Three Ways of Looking at Austin Mystery Writers or, Why I Go to Critique Group

#1

Yesterday Dominica felt faint, and Molly, my protagonist, steered her to a bench on the courthouse lawn and then dithered over what to do. She couldn't leave Dominica there to topple off the bench, but asking a passerby for help sounded lame, and there weren't any passersby to ask. So there was poor Molly, needing more help than I could give her, stuck any way you looked at it. She stayed that way all night.

Today, talking about treatments for migraines, one of my critique partners took a bottle of peppermint oil from her purse and passed it around. At the first whiff, I said, "Molly suffers from migraines! She carries peppermint oil in her purse! She can use that to revive Dominica."

In one fell swoop, I both saddled Molly with migraines and solved a knotty problem.

That is why I go to critique group.

#2

I said to my critique partners this morning, The whole project is stinky it stinks it's just nothing no hope.

They said, But it's so good so funny Molly is so funny it's not stinky.

I said, Yes, the first part and the last part are funny and very very good but there's still no middle and what there is stinks and anyway the other 5,000 words stink except for a few hundred here and there.

And they said, But the middle could be revised edited it has *promise*.

I said, But it won't work because I have written myself into a hole and can't get out so I have to trash that part and anyway the whole concept stinks.

And they said, *NO* you can fix it just keep going because we like Molly she's so funny.

This is why I go to critique group.

#3

So I finally got things together with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and today my critique group said it was fine. *But…*

"Nobody *died*," said Kaye.

“I know,” I said. “It's *li-ter-a-ry.”*

"But it's crime fiction," said Gale. "Somebody has to *die*."

Laura and Valerie, sitting on the other side of the table, nodded. In unison.

"I was going for *subtlety*," I said. "It's a death of the *spirit*."

They stared at me. I stared back.

"Somebody has to *die*," said Kaye.

Then all four said they didn't understand the last line. I had written the *entire story* so I could use *that* line, and no one understood what it meant.

I kept staring and thought about words like *philistines, peasants,* and *bourgeoisie.*

Finally I spoke. I said, "Thank you."

Then my friends began throwing out ideas for endings they liked, in each of which someone *died*. I sighed and said, *Yeahhhh*, and, *Okayyyy*, and, *I guessss…*

Gad, they were irritating, telling the truth like that. Especially the way they all kept agreeing. Especially since I'd known the ending was bad before I let them read it.

And then Kaye said, *XXX*—and I thought, *YYY*—and everything fell into place: I knew who would die, and how, and why, and what would happen next…

And I thought, *Kaye has given me the perfect ending. All the suggestions are good, but hers works on multiple levels. It's so right. Why didn't I think of it myself?*

And then I thought, *Oh, who* cares *about why.* What matters was that Kaye thought of it, and shared it, and that she and three other writers not only told the truth but grabbed me by the lapels and made me listen.

I rewrote the story, and it was published in Austin Mystery Writers' crime fiction anthology, *Murder on Wheels.*

And that is why I go to critique group.

Every. Blessed. Week.

###

Kathy Waller's “A Nice Set of Wheels” and “Hell on Wheels” appear in Austin Mystery Writers' crime fiction anthology *Murder on Wheels* (Wildside Press, 2015). A former librarian, former teacher, former paralegal, and former pianist for a string of churches desperate for someone who could find middle C, Kathy was born and reared in a small (pop. 150) town in Central Texas, and as a result nearly everything she writes includes a river, a cow, or a group of old ladies playing dominoes on someone's front porch.