

Start your own writers' collective

Strategies you can adopt from Philadelphia's successful Liars Club

What do you get when you bring together 13 authors who write literary novels, fantasies, horror, thrillers, crime, mysteries and young adult fiction, and ask them not only to promote each other's books but also to boost the fortunes of independent booksellers and public libraries?

The answer is The Liars Club. This Philadelphia authors' collective features a fun name, a clever shared purpose and a synergistic powerhouse of inventive thinking about social media, attracting publicity, drawing crowds and providing companionship in what is normally the solitary profession of writing. It's also a group of people who are eager to share how you can duplicate their concept by starting a collective in your city.

It began with a beer

Begun two years ago by *New York Times* bestselling authors **Jonathan Maberry**, L.A. **Banks** and fantasy novelist **Gregory Frost**, The Liars Club's members plan and take turns showing up for book readings, fiction workshops Q&As, library festivals and more. It's all part of their "all for one, one for all" philosophy of book promotion.

The idea for the club emerged over a beer shared by Banks and Maberry, who have known each other since middle school and were both writing for St. Martin's Press, and Frost, who was under contract with a Random House imprint. As Banks recalls, the three began their conversation bemoaning the fate of the publishing industry and discussing how lonely individual book signings can be while waiting for customers to drop by your table.

As the conversation continued, they decided it would be more effective — and more fun — to promote their books as part of a group. Maberry came up with the name for the club, wryly observing that as writers of fiction they make their living by lying. Banks liked the name instantly. "I thought it was hilarious," she says.



Jonathan Maberry



L.A. Banks

Next, Maberry and Frost contacted other writers they knew, inviting them to the first official meeting of The Liars Club, a brainstorming session held in an Irish Bar over mugs of Dead Guy Beer.

"We brainstormed things we could do to help ourselves and patch up some of the ills in the community," Banks remembers and the plight of independent booksellers came to mind. She says, "Independent bookstores are really struggling because of big chains and online sales—real mom and pop stores that hand-sold books and gave small midlist authors a shot at getting a following and doing signings, those stores were closing."

Adds club member **Solomon Jones**, author of *Pipe Dream*, *Ride or Die* and other books, "Promoting independent book sellers is brilliant. It promotes the people who promote us ... thereby encouraging them to promote us more."

Truth in Lies

The desire to help independent stores led to The Liars Club's first initiative, its Truth in Lies tour. The group didn't just set up book signings at independent bookstores in the Philadelphia area. It turned them into events in which they spoke to the local press about the value of the independents, held contests and gave away books and Liars' themed T-shirts. (Sample Truth or Lie contest question: True or false, a person who cuts off his wife's head can be found not guilty of murder if he says he thought he was slicing a melon. Answer: true.)

As time went by, certain other truths emerged. T-shirts were deemed too expensive to give away and the group has since switched to napkins and toilet paper bearing its logo. Static book signings were replaced by more interactive workshops and panel discussions.

Liars Club member **Kelly Simmons**, author of the novel *Standing Still* (Simon & Schuster), says panel discussions have worked well with the group's latest emphasis, bringing attention to the important roles libraries play in communities. Many libraries are facing cutbacks due to the poor economy even though they are a vital source of information, — *continued on page 12*

Wise book marketing advice from Liars Club members

You don't have to start your own writer's collective to benefit from advice from **The Liars Club**. Here are some of their favorite tips:

- **“Never forget who brung you.”** No matter how busy they are, **L.A. Banks** says authors should always answer their own email, recognizing that communicating with their public and learning their likes and dislikes about the author's work is the best focus group they will ever get. Conducting online chats with readers—especially when a new book is about to drop—is critical, she notes. Banks, author of 42 books, including her latest, *Never Cry Werewolf: A Crimson Moon Novel*, explains that in a chat room you might draw 50 or 75 readers, compared to a bookstore signing in which you might attract 10.
- **Build relationships with the media.** Former journalist **Solomon Jones** advises authors to help reporters and other news media perform their jobs better. Even if it may not benefit authors at that moment, it will down the road. “If they know that you are dependable, factual and diligent, they will come back to you again,” Solomon says.
- **Borrow ideas from authors who have bigger followings than you do.** Set up Google alerts for well-known authors whose books are coming out around the same time your book will debut. **Kelly Simmons** set up a Google alert for Kate Jacobs, an inventive author who has greater name recognition than she does. If you read about a popular writer who has a promotional idea you find creative, follow them, she advises. “I can't possibly think of everything that's being done in the business,” she reflects, but anyone is capable of adapting other people's ideas for their own use.



- **Don't underestimate the value of social media.** “Social media really works,” observes **Dennis Tayofa**. He suggests writing about other people in your genre that you admire on your blog and commenting on their blogs. “That's a great way to form a community with other people,” he says. Adds **Jonathan Maberry**, “I interview people in my own genre or in genres I'm going to be publishing in, drawing some readers to my blog through association of names they are going to be more familiar with. I'm also making genuine friends with them.”
- **Refuse to be pigeonholed.** Mayberry, whose latest book is *The Dragon Factory*, says his writing career has been extraordinarily varied. He's done everything from magazine articles to newsletters, plays, greeting cards, college textbooks and comic books. When offered the chance to do a type of writing he has never done before, he views it as a learning experience. He finds an example that someone else did successfully and deconstructs it. As an aspiring novelist, he broke down the novels of Stephen King and E.L. Doctorow to see how they handled the elements of plot, tension and point of view. If you too have a writer you admire, you might break down their technique as well. “Every book is a blueprint for how it is written,” Mayberry says.

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computer access and an essential link to passing the joy of reading onto children.

At library events, members sometimes talk about what libraries have meant to them and tell amusing anecdotes. They also take questions from would-be writers and readers in the audience.

“A number of the speakers are hilarious,” she adds. “It’s more fun to listen to them talk than to listen to them read from their books.”

This isn’t surprising, given that Maberry describes the group he cofounded as “an American literary version of Monty Python. We’re all business but clearly having fun.”

How members benefit

Of course, independent bookstores and libraries are not the only ones benefitting from The Liars Club. **Dennis Tafoya**, whose second crime novel, *Wolves of Fairmount Park*, is being released this month, says being a member of the club has greatly increased his effectiveness at securing book signings.

He explains, “When I approach a bookstore even as a St. Martin’s author, I’m up against a lot of (other authors) trying to get signings and events. If I can say I’m... with the Liars Club that helps, now that people recognize the name. I can bring other authors with me. That is something bookstores and libraries are much more interested in.”

When Tafoya called the Mysterious Book Shop in New York, a highly selective venue, he was able to offer them not only his services but Maberry’s. “I said, ‘It’s not just me, how about Jonathan Maberry? Absolutely, people will come to see both of us, and we will fill the place up.’” That offer enabled the duo to book a July signing at the bookshop.

For Simmons, The Liars Club affiliation has increased her credibility with her publisher. She says, “The publicity and momentum has made a difference with my publisher. ... They think of me as being a really inventive go-getter. ... My agent tells me all the time what a reputation I have for knowing what I am doing.” Through the club, she has discovered innovations she was

unlikely to have found on her own. As an example, she cites the “Two-Timing Liars” event they did at Christmas in which members shuttled between two bookstores located about five miles apart, tweeting and posting videos to their social media sites as they went.

Asked how The Liars Club has helped her, Banks says that she has heard about conferences she should attend that would have escaped her attention. Also, when she needed to switch agents, the process was smoothed by advice she received from Maberry, who knew enough about her work and style to steer her in the right direction.

In the plus column for Maberry is the increased visibility the group has received from Indiebound, the association of independent booksellers, the American Library Association, the North Atlantic Independent Booksellers Association and the American Booksellers Association.

He gets hundreds of emails from readers, some of whom mention that they saw his books in a library display or that they were hand-sold a copy in a bookstore Maberry has never visited. Even when the group cannot accept a speaking invitation, they will still blog and tweet about the venue anyway. As a result, Maberry says, “Our books are getting on shelves and on mailing lists and being mentioned by these organizations, and we’re increasing their visibility.”

Tips for setting up your own authors' club

- Invite other writers to join you only if they are upbeat and share your work ethic. The Liars Club’s writers work in different genres but are all under contract with major publishers, and therefore share the same problems and concerns. Self-published authors also share unique concerns and could benefit by coming together in a collective.

- Tafoya thinks the concept could work with writers in the same genre, perhaps with YA books, crime books or sci-fi. He advises that your own genre might be a good place to start. He says some libraries and bookstores would appreciate presenting a themed evening that a club with a single genre could offer.

12 Ways to Make Your Book More Mediagenic

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■ Where can you find these other writers? Attend professional conferences and pay attention to panelists you hear there whom you would like to know better. Increase the number of writers you know in your city by becoming a member of a local writer's group.

■ If you happen to live in or near Philadelphia, attend The Writers Coffeehouse, a free three-hour discussion session for writers of all genres held the last Sunday of every month at the Barnes & Noble in Willow Grove, PA. As many as 50 writers have been known to show up at the event, which runs from noon to 3 p.m.


■ One of the virtues of The Liars Club is that each member brings special skills to the table. Within the group are authors accomplished in social media, advertising, journalism and promotion. Each can assume a portion of the duties a single author would have to do all by himself or herself.

■ Give your group a catchy name and find a newsworthy way to promote members' books that also helps the community. Liars Club member Jones says, "I brought to the group the idea of talking about the fact that we are a group of authors who have come together in a tough environment to do something unique. That's news."

■ Create a website for your club and encourage members to blog, post positive messages and add news about upcoming events. Check out twitter.com/phillyliarsclub and www.liarsclubphilly.com for a good model.

■ Keep the size of the group manageable by limiting the number of members so you can all get to know each other.

■ Meet in person every four to six weeks; in between, keep in touch by email.

■ Curb your competitive urges. Jones says, "I think the thing I have learned from The Liars Club, even as an ultra-competitive person, is it can pay off to team with other authors if you all have the same goals and are willing to work together toward that goal." 

focus of his interview. You could do some research and do a ranking on your own topic. That's a great way to get publicity. Even if your book is already published, you could still send out a press release and say "According to the author of this book, here's how your city rates."

10. Use examples or tell anecdotes about famous people. It's a good idea to tell a story about a well-known figure to illustrate one of your points. People love reading about celebrities. For example, if you're writing a book about personality types, you could use a famous person to represent each personality type. It would be even better if you could include some interviews or quotes from leading entertainers, athletes, politicians or other famous folks in your book.

11. Reach out to groups that will naturally want to promote your message. I recently interviewed Rory Freedman about her bestselling *Skinny Bitch* books. Rory wrote the first book because she wanted to promote a vegan lifestyle. She's an animal rights activist. But she knew that if she wrote a book saying that killing animals is horrific, very few people would buy it.

So, she decided to focus on how adopting a vegan lifestyle will help you lose weight. At the same time, she added a lot of information about why you shouldn't eat meat. Because Rory is involved with a number of animal rights organizations, these groups were excited about promoting her book because they wanted to spread this message.

12. Choose a topic with a large, passionate built-in audience. I knew Mel Gibson was going to have a huge hit on his hands when I first heard about his movie *The Passion of the Christ*. I realized, "Wow, he can get every church to promote that movie." Other examples of topics with a sizeable following are books written for veterans and their families, for NASCAR enthusiasts or for fans of American Idol. In fact, I would discourage you from writing a book on a topic that doesn't have a built-in audience.

I hope you'll put many of these strategies into practice. Acting on even a few of these tips could lead to huge payoffs. If you follow my advice, you'll find that publishers and agents will be more interested in you, the media will be eager to talk to you, and your word of mouth and sales will really take off.

If you have a story to share about how one of these strategies worked for you, drop my managing editor a line at Martha@rtir.com. I'm always happy to read about BMU readers' publicity successes. 