

AWP Outline

EVENT TITLE: Motherlode: The Tripwire of Writing Real Family

Description: Family is often seen as the domain of mothers, but writing the domestic as a woman is fraught with a multitude of landmines--emotional, legal, psychological, and more. When writing as mothers or about mothers, are there ways to shield ourselves and our children, without sacrificing truth? Is it possible for a family to negotiate the way their shared story is told? What happens when our job of exposure clashes with our familial duty to protect? Where are the boundaries and where do they blur?

EVENT CATEGORY: Nonfiction Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator
Kelly McMasters

Creative nonfiction offers us a way to understand our world; mothering offers us a major grounding-wire to do so. How do we keep our children and families safe while telling our truths? A diverse cast of writers/teacher/mothers/daughters (we span race, geography, sexuality, and age) offers pragmatic examples and craft-based discussion on topics ranging from reportage and note-taking, archival work and research, applying lyric and meditative forms, and utilizing the narrator as shield.

Sonora Jha: SONORA JHA, PhD, is an essayist, novelist, and professor of journalism at Seattle University. She is the author of the memoir *How to Raise a Feminist Son: Motherhood, Masculinity, and the Making of My Family* (Sasquatch Books USA and Penguin Random House India, 2021) and the novel *Foreign* (Random House India 2013). Her op-eds and essays have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Seattle Times*, *The Establishment*, *DAME*, and in several anthologies. Her new novel, *The Laughter*, is forthcoming from Harper Via in early 2023.

Sonora grew up in Mumbai and has been chief of metropolitan bureau for the *Times of India* and contributing editor for *East* magazine in Singapore. She teaches fiction and essay writing for Hugo House, Hedgebrook Writers' Retreat, and Seattle Public Library. She is an alumna and board member of Hedgebrook Writers' Retreat and has served on the jury for awards for Artist Trust, Hedgebrook, and Hugo House.

Kelly McMasters: Kelly McMasters is an essayist, professor, and former bookshop owner. She is the author of the forthcoming *The Leaving Season: A Memoir-in-Essays* (WW Norton, 2023) and co-editor of *Wanting: Women Writing About Desire* (Catapult, 2023). Her first book, *Welcome to Shirley: A Memoir from an Atomic Town*, was listed as one of Oprah's top 5 summer memoirs and is the basis for the documentary film 'The Atomic States of America,' a 2012 Sundance selection, and the anthology she co-edited with Margot Kahn, *This Is the Place: Women Writing About Home* (Seal Press, 2017), was a *New York Times* Editor's Choice. Her essays, reviews, and articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post Magazine*, *The Paris Review*, *The American Scholar*, *River Teeth: A Journal of Narrative Nonfiction*, *Tin House*, *Newsday*, *Time Out New York*, *Columbia Magazine*, and *MrBellersNeighborhood.com*, among others. She holds a BA

from Vassar College and an MFA in nonfiction writing from Columbia's School of the Arts and is the recipient of a Pushcart nomination and an Orion Book Award nomination. Kelly has spoken about creative nonfiction at TEDx, authors@google, and more, and has taught at mediabistro.com, Franklin & Marshall College, and in the undergraduate writing program and Journalism Graduate School at Columbia University, among others. She is currently an Associate Professor of English and Director of Publishing Studies at Hofstra University in NY.

Joanna Rakoff: Joanna Rakoff is the author of the international bestselling memoir *My Salinger Year* and the bestselling novel *A Fortunate Age*, winner of the Goldberg Prize for Fiction and the Elle Readers' Prize. Rakoff's books have been translated into twenty languages, and the film adaptation of *My Salinger Year* opened in theaters worldwide in 2021 and is now streaming. She has been the recipient of fellowships and residencies from MacDowell, Sewanee, Bread Loaf, and many others, and has taught at Columbia University, Brooklyn College, and Aspen Words. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Porter*, and elsewhere, and her new memoir, *The Fifth Passenger*, is forthcoming from Little, Brown in 2024.

Jane Wong: Jane Wong is the author of two poetry collections: *How to Not Be Afraid of Everything* (Alice James, 2021) and *Overpour* (Action Books, 2016). Her debut memoir, *Meet Me Tonight in Atlantic City*, is forthcoming from Tin House in May 2023. She likes raccoons and is an Associate Professor at Western Washington University.

Rebecca Woolf: Rebecca Woolf has worked as a personal essayist since her teens, contributing to numerous publications, websites and anthologies, most notably her own award-winning personal blog, *Girl's Gone Child*, which attracted millions of unique visitors worldwide. During the height of the mommy blog era, Woolf helped launch Babble.com where she served as one of their original three bloggers, under the title *Straight from the Bottle* and went on to write weekly columns for Mom.me and Quiet Revolution Woolf's essays have appeared on Refinery29, Entertainment Weekly, Huffington Post, Parenting and more. She currently authors the bi-weekly column *Sex & the Single Mom* on Romper.com and the braid newsletter on substack. She is also the author of *Rockabye: From Wild to Child* (Seal Press, 2008) and the newly released bestselling memoir, *ALL OF THIS: a memoir of death and desire* (Harper One, August 2022). She lives in Los Angeles with her son and three daughters.

Event Structure:

The moderator will begin by welcoming attendees and describing the themes that unite us in the room: mothering, writing, and writing from a mother's POV. Each of the five panelists, including the moderator, will take turns introducing themselves with a brief introduction of their own work for five minutes each. Moderator will open up the discussion with a list of questions prepared in advance for 30 minutes. Our panel will begin with opening remarks and introductions. Each panelist will read from their work (see excerpts below) and then join in a conversation about the questions and concerns outlined in the event description, including the way mothers and mothering impacts the writing process on and off the page, how to wield a narrator as protection on the page (for the writer and others), and how to deal with collateral damage of family fallout after publication. The panel will then open up to questions from the audience for the remaining time.

Excerpts:

Joanna Rakoff, Fifth Passenger

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Because the thing you need to know, before I go any further, is simply this: For most of my childhood, I knew nothing of Mark and Anita's life or death. I was told, only, that I had one sister. Amy.

And once I discovered their existence, at age nine or ten or thereabouts, I was told nothing—not one thing—about their lives or their deaths. Their names were never mentioned, never dropped, casually, into conversation. Not by my parents, not by Amy, but also not by any of my zillion cousins, not by my grandmothers

You would think, wouldn't you, that I would have sensed something amiss? That there would have been signs? Clues? Evidence? That I would have asked questions? That I would have asked my mother or my father or my sister—or a cousin, an aunt, someone—what happened? But I knew, somehow, not to ask, never to ask. All these years later, I still marvel at how deep the code of silence ran in my family, so deep that it seems to me, somehow, embedded in my DNA, woven into the very cells that make me. Woven so tightly that for decades it guided every choice I made, from the books I read to the friends I made to the man I married.

And Amy? Amy, who was born not out of tragedy, but into love and hope, a normal child, born not just to parents for whom the world seemed full of possibility and excitement, but at that moment in which, for America, for Americans, all seemed possible, the world seemed to have cracked open. Amy, a child of the Eisenhower era, the post-war boom. Well, what if her life—her storybook childhood, riding bikes around the idyllic streets of Nyack, the Hudson drifting slowly by—were wrecked, eroded from the inside out, not by the accident itself, regardless of her role in it, not by the loss of her brother and sister, but by this secret she was sworn to keep?

And by wrecked, I mean not simply that the years, the decades, that followed have been shadowed by grief, by guilt—survivor's or otherwise—by loss and sadness. By wrecked I mean: heroin, homelessness, crime, stints in jail and psychiatric hospitals. By wrecked I mean: John Johnson was her dealer. Their marriage ended when he offered her as compensation to a gang of suppliers he'd shafted. And by offered as compensation, I mean: Gang-raped and left for dead in the parking lot of a local park.

What if binding Amy to secrecy represented a betrayal on the part of my parents—my entire extended family—so vast that the loss Amy suffered can't be calibrated on any known scale? So vast that over time it eclipsed the actual loss of her brother and sister? So vast that she lost herself?

What if Amy's life was ruined by silence?

Kelly McMasters, The Leaving Season: A Memoir in Essays

What should we save, Mama?

Every year, my children come home asking the same question after the annual fire safety assembly at their elementary school: What should we save if the house is on fire? We make plans, the three of us, for what to grab, how to get out, where to meet.

We'd come together at the fire hydrant in front of our apartment, they decide, its glossy red head a beacon of safety to them. I don't explain that we likely wouldn't be able to get close to the hydrant because the fire truck would need that space, thinking that if the kids made it to the hydrant and I did not, someone would collect them and keep them safe. We won't have a fire anyway, I reassure them. This is all just precaution.

Pre-caution. Care taken in advance. A kind of controlled burning.

But then, this winter, there are two house fires on our street. Both at night, both kitchen fires, a few weeks between them, both houses with children in them. The sirens bring the neighbors out into the middle of the street and we huddle and remark, point from afar. No one is hurt, donation pages are created. One house is quickly taped off and under reconstruction within a few weeks, puffs of damaged insulation curling over a dumpster in the driveway like yellowed cotton candy. The other house sits quiet and dark, broken windows covered with plywood, circulars piled on the stoop like wet leaves.

The neighborhood children claim the property, climbing the single tree in front of this house day after day, hanging from its limbs in front of the sagging façade, intuitively understanding that this house has been abandoned, long before the adults realize. The children have no appetite for nostalgia; preciousness can't compete with their craving to turn the tree into their own Roxaboxen kingdom. They quickly forget their friends who used to live there, what cars belonged to this driveway. The home's history washes away; the fire, the family only as real as the sound of a song that just ended.

In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym calls nostalgia "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed." There is romance inherent in loss and longing. In order for humans to move on after loss, collective memory shifts and binds together, agreeing on a shared memory of the past or of a place, a new beauty. Boym cautions us against believing in the truth of our nostalgia. We are lulled into trusting that this new beauty, this lie, is safe to believe because access—to the past, to home, to a place, to a person—is impossible.

There is no fact-checking for nostalgia.

Rebecca Woolf: "What is Consent to a Ghost: A Critique (and Vindication) On My Own Gaze"
<https://rebeccawoolf.substack.com/p/what-is-consent-to-a-ghost>

Jane Wong:
DRAGON FRUIT

In the murky broth of yet another heartache, my mother cuts me slices of dragon fruit. I'm home in Jersey and slumped at the kitchen table. My hair is dip dyed in snot, tears, and hot mascara. She hands me a slice, the white interior flecked with black seeds like suspended ants. The slice dangles on her knife, the glinting steel close to my mouth. I eat it off the knife. I've always eaten fruit this way, right off the sparks of my mother's blade. I take it into my throat, still heaving from too much survival mode. The taste is mild, despite the florescent hot pink flame. The seeds punctuate something I know must come. It slides down my throat like a sweet summer slug.

"Jane, you have to be strong. I need you to eat more," she tells me, cutting another slice.

But I tell her I'm so tired of being strong. Fuck strength, fuck resilience, fuck lessons to learn, fuck trying and trying and trying! I tell her I don't want to be strong.

That I can't be strong anymore, even if I wanted to be. That I want to be weak. I want to fall completely apart. I want all the atoms in my body to crumble, scree of the self. I want to lie down on this cold kitchen table forever. I want to be a sloth who hasn't shit in a week weak. Cracked ice, dish soap bubbles, mild hot sauce, rabbit paralyzed by fear, my breath leaking from me like an ellipsis weak.

I expect her to disagree, to demand strength, to tell me I have no choice. Did she have a choice, staring at the gaping pits my father left behind?

This time though, she doesn't fight me. "So be weak," she says, almost like a threat. Sticky fruit juice encircles her jade bracelet. Fruit flies rouse around us, dizzy stars. "But you have to eat more dragon fruit and clear your system."

She wants me to shit it out. This time, she hands me the knife.