

Aspiring writers descend upon St. Clements Castle for conference

By Karen M. Rider
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About 250 aspiring writers, seasoned journalists and authors from across the Nutmeg State and beyond gathered at St. Clements Castle in Portland for the second annual Unicorn Writer's Conference April 9.

Attendees, who hailed from 15 states and Bulgaria, came to pitch their novels or memoirs. Others were there to lay down their words for critique by some of the best literary agents and editors in the industry. And others came to listen and learn from speakers like bestselling author Carol Higgins Clark.

"Find your own voice and believe in it," said Clark, author of 13 bestselling suspense novels including her most recent, "Mobbed."

She kept the audience engaged with a sense of humor characteristic of her novels.

Clark spoke about finding her own voice and breaking out from the shadow of success attained by her mother, the award-winning mystery novelist Mary



Author Carol Higgins Clark, also seen at right, signs books at the Unicorn Conference at St. Clements Castle in Portland April 9 (Photos by Karen Rider)

Higgins Clark.

"The critics say that my mother's books go for the jugular, while mine go for the funny bone," Clark said. "My characters often arise from farcical characters and uncanny events I come across in my own life. The idea for my book, "Snagged," arose from attending a pantyhose convention."

Clark's advice to remain dedicated and develop discipline to finish a project — be it fiction or non-fiction — was well received.

The event offered inspiration to Portland resident Flo Barosiak.

"I'm re-energized now to finish [my] book," she said. "I enjoyed everything [at the conference] and I will share my experiences with the local writers' group in Middletown."

In addition to sessions on craft and editing, there was a focus on the rapid-fire changes taking place in the publishing industry, including print-on-demand and e-books and social media.

"Find your own voice and believe in it," said bestselling author Carol Higgins Clark.

Arielle Eckstut and David Henry Sterry, authors of "The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published," kept attendees on their toes with their sharp wit and anecdotes on publishing — including one story about the 25 agents who turned down the "Harry Potter" series now being treated for insanity.

The pair advised writers to do their research, build a network, write as if their life depended on it and persevere in the face of adversity.

"The presenters gave us encouragement and confidence that there are many pathways to get our work out there," said Rachel Eagan, a writer from Worcester, Mass.

The conference also offered writers the chance to have their book project critiqued by a respected agent or editor from some of the



biggest agencies in New York City, Boston and California.

The Unicorn Writer's Conference was created to serve writers at every stage of their writing journey, providing access to publishing industry insiders they would never ordinarily get a chance to meet and talk with.

"My goal is to put the knowledge and tools necessary to get published today into the hands of writers," said conference coordinator, publisher and agent Jan Kardys, who has worked in book publishing for more than 30 years, holding positions at major publishers including Doubleday, Charles Scribner's Sons, Simon & Schuster, St. Martin's Press, Scholastic and Warner Books.