2024 AWP/EVENT OUTLINE

TITLE: Crafting Unforgettable Characters—a Writer’s Guide to Storytelling

EVENT CATEGORY: Fiction Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator

Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry: Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry has published over fifty stories and received ten Pushcart Prize nominations and three special mentions in the Pushcart Prize anthologies. She’s is the winner of the Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction and the Raz/Shumaker Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction for her first collection of stories, What Isn’t Remembered, long-listed for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize and shortlisted for the William Saroyan International Prize. Her debut novel, The Orchard, was picked by the NY Post as one of the best books of the year and was a finalist for the 2023 Chautauqua Prize. It has been translated into many languages.

Event Participants

Jen Fawkes: Jen Fawkes is the author of Mannequin and Wife, a 2020 Shirley Jackson Award Nominee, Foreword INDIES gold medalist, and winner of the 2023 Phillip H. McMath Post-Publication Book Award. Her collection Tales the Devil Told Me was a Foreword INDIES silver medalist, a Largehearted Boy Favorite Story Collection of 2021, and a finalist for the 2022 World Fantasy Award for Single-Author Story Collection. Jen's fiction won the 2021 Porter Fund Literary Prize and has appeared in One Story, Lit Hub, The Iowa Review, Best Small Fictions, among others. A two-time finalist for the Calvino Prize for fabulist fiction, Jen lives in Little Rock, Arkansas. Her debut novel, Daughters of Chaos, is coming in July 2024 from Abrams.

Caroline Kim: Caroline Kim is the author of a collection of short stories, The Prince of Mournful Thoughts and Other Stories, which won the 2020 Drue Heinz Prize in Literature, was a finalist for a Northern California Book Award and the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize in Fiction, and was long listed for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize and The Story Prize. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in publications such as Georgia Review, Story, New England Review, The Rumpus, LitHub, The Michigan Review, and TriQuarterly, among others.

Raul Palma: Raul Palma is the author of A Haunting in Hialeah Gardens (Dutton) and In This World of Ultraviolet Light, stories (IUPRESS). He is the Associate Dean of Faculty and New Initiatives at Ithaca College's School of Humanities and Sciences. He earned his PhD at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
**Matthew Salesses**: Matthew Salesses is an Assistant Professor of Writing at Columbia University. He is the author of bestsellers *The Hundred-Year Flood* and *Craft in the Real World*; the PEN/Faulkner finalist for *Disappear Doppelgänger Disappear*; and, most recently, *The Sense of Wonder*. He was adopted from Korea.

**Opening Remarks**

Hello! Thank you for coming to our panel, devoted to crafting unforgettable characters. The authors gathered at the table are the true magicians when it comes to writing fiction and creating strong, multi-dimensional characters. When I read their work, I’m struck by its richness, its cultural diversity, and the remarkable use of language. Their characters draw the readers into a shared humanity, allowing them to inhabit, if only temporarily, a world they can never experience otherwise. Please welcome these gifted writers, as they take turns introducing and discussing their work, as well as their artistic motivations.

**Participant Initial Remarks**

The panelists will give a brief description of their work(s) and read short passages (5 min.) from their novels/stories.

**Moderator Questions:**

1) In your opinion, who’s the most unforgettable character in literature (or film)? Why?

2) How do you feel about the notion that a character must want? Robert O. Butler, for example, claims that “every story is about yearning.” However, there’s an increasing number of claims that the literatures/story forms of nonwestern cultures don’t necessarily center desire in a protagonist; that “passive” protagonists are, in fact, more valid, as they’re more realistic. Who among us hasn’t been a “victim of circumstance,” and is it OK for our characters to be? What are your thoughts on characters and desire, and at what point in your process do you address (or not address) this issue?

3) What’s the difference between characterization and “true” character (the protagonist’s deepest motivations and rock-bottom values)? How is “true” character best revealed?

4) To what degree is an implied reader on your mind when you're writing a character? Do you, as an example, curate the likability of your characters (i.e. to have your protagonist save a cat in the opening scene)? In other words, does a character need to be likeable in order to be unforgettable?
5) What makes a character complex and fascinating? Can an evil character be a protagonist? And if so, what other “unforgettable” traits he/she/they must have for the readers to empathize with such a character?

6) How important to you are "minor" characters? What makes them minor? Do they have to be unforgettable? What are their functions?

7) I’d like to talk about epiphany, catharsis, or change. Do we believe in change? And to what degree? The Ship of Theseus paradox. If a ship is repaired slowly over time so that eventually every part is replaced, is it still the same ship? This paradox is also a metaphor for human change. The question is: Who am I? Who was I? Who will I be? Will fate preserve me or remake me? Just like a ship navigating the unknown waters, so does a complex character sails through random, unexpected, life-battering events that may or may not alter her nature. Some writers believe that their character’s core identity doesn’t change, no matter what happens or what tragedy life has in-store for her. Others think the opposite, bit by bit the character evolves, changes into a rather different being, scarred by life’s travails. Which do you believe? Does your character stay at heart who she’s always been? Or is your character transforming into a new self that her past self, one day, won’t recognize?

Audience Q &A (time permitting)