

Packing up the crayons, picking up the pen

A new class teaches mothers the art of the memoir – whether they're looking for catharsis or a book deal

BY WENCY LEUNG VANCOUVER

Kirsten Hamelin takes a deep breath and reads aloud.

Do you ever look across the dinner table at the father of your child, she asks, "and want to stab a fork in their hand?"

The six other students in Ms. Hamelin's writing class laugh knowingly.

The women, all young mothers, have gathered at the home of Vancouver writer Cori Howard with their anecdotes about the frustrations, joys and fears of motherhood. They are here to learn what Ms. Howard, who leads the class, calls "the art of the momoir."

Ms. Howard began holding memoir-writing classes exclusively for mothers, both privately and at the University of British Columbia, earlier this year. The response has been so positive, she is now expanding her "Momoir Project" to offer similar classes in Toronto and online (themomoirproject.com).

"Especially for working moms, time just flies by and more often than not, we don't mark that time," Ms. Howard said. "[Writing] is just a way to remember your experience in all its different complex facets."

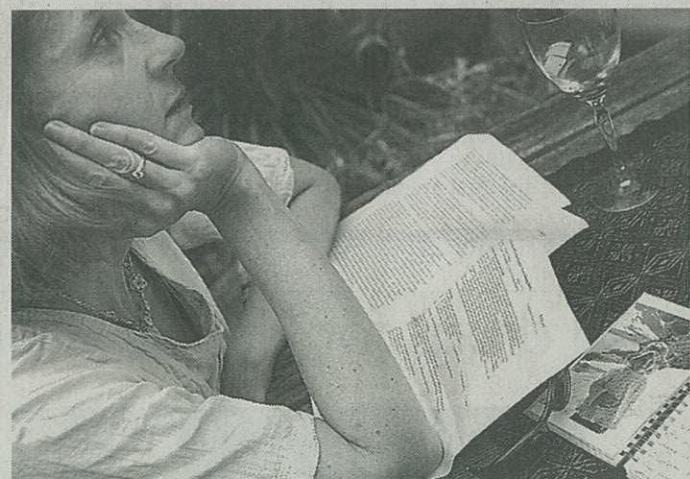
Ms. Howard, who has two children aged 3 and 7, wrote about her own abrupt transition to motherhood in the introduction of an anthology she edited, *Between Interruptions: Thirty Women Tell the Truth about Motherhood*, published last year.

While compiling the anthology, she said, she came across more stories than she could fit in the book and realized there was demand for a forum where mothers could share their tales.

Keeping a record through the postpartum haze isn't the only reason women are compelled to write about motherhood, Ms. Howard said.

Some also join her classes with the goal of having their work published or to pen stories for their children to read when they grow up.

Others find the practice of writing cathartic and take comfort in sharing their struggles with other women who can empathize.



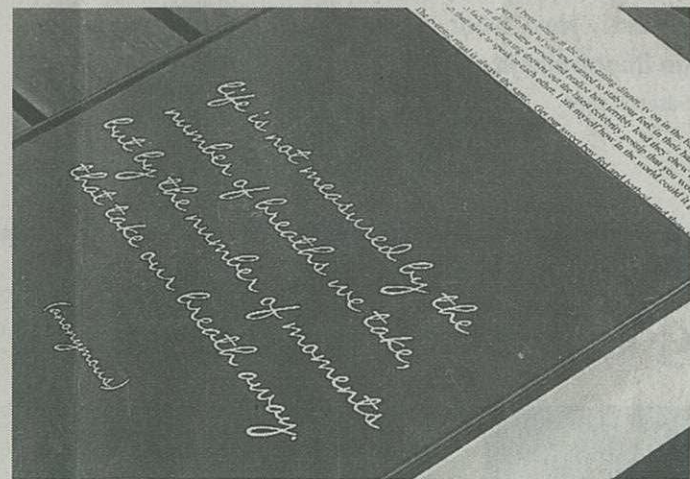
"It helps you feel less alone," Ms. Howard said, adding that even though each woman's story is different, "you realize you have more similarities than differences."

She has enlisted writers Randi Chapnik Myers and Katrina Onstad, both of whom contributed to *Between Interruptions*, to teach the Toronto classes.

Recurring themes in momoir

writing include how motherhood has changed women's relationships with their spouses, how it has affected their careers and how their own up-bringsings have influenced their parenting skills.

Since the subject matter is so intensely personal, it is not uncommon for students to laugh or break down in tears when they read their work aloud in



class, Ms. Howard said.

Student Heather Barnes, who has a six-year-old daughter, said the writing course has inspired her to record her childhood memories and her relationship with her own mother.

"For me, it's reflecting on my parents and how I was parented," she said. "It's therapeutic."

Ms. Hamelin – the would-be

stabber – said she, too, sees momoir writing as a form of therapy.

She said she felt a loss of identity after the happy birth of her son, who is now 18 months old.

Writing has given her an outlet for those conflicting emotions, she said. "I had lots to say."

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Heather Barnes, student

TOP Cori Howard, second from the left, listens as one of the members of her writing class reads. Ms. Howard launched the classes to teach women how to write their stories.

BOTTOM LEFT Heather Barnes listens to feedback during a group writing class in Vancouver, with a photo of her 6-year-old daughter, Tess, perched in front of her.

BOTTOM RIGHT The cover of a student's notebook reads, 'Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the number of moments that take our breath away.'

PHOTOS BY LYLE STAFFORD FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL