Event Outline: First Impressions

Event Title
First Impressions

Scheduled Day: Saturday, March 11, 2023
Scheduled Time: 12:10 p.m.–1:25 p.m.
Scheduled Room: Terrace Suite I, Summit Building, Seattle Convention Center, Level 4

Event Description
Seeing your fiction in print for the first time is a thrill. It could also be a stepping stone to future publications and wider recognition. The PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers recognizes 12 emerging writers each year for their debut short story, and the winners are published by Catapult in an annual anthology. Hear from previous winners, judges, and editors about how a debut story can make an indelible impression.

Event Category
Artistic & Professional Development

Event Organizer
Donica Bettanin, PEN America

Event Moderator
Donica Bettanin is the literary awards program director at PEN America. She has worked as an international rights manager, literary agent, and program manager in Australia, Indonesia and the USA. She is a mentor with Girls Write Now and holds a master's in nonprofit management from Columbia University.

Event Participants
Yuka Igarashi is an executive editor at Graywolf Press. Before joining Graywolf in 2021, she was editor-in-chief of Soft Skull Press, founder and editor-in-chief of Catapult magazine and the managing editor of Granta magazine. She is coeditor of the annual Best Debut Short Stories anthology.

Deesha Philyaw is the author of The Secret Lives of Church Ladies, winner of the the 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the 2020/2021 Story Prize, and the 2020 LA Times Book Prize: The Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction and a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction.
Allison Wright is the managing editor of the Virginia Quarterly Review. She also serves as president of the nonprofit literary organization WriterHouse and editor of Tiny Hardcore Press. Her writing has appeared in the Atlantic, VQR, Popular Mechanics, the Texas Observer, the Rumpus, and elsewhere.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping

Good afternoon and welcome to a conversation I have been looking forward to for months now, on powerful debuts, making first impressions count, and the passion of writers, readers, and editors that doesn’t just power this prize and anthology, but shepherds new work into the world every day.

For six years now, PEN America has partnered with Catapult to award the PEN/Robert J Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers, the winners of which are absolute debut short stories first published in a literary journal, magazine, or website, and collected in this—gorgeous!—annual anthology. What I’m holding in my hand here really represents the work of community: the journals that offer these first publication opportunities; the judges who do the work of uplifting new writers, PEN’s awards program, and Catapult’s commitment to giving these stories a home on bookshelves across the country. As we launch into today’s conversation, I’m delighted to introduce four panelists who have been and continue to be vital to that work.

Allison Wright is the managing editor of the Virginia Quarterly Review. She also serves as president of the nonprofit literary organization WriterHouse and editor of Tiny Hardcore Press. Her writing has appeared in the Atlantic, VQR, Popular Mechanics, the Texas Observer, the Rumpus, and elsewhere. Stories originally published in VQR have gone on to appear in several editions of the Best Debut Stories anthology.

Deesha Philyaw is the author of The Secret Lives of Church Ladies, winner of the 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the 2020/2021 Story Prize, and the 2020 LA Times Book Prize: The Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction and a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction. Deesha served as a judge for the 2022 prize.

Yuka Igarashi is an executive editor at Graywolf Press. Before joining Graywolf in 2021, she was editor-in-chief of Soft Skull Press, founder and editor-in-chief of Catapult magazine and the managing editor of Granta magazine. She is coeditor of the annual Best Debut Short Stories anthology.

Moderator Questions

1. Let’s start—at the start! Could you tell us about your first experience of publication, be it fiction or nonfiction?
   a. Was it a turning point for you?
b. Was there anything memorable about it that was different from what you expected?
c. Is there anything you’d do differently, looking back?

2. I’d like to ask each of you to talk a little about your experience with the prize and the anthology before we zoom out.
   a. Yuka, I feel like we should swap seats as you’ve been working on the anthology since its inception! Could you share a little about the development of the idea and perhaps what it was like working on that first edition?
   b. So Allison, can I ask you about VQR’s approach to finding new voices?
   c. Deesha, one of my favorite things about working on this prize is hearing snippets from the judges about the stories that have made a strong impression. Could I ask you to tell us a little please about the dynamic on a panel of judges like this?

3. All of you have deep roots in writing and publishing. As readers, as editors, as teachers, as podcasters, are there trends that you have observed among early-career fiction writers?
   a. In subject?
   b. In style/genre?
   c. In quality?

4. A question that I asked everyone to think about in advance: what is one DO and one DON’T that you’d offer to a writer seeking a home for their first story?

**Short Readings**

1. Deesha: reads from a favorite story from the year she was a judge.
2. Allison: reads from a favorite story originally published by VQR and then selected for the anthology.
3. Yuka: reads from a favorite story from her tenure as editor.

**Audience Q&A**