V107. How to Talk to a Writer
The Dos and Don’ts of Giving (and Receiving) Feedback (VIRTUAL EVENT)
Wednesday, February 7, 2024
9:00 to 10:00 a.m.

EVENT DESCRIPTION: For years, “brutal honesty” was the standard for feedback in writing programs and critique groups. Today, we hear talk of “feedback sandwiches” and the power of positive feedback, but how do these approaches serve? Our panel of instructors and authors will offer insights on how to give feedback in a way that serves and supports students across genres and backgrounds. Attendees can also expect insights on how feedback recipients themselves can manage the process to make the most of this resource.

EVENT CATEGORY: Multiple Literary Genres; Craft

EVENT ORGANIZER: Elise McHugh, University of New Mexico Press

EVENT MODERATOR: Joni B. Cole is the author of seven books, including two acclaimed writing guides: Toxic Feedback: Helping Writers Survive and Thrive (“Strongly recommended for academic libraries and public libraries supporting writers,” Library Journal); and Good Naked: How to Write More, Write Better, and Be Happier (included among Poet & Writers’ list of “Best Books for Writers”). She is also the author of a new collection of literary humor essays, Party Like It’s 2044: Finding the Funny in Life and Death. Cole teaches creative writing to adults through her own writer’s center in White River Junction, Vermont, the Writer’s Society at Dartmouth College, and at a diversity of academic and nonprofit programs across the country. Cole is also a frequent contributor to the Jane Friedman blog and hosts the podcast “Author, Can I Ask You?” jonibethcole@gmail.com.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS:
Emily Bernard is the author of Black is the Body: Stories from My Grandmother’s Time, My Mother’s Time, and Mine, which was named one of the best books of 2019 by Kirkus Reviews and National Public Radio. Bernard is the winner of the 2020 Los Angeles Times Christopher Isherwood Prize for autobiographical prose. Her previous works include Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, which was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year; and Some of My Best Friends: Writings on Interracial Friendship, which was chosen by the New York Public Library as a Book for the Teen Age. Her essays have been reprinted in Best American Essays, Best African American Essays, and Best of Creative Nonfiction. A 2020 Andrew Carnegie Fellow, Emily is the Julian Lindsay Green and Gold Professor of English at the University of Vermont. emilybernard1@icloud.com.

Tim Horvath is the author of Understories, which won the New Hampshire Literary Award, and Circulation. His stories appear in Conjunctions, AGNI, Hayden’s Ferry Review, and elsewhere. He is a visiting assistant professor in the Stony Brook MFA in Writing and Literature and an editor at Conjunctions. In addition, he teaches classes for Catapult, GrubStreet, StoryStudio Chicago, Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance, Manchester Community College, and for the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School. horvathon@gmail.com.
Gary Jackson was born and raised in Topeka, Kansas. He is the author of the poetry collections *Origin Story* and *Missing You, Metropolis*, which received the 2009 Cave Canem Poetry Prize. He's also the coeditor of *The Future of Black: Afrofuturism, Black Comics, and Superhero Poetry*. His poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Callaloo*, *The Sun*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Copper Nickel*. The recipient of Cave Canem and Bread Loaf fellowships, he's also been published in *Shattered: The Asian American Comics Anthology* and was featured in the 2013 New American Poetry Series by the Poetry Society of America. He's an associate professor at the College of Charleston, where he's currently the director of undergraduate creative writing and teaches in the MFA program. He serves as poetry editor for *swamp pink*. garyallenjackson@gmail.com.

Juan J. Morales is the son of an Ecuadorian mother and Puerto Rican father. He is the author of three poetry collections, including *The Handyman's Guide to End Times*, and his fourth collection is forthcoming from the University of New Mexico Press. Morales is a CantoMundo Fellow, a Macondo Fellow, the editor/publisher of Pilgrimage Press, and the associate dean of the College of Humanities Arts & Social Sciences at Colorado State University Pueblo. juan.morales@csupueblo.edu.

**OPENING REMARKS:**

Hi, I'm Joni B. Cole, and welcome to “How to Talk to a Writer: The Dos and Don'ts of Giving (and Receiving) Feedback.” I and my fellow panelists, whom you'll meet in a moment, really appreciate you being with us online and in spirit, to talk about this vital topic and how it affects not just our own writing lives . . . but of course our abilities to help our students flourish in their own creative endeavors.

For twenty-five years, I've worked as an author and a writing teacher at my own writer's center in Vermont, and I've taught and lead workshops at a diversity of academic institutions and nonprofit organizations around the country.

Not surprisingly, the subject of feedback has long been a focus of particular interest to me. Eighteen years ago, I published the first edition of my book *Toxic Feedback: Helping Writers Survive and Thrive*. Fast forward to last year, when I had the opportunity to revise and expand *Toxic Feedback*, with a new edition recently reissued from the University of New Mexico Press. In those intervening eighteen years, my professional life has evolved considerably, as has the world. But what hasn't changed is my conviction that feedback in its many iterations still plays a crucial role in our own creative lives and in our success and effectiveness as teachers and mentors.

In my view, feedback is often the difference between writing and not writing. It can also be the difference between writing and writing well. Yet too many seasoned writers and aspiring authors avoid or mismanage this invaluable resource, for reasons both totally understandable, but also misguided. Here are some of the refrains that I've heard over and over again in my tenure of teaching, that I feel need to be addressed.

- I'm terrified of getting feedback. What if everybody hates my writing?
- I never share my drafts. The last thing I need is someone messing with my story.
- The only kind of feedback that matters is brutal honesty.

One of my goals in proposing and facilitating this panel and enlisting the expertise of these esteemed fellow authors and teachers is to pop those misguided thought bubbles.

Of course, as writers and teachers, we all know there are times it benefits our creative process to avoid outside opinions, but there are just as many times when feedback in one of its myriad forms can enlighten and animate our work.
In my view, having conducted workshops with hundreds and hundreds of adult students and seasoned authors, I believe feedback is a dynamic that takes both skill and heart. At its most effective, I believe feedback is a form of communication grounded not just in skill, but also in civility, in thoughtfulness, in mutual respect, and, dare I say it, even in lovingkindness.

And lastly, I believe a better understanding of the feedback interaction in the writing realm can also serve us in the world at large, helping us in our relationships and our work lives, and helping us to contribute to a collective goodwill and a much-needed return to civility.

Today, I am thrilled to be joined in a discussion about this important topic with my fellow panelists: Emily Bernard, Tim Horvath, Gary Jackson, and Juan J. Morales. To get us started, if you could each introduce yourselves, as well as give a brief intro to your take on the subject of feedback.

**PARTICIPANT INITIAL REMARKS:**

I'm **Gary Jackson**, and I've been teaching creative writing workshops at the college level since fall 2005 and have been a workshop facilitator and participant for even longer. I've led undergraduate workshops, MFA workshops, and community workshops for all levels and ages. And though most of my experience is rooted in classroom workshop models (both unsilenced and silenced workshops), I've also worked in much smaller groups in giving and receiving feedback with my fellow friends and writers to workshop our manuscripts in preparation for contest submissions, publication, etc.

Some of my more memorable feedback interactions involve extremes—when I would sometimes workshop poems that involved superheroes and my fellow peers claimed they didn't “get” how superheroes could even appear in a poem, so I was offered little to no feedback; and on the other end—a famous poet shadowed a workshop on the day I was up and commented that they wouldn't change a damn thing (also about a poem that featured superheroes). Both of those occurrences run counter to what one should do in a typical workshop; that is, don't just say, “I don't get it!” but you should also probably avoid just saying, “It's perfect!” Though the latter can do wonders for an author’s ego.

I'm **Emily Bernard**, and the key to good feedback is learning to be a good listener. I have spent the last two years working as a freelance editor. Now that I have spent time on both sides of the editor's pen, I am in favor of brutal honesty. In general, our culture has become too focused on the ego. The cure for this is to renounce the narcissistic needs of the ego, in person and on the page. Flattery is a lie and serves no one. Those giving feedback must be honest, and those receiving it must listen honestly. Honest listening does not involve a desperate, self-involved insistence on affirmation. Those offering and receiving feedback must remain focused on what is happening on the page and not in their heads. Trust is essential, as is mutual respect. People who flatter you are not respecting you; they just want you to like them. Whether you want to be a good writer or a good editor, you must be focused on excellence, not feeling or looking good, either to yourself or to your reader.

My name is **Juan J. Morales**, and I'm based in southern Colorado, where I've been teaching since 2006 at Colorado State University Pueblo, a Hispanic Serving Institution that is also approaching MSI status. I have the privilege of teaching where there are many first-gen, post-traditional, and veteran-status students, as well as students from other diverse backgrounds. I also teach workshops for Lighthouse Writers in Denver and in various communities that have me. I witness many students entering the workshop with heavy imposter syndrome that impacts their approach to the creative-writing workshop. They are not sure what they can offer, and they worry their work will not be supported. This has pretty much mirrored my own experiences in creative-writing classrooms. My writing continues to explore my Latine background, family storytelling, supernatural strangeness, a lexicon built by a
bilingual household, and the ongoing quest to master my family’s roots in Spanish. These factors have taught me to emphasize the workshop as a place to build community, to be inspired, and to instill the need for persistence with our writing. Even if a workshop experience does not go well, we seek out the revision avenues, hold onto the duende, and do our best to find a home with our writing. Learning to give and receive comments effectively and kindly are the foundation for me to do that.

I’m Tim Horvath, and I’ve taught at every level from sixth graders and up, and I have also run workshops with adolescents in a psychiatric facility. Currently, I work with graduate and high school students. For me, the most memorable feedback I received was for my first workshop in graduate school. Part of what made it memorable was, I think, circumstance—I had moved from New York to New Hampshire, and the excitement of being in a new environment hovered over everything. But part of it was seeing the workshop letters that my peers wrote—the array of them, each one in a different font, some riffing, some more formal, one from the perspective of a parent who brought that to her feedback. In short, each of these letters was also a piece of writing. When I think of the word “feedback,” I think of the sonic version, which is often something that we want to avoid—when the speaker is positioned too close to the mic and there’s a screech that makes everyone plug their ears. That’s the kind of feedback we obviously don’t want—the words or tune getting lost in noise and distortion, a loop that really goes in one direction only, that makes us want to hear less rather than more. What was so important to me about the letters that I got was that they were the tangible evidence of people engaging with my work—as readers and as humans and also as burgeoning writers themselves. There were Dylan’s long, winding sentences, no capital letters, with a Beat energy; there were Jen’s neat, discrete paragraphs that broke down particular elements and sought the perfect balance between support and critique, plainly honed through her high school teaching; and there was Charlotte, my wonderful teacher, talking about Liesl, my character, as if she were a person. Later, another professor would come at my work from a very craft-oriented perspective, which felt right for him. For me, then, feedback is ideally a conversation or a missive, not a loop that spirals out of control, and it can become a piece of writing in its own right. I want my students to think that perhaps the feedback outlives this piece of writing—maybe there are things in it that will apply to the next piece, or remind them of things that they are already doing well when they need a boost one day. A voice they can hear when the din of the workshop has long faded. Of course I believe feedback can and should be immediately practical, too, but the idealist in me says it can surely be both.

Moderator Questions:
- How do you use feedback during your own creative process?
- What is the responsibility of the writer in the feedback interaction?
- Switching gears, as a teacher or mentor, could you elaborate on what you think is the core of good feedback?
- Do you have any good “bad” feedback stories—where you blew it, or someone gave you feedback that felt toxic?
- Is there someone or some particular comment that still resonates and serves you today as you’re working on new material?