2024 AWP/EVENT OUTLINE

TITLE:
Autobiographical Fiction: Writing about Trauma, Memory, Identity, and Survival

EVENT CATEGORY: Fiction Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator

Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry: Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry 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

Chris Dennis: Chris Dennis is the author of Here Is What You Do. His work has appeared in The Paris Review, Playgirl, McSweeney's, Granta, Lit Hub, Guernica and Best American Essays. He is the recipient of an NEA Fellowship, the Krause Essay Prize, and a New York Times Sidney Award for long-form journalism.

William Mark Habeeb: William Mark Habeeb is author of the novel Venice Beach and several works of short fiction, as well as nonfiction books and articles. He earned his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University, studied at the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute, and now teaches at Georgetown. He is on the board of Virginia Humanities.

Jeffrey Dale Lofton: Jeffrey Dale Lofton is the author of Red Clay Suzie, longlisted for The Center for Fiction 2023 First Novel Prize and awarded the Seven Hills Literary Prize for Fiction. He is a Senior Advisor at the Library of Congress; is a contributing editor to WELL READ Magazine; and co-hosts Inside Voices, a podcast that showcases all things literary. Red Clay Suzie will be available for the first time in paperback on March 5, 2024.

Sasha Vasilyuk: Sasha Vasilyuk is a journalist and author of the debut novel Your Presence Is Mandatory, which will be out in the U.S., Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Finland, Brazil in April 2024. Her writing has been published in the New York Times, TIME, Harper's Bazaar, Los Angeles Times, Narrative, USA Today.
Opening Remarks

Hello! Thank you for coming to our panel devoted to crafting autobiographical fiction. Today we will talk about the challenges writers encounter while writing from their own experiences about cultural heritage, trauma, disability, violence, and sexual abuse. What are the differences (or similarities) between autobiographical novels/stories and memoirs/personal essays? What determines a writer’s initial narrative choice? Can writing in general help us overcome our differences, hurt and loneliness, our inner struggles—with love, identity, gender or racial prejudices? 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, commenting on the real events that inspired and propelled those novels/stories.

Moderator Questions:

1) Why did you decide to fictionalize your story instead of writing a true memoir?

2) How conscious are you about including things from your own life in your fiction? Do you mean to or realize you’re doing it?

3) What are some ways and limitations of writing fiction around other people’s autobiographical sources?

4) To what extent are you comfortable with the reader speculating about what’s true and what’s not?

5) How do you use autobiographical elements while preserving the character as a fictional persona separate from you?

6) So much of who we are is an effect of our interactions with other people—the ways they behave and the stories they tell us. How much of what is autobiographical is you, and how much of it is actually the lives of other people?

7) What is the hardest thing to write when it comes to personal experience?

8) Is all fiction autobiographical to some degree?

Audience Q &A (time permitting)