The Las Vegas Writers Group was honored to welcome Dorothy Howell as the speaker for the July meeting. Addressing a capacity crowd at the Tap House, Howell shared secrets of crafting great dialogue. The award-winning author of 25 novels published by three major publishers, Howell spoke from experience.

“Elmore Leonard and I have something in common,” she began. “We both try to leave out the parts that people skip. People never skip the dialogue, and crafting believable dialogue is absolutely crucial to the success of your novel.”

“We’ve all heard the basic advice of ‘show, don’t tell,’” Howell said. “Use dialogue to reveal character. Does your character have an accent? Poor grammar? Does he ramble on about UFOs? Does she complain or gossip? As I’ve said these things, you probably got a picture in your head about each kind of person I was talking about.”

“Dialogue reveals settings and occupations,” Howell said. “A private investigator’s dialogue is different from a librarian’s.” She went on to describe a book she read recently about Irish immigrants. “It was a good book,” she said, “but all the characters sounded like British royalty instead of Irish immigrants.” Distractions like that take readers out of the story rather than drawing them further in.

Dialogue is also great for revealing the personalities of secondary characters, Howell said. This becomes especially important when writing a series. The main character stays the same, but secondary characters come and go. Give these secondary characters very specific traits. “A character might always give one-word answers, or always call people ‘dude,’” Howell said. “I knew someone who called everybody ‘Babe.’ I can’t remember her name, but I remember that!” Character traits established through dialogue stick in readers’ minds far better than narrative description.

Relationships can also be revealed through dialogue. “Everybody forms opinions of other people by the way they talk,” Howell said. “Have you ever gone to a job interview and known in two minutes whether you’d want to work for that person?” Howell described an experience in a restaurant an evening earlier. A young couple’s conversation escalated into a screaming fight, giving everyone at the neighboring tables a clear glimpse into the status of their relationship. It was the sort of interchange a writer might create to establish both individual personalities and interpersonal rapport.

“Use dialogue to propel your story and create conflict,” Howell went on. “Make your characters disagree with each other, or have a character always say no.” While working on a novel recently, Howell wanted to add conflict. “I decided to have the hero never say yes to anything the heroine asks.” That simple decision played out in far-reaching ways as she wrote the novel.
“Remember that long conversations slow a scene down,” Howell said. “Break dialogue up into smaller bits. Bring a disruptive character in to break up long chunks of speech.” Howell went on to explain that a writer must make a conscious decision about whether to craft quick, clever dialogue or to take a slower, more considered approach. Both have their place—it depends on the style and pace of the story.

Howell touched on the subject of internal dialogue, which is especially important in first-person novels. “We all think things we would never say out loud,” Howell said. Through internal dialogue, a main character can reveal those things. With dialogue, you can take a character through emotion, quandary, decision, and action. The reader is drawn into the character’s process. “Readers will start rooting for your character. Or maybe they’ll worry,” Howell said. “Maybe they’ll want to reach into the book and ‘slap somebody upside the head!’” If a writer succeeds in eliciting any of those responses from a reader, they’ve truly brought their characters alive.

“The key to the success of a story,” Howell said in closing, “is voice. Readers come back for a voice they enjoy. Agents and editors are always looking for new voices. Voice is the writer’s personality on paper.” A writer can have more than one voice, and different voices are needed for different genres. A romance voice won’t work for mystery, for example. But even though different voices are needed to tell different types of stories, one thing never changes. Everybody wants good dialogue.

After answering questions, Howell invited everyone to visit her Web site, www.DorothyHowellNovels.com and enter her contest. To celebrate the launch of her latest mystery, “Purses and Poison” (Kensington, July 2009), Howell is giving away a designer handbag to one lucky winner!

Summary provided by LVWG scribe, Megan Edwards

(Checklist attached.)
HE SAID/SHE SAID: CRAFTING DIALOGUE THAT
BRINGS YOUR CHARACTERS TO LIFE
Presented by Dorothy Howell

Say “yes” to:
• Dialogue that reveals character
• Dialogue that makes secondary characters distinctive
• Dialogue that propels your story
• Internal dialogue that tells the reader what your character is really like

Say “no” to:
• Excessive dialogue tags
• Dialogue that serves no purpose
• Dialogue that’s too “real”
• Long monologues
• Exposition through dialogue

Say “maybe” to:
Writing Dialogue by Tom Chiarella

Elements of Writing Fiction — Characters & Viewpoint
by Orson Scott Card

Speaking Of Dialogue by Sammie L. Justesen

The Book of Dialogue: How to Write Effective Conversation in Fiction, Screenplays, Drama, and Poetry by Lewis Turco

Dorothy Howell is the author of PURSES AND POISON and
HANDBAGS AND HOMICIDE, the mystery series featuring fashion sleuth