

Emotional Pacing in the Trauma Narrative
(Aggie Stewart, Grace Talusan, Katherine Standefer, Alden Jones)

Friday March 25 12:10PM-1:25PM ET
113C Pennsylvania Convention Center, 100 Level

Trauma memoirs require careful emotional pacing, which means modulating the presentation of emotionally charged material. Emotional pacing involves decisions about which events to include, how to withhold or present details, and how to sequence events, often using narrative techniques to manipulate the distance between the narrator and events. In this panel, four memoirists offer strategies for guiding the reader's experience in memoirs of near death, family secrets, and other difficult stories.

Emotional Pacing in the Trauma Narrative
(Aggie Stewart, Grace Talusan, Katherine Standefer, Alden Jones)

Emotional pacing relies on wide array of literary devices and techniques to either amplify emotion in a scene or moment or to create space around such scenes and moments in order to allow the reader to breathe, to fully take in and appreciate the amplitude of an action or event. I think about Mary Karr's use of humor in *The Liars' Club* to provide comic relief following emotionally intense moments or Joy Harjo's oscillation between poetry and prose in *Crazy Brave* to emotionally downshift or upshift around impactful moments and scenes or Maya Angelou's use of poetic devices such as anaphora—the repetition of words—or simile to amplify emotional moments in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* or the way she shifts between exposition and narration like a camera lens zooming in or out from such moments. What are some of the techniques/narrative devices you use in your work to modulate the emotional story in your work, to either amplify or to create space for the reader to breathe?

technique

humor

Mary Karr's use of humor in *The Liars' Club* to provide comic relief following emotionally intense moments



In Richmond, Virginia, we watched tobacco become cigarettes: beautiful white paper cylinders packed gently into boxes. Everyone in the family, including us kids, walked away from that tour with a carton of cigarettes.



“Fine! Everything is my fault. Just stop talking about the goddamn chickens.”

When I was in the third grade, we had an incubator at school where we hatched chicks.



“I’ll take a male and female,” he told the pet store clerk.

The clerk’s voice cracked, “I don’t think that’s a good idea, sir.”

“A male and female,” my father repeated. “One cage.”



Grace's mother Norma enjoying breakfast in bed with the family dog, Sashi.

technique

anaphora

Maya Angelou's use of poetic devices such as anaphora—the repetition of words



This is what happened and happened and happened.
I was seven and he was seventy.
I was eight and he was seventy-one.
I was nine and he was seventy-two.
I was ten and he was seventy-three.
I was eleven and he was seventy-four.
I was twelve and he was seventy-five.
I was thirteen and he was seventy-six.
There is no paper trail to document what happened to my body, and I don't remember all of what happened. The sexual assaults spanned seven years with such consistency and frequency that I was not present for all of it. I doubt I'd still be alive if I hadn't found a way to escape.
