

Wrangling the Beast

Playing with Structure in the First Novel

EVENT DESCRIPTION: One of the most difficult challenges first-time novelists face is figuring out the structure of their stories. Yet is structure imposed on story, or does it arise organically from it? The novels we admire most have not just married form to plot but found ways to make the form itself iterate what matters most. In this panel, award-winning fiction writers engaged in first-novel work will discuss their processes, struggles, strategies, and overall journeys through structuring their first novels.

This panel will approach a topic that almost all fiction writers struggle with at some point in their career: the challenge of structuring a first novel and making that structure meaningful and relevant to the whole. We are writers from diverse backgrounds deeply engaged in first-novel work. We are also writing instructors, professors, & editors in constant conversation with students and new writers. This panel was created because of the widespread interest in discussing structure in the novel.

EVENT ORGANIZER & MODERATOR

Joy Baglio is a speculative-literary fiction writer and the founder of Pioneer Valley Writers' Workshop. Her short stories have appeared in *Tin House*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Iowa Review*, *Gulf Coast*, and elsewhere. She's received fellowships from Yaddo, Bread Loaf, The Elizabeth George Foundation, and Vermont Studio Center, and is at work on two novels and a short story collection. Find her online at www.JoyBaglio.com and on Twitter @JoyBaglio.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS

Raluca Albu is a Romanian-born, Bronx-raised writer and translator whose fiction plays with form and explores the creative possibilities of historical archives. She is the online literature editor for BOMB magazine, a writing lecturer at NYU, and a recent Center for Fiction fellow. Find her on Twitter at @RalucaTweets.

Swati Khurana is an Indian-born, New York-raised writer, artist, Tarot reader, aspiring podcast creator. Swati edits flash fiction at Asian American Writers Workshop's The Margins and received fellowships from NYFA, Center for Fiction, Kundiman, and Vermont Studio Center. Find her online at www.swatikhurana.com and on Twitter @SwatiKhurana.

Emma Komlos-Hrobsky is associate editor at Poets & Writers magazine. She has also served as an editor at Tin House books and magazine and a professor at The New School. Her writing appears in Guernica, Conjunctions, Tin House, Hunger Mountain, Bookforum, and other publications. Find her online at www.emmakomloshrobsky.com and on Twitter @skunkorama.

OPENING REMARKS

The title of this panel - Wrangling the Beast - expresses what I think everyone working on a novel or book-length project (especially their first) likely feels at some point: that there's a lot of wrangling in this process, a lot of wrestling, a lot of idea-grappling, a lot to hold in the mind, and it often feels like there's something huge and uncontrollable, wild, even beast-like about the extensiveness of this process, of what emerges, and the form it takes. We often find ourselves trying to subdue or control this "thing" that we don't fully understand, that's still in the process of becoming what it is. It's a difficult process, to say the least.

At the root of this panel, too, is the concept of structure: the thing that we often find ourselves wrangling and wrestling and searching for in our longform projects. Here's how I think about structure, for anyone who wants a definition, and so we're all on the same page: structure in a novel has to do with the story, the plot but specifically how it unfolds. It's really hard to think of structure separate from the story, in the same way that it's hard to think of the experience of living in a house without the actual frame of the house. I come back to the house metaphor a lot, for myself, because it feels so clear: even though a lot of what we experience in the house has to do with how it's furnished, what's in the rooms, what color the walls are, etc. so much of the experience of being in those rooms is still defined by the shape of the house, the structure.

Also here: make sure to check out our reading list, attached as a resource. We included all the longform works we could think of that play with structure in interesting/unusual ways, and where the structure iterates something about the book itself and feels important.

So, on that note, I'm so delighted to have these amazing writers here who've either recently completed or are engaged in first book work.

MODERATOR QUESTIONS

1. Introductions: So to start, could introduce us to your novels-in-progress, and the ways you've been thinking about/wrestling with structure?
2. Hurdles / Challenges: What big hurdles have you come up against in your novel work? And what breakthroughs or insights have you had into those?

3. Structure & Story: How would you describe the relationship between your project/novel's structure and the story? Did your sense of the story reveal a structure or did looking at structure help you discover what happens? Did you impose a structure on the story, or did structure arise from it? How do you think about that form/content relationship?
4. Structural influences: What authors, literary works, symbols, visuals, structural models, etc. have influenced or inspired the "shape" of your novel? (For example: Freytag's Pyramid, Three Act Structure, Screenplay structure, Fairytale structure, mythological structures, etc.; Or other shapes: mosaic, spiral, mystery box, non-linear, vignette, epistolary, etc. Or are there other media that have shaped your novel? Other influences that have led to different ways of thinking about structure and how has that expanded the project?
5. Craft Advice: So, what craft advice would you give to writers wrestling with how to structure their longform projects? What tools can help writers figure out the structure of a book-length project?