

## Monsters Keep Us Company: Writing and Publishing Beastly Things

**Event Description:** In *Monster of God*, science scribe David Quammen writes that monsters “keep us company.” Sea beasts, serial killers, white supremacy, xenomorphs—writers obsess over what looms. In this panel, five CNF writers discuss the risks/rewards of confronting monsters. How do we write the ultimate Other when the monster is us? How do we navigate narratives that paint us as monsters? Do we stomp, shred the construct? We offer tips for witnessing, approaching, confronting, and wrangling the fearsome.

**Event Category:** Nonfiction Craft & Criticism

### Event Organizer & Moderator

**Clinton Crockett Peters:** Clinton Crockett Peters professes creative writing at Berry College, the world’s largest college at 27,000 acres. He is the author of *Pandora's Garden*(2018) & *Mountain Madness*(2021), both from UGA Press. He appears in *Best American Essays 2020*, *Orion*, *Southern Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Hotel Amerika*, & elsewhere, and he’s won prizes from *Iowa Review*, *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, & others. He has an MFA from Iowa and a PhD from North Texas.

### Event Participants

**Lina Maria Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas:** Lina Maria Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas has a creative nonfiction and a literary translation MFAs from the University of Iowa. She is the author of *Drown Sever Sing* and *Don't Come Back* from Mad Creek Books. She is a Rona Jaffe fellow and works as an assistant professor at the University of Chicago.

**Sarah Viren:** Sarah Viren is the author of the essay collection *MINE*, winner of the River Teeth Book Prize and the GLCA New Writers Award. A contributing writer at the *New York Times Magazine*, she is also an assistant professor at Arizona State University.

**A. Kendra Greene:** A. Kendra Greene is the author, illustrator, and audiobook reader of *The Museum of Whales You Will Never See*. A former Harvard Library Innovation Lab Fellow and Fulbright grantee, she is Associate Editor at the *Southwest Review* and has written for *The Guardian*, *Atlas Obscura*, and *Wall Street Journal*.

**Michi Trota:** Michi Trota is a five-time Hugo Award-winning, British Fantasy Award-winning, and Ignyte Award finalist essayist, writer, and editor. She is the first POC Editor-in-Chief of Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA), Senior Editor of *Prism*, and the first Filipina Hugo Award winner.

## Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Good morning everyone, and welcome to “Monsters Keep Us Company: Writing and Publishing Beastly Things.” Please silence your cell phones. I’ll read a brief introduction before turning things over to my fellow writers to read from their work. I’ll then ask a few prepared questions before turning things over to the audience.

The most monstrous creature of all is the human child. According to *Buzzfeed* readers, children have lapped urine from an airport urinal, stopped birds flat in Central Park, left poop in their pocket to later throw at their friends when they lose a football game. My own daughter proudly ate a cockroach once, like Godzilla a railcar, showing my then-wife the still-thrashing drumsticks dangling from her mouth. The core of monstrousness seems to be fear of the Other and the primal paranoia of being eaten. But that’s not all. Children, those connoisseurs of sewers, predisposed to all manner of destruction and taboo, they learn, as we’ve learned, what’s monstrous from those around them who show young minds the way. Parents help children navigate what is pure, what is clean, what is good. Cockroach legs aside, we often get it wrong.

Drawing from their ten-plus books and extensive editing experience, our panel serves AWP members interested in writing and publishing nonfiction that dissects the monstrous. We discuss how our writing incorporates monsters of all shapes. We offer insights on how to research nightmares, write misunderstood creatures, dismantle monstrous constructs, and pitch/publish writing that might initially turn away editors. Our panel represents a range of communities from Chicago to Colombia.

So, gather around adults and children, as we tell tales and un-learn what’s monstrous.

The five writers will then read five minutes of their work, and, in Q&A form, they’ll rap about the repulsive, enormous, and pervasive.

### Questions:

1. How do you determine when violence or “grossness” is gratuitous when talking about monsters and when is it necessary?
2. Do you ever fear that the act of writing about monstrous violence can double as a reenactment of that violence and can serve to re-traumatize others--maybe yourself--and incriminate you as a participant in said act?

3. Sometimes we write about uncomfortable topics to make them more palatable. Sometimes the goal is to ask readers to lean in to the discomfort. A big part of both approaches is research. I'd love to hear panelists talk about the role of research in developing their work on uncomfortable subjects.
4. Do you have any experiences of not being able to read someone else's writing because of the level of violence or grossness? Have people responded to your "monstrous" work with dislike or aversion?
5. If "Beauty is truth" (Keats) and "Beauty will save the world" (Dostoyevsky), what will a carnival—or museum—of monstrosity do?
6. As professors and editors, have any of you experienced students or writers/readers requesting that you include less trigger-warning-worthy pieces of writing? What reasons have people given for these requests, and how have you fielded them?
7. What is the key to writing a visceral scene? How is it different from other types of descriptive writing?
8. Many writers use monsters as an entry point to thinking about the human experience. What's so attractive about monsters?
9. What's the value of writing into discomfort?
10. In Lia Purpura's essay "Shit's Beautiful," she writes: "Why is the end [meaning the end process of our digestion process] not beautiful? It's certainly easier to talk about smells, germs, the unclean, and to keep things neatly in their place. And anyway, why bother to see if a thing's on the way out, about to go down the drain. We think we're put off by, disgusted by shit. But really, I think we're afraid of the end." She highlights the idea that our discomfort with violence, scatological material, monsters, etc., is about our discomfort with mortality. I'm curious what panelists think of their own work in terms of this idea Purpura raises.