**EVENT OUTLINE**

**Title:** Family Secrets: Balancing Love, Culture, and the Stories We Can’t Ignore  
Room 2207, Kansas City Convention Center, Street Level  
Saturday, February 10, 2024  
10:35 am to 11:50 am

**OPENING REMARKS:**
Welcome to Family Secrets: Balancing Love, Culture, and the Stories We Can’t Ignore. 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.

**Event Description:**

Writing about family requires balancing loving portrayals with exposure of more difficult truths. How do nonfiction writers balance an ethics of care and a freedom to tell their truths when the story involves family? How can we manage disclosures and input or lack thereof before and after publication? What unique
pressures do writers from immigrant, LGTBQIA, and families of color face? This interactive discussion features a diverse panel of writers who have grappled with writing family secrets.

**Event Agenda:**

The moderator will begin by introducing the panelists who will introduce their own work and describe their experiences of writing and publishing their books. After a 30 minute moderated discussion among the panelists, the audience will be invited to engage in the topic through a series of prepared activities and discussion prompts for about 30 minutes, followed by a summary and wrap-up by the panel and moderator.

**Introduction of Panelists:**

**Susan Ito** is the author of the s AZe de memoir *I Would Meet You Anywhere*. She coedited the anthology *A Ghost At Heart's Edge: Stories and Poems of Adoption*. She is a member of the San Francisco Writers' Grotto, and on faculty at Mills College at Northeastern University.

**Roberto Lovato** is the author of *Unforgetting* (Harper Collins), a “groundbreaking” memoir the *New York Times* picked as an Editor’s Choice. Lovato is also a journalist and assistant professor of English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

**Leslie Absher** is a journalist and essayist. Her debut memoir *Spy Daughter, Queer Girl* (Latah Books) was a finalist for the 2023 Judy Grahn Award for Lesbian Nonfiction. Her essays have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Salon*, and elsewhere. She is a regular contributor to *Ms.* magazine.

**Mas Masumoto** is an organic peach, nectarine, apricot, and grape farmer near Fresno, California. He has written thirteen books including award-winning *Epitaph for a Peach* and *Wisdom of the Last Farmer*. His newest book, *Secret Harvests*, is about a family history of struggles, disabilities and secrets.
Angie Chuang is a nonfiction writer and an associate professor of journalism at University of Colorado Boulder. Her first book, The Four Words for Home, won an Independent Publishers Award. Her work has appeared in Creative Nonfiction, Litro, the Asian American Literary Review, Vela, and others.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Hello everyone, and welcome to “Family Secrets: Balancing Love, Culture, and the Stories We Can’t Ignore.”

I wanted to bring this panel together because last November, I published a memoir, titled I Would Meet You Anywhere, that chronicled an enormous secret: my own existence. I had been born in secret in the aftermath of the Japanese American incarceration during WWII, adopted by a Japanese American family, and met my birth mother when I was in college. For forty years, we had a rollercoaster of a relationship where I was not allowed to tell anyone else my identity. I was introduced as a “friend of the family” or just not mentioned. As a biracial person, I was deeply curious about my “other half” but my birth mother would not reveal the identity of my father. I was a secret, and secrets were kept from me, and I kept my own secrets as well. This memoir was the culmination of all of those secrets that ultimately had to see the light of day.

I’d like to start by having each of our panelists briefly introduce themselves and their writing. What family secrets did you find so compelling that you had to write about them? What were some of the things that made these stories so compelling? What were some of the challenges you encountered, and how did you manage those? Tell us some of the ups and downs of your journey, in the writing, the publishing and post-publication.

PANELIST REMARKS

Roberto: Growing up in a Salvadoran immigrant family in San Francisco’s Mission district during the civil wars in Central America, secrets dominated both my
personal and political life. I just didn’t know about them. Writing my book led me to not only explore the secrets of family and the secrets of states, but it also allowed me to see the invisible thread(s) running from the secrets of family to the secrets of state.

Doing so made me realize that, for me, writing is about connecting the epic and intimate. In times of intense and intersecting crisis, the job of the memoirist is to help readers see these connections in their own crisis-riddled families and countries.

Leslie: I grew up in a house of secrets - my dad’s, that he was a spy, and mine, that I liked girls. Neither secret was ever discussed growing up. My parents were from Texas and came of age in the early 60s. My mother was a painter and my father planned to work as a city manager in San Antonio before he switched careers to work for the CIA. I always knew that as a family, we were all not supposed to talk about my father’s occupation - whatever that was. It was important and something I wasn’t supposed to ask about or mention. So, in a sense, I kept a secret I didn’t have any clarity on. But that’s common for children of intelligence officers. Unlike my father who joined the CIA voluntarily in his twenties, received a paycheck, and retired from it after nearly 32 years, I was born into my father’s secret world. It was the air I breathed. When I did find out - from a stranger on a CIA base - everything fell into place. Why my dad was so secretive, so anti-communist, so circumspect in crowds always looking over his shoulder. But that didn’t mean it was easy for me to come out as the daughter of a spy. That took many years. I had to free myself word by word. I began writing this memoir when I was forty and it took nearly 17 years before it was published. Writing takes the time it takes. Especially memoir. The other secret was my queer sexuality. I knew I liked girls and also knew that this wasn’t okay. It was a stain I could never get rid of. After I graduated from college in Boston, I found the women’s community and came out as a lesbian. I became super-queer by going to Pride, and gay dance clubs, and joining a women’s soccer team. When I finally came out to my father in a letter, he said he couldn’t accept it and that it wasn’t natural. “It” being me. That drove a wedge between us for decades. Ironically, it was the
process of writing this book, needing answers about his work in the CIA, especially his involvement in a coup in Greece, that enabled us to repair our relationship. Slowly, through research, travel, meeting with scholars, and eventually having conversations with my father, I came to a kind of understanding about his secrets and mine. There are many truths; I learned the ones I needed to. It wasn’t easy and there is much that I will never know but writing this book gave me back my relationship with my father. It also grounded me in my truths, political and personal, and allowed me to let go of what wasn’t mine. For that, I will always be grateful.

Leslie’s reading: He was making it sound like the Greek military and the CIA never crossed paths. As if “the colonels,” as the dictators came to be called, had arrested and tortured people in some other Greece, not the Greece where we had lived and where he had worked.

“I’ve heard horrible stories,” I said, recalling what friends had told me—instances of guns shoved into faces, people dragged from their homes and beaten inside dark cells. My voice wobbled. I pushed the sharp edge of the creased straw deeper into my palm, wishing I had some kind of proof or at least more information.

“Were your friends on the ground?” Dad popped the chips into his mouth, brushed his fingers together to dust off the salt, and reached for his water glass.

I watched a single ice cube slide into his mouth. I had no idea what he meant by “on the ground.” Was he talking about troops, soldiers on a battlefield? The people who told me stories of torture were friends I had met in my twenties after college—not soldiers, just citizens.

“Yes,” I said.

“Well, so was I, and there was none of that.”
Dad lowered his water glass. Subject closed. Conversation over. This was what always happened. I sounded lame, and he sounded right.

When the food arrived, Dad hunched over his plate to eat. Every now and then, he looked over at the television, which was now a shiny black surface. I had other questions, but what was the point? It was 2002, and even though Dad had been retired for over ten years, it didn’t matter. He’d never tell me the truth. Besides, if I kept pushing for answers, I might lose the tiny, anemic shard of a relationship we had. Barely had. And for what? What did I think this would help me understand anyway? I finished my cheesy enchiladas and watched Dad pay the check in silence.

I didn’t know it then, but my search for answers about my father and our secret CIA life was just beginning. One day, I thought I might write about his role, the CIA’s role in the Greek coup. A journalist’s investigation into history, full of dates and facts. At least that’s what I thought it would be about—an expose of his guilt, his culpability. I couldn’t anticipate the ways it would evolve into a story about secrets. My father’s and mine. And that in the end, it wouldn’t only be about secrets; it would be about love too.

Mas: please write your opening remarks here):

I thought I knew my family.
Growing up Japanese American, my family didn't share much about our history. I had vaguely heard of a "lost aunt." We had no photos, no written documents, no stories about her. Once and a while a reference was made about an aunt "with issues" who had died.
Then I got a phone call from a funeral home in 2010 that changed everything. A 90-year old woman lay in a coma and in hospice, they believed she
was my mother's sister. Shocked, I verified this identity and yes, she was the lost aunt, separated from our family for 70 years, still alive in Fresno, a few miles from our family farm.

I was haunted by this discovery. How did she survive? Why was she kept hidden? How did both shame and resilience empower this lady and my family to move forward through a saga of being foreigners in America?

Every family has secrets - the heart of my memoir: Secret Harvests, A Hidden Story of Separation and the Resilience of a Family Farm.

Angie: I’m working on a second memoir now that has some grounding in my first-generation immigrant family from Taiwan’s history. In my first book, The Four Words for Home, I wrote a braided memoir about an Afghan family in the wake of 9/11 and incorporated my own family’s history. Much of it was about my father’s story of immigrating to the United States during the 1960s, when U.S. immigration policy created a version of the American Dream for so many skilled workers and students from Asia and other countries--and how that dream was derailed when he manifested bipolar disorder. His inability to accept this diagnosis and address his mental health had much to do with cultural taboos and secrecy in Chinese culture. My writing and publishing the book while he was still alive was equally complicated, not just for him but also my mom, brother, and others. Now, my second memoir is more broadly focused, but is based on the concept of One Heart in Mandarin Chinese, which means singleminded determination, a defining trait of both my father’s personality and his mental illness. Here’s an excerpt from it. It begins with my researching and asking about a flight I believed my family and I had been booked on when I was a child. We had changed our plans, and the had crashed:

As I researched Flight 759, I wondered why my family had not talked about—and apparently not thought about, if my parents’ reactions were any indication—the crash since that day. As a child, I had quietly thought about it often. I knew that Good Confucian Daughters didn’t bring up topics their parents didn’t want to talk about. …
Looking back, I think the Summer of 1982, and that Florida trip in particular, resonated with me because it was a high point for my family. As my mother said, we were lucky then. It was, in particular, a very good time for my father, a peak of his career and—unbeknownst to us at the time—his mental health.

In the years that followed, Dad became prone to fits of rage, lengthy diatribes about how everyone—his bosses at work, friends, and even us, his family—were against him. He and Mom fought more. When Dad had his first depressive episode after he suddenly left his engineering job, we pretended he was just “resting” after many years of long hours and sleep deprivation. Things got worse, much worse—entire days spent in bed, followed by the “home improvement” projects that he worked on all hours, hardly sleeping, but never finished. Soon, our whole house was a construction zone, with walls torn down to the studs and piles of sheetrock and tools. I got used to falling asleep to hammering or drilling in the wee hours of the morning. The feeling that our home had been subjected to a series of explosions, that we were constantly tiptoeing around things for fear of stepping on a nail or dislodging some work in progress, mirrored our psychological states. We ignored things that were broken, stepping over them, pretending they weren’t there—or that they were supposed to be that way. We latched on to what illusions of normalcy we could glean (don’t all dads go on these home-improvement kicks?) and never acknowledged to each other anything was wrong.

The first time anyone in our family used the word “bipolar” (or “manic” or “depressed”) in front of each other was after I went to college, took a psychology class, met people who revealed they had been diagnosed with manic depression (as it was more commonly called then), and returned home on a break. I couldn’t not say it. “Dad, you are NOT NORMAL,” I yelled at him on the final day of winter break my sophomore year. He was up on the roof, pulling shingles, as I craned my neck and shouted at him. “You have manic depression. You are manic right now. Do you know what bipolar disorder is?” He never stopped yanking at the shingles with his inverted hammer, the fury building behind his thick glasses. “No daughter of mine calls her father crazy!” he yelled, kicking a pile of shingles until they came cascading off the roof onto the deck with a clatter. I jumped. The misshapen nails on the weather-beaten brown shingles were rusted and bent into odd angles, like broken limbs.
In that one afternoon, I had broken every Good Confucian Daughter rule in the book. But the space between me and my family had already widened irreversibly.

(end of Angie’s excerpt)

Thank you, panelists! Now we’d like to hear more about you, our audience’s, experiences with this theme. What brought you to this panel? Might you be grappling with writing with some family secrets of your own?

We’d like to get a sense of who is in the room. How many of you (show of hands) are from the Midwest? East Coast? West Coast? Southeast? Southwest? International?

How many of you are writing memoir? Fiction? Poetry or another genre?

AUDIENCE ACTIVITIES

Now you will have the chance to share with each other. Turn to the person sitting next to you and we’ll do some sharing.

● Think-Pair-Share - each person thinks for a minute about their own family secrets and writing about them, then pairs up with someone sitting near them, and they take turns sharing with each other.
● What is the hardest thing about writing about this secret? What gets in your way as a writer? Share for 3 minutes each, then switch.
● Then SQUARE THE PAIRS (4) Pairs, find another pair to share with! Talk for 10 minutes. Think of something you want to ask or say to the panel, maybe something that came up for your group.

After about 30 minutes of audience conversation, we will wrap up with any takeaways or insights and wrap up this session. Thanks for being here!