Event title: Writing the Resonant Recent Past

Event description: Writers set their novels in the recent past (late 20th, early 21st centuries) for many reasons—to understand social change, to give voice to long-ignored voices, even to enhance plotting (no cell phones!). But what makes such novels resonate with the present? How can focusing on the recent past give us a clearer lens on our current era? And what considerations should writers keep in mind when writing about a time period that’s familiar, but also irrevocably different?

Event category: Fiction craft and criticism

Event organizer and moderator:

Event participants:
Karen Dukess: Karen Dukess is the author of The Last Book Party, which was a Barnes and Noble Discover New Writers and IndieNext pick. As host of the Castle Hill Author Talks, she has interviewed many acclaimed authors. She has a degree in Russian Studies from Brown University and a Master’s in Journalism from Columbia University. She lives in Pelham, New York, and spends as much time as possible in Truro on Cape Cod.

Daisy Alpert Florin: Daisy Alpert Florin is the author of My Last Innocent Year, New York Times Book Review Editors’ Choice, an Amazon Editors’ Pick, a Washington Post Staff Pick and an Indie Next pick. Daisy attended Dartmouth College and received degrees from Columbia University and Bank Street Graduate School of Education. She was a recipient of the 2016 Kathryn Gurfein Writing Fellowship at Sarah Lawrence College and a fellow in the BookEnds novel fellowship. A native New Yorker, she lives in Connecticut with her family.

Ava Homa: Ava Homa is an award-winning novelist, activist, and on faculty at California State University, Monterey Bay. Her debut novel Daughters of Smoke
"and Fire" was featured in Roxane Gay’s Book Club, the Unplugged Book Box, and Women for Women International. It was listed as one of the best books of the year in the Wall Street Journal, the Independent (UK), and the Globe and Mail, and won the 2020 Nautilus Silver Book Award for Fiction and a finalist for the 2022 William Saroyan International Writing Prize.

Jen Savran Kelly: Jen Savran Kelly lives in upstate New York, where she writes fiction and works as a production editor at Cornell University Press. Their debut novel Endpapers won a grant from the Barbara Deming Memorial Foundation and was selected as a finalist for the SFWP Literary Awards Program and the James Jones First Novel Fellowship. Their short work has been published in Potomac Review, Black Warrior Review, Iron Horse Literary Review, and elsewhere.

Opening remarks:

Hello everyone, and welcome to our panel on Writing the Resonant Recent Past. Thank you for joining us virtually. My name is Sarah McCraw Crow, and I’ll be moderating this panel. So, novels set in recent decades might not be historical fiction, but they aren’t quite contemporary, either. The novelists here today set their books in the 1970s, ‘80s, ‘90s, early 2000s, and a longer sweep, from the 1960s to 2015. And we’re here to talk about the considerations, challenges, and joys of setting a novel in the recent past, and hopefully have time to talk about how best to research, in order to access the past emotionally and sensorially.

Now to get us started, I’ll introduce our panelists, each of whom will tell you a little about her novel and read a brief passage. (Introductions and readings will follow.)

Moderator’s questions, addressed to particular panelists:

1. Let’s talk about how you came to set your novel in one of these decades. Was it more instinctual, or did you have specific goals for a character or story? (Ava, Jen)

2. When did you know that you needed to do some background research about the time period? (Daisy, Jen, Ava,)

3. And how did that research inform your character or story, if it did? (Karen, Jen)
4. How did time and place intersect in your writing and research? (Ava, Jen)

5. How/when did you begin to think about the contrasts between then and now, and how much to draw attention to those contrasts? (Jen, Daisy)

6. Some of you ended up changing your novel’s time setting: when and why? (Daisy, Karen, Jen, Ava)

7. What are your techniques for avoiding anachronisms, and staying true to your novel’s time period while also staying true to today’s reader? (Sarah, Karen)

8. The cell-phone/technology/plotting question: We’ve all heard about writers setting their novels in the near past, just long enough ago that cell phones and Google didn’t exist, to make their plotting easier. Can you talk a little about the work of plotting fiction in the recent past? (Karen, Sarah, Ava)

9. Once your novel was out in the world, did you get pushback from readers or reviewers—did anyone question details in the narrative, or call out a character’s behavior or word choice? (Karen, Jen, Daisy)

10. Any dangers or red flags in writing about the recent past that you want to note? (Karen, Ava)