

**Event Title: Concise Punches of Reality:
Readings From Five Chapbook Memoirists**

Event Description

Some shy away from writing memoir because writing a lengthy, personal, emotional narrative of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pages seems too daunting. Yet, as our readings will show, it's possible to craft memorable journeys within a shortened format. We use first person narration as well as poetry, vignettes, photography, and social justice essays, reading from works that were made more powerful by being published in chapbook form. These are not tomes, but concise punches of reality.

Event Category: Nonfiction Readings

Organizer: Juanita E. Mantz

Moderator: Romaine Washington

Event Participants:

Juanita E. Mantz (“JEM”) is a USC Law educated lawyer/deputy public defender, writer, and podcaster. She is in the low residency MFA program at UNO. Her memoir "Tales of an Inland Empire Girl" will be published by Los Nietos Press in January 2022 and her hybrid chapbook titled "Portrait of a Deputy Public Defender, or how I became a punk rock lawyer" was released by Bamboo Dart Press in 2021.

Her stories have been published in literary journals, magazines, newspapers & anthologies. She is an alumnus of VONA and Macondo and has presented at the UCR Punk Conference and Beyond Baroque. She produced the ASA 2020 Freedom Course on Combatting Mass Incarceration.

Kendall Johnson is a writer and artist in Upland, California. Johnson drew upon his experience as trauma psychologist, on-scene disaster consultant, and former firefighter and military for his memoir writing: *Chaos & Ash* (Pelekinesis) and *Black Box Poetics* (Bamboo Dart Press, 2021).

Allen Callaci is the author of the 2016 memoir “Heart Like a Starfish” the 2020 eLit award winning e-book “Louder Than Good-Bye” on Pelekinesis Press and the chapbook "17 & Life" on Bamboo Dart Press, 2021. He has also blogged for BK Nation, The Huffington Post, and Inland Weekly and sings with the lo-fi pioneer band Refrigerator.

Gail Butensky began taking photographs to document the music (and the scene) she loved. Her photographs have appeared in numerous magazines, newspapers, album covers and books.

She has since expanded her view to take pictures of the desert, travels, and strange shrubbery. “Every Bend” is her first solo book (Bamboo Dart Press, 2021).

Romaine Washington is the author of *Purgatory Has an Address* (Bamboo Dart Press, 2021) and *Sirens in Her Belly* (Jamii Publications, 2016). She is a fellow of The Watering Hole, South Carolina, and the Inland Area Writing Project, UCR. Washington has presented her work in a wide variety of venues from the National Poetry Slam to KPFK and NPR. She is a native of San Bernardino and currently resides in the Inland Empire.

Introduction of the Writers in Reading

1. Allen Callaci will read excerpts from his chapbook memoir, 17 & Life.
2. Kendall Johnson will read two vignettes from his chapbook memoir, Black Box Poetics titled *Flying* and *A Good-bye*.
3. Gail Butensky will read excerpts and display a series of visuals from her chapbook memoir, Every Bend
4. Juanita E. Mantz, will read a chapter from her chapbook memoir, Portrait of a Deputy Public Defender or how I became a punk rock lawyer, titled *How a Not-So-Sweet Hooligan Girl Escaped Incarceration*.
5. Romaine Washington will read three poems from her chapbook memoir Purgatory Has an Address, *All-American Pastime*, *Gargoyles and Goddesses* and *at the end of the devil's breath*.

Moderator Questions for the following participants

Allen Callaci

Q: William Faulkner has said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” In your chapbook on page 6 you open with this: *We don’t move on. We move in circles with the remainder of the past following from behind like shadows lingering out form forever*, and on page 30 you say: *Maybe existence is a mix tape that repeats on an endless loop*. How did you decide what to focus on in the retelling of the events in your book?

A: I intentionally chose to not focus on the murderer but focus instead on Anna and the spark that was extinguished. My focus while writing on this was to make it a meditation on loss and not a sensationalistic true crime piece.

Kendall Johnson

Q: Jane Friedman’s essay, *Why Write Memoir Right Now*: “Writing memoir provokes the kind of discover that often eludes us. As anyone who has experienced trauma will tell you, **healing begins in having words for the experience**. Name it and we begin our way home”.

An excerpt from your vignette “Healing” on page 56 of your chapbook memoir describes a scene: *Here’s what I’m going to do, he told me. I’m going to experiment with tonal and pitch variations until I find which frequencies. I don’t know what you’ll experience, he said, but you’ll probably know when we are there. I will too. Then we’ll focus on that*. You say that each vignette is in a black box – is this your way of seeking healing from trauma?

A: Of course. We all seek wholeness and trauma shatters our world and our sense of ourselves. I’ve probably experienced more than my share of traumas and dramas, and it not only gives me interesting material with which to work, but also opportunity to see myself and my world anew. For this I am grateful. When I write about trauma, though, I’m writing about more than disruption and pain. I’m also writing about life and love, joy, and renewal, and making meaning from chaos. My most recent book, *Fireflies Against Darkness (Arroyo Seco)* looks at sources of light within the current world challenges.

Gail Butensky

Q. On page 26 of your chapbook memoir you tell the reader: *Oftentimes I would be the only person at these shows with a camera. Now you go to a show, and everybody is taking pictures because everyone has their phone and I take far fewer photos.* On page 44 you tell the reader: *The habit of taking photos for so long has changed how I view things. I go on walks, and I stop all the time to snap pictures, almost out of habit now.* These comments almost sound contradictory and it is interesting that when there are more cameras you want to take fewer pictures. How do those two ideas express your perspective in photography?

A. Back in the day, since I was the only one with the camera, I felt a need to document; it was my journal, my diary and a public record of it all. You never knew who might want to see them later (or even pay you for them!). Just like Allen said his mixtape was an endless loop of memory, my memory is in the boxes of negatives and prints I have on shelves.

Plus, it took more work to get into places with a camera- I had to be on a list or sneak it in....

And after photographing so much, that's how I see things - so I'm still inclined to take a picture, with my phone, when I'm out and about, but I don't feel the need to document other goings on since so many people have cameras' now and they can just text me the photos...

It's also about access- when I shot so much film I worked in darkrooms and had great opportunities to print as much as I want. Of course, the digital and the phone make it even easier, but I don't shoot film if I can't print it myself, and I do not like sitting at my computer in photo shop!

Juanita E. Mantz

Q. In your chapbook memoir there is an underlying current of the social class structure and how we are impacted by it. Would you like to talk more about it, especially considering your career as a Deputy Public Defender?

A. My book is about the intersection between blue collar life, my job in public defense and punk rock. As a deputy public defender, all my clients are indigent. And as I say in my book, we have created an incarcerated class in America. People who would be fighting their cases on the outside, but for the fact that they are poor. Add in the racial component, and then mental health issues, and we have a crisis of epic proportions. Because as Angela Davis says, our communities of color

have been criminalized.

We have people being warehoused in the jail on petty crimes or low-level felonies that would be able to fight their cases on the outside, but for the fact that they are poor. I grew up in the community I serve, blue collar, and I dropped out of high school and took my GED but made it to USC Law. My dad was a trucker, my mom a waitress, and I see myself in my clientele. We are all one. We will be judged by history accordingly.

Allen Callaci

Q. Were you aware of the social class distinction when you were younger is that something that has heightened in your view as you look back on your youth?

A. I was vaguely aware of it as a tween and teen, but it became more evident as I grew older. Anna's passing might have been a moment when I really started to become aware of the class divide. Upland High where Anna attended was located in an upper middle-class area while Montclair High where I attended was a blue-collar school primarily attended with lower middle-class students. There were no grief counselors provided for students at Montclair High in the wake of Anna's passing to help deal with the loss like there were at Upland High.

Q. For all Participants

During the pandemic many people found respite in memories and nostalgia. It helped to maintain a connectedness in relationships when we couldn't physically be together. How did the pandemic impact you?

A: Juanita

But for the pandemic this chapbook of mine, "Portrait of a Deputy Public Defender", would never have happened. I was working from home because of covid, only going to court one day a week. We public defenders were all working extreme hours, even all weekend, writing bail motions to get our clients, who were suffering and at risk, released.

I was also visiting them every morning, early AM, in the jail via video from home. My workday would start at 6 am. It was hard and traumatizing for the clients and me and I needed an outlet, so I joined a group writing pandemic poetry on Facebook. I wrote the poems in this book (my book is a collection of social

justice essays, memoir, and poetry) in that Pandemic poetry class. The Professor was the one that recommended me to Bamboo Dart for my chapbook. It was healing. And the rest was magic.

When I returned to court full time, my eyes were wide open to the issues in this "system" of mass incarceration. I am forever changed. So yes, the pandemic was traumatizing and chaotic, but like in all chaotic times, creativity flourishes.

A: Gail

Since I work mainly outside (I'm a landscaper) I wasn't as confined during the lockdown as most folks. But during my slow summer season, with the heatwaves and fires surrounding us, I did take the opportunity to stay in and start sorting and scanning and finally begin to organize the archives- quite a reflective process, but more in a nostalgia sort of way.

It also gave me the great opportunity to pull my book together quickly! So, I can call that my "pandemic project"

A: Kendall

Very positively! The lockdown provided me the chance to focus upon what I was about. I was gifted the opportunity for focus, allowing me to publish one full sized memoir, and two chapbook sized books of memoir-based poetry as well as work on my art. It allowed me the chance to engage people all over the globe in conversation about writing and about their work using technologies. Creatives here and abroad turned lemons into lemonade in ways we couldn't foresee. We were forced to rethink the things we take for granted and get beyond much of the everyday spectacle that obscures our vision. So many folks I know took advantage of the time to explore and reexamine their memories and search for new meanings.

Q: What benefits or advantages did you find in condensing your memoir to fit a chapbook format?

A: Juanita

The chapbook format is a way to focus your work and for me, it forced me to cut a lot out of my first high school dropout story until I got to the bare truth and

what I needed to say rather than everything I wanted to say. I really love the shorter version and I still use the longer version in my YA full length book.

A: Romaine

I am from a closed adoption and when my adopted mom died in 2016, I began writing poems about seeking connection and to tell the story of self-identification. This evolved into the sections on racial awareness and poetry of place where I began to identify myself with the place where I grew up. Condensing it down to fit the format of a chapbook reduced redundancy and collection after my mom died in 2016.

A: Allen

I think the chapbook format is terrific because it forces a writer to distill their writing into its' concise and purest form.

Close:

Writing memoir in a condensed format is one way to avoid overindulge in descriptions of setting and the non-essentials that could possibly be a distraction from the core of the heart of the memory that clarifies, and helps define, provides insight and meaning to life and experiences both traumatic and joyful.

I think Bell Hooks speaks for us memoirists when she said, “I gather together the dreams, fantasies, experiences that preoccupied me ... that stay with me and appear and reappear in different shapes and forms in all my work. Without telling everything that happened, they document all that remains most vivid.”

The chapbooks have helped us distill our most vivid experiences. Bamboo Dart Press afforded us the opportunity to invite others to read our most vivid experiences.

In creating a chapbook, it was easy to work with the small press and have input on formatting, artwork, and the commercial videos for the books on YouTube. It has been an honor to have our concise memoirs published with them. It has been a pleasure creating this presentation, and we thank AWP for hosting us virtually and for your time in allowing us to share excerpts of our concise punches of reality.