EVENT TITLE: The Happy Family: The Craft of Domestic Horror

Event Description: Ghosts. Sacrifices. Monsters. Mothers. What do we hide inside our houses, and what do our houses hide from us? How do we tell the same family stories in new ways? In this panel, five writers of literary horror discuss the domestic as a place of invention, myth-making, and witnessing. Drawing upon examples from their own novels and short stories, the panelists share strategies and tools from graphic novels, film, and other mediums that have helped them bring their hauntings to life.

EVENT CATEGORY: Fiction Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator
Elinam Agbo was born in Ghana and raised in Kansas. A graduate of the Clarion Workshop, she has received fellowships from the Kenyon Review, Aspen Words, and the Helen Zell Writers’ Program, where she earned an MFA in fiction. Her work has appeared in American Short Fiction, Apogee, Nimrod, and elsewhere. She is currently an assistant professor in the Creative Writing Program at Bucknell University.

Event Participants
’Pemi Aguda is from Lagos, Nigeria. W.W. Norton will publish her debut short story collection, Ghostroots, in 2024. She was a MacDowell fellow, a Miami Book Fair fellow, and is a graduate of the Helen Zell Writers’ Program. Her work has appeared in Zoetrope, Granta, ZYZZYVA, & One Story, among other journals.

Gerardo Sámano Córdova is a writer and artist from Mexico City living in Brooklyn. He is the author of Monstrilio. His stories have appeared in Apartamento Magazine, Catapult, The Common, Passages North, Chicago Quarterly Review, and others. He holds an MFA in Fiction from the University of Michigan and is the current Writer in Residence at Fordham University. Gerardo has also been known to draw little creatures.
Akil Kumarasamy is the author of the novel *Meet Us By the Roaring Sea* (FSG, 2022), and the collection *Half Gods* (FSG, 2018), which was awarded the Bard Fiction Prize and the Story Prize Spotlight Award. She is an assistant professor in the Rutgers University-Newark MFA program.

Annesha Mitha is a writer based in Chicago, IL. She holds an MFA from the Helen Zell Writers’ Program at the University of Michigan. Her work has been published in McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern, American Short Fiction, Catapult, and more.

**Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements**

Good morning, and welcome to “The Happy Family: The Craft of Domestic Horror.”

We know there are several ways you could be spending your time right now—other panels, the book fair, exploring Kansas City—so we really appreciate your presence here today.

I’ve had a recurring dream for years now: all the places I’ve lived bleed into one another, so that one moment I would be listening to my family argue on a street we lived on in Ghana, and then the next I’d be on an empty street in Kansas, listening to the same voices. There are sometimes variations in the narrative and people, but the structure remains consistent. One night, I had this dream in Michigan, and when I opened my eyes, I was sure I could hear my parents arguing outside my door. I sometimes sleepwalk, so I waited a few minutes to wake up properly. Then I remembered that I was in grad school, and none of my family members lived in that house with me.

Once awake, I got out my phone, opened the Notes app, and wrote, “Story idea where a ghost is haunted by the living.” I didn’t write this story for years. Or rather, I tried to start and stopped several times. Then last month, I realized that my novel-in-progress is indirectly about a ghost who is haunted by the living.
This panel came about because I am intrigued by what writers can do with the space of a house. In fiction, I am drawn to houses with quirks, unique personalities, uninvited guests, hidden rooms, walls no one can touch. In other words, houses that reflect or mimic the people who inhabit them.

As I explore issues like domestic violence and complex inheritance in my novel, I’ve been inspired by the innovative writers on this panel. Akil Kumarasamy, Gerardo Sámano Córdova, ’Pemi Aguda, and Annesha Mitha each explore familial tensions, grief, trauma, and hauntings in a range of domestic spaces. They imbue household objects with memory and seamlessly incorporate inherited narratives like folktales and myths into the story of a character or a place. They are also eclectic readers who offer me great recommendations when I complain about my novel-in-progress.

I’m thrilled that they agreed to share their brilliance with us today.

‘Pemi, Gerardo, Akil, and Annesha: could you briefly introduce yourselves and give us a brief overview of what you’ll share?

Participant Initial Remarks

‘Pemi Aguda:
I’ll talk about physical buildings as an expression of family history, and the ways house objects might reveal secrets that families want to keep hidden.

Gerardo Sámano Córdova:
I’ll talk about how spaces and objects can reflect a character’s interior landscape. How objects can decay or come alive in sync (or in contrast) to a character. How a place interacts with a family’s dynamic.

Akil Kumarasamy:
I’ll talk about how spaces/homes can evoke absent characters and how by returning to specific spaces that are full of history characterization can deepen.
Annesha Mitha:
I’ll talk about writing spaces for the elderly, such as assisted living and nursing homes, and the way that houses and rooms are fertile for narrative.

Moderator Questions

1.) What drew you to exploring the domestic space in fiction? When did you first realize that the domestic played a big part in your work?

2.) Each of you has written framed narratives—that is, stories within stories. I’m thinking of ’Pemi’s haunted house “The Hollow,” the folktale that contextualizes Magos’s decision to feed the lung in Gerardo’s novel Monstrilio, the manuscript in Akil’s novel Meet Us By the Roaring Sea, and the variety of ghosts in Annesha’s short story “In Search of a Better Ending.” What is it about the telling of stories—and the way stories are inherited in the domestic space—that you’re drawn to?

3.) I am often inspired by the pacing and structures of the stories I reach for when I am tired and craving a fun distraction. Marry My Husband by Sung So-jak, a webcomic that adds a compelling twist to the reincarnation trope, is one my current favorites. How have you learned to be a better writer by having fun and experimenting with form?

4.) Who are your favorite writers of domestic horror and why?

Responses of each participant to moderator questions

QUESTION 1

Annesha Mitha: I always say that I didn’t grow up in a city, I grew up in a house. I had a very…restrained upbringing, which was part of growing up with a parent who had a temper. After I was eight, we never went on vacation, we never had dinner downtown, we never explored the neighborhood. It was always school, extracurriculars, homework. Most of my world was the four corners of my room. So as I started writing in my teens, I noticed that many of my stories were setting-
less. I couldn’t quite grasp the texture of a town or city, or even a hiking trail, because those places weren’t real to me. And eventually, as I got older, I realized that what I had experienced was not a lack of setting, but a different kind of setting. The corners of my house were as real as any town and city. So then I started creating fiction that took places in rooms, in houses, in the interiors of cars. I think that rooms are amazing—so much of our lives play out in them. And of course, I do now add the texture of other settings to my work, I’ll always focus on the room.

‘Pemi Aguda: Similar to Annesha, I also had a restrained upbringing; my folks were very strict, so my sisters and I had a limited world to explore. So, it might have started from writing what I knew. After I was able to move past these borders, I became interested in how the outside world played out on the stage of our very nuclear insular family… eventually realizing that we weren’t as insular as I thought because the city and the outside world seeped in through cracks, through us. I think that’s one thing that interests me about domestic fiction—the way the inside characters are a manifestation of outside forces. You can’t understand one without the other. But also how family history makes a home more cramped, or creates secret passages and hidden rooms, proving that there’s more to explore than what meets the eyes.

Gerardo Sámano Córdova: I’m interested in writing about families, and I find living spaces fascinating. Families imbue themselves collectively and individually in the spaces they inhabit, spaces become a collection of objects, patterns, colors, and arrangements that clash, support and shape its inhabitants. A drab house may make us sad, or may be drab because we are sad; a bright yellow wall may make some happy, some manic. We can stare at a damasked wallpaper and find the shapes of horrific thoughts or others may find respite, if we suddenly find an owl that we’ve never seen before. In any case, the domestic exists in space, and that space is infinitely interesting.

Akil Kumarasamy: We spend so much time in homes. There's a whole kind of language we speak in these domestic spaces that is particular to characters and families. I'm interested in all the rituals of being together in these spaces. As ’Pemi pointed out, it's not as insular as it seems, the outside does seep in. The television
and computer all feel like portals. As I was writing, I understood that a lot of the tension of my work comes from the domestic spaces pushing up against the outside world.

QUESTION 2

‘Pemi Aguda: Doesn’t storytelling start from home? From bedtime stories that entertain, to anecdotes that have a secondary purpose of warning or teaching, to overhearing the stories that the adults told each other that had parts inaccessible to us, until we grew into that knowledge. In Nigeria, we also have a very “let me tell you this story” culture, a very “I have to tell you that story before I tell you this story” culture, and I find that voice helps me enter a lot of stories and helps me also get at why I’m trying to tell it. I’m also endlessly inspired by the ranges of realism available in Nigerian culture—the folktales and parables, sure, but also the real stories in the newspapers and radios that treated the supernatural as mundane were foundational to the stories I began to write.

Gerardo Sámano Córdova: I agree with everything ‘Pemi just said. Stories are the way we come to understand the world and our place in it. We’re constantly narrating our life to make sense of it. We frame our actions, our relationships, our day to day in stories. Stories serve as outlines for other stories, frameworks to make ourselves understood. Our successes or failures exist because we compare them to similar stories. That is why I think it’s fascinating to encounter different types of narrative structures, other ways to tell stories, and see how those change how we see ourselves in the world. What if we told every story nonlinearly? What would that do to our understanding of consequences? Think of stories in which ancestors are a part of daily life. How does that inform the way we live our own lives if we have access to our lineage and past? What we call the supernatural is a way to tell the story of something we can’t understand, or something we do understand but not quite consciously.

Akil Kumarasamy: Even the memories we have are also stories. I think playing around with narrative structure, I'm asking if there is a way to reframe this story and how does story
change with the retelling. If I can think of the book as a kind of house that contains different ideas, I'm interested in how things that don't seem connected or related might live in that space. Looking back into different periods, houses of my life, I'm trying to make sense of it, unearth a new understanding I didn't have at the moment. Sometimes I think of filmmaking and having budgets as useful ideas in writing fiction because it helps me contain my imagination. For example, instead of having six places to shoot a scene, what would happen if I really used the two settings I started with. What can I uncover? How can I get characters and people more entangled into these spaces?

Annesha Mitha: For some reason, I’m thinking about reality TV shows like Terrace House, a Japanese show that’s just a bunch of people living in a house together. I think what draws me to rooms and the domestic is the false calm. It feels like a preserved space, kept away from the outside world. Terrace House was lauded for being soothing, stress-free. But outside Terrace House, the tabloids are ripping contestants apart. The tension trickles in. And of course, Terrace House ended due to the bullying of its participants. Home is something like an experimental field. Particles filter in from the outside world, but once inside, they can’t get out. There’s nothing left but for all these emotions to bounce off of one another, and then, finally, to react. My current work in progress takes place in an assisted living facility and nursing home, which is kind of the ultimate domestic space. Everyone there brings decades of living, of experience. And as I’m writing, it’s fascinating how to see these decades of memories bounce off each other in this enclosed space.

QUESTION 3

‘Pemi Aguda: Everyone knows I love my murder mysteries. I love the cozy ones, yes, but my favourite murder mysteries are the ones where I am sobbing for the murderer by the end. There’s something to learn there about characterization and refusing the easy binary of good vs. bad. We’re all fucked up and can do horrible things in the right circumstances. I also enjoy how they feel like puzzles (I love a jigsaw puzzle), and the invitation to try to solve the mystery alongside the writers. I find that beyond the story facts presented, I am looking for other storytelling clues: like the acting, or when someone is introduced on screen, and how much
screen time they get, to decode who did it. And these feel applicable to my fiction—entering a story like it’s a mystery to me helps me to discover why I’m writing it along with my characters, and that flexibility has taken me to interesting places.

**Gerardo Sámano Córdova:** I too love puzzles and writing often feels like putting a puzzle together for which you only have pieces but no finished reference. I love silly things. I love absurdity. I’ve been thinking a lot about John Baldessari and his piece “Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line.” It’s ridiculous and gorgeous, and moves me in a way other more “profound” pieces leave me empty. Play is tremendously important in my work, experimenting, pushing words to absurdity, having characters react in the most extra ways. Do I want to write something I’ve already read? No.

**Akil Kumarasamy:** My current work also deals with thriller elements. I’m interested in using genres and taking it to strange places. My previous novel had science fiction elements of taking place in a near futuristic NYC but also had a manuscript translate from the 1990’s. For me playing with form and genres is essential in trying to create something that feels unusual and fresh. Yes, like Gerardo, I appreciate when characters act in extra ways. Also, I wish I was as good as puzzling as Gerardo and Pemi.

**Annesha Mitha:** My current work of fiction draws from thrillers. And I’m not talking somber, morose, difficult thrillers that contemplate time and space. I’m talking high-octane splashy twisty turny readable genre thrillers. I absolutely love thrillers and think they’re incredibly difficult to accomplish—I don’t think I could accomplish one! I’m trying to take what I’ve learned from thrillers and embody these tropes in the novel. I’m trying to add in twists and turns, trying to tap into the “and then there were none” trope. And before you ask, some of my favorite thrillers are The Appeal, anything by Jane Harper, Look Closer, The Block Party.

**QUESTION 4**

‘**Pemi Aguda:** Shirley Jackson, because a lot of her horror can be read as an externalization of psychology and I love that murkiness between supernatural and
‘madness.’ Han Kang works with constraint, physical and social, really admirably in the “Fruit of my Woman” and “The Vegetarian.” In both, a woman transforms (or believes she is transforming) into a plant. Although not everyone might agree she writes horror, I find Kang’s fiction really visceral.

Gerardo Sámano Córdova: Yes Shirley Jackson! Samanta Schweblin also works in that space. I loved Little Eyes (Kentukis in Spanish) and the ways these little intruders at home would change people’s lives. I constantly think of Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier and how the domestic space closes in on the narrator. Mariana Enríquez in Our Share of Night explores domestic spaces at length, as personal, familial and also as a reflection of Argentina’s time period. Ámparo Davila’s “The Houseguest” is an amazing short story in which a houseguest haunts a woman. Julio Cortázar’s “Casa tomada” in which a brother and sister slowly get pushed out of their own home by invisible forces. And of course many movies that do this brilliantly (The Babadook, Hereditary).

Akil Kumarasamy: I would also echo Han Kang and the Vegetarian and "Fruit of my Woman," which deals with a woman transforming into a plant in a very visceral way. Samantha Schweblin's Fever Dream really paralyzes you in this suspended space and doesn't let you go. I would also say Kafka's Metamorphosis is another great domestic horror story. It takes place all in the span of an apartment and Gregor, the main character, is turning into an insect.

Annesha Mitha: Mariana Enriquez and Samanta Schweblin do an incredible job rendering domestic spaces. One of my favorite Mariana Enriquez stories, I think it’s the first one in her short story collection “Things We Lost in the Fire,” is called The Dirty Kid. This story takes place in a large drafty house in the “rough side of town.” The main character eventually forms a relationship with this unhoused child who lives across from her, and she tries to help him but ultimately does not try to save him. And in this story, the house itself becomes a character. It’s a place of safety, of return. It’s something the main character has but the kid will (spoilers) never have. Its mere existence creates a tension in the story. Samanta Schweblin’s books all have to do with domestic horror. In Little Eyes, little robots called Kentukis are controlled by strangers in distant countries. The person who buys the uplink observes, the person who buys the Kentukis is observed. Horror abounds,
because people are terrible. This is a way of expanding the domestic space, of bringing in people from across the globe into a room—and watching the consequences play out.

Q&A Session