

- 1) **Event Title:** *Give It a Name: Mental Health and the Writing Life*
- 2) **Event Description:** The writing life is one of solitude and struggle, and for some writers who deal with mental illness it can seem insurmountable. Panelists will discuss how identifying and naming their mental health concerns informs their work and opens avenues to successfully navigating the challenging paths towards publication and participating in literary culture. From cultivating a consistent writing practice through marketing and publicity, panelists will share their experiences with coping while working.
- 3) **Event Category:** Artistic and Professional Stewardship
- 4) **Event Organizer:** Paul Pedroza
- 5) **Event Moderator:** Paul Pedroza
- 6) **Event Participants & short bios:**

Moderator: Paul Pedroza

Bio: Paul Pedroza is the author of the story collection, *The Dead Will Rise and Save Us*. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *Rattle* and *MAKE: A Chicago Magazine*. Currently, he is completing his first novel.

Initial Remarks: Managing my depression, anxiety, and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) while pursuing publishing success as a writer requires vigilance, informed life decisions and practices, and balance through outside interests. The first step towards management was to give my particular struggles their proper names. Once I was able to identify them, I was able, through certain interventions, to find balance. Writing is difficult for all writers and often lonely; writing while trying to manage mental health sometimes seems impossible. What strategies work best for handling the solitude that writing requires, the constant rejection, the pressures of networking and fitting in, etc. are as unique as our individual writing voices, but general practices through therapies such as dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) and cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) have proven helpful, and I'm here to witness this. I've also found that avoiding loading so much of my identity into my writing has helped with perspective and coping. Alongside writing, I've found that fitness, bibliotherapy, music, and working with my hands have provided a crucial foundation from which I send my work out to be picked apart, rejected, and sometimes accepted.

Participant: Bruce Owens Grimm

Bio: Bruce Owens Grimm is a queer nonfiction writer who examines how fatness, mental health, family, and/or the supernatural can impact life. He has attended residencies & workshops at The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Vermont Studio Center & VCCA. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing.

Initial Remarks:

"I'm Going to Tell You a Secret."
Bruce Owens Grimm

Don't tell anyone. An ex-boyfriend gave me this advice years before my major depression, general anxiety, and PTSD became a major factor in my life. We had been talking about mental health, the more general feelings of depression and anxiety that can happen to anyone as they try to build a career or simply live their life. The don't tell anyone policy applied to if they ever became diagnosable situations that required therapy and medication. His concern being that revealing such things would negatively impact my burgeoning writing career. As in most artistic careers, writing can be full of ups and downs. As they say on *Project Runway*, "one minute you're in, the next minute you're out." This phrase is anxiety inducing on its own. Don't rush, the going out of fashion part seemed to be his message. The not so hidden message was that the shame and stigma surrounding mental illness in our culture would hinder opportunities because people wouldn't think I could handle them.

Here's the thing: I've kept secrets most of my life. I was closeted and in a heterosexual marriage for nine years because I was afraid to be gay. For most of my life, I kept it a secret that both my parents abused me. My mother emotionally abusive. My father physically and sexually abusive. That last one, having been sexually abused, kept so confidential that for a long time it was even consciously unknown to me. However, the memory lock box opened a few days before my forty-second birthday (I'm forty-three now so not that long ago). Why then after so long? I have no idea. All I know is that it wrecked, among other things, as you can imagine, my writing practice. I have a very active internal voice and it disappeared. Perhaps my brain exchanged my writing voice for the memories it released from the box they had been locked in.

I couldn't sleep. I couldn't write (and I had a deadline for an essay series I was writing at the time). I saw shadow figures in windows as I walked down the street. I experienced the past and the present as if they were happening at once. I felt cold all the time. Worst of all, it felt like my father's ghost constantly stood behind my left shoulder. I felt his hand hovering, wanting to touch my shoulder but he never did. The agony and the dread that it could happen at any moment yet didn't become felt unbearable. My father had died nine years before any of this happened made the idea of the ghost feel even more realistic.

And I told no one. I kept it a secret. It grew and grew inside of me until it broke out of me on the walk home from brunch with my roommate (who was also the ex who gave me that don't tell anyone advice, but that's another story for another time).

He asked me what was going on? I told him. Everything. He hugged me and said it would be okay. Then I told a friend and another friend, and then I tweeted about it. I still couldn't write, then on my way to San Antonio in 2019 for a writing retreat with my dearest friend, I heard a song in my head for the first time in months. I heard Madonna's voice. She sang her song "Survival" from *Bedtime Stories* and then "Don't Tell Me" from *Music* joined in until they formed their own little mash-up in my head. I'd been a true, die-hard fan since I the first time I heard "Vogue" play on the radio in the early summer of 1990. She had been there for me when I came out, when my father died, when my first boyfriend broke up with me, and now here she was again when I truly needed a friendly voice in my head. I could write again. Madonna had sung to me, "don't tell me to stop" and "it's all about survival."

My mental illness, of course, didn't go away. Madonna's not that powerful. I have medication, therapy and an amazing support system to help with my diagnosis. However, Madonna's voice gave me my writing voice back. I knew exactly what I had to do: I had to write about my sexual abuse. I had to write about how my depression, anxiety, and PTSD impacted me. Removing the secrets is what would help me survive. That's my choice and what works best for me, it may not be the best thing for everyone.

I still struggle. My anxiety tells me on a consistent basis, to give up. It tells me that I'm a failure. That nothing I write is any good. It told me that many times as I wrote this piece for this panel. It tells me to disappear. It never shouts. Its voice is calm, persistent. It wants me to believe it rather than any evidence that these things are untrue.

Recently, I started with a new therapist. When I told her about wanting to disappear, we created a Coping and Safety Plan. One of my listed coping skills is listening to Madonna. Yes, Madonna is part of my treatment plan. Her music helps me in the moment when I feel overwhelmed. Listening to her music helps me to write, to continue to tell my story. As she says in her documentary of the same name: I'm going to tell you a secret. Writing about my secrets is what keeps me alive. In the essay, "Writing Pain with Metaphor," Sonya Huber says, "as with other social challenges, finding words to describe our real experiences can help us break out of isolation. That is what writing about my mental health has done for me.

Participant: Sarah Fawn Montgomery

Bio: Sarah Fawn Montgomery is the author of *Quite Mad: An American Pharma Memoir* and three poetry chapbooks. She is an Assistant Professor at Bridgewater State University.

Initial Remarks:

Navigating MFA/PhD programs while mentally ill and the pressure to "hide" this in academia. Transition into reframing mental illnesses as an asset for writers and

exploring mental illness as subject for writing a memoir. Finding a publisher for a mental illness memoir and navigating the publishing process while mentally ill. Marketing challenges and strategies for writers with mental illness. Strategies and writing practices for writers with mental illness.