

Title: Twisted Sister: On Writing Siblings in Fiction

Number: F178

Date/Time: 12:10pm - 1:25pm on Friday March 6, 2020

Location: Room 006A, Henry B. González Convention Center, River Level

Event Description: Sibling relationships are often uniquely intimate and uniquely fraught; thus, these bonds are inherently dynamic material to explore in fiction. Siblings can reveal much about our characters: from the familial ecosystem a protagonist was born into and their place in it to how the power dynamics established in childhood can reverberate throughout a life. This panel will explore how writers approach rendering the vast complexities of sibling relationships in their own diverse bodies of work.

Introduction: A great deal of fiction concerns family life, and yet it's rare to encounter a discussion centered on siblings. This panel aims to generate a conversation about the craft of writing siblings, while also engaging broader philosophical questions about the dimensions siblings can bring to a fictive world. The panel will also explore, when appropriate, how writers have navigated the off-the-page challenges of drawing from their own sibling relationships, especially when the portrayals are fraught.

Panelists: Laura van den Berg (moderator), Justin Torres, Chantel Acevedo, & Alejandro Nodarse

Format:

- + The moderator will introduce the topic & panelists. The panelists will each speak briefly, expanding on our own relationship to the topic.
- + The moderator will ask questions and conversation among the panelists will follow.
- + In the last 15-20 minutes, the moderator will open the conversation to audience Q & A.

Moderator Questions:

- + What is a favorite “sibling oriented” work of fiction, and what do you find especially compelling or illuminating about this work? (One of my favorite “sister stories,” for example, is Rebecca Curtis’s “The Christmas Miracle,” which uses two very different sisters to tell the story of a family in a moment of crisis, a story that could not be accessed without the kinetic, chaotic energy that arises from having these two sisters in the same space).
- + Another thing that can be compelling about these relationships is that there is the potential for both tremendous intimacy and mystery—who do we know better than the people we call siblings and yet there are so many dimensions, from the different ways siblings process the same events to the people we become as adults, that can be deeply mysterious. When I think of my own sister, I feel like there is no one who I understand more and no one I understand less. This feels like an irreconcilable position, and I

suppose that's why I write toward it. What draws each of you to centering/exploring these relationships in your work?

+ Sibling relationships have the power to reflect the broader dynamics between parents/guardians—how they handle conflict, their worldview, their secrets, their traumas—and so writing into these kind of relationships can be a unique channel for uncovering the ecosystem of a family. Have you found this to be true in your work? What other dimensions of the world do writing sibling relationships allow you to access?

+ Sibling relationships can, of course, take a great many shapes, from adoptive siblings to step siblings to siblings by way of deep friendship or shared community. For those of you who have explored these kinds of relationships in your fiction, can you speak to that process? What possibilities did you discover?

+ Sibling relationships can, of course, shift over time—sometimes radically. That's something I think about a lot about when writing into these relationships, the specific strands of time I'm looking to illuminate, and what this moment in time says about the characters' presents, pasts, and possible futures. Is this something y'all think about as well?

+ There is a Louise Glück's poem, "Descending Figure," with these lines: "Of two sisters/one is always the watcher,/one the dancer." This got me thinking about how, in my own work, I'm often drawn to writing sisters who are opposites, at least on the surface, and who can serve as shadow selves—or doubles or doppelgängers—for each other. I think this type of "countercharge" structure can be dynamic, but/also there is the need to avoid reductive binaries (one is like this, the other like that). Is this a challenge you've navigated in your work?