

“Writing for Recovery: New Sobriety Narratives”

Tara Stillions Whitehead, L.L. Kirchner, Darren C. Demaree, Michael McClelland

Event description: The addict's crisis transcends the page and is often brought there by the writer-addicts themselves. The trauma of addiction is a central conflict in any addict's story; however, it is not the only plot point. This panel of writers in recovery seeks to discuss where the sobriety narrative stands today, how recovery stories can combat harmful fetishization tropes that further stigmatize addicts, and how real-life recovery tools can help the writer become a better writer of witness.

EVENT CATEGORY: Panel

EVENT ORGANIZER AND MODERATOR

Tara Stillions Whitehead is a writer and filmmaker. Author of the hybrid collections *Blood Histories* (Galileo Press 2021) and *The Year of the Monster* (Unsolicited Press 2022), she is Assistant Professor of Film, Video, and Digital Media Production at Messiah University in Pennsylvania.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS

L.L. Kirchner is a journalist, award-winning screenwriter, and memoirist. She's currently writing *Florida Girls, A Novel*, the fictional account of a troupe of swimsuit models who ran the Tampa mob at the end of World War II.

Darren C. Demaree is the author of sixteen poetry collections, most recently “a child walks in the dark” (Harbor Editions, November 2021).

Michael McClelland's first book, *Gay Zoo Day*, was released by Beautiful Dreamer Press in 2017. He is a graduate of Allegheny College, The London School of Economics, and Georgia College, and is currently pursuing his doctorate at the University of Georgia.

IN-PERSON EVENTS, PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING AT THE BEGINNING OF YOUR EVENT - 2 min

Welcome to “Writing for Recovery: New Sobriety Narratives.” A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me, the moderator of the panel, know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

OPENING MODERATOR REMARKS AND INTRODUCTION OF PANELISTS - 6 min

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for being here. With such an amazing list of panels to attend at this conference, we thank you for taking the time to attend this one.

My name is Tara, and I am a recovering alcoholic.

What did those words signal for you? Just now? What materialized? What feelings and images? Longing? Pity? Pain? Maybe indifference? Coffee hot as the sun and thick as molasses? Unsteady bodies and brutally hard metal folding chairs? Did your eyes roll in the back of your head? Did the script – “I am a recovering alcoholic” flip a switch? Scripts can do that. The more we hear them, the less exceptional the narrative becomes. They imply meaningless through rotteness. Which is fine. Because my alcoholism and drug use was exactly that—a progressive loss of meaning, one drink or line at a time. An escalating—and to be honest, banal—asymptote of loss.

I don't know what I've been longer, a writer or an alcoholic, but I do know that those identities have always been connected. I grew up in an alcoholic household. I went to recovery meetings as a child. I watched parents relapse, overdose, and recover. Cyclically. As predictable as the endless and oppressive Southern California sunshine. I did the same. Cyclically. That's *my* story. It might be a familiar one. That's okay. Familiarity and cliché are not the same. And that's not every alcoholic writer or addict's story. Maybe you have read some of those other stories. Maybe those stories are your story, or the story of someone you know, someone you knew, someone you love, someone you lost.

Those stories, the familiar and the *other* stories, are happening everywhere. They are grouped together and abstracted into numbers because numbers are the way we understand hard-to-understand crises at the macro level:

According to the 2020 national survey on drug use and health 41.1 million people in the US struggled with a substance use disorder and needed treatment. Of this 41.1 million over the age of 12, 2.6 million received treatment, whether through therapy, rehab, IOP, or other recovery-focused treatment programs. Just for reference, when I submitted this proposal in March of 2020, that number was 20.4 million, which had been stable across four years of SAMHSA data. Two thirds of those numbers involved alcohol.

Statistics, statistics, statistics.

It's a familiar way to look at addiction, right? It's facile. It's comprehensive. It's

This panel is not about educating people on the numbers or attacking *specific* popular representations, socio-political stigmas, or limited health resources that platform and enable a culture of addiction. This panel isn't here to promote a program of recovery or address the risks associated with drug and alcohol use either. The panelists before you have different stories, struggles, families of origin, recovery practices, dreams, jobs, drugs of choice, methods for staying sober and engaging with the topic of addiction and recovery in writing. They work in different modes and mediums: poetry, film, fiction, essay, and the necessary, hybrid spaces recovery narratives inhabit. This panel is not purposed towards excluding active addicts or alcoholics or recreational drug users. This panel wants to look at a topic that is not new but is gaining greater representation and narrative space because the epidemic of addiction is gaining greater representation, taking up more narrative space: recovery and writing.

Each of these writers will open by speaking on their observations regarding the common addiction/addict/recovery narratives they see, how their own experiences in recovery affect their writing, and where they would like to see recovery and sobriety narratives go. Through their opening remarks and a moderator-led Q & A, they will also discuss the other, major factors in getting new sobriety narratives out into the world, getting people to recognize the recovering alcoholic/addict not as a passive vehicle for voyeurism, a trip into hyperbole, relentless self-destruction, and predictable tragedy; not as a device for fetishizing danger, which further stigmatizes the real-world addicts at large. They will discuss the struggle with the banality of sobriety and the resistance of some publishers to take on recovery characters. They will also discuss the gift of recovery on their process as writers.

We will reserve the last fifteen minutes for questions from attendees.

PARTICIPANT OPENING REMARKS, INITIAL THOUGHTS, OR READINGS

- These can be in a paragraph, a bulleted list of items the speakers would like to cover during the event, or a copy of whatever he, she, or they plan to read.
- If you are concerned about distributing copyrighted material at an in-person event, please make sure to gather the reading material back at the end of the event and let those using an outline know that you will need the materials back at the end of your event. You might also consider printing separate copies to attach to this overall event outline so you may just collect that portion back from the attendee using the outline.

Darren C Demaree - 8 - 10 minutes

It's common in addiction/recovery narratives for the writer and the reader (both) to cling to the action of the narrative, as if the recovery story itself is a mere skeleton waiting for a cycle of tragedy and triumph to give muscle to the piece. The reality of my own (and many other) addiction/recovery stories is one of a hole dug one fistful at a time, one drink at a time, until there is only the depth of the disease, a punishing quiet and loneliness that cannot be acknowledged by love without self-love, that cannot be addressed without surrendering to the full context of the experience, and cannot be survived without the strategic return of each portion of previous dirt. Eventually, with almost a hush, you're returned to the living, but never part from that particular landscape or narrative of addiction. You live on top of the same dirt that once surrounded you, would again grant you your miserable hole, and possibly gather to give you a soft burial if the cycle wasn't again dealt with. These are stories of the living and the dead. Anyone who spent time in a long-term rehab facility could give you the names of those lost, or since these

diseases are often generational, show you the dark marks on the family tree that have paved the way. There is inherent drama in these narratives, but so much of the actual survival is built on these individual handfuls of dirt that are kept and placed again. What has been lost in so many of the old narratives of recovery are the small moves, the routines, the deep breaths, the bad coffee, the constantly evolving humor of it all. I've never laughed with my whole body more than the first time I was able to commune with my story and others like it. As we hope to redefine and recontextualize these narratives, not just from an artistic perspective, but from the survival perspective of one human experience being shared with another it's important that we share each little notch in the process. The sweeping narratives of drama and phoenix metaphors have no place in a group of people that know how hard and treasured this process truly is.

L.L. Kirchner - 8 - 10 minutes

- When I showed up to a meeting, one of the first things I was told was to “take the cotton out of my ears and put it in my mouth.” And that was how we talked *to each other*.
- My life had to get really bad—multiple institutionalizations, a bleeding ulcer, alcoholic hepatitis—before I got sober. That this happened before I was 19 is lucky and terrible, but mostly revealing. It's been a steep learning curve to realize that my addiction trajectory was not the same as most people. When I made the mistake of chalking that up to youthful indiscretion and relapsed, everything happened again, only faster, and with more risk, because now I had a car.
- [SLIDE 1: ADDICTION THROUGH THE AGES]
Fear that my life would be over if I got clean was reiterated through books—F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway's classics, Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Hunter S. Thompson (who famously said— “I hate to advocate drugs, alcohol, violence, or insanity to anyone, but they've always

worked for me.”) Even the more grim portrayals—like the 1990s classics *Drugstore Cowboy*, *Leaving Las Vegas*, and *Jesus' Son*—have all presented a glamorized view of addiction.

- [SLIDE 2: EASE OF ABUSE]

Or maybe that’s me. Because when I see someone nod off in a film, I don’t think, *Oh goodness, that girl’s in danger*, but, *GodDAMN that looks like a good high*. And that’s with 26 years of sobriety.

- [SLIDE 3: CENTRAL ADDICTION STORY]

The way we talk to addicts matters, and that includes how we talk about ourselves. Narratives of addiction and recovery have become their own genre, with shapes that reflect cultural ideas about morality, free will, and social responsibility. But while this trope has created opportunities for empathy and understanding, it has also fostered beliefs about how addiction and recovery work. Promoting more diverse accounts matters, not for the sake of diversity but to truly reflect the experience of people trying to save their own lives.

- I want to create worlds where addiction isn’t the main character’s whole story. I like worlds populated with people in recovery, where addiction isn’t the whole story. I write to show that there is life in recovery, with all the conflict/tension/and drama I need.
- I’m showing my work here because I’m going to critique it in the next section.

Micheal B. McClelland - 8 - 10 minutes

I think one of the mistakes we make in the literary community is that we maintain the expectation that writing about addiction and recovery needs to exist on a trauma/triumph binary. I’m not saying there isn’t space for such writing; there needs to be more writing about addiction from every angle. But it took me a long time to realize that I’m still allowed to write even though I might not be “fixed”

and I might not ever be. My recovery story has been a story of relapse. It's often been a story of failure. This doesn't mean I have any less of a story to tell.

In the beginning of my writing career, I never wrote addiction into my fiction. My characters were drinking like "normal" people; they were living the life I could not live. My nonfiction was the polar opposite; I felt the need to repent when writing about my own life. To try to explain what had happened to me to make me this way, as if that were something I could ever figure out. And if I ever found myself getting too serious, I would slather humor on top of the whole sad story, just as I've often done in a number of recovery programs.

It is only recently that I've allowed my characters (and myself) to represent the broad and complicated spectrum of addiction and recovery. I've had to take myself out of my comfort zone, and I have had to stop using addiction as something to make my characters (or, again, myself) more edgy. As I've become more comfortable approaching addiction and recovery personally and at-large as a nuanced, baffling, and multifaceted force, my own writing has cracked open. I feel a freedom that I never had before.

Q & A - MODERATOR QUESTIONS PORTION - 20 to 25 min

QUESTION GRAPHIC - SOBER OR DEAD: A FALSE BINARY

1. Many popular addiction narratives present this false dichotomy that moves chronologically from "trauma to redemption" or "trauma to death." As a writer in recovery, I see this as one of the more damaging pretenses that film, television, and fiction distributes on main, usually to appease an audience's hyperbolic expectations and assumptions about the disease of addiction, but also as part of a bigger problem with narrative simplification and superficial resolution. How can sober writers or writers in recovery even begin to dismantle the "redemption or

death” paradigm? Are there books or films or writers out there whom you see as playing a substantial role in shifting that paradigm?

L.L. Kirchner

- I think this dichotomy exists in part because of 12-step recovery, where you either are or aren't sober. That redemption arc is tough to break away from
- Starting in the aughts with Mary Karr, the rise of memoir has brought us an avalanche of recovery literature. Bill Cleggs, Sarah Helopa, Lisa Smith, Amy Dresner, Leslie Jamison, Kristi Coulter and Erin Khar, to name just a few.
- [SLIDES 4 & 5 OR GIF]
I'm using my work here because I can talk about the problems of trying to tell the more complex story as I've experienced it. Though I don't want addiction to be the story, it is always part of my personal story. Failing to mention that is a failure to reveal the “stakes” of any trauma. As in, “she felt all alone in the world.” Terrible, right? But then there's the idea, too, that, “she knew one drink could take away the pain, but it would lead down a hideous path.”
Failing to mention that this consequence exists does a disservice to people with substance use disorders and people *without* substance use disorders both.
Not surprisingly, the book does it better. I was eight years sober when I went to Qatar, so it wasn't a present crisis. But when my ex ended our marriage over the phone? It became a distinct possibility. Because I'd relapsed before, I was afraid that, if I stayed miserable, I'd pick up again. And that *had* to be part of the narrative.
- The short film, *My Dinner with Steve*, is about dating after being off the market for a long time. For me, culture shock was also part of the experience, but that's a lot to convey in 10 minutes. So I cheated, and made the character freshly sober and relieved to find herself on a date with someone in recovery. So relieved, she massively overshares. I

totally did this—with ten years clean and sober! But when I tried to write it that way, it was muddled for the audience. In part because there's not really a universe where sobriety is an understood aspect of a character, like diabetes. It's either *the main story* or trauma porn.

Darren C. Demaree

Equating relapse with death is the most dangerous piece of the misunderstood recovery narrative, and one that affected me for many years. There is a false equivalency created by the process of freeing your life from drugs and alcohol that if you were to ever use again it would be absolute and certain death. I understand the motivation behind it, but it creates a needless cliff for us to exist on. It is my only goal every single day, to not have a drink, but if some unforeseen confluence of events and entitlement were to ever trip me the way they used to, and I had a drink or got drunk my hope would be that it would not lead to my immediate demise. More than likely it would not, and after the fact should the shame of my act be the first step into a hard burial? No. Giving myself permission to acknowledge that my life is worth living flaws and all has been incredibly freeing. It allowed me to not live in a constant state of punishment. Tomorrow (January 24th) will be ten years since my last drink, and the biggest gift I've given myself in those ten years (other than getting sober) has been to remove the cliff from my daily life. I've replaced it with routine, with work, with small active steps of daily recovery. I cannot threaten myself into long-term sobriety. Nobody should.

Michal B. McClelland

The television show *Mom* helped get me into recovery. It's a fairly traditional sitcom, and many parts of the show are guilty of showing addiction on the trauma/redemption pipeline. But I really loved how terrible the characters were (in some ways) after they got sober. The wonderful and terrible thing about my own recovery is that it has shown me how many problems I have that are unrelated to alcohol. I think representing this in my work is just so much fun, because it allows

me to play with expectations. We expect the addicts in our books to be the bad guys. And we expect the characters with good recovery to be angels. But in real life, we've all met assholes in recovery and we've all met absolute sweethearts who just can't get themselves sober. And their stories have value, too, and can be so much fun to write.

QUESTION GRAPHIC: EXCEPTIONALISM AS ILLUSION

2. In a 2018 interview with *The Paris Review*, Leslie Jamison, author of *The Recovering*, explains that “[s]o much of recovery is a fight against exceptionalism—that necessary act of saying, What I’ve lived has been lived before, will be lived again, is nothing special but still holds meaning, still holds truth.” Do you experience this struggle when trying to incorporate recovery narratives into your work? Do you think America’s obsession with and criticism of exceptionalism poses a challenge to sobriety/recovery narratives?

L.L. Kirchner

- I relate to the quote, but this doesn't feel like a big struggle for me personally.
- I've been criticized for saying things like, “Don't clap, my being sober is just doing what the rest of the planet does naturally.” But then there've been times when I was disappointed at a perceived lack of recognition.
- Essentially, I don't think our struggles are more or better or less than anyone else's, but as creators it's our job to render them in exceptional ways.
- Another aspect of this is the 12-step program concept of anonymity, which relies heavily on eschewing exceptionalism. I don't know if I agree or have just been brainwashed at this point, but when telling your story feels like courting disapproval from life-saving medicine, it's problematic.

Darren C. Demaree

A sober person is just a person. Recovery takes strength. Every form of recovery from trauma does. One of the reasons I drank the way I used to, one of those little negotiation tactics we all use when we're still using, is that I deserved to drink as much as I wanted. I was special and I deserved to drink special amounts because of that. Exceptionalism is the enemy of recovery. Critics and societal pressures of the recovery process, to try and re-frame it in a way that leads to dramatic scenarios are wasted efforts. If I'm really on top of my game I don't even put myself in a position where I have to say yes or no to a drink. Keeping myself two or three decisions in front of having to say yes or no is the best trick I know about staying sober, and that's not exceptional at all. It's acknowledging that I am a person with a weakness, a person built to crumble under the wrong pressures, so I refuse to take part in those narratives. It's boring and unexceptional, but then again I'm alive and happy so who gives a shit? I don't owe anybody a story where I rise up to beat the dragon of my alcoholism over and over again.

Michael B. McClelland

I love this question and I think it also shines a light on a problem with the writing world. Or at least my writing world thus far. And that is this pressure to find that special something that will make us stand out. That thing that will help us get our big break. The title story of my first book is about a real experience of mine, which was being sexually assaulted. While drunk. I don't really need to add the "while drunk" to most things from that time in my life, because if it happened to me it happened while I was drunk. But I felt this internal and external pressure to use my unique trauma to try and get a foot in the door in the writing world. (My trauma isn't unique in itself; it's unique because the story started at a zoo!)

I still find myself falling into this trap, particularly with memoir/CNF. I start essays from the place of, "how was I different/special in this situation?" which isn't really that satisfying of a writing experience. My favorite experiences with writing nonfiction have been explorations, interrogations, and the serendipitous nature of human connection. I love the things that make us all similar, but I worry that won't

make me seem special enough for editors. I think this trend comes from writers but also from publications, publishers, and editors. I've had columns turned down because they "already had an alcoholism column" or they "already had a gay alcoholic column" and it's infuriating, because there can obviously be more than one of those, even in the same publication! We're all different, we're all the same!

QUESTION GRAPHIC: WRITING AND RECOVERING, WRITING SOBER

3) How have sobriety/recovery affected your process, publishing, and interaction with the writing community? What creative challenges or challenges to process do sobriety/recovery present (if any)? What benefits?

L.L. Kirchner

- One big one was my belief—the idea that I wouldn't be able to write if I wasn't on something, but the truer picture for me is that, without recovery, I wouldn't be able to function or forge professional relationships.
- Here's a recent example: an editor chastised me for pitching a story about 21-step meetings offering Zoom recovery online. He wrote:

We also pay attention to AA's letter to the media, which they send out each year -- to abide by those requests, I rarely let people write about 12-step programs. I do know there's a piece brewing here in the building about online recovery (we've touched on it a few times already) so don't be surprised if you see it
- So that's weird in a lot of ways, but sticking to the point I'm making here—who is deciding whether or not I am "allowed" to tell my story? Who is sending these letters and what do they say? It's odd that a program that boasts of hands-off leadership is dictating terms like this behind the scenes.

Darren C. Demaree

I have written thousands of poems and published as many books as I have because I made my writing process part of my recovery process. I used to wait until everyone else was asleep, and then I would really start in on the drinking. So, part of my routine in the beginning was to exhaust myself every day. This meant a workout I could do every single day. It meant a writing routine that I had to execute every single day. I convinced myself through the early desperation to get and stay sober that this was what I needed to do, and like the old baseball player that I am, I clung to what worked. Each day I was sober I equated to a day I got a hit, and as long as I kept getting hits it didn't matter the effort it took. It was untenable, I don't work like that anymore, but part of my success and dramatic outpouring of work stems from desperation to stay alive. I wrote to live. That's the most dramatic thing I've typed on this outline thus far, but it's true. I feel comfortable not writing every day because my sobriety practice has changed. I've matured as a sober person, but there is no doubt that I would not be on this panel addressing these topics if I hadn't interwoven the threads of sobriety and creativity in the way that I did.

Michael B. McClelland

To be completely honest, it's been such a gift as a writer and such a curse as a member of the writing community. My MFA program, PhD program, and most of the conferences I've gone to have been overflowing with alcohol, and my recovery journey and my writing journey have been on a similar timeframe, so I was in too vulnerable of a personal position to participate in some of the writerly things I participated in. And I'm not pointing fingers; the fault was with me. I don't know that we're ever going to separate the arts from alcohol and drugs. I think the bigger problem is this feeling as writers that every opportunity is going to be either the big one or that it could be the last one. It's programmed into us from when we start writing that it's such a hard business and that it's so hard to get a big break. And so many of the things that seem like big breaks come with a buttload of risky situations.

But the writing has saved me. Because it's been through writing (and SO MUCH therapy) that I've explored more of myself and that I've started to break away some

of that self-consciousness that hurts my writing and makes me want to drink. There are so many avenues within our art for us to travel down to inspiration and discovery.

ATTENDEE Q & A - 15 min

(I will have questions lined up in case no one jumps in, but I feel like there will be a good amount of discussion to go around.)