WRITING WITH FIRE: POETRY AND MENTAL ILLNESS

Event Description: This panel will explore representations of mental illness in poetry and the complex relationship between mental illness and the artistic temperament. While the “mad poet” archetype is flawed, a poet’s mental state and the poetry they produce are inextricably linked. After reading a sampling of their own work, panelists will share their experiences with writing about mental illness, including a discussion of craft, therapeutic benefits, destigmatizing mental illness, and intersectionality.

Event Category: Poetry Readings

Event Organizer and Moderator: Stevie Edwards

Stevie Edwards is a Lecturer at Clemson and Poetry Editor of The South Carolina Review. They are the author of Quiet Armor, Sadness Workshop, Humanly, and Good Grief. Their poems appear in Poetry Magazine, American Poetry Review, and elsewhere. They have an MFA from Cornell University and a PhD from the University of North Texas.

Event Participants:

Leila Chatti is the author of Deluge (Copper Canyon Press 2020) and multiple chapbooks. She teaches in the MFA program at Pacific University and is a Provost Fellow at the University of Cincinnati.

Marlin M. Jenkins studied poetry in University of Michigan's MFA program and is the author of the poetry chapbook Capable Monsters. They currently live and teach in Minnesota.

Eugenia Leigh is a Korean American author of two books of poetry. Poems from her new collection, BIANCA, were awarded Poetry's Bess Hokin Prize and have appeared in The Atlantic, The Nation, Ploughshares, and elsewhere. A Kundiman fellow, Eugenia serves as a poetry editor at The Adroit Journal.

Danez Smith is the author of three collections including Homie and Don’t Call Us Dead. For their work, Danez won the Forward Prize for Best Collection, the Minnesota Book Award in Poetry, the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry, the Kate Tufts Discovery Award, a Pushcart Prize, and has been a finalist for the NAACP Image Award in Poetry, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the National Book Award. Their fourth collection, Bluff, will be released in August 2024. Danez lives in Minneapolis with their people.

Opening Remarks:

Welcome to “Writing with Fire: Poetry and Mental Illness.” A few reminders before we begin:

• For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, Stevie Edwards, 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.
We’re all grateful to have you here with us today to talk about mental illness and poetry! We know there are a lot of great panels to choose from—as well as offsite events, exploring the book fair and city, taking well-earned naps, etc.—and we appreciate that you’ve chosen to spend your time with us today. I personally feel very lucky to be up here with some of my most brilliant peers getting to talk about a topic that has been an integral part of my writing journey for the past decade or more, as a writer with bipolar I disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and PTSD. This panel is comprised of some poets I have known for years and some I have known only through the internet, but they are all people I greatly admire and am excited to be in conversation with. I would like to especially thank Marlin Jenkins for their help with organizing and brainstorming this panel. We realize that some of our poetry may include triggering topics, and we hope that you will take good care of yourselves during this presentation; if you feel the need to step out for a minute, we won’t be offended, but please do so quietly if possible.

While the “mad poet” and “tortured artist” archetypes are something that we want to challenge, there is clearly a long tradition of people with mental illness feeling called to write about it, and we want to talk about the relationship between writing and mental illness, as well as the process of writing about mental illness. I have found that writing about mental illness helps me to understand it, and myself, better, and this process has taught me to be gentler and kinder to myself. Each panelist will share a selection of their poetry and provide some initial remarks on how their poetry engages with the topic of mental illness. Afterward, the panel will answer a list of questions we’ve collaborated on preparing, and then we will open things up to the audience for additional questions.

Participant Initial Remarks:

Leila Chatti:

I will be reading poems written during and about mood episodes, from manuscripts in progress. I will discuss the harms in the mythologizing of the "tortured artist" and how attending to mental health is inextricable, for me, from the writing life—in order for me to write, I must be first alive, and second, able to think beyond only survival and total desperation. As Sharon Olds said, in response to someone asking her advice to writers: "Kiss your wrists every day." We must take care of ourselves, before anything else. I will discuss in particular how I manage writing about painful experiences without making myself vulnerable to a relapse, the influence of therapy on my work, and the joys to be found in community when we write from the truth of who we are.

Stevie Edwards:

I will present poems that use humor as a mode of writing about depression, bipolar episodes, and trauma. Like many of my favorite comedians, I often turn to humor to approach some of life’s darkest moments because it gives me an entry point to talking about the subject matter and can act as a salve for the deep pain of the situations being described. My journey with mental illness has included a lot of ugliness, including hospitalization and lost friendships, but the ability to craft something beautiful and humorous out of it and to choose how to tell my story has been empowering.
Marlin Jenkins:
I will be reading poems that overtly engage in form via troubling the lines between order and disorder and talking through the form-content relationship. Particularly in terms of OCD, but also with anxiety and depression, strict formal structures can offer a container mirroring the sense of trapness, confinement, and/or obsession of mental health episodes. I’m considering how imposing a form onto a poem can be empowering as a way to introduce control in moments when one feels out of control, but then pushing back against and disrupting those same constraints can also be empowering. I’m considering, too, how writing about mental health can help us to capture, understand, and—perhaps most importantly—explore our own feelings, behaviors, and experiences by wrangling them into language and shape.

Eugenia Leigh
I will share poems that touch on or discuss bipolar disorder and complex PTSD from my two poetry collections. My first book was written when I was not yet diagnosed with mental illnesses, whereas my second book was written mostly post-diagnosis. Both books tackle similar themes but through different formal and craft choices because of the limitations of vocabulary in my first book and the access to newfound vocabulary in my second. I will talk about the misguided fear I had in my twenties of mental health help, of losing my “creative brain.” I will also talk about the frustrations that I now experience on the other side of having received psychiatric and therapeutic services: how our culture glorifies “mental wellness,” bypassing the understanding and acceptance of folks with mental illness; how gaining access to mental health help meant a new avalanche of grief and rage for me; how the real-life, nonstop management of mental illness both supports and interferes with the life of a poet.

Danez Smith
I’ll be reading poems from my previous collections as well as new poems that either deal directly with mental illness or that were written during depressive/manic episodes. I will talk about the difference between writing about mental health from a distance vs writing within moments of crisis and how we these two selves can learn from one another.

Moderator Questions:
1) What is it that you, as a writer and human, get from the process of writing about mental illness? Additionally, what do you hope that your audience gets from your choice to write and publish poems about mental illness?
2) What do you see as obstacles or potential pitfalls of writing about mental illness?
3) How do you navigate the relationship or contention between the artistic necessity of risk-taking and the boundary setting that often comes with managing one’s mental health? How do you propel your work while protecting yourself?
4) This question is repurposed from Linda Gregerson: "How do we define sincerity in a genre that’s almost always a performance of the private?"
5) Has a mental illness spell ever gotten in the way of your writing or writing-related work? What are some practices you've adopted that pull you out of those slumps? How do you push yourself to keep going as a poet when the brain stuff gets very bad or very loud?

6) What would you say to someone who worries that seeking treatment for their mental illness will hinder their creative spark?