. The error was repeated in a picture caption.

 Email worksinprogress@nytimes.com

NEWS

- [World](#)
- [U.S.](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [N.Y.](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Tech](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Today's Paper](#)
- [Corrections](#)

OPINION

- [Today's Opinion](#)
- [Op-Ed Columnists](#)
- [Editorials](#)
- [Contributing Writers](#)
- [Op-Ed Contributors](#)
- [Opinionator](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [Sunday Review](#)
- [Taking Note](#)
- [Room for Debate](#)
- [Public Editor](#)
- [Video: Opinion](#)

ARTS

- [Today's Arts](#)
- [Art & Design](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Dance](#)
- [Movies](#)
- [Music](#)
- [N.Y.C. Events Guide](#)
- [Television](#)
- [Theater](#)
- [Video: Arts](#)





LIVING

- [Automobiles](#)
- [Crossword](#)
- [Food](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Fashion & Style](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Magazine](#)
- [N.Y.C. Events Guide](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [T Magazine](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Weddings & Celebrations](#)

LISTINGS & MORE

- [Classifieds](#)
- [Tools & Services](#)
- [Times Topics](#)
- [Public Editor](#)
- [N.Y.C. Events Guide](#)
- [Blogs](#)
- [Multimedia](#)
- [Photography](#)
- [Video](#)
- [NYT Store](#)
- [Times Journeys](#)
- [Subscribe](#)
- [Manage My Account](#)

SUBSCRIBE

-  [Home Delivery](#)
-  [Digital Subscriptions](#)
-  [Times Insider](#)
-  [Crossword](#)
- [Email Newsletters](#)
- [Alerts](#)
- [Gift Subscriptions](#)
- [Corporate Subscriptions](#)
- [Education Rate](#)
-
- [Mobile Applications](#)
- [Replica Edition](#)