

## Reunions Revised & Revisited: Writing about (re)connecting with birth families

John Gallaher introduction to the panel:

Writers who are adopted or otherwise estranged from their biological parents face particularly challenging artistic questions about how familial reconciliation (or lack thereof) can be transformed from raw experience into poems, stories, or essays. Today, we will discuss how we've crafted our experiences facing adoption, parentage, and identity into literary work—and, in doing so, explore the relationship between experience and art, and how each informs the other.

This panel features a range of poets and memoirists from diverse backgrounds who will break down the process and potential pitfalls of transforming the emotionally charged experience around the topic of (re)uniting with birth families into poetry and nonfiction; our purpose is to provide possible pathways for others who wrestle with writing about adopted/biological family, deciding who has permission to tell these stories, and determining how much to lay bare on the page in service of art.

I'll introduce the panelists, and each panelist will then talk about their subject position, their story, and how they worked and revised it into finished form. Each will take fifteen minutes or so, with the compliment left for Q&A, audience participation, and conversation.

JG: Some of my poetry collections include *Your Father on the Train of Ghosts* (with GC Waldrep), *In a Landscape*, *Brand New Spacesuit* (all from BOA Editions), and my forthcoming collection *My Life in Brutalist Architecture* from Four Way Books in spring 2024. I co-edit the Laurel Review and live in northwest Missouri.

### John Gallaher Outline:

1. I will talk about adoption from my subject position (I don't want to presume any more global knowledge or generalizations). Then a brief overview of my adoption story. And "reunion" story at AWP Portland.

This is my story, which I've come to know over time. I was born, January 6, 1965, as Eric Martin Enquist. My mother and father were young, and divorced a year later. He died in a car accident in the summer of 1968, when I was 3 and a half, which coincided with my adoption and name change to John Jerome Gallaher, Jr. The first complication in this story is that my adoptive mother, when I was born, was my second cousin. Her father and my birth-grandmother were brother and sister. The second twist is that my brother, who I was raised with, also adopted, was, at birth, my cousin. His birth-mother and my birth-father were siblings. These connections are close. It should have been an easy story to sort out, but it took 50 years, for various reasons, including several people dying young, and some ill-feelings between parties when I was adopted. Though bits of the story are scattered through my previous books of poetry, my forthcoming book, *My Life in Brutalist Architecture* (FWB 2024), is where I address it fully.

My birth mother and two half brothers live in the Portland area, and I was reunited with them in 2019, at AWP Portland. The facts help, but most of my thinking around my adoption has been psychological.

2. A brief conversation of things I've seen in workshops with people talking about their adoptions and what others sometimes say about adoption.

Two stories: Adoptive father isn't a real father. Jokes about adopted people that make it into sidebars in stories, the "he's adopted" bit, from jokes to Disney movies, etc. Why this trope hasn't been healthy for me.

3. A short reading of poems 2 -3.

Gary Jackson outline:

1. A brief introduction/overview to my second book *origin story* and how it's attempting to reconnect (my) estranged family and the liminality of page-meets-reality when attempting to chronicle familial collisions disrupted/instigated by diaspora. Also, to echo John's story, I can talk about two "reunion" stories that also happened at AWP Los Angeles (2016) and AWP D.C. (2011)—and subsequently triggered the poems in *origin story*.
2. A deeper delve into how my subject position informed my writing process when writing and revising poems about family (specifically those in *origin story*). And how some of these strategies inform my writing and teaching: for example, how I approach persona, appropriation, P.O.V and voice.
3. A brief reading of my work: 2-3 poems.

Nari Kirk outline

1. My origin myth—so much unknown and most of what I do know polished by my adoptive mother—and how that lack of concrete beginnings has affected my sense of self. There has been no reconnecting with my birth family but instead a complex inner reckoning with what it means to exist without a known precursor.
2. Reflections on how that inner reckoning is explored in my writing, particularly in creative nonfiction and a little in poetry and fiction. While my origin story is somewhat atypical, and comes with its own challenges, the questions of "Where do I come from?" and "How do I reconcile where I came from with who I want to be?" and "How to find a sense of belonging?" are pretty universal. Honing self-awareness and compassion becomes a critical component of the writing and revision process.
3. A brief reading of excerpts from my prose.