

Event Title: The Importance of Novels in Preserving Queer History

Presenters: Carter Sickels, Viet Dinh, Brandy Wilson and Alan Lessik, moderator

Type of Event: Fiction Craft and Criticism

Event Description: History is determined by those who record and remember what happened. LGBTQ people are not the only group that has been seen its history distorted or eliminated. Novels often serve as the only place readers can find information about queer lives, events and livelihoods in the near and distant past.

Four novelists will read from their works and discuss how they have preserved the real-life stories of people and events which offer insights to queer contributions to history.

Statement of Merit: Typically, panels on historical novels focus on research and the use of historical information in the writing of novels. This panel will uniquely focus on how novels with queer stories and characters have helped to preserve the untold history of the diverse LGBTQ community worldwide. By using a wide range of examples, the panel will demonstrate the power of fiction to fill the gaps in the historical record so that we can understand our past and better affect our present and future.

Carter Sickels

Carter Sickels is the author of the novel *The Evening Hour*, and the editor of *Untangling the Knot: Queer Voices on Marriage, Relationships & Identity*. He is assistant professor of creative writing at Eastern Kentucky University.

I will be reading from my novel *The Prettiest Star*, forthcoming from Hub City Press in 2020. *The Prettiest Star* is about a young gay HIV+ man, and his decision to return to the small town in Ohio where his family lives. The novel takes place in 1986, and considers the AIDS crisis of the 1980s through the lens of rural America, while asking questions about the true costs of silence and denial.

Key Points:

- Literature can shine a light on the past but also preserve marginalized perspectives—and this is important because queer voices are often distorted or erased. In the case of my novel, I'm examining an overlooked part of the epidemic, those men, lost to AIDS during the 1980s and 90s, who returned to the rural communities and families who'd rejected them.
- How, by learning queer history, do we understand ourselves? LGBTQ people often are estranged from biological families; we must know the stories of our queer ancestors and elders in order to understand who we come from and how we will survive.

Brandy Wilson

Brandy T. Wilson, PhD is the author of *The Palace Blues*, a Lambda Literary Award Finalist. Her work has appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *G.R.I.T.S.*, *Lumina*, *Sinister Wisdom* and *Pank Magazine* among other publications. She teaches writing and literature at Mississippi University for Women.

My debut novel, *The Palace Blues* is set in 1923 and tells the story of Frankie, a white, Texas tomboy visiting her aunt and uncle in Chicago where she meets and falls for Jean Bailey, an African American, cross-dressing, blues singer from Georgia. The novel traces Frankie's journey south from Chicago as she chases the Vaudeville Circuit in her search for Jean Bailey. One of the things that surprised me the most in researching this book and that I explore in the book is that the blues scene of the 1920s, which not only allowed women to have autonomous, self-created lives and careers, it also provided a sort of refuge for LGBTQ people of the time period.

I'm working on new novel based on a woman Hemingway used as a model for his character Brett Ashley. After that book, *The Sun Also Rises*, was published, the real woman lost her reputation, her title, and the custody of her son. My novel explores a similar situation but is set in the 1990s and 2016, showing the arc of the relationship with the estranged son and how the few options available to her as a lesbian mother who had a child with a man in the 1990s shaped her life.

Key Points

- Queer histories are commonly erased, ignored, or altered by dominant narratives. Representation is important, to understand where we came from and what is possible.
- Preserving queer history can help us see the issues we are still facing today. Highlighting the historical context and relating it to the contemporary may help us to better understand how we might address those issues and enact change. And this is a goal in my work—to provide representation of a somewhat lost queer past, illustrate how surprisingly progressive it was in some ways, very oppressive in others, and how now, looking back, we can understand the advantages we have and can utilize the strengths of this time period in our own time in facing adversity.
- "Historians choose not to represent aspects of the past about which our historical documents are silent, but some of these stream-of-consciousness and informal conventions most obviously—are so fundamental to so much of life that it is a little hard to say which depiction of the past is more distorting: a history that says nothing about them, or fiction that in the absence of authoritative evidence tries to represent them so responsibly as possible." William Cronon, qtd in *Narrative Economics* (p. 79) Illustrating the "facts" in novel form allows readers to truly reimagine these lives, feel a deeper connection to our lineage, and help us see more clearly how we can be represented today.

Alan Lessik

Alan Lessik is a novelist, Zen practitioner, amateur figure skater, and LGBT activist. His debut novel, *The Troubleseeker* (Chelsea Station Editions), was short-listed for the Publishing Triangle's 2017 Ferro-Grumley Award for LGBTQ Fiction. His non-fiction works and essays have been published by Lambda Literary, the *Advocate*, and, *San Francisco Bay Guardian*. He currently serves on the Board of the LGBTQ Caucus of AWP and is a member of the Writers' Grotto in San Francisco and the National Writers Union. His second novel is in the review process and he is now starting work on his third novel, a gay Ukrainian immigration story from the early 1900s.

I will be reading from my novel, *The Troubleseeker*, a modern gay Cuban-Santería re-telling of the Odyssey story. Inspired by the life and times of my former partner, *The Troubleseeker* explores issues of the meaning of home, exile, oppression within the cultural milieu of Havana, Minneapolis and San Diego in the 60s through the first decade of 2000.

Key Points:

- By their nature, novels go into details of lives and times of their characters. Well done, novels reveal the nature of the times, the possibilities, the constraints in a way that renderings of 'history' would find not-to-the point or useless. Yet these details bring about a richness and fullness to the characters for readers.
- So much of queer history is written in the cracks of history. Men and women might be noted as unmarried, not fitting in with society or described with code words such as dandy, unfeminine or unmasculine, avant garde. Yet none of these words gives context to the deepness of the life and times.
- As contemporary writers (and readers), we carry our current times with us in our interpretation of characters. I recognize this trait in writing about historical events and it bleeds into my writing purposefully. I don't pretend that I can accurately describe, early 20th century Japan or Ukraine to take examples from my other works, but I am willing to take what I do know to make to experiment with a character based on what I understand or human reactions to constraints placed by society.

Viet Dinh

Viet Dinh teaches at the University of Delaware. He has received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts as well as two O. Henry Prizes and the Alice Hoffman Prize for Fiction. His debut novel, *After Disasters* was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Prize.

Possible Discussion Questions

- How important is "getting it right" in terms of research, or do we have license to rewrite history, or an obligation ever to do so?
- There has been a great deal of discussion about detailing the realities of our past and present lives. There has also been a debate over whether or not we need to promote happy endings in literature rather than the sometimes sad truths. How much pressure do you feel to give our pasts a brighter ending?

- What was the most important thing you learned about queer history in writing your book?
- As queer authors, is it our responsibility to tell these stories? In an essay by Melvin Dixon, a black gay writer who died from AIDS complications in 1992, called “I’ll be Somewhere Listening for My Name,” and he calls for more diversity in queer literature, and he says, “We must . . . guard against the erasure of our experiences and our lives,” and also says, “We alone are responsible for the preservation and future of our literature.”
- Because queer voices have often been erased, silenced, or distorted, one of the difficulties that may come up in writing about queer history is that the material you need is just not there. What kind of research did you do, and if you couldn’t find or access the material, how did this affect your project and your approach?
- The panel focuses on the kinds of queer histories we’re writing about, but I’m also thinking about who are we telling these stories to? Who is your audience, and did this affect the way you approached the telling or the shaping of your project? And, how do you write about the past, and still reach contemporary audiences?
- When you’re writing an artistic project that is about a history, what responsibilities do you have to the facts or the events? How important is documentation compared to artistic creation? How do you balance “getting it right?” with creating?