(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC)

**JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I’m Jonathan Rogers, your host.

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** Diana Glyer is an English professor at Azusa Pacific University in California. She’s devoted much of her impressive academic and writing career to C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien and the writers who surrounded them. She has deep insight not just into these writers books, but into their lives, and the ways they spurred each other on to create the work that has meant so much to so many of us.

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** I recently read her book *Bandersnatch*. That book has so much wisdom about collaboration and writers groups and critique and encouragement that I knew I had to get Diana Glyer on The Habit Podcast.

Diana Glyer, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast today. Thanks for making time for us.

**DIANA GLYER:** Hey, it’s a pleasure. It’s really an honor to be here.

**JR:** (chuckles) I know — I suspect a lot of people who listen to this podcast already know that C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien were friends. They know about the Inklings and a general— I guess I should just speak for myself. Before I read your book *Bandersnatch*, I guess I thought of myself as knowing about the Inklings, but you… in that book bring things… you tell specific details about the Inklings and about the way they did their writing together. They did life together in many ways. It made me realize I didn’t know as much as I thought I did about the Inklings. So I’d love to hear you — I’m sure you’re called upon very often to summarize what the whole Inklings thing was. So could you take a few minutes and tell us some things about who the Inklings were and what they did for each other, and for us?

**DG:** Sure, so late in the 1920s, 1929, C.S. Lewis and his friend J.R.R. Tolkien decided to make a very, very simple commitment. And that was they enjoyed each other’s company so much that they decided to get together for lunch one day a week. That simple. Two guys. Lunch one day a week. Heading over to the pub for a pint and good conversation with a friend.

And in December of 1929, that simple lunch commitment — simple lunch conversation — shifted, because J.R.R. Tolkien made a radical and dangerous decision to share some poetry that he had been working on with his good friend. Now, that’s scary. I mean, Tolkien’s an introvert. He is shy about the work he’s been doing, and this was a poem that was very, very close to his heart, and he had been working on it for some time. But he happened to have a copy on him, and I sort of picture them at the end of this meeting together, Tolkien very, very reluctantly turning to his extroverted friend C.S. Lewis and saying, “I’ve been working on this little poem, and I wonder if uh… I wonder if… well, perhaps you’d take a look at it, you know?”

And uh… Lewis took it and read it, and the next couple times they got together, Lewis started bringing some of his poetry. And there were these exchanges of manuscripts in these Monday meetings, and they loved it so much that out of this habit, through January, February, March the next year, they started to invite other people to come with them. And the Inklings meetings began with this very simple, very ordinary kind of conversation. Two guys getting together for lunch. It doesn’t get any simpler than that. And that involved into sharing works in progress, very rough drafts of things they were working on.

Meetings shifted as the group grew from Monday morning to Thursday nights. And they met in Lewis’ room at Magdalen College. And so, I’m a college professor, but I don’t live on my campus at Azusa Pacific University. But at Oxford they do. The dons have usually a home away from campus, but they have rooms on campus where they live during the week or during term time. And so in that Lewis had a large sitting room, and on a Thursday night, these men would gather — usually about 9 o’clock at night. They were late night people, get together at 9 — 8:30, 9. They called that “after dinner,” so if you look at the records they say, “after dinner, we gather.” I’d think that’s 7 o’clock, but not for them. For them that’s 8:30 or 9.

**JR:** (chuckles)

**DG:** And then they would read their works in progress out loud. Usually the roughest rough drafts, penciled in the night before perhaps, and then they would talk about the work in various ways. They’d usually stay up until 1 or 2 in the morning, and then they’d wander home from there. And they did this for… about fifteen years. Fifteen, almost twenty years.

There are nineteen men who are considered members of the group, and like a lot of groups that last a long time, the membership of the group shifted because it was kind of an open thing. So, people would kind of join the group for a season, and then kind of rotate out, and that’s part of the secret of their longevity, is that openness to inviting new people in, and to giving people the freedom to participate not necessarily every single time, but as they are able. So a number of members of the group came. They would come maybe for a few times for a month or two, and then you wouldn’t see them again for a year or two, and so on.

So there’s this openness, but there was a core — 3 or 4 or 5 people — who would show up very faithfully, Thursday after Thursday. And they did this for quite a long time, for seventeen years.

**JR:** So very famously they met at the Bird and— the Eagle and Child pub. Are you saying it was just early on that they did that, and then later on their meetings were in Lewis’ rooms?

**DG:** No, not at all. I’m saying there were actually two very distinct meetings of this group. And so the Thursday night meetings are the only group that the members called “an Inklings.” So they didn’t call themselves Inklings, they called the meeting “an Inklings.” So, “We’re going to have an Inklings,” or “I went to an Inklings.” That was always Thursday night.

Thursday night was a closed group. And by that I mean it was by invitation only. You couldn’t wander in, you couldn’t bring a friend because you felt like it. It was a closed group. And I think that that’s a really important thing to keep in mind as we consider what makes a really successful writers group. Because in order for a writers group to thrive — especially for one that lasts long term — you need for there to be a healthy dose of safety, some security, and some ritual or structure that makes you feel safe and stable enough that you can risk some daring ideas in the creative work that you’re doing.

So that was the Thursday group. The Thursday group was the writers group. But on Tuesdays they met — Tuesday mornings, actually, morning into lunch time — they met at The Eagle and Child, The Bird and Baby pub, and there, that was an open meeting. So if you have been to the pub, you know that The Rabbit Room is the little space in there. In the olden days, before the pub was remodeled, that was a little bit remote, but still, people were coming and going. And various individuals would just drop in, and that was conversation only. Women were part of that group, students were part of that group, but that was not a writers group. That was a conversation, a fellowship group. A building relationship group, and kicking around ideas in a very informal way.

I think that was important to the friendships and also to the writing that the men produced, but it wasn’t really an Inkling. So some of the Inklings also met faithfully for these Tuesday meetings, but that was a different thing. There is no record of any manuscripts ever being read at The Eagle and Child pub.

**JR:** Ahhhh… okay. This is what I’m talking about, Diana, when I say we have this vague sense of what the Inklings were up to. So they didn’t call themselves “The Inklings,” they just called their meetings…

**DG:** An inklings. We’re going to have an inklings on Thursday.

**JR:** (chuckles) Alright. And you said they met — the Thursday night meetings went on for nineteen or twenty years? Is that what you said?

**DG:** Yeah, yeah. They started… I believe the first meeting of the Inklings was this brave step of Tolkien’s in 1929 to share his poetry. To shift the conversation from just talking about ideas and administrative politics and books they were reading to actually reading each others’ stuff and giving detailed feedback. The last Inklings meeting was in 1949, and they just had a night when no one showed up. And that was the end of the group. It was very sort of unofficial and quiet.

Things had started to lose a little bit of their vitality after one of the members, a guy named Charles Williams, died unexpectedly. And so he was a very lively and unusual member of the group. He wrote what are sometimes described as supernatural thrillers, novels where the uh… relationship between the natural world and the supernatural world is very, very thin. Williams believed that natural worlds and supernatural worlds exist side by side, and every now and then we catch a glimpse of that supernatural world that is at any given moment all around us.

Well, Charles Williams brought a particular personality. He was one of those kind of lively risk takers. He was a bit of an outlier in the group in some ways. Not an academic, but someone who was well-traveled, someone who preferred the city to the university or the academic life, and he brought all of that to the group. And that caused a certain kind of liveliness. When he died, the group started to lose some of that, and eventually, um, resolve.

A lot of times I’m asked about the end of the Inklings — why did they end? Why didn’t they keep going? And in some ways, I would say that’s the wrong question. What’s really remarkable is how long they lasted. So a typical writing group, if you study writing groups — whether that’s in a school setting or writing groups that emerge among groups of writers who commit to each other in a writing circle — usually groups like that last 4, 5, or 6 years. If a group lasts 8 years, that’s a little bit unusual. That’s more than is typical. And the reason for that is something… I mean, if you think about it, anyone can relate to. We go through different phases of life. We go through different stages in our family, in our work life. People move. A writing group that lasts for 4, 5, or 6 years is a highly successful group. And the goal in putting a writing group together is not to last indefinitely, but to last as long as that group is fulfilling the needs of the participants.

**JR:** So have you been in successful writing groups before, Diana?

**DG:** I have been in a number of successful writing groups. But I think that when people are asking about writing groups, one of the things that I like to emphasize is that I think all writers nee groups, but I don’t think all writers need writing groups.

**JR:** Ahhhh…

**DG:** So when people ask me, uhh… how do I start a writing group? I’m kind of out here solo. I really feel— I read your book. I’m really excited. I read in *Bandersnatch* about all of the different ways that a writing group can help and sustain my creative vision. I wanna start a group. How do I get going? And the first question I wanna ask is are you sure you need a critique group? Because I’m not sure that every writer needs a critique group.

Just to broaden it out a little bit, to think about it, I think all writers need to get together with other writers. Because fundamentally, writers get how hard it is to sustain productivity and interest and inspiration year after year, decade after decade. It’s hard. And we need each other. We need each other for encouragement. We need each other for challenge. We need a lot of different kinds of things that we can talk about. But I don’t know that a critique group is always the answer.

So for example, uh… when I was working on *Bandersnatch*, I really wanted to get a younger voice in that, and a less academic voice, and so I created an ad hoc group. So that’s one of the kinds of groups that I think is really helpful. And I gathered together some students and some recent graduates, and we got together for every week for about a year and a half. And we read chunks out loud, and we worked with the material. And that’s an ad hoc group. Everybody—

**JR:** And that was all about your project, Diana?

**DG:** That was all about my project. Now other groups split off from that. So when one member of that particular group — we called ourselves Team Bandersnatch. And so, some of the members of Team Bandersnatch said, well, I’m working on a novel. Could we do an ad hoc group just for the next few months while I’m trying to get my novel together? Or another participant said, I’m finishing my master’s thesis. Could two of you and then two of my other friends put together an ad hoc group just for the life of this project? Would you come alongside what I’m doing, and would you help me just to get this one project done? Which is a great thing to do! Those are by definition short term, and very focused on the life of one project.

But that’s not the only kind of— another kind of group is a problem solving group. So for example, there’s a group of theology profs at Azusa Pacific University. They get together for coffee twice a week. And they do it, they schedule their time, so that there — these are the two mornings a week when they write. So you know one of the secrets of being a productive writer is you schedule your writing time. So they have been in this pattern, two mornings a week they write all morning, and then they get together for a late coffee, late morning, and then they go back and write for another hour or two. This has been their pattern for years.

What they do in that coffee time is critical to their success. Because you know how it is when you’re sitting, you’re working on a project, you’re like, ugh, it’s not working! Ugh, I can’t make this paragraph behave! Ugh, I can’t figure out how to do this thing! Right? So you say, I’m gonna give it up. I’m gonna go have coffee with the guys.

You sit down, and Steve turns to you and he says, “So what are you working on this morning?” And you say, “Well, I’m working on chapter 8.” And he says to you, “What’s chapter 8 about?” And then you say, “Well, what I’m trying to say in chapter 8 is…” and then it gushes forth. Beautifully, fully formed.

**JR:** Mmhm.

**DG:** Everything that you’ve been — now why is that? Why is that you just spent three hours banging your head against your desk and couldn’t say anything sensible, but when we’re face to face, something happens. Now there’s a neurological reason for that. You’re probably aware of it. That when people meet face to face, that face to face connection wakes up, turns on various aspects your brain that are not connected or not, um… the on switch isn’t moved when we’re on Zoom for example. When we’re talking on the telephone. When we’re looking at our books or composing on our computers. God has hard wired us so that our brains are much more active. We have access to a larger percentage of our brain when we’re face to face. And we know this from studies particularly of infants and their caregivers, and the way that when caregivers and infants are face to face, there is neurological change that takes place, not only in the infant, but also in the caregiver.

So face to face is really important for us. We are hard wired for it. And that’s part of the reason why when we get together with a person and try to explain to that person what we are trying to express, we have access to a far greater range of vocabulary, of interest… but the other thing is this. And that’s that all writing is by nature transactional.

So if you think about just how it feels, you think about the affect of it. When you are sitting there writing and trying to create text, you get the feeling that you’re talking to yourself.

**JR:** (chuckles)

**DG:** And you know what you mean, and so not so much really depends on what you say.

**JR:** Mmhm.

**DG:** But when you’re looking eyeball to eyeball to a friend, and you say, “I’m trying to explain something about how Hugo Dyson was a key member of the group,” and you say, “Huh? What? What do you mean by that?” All of a sudden, I realize that you don’t know the same story that I do, and that awakens in me the language that I need in order to get that across. That’s why those face to face meetings are so important.

So that’s what a problem solving group is. Nobody in these groups is actually reading each other’s stuff. All that they’re doing is getting together regularly to talk, and to ask questions, and to express ideas and clarify phrasing that helps them as they go back to their writing desk.

**JR:** That is so great, Diana! I love those insights. I talk about — um, I didn’t invent this phrase, I can’t remember where I got it from — but the curse of knowledge?

**DG:** Mmm.

**JR:** You know, so many of our writing problems, it’s not because you’re ignorant. It’s because you know too much!

**DG:** Yeah. Yes.

**JR:** You know what you’re saying, and so you don’t have any idea that this sentence makes no sense whatsoever, because you already know what you’re saying!

**DG:** Right. And that’s why it’s so hard—

**JR:** It feels like you must be some sort of idiot, but it’s not that you’re an idiot. It’s just that you’re too knowledgable.

**DG:** Right, and that’s why it’s so hard for us to revise our own work. Because when we read our own material, we don’t read what we said. We read what we meant.

**JR:** (laughs) Yeah. Right.

**DG:** Right? And so we need other people to come along and say, well, I don’t know what you mean here. Right? And that’s one of the most helpful forms of critique. And so if you are in a critique setting, I think that for someone simply to say, “I don’t understand this. I don’t know what you mean.” Or, “I sort of get it, but I don’t quite grasp it. Can you tell me more? Or can you give me an example?” And that causes us to externalize those things that are internal knowledge for us.

Just real quick, just to talk about a couple of other kinds of groups, or ways that groups can help each other. One of the ones that my students have found most helpful are what we call parallel play groups. So parallel play is a concept where people are together in the same place, but they’re each working on their own thing. And I know an awful lot of writing groups — and this works, by the way, really well over Zoom or online formats. And you just say I need a regular structure of writing. So every Monday and Wednesday, from noon to 4, that’s my writing time. And you find other people who will be like yeah, that’s my writing time too. And you just show up. You don’t really talk or interact. You just have people there, and everybody’s just working on their own thing. There are a number of clubs and organizations I know who have started that kind of thing.

And so what that does is it provides the accountability, but also that sense of companionship to know that I’m not the only one sitting there scratching my head. I’m not the only one that just deleted 500 words that I spent two weeks writing. You see that other people are involved with it, and it does marvelous things.

My students often get together for parallel play according to a weekly schedule. Everybody’s studying their own thing or working on their own papers, but the companionship of being in the same space is pretty important. I guess I would mention one other kind of group—

**JR:** Hey, before you do that, can I ask you a quick question?

**DG:** Oh yeah.

**JR:** When you said it’s good to do over Zoom, do you mean that people are literally logging into Zoom and sitting there for 4 hours?

**DG:** Yes, I do.

**JR:** Like, looking at somebody else writing.

**DG:** That’s right. And uh, in a younger crowd, there are actually people who vlog, and that’s their whole vlog thing. Is that you can watch somebody for a certain amount of time, at certain hours of the day, sitting and studying, and they just call it study group. You and one other person — oh, in this case, a lot of other people — kind of logging on to watch somebody study and study along with them.

**JR:** Really?

DG: Yeah! Yeah. It is accountability and it is companionship, and those two things make a big, big difference for our productivity. So if I can, I’ll talk a little bit about my group. I have a group that has been meeting for over 20 years.

**JR:** Oh wow!

**DG:** Which is a pretty remarkable thing. It is not a critique group, but it is definitely a writers group. And we get together twice a month and have for more than twenty years now. And our group is a prayer group. It is probably the thing that has helped me more than anything else in my writing life.

So we get together — unlike a general prayer group where you can pray about all the different things that might concern you, we get together, we share a meal together, we worship for a few moments, and then each person takes the prayer chair and shares specifically what are they working on now and what do they want God to do? How do they need God to intervene, wherever they are in the process? Whether that’s getting the courage to send out a query letter to get published, whether that’s I got this idea for a novel and I don’t know if I should undertake it or not. I submit to my prayer group when I get an invitation to do something like a podcast or a lecture.

**JR:** Uh huh.

**DG:** And I say, should I do this? Is this something that will add value? Is this something that will make a difference? Because I don’t want to waste time. I don’t want to do something just to tick a box, you know? You get to a point in life where you think, I really want to do things that will make a difference for folks, that will add value. And my prayer group prays for all of these kinds of events. And so that group has been sustaining.

We don’t give each other advice. We don’t read each other’s stuff. In fact, advice is strictly forbidden. But what we do is we function as resonators for the challenges that we have. I think one of the most powerful words in this whole field of writing groups is resonators. And a resonator is someone who fundamentally understands what it is you are attempting to do and commits themselves to companioning with you to help you get there.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DG:** And the Inklings were tremendous resonators. Even in their critiques, they were able to say, I get what you’re trying to do here. What you’re trying to do is really good. Let me companion with you in all of the various ways I can. Let me support you in the work you’re trying to bring forth.

**JR:** Yeah, one of the, uh… in The Habit Membership and other places where I have people gathering to give each other critique, or comment on one another’s work… I’ve got a document where I try to lay out some rules for that. And one of the rules is — and this is a rule that goes both ways, whether you’re receiving input or giving it — your job is to help the other person give voice to your vision. Rarely would it ever be to change somebody’s vision. As you’re making comments, be thinking I’m not here to hijack somebody’s vision. And if I’ve got something to say that might help that vision be more clear… great. Here it is.

And by the same token, as you’re trying to adjudicate what input to pay attention to and what to ignore, I think a lot of it is, is this person trying to get me to do something I’m that I didn’t set out to do, or are they trying to help me do something I set out to do in the first place?

**DG:** Yeah, that’s really good. I think that’s part of the reason why the word “resonators” is such a rich way to look at it. I had uh, discovered that word and seen that word as a descriptor for the creative process, but it was a friend of mine after I’d given a lecture who helped me really understand waht that is.

He said, “Do you know what a resonator actually is, functionally?” I said, “No,” and he said, “A piano is a resonator. And a violin is a resonator.” And I said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

He said, look, the sound that the string of a violin makes is very soft and very limited, and it’s the body of the violin that amplifies that sound and gives it its fullness and resonance. It helps it to become full grown and mature. It doesn’t change that sound. It merely vibrates at the same frequency and adds the depth of dimension.

And that’s what we do for each other as writers, I think. Whatever kind of writing group we have, we resonate for one another. And we have to be good listeners in order to do that, and simply to say can you tell me more about that? I don’t quite get what you’re saying. Can you clarify that for me? Can you give me another example? I’m not quite grasping. Is this what you’re trying to say? Those kinds fo feedback are so much more helpful than, “I didn’t like chapter 2.”

**JR:** (laughs)

**DG:** Or, “That character makes me nuts!” Or these other kinds of criticisms which are very, very different from that kind of critique. I like what you said about maintaining the author’s own vision as opposed to imposing on the author a vision of your own. I think resonators help to capture that. But I also think the whole idea of being an author helps to capture that. Don’t you?

**JR:** Yeah.

**DG:** That the same root word for “authority” is the word “author.” The author is an authority, and they’re able to say, “That’s a really good idea, but that won’t work for this project.” You know? So we learn how to listen. You’re exactly right that when it comes to giving one another the kind of feedback that we need, we need to be both good givers of feedback, but also good listeners, good receivers. And part of that being a good receiver is learning when that’s a really good idea, but for someone else. That’s not really gonna take me in the direction I want to go.

**JR:** Yeah. That’s the right answer to a different question.

**DG:** (laughs) That’s right. Very good. Very good.

**JR:** Um… well… you know, I have said I don’t know how many times that I have never been in a successful writers group, but that’s not true. From what you’ve just said, I realized that’s not true. I’ve been in a wildly successful writers group. I’ve just never been in a successful critique group.

**DG:** There you go.

**JR:** I’ve been very blessed to have writer friends who know what it means to write books and songs and bring things into the world, and that makes a huge difference in my own work, in my own approach to the world. And that’s a completely different thing from needing… I guess I’ve felt a little bit… guilty’s not the word, but weird about the fact that I’ve just never been in a critique group that seemed to work.

**DG:** Yeah.

**JR:** And you know, part of the problem is I’ve never been sufficiently afraid enough of what the critique group was gonna say to maybe get my work done for the week or whatever.

**DG:** (laughs)

**JR:** But this is really helpful to have some different language. Yes, I’ve been in a successful writers group.

**DG:** Good, I’m glad to hear that. And even when you think about the Inklings, we have instances where, for example, Charles Williams didn’t like things read out loud as much as C.S. Lewis did. So some of us are more auditory, right? And some of us are more visual in how we process a text. And so we have all kinds of occasions where Tolkien, after he had read for the Inklings, would give those manuscript pages to his friend Charles Williams, and then they would meet — just the two of them — later in the week, usually at a pub called the Miter. And Charles, having had time to read and reflect on the manuscript, would chat with Tolkien about some of the details of the progress of *The Lord of the Rings*.

And that was really important. That was a different form. Even the Inklings would get together sometimes for these ad hoc groups or these smaller groups or these different kinds of groups. Each member of the group were members of other kinds of groups as well, whether those were essay clubs or debating societies or other kinds of special interest groups. And so we tend to think they’d put all of their attention just in this one Thursday meeting. But that’s not the case. Before the Inklings, after the Inklings… most importantly, during the lifespan of the Inklings groups, they were constantly connecting with other writers outside, as needed, so that they could throw ideas around, get feedback on a specific kind of topic, and so on.

And so we need a much more fluid idea of what a group is. We think that a group starts with nine people, and then stays with those same nine relentlessly… that’s not how it works. It’s a much more permeable, flexible, and open kind of system. And the bottom line is writers must find ways to connect with others. We can’t sustain the writing life alone. It’s too hard, and it’s so discouraging, and it’s very time consuming.

Among other things, we need other writers who can model for us what to try and what to do. And this was the effect of the Inklings on C.S. Lewis’ brother Warren Lewis. And I think that that’s a really important thing. He joined the group from almost the start, in the very early years of the group, and was one of the most active members of the group during those years.

But what’s really fun is he didn’t actually start writing until he’d been part of the group for quite a long time — 5, 6, 7 years into it. It suddenly occurred to him, hanging around with all of those writers, hey I can do that! Look what they’re doing. I could do that.

**JR:** How hard can it be? (laughs)

**DG:** (laughs) And that’s when he started writing, and he published seven books, and they’re brilliant! They’re brilliantly written. Uh, but he did it because he kind of hung around and watched and observed this process until he was ready to plunge in himself.

**JR:** Yeah. Okay, I gotta ask you this. I know… among, even in my group of writers, The Habit Membership, I have a lot of people in there who feel lonely. They live in some small town in Nebraska or Manitoba… I mean, some small place where they feel like there’s nobody like me, I don’t know where to find— And you know, for those people, the in Internet has been a boon in some ways, to help them find people like them who have similar interests. But you’re talking about, that’s nice that these people in Oxford got to hang out with Tolkien and go to an essay club.

And I was even thinking about your theology professors… (pause) You know, meeting for coffee. I live in Nashville, Tennessee, and there’s plenty of writers around, but if I were to write for two hours and then go get coffee, it takes 15 or 20 minutes just to drive to the coffee place. This isn’t like being on a campus.

So can you talk about some of these… well, that’s two different things. But let’s start with the idea of people who feel like, “I’ve got nobody in my life who shares my interests. I don’t know where to even start finding people who like what I like.

**DG:** Sure. You’re right. It is a wonderful thing to be part of a university environment, and that does throw open a lot of doors of opportunity. But I think that that isn’t the only way to do it. So, for those who feel isolated, I would go back to sort of the beginning of what I expressed, and that is the Inklings did not start as a critique group.

They didn’t start by— the way that most of us would. Most of us would think, I gotta get a group together. So I’m gonna put on my Facebook, and I’m gonna put on my Craigslist and everything I can, and see how many people I can get together at the library. And we’ll get thirty people at that first meeting. And you’ll say, I’m gonna start a group! And you’ll pray that there will only be so much attrition so you still end up with a critical mass of maybe eight or ten people that can sustain this thing over the long haul. And that’s going about it the wrong way.

The Inklings started because two guys decided to get together for lunch one day a week. And at the time, while they had a lot in common, they were very different personalities, and neither one was an accomplished author. Neither one of them. They were failed authors in a matter of fact, in lots of ways. They’d been writing all their lives, but they hadn’t— nothing they’d done had ever— they were just guys! They didn’t know they were C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien!

**JR:** (chuckles) Right.

**DG:** They were just guys, and they enjoyed each other’s company, and they found that they drew out from one another new things, interesting things. They enjoyed each other’s company. So to that person who feels isolated I’d say can you find one other person who sort of gets what you do? Uh, who energizes you?

See, here’s the litmus test of a really good resonator is very very simple. It’s something I learned from my mentor, Don Murray. And he used to say you want to find that person that, after you talk to them, you can’t wait to get back to work.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DG:** You can’t wait to get back to work. So I do one on one critiques with my students, right? We do one on one for them in their classroom. And I really believe that I have failed unless the student leaves feeling like you know what? I’m gonna cut my next class, ‘cause I cannot wait to get back and work on this paper.

**JR:** (laughs)

**DG:** You know what I mean?

**JR:** Yeah.

**DG:** Not encouraging cutting class, but I wanna get that oh, now I know what to try! And I really can’t wait to get back at it! That’s what you’re looking for. Is the person that makes you feel like that. And so I would say try to find one other person. Make a commitment to get together on a more or less regular basis. Try to articulate what you need. Do you need prayer? Do you need parallel play? Do you need critique? Do you wanna work on a project? What is that? What would that look like?

In my prayer group, by the way, it’s not all just writers. We also have musicians. We have visual artists and others. Because all of us who are involved in the artistic enterprise understand on a visceral level how terrifying it is to get your work out there, and how frustrating it is to have something in your heart and to have the physical manifestation of it not match. We know about discouragement. We know about loneliness and isolation. So really in our group there’s no difference between the painter and the person who writes musicals and the person working on their thesis and the person working on a novel. We all get the creative process. So even expanding a little bit… getting together with others.

I recommend that people start, if they wanna go a little deeper in thinking about a group, that they find a book and read it together and talk about it. And that shifts from that awkwardness… hi. (chuckles) What are we gonna talk about? To, “Let’s talk about chapter 4 and 5!” And what that book is… a lot of groups started because they read *Bandersnatch*. And uh… just, “Can we just read this together and see if any of this would be something we’d want to try?

So you start small. Start with two. Two is a magic number. A guy named Joshua Wolf Shenk has written a book called *Powers of Two*, and notes in that historically, how many great breakthroughs in science and technology and music start between two people start bouncing ideas back and forth, and then they start inviting other people who share the vision, and the group grows. Two is a magic number. So I recommend that people start on that kind of level.

**JR:** Is it fair to say that a resonator doesn’t even have to be a person that themselves is an artist? You were talking about people who ask good questions, who are paying attention and are curious. I don’t know that… if indeed you live in a place where it’s literally true that there’s nobody else who’s interested in, you know… I don’t know if that’s literally true for anybody. But I know it feels true. I wonder if you can just, you know… you have a friend who’s a farmer, but is interested in what you’re doing, I should think that would scratch some of this itch.

**DG:** That would be fabulous, right? That would be fabulous. I think in a lot of ways, that’s such a good starting place, because then we start to realize I don’t need everything from each individual.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DG:** Just one thing that I get from that person. That person makes me excited because they ask good questions. That person makes me excited because they believe in me. That person makes me excited because they contradict everything I say, and they make it necessary for me to raise the bar a little bit and to do a better job at what I do. So absolutely.

And then there’s another person who’s particularly good— I have one person in my world, and he hates everything I do. And I always send him my academic articles before they go to press, because I know he’s gonna rip them apart. But here’s the power of that. Here’s the thing that really makes that amazing. Is that since I know I’m gonna send him that article, while I’m writing that article, I keep him in mind as one of my readers. And I shift what I say, because I know ooh, if I say that, he’s gonna jump all over it.

**JR:** (chuckles)

**DG:** Or ahh, that’s a phrase that’s his pet peeve! Or ooh, he’s gonna ask me where my evidence is, right? Or he’s gonna say it’s too speculative. I know it, because he always does.

**JR:** (chuckles)

**DG:** And that means that even as I’m writing, I’m thinking about that one critic. He is invaluable to me. But the most important thing he does isn’t the final, marked up copy of my manuscript, although I treasure that. It’s that it’s changing how I’m thining during my composing process, and that’s worth its weight in gold.

**JR:** Oh, that’s great. Yeah. And you know I… when you spoke of people that make you wanna sit down and write… or skip class. Which I…

**DG:** (laughs)

**JR:** I cannot get behind that, Diana.

**DG:** Alright, alright. We’ll have to edit that part out before my dean hears this particular interview, okay? (laughs)

**JR:** Yeah. Well, I know people who are just good storytellers, and they think of themselves as not being creative. And when I talk to them I think… I want to go write some of what they said down, or in any case, I just wanna go write something down. Well, Diana, we’re running— actually, we ran out of time a while back, but this is just too much good stuff. But I have to ask you the question I always ask. Who are the writers who make you wanna write?

**DG:** Well, obviously, I have a lifelong fascination with Lewis and Tolkien, all aspects of their work. But not only that, all aspects of their example. They are bold models to me of a life well lived. C.S. Lewis’ friend Walter Hooper said of C.S. Lewis that he was the most throughly converted man he had ever met.

**JR:** Mmm.

**DG:** So Lewis to me continues to be an incredible example of me wanting to use all of my talents and to be thoroughly converted, to have no aspects of my interests, my day, my talents, my abilities that isn’t an open invitation for the lordship of Christ, and uh to be the hands and feet of Jesus in this world.

Other writers that have been tremendously importantly to me — I have to mention Anne Lamott’s book *Bird by Bird*.

**JR:** Oh, I like that book.

**DG:** Because I think what she does is she lays out a very practical way that writers can get their work done. The idea of the one inch frame, you may be familiar with. The idea of really, really bad first drafts. Those two keystones changed the life of every writer that I know. And she just explains it so well, she’s such a brilliant writer herself. I actually cried when I read her autobiography, not because of the content of that, but because her sentences (laughs) are soooo beautiful. I thought ohhhh, look. She can make the English language do things that I am just in awe of.

And then I would say finally, I had the privilege of studying with a man named Don Murray, who was a professor at the University of New Hampshire. Won a Pulitzer Prize in journalism.

**JR:** Hmm.

**DG:** He wrote a book — it’s out of print now, but oh my goodness, you’ve gotta find a copy. It’s called *The Craft of Revision*, and I’ve used that book for years in classrooms with reluctant writers. It is largely about revising, but it’s much more just about the writing life and the writing process.

I think sometimes when we’re talking about writing, we focus way too much on the final product. We’re trying to make a product look a certain way. And we don’t talk enough about the magical space in between when we first get an idea and when we have a finished manuscript before us. I think that knowing what the target might look like is helpful, but honestly, I don’t think that that’s where our focus should be. It should be on today. What are the steps that I can take to move this project along, just a little bit further? And if we keep that mindset, then we keep producing regularly and on a daily basis.

To me, it’s always been astonishing to see how if I will just say, every day, in terms of my writing tasks, what’s the next action that I can take to move this project along just a little bit, how much can get done at the end of the year or two years or five years. So Don Murray’s book *The Craft of Revision* helped me a lot in some of the same ways that Anne Lamott does, talking about writing process. But also because he too is a good writer, very different style from Lamott. I am constantly inspired by him and by his example.

**JR:** Yeah. Well, great. I have been very encouraged by the things you’ve had to say about writing groups and friendships among writers.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** So thank you for being here. And I hope to do this again.

**DG:** Let’s plan for a followup sometime at your convenience! And thank you so much for the chance. It’s fun to talk about these important ideas.

**JR:** Thanks, Diana.

(THEME MUSIC)

**DREW MILLER:** The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We’re so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.

Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song “Too Good” as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.

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(THEME MUSIC OUT)