Event Title: The Facts Behind Memoir: How Research Expands the Vision and Market for Stories

Event Category: Nonfiction Craft and Criticism

Event Description: Non-celebrity writers are often told their memoirs are not marketable, but our panelists have found that research-driven memoirs occupy their own niche, with crossover genre appeal. We will explore the ways research can break memoir open, offering readers a deeper, fact-driven understanding of both the author and themselves. Panelists will share ideas for using archival research, interviews, immersion journalism, and more to illuminate the wider realities that drive our experiences.

Opening Remarks & Housekeeping Announcements:
Good morning and welcome to “The Facts Behind Memoir: How Research Expands the Vision and Market for Stories.” Thank you for sharing some of your Saturday morning with us! We are grateful you’re here, and we’re delighted we get to have this conversation with you! I’ll start with panelist introductions.

[Jody reads panelists’ bios; Sofia reads Jody’s]

Event Moderator: Jody Keisner (she/her) is the author of Under My Bed and Other Essays. Her work has appeared in the Los Angeles Review of Books, Fourth Genre, Brevity, Assay, Threepenny Review, The Normal School, and elsewhere. She is an Associate Professor of English and the editor of The Linden Review.


Additional Event Participants:

Minna Dubin (she/her) is the author of MOM RAGE: The Everyday Crisis of Modern Motherhood (Seal Press, 2023). She is the recipient of an artist enrichment grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women. She lives in Berkeley, CA with her husband, two kids, and no pets because enough is enough.
Jennifer Lunden (she/her) is the author of AMERICAN BREAKDOWN: Our Ailing Nation, My Body’s Revolt, and the Nineteenth-Century Woman Who Brought Me Back to Life, which was praised by LARB and WaPo, and called a “genre-bending masterpiece” by Hippocampus.

Unfortunately, Erica Berry was not able to join us this morning, but I’m told the paperback version of her book, Wolfish: Wolf, Self, and the Stories We Tell About Fear, launches this week!

Jody: This panel came about because I’ve been watching in awe as researched memoirs and researched collections of essays have been exploding onto the literary landscape over the past few years. The genre continues to build momentum in new and exciting ways. I was interested in being in conversation with writers who used research to “break open” their stories. My book, Under My Bed and Other Essays, about how fear shapes our lives as women, mothers, and people living with chronic illness, wouldn’t have come together if I hadn’t looked beyond the borders of my lived experience and into science, psychology, sociology, religion, and pop culture for the answers I sought. Yet compared to the research you’ll find in the other panelists’ books, I would describe my book as “research light.”

For the remainder of our panel, I’ll ask our panelists a few questions, after which we’ll open it up to the room for a twenty-minute Q&A.

To begin, I invite the panelists to tell us what their researched memoir is about and what brought them to this panel.

Participant Initial Remarks:

Minna Dubin
I sort of fell into writing a researched and reported book that includes memoir (but is possibly a work of social criticism more than anything else), because I really didn’t want to write a whole traditional memoir about my own mom rage. That would have felt disingenuous to my mothering life, which is full and beautiful and contains a lot more than rage. But I knew that mom rage is the topic that would sell. I also felt that and Mom Rage is a book that mothers of this moment need. My background is in writing facilitation with pregnant teens, many of whom have pretty harrowing stories to tell, so my work experience prepared me to interview mothers about their rage, and then figure out how to retell their stories in an
engaging way. Their stories ultimately helped shape the book. I also needed their stories to back mine up, because I was trying to prove that mom rage is a widespread phenomenon with its roots in patriarchy. As a society, we tend not to believe women unless there are droves of us claiming the same thing. Reportage and research supported my personal story and helped strengthen the book.

**Jennifer Lunden**

My book is called AMERICAN BREAKDOWN: Our Ailing Nation, My Body’s Revolt, and the Nineteenth-Century Woman Who Brought Me Back to Life. I’d been sick for six years when I discovered Jean Strouse’s biography of Alice James. Alice was a 19th-Century diarist better known for being the sister of the writer Henry James and the psychologist William James. She had an illness called neurasthenia, and her symptoms, primarily a disabling fatigue, reminded me so much of my own experience of what was then called chronic fatigue syndrome (and is now known as myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome, or ME/CFS), I wondered if our illnesses were one and the same. I decided I wanted to write about this, to try to trace our illnesses to their source.

I was thrilled to be invited to speak on this panel because I’m excited about the possibilities of the researched memoir. I think this approach to memoir is growing in popularity because for those of us who want to kindle social change, one way to do that in writing is by engaging both the head and the heart together.

**Sofia Ali-Khan**

A Good Country: My Life in Twelve Towns and the Devastating Battle for a White America is a braided narrative, part memoir and part the history of how American apartheid is maintained through the lens of twelve towns I called home. It’s the record of what happened when Trump campaigned on a ‘complete and total shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,’ and I found I needed to re-examine all I thought I knew about America. I started with retracing the color lines I’d tripped over as a racially ambiguous, Pakistani-American Muslim in the twelve towns I’d lived in all over the country. Then I searched for the stories of how those lines got there. What I found was a series of movements aimed at creating and maintaining a white America, with Brown and Black people chased to the margins. The histories I tell stretch from before America was a sovereign nation to today and the towns implicated in these stories stretch from coast
to coast and border to border, all part of the ongoing colonial project of America. But when I looked at the examples of other settler colonial nations, I realized: it doesn’t have to end this way.

**Moderator Questions:**

1. Describe the point in the writing process when you realized that the only way to actualize the story you wanted to tell was to include research.
2. Let’s talk about the logistics of research. Which research methods did you use? How often did your research require you to hit the pavement? Did you come against any barriers or dead ends?
3. How much time would you say was devoted just to researching if you had to quantify it? Three months? A year? Five years?
4. Can you talk about a time your research took you in a surprising and/or dismaying direction?
5. What did your research teach you about your personal story?

**Conclusion:** Audience Tips and Take-aways and Q&A