EVENT TITLE: Shaking Up the Memoir from Middle America

EVENT DESCRIPTION:

Four diverse memoirists come together for a discussion of the joys and perils of writing timely memoirs from the middle of the country, exploring issues related to voice, persona, research, and tension in developing a well-constructed memoir.

EVENT CATEGORY: Nonfiction Readings

EVENT ORGANIZER AND MODERATOR: [I've pulled the bios from the AWP website, but feel free to alter and expand. I think we should try to keep each under 100 words, if possible.]

Taylor Brorby is the author of Boys and Oil: Growing Up Gay in a Fractured Land, Crude: Poems, Coming Alive: Action and Civil Disobedience, and co-editor of Fracture: Essays, Poems, and Stories on Fracking in America. Taylor’s received fellowships the NBCC, the MacDowell Colony, and Mesa Refuge. He is a contributing editor at North American Review and teaches at the University of Alabama.

PARTICIPANTS:
Camille T. Dungy’s books include Soil: The Story of a Black Mother’s Garden, four books of poetry, most recently, Trophic Cascade, and the essays Guidebook to Relative Strangers. She’s edited anthologies including Black Nature. Dungy teaches at Colorado State University.

Toni Jensen is the author of the memoir Carry, a Dayton Literary Peace Prize finalist, and the story collection From the Hilltop. An NEA fellowship recipient in nonfiction, she teaches at the University of Arkansas and in the low-residency MFA at the Institute of American Indian Arts. She is Métis.

Gabe Montesanti is the author of the roller derby memoir, Brace For Impact (The Dial Press, 2022). Her nonfiction has appeared in LA Times, HuffPost, Lit Hub, Brevity, Electric Literature, The Offing, Essay Daily, and Boulevard Magazine. Her work has been anthologized in Black Lawrence Press’s They Said: A Collaborative Anthology and Belt Magazine’s Sweeter Voices Still: An LGBTQ Anthology from Middle America. Gabe is currently at work on a memoir about performing drag.

OPENING REMARKS & HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Thank you all for being here this morning, especially with so many other fantastic panels to choose from. I’m honored to share this space with three writers I not only admire, but whose work I find necessary for the times in which we currently live. As my big sister says, it’s been all about me since 1987, and this panel came out of my own selfish desire to explore non-coastal memoirs that help reveal the complicated landscape of America. I wanted a panel made up of people who don’t live in Brooklyn or the Bay, writing from
their own experiences in Middle America, that place that can sometimes be classified as a monolith, and to be in conversation with writers whose topics not only were timely, but more importantly, whose sentences and paragraphs were worth serious study and contemplation. So often, writers outside the publishing centers of power can feel at a loss of why their stories matter. Stories from Middle America do matter—they help shape the very bedrock of the stories of who we have been, who we are, and who we might become. I’m excited for the conversation ahead, getting to chat with these three fantastic writers. We’ll be talking for about 45-60 minutes amongst ourselves, and then I’ll open it up for about 15-20 minutes of audience Q&A.

PARTICIPANT INITIAL REMARKS:

Each participant will read 2 - 3 minutes from their respective memoir.

MODERATOR QUESTIONS:

1. Relatedly, do you think your memoir is filling some gap in the literature or some hole in the national conversation? Is that rooted to the setting(s) of your memoir?

2. Your memoirs come in a variety of forms and shapes. Were there other authors you turned to as models, is there a lineage you’re aware of that you’re working in? Can you share a bit with us about the process of finding the right form for your project?

3. Some writers write more material than they use, was this your case? If so, what didn’t make it into your book? Was that your choice? Was it a conversation with your editor? Was it at all related to beginning to think about an audience, about the people who might come to read your book?

4. We’re each at various stages in our literary career. Why a memoir? What did the conversation in your head, or with others, look like about this project? Were any of you hesitant to write a memoir? How did you confront the reality that so many authors are faced with: why does this project matter.

5. These memoirs take on some of the most important issues we face today—race, sexuality, climate change, gun rights, family relationships. Were these the driving forces when writing your book? If so, why? If not, what were some of the driving forces getting you to the page to do your work?

6. What did writing your memoir teach you? Has your life changed since your book has been in the world? Do you have any tips you’d recommend to other memoirists or prospective memoirists?