TRUE confessions.

Fifteen women are gathered on sofas and chairs in the Veterans Hall of the Southampton Cultural Center, and each has a story to tell. One by one they read aloud from the loose-leafs, notebooks and clipboards where secret moments of their pasts are stored. Sometimes funny, often heartfelt, haunting remembrances.

Snatches of memoirs in the making, kiss-and-tell tales of incest, violence, squashed anger, sadness and abandonment.

Their voices are the Herstory, a special writers’ workshop.

Women from ages 25 to 80 – most of whom have not written before – meet once or twice a week, three to four hours at a stretch, to deal with the traumatic events in their lives and seriously craft them into book-length memoirs.

Hazel Sharon Saunders starts her tale when she was 22 years old, saddled with an unwanted pregnancy that disgraces her religious black family. Upon her return home to Southampton, her younger sister, ill with sickle-cell anemia, tells Ms. Saunders she is also pregnant and makes Ms. Saunders promise to raise her baby if she dies.

Ms. Saunders, 51, drifts to earlier memories of incest and the multiple personalities – gesticulating wildly as she animates the imaginary broker who bargains between her conflicting selves – that helped her to cope.

Before she started the writing workshop a year and a half ago, Ms. Saunders had never told anyone about the incest.

“I promised my eight-year-old abandoned self that I’d never betray our secret,” said Ms. Saunders, the only African-American in the group. “Worse than that, I told a whole audience of white people.”

“When I started writing in this group, it was like a floodgate opened,” said Ms. Saunders, a physically disabled child care worker. Homebound, she has become a prolific writer and is considered to be closest to completing her book.

She was shaken – not that she finally told, but that the other women actually cared.

Pat Gorman, a 51-year-old Bridgehampton acupuncturist, grew up in Queens. Her mother was Irish but her father was a Sioux Indian who secretly taught her rain dances in the backyard. Two and a half years ago, when Ms. Gorman was diagnosed with a
Women become writers to share the secret moments of their pasts.

There are links to psychoanalysis. “It’s almost like you find the wisdom,” she said. “You go back to the moment and feel it. Everybody has to reclaim herself and actualize it.”

But they also must develop a self-caring. “We don’t want to make our stories into case histories,” Ms. Duncan said.

It was the third week Claire Pasternack, a high school gym teacher who summers in East Hampton, had come to the writers’ gathering. “I always wanted to write but I couldn’t as long as my parents were alive, especially my mother. I felt I would betray her,” she said.

Admitting she was nervous, Mr. Pasternack read “French Doors,” her childhood memory of running through the house when it was so big and she was so small.

“This is to help clear me out and be more present in my own life,” she said. “I’ll be 57 this month and it’s the age my mother was when she died,” she said. “I’m trying to honor her with this story. No one ever listened to be before.”

Neither was she allowed to tell.

Ms. Vocht, an alcoholism counselor, was 8 years old when she walked in on her father molesting her two sisters. Taken away and put into an orphanage, she spent her childhood behind bars. Years later, her boyfriend molested her own daughter.

“The unspeakable was never to be spoken by me,” Ms. Vocht said. By writing, Ms. Vocht said, she hoped the pattern would be broken.

“I started out writing about surviving a childhood with a mother who was very mentally ill,” said Marsha Benoff, a freelance artist from Shirley who had written 100 pages in her first three months at the workshops.

“As I progressed,” she said, “I realized it was not only my voice but I was also giving voice to her pain and her life. All of the years of listening to her moaning and complaining. I’ve been putting into focus. It’s not destructive. It’s all constructive.”