

Event Outline for AWP 2022

Title: Beyond Romanticism, Beyond Shame: Writing About Mental Illness

Category: nonfiction craft & criticism

Description: “Illness,” writes Lauren Slater, “medicine itself, is the ultimate narrative: there is no truth there.” While there is much more awareness and less romanticizing of mental illness in literary culture than there once was, writing about diagnosis and recovery still brings with it plenty of stigma and shame. With work that ranges from graphic forms to narrative nonfiction, our panelists discuss their approaches to writing about mental illness, family history, and psychiatric care.

According to NIMH, nearly 1 in 5 adults in the US suffer from mental illness, but what comes after an episode or a diagnosis is to make sense of what has happened. Writing about experiences of mental illness and psychiatric care is important because it can help break the cycle of stigma and shame. Conference attendees will benefit from the openness and observations of our panelists, who have written in a variety of forms and who identify as queer, disabled, mixed race, and white.

Event organizer/moderator: Liz Harmer

Liz Harmer is a Canadian living in California. Her first novel, *The Amateurs*, a speculative novel of technological rapture, was released with Knopf/Vintage in 2019. Her stories, essays, and poems have been published widely. She has been a fellow at the Bread Loaf and Sewanee Writers’ Conferences, a finalist for the Journey Prize, and nominated four times for National Magazine Awards, one of which she won in 2014 for Personal Journalism. In 2021, she was one of the winners of the CRAFT Literary Creative Nonfiction Award. Harmer’s second novel, *Strange Loops*, is forthcoming with Knopf Canada in 2022. She writes about love, madness, motherhood, and religion, and is at work on a memoir on her experiences of psychiatric crisis and treatment.

Welcome to Beyond Romanticism, Beyond Shame: Writing About Mental Illness. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, Liz Harmer, 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.

(notes about hybridity PLUS trigger/content warnings)

Opening Moderator Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Thanks everyone, for coming. I know that there are plenty of barriers to coming to panels, and we're grateful that you've made space and time to think through some around writing nonfiction about mental illness. The idea for this panel came out of some of my personal anguish around the topic. I have been driven for many years to write about an experience that remains one of the most formative of my life: when I was seventeen, I had an episode of manic psychosis and spent six weeks of my senior year of high school in the psych ward. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, but I don't seem to have the disorder, at least not in any DSM-V version of it. I haven't required medication or hospitalization in 20 years. The memoir in its current stage is called "Interpretation Machine," and I'll read this from the first chapter:

"I called this memoir "Interpretation Machine" not only because I was always in an interpretive mode but also because there were so many questions. When my mother said to me, in anger, that the thesis of this memoir was that my family dysfunction had made me go mad, I was telling her the truth when I said that wasn't the thesis. I wanted to, by writing the book, build the machine that could decode everything. I didn't know what had happened or what it meant. For I had once been truly manic, truly psychotic, but I was no longer mad. Something had happened to me, but I didn't know what.

At twenty, I fell in love with a philosopher, the most rational person I know, and together we always considered a multitude of theories. In 2015, when I started to write this book in earnest, I came across a zany scientist's theory of the brain, which he'd reached after recording everything in his life—food, sleep, exercise, weather, mood, etc—and decided that everyone is on a four-week moon cycle. He called it "one's own drummer's drum." I thought that if I did the same—kept a record of everything—then I'd come to the bottom of myself. But it was like Borges's maps and libraries, it was the Tristram Shandy paradox, it was like the film *Synecdoche, New York*: I'd replace living with a complete record of living, a record that was the same size and length as the life itself.

I am an interpretation machine. This memoir is an interpretation machine. This book is the technology I am using to try to make sense of a life. The epigraph from Sharon Olds succinctly poses the question preoccupying me: "I was insane. Was I insane?"

The writing of this book has led to a great deal of difficulty for my family, who see things differently than me, and for whom my illness was a traumatic event that has affected them. It also led me to research family history, and to think through many of the issues around writing about mental illness. For one thing, writing about one's own mental illness comes along with plenty of issues: the pain it might cause others, and the stigma it might bring upon oneself. People often call such a writer "brave" and are glad for the work they do, but I hoped, with this panel, to commiserate about and share strategies for facing certain things that come up when one writes about this.

Thus, I'm delighted to welcome our participants: Hollay Ghadery, Courtney Cook, Claire Phillips, and Ashley-Elizabeth Best. I'll ask each of you to introduce yourselves and give a brief overview of your personal experiences with writing about mental illness.

Event participants & brief biographies:

1. **Hollay Ghadery** is a writer living in rural Ontario on Anishinaabe land. She has her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Guelph. Her fiction, non-fiction, and poetry have been published in various literary journals, including *The Malahat Review*, *Room*, *CAROUSEL*, *The Antigonish Review*, *Grain*, and *The Fiddlehead*. *Fuse*, her memoir of mixed-race identity and mental health, was released by Guernica Editions' MiroLand imprint in spring 2021. Her debut collection of poetry, *Rebellion Box*, is due out in spring 2023 with Radiant Press.
2. **Courtney Cook** is a writer, illustrator, teacher, and mental health advocate. Her debut graphic memoir, *The Way She Feels: My Life on the Borderline in Pictures and Pieces*, released by Tin House in June of 2021, was awarded a starred review from *Kirkus*, selected as a July 2021 Indie Next Pick, and named as one of the Best Books of the Year by *Book Riot*. Courtney's writing has been published by outlets such as *TIME*, *The Guardian*, *The Rumpus*, *Hobart*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *Split Lip Magazine*. She received her BA from the University of Michigan and MFA from the University of California, Riverside. Courtney lives in Chicago and teaches creative writing from her living room with the help of her senior cat, Bertie.
3. **Ashley-Elizabeth Best** is a disabled poet and essayist from Ontario, Canada. Her work can be found in *New Welsh Review*, *CV2*, *Ambit Magazine*, *Grain*, *December Magazine*, and *Glasgow Review of Books*, among others. Her debut collection of poetry, *Slow States of Collapse*, was published with ECW Press, and her most recent chapbook, *Alignment*
4. **Claire Phillips** is the author of the memoir *A Room with a Darker View: Chronicles of My Mother & Schizophrenia* and the novella *Black Market Babies*. She is the recipient of the Academy of American Poets prize and a Pushcart Prize notable. Her writing has appeared in *Black Clock* magazine, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *I Largehearted Boy Blog*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Motherboard-Vice*, and *The Nomadic Journal*, among other places. She teaches writing at CalArts, SCI-Arc, and U.C. Irvine, and is Director of the Los Angeles Writers Reading Series at Glendale College. She holds a M.A. in Creative Writing from New York University and a B.A. in English from San Francisco State University.

Participant Opening Remarks, Initial Thoughts, or Readings (readings to be planned later)

Holley:

- “writing a book about my mental illness was not cathartic, which is what many people assume: that writers put these books out in the world to, at least in part, make themselves feel better. I can't speak for the experiences of others, but I do know I am not the only writer who believes that much of the catharsis—the healing—has to happen before.
- quote from Vicki Laveau-Harvie, who wrote *The Erratics* (a memoir of family trauma that pivots around her narcissistic mother)
- intro to Holley’s memoir of mixed-race identity and mental illness, *Fuse*
- also “the damage of the recovery narrative: that in order to be loved and valued and whole, the person with a mental illness must be healed”

Courtney:

- intro to graphic memoir *The Way She Feels* and her BPD diagnosis
- the place for the text in the process of finding one’s diagnosis
- memoir as a kind of time capsule of the writer you were

Ashley-Elizabeth:

- disclosure vs. craft
- the mental health of immediate family: “to write about my mental illness I must write about my past, my family and the trauma that I endured and still work through. They are often unhappy with the way I have written about them, not because it wasn’t truthful but because it revealed them to the world in a way that makes them unhappy. I don’t intend to write about my family and I focus as much as possible on myself, but my belief is that if approached with kindness and empathy, even if you have been wronged, to stay as close to the truth as you know it, is the best course of action.”
- CNF vs. poetry
- desperate poverty as well as mental illness; question of homelessness and threat of death
- the Hermit Crab poem/essay as a way to add depth and shape: “I have found it particularly powerful to use medical documentation and forms received from disability support programs to add a human element to viciously bureaucratic systems meant to exclude and punish the sick, poor, and disabled”
- will also address the question of catharsis

Claire Phillips:

- I began the writing of my memoir, *A Room with a Darker View: Chronicles of My Mother* (DoppelHouse 2020) in the final nine months of my mother’s life.
- researching this subject for the first time in 20 years, when I first learned of my mother’s diagnosis, I discovered much had changed. Having eschewed the reading of

contemporary biographies on the topic of schizophrenia, reluctant to encounter more material about the “exceptional schizophrenic,” I was pleasantly surprised to find a wealth of incredible material on this subject, often written from the first-person perspective.

- using research and family narratives
- discussing mental health openly is extremely important in transcending myths and stereotypes about its origin and treatment.
- the significance of first-person narratives on the subject of “the collected schizophrenias,” the incredible literary output in the past decade as well as the importance of the chaos narrative and the work of critic Arthur Frank. I will be reading excerpts from my published article, “Language, Lunacy and the Literary Provocateur: Life Writing & Schizophrenia” (Nomadic Journal).
- mining a “romanticized language” versus self-identifying language around illness narratives. “When I review my prior writing, at times I am mortified to discover a preponderance of language such as “suffering from” or “struggling with” to describe my mother’s experience of schizophrenia and psychosis. While I think this romanticized mid-century language leads mostly to stigma, shame and a conflating of illness with character, the immense demands and side-effects of treatment often left me at odds with paler language.”
- Recuperation, revision and reclamation of language

Moderator question period: (30 minutes?)

1. I want to start with a very large and difficult question, which is what made you choose to represent this material in nonfiction rather than in some other form? I have been asked—and have asked myself—this question several times, and in fact I’ve written the material from my memoir as fiction as well as poetry in an attempt to find the form. What are the advantages and pitfalls of nonfiction?
2. Specific importance of destigmatizing and picking up on Claire’s comment: what are some of the stigmas/romantic versions of mental illness you’ve seen?
3. A question that will pick up on Holley’s comment above about the pressure to have healed/recovered as part of these narratives.
4. A question that asks about confession/catharsis? (starting with Ashley)
5. A question about the ethics of representing others. (starting with Claire)
6. Another question about form (graphic forms/hermit-crab essays) (starting with Courtney)

Q&A: (10-15 minutes)

In-person events: at the end of the event, there will be time for a 10–15-minute Q&A session. Please pass the wireless microphone to the person posing the question or repeat all questions into one of the wired microphones.

Supplemental documents can include more information on the topic being discussed, resource or reading lists, promotional material, and any other materials you'd like to share with your attendees.