Title: Writing about Your Trauma without Re-Traumatizing Yourself

Number: T241

Date/Time: 3:20pm - 4:35pm on Thursday February 8, 2024

Location: Room 3501CD, Kansas City Convention Center, Level 3

Event Organizer: Elizabeth Kleinfeld

Session Description: Writing about trauma can be therapeutic, but revisiting painful subjects can also take a toll on the writer. Beyond therapy, what can a writer do? This panel of essayists, poets, memoirists, teachers, and coaches will share how they’ve structured their writing practices to integrate support and healing, strategies for delving into traumatic memories without deteriorating psychologically, and their reasons for choosing to write in the face of pain.

Writing about trauma can come at a high price, triggering anxiety, depression, and emotional pain. Memoirists on this panel represent a spectrum of seasoned and newer writers, with backgrounds that include military culture, health care, higher education, and sex work. Panelists will share how they’ve navigated writing about trauma rooted in ableism, abuse, racism, death and grief, poverty, mental health, intergenerational trauma, spiritual abuse, and other individual and systemic sources.

The moderator will begin by introducing panelists and reading their short biographies. The four panelists will each give a brief introduction of their own work for 3-5 minutes each. The moderator will then open up discussion with a list of questions prepared in advance about protecting yourself emotionally while writing about trauma. The panel will end with a 10-15 minute audience Q&A.

Housekeeping: Welcome to “Writing about Your Trauma without Re-Traumatizing Yourself.” A few reminders before we begin: • For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me 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.

Opening Remarks

Introductions of Panelists

Moderator Questions

1. What purpose do you find in writing about your trauma?
2. How do you take care of yourself emotionally when you are writing about your traumatic experience?
3. What do you do in terms of your writing schedule, where you write, and other aspects of your process to take care of yourself?
4. Roxanne Gay and others have talked about their own processes for writing about trauma. Is there a piece of advice you’ve heard or read that helped you? Is there something you’ve tried that you thought would make writing about your trauma easier but it backfired?
5. What do you wish someone had told you when you first started writing about your trauma?
6. How do you motivate yourself to keep dipping back into your trauma to write about it?

Panelists:

Athena Dixon, athenadixon@gmail.com

Athena Dixon is the author of the essay collections The Loneliness Files (Tin House Books) and The Incredible Shrinking Woman (Split/Lip Press). Her poetry appears in The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 2: Black Girl Magic and her craft work in Getting to the Truth: The Craft and Practice of Creative Nonfiction. Additionally, her prose has been published in Harper’s Bazaar, Grub Street, Shenandoah, Narratively, and Literary Hub. Athena is the Nonfiction Editor for Split/Lip Press and serves as a consulting editor for Fourth Genre. She lives in Philadelphia.
Lisa Cooper Ellison, lisa.cooper.ellison@gmail.com

Lisa Cooper Ellison is a trauma-informed writing coach, author, and speaker with an Ed.S in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. She is the host of the Writing Your Resilience podcast and teaches courses in memoir, the psychology of writing, writing about trauma, and the book proposal. Her essays have appeared in HuffPost, Kenyon Review, and Hippocampus Literary Magazine among others. Her memoir, Please Stage Dive Carefully, about navigating grief in the aftermath of her brother’s violent suicide is currently on submission. She’s now at work on Write Wise: A Mindful and Irreverent Guide to Writing about Trauma, Loss, and Other Tough Stuff that Messed Us Up. To learn more, check out her website: lisacooperellison.com.

Elizabeth Kleinfeld, ekleinfe@msudenver.edu

Elizabeth Kleinfeld writes about grief and disability in scholarly and memoir essays. Her creative work has appeared in Herstry and Bright Flash Literary Review and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She directs the writing center at Metropolitan State University of Denver and is a trustee of the University Press of Colorado. She is writing a manual for new widows and a memoir about being her husband’s caregiver. She lives in Denver with her two dogs, who like to watch her dance and cook (sometimes simultaneously). She blogs about grief, disability, and Buddhist life at https://elizabethkleinfeld.com.

Libby Kurz, libbykurz@gmail.com

Libby Kurz is a writer, teacher, nurse, and US Air Force veteran. Her work appears in The Iowa Review, Ruminate, Literary Mama, and Driftwood Press, among others. In 2019, Finishing Line Press published her poetry chapbook, The Heart Room, which chronicles her experiences as a cardiothoracic surgical nurse. An excerpt of her memoir in progress, Bloodlust, was a recent winner of The Iowa Review's 2022 Jeff Sharlet Memorial Contest. She teaches poetry, memoir, and trauma writing workshops for The Muse Writers Center, Armed Services Arts Partnership, and Wounded Warrior Project. She lives in Virginia Beach with her husband, three teenagers, and Swiss mountain dog. You can find her at www.libbykurz.com
Margo Steines, margosteines@gmail.com

Margo Steines holds an MFA in nonfiction writing from the University of Arizona, where she is faculty in the Writing Program. Her work was named Notable in Best American Essays and has appeared in The Sun, Slate, Brevity, Off Assignment, The New York Times (Modern Love), the anthology Letter to a Stranger, and elsewhere. She is the author of the memoir-in-essays Brutalities: A Love Story.

Margo is a born-and-raised New Yorker, a journeyman ironworker, and serves as mom to a small person. She is also a private creative coach and writing class facilitator. You can read more about her practices at margosteines.com.