

Brutal or Traumatic Scenes in Creative Nonfiction: Is There a Veil?

Pre-recorded event

Description: Most of the time, creative nonfiction books deal with something traumatic or brutal. As writers, how mindful are we in recreating these scenes on the page? When we engage with topics like physical, mental, or sexual abuse, rape, self-harm, debilitating illness, and deaths of our loved ones, how intentional are we when narrating readers through these moments? Do we create a veil to protect our readers or draw the readers right in as though they're experiencing these things themselves?

Moderator: Lara Lillibridge

Panelists: Athena Dixon, Christine Hyung-Oak Lee, Krystal Sital, Carol Smith

I. Welcome and Introductions - Lara Lillibridge

A native of Northeast Ohio, **Athena Dixon** is the author of *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* (Split/Lip Press) and *No God in This Room* (Argus House Press). Her work also appears in *The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 2: Black Girl Magic* (Haymarket Books). Learn more at www.athenadixon.com.

Christine Hyung-Oak Lee is the author of the memoir *Tell Me Everything You Don't Remember*. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *ZYZZYA*, *Guernica*, *The Rumpus*, *Hyphen Magazine*, and *BuzzFeed*.

Krystal Sital is the author of the critically acclaimed memoir *Secrets We Kept*. A PEN Award finalist, her essays have been anthologized in *A Map Is Only One Story* and *Fury: Women's Lived Experiences of the Trump Era*. Her work can also be found in *Elle*, *The New York Times*, and *Catapult*.

Carol Smith is an award-winning journalist and editor for NPR affiliate KUOW Public Radio in Seattle. Her essays and other writings have appeared in more than a dozen literary journals. Her memoir, *Crossing the River: Seven Stories That Saved My Life, A Memoir* (Abrams Press) came out in May, 2021.

Lara Lillibridge (she/zher) is the author of *Mama, Mama, Only Mama; Girlish: Growing Up in a Lesbian Home*, and co-editor of the anthology, *Feminine Rising: Voices of Power and Invisibility*. She is the Interviews Editor for *Hippocampus*

Magazine, a Creative Nonfiction Editor for HeartWood Literary Magazine, and is a mentor for Writer to Writer.

II. Lara—Krystal, you and I proposed this panel together, so I want to start by asking what you mean by “the veil?” And to each of the panelists, how do we interpret or define the concept of veil in our writing?

A. Krystal—quite simply, I think of it as a protective layer between the reader and the events/material/writer. How conscious are we as writers of this veil when we are writing? How much do we care? And why? Will elaborate more here.

B. Athena—I think the veil is not only a content decision for me, but also a decision of form. I find it a means of protection of self, respect for my readers, and the subject matter. I never want to sacrifice myself for the sake of the page so for me there needs to be a conscious thought about what I decided to present.

C. Carol—I think of the veil as a kind of filter that allows me to focus the reader on what I want them to see or experience. Think of how a veil that covers a part of the face makes you see the eyes differently, or how a surgical drape focuses attention on a specific area of the body. It’s a way of screening out the things that would otherwise distract or overwhelm a reader.

D. Christine—The veil. I see it as a kind of withholding. Once Chris Abani had an exercise in a workshop where we had to share the biggest question in our life and why. I said I didn’t want to share, because it was “private.” He paused and responded, “Then why do you write?” That woke me up. I have practiced the veil my entire life as a marginalized person and also in service of “politeness,” and I refuse to let that into my writing. Politeness creates distance. There is no veil for me as a writer. There is curation, but that is different from the veil, because curation is in service of the story.

III. Separation Between Writer/Narrator in Service of the Veil.

A. Lara—Many writers struggle with the separation between themselves as the writer and the narrator on the page. I wound up writing my memoir in third person, because that was the only way I

could achieve separation. Christine, you had a wonderful quote on this subject in your book:

I too have created a character to embody the trauma. The person on these pages is the character Christine. The person telling you this story is the narrator Christine. And the person behind all this is me, Christine.

Can you speak about narrator separation and the veil?

Christine—Here's the thing: there's always a separation between the author and narrator and the character. Frederick Reiken wrote a fantastic article about this craft issue in *Writer's Chronicle* a number of years ago called "The Author Narrator Character Convergence." In first person memoir, it's easy to fall into convergence—because the author, narrator, and character are more likely than not the same person. The author is the person curating and writing the story, the narrator is the voice telling the story on the page, and the character is the person living the story on the page. We don't, for instance, share EVERYTHING that happens in our life but select what is best for the story arc. And the narrator is providing the framework for the character with things like exposition—and the character shouldn't provide exposition but embody the story. It's important in memoir to have this separation, if even to provide distance between the lived story and the learned lessons. Even if there is a minute difference from where the narrator stands and the character lives, that separation must be recognized. And that is the distance that provides insights for the reader.

B. Lara—Carol, your memoir is a little different. In your book, you are reporting on the stories of other people as well as your own. You have this quote:

I had to take this journey through stories, had to report out my own life by interviewing people who were going through something hard of their own. Their stories let me put my experience into words, the words I couldn't find in the beginning.

Can you talk about the separation between narrator/reporter, the memoirist, and the self?

Carol— My memoir is about coming to terms with the sudden death of my 7-year-old son. In the beginning, I coped by shutting down. I couldn't express what was happening to me. At the time, I was also a reporter and I discovered that the stories I was most drawn to were in some way helping me answer the questions I faced as I struggled through my own grief. Reporting those stories allowed me to step outside myself—to get distance—which in turn helped me better understand what I was going through. The journey of the book is how I integrated what I learn from the other characters in the book. In essence, I had to first create that distance for myself, and then I had to close it again. The narrator is my character experiencing that process in the book.

C. Lara—Krystal, your book encompasses the stories of yourself, your mother, and grandmother. Can you talk about the narrator in your multi-generational story?

Krystal—Some of these stories are not mine. They're part of my family history but I hold no ownership over them and wanted to convey that to the reader utilizing third person. Once in third person, the story is as close as you can be in first person. I do create and maintain a separation of writer and narrator to protect the reader. Based on my own reading experience with books.

D. Lara—Athena, your book is an essay collection, so how did the writer/narrator separation work for you?

Athena—I think there is a bit of a duality for me. I use the role of narrator to give myself freedom as the writer. The writer is very much me exploring the tensions and curiosities of my experiences, but I don't have the capacity to be as open with those discoveries without the lens of the narrator.

III. Lara—Structure in service of providing transparency / How did the structure evolve to uphold or take down the veil?

A. Athena—It really took a set of outside eyes (my editor) for me to see the story isn't always linear. I'd not taken the time to view the ebb and flow of the

story and how it mimicked my life versus being a retelling. I had to get out of the living of it and hone in on the craft of it.

B. Krystal—To fully encapsulate the full scope of the story, time jumps were necessary. But also—why not? (Explain here the movement from one chapter to another.)

C. Carol —If a veil is one way to think about focusing the reader's emotion, then you can use structure to create that veil. In my early drafts, I opened with the scene of me learning about my son's death because that's what sets the journey of the book in motion. But as I revised, I realized that at that point, the reader didn't know me or my son at all so the impact of that scene was going to be different than if I put it (in flashback) toward the end of the book. The book takes the reader along with me as I'm coming to terms with his death. By the time that scene arrives close to the end of the book, the reader knows us and the scene has a deeper emotional resonance. In terms of sequencing the book, that was really determined by the questions I was trying to answer. Answering one naturally led to asking another. The arc of the stories is always moving me toward a place of learning how to both live with this loss and be able to live joyfully.

D. Christine —My memoir was about my loss of short-term memory and rebuilding my brain. It was a challenge to literally write a story about something that I didn't remember fully. In real life, I was reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* when the stroke occurred. So I incorporated Vonnegut and emulated my recovery with regards to repetition and memory gaps as Billy Pilgrim did; unfortunately, the character's problem shouldn't be the reader's problem...and for some readers this structure caused confusion--and in some cases, served as a veil, alas. Which proves to me that readers do NOT want a veil! At the same time, I had chapters about science...and readers loved that...so the veil isn't always about the self but about third party subject matter to provide context for the story--it's interesting that the thing I felt was least intimate made the reader feel more intimacy.

V. Lara—How mindful were you of the emotional fortitude of the reader? Did you want to immerse or protect the reader in regard to any topics?

A. Carol—I knew my challenge was always going to be getting people to pick up and start a book about a child's death. It's a topic that triggers many people's own worst fears. But I didn't want this to be a book only for bereaved parents. It's for anyone wondering how to live with hard things that you can't change. So I had to find a way for people to enter and stay in the story without

automatically turning away at the beginning. That was another reason for holding the details for later in the book. I wanted to first immerse them in the struggle toward acceptance so they were more ready at the end to absorb news of his death.

B. Christine—Ha ha. I never protect the reader. My whole life is a marginalized story that has skirted the mainstream narrative and my entire childhood was about protecting the fragility of my audience receiving my story. So as a writer, I just do not protect the audience. Again, no veil.

C. Athena—I honestly didn't think of it. I wanted to write what needed to be written without worrying about anyone's possible positive or negative reaction to it. The underpinning of the whole collection was about feeling invisible and unheard. The book was my time to be heard and I wanted to do so without feeling stifled by outside forces or concerns.

D. Krystal —This is so interesting because I was really worried and concerned about the emotional fortitude of my storytellers. But maybe because I was already starting there, that translated to the work as well. Not all of the time—first drafts of that opening chapter.

IV. Lara— let's talk about the level of details—how much or how little to include and how does this enable or disable the veil?

A. Krystal—I allow the storytellers to lead me. I allowed them to speak at will and length. But the magic remains in the details and images that keep recurring. Also, the parts that trouble us the most.

B. Athena—I've usually honed in on a particular point of detail before I begin writing. That helps me drill down into the subject matter. Those experiences I've written about are anchored in my mind by very specific sounds, smells, etc. I use the page to build the detailed world around those senses.

C. Christine—memoir is about curation—I spoke to this in referring to author and narrator separation, and so we as memoirists are always figuring out how much to include. I did consider who it was I wanted to protect and adhered to that guideline...but also centered my recovery and the parts of my life that informed how it was I recovered. One apparently controversial thing I did was to write about my childhood as an Asian American and how that informed the person I became; many readers were a little taken aback, because they weren't used to identity politics in illness memoirs. And it wasn't until recently that I learned that my memoir was the first by an APIA published by a major house that centered on illness—which makes sense,

given audience reaction. Again, though, that is part of the veil; I wanted to make transparent these connections of different lived experiences. I wanted to lift that veil.

D. Carol—It's interesting, one of the most common condolences that many people hear is: "I can't imagine...." But if you can't imagine, you can't truly empathize. That became my personal guide for how to write about trauma. I wanted readers to imagine how they would cope with their own "worst nightmare" so they could better understand what others in their lives might be facing. At the same time, I needed to keep the reader in the story, so I was always trying to walk that line between expressing the hard thing and not flooding the reader or triggering their own trauma reactions. The other characters in the book were going through hard things of their own and some of those scenes were pretty difficult. I tried to be true to their experiences and capture them in a way that people could understand what they were facing without turning away. One of those characters was someone who had had a severe burn injury. In the course of reporting that story I observed skin graft surgery, which is a really difficult surgery for the patient and also difficult to watch. That's one where my editor asked me to take out some details that could be overwhelming for readers. I ended up choosing just the details that conveyed the essence of the experience. I always remember a story I read many years ago about a little boy who died of exposure after his dad lost track of him while they were out hunting. The only thing I remember about that story is a single detail about frozen tears. That single detail carried the whole weight of the tragedy for me and was a lesson I learned about how "less is more."

VI. Lara—How protective of yourself were you in writing? How do you write about trauma without retraumatizing yourself?

A. Krystal—I wasn't protective of myself at all and that took me by surprise (explain more here). I was more so worried about my grandmother and mother who had to deal with more of the aftermath psychologically. Or at least that's how I perceived it at that time.

B. Athena—I've always been very conscious of keeping a piece of myself off of the page. Even if I may approach the same topic, I at times keep an alternate draft for myself. This allows me to find entry points into the topic

where I am exploring rather than destroying myself in the process. And, of course, there are things I will never share world because there is no literary value to it.

C. Christine—Not at all. Mostly because I wrote about my stroke 7+ years after the fact. I was going through a trauma (motherhood + husband's affair + divorce) and looked back on my stroke for lessons.

D. Carol—My central writing challenge from the beginning was closing the narrative distance between me and the reader – to transition from my detached, journalistic “observer” voice (that I was comfortable with) to a voice that put readers in my body. To do that I had to re-remember things, re-experience the memories so I could rediscover what was happening to me physically at the time. I took a lot of breaks in the writing. I did more journaling to get it out before figuring out what belonged on the page. I paid closer attention to how my body experienced stress in everyday life. In the process of writing the book, I realized I had had classic symptoms of PTSD that I had never identified as such. I also realized that what I experienced is now commonly termed “complicated grief”, but that also had not been named as such at the time. It was helpful for me, even after the fact, to have that context for what I experienced.

VII. Lara: wrap up, thank yous.

Panelists Books:

The Incredible Shrinking Woman by Athena Dixon, Split/Lip Press, 2021

Tell Me Everything You Don't Remember: The Stroke That Changed My Life by Christine Hyung-Oak Lee, Harper Collins, 2017.

Girlish: Growing Up in a Lesbian Home by Lara Lilibridge, Skyhorse Publishing, 2018.

Secrets We Kept: Three Women of Trinidad by Krystal Sital, W.W. Norton. 2018.

Crossing the River: Seven Stories That Saved My Life, A Memoir by Carol Smith, Harry N. Abrams, 2021.