AWP24 Event Outline

Event Title: When Essays Become Books: the Ins and Outs of Creating Collections

Event Description: Essays are a popular genre, and sometimes essayists consider turning their work into a collection. The thought of taking essays and forming a book can feel daunting and perhaps intimidating. What order and structure? Which essays belong? Do I have enough essays for a book? What about previously-published work? Is there pressure to categorize essay collections as memoir? In this session, panelists will discuss the ins and outs of creating essay collections—from initial idea to published work.

Type of Event: Nonfiction Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer and Moderator
Patrice Gopo: Patrice Gopo writes stories steeped in themes of place, belonging, and home. She is the author of two essay collections: AUTUMN SONG and ALL THE COLORS WE WILL SEE. Her debut picture book, ALL THE PLACES WE CALL HOME, is based on one of her essays. Please visit patricegopo.com to learn more.

Event Participants
Theresa Okokon: Theresa Okokon is a Wisconsinite living in New England. She's a writer, a storyteller, teacher, and the cohost of Stories From The Stage. Theresa's forthcoming memoir in essays about memory, family stories, and the death of her father is called The Okokon Family Orchestra.

Leslie Contreras Schwartz: Leslie Contreras Schwartz is a multi-genre writer, a 2021 Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellow, and the 2019-2021 Houston Poet Laureate. She is the winner of the 2022 C&R Press Nonfiction Prize for From the Womb of Sky and Earth, a lyrical memoir. She teaches poetry and nonfiction at the MFA Program in Creative Writing at Alma College, Michigan.

Randon Billings Noble: Randon Billings Noble is an essayist. She is the author of the collection Be with Me Always and the editor of the lyric essay anthology A Harp in the Stars. She is the founding editor of the literary magazine After the Art and teaches in the MFA programs at Goucher and West Virginia Wesleyan.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements:
Hello, everyone!! Welcome to When Essays Become Books: the Ins and Outs of Creating Collections. Maybe you’re watching this session today because you are in the process of shaping a book of essays. Or maybe you’re here because part of you wonders if shaping a book of essays might be in your future. Or perhaps you are like so many other people, and you just like to learn new things. Regardless of what brought you to this session, we’re so glad you’re here.
I’m Patrice Gopo, and I’ll be moderating today’s discussion with this fabulous panel. I’m the author of two essay collections: *All the Colors We Will See* and *Autumn Song: Essays on Absence*. With my first essay collection I had a literary agent who submitted my book proposal to a number of different imprints at large publishing houses before that manuscript received an offer. With my second essay collection, I submitted that collection on my own and specifically targeted small and university presses. After shaping two books of essays, I’m a firm believer that in the process of shaping a book of essays, we just might learn something new about ourselves, about the world we inhabit, about our work. Given all that, I’m looking forward to this conversation that will soon unfold.

A warm welcome to the panel. I’m delighted that we are all here. Let’s please start with you each introducing yourself and sharing some of your experience gathering essays into a book. Please also include a little about your road to publication.

**Participant Initial Remarks:**

**Grace Talusan:** I’m Grace Talusan. My first book, THE BODY PAPERS, won the Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing and the Massachusetts Book Award in Nonfiction. I also teach in the nonfiction writing program at Brown University.

**Theresa Okokon:** I’m Theresa Okokon, and I am a social worker by education, and also have training in trauma responsive yoga. These days, besides my day-job, I work as a storyteller, writer, teacher of storytelling and writing, and co-host of a storytelling TV show. I came into writing
by way of storytelling as I wanted to find a way for my stories to live on paper. I learned, through Grace Talusan, that this was called “essays” so I took a year-long essay class with Grace. In that class I realized that all of my essays tended to point in one direction, and to ME it felt like they were all telling the same story from different angles. That is how I realized I was writing a book, so I took another year-long memoir class to compose the draft of that book. I later was signed by my agent, and have since signed with Atria Books at Simon & Schuster for publication of my memoir in essays, THE OKOKON FAMILY ORCHESTRA, due out in 2025.

**Leslie Contreras Schwartz:** I’m Leslie Contreras Schwartz and my background is in poetry; I’ve written four collections of poetry and was the Houston Poet Laureate. I wrote my collection of lyrical essays, FROM THE WOMB OF SKY AND EARTH in a burst of creative energy, knowing that I had something to say in the essay form.

**Randon Billings Noble:** I’m Randon Billings Noble and I’m a dedicated essayist.

I was writing essays long before I knew I was writing a book. But I’m a rather analog person, and the idea of having a book – of having my essays collected in one actual, tactile, tangible place – appealed to me. I was also interested in teaching at the college and graduate level and a book was necessary to that aim.

My collection *Be with Me Always* had a convoluted path to publication – from having and losing a New York agent through an intense submissions process to a happy ending with university press. I’m a huge fan of university presses because of their interest in publishing more
literary and experimental essay collections and their commitment to their writers’ independence and creative control.

Moderator Questions:

Broader Questions

Patrice’s comment: we’ll get to some of the more logistical/practical questions about turning essays into books. However, first, I’d love for us to consider the broader journey toward writing books of essays and the overlap that exists between memoir, hybrid work, etc.

(Please note: initial responses based on who expressed particular interest in answering a specific question)

1) In the essay collection *Changing My Mind*, Zadie Smith writes, “This book was written without my knowledge. That is, I didn’t realize I’d written it until someone pointed it out to me.” What do you think about that quote? Do you find yourself resonating? Or perhaps you had a different experience? *Let’s begin with Leslie.*

2) Let’s consider the idea of THEME. Do you think a book of essays needs a theme across the entire collection? If so, how do writers uncover the theme (or themes) in their work? *Let’s begin with Randon.*

3) Let’s talk a little bit about some different categories: essay collections, memoir-in-essays, memoir. What thoughts come to mind as you hear those words? *Let’s begin with Theresa.*
4) Warnings and naysayers often talk of the difficulty in publishing essay collections (unless you are well-known, a celebrity, etc.) But we’ve all published books. What are your thoughts about pursuing publication with essays? Are publishers interested in this work? Let’s begin with Grace . . .

5) Do you think that the publishing marketplace can put pressure on a manuscript? To try and pressure it to be a memoir versus essay collection. With memoirs being so popular, is there pressure to categorize essay collections as memoir? Let’s begin with first Theresa and then Randon . . .

Logistical Questions

Patrice’s comment: Let’s spend some time considering some of the practical questions writers might ask as they are thinking about gathering their essays into a collected work. No need for everyone to answer each of these questions, but a couple of perspectives would be great!!

1) Any suggestions or tips for ordering or structuring a book of essays? Let’s begin with first Leslie and then Randon . . .

2) Everything you’ve ever written perhaps doesn’t belong in one book of essays. How can a writer determine which essays belong? Let’s begin with Grace . . .

3) How many essays does a writer need to create a book? Or is this about pure numbers? (Patrice answered)

4) Is it okay to include previously-published work? Is there a limit to the amount of previously published work? Let’s begin with Randon . . .
5) What is the process for submitting your work and finding a publishing partner? Let’s begin with Theresa . . .

**Patrice’s Closing Comment:**
We’ve covered a lot here in this short hour. Our hope is that you leave this panel with tools, tips, and ideas for shaping essay collections and moving those collections toward publication. Please note that at the end of the official outline for this session, we’ve included some resources that might help you. To the panelists: what final one-sentence thought, suggestion, or encouragement do you have for anyone thinking about taking their essays and creating a book? And please share where people can go to find out more about you and your work.

**Participant Final Remarks:**

**Grace Talusan:** There are many paths to publication.
[www.gracetalusan.com/](http://www.gracetalusan.com/)

**Theresa Okokon:** Believe that people want to hear your story.
[www.theresaokokon.com](http://www.theresaokokon.com)

**Leslie Contreras Schwartz:** Don’t be afraid of the editing process. It can deepen meaning in your book and is exciting!
[www.lesliecschwartz.com](http://www.lesliecschwartz.com)

**Randon Billings Noble:** It can be a long road – or feel like a game of Chutes and Ladders. But if you’re dedicated to the essay form – and I think it’s such an important way of writing in the world – stick with it.
To quote Cheryl Strayed writing as Sugar: Do the work. Keep the faith. Be true blue. You are a writer because you write. Keep writing… Your book has a birthday. You don’t know what it is yet.

[www.randonbillingsnoble.com](http://www.randonbillingsnoble.com)

**Moderator Final Remarks**

**Patrice Gopo:**
Thank you so much to the wonderful panelists for their thoughtful comments and conversation. And thank you to all who listened in on this discussion. I hope that you leave here knowing that engaging with shaping a collection is an act of discovery that might help you understand something new about yourself, your work, or the world around you. If you’d like to learn more about me and my work, please visit patricegopo.com. Wishing you every good thing with your work!

**RESOURCES:**

“Forest in the Trees: The Challenges of Shaping a Book (not a Collection) of Essays” by Rebecca McClanahan

“In Defense of Themelessness” by Randon Billings Noble

Authors Guild *From Manuscript to Marketplace* Webinar Featuring *Autumn Song: Essays on Absence*:
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhuGo1adKPk&t=131s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhuGo1adKPk&t=131s)