Event Title: Resuscitation: Writing About Trauma

Event Description: How can fiction express trauma, both lived and witnessed? From “telling it slant” to employing metaphor and rhythm, to imbuing the very landscape with disturbance, fiction permits us to animate trauma in amazing ways. Drawing upon our collective experience as writers, editors, emergency room physicians, and members of the Latinx diaspora, we will describe our own approaches and that of other authors to writing about trauma.

Event Category: Fiction Craft & Criticism

Housekeeping Announcements
Good morning, and welcome to “Resuscitation: Writing About Trauma.” Before we get started, a couple of reminders:

- 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 remains clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Event Organizer & Moderator
Rachel Kowalsky, MD: Rachel Salguero Kowalsky is a first-generation Guatemalan American, a pediatric emergency physician, and three-time Pushcart nominee. Her short stories are in The Missouri Review, Atticus Review, Booth, Orca, Best of jmww, The Intima, and elsewhere. She teaches Health Humanities at Weill Cornell Medical College.

Event Participants
Beth Hahn: Beth Hahn (she/her) is the author of the novel The Singing Bone (Regan Arts, 2016) and The City Beneath Her (Regal House, 2025). Her writing has been published in The Chestnut Review, DMQ Review, Ran Off with the Star Bassoon, The Common, and CRAFT, among others. She is the editor of -ette review.
David Byron Queen: David Byron Queen has an MFA from the University of Montana, where he was a Truman Capote Fellow. His work has appeared in VICE, Paste, Split Lip Magazine, Vol. 1 Brooklyn, Hobart, McSweeney's, and elsewhere. He lives in New York and runs the publishing company word west.

Jay Baruch, MD: Jay Baruch is a writer, ER doc, educator, and Professor of Emergency Medicine at Alpert Medical School of Brown University. He's the author of two books of short fiction. His latest book of nonfiction essays is “Tornado of Life: A Doctor’s Journey Through Constraints and Creativity in the ER.”

Opening Remarks:
Writing about trauma is a key concept for me in fiction writing. I turn to the page—as I suspect many of us do—to sort things out and make meaning from experience. Often, that involves bringing some of life’s most grotesque, vulnerable, and frightening moments—not really fit for an essay or even the dinner table—into a story. But what is the process? How should this, or how can this be done? When we take our impressions, let’s say a sick child gasping for air, or let’s say my father as a hungry little kid in Mazatenango, and put them into the lathe, what is the process for making something new from them? Or, should I just usher them onto the page as they are?

I’ve asked Beth Hahn and David Queen and Dr. Jay Baruch to join me today because I admire the way that their work tells trauma, or carries trauma. And I know that they are amazing teachers because they have been my teachers and mentors.

I’m going to ask each participant how they get trauma onto the page, then summarize concretely what I’m hearing from them, then I’ll ask some questions of each of them, and finally I’ll field questions from the audience.

A final point. So that we all have some common touch points in this discussion, we chose three works we think that many participants will have read: Tim O’Brien’s The Things We Carried, James Baldwin’s Sonny’s Blues, and Amy Hempel’s The Harvest. Whenever we can, we’ll draw examples from those stories and we’ll also give examples from our own work.
Participant Initial Remarks:
Opening question: How do you take trauma- lived or witnessed- from where it resides, and situate it inside a story? Where does it go? The center? The edges? The landscape?

Beth Hahn:
A discussion of her story, Resuscitation (The Common 2023), and personifying the person at the heart of the trauma as a gesture towards empathy.

David Byron Queen:
A discussion of the subterranean, or molecular, trauma beneath the story, and how it relates to the central action of the story.

Dr. Jay Baruch:
A discussion of paying attention to what you are not saying on the page, locating the trauma in that silence.

Follow up Questions:
1. David and Beth, as editors of literary magazines word west and -ette, and as teachers of writing, what are common pitfalls you see in stories about trauma? What should we be careful of?
2. Jay, as an ER physician, I feel conflicted about writing about medical trauma, because I worry that it leverages, or is predicated on, the privilege society gives me of being close to people in their most vulnerable moments. Have you ever felt that, or what advice would you give to physicians who incorporate their experiences into their writing?
3. We have spoken before about how trauma is not something you resolve, but rather something that you carry. There is no real end point to trauma. So how do you know, as a writer, where the story ends? What moral “north”, if any, does the story move towards?

Questions From The Audience