EVENT TITLE | Transcending Trauma: Avoiding the pitfalls of sentimentality and reductivism in fiction

EVENT DESCRIPTION
Childhood trauma is powerfully determinative over the course of a lifetime. Its effects can include depression, feelings of lack of self-worth, difficulty in achieving and maintaining long-term relationships, and, in extreme cases, suicide and acts of self-harm. In this panel, five queer writers discuss how their work humanizes the embodied experience of violence, homophobia, familial disruption and ethnic and political dislocation in fiction that is brutally honest, yet hopeful.

EVENT CATEGORY | Fiction Craft and Criticism

EVENT ORGANIZER & MODERATOR

EVENT PARTICIPANTS
Richard Mirabella: Richard Mirabella is a writer and civil servant living in Upstate New York. His work has appeared in American Short Fiction, Story Magazine, and elsewhere. He is the author of the novel Brother & Sister Enter the Forest, a New York Times Editor’s Choice

**Danny Ramadan:** Danny Ramadan is a Lambda award-winning Syrian-Canadian author. His novels, *The Clothesline Swing* and *The Foghorn Echoes*, continue to receive accolades. His award-winning children’s series *The Salma Books* continues to grow. Ramadan has raised over $300,000 for LGBTQ+ refugees. You can find out more about his work at www.dannyramadan.com.

**SJ Sindu:** SJ Sindu is the award-winning author of the novels *Blue-Skinned Gods* and *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, the short story collection *The Goth House Experiment*, and the graphic novels *Shakti* and *Talk Water* (forthcoming). Sindu is an assistant professor of creative writing at Virginia Commonwealth University, and a co-editor for Zero Street, a publisher of LGBTQ+ fiction through the University of Nebraska Press. You can find out more about her work at sjsindu.com. Zero Street is currently open for submissions.

**OPENING REMARKS**
Welcome everyone to “Transcending Trauma: Avoiding the pitfalls of sentimentality and reductivism in fiction.”

I hope you’ve had a great conference experience. I’d like to thank you for finishing your time in Kansas City with us on this final afternoon of AWP 2024. My name is Lucian Childs and for the next seventy-five minutes I’ll be your moderator while we discuss this important topic.

Childhood trauma is a fundamental issue for me, both personally and as a writer. I suspect most of us have dealt with it to some degree. Although its effects can be debilitating, it informs who we are at our
core. As the psychologist R. D. Lang once famously said, “We are all in a post-hypnotic trance induced in early infancy.”

However important it may be in our own lives, as writers centering our fiction on deeply internalized psychological damage can be problematic. If we’re not careful it can flatten our traumatized characters to mere symptom sets, their abusers to cardboard cutout villains and their loved ones to would-be saviors or enablers.

Though my debut novel, *Dreaming Home*, is often quite funny, it is at its core an exploration of the effects of childhood trauma. When the primary character is fifteen, his sister out him to their father, resulting in a situation that quickly spirals into both physical and psychological violence.

Along the way, the novel touches upon wider societal issues compounded by trauma: conversion therapy, family abuse, queer youth homelessness, PTSD in combat veterans, and AIDS.

Rather than focus on the traumatized character’s damage, the book relates its effect on his family members and loved ones. In doing so, it poignantly explores the many ways we search for connection and home.

Today, I’m thrilled to be joined by fellow queer authors Richard Mirabella, Danny Ramadan and SJ Sindu, writers who have humanized the embodied experience of violence, homophobia, familial disruption and ethnic and political dislocation to create fiction that is brutally honest, yet hopeful.

To begin, would you each introduce yourself and give a brief overview of your relevant work and how it speaks to the use of trauma as a narrative engine.
PARTICIPANT INITIAL REMARKS

Richard Mirabella

Trauma has become a buzzword, but there is a long history of literature and theory exploring this serious subject. I will bring up the work of Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, and others. I will talk briefly about how the criticisms of using trauma as a shortcut for complexity in a character is a valid criticism, but how trauma can become a gold thread in the tapestry of the life of a character.

In my own novel, *Brother & Sister Enter the Forest*, the character's trauma is not a mystery or problem that can be solved. Instead, his trauma is an atmosphere in his life, influencing every aspect of his existence, including every relationship.

Danny Ramadan

I would say it’s not trauma that fills the pages of my books, but rather the aftermath of trauma. The process of navigating the post-traumatic era in an authentic and representative way is where my writing takes me.

Trauma as an engine feels like a broken wheel, unable to carry the story forward. It feels unproductive, and somehow invasive. However, seeing the characters grow, evolve and become their true self (or their shadow self) feels like an unmatched experience. It’s unique, truthful, complex and nuanced.

In my writing, I have fictional characters finding solace in the community, self-care, therapy and love. While others find remedy in destructive behaviours. At the end of the day both of these routes (and any routes that meander between the two) feel authentic to how trauma form a person’s trajectory. The focus then becomes on the
growth within the human condition, rather than the acute impact of trauma and its almost pornographic nature.

SJ Sindu

First, let me say that I’m so tired of publishing expecting us to serve up our traumas for mainstream consumption. And by us, I mean those of us with minoritized identities, those of us who have immigrated, those of us who have lived through war, those of us who are queer or racialized or trans or nonbinary.

The problem, I think, comes from the sensationalizing of our trauma, and from the fact that mainstream readers don’t know how to engage with our stories outside of trauma. So in the same way that we need both queer stories that are about queerness and queer stories in which characters on bigger adventures just happen to be queer—in that way, we need both stories about trauma, and stories in which the trauma is not the center of the story.

In my own writing, I have written stories heavily steeped in trauma, and stories in which characters have trauma but the stories are actually about other things. For me, writing in different genres and forms is a way to navigate this choice. If I’m writing about my own trauma, I’m almost always writing poetry or lyric essay—the fragmented, leaping nature of the form reflects the way in which I remember and engage with my trauma. If I’m writing characters who have similar traumas to my own, I’m writing literary fiction, because that space resists sensationalizing. But if I’m writing commercial fiction or commercial genre (like fantasy), I don’t directly write about my own trauma. This is both a protection from mainstream sensationalization, and a resisting of the publishing industry’s expectations of minoritized writers. So by filtering through different genres and forms, I’m able to choose what kind of engagement with trauma I want to have with the audience.
PANEL DISCUSSION
Panelists will discuss this topic using the following questions:

1. Throughout our recent books, a traumatic past is a powerful presence that at times threatens to dominate the narrative. What techniques have you used to mitigate the monolithic effects of trauma, to deepen the humanity of your characters and to provide nuance to the storytelling?
2. Sentimentality and reductivism can foster easy reader engagement. Do you feel publishers encourage this as a way to gin up interest in their books? If so, how have you responded to this expectation?
3. As members of marginalized communities, how can we use embodied pain without perpetuating stereotypes or other fixed ideas about our communities?
4. We fiction writers aren’t customarily subject-area experts on the root causes and myriad effects of the traumas we describe. How do we balance being spokespersons for these important topics, while still fulfilling our primary goal of creating art?

AUDIENCE Q & A AND CLOSING REMARKS
Moderator will solicit questions from attendees and afterward make closing remarks.