Event title: Greater than the Sum of Its Parts: Writing and Structuring Essay Collections

Event description: Putting together an essay collection is like arranging an album—each piece should be its own work of art, with its own unique effect; but the pieces should also build on each other so that the collection as a whole has a sense of flow, momentum, and resonance. How do you do both? In this session, five authors of essay collections will discuss considerations like thematic vs. chronological structure, repetition vs. redundancy, and balancing variety with cohesiveness.

Event category: Nonfiction craft and criticism

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A few reminders before we begin:
• For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, (identify moderator), 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.

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Moderator: Lilly Dancyger is the author of First Love, a collection of personal and critical essays on female friendship forthcoming from The Dial Press in May; and Negative Space, a reported and illustrated memoir about art, addiction, and inheritance; and editor of Burn It Down, a critically-acclaimed anthology of essays on women’s anger.
Panelists:

Melissa Febos is the bestselling author of four books, including Girlhood, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism, and Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative. An NEA and Guggenheim fellow, she is a professor at The University of Iowa.

Alexander Chee is most recently the author of the essay collection How To Write An Autobiographical Novel. A recipient of the 2021 Guggenheim and USA Fellowships, he is a professor of English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth College. His third novel, Other People's Husbands, is forthcoming in 2025.

CJ Hauser is a multi-genre, non-binary, queer amphibian of a person. Their memoir, The Crane Wife, is published by Doubleday. They are also the author of two novels: Family of Origin and The From-Aways. They teach creative writing at Colgate University.

Aisha Sabatini Sloan is the author of the essay collections The Fluency of Light, Dreaming of Ramadi in Detroit, the book-length essay Borealis, and a collaboration with her father called Captioning the Archives. She is an assistant professor of creative nonfiction at the University of Michigan.

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Opening remarks:

Each panelist will briefly describe their essay collection(s), including the themes and/or overarching narrative(s) that hold the essays together. (Approx 3 minutes each.)

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Moderator questions:
How did your collection(s) come together? Did you have the idea for the book first and then write the essays, or write the essays as stand-alone pieces and realize later that they fit together as a book?

How did you decide what order to put the essays in? What were your organizing principles?

When writing and/or compiling your collection(s), were you thinking about how similar or different the essays were in terms of form, style, length? Were you aiming for consistency or variety or trying to strike a balance between the two? What did that look like for you?

How did you handle the repetition of important information or events, so that each essay included the necessary context but it didn’t feel repetitive?

CJ: This is a big question and maybe others can chime in too, but since The Crane Wife is subtitled “a memoir in essays” I’m putting you on the spot… Can you speak to this in-between label? What do you think distinguishes a memoir in essays from a collection of personal essays?

Aisha: Graywolf is republishing your collection Dreaming of Ramadi in Detroit (congratulations!!), can you talk a little bit about that process, and what it was like to revisit a collection you originally published seven years ago? What changes did you make for the new edition?

Melissa: The first time I read Abandon Me, I read it like a memoir… and then I heard you speak about it somewhere, and you referred to “the main essay” in that book, broken up and interspersed between other shorter essays, and it blew my mind. Can you talk a little bit about the structure of that book?

Alex: The essays in How to Write an Autobiographical Novel were written over several years and then collected—I’m curious how that impacted your sense of the “point of telling” for the book as a whole, or what it was like to bring perspectives from different periods of your life together in a book so that they fit together so
well. Did you do a lot of revising/updating as you compiled them, or what did that process look like?

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10-15 minutes for audience questions.