

- Of Triggers and Things: Workshopping the Difficult Text
- Thursday, March 24, 2022
- 1:45 PM–3:00 PM ET
- 109AB, Pennsylvania Convention Center, 100 Level

#### Event Title & Description

##### [Of Triggers & Things: Workshopping the Difficult Text](#)

([Tim Tomlinson](#), **Jee Leong Koh**, [Jacqueline Bishop](#), [Sally Breen](#))

In an online class with international participants, one panelist was taken aback by a submission of creative nonfiction that entered de Sadean realms of sexual exploration. Despite the writing's brilliance and the scene's necessity, the panelist felt that a warning, at least, was necessary for those with less tolerance for extreme behaviors and graphic description. This panel will discuss strategies for confronting that moment in workshop.

Event Category: Pedagogy

#### Event Organizer & Moderator:

**Tim Tomlinson** is the author of the poetry collection *Requiem for the Tree Fort I Set on Fire*, the short story collection, *This Is Not Happening to You*, and the ecopoetry chapbook *Yolanda: An Oral History in Verse*. He is the director of New York Writers Workshop, and co-author of its popular craftbook, *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*. He's a Professor of Writing at NYU's Global Liberal Studies. [timtomlinson.org/](http://timtomlinson.org/)

#### Jacqueline Bishop t/k

**Sally Breen (PhD)** is the author of *The Casuals*, winner of the Varuna Harper Collins Manuscript Prize (2011), and *Atomic City* (2013). She is senior lecturer in creative writing at Griffith University Australia and Executive Director of Asia Pacific Writers and Translators. [www.sallybreen.com.au](http://www.sallybreen.com.au)

#### Jee Leong Koh:

**Jee Leong Koh** is the author of *Steep Tea* (Carcanet), named a Best Book of the Year by UK's *Financial Times* and a Finalist by Lambda Literary in the UK. He has published four other books of poems, a volume of essays, a collection of zuihitsu, and a hybrid work of fiction. He has taught high-school English, in Singapore and New York City, for 24 years. He heads the NYC-based literary non-profit Singapore Unbound and the indie press Gaudy Boy.

#### Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Good afternoon, and welcome to “Of Triggers and Things: Workshopping the Difficult Text.”

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, (identify moderator), 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.

Thanks for joining us this afternoon. We look forward to a stimulating discussion, and we welcome your participation. As I allude to in the panel description, this discussion emerges out of my own experience of an encounter with a difficult text, a text that was sexually explicit in what I thought, and still think, was literary and original—actually, original might not get it: *unique*, at least in my reading, and I've read some pretty graphic stuff. I tend not to assign graphic material for workshops, especially these days, and on some level I think that's a loss. But things have changed, at least I feel that they've changed, and we're here to talk about how each of us perceive that change, and how we've faced the challenges, such as they are.

I'll begin, and I'll be followed by Jacqueline Bishop, Sally Breen, and Jee Leong Koh, in that order. After each of us has offered some opening observations, I'll ask a few questions, but I want to stress this: as soon as I see that there are questions or comments from you, the audience, I want to welcome those into the discussion.

## **Participant Initial Remarks**

### **Tim Tomlinson:**

I will talk about experiences teaching explicit texts, and workshopping explicit manuscripts, and give an idea about how I've handled each. How I've handled them is an evolution in progress. What troubles me is a) the feeling that the potential discomfort is too much of a risk to take, and b) that I'm imposing my own limitations/orientations on material that makes me uncomfortable. Or, to paraphrase Aretha Franklin, who's triggering who? I'll talk about my experiences as they relate to workshops with adults in programs outside the university, and to workshops with undergraduates inside the university.

### **Jacqueline Bishop: t/k**

### **Sally Breen:**

There is much to say in this arena, the crux being a wedge (perceived or otherwise) between academic and philosophical integrity and new millennium cohorts and duty of care. What I've got to say is not necessarily resolved – I will draw on almost twenty years of experience of teaching crime fiction – undoubtedly a minefield, and how I've oscillated and continue to, in the face of the black mirror and shifting cultural perspectives. Writing crime is not an easy business. Teaching it is even more fraught. I will describe my experiences and the difficulty of evoking a literary history of blood and violence and pain with my students so they might write about crime effectively (perhaps brilliantly) but without damage. I'm not sure it is possible. I will draw on recent

scholarship which questions the effectiveness of trigger warnings and will discuss my pedagogical approaches with a view to generating further dialogue.

### **Jee Leong Koh**

After teaching *Macbeth* for 15 years and receiving a variety of critical and creative responses from students to the play's power and complexity, I was taken aback one day when a student took me to task for not warning the class about Lady Macbeth's suicide. The challenge has changed my thinking regarding teaching literature and writing to high-school students, which I will discuss also in relation to colonial (mis)representations in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and caste-based violence in Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

### **Moderator Questions**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.