

(Virtual) Panel on Breakthrough Nonfiction Forms

Event Description: Forms do more than contain: they exclude. They break down. They free. When forms disrupt expectations, they can shatter paradigms. This panel joins five essayists in conversation about how structures we reconstruct expand access, inquiry, and dialogue. They will discuss how new nonfiction forms can be used to increase intimacy, forge inroads into others' experiences, address global crises that defy traditional structures, and reframe a more comprehensive social context.

Statement of Value: This panel stages a quintet from *Paper Concert: A Conversation in the Round*, a book-length essay that enacts a dialogue that challenges the stories we tell ourselves about race, family, art, nature, and more. This diverse group of panelists have conducted similar formal advances in their individual work but together they demonstrate a new cooperative expansive enough to create a form to embody the multitudes every individual contains.

Agenda: The moderator will begin by welcoming attendees and describing the panelists' use of innovative nonfiction forms. The moderator will read an excerpt from the introduction of the book that gathers these panelists and establishes a dialogue on unclassifiable forms. Panelists will then read selections from their own work for five minutes each. The moderator will pose questions to extend the conversation on form begun in the book, before opening the discussion to questions from the audience.

Event Participants:

Eric LeMay teaches in the writing program at Ohio University. He serves as an editor for *Alimentum* and *NOR* and is a host on the New Books Network. He is the author of three books, including *In Praise of Nothing*, a collection of traditional and multimedia essays. Find him at www.ericlemay.org.

Rebecca McClanahan's eleventh book is *In the Key of New York City*. Her work has appeared in Best American Essays, Best American Poetry, and the Pushcart Prize series. Recipient of the Glasgow Award in nonfiction, she teaches in the MFA programs of Rainier Writing Workshop and Queens University.

Jericho Parms is the author of *Lost Wax*. Her work has appeared in *The Normal School*, *Hotel Amerika*, *American Literary Review*, *Brevity* and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and is a consulting editor at *Fourth Genre*.

Ira Sukrungruang is the author of the nonfiction books *This Jade World*, *Buddha's Dog & other Meditations*, *Southside Buddhist*, and *Talk Thai: The Adventures of Buddhist Boy*. He is the Richard L. Thomas Professor of Creative Writing at Kenyon College and the editor of *Sweet: A Literary Confection*.

Amy Wright is the author of *Paper Concert: A Conversation in the Round* (Sarabande Books 2021) as well as three poetry books. She is Senior Editor of *Zone 3* journal and the 2022 Wayne G. Basler Chair of Excellence at East Tennessee State University.

- I. Moderator welcomes attendees and briefly describes *Paper Concert*, the book that gathers these panelists.
- II. Panelists describe their relationships to form
- III. Moderator (Amy Wright) reads from the introduction to *Paper Concert*
- IV. Each panelist reads one of their answers from *Paper Concert*, text follows

When in your life have you felt the freest?

Ira Sukrungruang: I love snorkeling. I lose myself in this underwater world. I don't feel my body. I float and follow, and once it got me into trouble because I was so far from shore, carried away into the belly of the ocean by a rip tide. I survived, barely. Still, I go back. That calm, the change in sound, the change in body . . . I don't know, it's easy to lose yourself because in a weird way there is no self. It's like what Ted Kooser said once about a good poem: an enchantment happens, and it's like staring at the bottom of a glass-bottom boat, and you lose yourself and keep leaning in and leaning in until your head hits the glass and the spell is broken. Coming up in snorkeling is that shock back.

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How does the essay follow, or resist following, your mind on the page?

Jericho Parms: Ideas shape movement. Observations shape movement. Research shapes movement, too.

I think of the relationship between research and writing as a merry-go-round where there is both vertical motion and horizontal motion. Information that exists in the world at large can propel a piece while thoughts and images in my own mind bob along, rising and deepening at points. Or vice versa. And perhaps, like a merry-go-around, an essay might not ever arrive somewhere but seek instead to journey through texture and sounds, patterns and silences—language—until we step off the ride, slightly dizzy or seeing stars, with some sense of meaning.

That said, inevitably some essays resist, or rather insist, on cutting a separate path. In those moments it's up to me to follow. Often eagerly, on occasion, dragging my feet like a child—but childlike, too, in my own willingness to be awed, inspired to imagine, be led by curiosity, *shaped* by whatever happens upon the page.

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You say in your essay “Hic Sunt Dracones” that we need dragons because the “world, like the World Wide Web, has no end, no edge.” Later, you specify that dragons represent boundaries “for us, who need limits if we’re to know these worlds and our

places in them.” Will you give me an example of a dragon that has helped you to know or find your place in the world?

Eric LeMay: Perfection, especially that idea of artistic perfection, has become more and more menacing and dragon-like as I’ve grown as a writer and person. I began my career with a belief that the perfect artwork should not only be the aim of any serious artist, but also that it was redemptive, worth any measure of sacrifice. I think the belief came out of that desire we have when we’re young to really do something, really achieve something. I still believe in the transporting power of art, but experience has taught me that you get there—at least I get there—by fucking up and around.

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How did you craft a narrative for The Tribal Knot, a multi-generational memoir that braids stories of your family across distance and decades? And, what gave you the courage to undertake such a project?

Rebecca McClanahan: Courage? Is it courage when you have no idea of what’s ahead of you? Because I had no idea where the trail would lead. I’ve never had an idea where any writing adventure might lead; if I did, I probably would hang back like the Cowardly Lion. I just plunged in because I was so fascinated by the letters and documents and artifacts, and later by the oral histories and interviews, that I could not have stopped even had I wanted to. I was hooked. As for the form, it developed over a long period of trial and error. But once I discovered the ancestral hair-weaving detail—through one of my interviews—that image helped me see that the narrative would be shaped at least partly by interwoven histories. I also opted for fairly straightforward chronology, to help the reader move through time with me.

- V. Panelists read selections from their individual work to illustrate their use of form to expand access, create intimacy, deepen dialogue, reframe contexts, forge inroads into others’ experience, address global crises, and challenge expectations

Discussion Questions:

How do you use form to create opportunities for freedom (from expectations, limitations, traditions, biases, etc.)?

How do you use form to challenge the nature of inquiry and deepen the questions we’re asking as a society?

How do use forms to open access and invite more members into important conversations?

How do you use form to address personal, social, and global issues?