



## Inspired by joy: writing on the French River

By Lianne Thompson

*Inevitably they find their way into the forest. It is there that they lose and find themselves. It is there that they gain a sense of what is to be done.*

— Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World*



My car nosed over the forested ridge, and I stared down the hill, catching sight of the bright glimmer of water through the trees. Navigating the long drive, I finally pulled into a spot on the bank of the French River.

I had been excited for weeks about this week-long solo adventure. It was May 2023. Post-Covid, I was now self-employed after a successful 35-year career. My consulting clients had been great. I had lots of flexibility working from home. My children were grown and stepping out into their own futures, and something kept nudging me.

Chatting with a friend over coffee just a month earlier, the topic of writing stories and fairy tales came up. Not the kind of corporate work I had been doing for decades. I remember staring into my cup as the vision of a cardboard box came to mind. Tucked in a mostly disregarded corner of my basement, it was filled with notes and a 3-ring binder full of old-style printed pages — the children’s novel I had started more than 25 years before.

I loved that story. Never finished it, though, and as we talked, I wondered. Was this the time to dust it off, dive back in? My creative writing muscles were sorely out of practice, and I would need something to jump start those juices. I googled for ideas, and there it was. *Write on the French River* was the top result delivered to my laptop.

## ***Finding space***

The week-long writers' retreat is an annual event held each May at [The Lodge at Pine Cove](#). Almost four hours north from my home west of Toronto, I traced the route on the digital map, finding it nestled in the forest along the historic French River. I had never been to the area, but the photos were gorgeous. The lodge — spectacular. Add to the location: gourmet meals, classes, workshops, time to write.

Then I looked up the bios of the instructors and mentors. Oh, my. These were real writers. They'd won journalism and literary awards. Their books were on bestseller lists and the shelves of bookshops and libraries. My unpublished, quiet self felt intimidated, but I couldn't get the place out of my mind. After a couple of days, I sent off an inquiry, and Alex, the owner of the lodge, responded immediately. Yes, of course, this was for me! All writers are welcome, whether starting out or well established.

So here I was. With a deep breath, I grabbed my bag and walked across a carpet of pine needles into the main lodge. The timbered building was filled with light reflected from the river, the walls and soaring ceiling supported by wooden beams. It is a space intended to invite and comfort, especially with a library chock-full of books, and with deep chairs facing the windows.

The staff welcomed me, and a team member took me to my cabin.

## ***The beauty of the lodge***



We crossed the long walking bridge spanning the Pine Cove inlet and climbed a hill to a cluster of timber cabins built into the hilly and rocky shoreline. My home for the week was fully fitted out for comfort. I knew my favourite spot was going to be the screened-in porch. It would be perfect for early morning coffees — to my delight, delivered with fresh pastries to my door each morning! This was a place to immerse oneself in writing and do some dreaming.

That first night our group of 20+ gathered. There were published writers and journalists, individuals working on memoirs and poetry and essays. To my relief, I was not the only one working on their first novel. As we chatted together over the first of many scrumptious gourmet meals, I watched the sun redden and set over the river.

## ***First class instructors and guest speakers***

The next morning, I settled in at a table for our opening workshop with renowned author, Don Gillmor. As I opened my notebook and glanced around at the group of writers, it felt like standing on some kind of threshold. With my partially written manuscript tucked in my bag, I listened to Don talk about bringing our writing to life. No matter the topic of our novel, essay, memoir or article, when we bring what we *know* to the work, that is when the work comes to life — when the reader recognizes something real in the words. I listened to Don. To all the instructors. I took it all in. I wrote it all down.

And as the week progressed, my notepad and my mind filled with ideas. Special guests — including a literary agent and a publishing house editor — provided a glimpse into the publishing world. Something I knew little about. That knowledge, and the chance to have a talented author review my writing and provide feedback,

was a gift. The opportunity to meet other writers, exchange ideas and encouragement on our various projects was eye-opening and rewarding.

Between workshops, small group discussions with our assigned mentors, and meal after mouth-watering meal, I walked the property. Some of us leapt off the dock for quick swims or went for boat rides with Alex, who brought history to life with his tales of the area. Every day I drifted through the woods, alone with my thoughts. In a place that felt far removed from the everyday, I was rediscovering something forgotten.

### ***Next steps***

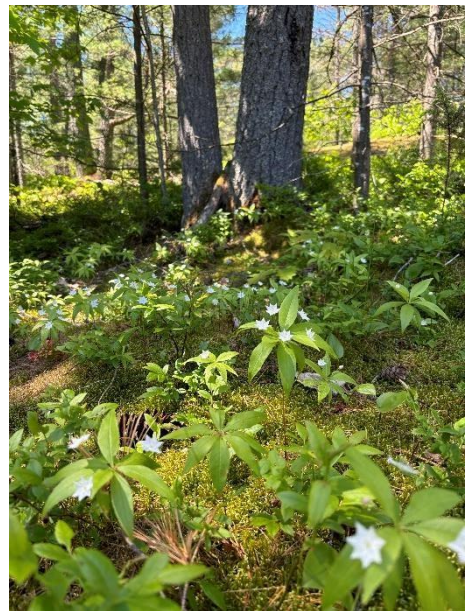
On the last night, we each read an excerpt of our work. Reading my words aloud to the group was a little terrifying but brought with it a keen sense of satisfaction. In that moment, I realized I *could* finish my novel. My original tale of magic in another realm was evolving into something I had not envisioned all those decades ago. This was life-changing for me.

Over the top? Perhaps. However, attending this retreat, in this setting, reawakened the storyteller in me.

Before the retreat ended and I left this magical place, I had a plan: Set aside blocks of time to write. Finish the manuscript. Hire an editor. Don't give up. And continue to return to the woods to find my younger self — the one who still believed in fairytales.

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Since semi-retiring from a career focused on customer service, corporate communications and organizational excellence, Lianne Thompson is delighted to add *novelist* to her bio. She is in the final stages of completing her first fantasy novel.



# Write on the French River: Why Writing Retreats Matter

By Lindy Mechefske



I'm pounding down the highway—hour after hour—driving north and west away from my home in Kingston towards a pin dot on the map, a writing retreat in a northern lodge along the banks of the French River.

The further I travel and the deeper into the rugged rocky outcroppings and pine trees of the Canadian Shield, the more I find memories from my high school history class swirling around my brain. Words like *Coueurs de Bois* and *Voyageurs* come to mind. The French River or *la Rivière des Français*, was named by the Ojibwa, because of the early French explorers like Radisson and Samuel de Champlain who along with great packs of voyageur canoes travelled this waterway in a time before roads, a time before the nation was yet a nation. The French River was part of the fur trade super highway from Montreal to Lake Superior.

Since I moved to Kingston over a decade ago, I've breathed a little more deeply of the past of this country. Each day as I travel the old lift bridge on my way into town – I'm crossing the intersection of the historic Rideau Waterway, the St. Lawrence River, and Lake Ontario—bodies of water that once brought settlers west and provided natural geographic boundaries defining the nation. It's impossible to live in a place so connected to the history of Canada without feeling the impact more fully. Perhaps this is why the French River, which I canoed in my youth without any thought towards its past, suddenly feels so important.



Somewhere north on Hwy #69, my GPS comes abruptly to life and directs me onto a back road vaguely heading in the right general direction. This wasn't what I planned but I follow the instructions and am soon on a winding back road in the bush—with no road signs and no real idea where I am. I pull my car over to look at the map, and am just contemplating turning back when my phone rings. It's my friend, Alec, from Kingston who wants to know if I want to grab a drink. I haven't heard from him for months. He is a writer who once canoed across the country, following the lakes, rivers and portage routes of the fur traders and voyageurs and wrote about it in his beautiful book, *Coke Stop in Emo: Adventures of a LongDistance Paddler*. He's the only person I know of that would have any clue what I'm talking about when I tell him I'm somewhere off Hwy 69, south of Sudbury, heading east-north-east towards Noelville, on an unmarked back way, hoping I'll soon turn onto the numbered road leading me towards the French River. He figures I'll be fine. "Keep going and call me about that drink when you're back in town," he says. Within minutes of hanging up the phone, I lose connectivity. But now, with serendipity on my side, I abandon the map and just keep driving.

I arrive late afternoon at the end of the dead end road where the Lodge at Pine Cove is located. The French River looms large here with its clear waters, rocky shores, and old growth pine trees. Among other things, this is Group of Seven country where Tom Thomson once captured the windswept pines and flowing river with brush and paint and a remarkable eye for landscape.

But this week, it is a group of writers who will descend here, for the Annual "Write on the French River," creative writing retreat—a collaborative effort between the Lodge and the literary journal, *The New Quarterly (TNQ)*.

One by one we arrive and are taken to our cabins. Any trepidation about where I'm about to spend the week subsides as I walk into Champlain, the beautiful cedar cottage I'm assigned to. The two women who are to be my cabin mates are already *in situ*. One is the resident poet for the week and the other is an artist and writer, working on a children's book. Our cottage has three large bedrooms, a fullyequipped kitchen, a lovely bathroom, and a large living room with

a wood-burning box stove. The screened in porch has one of the best views on the entire property.



The five-day program is packed. Luckily we are well-fortified. Each morning a breakfast basket is delivered to the cabins. Ours makes us squeal every morning despite the predictability of contents—a winning formula of fruit, granola, juice, croissants, *pain au chocolat*, butter and jam. We sit together, a full pot of coffee, the fire going, the river just beyond our kitchen table. The granola is the best on the Planet. It's a secret recipe; one that I tried unsuccessfully to obtain but have *almost* managed to duplicate at home. Think almonds, cashews, unsweetened flaked coconut, dried sour cherries, dried apricots, and finally, large flake oats, probably steel-cut, maple syrup and possibly some sunflower seed oil. Make sure the nuts and dried fruit outnumber the oats by a stiff margin. Bake it to perfection—not too well done—it's best when it's just nicely browned and ever so slightly clumpy.

Our days pass in a blur of writing group sessions, writing craft talks, lectures, presentations, lunches, dinners, and evening events. We find time for some intense conversations. Most of us are scrambling to fit in some activity time to attempt to wear off the consequences of all the good food. Out of fear of bears, I walk the roadway leading into the lodge, rather than the hiking path on the property. I do this in early morning before breakfast. It only strikes me later that there's no reason why bears should choose to avoid the quiet dead-end road.

The instructors are an all-star cast including writers Don Gillmor and Oakland Ross and *TNQ* non-fiction editor Susan Scott. The lectures and writing craft classes are brilliant. The only dilemma comes when there are overlapping sessions—which to choose and which to forsake. Travel writing or poetry? I choose poetry. It is wonderful. Our poet in residence, Nanci White, leads the session. She recites poems by heart. We talk about Basho, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Emily Dickinson. We write and share our own haiku poems. I usually dread this kind of thing but somehow this time—it works. We all seem to feel embraced by both the place and each other

and there is a collective, almost pulsating sense of energy. The travel writing group says the same of their session.



This is a truly inspired group of leaders—intelligent, insightful, and helpful. There’s an atmosphere here that is surprisingly safe; nobody is intimidated no matter what stage of the game they are at. The leaders pay attention to us in a way I’ve rarely seen happen before. We are somehow united. It is a love—almost carnal—of stringing together words that has also brought us together.

On our last night, we have an evening session of participant readings. I am first up to read, and am slightly fortified by a single neat gin. Hendrick’s. Afterwards, I sit in the lamplight, listening to the others, while behind us, over the river, the light is gone and the lodge is wrapped in the dark night.

Later yet, I head back to my cabin, flashlight in hand, crossing the wooden man bridge across Pine Cove, the little inlet that separates the main lodge from the cabins. In the dark and the quiet—the sky starless, the moon shrouded by cloud—I have a tiny, perfect revelation. An unexpected surge of happiness. The realization that what I have experienced here is that elusive sense of belonging.

I’m leaving a little less lonely, a little less full of self-doubt.

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Lindy Mechefske is a freelance writer, an employee of Queen's University, and author of *A Taste of Wintergreen*. You can find her blogging about her foodie adventures at Love in the Kitchen – [lindymechefske.com](http://lindymechefske.com).



*Photographs courtesy of James Walsh. For more information about James see [www.sinamatella.com](http://www.sinamatella.com).*