

First-Person Journalism

How Do You Make a Personal Voice Believable?

AWP Conference 2022

Summary

Looking for a moving, provocative discussion? You've found it.

This panel was recorded in late December 2021, when we had a lively conversation about writing nonfiction with a first-person voice (see the end of this outline for some of the questions addressed). I also asked each panelist to read a first-person excerpt from their own work. One reading from a creative nonfiction piece about a young white man teaching at Tuskegee in the late 1960s sparked a particularly candid discussion.

Offensive Language Alert

The white writer doing the reading spoke the N-word out loud, quoting George Wallace and other white supremacists at the time. This led to a debate about whether saying the N-word in a public forum is acceptable in any situation – one of the best and most civil conversations about this issue among diverse participants I've heard in a media setting.

At our request, AWP edited out the spoken word in the recording, but the reading and discussion remain. All participants wanted this segment included in the final recording. Still, we know the N-word has traumatic associations for many listeners – recognizing its impact on the audience is part of our recorded discussion – as is who has the right to tell a given first-person story. We hope you'll join in this ongoing conversation with us.

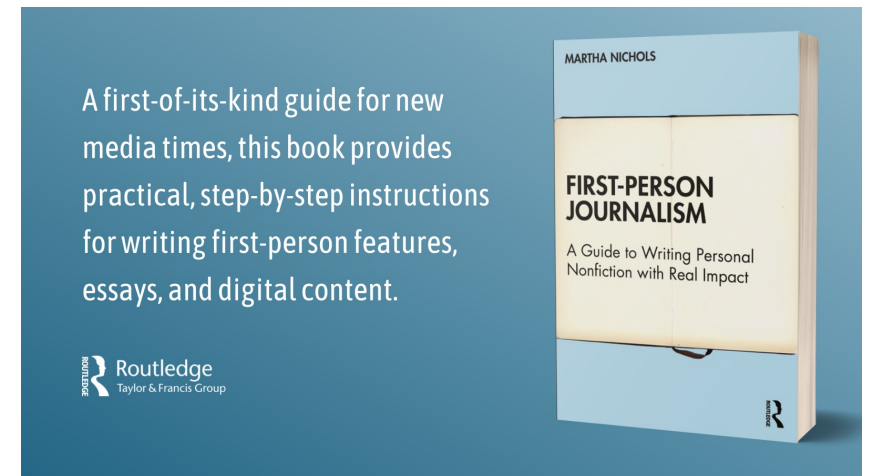
— *Martha Nichols, organizer and moderator*

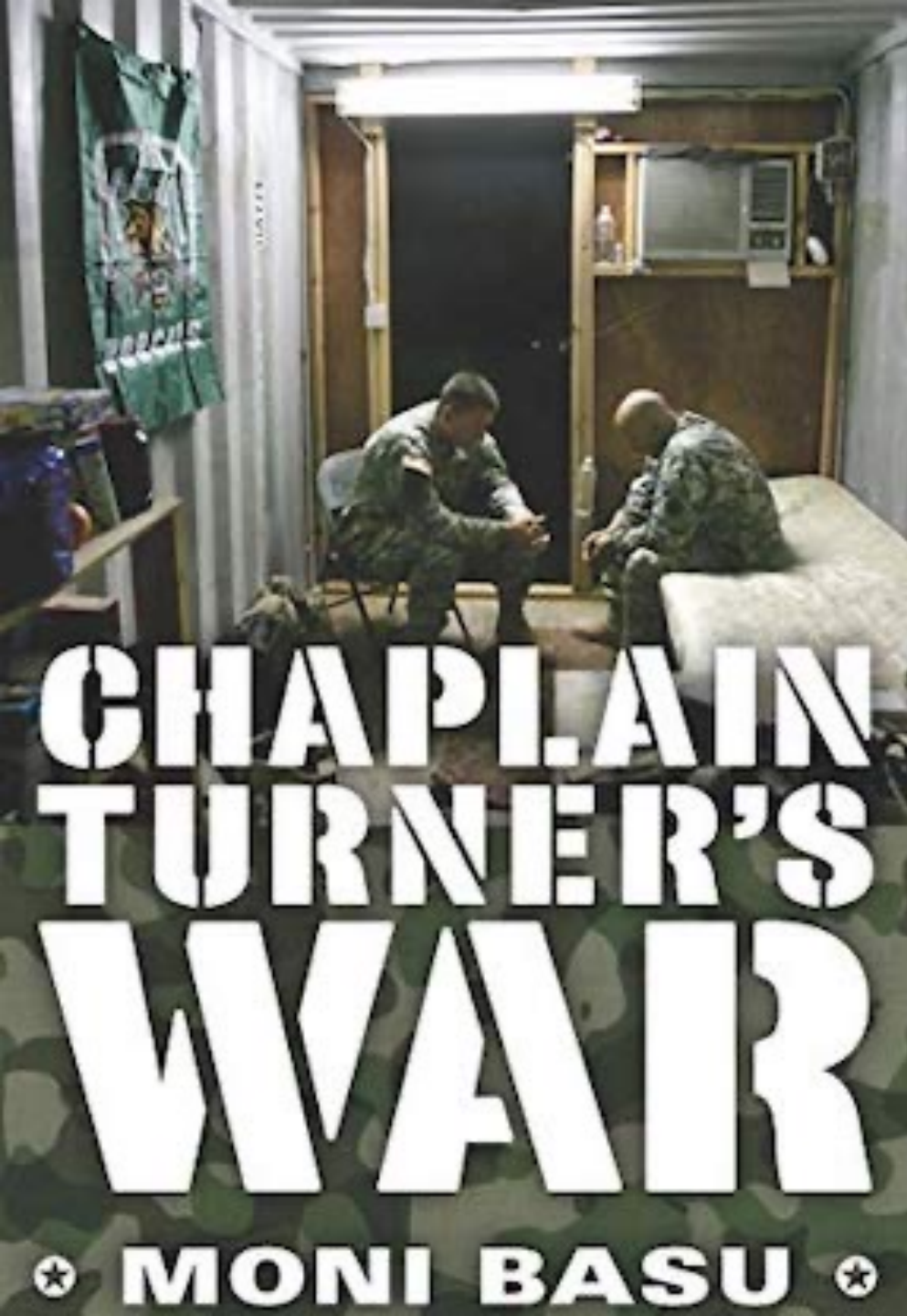


The Inspiration for this Panel

First-Person Journalism, a writing guide by moderator Martha Nichols, was recently published by Routledge. It's a compilation of her many years of thinking about and teaching this hybrid nonfiction genre.

If you'd like to purchase the book during AWP22, the publisher is offering a discount code to conference goers. See the flyer attached with this event listing.





Moni Basu

panelist

Moni Basu is the Michael and Linda Connelly Lecturer in Narrative Nonfiction at the University of Florida. She was a reporter and editor at CNN, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and other newspapers and still writes for magazines, including the *Bitter Southerner* and *Flamingo*. She published her e-book, *Chaplain Turner's War*, in 2012.

White People

December 7, 2020

Memoir by Kent Jacobson

Why Go There, Young Man?



"FREEDOM TRAIN TO ALABAMA" © PETER PETTUS

Kent Jacobson

panelist

Kent Jacobson has taught minority audiences for thirty years: in an Alabama college, Connecticut prisons, and an inner-city in Massachusetts. His memoir writing focuses often on race and class. Jacobson's nonfiction appears in *Talking Writing*, *The Dewdrop*, *Lucky Jefferson*, *Backchannels*, *Hobart*, *Longridge Review*, and elsewhere.

Facing Image: From *Talking Writing*, Fall 2020.

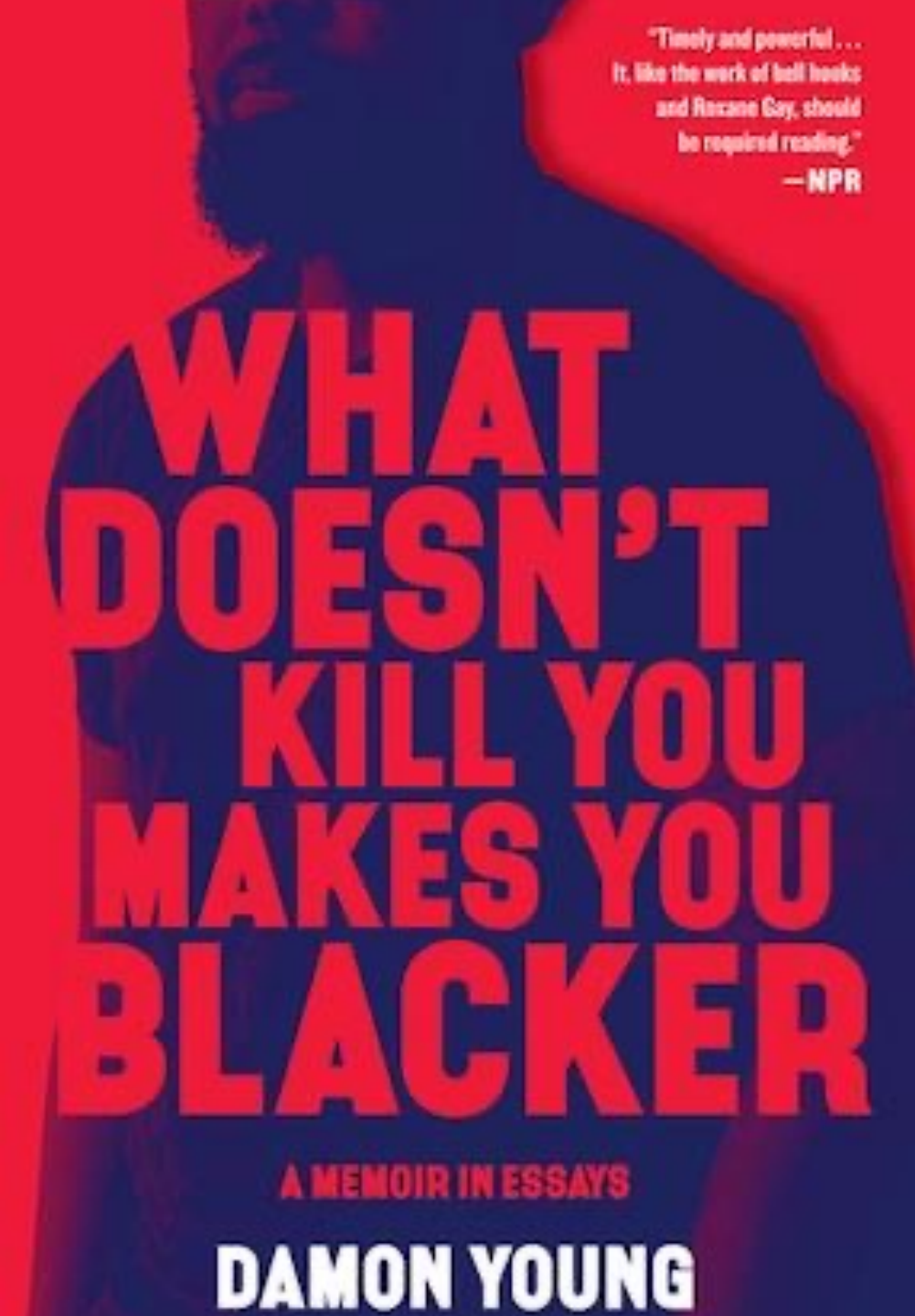


Lewis Raven Wallace

panelist

Lewis Raven Wallace, an independent journalist based in Durham, NC, is the author and creator of *The View from Somewhere*. The book (University of Chicago Press) and podcast are about the history of journalistic "objectivity" and how it has been used to uphold the status quo and exclude voices from oppressed communities.

Podcast link: <https://www.lewispants.com/>



Damon Young

panelist

Pittsburgh writer Damon Young's debut memoir — *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Blacker: A Memoir In Essays* (Ecco/HarperCollins) — is a tragicomic exploration of the angsts, anxieties, and absurdities of existing while black in America, and won the 2020 Thurber Prize for American Humor and Barnes & Noble's 2019 Discover Award.

FIRST-PERSON JOURNALISM

A Guide to Writing Personal
Nonfiction with Real Impact

Martha Nichols

moderator

Martha Nichols is co-founder of *Talking Writing*, a nonprofit digital magazine with an emphasis on personal essays. A longtime journalism instructor at Harvard University Extension School, she's the author of the recent guide *First-Person Journalism* (Routledge) and editor of *Into Sanity*, an anthology of essays about mental illness.

Questions

- **Why use first-person in journalism – and when should we use it?**
- **What's the difference between first-person journalism and memoir?**
- **Why do you believe what a first-person writer says?**
- **What role does humor play in your work and in engaging with readers?**
- **Who are some of your favorite first-person nonfiction writers?**

