EVENT TITLE: Writing About Addiction

Event category: Nonfiction & Memoir

Event description: Addiction is a reality for many writers and the loved ones they write about. For memoirists who want to tell their stories, how they handle writing about their own and other people’s addictions can be a tricky ethical minefield. Some writers must navigate issues of anonymity, a cornerstone of 12-step recovery programs. Others must consider how their stories may raise issues of legal liability. How can we share these stories ethically? How can we balance truth-telling and privacy?

Event organizer & Moderator

Christie Tate is the author of two memoirs, Group: How One Therapist and a Circle of Strangers Saved My Life, which was a New York Times bestseller and has been translated into 19 languages; and B.F.F.: A Memoir of Friendship Lost & Found. Her essays have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes and have appeared in The New York Times, The Los Angeles Review, Carve Magazine, The Rumpus, and elsewhere.

Event participants:

Johnathan Winston Jones is a queer social scientist and writer with recent work in The Sun. Jones’ memoir on addiction received the distinguished thesis award from Northwestern University’s MFA program. Jones was a Fulbright Scholar to the United Kingdom with degrees in Human Rights and Public Policy.

Laura Cathcart Robbins is the host of the popular podcast, The Only One In the Room, and author of the Atria/Simon & Schuster memoir, Stash. Her recent articles in The Huffington Post and The Temper on the subjects of race, recovery, and divorce have garnered her worldwide acclaim.
Laura McKowen is the bestselling author of *We Are the Luckiest* and *Push Off From Here*, and the Founder of The Luckiest Club, an international sobriety support community.

Eliene Zimmerman has been a journalist for 30 years, and a columnist and regular contributor to *The New York Times* for 20 years. She is the author of the 2020 memoir *Smacked: A Story of White Collar Ambition, Addiction, and Tragedy*. She is also a clinical social worker in a hospital emergency department.

**Introduction:**

A. **Opening remarks and housekeeping:**
   a. A few reminders before we begin:
      i. For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel (Christie Tate) know and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
      ii. Please make sure the spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
      iii. Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
      iv. Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
      v. 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.

B. **Panelists opening remarks:** Call on Panelists one-by-one and let them introduce themselves briefly
   a. Who you are
b. Pronouns

c. Relationship to addiction and how it shows up in your writing
   i. Jonathan Winston Jones
   ii. Laura Cathcart Robbins
   iii. Laura McKowan
   iv. Eilene Zimmerman

d. Here are a few statistics on addiction to keep in mind during our discussion: According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 46.3 million Americans aged 12 and over met the application DSM-5 criteria for having a substance abuse disorder in the past year, and of those, 29.5 million were classified as having an alcohol use disorder.¹
   i. 1 in 10 Americans over the age of 12 have an alcohol use disorder²
   ii. 95,000 people die because of alcohol every year in the U.S.³
   iii. 50,000⁴ people die annually from Opioid overdose
   iv. 12% of American children live with at least one parent who abuses alcohol or drugs or who has a substance abuse disorder⁵

v. Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation estimates that an addict’s destructive behavior affects at least four other people; The American Medical Association’s

³ https://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/addiction-statistics/
⁴ https://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/addiction-statistics/
⁵ https://americanaddictioncenters.org/rehab-guide/guide-for-families-i
estimates are higher—the addict’s behavior affects at least five other people.

Questions for panelists:

C. Before we jump into the ethical considerations, let’s take a threshold question. **Why write about addiction? Why is this subject important? Why make the struggle public in your writing?**
   a. Laura Cathcart Robbins: This subject is important because it touches so many people’s lives and our stories can help and heal others.
   b. Laura McGowen: This subject is important because it is part of so many human’s experiences. Our stories keep others from having to be alone.
   c. Eiliene Zimmerman: This subject is important because it’s a vital part of many people’s lives. Our stories help other people.
   d. Jonathan Winston Jones: This subject is important because it’s a matter of life and death; stories are a way that we heal.

D. **Eilene and Johnathan**: You write about other people’s addictions. **What kind of permissions did you seek, if any, before writing? What about before publication? What kind of reservations did you have about potentially telling someone else’s story?**
   a. **JW**: I didn’t send the publication to my mother before the publication date. I subsequently sent it to her. I was worried, as was my editor, about telling the story with the right ethics, and we worked hard to make it truthful also.
to allow my mother her dignity and humanity by exploring the context of her addiction.

b. **EZ**: My subject was my former husband who died and so permissions were not the central concern of my publication process. I wanted to show he was a full person and that his addiction was only one part of his experience. I worked hard to get the facts right and to include scenes of times before the addiction took hold to give a fuller picture of how addiction distorts a life.

E. **Laura McKowen**: You write about your own addiction. **In your work did you find it necessary to seek permission before publication? If not, what kind of privacy considerations did you encounter leading up to publication?**

a. **LM**: By the time I published my first memoir, I was very public through the community I founded. I felt authorized by my own sobriety and my leadership of the group to tell my story.

F. **Laura Cathcart-Robbins**: Your work describes your participation in an anonymous fellowship. **What did you hope to gain by writing about your participation in an anonymous fellowship? What do we gain for anonymity? What is lost with anonymity? When you approached your writing about your own experiences, how did you think about the tradition of anonymity and balance that with telling your own story?**

a. **LCR**: I write to shine the light on addiction. I hope my story will help others who are questioning their habits and wondering about addiction. I think it’s possible to
balance the principles of anonymity and story-telling. I asked for help in shaping my story.

G. All panelists: Do you have any regrets about anything you’ve published related to addiction?

i. Eilene and Jonathan: Have any of your relationships improved because you wrote about addiction? Or have any of them strained following the publication of your work?
   1. EZ: I have no regrets and for that I’m grateful. My kids were supportive of the book, and we’ve had great conversations on the backend of publication.
   2. JJ: I have no regrets about publication either. The subject is difficult to discuss, but important for individuals and for our culture to move forward into healing.

ii. Laura and Laura: Is there a trade off between helping strangers and exposing yourself/others in writing about addiction recovery?
   1. LM: It’s scary to be exposed as one is when one publishes a memoir. There’s no way around that fear. The fear is not telling is much greater though.
   2. LCR: There are many trade-offs when putting personal work out into the world. The balance is helping others and not harming yourself in the process. Lots of writers talk about how you have to protect your heart and your mind.
when you are working on creative work that gets close to the bone.

H. All panelists: Who were you worried about hurting when your work was published?
a. All: It’s scary to worry you will hurt your family. Ex-spouses/partners are also a source of fear. People who are still using are a source of fear. Every memoirist wonders if their work will earn them ostracization from their community and support or scorn from strangers.

I. All panelists: Did you lose any relationships because of the work you’ve published related to addiction?
a. All: No relationships were terminated, but many of them changed as our stories went out into the world.

J. All panelists: I assume that you have held some information/stories back from readers because of privacy. Can you talk about the boundaries you draw around the private matters—family only or not for public consumption—and how that strengthens both the word and your relationship with the reader? (Assumption: Having boundaries is good for the writer, and what’s good for the writer is good for the relationship between writer an audience.)
a. All: We all know that to create publishable work we have to leave some of the information out. Our duty is to tell the truth, education, entertain, and elucidate, but no writer owes readers everything—as in, every gory detail about the debauchery or degradation that occurs with addiction. Holding back is an act of craft and also service
and care for the writer, her relationships and the reader. These obligations must be balanced.

K. **All panelists**: Did your editors raise any privacy concerns when you were preparing for publication? What concerns? Describe those conversations.
   
i. Did you ever push back when an editor/agent wanted more detail? Or when they wanted less?
   
   ii. Did your editors ever press you to get written permission from the people about whom you were writing?

   1. **JJ**: My editor at *The Sun* had concerns about how my mother would react to the essay I wrote. We worked through permissions over a long period of time.

   2. **EZ**: Less concerns for me because the addict had died before publication.

   3. **LM and LCR**: We fielded some questions from the legal folks, but were able to disguise people and give them their privacy/anonymity and still tell the story as we wanted to.

L. **All panelists**: Did you ever consider fictionalizing your accounts to protect other people?

   i. All panelists: In early drafts, did you do more protecting of yourself or others and have to slowly, through several drafts, have to become more exposed—and expose others—to make the work sing?
1. **ALL:** Early drafts are a mess of protecting other people and trying to get the craft elements right and sifting through the scenes to find the story. It gets easier to tell the story as it needs to be told as the drafts get deeper and more intense.

**M. Eilene:** Your book is about someone who died from addiction. Did his death give you more freedom to say whatever you wanted to say about your experience of his drug use? How does death change the calculus?

a. **EZ:** Undoubtedly, my ex-husband’s passing made it easier to tell the story. He was frozen in time, and sadly, he didn’t get to have a say. I believe I honored him and his memory through the story I told.

**N. Jonathan:** Your essay *Penned* is about your mother’s drug addiction. Has she read the essay? Do you worry that she will come across it or someone will show it to her? Will you share it with her one day?

a. **JJ:** I sent my mother the essay a few years after I wrote it. I know I’ve done what I need to do to keep her informed about what I’ve written within the context of both her and my limitations.

**O. All panelists:** What is gained when writing about addiction? What did you hope to gain when sharing these stories with the world (versus in a private setting or anonymously)? What does hope mean in this context?
a. **ALL:** Writing about addiction allows other people to see their lives reflected in writing. By including our names and faces, we made both addiction and survival more real. Both are real: the pain and the aftermath. It’s important to chronicle this very real—practically mundane—aspect of modern life. The world—our families and work places—are filled with addictions. Writing about loving one or being one is important to show what’s possible especially for people gripped in darkness.