AWP OUTLINE

TITLE: Navigating stormy waters: telling your tales when they're hard stories to tell

CATEGORY: A multiple literary genres reading and discussion

DESCRIPTION: How do you write your tale with compassion and love when it is a hard story to tell? These five writers will read from their works of memoir and autobiographical fiction touching on their own stories and their family stories of addiction, mental illness, trauma, neglect and chaos. After, they will talk about how they were able to navigate the choppy waters of truth telling in their books and how they use their voices for change and to highlight their own stories of redemption and forgiveness.

Welcome by JEM (who will read last and then moderate the Q and A)

Hi everyone, welcome to “Navigating stormy waters: telling your tales when they're hard stories to tell”.

A few reminders before we begin: For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you. Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers. Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them. Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products. Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

K! Greetings, I am Juanita E. Mantz (“JEM”) and I was honored to organize this fabulous reading with some of my favorite writers and friends: Toni Ann Johnson, Hannah Sward, Nikia Chaney and Laurie Markvart. I will moderate the Q and A after we read from our work on family stories that are hard to tell, both memoir and
autobiographical fiction. I guess the question is how to write this with love and compassion and how do you use it to change the world. We will talk about that at the end.

Let’s get this started!

Readings and bios in the order they will appear

1. **Reader Number 1: Toni Ann Johnson**

BIO: Toni Ann Johnson won the 2021 Flannery O’Connor Award with her linked story collection Light Skin Gone to Waste, which was selected for the prize and edited by Roxane Gay and published by The University of Georgia Press in 2022. The book was nominated for a 2023 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work. A novella, Homegoing, which is linked to the story collection, was published in 2021 by Accents Publishing. A novel, Remedy For a Broken Angel was released in 2015 by Nortia Press and was nominated for a 2015 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work by a Debut Author.

Reading Excerpt from *Light Skin Gone to Waste*, story: “Wings Made of Rocks.”

“The first time he fell in love, he was twenty-five and earning a second Master’s Degree at City College. To pay the bills, he worked for the Welfare Department, checking up on recipients. He and his wife and daughter were still living at his mother’s. When Phil’s beloved, a graduate school classmate, broke up with him, he grieved the loss for months.
The day he finally packed up to move out of his mother’s house and leave his wife, “Mother” stood in the doorway watching him. Her thin floral dress was faded. Her curls, peppered with gray, were pinned back from her face.

“God help you, Philip,” she said. “Now you have nothing.”

He saw his reflection in the wall mirror beside her. They had the same full lips, slim nose, and angular chin. His dark eyes were framed by heavy brows like hers. But Phil’s face had no frown lines. And the thrill of life still shone in his eyes.

“Oh, I have plenty, Mother,” he said. “I have my mind.”

He became a psychologist and remarried. The time between marriages, less than two years, was the only time he lived alone. He savored it like good scotch. The company of women was nice; even nicer was having no one to criticize him, no one making her happiness his responsibility.

The second time Phil fell in love was with his next wife. Velma had a rough start in life with a financially unstable mother. She was taken in and raised by a good family, but the bumpy beginning had left its marks. Still, she was gutsy and beautiful and a supportive companion. Curious about the world, she was willing to travel with him to places no Black person she knew had ever been, like Moscow and Istanbul. And she didn’t blink at leaving the known world of the Bronx for uncharted territory in Upstate, New York. Her fearlessness inspired him.

Then they had Madeline.
Phil heard them together one afternoon while she was giving Maddie a bath. The child was four and going through what Freud called the “Phallic Stage” of development.

“Mommy, why did you say not to touch myself while we were at the store?”

“Because we don’t touch ourselves in public, Maddie. It’s not allowed.”

“But, Mommy, it’s my-self.” She said this as if it were the final word on the matter.

“Listen, I catch you touching yourself at the A & P again, I’m gonna smack you, you understand?”

Madeline was quiet for a moment. “Why can’t other people see our private parts?” she asked.

Velma scoffed. “Because we use them to do private things. Stop talking. Mommy doesn’t want to talk.”

“Why don’t you want to talk, Mommy?”

“Because I don’t. Be quiet.”

“I want to get out now.”

“Sit down, goddammit,” Velma yelled.

Phil heard a splash.

“Ow, Mommy, that hurts!”

“Shut up.”
There was a slap. Phil ran down the hall and into the bathroom. Velma was in striped short shorts, kneeling on the bathmat. Small, dark-eyed Madeline, with long curls and cheeks that puffed out like she had a pear in each one, was sitting in the tub.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing to a strawberry-colored mark on her face, a face that resembled his own.

“She stood up and grazed her cheek on the faucet,” Velma said.

Madeline looked at her mother with eyes the size of saucers. The lie stunned her. Her little shoulders slumped and her chin dropped to her chest. Phil recognized those hurt feelings, the frustration of being small when someone grown behaves unfairly. It reminded him of his mother. Not the hitting, Mother wasn’t like that. It was the ease with which she was cruel to her young child.

With a steady gaze on Velma, he shamed her until she looked away. She knew he knew what she’d done.

His first wife was neglectful. Mothering wasn’t of interest to her. Phil recognized his pattern: drawn, unconsciously, to what he’d meant to escape.

After finishing a PhD in clinical psychology, he earned a post-doctoral diploma in psychoanalysis. During training, undergoing analysis himself was mandatory. He explored how losing his father and being emotionally rejected by his mother affected his unconscious and manifested in his behavior. Once training was complete treatment ended.
He’d planned to get back to it when he had more money. When he made more money, he thought he’d do it when he had more time.

Monogamy never appealed to Phil. He realized it was what most women hoped for, but it didn’t seem reasonable or even possible. Girlfriends provided the excitement of newness and relief when a wife’s sex drive wasn’t in sync with one’s own.

Abby Goldberg was an artist from an adjacent town. She’d been a patient at Phil’s home office in Monroe. Once their mutual attraction was clear, they terminated the professional relationship. Abby began making trips to Phil’s Manhattan office, which was a rented one-bedroom on lower Fifth Avenue. He saw patients there three days a week and often spent the night. Their affair inspired her to paint a biomorph, a magnificent, multi-colored abstract, from which shimmering rays seemed to project, with vague shapes of two bodies entwined, one golden and one pearl white. She told him it was a representation of them—their souls—during the act. Together, they hung it in his office. Looking at never failed to make Phil’s entire body smile.

Phil noticed that Madeline seemed depressed that fall. When they came back from their summer vacation in West Africa, she was sleeping more than usual. She never wanted to get out of bed. At first they thought it was jetlag. Then it went on for weeks. She asked to stay home from school. She quit her ballet class. And she began acting out in odd ways. For example, she decided not to wear the pajamas
she’d worn on vacation anymore. Phil thought that was fine—she was asserting her independence—but one night Velma made her put them on. The next morning as had become typical, Madeline wouldn’t get up. He went in to wake her and found shreds of light blue pajama fabric in a heap on the floor beside her bed. She’d cut them up with scissors.

She was asleep, on her stomach, with one arm over her teddy bear. Phil touched her on the back and she shook awake yelling, “Don’t touch me!” She reached back, swatted at him, and then she was crying.

Their Great Dane galloped up the stairs and into her room to see what was going on.

“Look who came to see you,” Phil said. “See, you’re okay, Brutus won’t let anything hurt you.” The dog sniffed at her head.

When Phil touched her again, she wriggled away. He sat where she’d been. “Did you have a bad dream?”

She didn’t answer. He asked again.

She sniffled. “I don’t remember, Daddy.”

“Okay. But if you do and you want to tell me about it, you can.”

She said nothing more.

When Phil told Velma about the pajamas the two of them were down in the kitchen. Her jaw clenched. She turned and banged through the swinging door marching toward Madeline. He followed, and caught her by the arm.
“You’re not spanking her. She’s upset about something. Why don’t you try to understand her, instead of shaming her constantly?”

“I’m trying to train her, Phil.” She yanked her arm away, tightened the belt on her bathrobe, and patted at the curlers on her head. “She’s gonna have to wear things, and do things she doesn’t want to. That’s life. She’s not gonna be able to chop up the shitty parts of it she doesn’t like.”

“Leave her alone.”

Velma’s lips moved over clenched teeth. “You think I don’t want to hack up the things in my life I don’t like?” She thrust her face up toward him and cocked her head. “If I could take an axe to the crap I hate, I would. But I can’t, can I? Well, neither can she. She has to learn to suffer through bullshit like the rest of us.”

“Keep your hands off my daughter, Velma.”

“Bring your ass home from Manhattan after work, Phil.”

“Velma—”

“I’m a single parent while you’re down there fallin’ up a bitch’s pussy. You don’t like how I’m parenting, come the fuck home at night and do it yourself.”

She was nothing if not direct.”

2. **Reader #2 Hannah Sward**

BIO: Hannah Sward, daughter of the late poet Robert Sward, is the critically acclaimed author of *Strip: A Memoir*. *Strip*, Sward’s first book, has received the attention of authors such as Noble Prize winner, J.M.
Coetzee, Melissa Broder, and NYT Bestselling novelist Caroline Leavitt who called Sward, “One of the most moving and honest memoir writers. So eloquent, so brave.” Sward has appeared on NBC CA Live, C-SPAN BookTV, dozens of podcasts, panels, and in magazines such as Recovery Today. Sward lives in Los Angeles where she is working on her next book. To find out more hannahsward.com.

Reading Excerpt from Strip: A Memoir

The Man in the Brown Car

1976 – Victoria

I spend so much time alone. I hide under the front porch and watch the cherry blossom petals float to the ground. Alina is at art class and Dad is in India. I like to walk to the park, step in puddles with feet bare in red sandals and feel the water between my toes.

Today, nobody is in the park, not even Emily. Her mom would not let her go today. I swing on the swing with my doll and go so high. A man in a brown car parks across the street under a beautiful tree that has not lost its leaves. He watches me, waves for me to come over. I keep swinging. He waves again. I get off the swing, walk towards him, hold my doll tight.

I am in his car. He tells me he is bringing me home but he drives so far and my feet are cold and I start crying. He stops the car at the end of a street in front a yellow ‘Dead End’ sign.

“Do you know how babies are made?” he asks.

I know they come from bellies but I can’t talk. I am wearing pink- and white-checkered shorts. The doors are locked and his zipper goes down and his stomach has hair on it and it’s white and there’s more hair down there. He takes out a thing like a floppy fish and my shorts are off. The fish goes stiff. He’s so close to me and I can’t breathe.

“Stop the crying,” he says. He tugs and tugs on the thing and it’s touching me down there. “If you tell anyone I will kill you.”

I hold my doll’s hand so tight and try to hold my breath so I don’t cry and close my eyes.

“Open them,” he says. “Look down.”
So much white stuff comes out of the fish and it’s all over me. He tells me again if I tell anyone he will kill me. I can’t stop crying and I know that is not good.

“I promise, I won’t.”

He drives around and around and my shorts are back on but they don’t feel good. They are wet like my feet. He brings me back to the park and the brown car goes away. I am not dead. My doll has lost her shoe.

I am at the police station and my clothes and my doll are in plastic bags. I don’t know how I got there and I am so scared because all I can think is he will come back to kill me if he knew I told but I don’t remember telling or how I got here but I am sitting with Alina and she is not happy with me. She is mad. We get in the police car and drive and drive and look for the man in the brown car. It gets dark and Alina brings me home. I don’t want my dad in India and my mom in Florida. I just want them to come home.

Speed in the Bushes

“It was a few weeks after I met Omar, on a windy, Saturday morning, that something changed. I was standing in my nightgown in the backyard. Grapefruit gouged by squirrels slumped on the overgrown ground. Bougainvillea thorns clawed at the wood fence and the vines tangled into the bushes and trees on their way up to the telephone line. My bicycle leaned against a fig tree and ferns twisted through the cobwebbed spokes.

I had been trying to quit crystal again, and it had been two weeks when I’d gotten a call from Lisa. She had called before but I hadn’t picked up. This time I didn’t even think about it. I was on the 10 freeway in five minutes.

Forty minutes later I was in the lingerie aisle at Ross looking for Lisa. She saw me and gave me a hug as I slipped the money into her back pocket and she handed me the baggie of crystal that was wrapped in blue tissue with a red Christmas bow. I sensed we were being watched and grabbed a pale blue robe from one of the racks and held it up in front of myself. “Perfect,” I said.
I tried it on. It felt like being wrapped in rabbit. I walked to the dressing room with it and took a bra off a rack and slipped into the change room, making sure I chose one with a door that latched. I tore into the tissue. The crystals looked like organic Mediterranean salt. I prepared a line, snorted, and put the baggie in my pocket, leaving the bra and rabbit robe behind.

Now here I was, two days later with no sleep, in my backyard shaking with the wind. Barefooted and barehanded I reached towards a branch. Pink flowers fell to the ground from the trees. Purple morning glories peeked out from the bushes. A thorn pricked my finger. Prick, pick. Prick, pick. Each time a thorn pierced me I told myself to put on gloves before breaking another branch, following the bougainvillea into the bush. I was caught in the vines, tearing them apart, tearing me apart. My arms were scratched, my mouth dry. An hour passed, then two. I was on my hands and knees, then back on my feet. My shins were scratched, knees dirty, and my jaw, it was very tight.

“You go inside,” I told myself. “Get water. You have to pee.”

I never liked to garden before speed. Alina used to cut the grass in our front yard between the pebbled path with a pair of nail scissors. I would have to help her. The only thing I liked about that garden was when the rhubarb grew and Alina made pies out of it.

I still don’t know why this day became so different than any other. At 8 p.m. I was laying on the cool black-and-pink tiles of the bathroom floor. My arms and legs stretched out wide. I was pale, nauseated, my forehead damp with cold sweat. My heart beat too fast and I couldn’t get up. The scratches all up and down my arms were streaked red, like I had been attacked in the jungle. How many years had I spent in the bushes with my head down, tangled in the weeds?

My heart and head raced in rhythm to the images of my life. My mom leaving, my sister crying and clinging to my leg when I flew home every summer, brown car man, the babysitter, the nightmares. I thought about my dad and his women and his poetry, my step-mom’s borscht, my little brother’s dead cat. I remembered me bending over and swinging on poles for money, the drugs and the men in hotels, the decent job at the law school that I had quit and now, even though I called it sugar daddy work, being into prostitution for the third time. More images came, leading me to where I was, thirty-six, lying on the floor of my pink bathroom on a
Saturday night in Los Angeles, torn red from fighting with the vines in the garden. I saw no escape.”

3. **Reader #3 Nikia Chaney**

BIO: Nikia Chaney is a multi-genre author and artist. She has published two poetry books, To Stir & (Word Works, 2023) and us mouth (University of Hell Press, 2018), a memoir, Ladybug (Inlandia, 2022), and a short volume of science fiction, Three Walking (Bamboo Dart, 2021). She teaches in Santa Cruz.

Reading Excerpt from *Ladybug*

“Mama,

You are sitting behind me. I can see your dark clothes and the outlines of your body, larger than mine in the mirror. I look so small in your lap. I see you behind me and in the mirror it looks like I am inside of you, like I am a part of you. You are combing my hair. You style my hair in a ponytail on one side. You will twist it at the ends, but my hair will poof out in the middle so I will end up having one askew poofball, with a small little twist poking out at the tip. My hair is brown but medium, light and soft. In the bathroom light it looks dark, but out in sunlight, my hair is almost red like red-brown straw, threads of kinky wisps escaping the strictest rubber bands. When my hair is pressed and dry, it is fine and very thin. When my hair is wet it hangs down curly but defined, slick. Good hair you say and you always press it first to get it done fast. I can feel your hands in my hair now, but I know you are not paying attention to what you are doing. I can hear you move and stop and then move and stop and move and stop like an animation figure
or a cartoon character trying to dance on a television screen with bad reception.

That static, then that pause, interrupts you again, and I can’t see or hear you. Not the real you. You are no longer there. You stop moving again and I wait, watching your face slightly turned away. You are listening to something I can’t hear. I say

You speak like you are waking up, slurring words, talking very slow

Mommy, Mommy. Huh, what is it?

Finish my hair, I am watching you and realizing that you don’t see me. That you are coming in and out of a place I can’t see Mommy. Mommy. Why did you stop?

I am eleven years old. Today I am wide awake. I am not reading anything or trying to fantasize in the bathroom glare. I am not counting or making up stories in my head. This day I am in the bathroom wide awake, and I am wanting, trying as I do from time to time, to understand.

You look down at me now like you are contemplating telling me something. Already I am beginning to learn to watch you closely. I will soon grow to learn to know all your stories, your sighs, your repetitions that signal what is coming. Like bells ringing in a background, so quiet it is hard to know they are really there. We,
me and my sister, can read you now, days before you fall apart; we know when it comes, we know when it will come and sometimes how long it will last. No one else can see this though, but it’s a smell, a hint in the fraction of a sound, the slight curve at the beginning of a sentence.

But back then I am small, and I watch you in the mirror and something in me hurts. You are beautiful, your face round and soft, your hands warm. You speak quietly enunciating your words to me, so unlike the other women in the neighborhood. This is Inglewood, California, 1988, bright and loud, spilling brown colored kids out on the sidewalk, like butterflies or trash, their mothers screaming at them from the front door. Everyone is gonna get a whooping, or their behinds kicked for some right and wrong thing that they do and we little brown beings learn that speaking directly to adults, asking questions of adults, placing ourselves on their grown-up realms is disrespect, as in who do you think you is, as is sin. But I want now to see, to know what you will tell me. It feels like a secret, like something that only you can understand. And I want to know you, to be there in the bathroom with you instead of outside that static pause, waiting for the spell to pass. You sigh and your voice is quiet, serious Niki.

Sometimes I hear people talking to me. But no one is there. No one is in the room. But I hear them and I think they are real people. It’s like voices that no one else
says is real. Right now they are talking, but sometimes they yell at me. They scare me. Can you hear them? Can you hear them? Can you hear them too?

I strain to listen. You have gone silent again, stiff and lost. I lean into your body and try with my whole being to hear. I make my posture like yours. I close my eyes thinking that it might help me hear better. I brace myself and imagine my ears becoming as big as an antenna, huge satellite dishes that will pick up all the sound in all the house in all the neighborhood in all the world. But I only hear the water running in the sink. Outside a bird caws, then the whoosh of a car driving by. There are voices, yes, but they are muffled from the people next door, through the walls. Tiny sounds of a television. No people yelling, no people talking to me alone. Only silence and me and the mirror and you, my mother, stiff catatonic behind me. I think of something I saw something on television just this past week, an old Twilight Zone episode. A lady had bandages all over her face. Most of the episode was about removing the bandages. I remember being frustrated at all this talk and anticipation

She's so ugly. I'd kill myself if I looked like that. Then, after years and years they finally remove the bandage. The nurse screams and drops the scalpel. Loud music. And I'm holding my breath. But the woman is beautiful,
her hair short and coiffed all styled up, all young white women, her eyes big and, I imagine, blue. And all the doctors and nurses are ugly with snouts and twisted bottom lips. You scream watching with me and then laugh at the show; it is your favorite episode. But I don’t understand. I am younger than I am in the bathroom. I do know then that there is a point to it of course, every story, every sentence uttered has a point and ending that wraps the entire think up like an old empty box of chocolates found under the bed. I am learning though, slowly so it makes me impatient, but too quickly to know the words. I search the pig faces and the pretty crying lady and your laughter for it but I can’t reach that far. I barely know what to scream at, what to be shocked by. But I remember the scenes stretched out like taffy or stockings you pull off slow, alone in that bathroom, the dark unseen faces of the doctor and nurse, the sad pity, and the woman with bandages crying and weeping about being ugly, desperate in her pain, her wrongness, ashamed.

And then it happens; the turn. If this were written then the paragraph would shift or the line would break. Suddenly, I am afraid to look in the mirror. I feel my heart beating in the silence, and I squint my eyes shut as tight as they can go. I don’t want to be in the bathroom facing the mirror in the quiet. I am terrified, my whole body shaking like a car’s radio antenna in the wind. I think if I look my own face will be twisted or I will have a snout, that upward snarl that sighs with a protruding twisted lip, a face somehow askew hiding inside another face. I think if I look I
will hear the voices and disappear from the room like you do, like you who can stand still for seven whole minutes (I counted once) without moving a muscle, not a twitch, deep in yourself, deep in your head, completely and utterly unreachable. What if I lose my skin too, what if my eyes become like yours? When you are sick your eyes change, they squint very small and even if you are looking at me you stop looking at me. I look down into the sink. I can’t hear anything. I can’t hear people anywhere, there are no voices, but I know that I am like that white lady with the bandages; I am wrong. Wrong. All wrong. My own self, my own understanding of this world, my own face must be wrong.

Mommy. Mommy. I can hear them too. I can hear people talking too. I hear them. I hear them like you. You sigh, so relieved and happy. You smile at me in the mirror and laugh, a little, coming back into the room. I refuse to look at you, especially your eyes. I do not know what I will see. I don’t want to look at anyone’s eyes ever again. You say

I thought so, baby, I knew it. The voices are real.”

4. Reader #4 Laurie Markvart

BIO: LAURIE MARKVART is a professional singer, musician, published author, songwriter, blogger, and poet. She thrives through life with general anxiety disorder and is a social media advocate for positive mental health awareness. She
is also a recent breast cancer survivor. Laurie is Midwest-born but now lives in Los Angeles with her son and two cats, Sir Freddie Mercury and Lady Annie Lennox.

Reading Excerpt from Somewhere in the Music I’ll Find Me: A Memoir

Chapter 3 – PRIVILEGE

“One day on the weekly drive to the grocery store with Mom, she paused the car a bit longer after pulling out of our gravel driveway.

"Laurie, your dad and I have noticed you love music; you're always singing. So, you're going to take piano lessons."

"Sure, Mom. If it makes you happy."

I never thought twice about making her happy, and she was right. I loved music, and when I'd listen to it, I was intrigued by how to play any of it. How does music happen? How did these opera vocalists get so high with their voices or hold a note so long? How did the horns peak at the right time with the strings? How did any of it happen? I guess it must start with piano if that's where they want me to start?

"Learning a musical instrument is a privilege." She glanced my way, winked, and then gunned the gas pedal, my head forced back against the headrest. I knew with the wink she was happy for me.
"I never had the chance. Understand how lucky you are that we can afford to buy a piano for you to take lessons."

James Archie Sr., my mother's father, was a classically trained vocalist. He descended from a long line of family musicians. He was a well-known regional singer in the 1940s when my mom was young.

My mother idolized her father and his success. She would say, "Your grandfather was very popular. Hundreds would come from far away to hear him sing. I couldn't believe I was the daughter of someone famous!" Then her expression would sadden. "But he was also a drunk, and my parents had awful fights."

I was never sure if my mom exaggerated the stories of their fights or her father's musical success. Although, one of his live shows was recorded, and she would play the LP vinyl for us. His tenor voice sounded beautiful and pleasant, and he sang with tremendous emotion. When Mom was melancholy, especially when she was drunk, she'd play that record and drift off somewhere else, eyes closed, swaying back and forth. My brother and I would never disturb her then.

My grandfather had supported his family the best he could on a singer's salary, but he spent most of his money on alcohol. Eventually, he was forced to quit performing and work a stable job to keep the lights on. Attempting to keep my grandfather off the sauce, his father opened a dry-cleaning business. My family had
a saying that my granddad learned how to clean up other people's clothes, but not himself. He was in his early sixties when he died of a heart attack. I was only three but well remember my mother's pain; she cried for weeks. Her sadness scared me. That had been the beginning of her unavailability, the start of my profound loneliness and desire for her attention and approval.

From the time I was five, my mother went to a psychiatrist twice a week. My brother and I went too-to the waiting room. It was an appealing office in Madison with soft cushioned couches, magazines on tables, and tall leafy indoor plants. The best part, the Coca-Cola machine in the waiting room would dispense endless amounts of glass bottles for our drinking pleasure. The receptionist never stopped my brother or me from sliding the top of the machine open for more drinks. I was happy if the bubbles kept coming but eventually, I’d get a stomachache. Also, there was never enough Cola to satisfy my curiosity why my Mom was talking to the man “behind the door.”

Mom had been diagnosed bipolar with a severe anxiety disorder. She had massive mood swings: being happy and energized, then wholly depressed and shut away in her bedroom. When my dad would come home from work, he would discreetly open the back door and whisper to my brother or me, "How is she today?" During this period, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital twice. It was the first time I heard the words "suicide attempt." She was gone for two weeks to a
month. Each time Mom left, a deep sense of abandonment took over. In her absence, my father was loving, sometimes reading to us before bed. Although he was also despondent, he took on her housekeeping chores. But between his job and visits to her, we were stuck with our grandmother for much of our caretaking.

My mother's mom came with all sorts of demands and expectations regarding bedtime, dinner, and politeness. Her coldness was far different than our mother's warmth and love, and sometimes we could be downright rude to her. She was an easy target for frustration over our mother's absence.

Our grandmother was highly emotional and would swing between anger and weepiness with predictability that amused my brother and me. When grandma would look for us, we'd giggle, hiding in closets or under beds. We played a game of hide-and-seek that she didn't know she was playing. She always wore a white apron that looked ready to burst; it was tied so tight around her plump waist.

"Children, I've asked you to come downstairs now!" This stock high-pitched shriek from her perpetual white Mylanta-lined lips came after other failed attempts to rouse us for dinner. We'd ignore her until she'd crawl up the carpeted flight of stairs on all fours, like a monkey, due to her bad back. She'd whine in tears, her blue eyes squinting in frustration as she approached us. They were the same blue as my mother's eyes, filled with sadness. And mine, filled with curiosity.
"Wait until I tell your father!" That was her final warning, shaking her finger close to our faces when she found us. And it worked. I never wanted to make things worse for my dad.

My mom did not like her mother, as she told me numerous times. I assume this knowledge added to my disregard of my grandmother's feelings and my annoyance of her in my mother's absence. Grandma would say, "Your mother makes excuses. She's just like her father, bless his soul, a drunk and ill-minded. She has everything in the world--a lovely home, you two beautiful children--and yet she chooses to be ill!"

I knew my grandmother was wrong. My mom didn't choose this. Something was wrong with her, and I had a growing need to protect her. To make her healthy and bring her back to me.”

5. **Reader #5 Juanita E. Mantz (JEM)**

Bio: Juanita E. Mantz (aka JEM) is a USC Law educated lawyer, writer, performer, and podcaster. Her memoir "Tales of an Inland Empire Girl" about her chaotic IE childhood and punk rock high school dropout year won bronze at the 2023 Latino Books to Movies Awards. Her chapbook "Portrait of a Deputy Public Defender, or how I became a punk rock lawyer" about the horrors of mass incarceration won gold at the 2022 International Latino Book Awards. On her video podcast, "Life of
Reading Excerpt from *Tales of an Inland Empire Girl*

**Bad Things Happen**

“I don’t like to talk about bad things. I would rather just drink and party. Or better yet, take me to a concert and I’ll lose myself there. When I saw The Smiths live in concert, I thought I was going to pop like a balloon from the pure joy of it. It was one of the best days of my life. Morrissey was so beautiful up on stage, and his voice echoed and stirred something in me. He made me feel sad and happy at the same time.

It was my senior year of high school and we were living in Ontario. The rental house was right below Fourth Street by Yum Yum Donuts, the place where Dad got day-old donuts on Sundays. I remember that house because it’s where I crashed my first car, and where Dad ran over our cat, and where we had our legendary kegger party. It was also where Dad almost killed himself.

I don’t know when Dad got the call that evening. It was still light out when I came home from school and Dad was crying. His oldest daughter Barbara, our half-sister, had died in a horrific head-on collision. Barbara was Dad’s daughter from his first marriage to a woman called Tiny. He had lost custody of Barbara and her younger sister Roberta when they were little. Barbara had been living in the trailer park my parents managed, but when Dad lost the bar, Barbara moved to Oregon with her girls Rosie, Desiree, and baby Sara in tow.

Mom always said Barbara was unlucky in love and that all of her kids had different fathers. Barbara’s younger sister Roberta, who Mom called the responsible one, had been married for years, and lived in Kansas with her husband and two sons.

Dad loved Barbara more than anything in the world. Mom said it was because Barbara needed him the most. It made Mom angry that Dad would do anything for Barbara. He would drive for hours to help her if she was stuck somewhere.
Mom, who never called in sick to work, had decided not to go in that day. She was there when Dad locked himself in the bathroom. Dad sounded like a wounded animal, screaming “Barbara! My Barbara!” again and again.

We all huddled in the hallway by the bathroom listening as Dad howled out his sorrow. After a while, I couldn’t take it anymore and I sat in my room covering my ears.

Mom was pounding on the door.

“John, open the door,” she said over and over. “Please, John.”

Mom wasn’t mad for once, and she was calm and kind. That was what scared me. I ran over and started crying and begging him, “Please, Dad, open the door, please!”

“John, we love you,” Mom said into the door over and over, almost like a prayer.

Dad kept repeating Barbara’s name, over and over. He wouldn’t stop crying.

Mom whispered in my ear, “Dad has his gun in there with him.”

“Barb, Barb!” Dad wailed.

“John, open the door, please,” Mom cried.

Dad cried, “No.” He was sobbing, “I don’t want to be here anymore, not without Barb.”

I don’t remember how long he was in there exactly, but it felt like forever and a day. I don’t remember what finally persuaded him to come out of the bathroom.

That night, I put on the Go-Go’s Vacation and played the song “Worlds Away” on repeat over and over, until I fell asleep.

Later, Dad and Mom took one last drive for Barbara. Dad scraped together every cent he had to bury Barbara and buy her a headstone in Oregon. He had the
headstone inscribed with the words “Loving mother and daughter.” Something changed in Dad after Barbara died.

**Dialogue/Discussion Post Readings moderated by JEM**

1. How do you navigate the choppy waters of writing about family? What was the hardest part?

JEM’s aside comments: For me, this was a hard process. It is why I almost put the book aside and why it took over a decade to finish. Ultimately, it ended up a better book for all the family drama and struggles.

**TONI ANN JOHNSON**
My father is deceased, and my elderly mother has Narcissistic Personality Disorder. This makes her toxic and abusive, and we aren’t in contact. I’m cordial with my half-sister though not especially close. I didn’t feel much guilt about writing about my family’s dysfunction because I took so many years to do it. Most of my mother’s friends (who she hid her true background from) have passed away.

At first, it was difficult to write about my mother and her trauma because I knew she felt protective of her privacy. But her inability to be honest about who she really is contributed to her inability to be authentic with me as a parent, and that damaged our relationship. For my own healing, I decided to write into her past more than I knew she would approve of because I couldn’t tell a story that offered a full perspective of the family’s dynamic without embracing the full truth she neglected to acknowledge throughout my childhood.

Equally hard was writing about the times when I was in the middle of my parents’ imploding marriage. What I was exposed to—my father’s infidelities and my mother’s physical abuse of me—were both painful and sometimes hard to write, though they felt necessary.

**HANNAH SWARD**
I focus on telling my truth. I try to do so without pointing blame, without judgement or analysis of what I think my family did or didn’t do. This requires a certain detachment. To write from a place of openness about what is, through the eyes of the narrator. Almost an innocence. This is not easy. The voice of ‘what will my family’ think appears. The question becomes how do I quiet that voice? Pen to
paper without censorship. If I am to write my truth, I must put everything and everyone else aside. Not callously. But to get out of my own way. To stay ‘out of the results.’ The moment I start futurizing about how this person or that person may react I must pause. I must come back to center. I must get quiet and put all the ‘voices’ aside. My mother, my father, my stepmother. Everyone has their version of ‘the story’. I must focus on mine.


“Mom, I’m scared. I’m scared of you reading the book and feeling hurt. I didn’t write it with the intention of hurting you.” “I’m fine, I’m fine with it all,” she said. “You think your father didn’t write about me?” But when the book came out, she wasn’t fine. She wasn’t fine at all. How did/do I navigate that? I have learned to be okay with her not being okay.

NIKIA CHENEY
In my memory I didn't give names to my family members. I didn't set out to do this consciously, I just felt that the roles of my mother and sister existed as such pivotal aspects of my life, not naming family members seemed best. In the end I'm glad I didn't use names as I discovered after the book was published that their anonymity was important to me. This was the hardest part, balancing this.

LAURIE MARKVART
The hardest part was reliving the harrowing times growing up in a home with a mentally ill/bipolar mother and then narrating the book with literary prose. I wanted to spit out the words in ugly bullet points mirroring how I felt, but ultimately, I wanted to tell a linear, full story. So, I just buckled down and wrote. But I had a muse or two to get me through. Mine were wine, coffee shops, and my go-to of listening to music. I always wrote to the same background music. BTW the wine is only sometimes a good idea, ha! There is the saying…”Write drunk, edit sober.” I can say this much…” If you write drunk, you’ll have a lot more to edit. But also, writing about my marital life and the unfathomable losses we suffered was extremely difficult. There was a section in my book I couldn’t bear to write. It was too painful. But my editor reminded me it was the most pivotal part of
the story. He said: “The hardest parts for the author to write are typically the best parts to read.”

For me, even more challenging than writing the book was narrating and performing it for my Audible. I relived it, and I don’t want ever to do that again.

2. Talk about narrators and the reliability or unreliability of memory and how you dealt with that issue?

JEM’s aside comments: I always acknowledged what I didn’t know but my narrator Jenny is kind of a drama queen and has a little bit of Sally J. Freedman in her (from Judy Blume) and can be a dramatist.

TONI ANN JOHNSON
I wrote as if the narrators believed they were reliable. Whether they are or not is up to the reader to decide, but if a story is in a character’s POV those characters believe the narrative they’re sharing. Often, their perspective is obviously flawed. Sometimes their perspective feels more believable, but I think most narrators, aside from omniscient, are unreliable to some degree because their POV is limited to what they see/think/feel.

I am not writing memoir so I didn’t worry about the reliability of memory. I did base my stories on real events as I recalled them. However, I didn’t feel every detail needed to be factual. I made an effort to write what was “true” overall. By that I mean, though some details in a story may not have happened precisely as written with regard to that specific event, in the larger world of the family, they are “true” because of the accretion of the details of similar events. So, if Velma didn’t hit Maddie in a particular story based on an event that happened to me, she did abuse her many other times, and so the slap I chose to include is “true,” even if it's been taken from one event and applied to another.

Also, when it comes to certain characters it’s clear that their version of events is colored by who they are. I used voice, attitude, humor, and exaggeration to make that clear to the reader at times. If a character is consistently over-the-top, the reader should be able to discern that that character may be exaggerating for effect or endeavoring to manipulate the reader to buy into their version of events.
HANNAH SWARD
Memory itself is unreliable but that does not mean it is not ‘true.’ Memory is only through my own lens. Sometimes that comes from a feeling and from that feeling a fleshing out of the scene. It is my experience, the narrators experience of what did or did not happen. For example, when I was taken away at six by a man in a brown car, as much as I am ‘certain’ I was wearing pink and white checkered shorts and that the man’s car was brown, this is only my memory of it. Perhaps my shorts were not pink and white checkered. Perhaps they were red. Does that make my memory any less valid?

NIKIA CHENEY
Oh that is hard. I check with my sister to make sure I was remembering it right. The art of "writing" is making a scene from impressions. Looking back now at the memoir, I see places that I missed or timelines that I got wrong, but I do think the way the story feels is just as important in connecting to readers as getting the facts perfectly correct.

LAURIE MARKVART
When I asked my family, friends, and other sources for help to stimulate my memory, I discovered that their memories of the same events differed from mine and sometimes drastically. It just shows how, our memories, especially tied to traumatic events, are retained differently.

3. How do you use your writing for social change and why is that important to you?

JEM’s aside comments: this is why I write. I wrote my book for the HS dropouts and the punks to show them their first act is not their last and I wrote my book about punk rock and public defense to show the inequities in the criminal system of injustice in this country that I know well in my day job as a deputy public defender.

TONI ANN JOHNSON
Because I’m often writing about race, and my experience as “the other,” the desire to affect social change is implicit sometimes without my consciously trying to communicate that. When one is “othered,” the moral argument typically becomes one wherein the flaws of dominant culture racist ideas must be dismantled. Sometimes I use my writing specifically toward affecting change, for example,
when I’ve written about the importance of my work with planting trees in South Los Angeles. This is important because it’s an issue of environmental justice. Lower income areas have fewer tree and less green space than higher income areas and if the means to add more trees and green space exists, it’s, in my opinion, a cruelty not to provide the two.

In my fiction, the Arrington family is Black in a predominantly white world giving rise to a number of micro aggressions as well as situations that are overtly racist. In writing about them, I’m simply trying to show these things from the point of view that I experienced them in the hopes that readers can empathize. Maybe that empathy will lead to a change in behavior or an altered perspective or to greater insight into an experience the reader hadn’t seen or considered. I think all of that is part of “social change.” Social change, I think, requires empathy. If you don’t or can’t empathize with people who are different from you, and you have political, social, or economic power over them, there’s no motivation to fix societal unfairness. Fiction is a good tool toward helping readers to empathize with and understand those who are different from them. It’s important to me personally because as I see it, our society is unwell, our country is unwell, the world is unwell. Too many people determine what they feel and believe based on their limited perspective and it’s our responsibility as writers to broaden perspectives and to affirm the humanity of all people. I think many of our problems arise because some are viewed as less human than others.

HANNAH SWARD
Writing is conversation. Without conversation there is no dialogue and without dialogue there is no social change. In Strip I write about addiction. Despite how rampant it is in our country, the stigma, the many misconceptions remain. How do we as writers dispel these ‘old ideas”? One way is through story. By writing about my own experience, I hope to shed light that addiction does not discriminate. Class, race, education – no one is exempt. Addiction is not a choice. It is a disease. In writing about my own addiction I hope to help dispel the stigma. It is important to me because this lack of understanding contributes to the deep shame, the isolation, the despair many addicts suffer from. It was only by reading, by hearing other people’s stories that I sought help.

NIKIA CHENEY
Because my book is about mental illness in black communities, I really hope that I can be a voice that helps others realize that they are not alone. The stigma of mental illness is very real, so social change for me is bringing this to light in order
to have more spaces where those of us with mental illnesses can be helped. The burden is often on the families. I want to use my writing to highlight this.

**LAURIE MARKVART**
Not only do I mention resources in the back of my book and Audible for mental health support and services (encouraging those suffering to seek help), but most importantly, in my book, I tackle society’s lack of support for those who have a mental illness. While the public conversation is getting better, there is still a massive contradiction between society’s awareness of mental illness and actual acceptance—moreover, compassion. Currently, it’s trendy to talk about anxiety, depression, and mental health “triggers.” Still, society is NOT as accepting to engage in conversation about severe mental illness like bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, post-partum psychosis, suicide, etc. This must change. My mother suffered so profoundly in being shunned because of her illness, and I don’t want others to suffer. This is very important to me.

Lastly, I talk openly about my general anxiety disorder in the book and on social media, hoping to help others not feel alone if they are also suffering. I am not a mental health professional, but I am a soldier living life with a mental illness, and I want to talk about it, hoping to help others and push for change. I’ve thought that if my book can slightly impact society’s take on mental illness or help one person not feel so alone in their mental anguish, then all my suffering in writing this choppy and difficult story will be worth it a thousand times over.

4. Talk to us about how you use the themes in your books as a way to expand the normative discourses.

**JEM’s aside comments**: I think this is key. I wrote my long memoir Tales of an Inland Empire Girl to show the story of a half white half Chicana who is punk rock. And regarding my book about public defense, I will note that the deputies used to call my clients “the bodies”, that’s how dehumanizing it is in the criminal system. I also wrote my punk rock and public defense book to talk about the incarcerated class which no one talks about.

**TONI ANN JOHNSON**
One example in my work is the look at an adult child of narcissists. I think narcissism in parenting isn’t as widely understood as it should be because it’s not uncommon. But in American culture, and more specifically in many of the ethnic cultures that are part of American culture the “norm” is that we’re supposed to honor our parents and love and respect them no matter what abuse they inflict.
because they’re our parents. I’ve been questioning that in all three of my books. My first novel dealt with a narcissistic mother and her daughter and so do my more recent two books, Homegoing and Light Skin Gone to Waste, which are connected and about the same family. The latter two books look at narcissism in both parents and their daughter is recognizing the disorder, its effect on her, and questioning her relationships with her parents. In what I’m working on now, that same daughter is moving farther away from normalizing her parents’ abusive behavior. I’m now exploring family estrangement and no contact, which has not yet become mainstream, but it’s becoming more common as adult children of narcissists realize that people with Narcissistic Personality Disorder don’t change. Other examples are I tend to write about middle class or upper middle class African-Americans who are the social equal of their white friends and neighbors and how even when class differences are not relevant, because the Black people are not lower class, there are still hurdles to overcome in race relations due to misperceptions—the most common being that all Black people are at the bottom of the social hierarchy or should be at the bottom, and don’t deserve to occupy the space they claim it if has previously excluded them.

HANNAH SWARD
Often, the normative discourse around sex work is that it is fueled by drugs. By sharing my own experience, where this was not the case, I hope to open a window into a broader conversation dispelling this stigma. Doing so provides space for questions to be asked. How and why do young women get involved in sex work? What are contributing factors? How can we break the stigma and provide help? And how, by expanding the conversation can we create a space for women, for all genders, to talk about their experience, to seek help without shame or remorse? By writing about my own experience I’ve had so many young women share their ‘secrets’. By creating a safe space to share their secrets, secrets that add to the shame, hopelessness, isolation – the opportunity for them to know they are not alone, that is invaluable.

NIKIA CHENEY
Normative discourses ask us to engage with familiar stories. I want to break through in this by talking about something that is actually more common than assumed but just not talked about enough. What surprises me is that every time I read from the book, someone comes up to tell me about their brother or mother or child or friend who suffers the same thing. I want to say you are not alone. I really hope my book does this.
LAURIE MARKVART
I used themes of family dynamics, coming-of-age, societal expectations and characterizations, personal growth, and realizations to expand on the topic. Mental illness definitions are clinical, and yet when talking about human suffering, a mental illness diagnosis is different from person to person and is subjective. I encourage the conversation to stay open and, above all else, for society to have compassion as the topic evolves, especially for those who perceive mental illness as nothing but a trendy topic.

5. What advice do you have for writers engaging in truth telling and talking about hard subjects?

JEM’s aside comments: Just do it!

TONI ANN JOHNSON
Learn what you need to know. If you have a fixed idea about something, try to see the issue from another perspective even if that other perspective feels flawed to you. Have some understanding of it and then proceed with your version of what the “right” way is. Whether you are conscious of it or not, you are writing about your version of what’s right—what’s just and fair. But your argument isn’t as strong if you haven’t been gracious to the opposing view and tried to understand why it exists. That said, as you proceed if you believe your perspective then share it fearlessly.

HANNAH SWARD
Put all the ‘voices” aside. Get quiet. Put pen to paper, fingers to keyboard and write your truth. Don’t worry about ‘the audience’. Don’t worry or think about publication. Simply write. Write like no one is ever going to read it. If you’re not ready to write the hard parts, if you’re not ready to write the truth, write the parts that you can. Come back to the hard parts later. And if when later comes you’re still not ready, ask yourself why? What are you scared of? Often the answer lies in the future. Come back to present. Write as if no one is ever going to read what you are writing.

NIKIA CHENEY
I would say just be as honest as you can to yourself in why you are writing this story. I really used writing as a way to understand what had happened in my childhood and what was happening to me in present life. I stayed true to this (I
hope I stayed true to this) and I really questioned if I would want this story published. Ultimately I decided I would as it felt right and it honored my mother and daughter (gave me a way to express my love to them). But I had clear intentions of why of was telling the story before I sought publication so I would tell writers to really dig deep and make sure to understand intentions.

LAURIE MARKVART
They should deeply dive into why they are writing the story. What do they hope to accomplish? What’s their finish line? How do they feel writing about themselves and other people? How will the story impact others who are mentioned in the book? Is the author prepared for the potential emotional and mental strife of writing about a complicated subject? During this time of reflection, I suggest they write an outline or plot points and, during this time, discover if they get triggered by the subject(s) or if it enlightens them. Is the pain worth the story?

While I was writing, I actively worked with my mental health therapist when I hit hard emotional bumps in the manuscript that caused negative triggers. I also had mentors, and I attended non-fiction writing workshops and writer retreats. This community helped me learn other’s tactics for coping while writing. Writing is hard. Non-fiction and memoirs are even harder. But at the end of the day, some of the best memoirs move people and change society.