

More Interesting than Monsters: Resisting the Urge to Villainize in Memoir

Statement of Value and Outline

Event Title: More Interesting than Monsters: Resisting the Urge to Villainize in Memoir

Type of Event: Nonfiction Craft and Criticism

Event Description: Vivian Gornick instructs memoirists to capture complexity in the people they write about, even those who cause great conflict or pain. “For the drama to deepen,” she asserts, “we must see the loneliness of the monster and the cunning of the innocent.” Memoirists on this panel share their experience portraying difficult people on the page and offer techniques for writing about them in rich and multidimensional ways, resisting the urge to villainize while also not pulling any punches.

Event Agenda: The moderator Ronit Plank will begin the event by introducing herself and the panelists Lilly Dancyger, Michele Filgate, Allison Hong Merrill, and Michelle Yang and reading their short biographies. The panelists will give a brief introduction of their own work for five minutes each in which they highlight the most troublesome people in their story and what they found most challenging in portraying them. The moderator will then open up discussion for about thirty minutes with a list of questions prepared in advance. The panel will end with a ten-to-fifteen-minute audience Q&A.

Statement of Value: Memoirists who write difficult people with detail, nuance & empathy help readers more viscerally understand the toll of these relationships. This panel will offer attendees a presentation of work & conversation with a diverse panel of memoirists whose range of experience includes parental drug addiction, immigrant bride, paternal rejection, maternal abandonment, and child sexual abuse.

OUTLINE

Welcome and Introduction :00-07:00

Ronit welcomes attendees and thanks them for coming. She introduces each of the panelists:

Lilly Dancyger is the author of *Negative Space* (2021), a reported and illustrated memoir selected by Carmen Maria Machado as a winner of the Santa Fe Writers Project Literary Awards; and the editor of *Burn It Down* (2019), a critically acclaimed anthology of essays on women's anger from Seal Press. Lilly's writing has been published by *Guernica*, *Literary Hub*, *The Rumpus*, *Longreads*, *The Washington Post*, *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone*, and more; and she is currently at work on an essay collection about the power and complexity of female friendship. She lives in New York City, and you can find her on Twitter at [@lillydancyger](https://twitter.com/lillydancyger)

Michele Filgate a contributing editor at *Literary Hub* and the editor of a critically acclaimed anthology based on her *Longreads* essay, *What My Mother and I Don't Talk About*, published by Simon & Schuster. Her work has appeared in *Longreads*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Refinery29*, *Slice*, *The Paris Review Daily*, *Tin House*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Rumpus*, *Salon*, *Interview Magazine*, *Buzzfeed*, and other publications. She teaches or has taught creative writing at NYU, The New School, *The Sackett Street Writers' Workshop*, *Catapult*, The Shipman Agency, and Stanford Continuing Studies.

Allison Hong Merrill is the author of the memoir, *Ninety-Nine Fire Hoops*. A Taiwanese immigrant, Allison came to America as a university student, that's when she realized her school English wasn't much help when asking for directions or opening a bank account. By recording the classes she took and reviewing the tapes every night for years, she eventually learned English well enough to earn an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. But please excuse her if she misuses verb tenses or mixes up genders in third-person pronouns when she speaks. It's no secret—English is hard. Visit her at allisonhongmerrill.com.

Michelle Yang is an advocate whose writings on the intersection of Asian American identity, body image, and mental health have been featured in *NBC News*, *CNN*, *InStyle*, and more. After hiding her bipolar condition for two decades, Michelle realized she can't advocate for herself, or anyone, if she doesn't admit her own struggles. Her memoir, *PHOENIX GIRL: HOW A FAT ASIAN WITH BIPOLAR FOUND LOVE* is forthcoming. You can find her on Instagram @michelleyangwriter.

Ronit Plank is a writer, editor, and speaker whose work has been featured in *The Rumpus*, *The Atlantic*, *The Iowa Review*, *American Literary Review*, *The New York Times*, and elsewhere. Her memoir *When She Comes Back*, about the loss of her mother to the guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and their eventual reconciliation was a *Book Riot* Best True Crime Book of 2021. Her short story collection *Home Is A Made-Up Place* won Hidden River Arts' 2020 Eludra Award and is forthcoming. She is creative nonfiction editor at *The Citron Review* and host of the podcasts *The Body Myth* and *Let's Talk Memoir*. You can find her everywhere @ronitplank.

06:00-26:00

Ronit will ask each co-panelist to give a four-minute introduction of their memoir in which they highlight the most troublesome people in their story and what they found most challenging in portraying them. When they are finished Ronit will introduce her memoir.

26:00-55:00 Ronit asks co-panelists the following questions and answers two that pertain to her memoir.

-**Lilly**, what was especially important to you to capture when portraying your father? What did you want the reader to understand?

-**Allison**, what did you find helpful to remember when you were working on scenes involving your ex, Cameron and his family, and did your depiction of them change much over your different drafts? How or how not?

-**Michelle**, when you were writing your memoir what was the balance for you between revealing family dynamics and protecting your family?

-**Michele**, can you speak to your process of selecting qualities that humanized your stepfather when you revised the essay that become the catalyst for the anthology you edited and any challenges you encountered in doing so?

-**Lilly**, when you think of a particularly disconcerting memory of your father or mother that made it into *Negative Space*, how did you go about writing it to guide the reader to understanding but leave room for them to interpret for themselves the relationships and dynamics at play?

-**Michelle**, who was the most difficult/painful character in *Phoenix Girl* for you to write about and what tools did you use to portray them to your satisfaction?

-**Allison**, the beginning of *Ninety-Nine Fire Hoops* is set in the harsh environment of your early years living in poverty and you capture the often-abusive treatment of the adults in your life without self-pity or pointing fingers. What did you want the reader to take away?

-**Michele**, you've said that it in Jo Ann Beard's at the *Tin House* summer workshop where you had the major epiphany for your essay. She talked about how you have to show the light and the shadow of a person and not turn them into a cartoon villain. How do you check in with yourself in this regard when it comes to new work you are writing, what's your gauge?

Questions to the panel- Practical Advice for memoirists (please be prepared to answer these questions)

-Why is it important to portray troublesome people in nuanced ways when writing memoir?

-What advice can you offer writers for creating rich and even-handed depictions of complicated characters whose actions have profoundly impacted the memoirist?

-What is something to be wary of when writing about the people who have hurt a memoir most?

If time:

-Lilly, did the way you portrayed your mother and father change a great deal over your drafts?

-Allison, when you were writing about your mother did you worry readers wouldn't understand her or your relationship and if so, what did you rely on in your writing choices to temper that?

-Michelle, what have you learned about writing about loved ones who fall short?

-Michele, did you have any concerns about or resistance to adding more humanizing details to your portrayal of your stepfather and mother in your essay "What My Mother and I Don't Talk About?"

55:00-1:15:00 Q and A with attendees

1:15:00 Thank you for attending and goodbye