



# THE WRITER'S CENTER MAGAZINE

WINTER/SPRING 2024

- 05 **Meet authors  
Shannon Sanders,  
Jose Hernandez  
Diaz, and Donna  
Hemans**
- 15 **Writing workshops  
& free events for  
writers**
- 27 **Highlights from our  
Virtual Craft Chats**

FREE

## OUR SPACE, YOUR EVENT

From writing groups, book clubs, and readings to business meetings and presentations, hold your next event at The Writer's Center! We can accommodate events of all sizes in our classrooms, Reading Room, and 110-seat Theater.

[writer.org/rent](http://writer.org/rent)



## The Washington Independent Review of Books Presents: **The 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Washington Writers Conference** **Community • Craft • Creativity**

**May 3 & 4, 2024**

Bethesda North Marriott  
Hotel & Conference Center

Guarantee of 4 one-on-one  
pitches with literary agents with  
Super-Early-Bird registration,  
open through December 31!

"The Washington Writers Conference is the  
premier writers conference in the DC area"

–Peter Baker, 2022 Keynote Speaker, Chief White House  
correspondent for the New York Times, co-author with  
Susan Glasser of *The Divider: Trump in the White House*  
2017-2021



**More details and registration at [wirobooks.com](http://wirobooks.com)**

**EXECUTIVE EDITORS**

Zach Powers  
Laura Spencer

**EDITORS**

Amy Freeman  
Emily Holland  
Margaret Meleney

**CONTRIBUTORS**

Sarah Cypher  
Jillian Danback-McGhan  
Elyssa Maxx Goodman  
Donna Hemans  
Jose Hernandez Diaz  
Christine Kessides  
Ben Kline  
Rebecca Maker  
Alina Pleskova  
Cleo Qian  
Annie Rehill  
Shannon Sanders  
Tess Taylor

**ART DIRECTOR**

Emily Fussner

**COVER IMAGE**

Madeline A. Stratton

**ABOUT THE WRITER'S CENTER**

Founded in 1976, The Writer's Center supports writers and everyone who wants to write!

Every year we offer hundreds of creative writing workshops in all genres and for all experience levels, dozens of free events for writers, and countless opportunities to connect with the Washington DC and national literary communities.

**THE WRITER'S CENTER**

4508 Walsh Street  
Bethesda MD 20815  
301-654-8664 | [writer.org](http://writer.org)

# THE WRITER'S CENTER MAGAZINE

WINTER/SPRING 2024

04 **FROM THE EDITOR**

05 **SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY**

A discussion with fiction writer Shannon Sanders on her debut short story collection

08 **BOTH A REALIST AND A SURREALIST**

A conversation with poet Jose Hernandez Diaz

11 **THE HOUSE OF PLAIN TRUTH**

A discussion with novelist Donna Hemans about her newest novel

15 **WINTER/SPRING 2024 WORKSHOPS**

26 **FREE EVENTS FOR WRITERS**

27 **HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE WRITER'S CENTER VIRTUAL CRAFT CHAT SERIES**

30 **NEW POEMS FROM POET LORE**

32 **JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE PAGE**

Jillian Danback-McGhan

34 **BEAUTIFUL LIVES**

A conversation with Elyssa Maxx Goodman on her new history of drag in New York

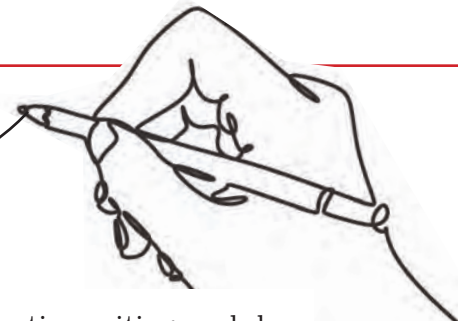
36 **PUBLICATION MOUNTAIN**

Christine Kessides's Journey to a Published Book

37 **TELLING AN EMOTIONAL TRUTH**

Learning about Speculative Nonfiction with Annie Rehill

39 **NEW BOOKS**



### EDITOR'S NOTE: A WRITER'S CENTER PRIMER

Before every event hosted by The Writer's Center, we give a brief intro to the organization. After several hundred events, the staff has gotten pretty good at it! We thought this would be a good place to share, in print, what we usually share aloud.

Founded in 1976, The Writer's Center is a literary arts nonprofit, headquartered in the Washington DC area. We exist to support writers and everyone who wants to write. One of the main ways we do that is

by offering hundreds of creative writing workshops every year, in all genres and for all experience levels. At any given time we have around 100 instructors, all professional writers, sharing their knowledge of the written word.

In addition to paid workshops, we also host dozens of free events for writers. From author readings and book launches to panel discussions and virtual chats on the craft of writing, we try to meet writers at all stages of their literary journeys.

Finally, we publish *Poet Lore*, America's oldest poetry magazine, which is now in its 134th year of continuous publication.

You can learn more about all of this (and much more!) in the pages that follow and at [writer.org](http://writer.org). So, if you're only just now getting to know The Writer's Center, we hope you'll keep joining us for new programs and for years to come.

—Zach Powers, Artistic Director



## ABOUT THE COVER

### Madeline A. Stratton

*Searching For ???*, 2023, Acrylic, gouache, and house paint on canvas, 24 x 18 in.

Utilizing paint and textiles in vibrant colors and patterns, Stratton creates architectural representations stemming from memory—silhouettes and simplified structures that convey both absence and belonging. She memorializes objects of daily ritual and the spaces in which they take place by incorporating embellishments of glitters, rhinestones, and fabric on the painted surfaces.

Madeline A. Stratton (b. 1987) is an artist and educator originally from Memphis TN, now based in Washington DC. She holds an MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art, and an MA in History of Art & the Art Market from Christie's Education. She has exhibited in group exhibitions throughout the US including the Kreeger Museum and several solo shows in Washington DC. She was a Hamiltonian Fellow from 2019-2022. Stratton also currently teaches upper school art at St. Albans School. View more at [madelineastratton.com](http://madelineastratton.com).



# SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY

A discussion with fiction writer Shannon Sanders on her debut story collection, *Company*

By Zach Powers

Shannon Sanders is an alum of The Writer’s Center workshops, so we’re thrilled to see her debut story collection, *Company*, receiving so much positive and well-deserved attention (the book was included in *Publishers Weekly*’s Best Fiction of 2023, among other accolades). Shannon kindly joined us to answer a few questions about her writing practice.

**Starting broadly, what are the elements of the craft of writing that you’re most cognizant of as you’re first drafting? What is your writer brain thinking about during draft one?**

When I start drafting, I’m always focused on whatever interests me about writing the story — and usually that’s situational irony. Most of my stories begin with a seemingly straightforward situation — for example, *Two brothers are concerned about their mom’s new relationship* — and then introduce a heavy dose of irony or subtext to invert the reader’s understanding. My concern at the first-draft stage is whether I can set that up well! A close second is character — I really try to bring my characters to life in the very first draft. That way, by the time I get around to revising, they’re more like familiar old friends (and very easy to work with) rather than new balls of clay (stiff, cold, tougher to shape)!

**On the other hand, what do you focus on during revision? What overlaps with the first-drafting process? And what’s new and exclusive to later drafts?**

It feels naughty to admit this, because revision is such a critical part of the writing process, but: I hate revision. I’m trying to work through that feeling, and I don’t recommend it to anyone else! I try to get as close to my intentions as possible with the first draft, but of course that isn’t always possible. I’m a big fan of workshops (including the many I’ve taken at The Writer’s Center!), and I try to be open to the feedback of early readers! I revise with that feedback in mind. I also try to sharpen scenes that feel flabby and to tighten up plot timelines. For some reason, a lot of my stories involve characters who are facing stressful deadlines, so I often have to go back in and make sure certain important details, such as the day of the week, are crystal clear to the reader.

**With linked stories, we often focus on the characters and settings and plot elements that make them cohere. But how do you approach the linking from a craft perspective? How does your use of language overlap from story to story, and how does it vary as you move from character to character, place to place, etc?**

This collection was really fun to write because it involves a multigenerational family, and families often share a certain vernacular and all sorts of idiosyncrasies. It was a really exciting challenge to imagine all the ways the Collinses’ shared traits might manifest across genders and generations and in all these different people. I really tried to bring what I know about real-world families onto the

page here. In my own family, for example, there are expressions my grandmother uses sincerely, that her daughters (my mother and her sister) use for verbal flair, and that my cousins and I have appropriated in a loving (but semi-ironic) way. I also recognize that each generation has its hallmark mannerisms and communication styles — I tried to be true to that fact, too.

I wrote the first few stories not realizing I was working on a collection — that revelation didn't happen until I was years in. Any coherence in those first few stories happened 100% organically and probably reflects what was going on in my own life at the time. But once I *did* realize a collection was taking shape, I was very deliberate about trying to make sure there was great believability to the world of the stories.

**Let's talk endings! You won me as a lifelong reader of your work with the ending of the first story, "The Good, Good Men." And in all the stories, you have a knack for landing on inevitable yet surprising moments. What makes an ending resonate?**

Thank you for the kind words! I am fairly consistent in one aspect of my writing process: I usually begin a draft with an ending in mind and then write *toward* that ending. For the story you mentioned, like several of the others, I had a really clear mental picture of the final scene; my job then was to figure out what groundwork I needed to lay so the planned ending would land. (I hear often about writers who do the opposite — start with a beginning and then write forward not knowing where they're headed — and that sounds frankly terrifying to me! Though I do see how that probably allows for more of the fun of discovery.)

There's a classic rule that a story can't end until there has been some sort of change. I basically follow that rule, but broadly. For me, subtle change is enough, and it's also perfectly fine for the change to occur in the *reader*, rather than in the world of the story. I also love stories in which the only change that happens is that a character digs her heels in further and *refuses* to change. (There's at least one of those in *Company*!)

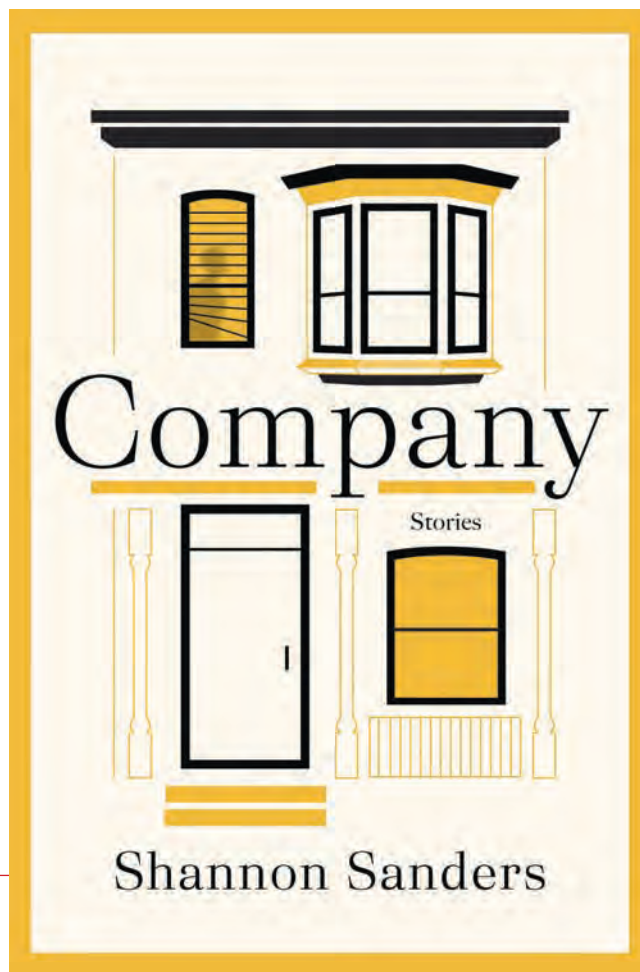
A few of these stories are set up with ticking clocks — in other words, characters are anticipating and preparing for something major to happen. More than once, I chose to end the story *before* the

looming event, which I know surprises and even annoys some readers! But I like the idea that when the reader reaches such an ending, and is perhaps shocked that the story ended *too soon*, they may have to reflect and consider whether the story wasn't actually about the looming event, but something else entirely. It's a little bit like a game I play with myself.

**These stories do a lot of wonderful things, but if I was forced to choose one category to apply to them, I'd probably call them character studies. Where do you find your characters? And how are they developed?**

A small number of characters in the book are based very roughly on people I know very well — my husband, my brother, and my parents. (All of these people are aware, and I would never write about their real lives in any way! Not to worry.) I think character studies are a really handy tool for newer writers especially.

All the other characters are inventions. Some are composites of people I've known in my life, but most are total projections of what I imagine a certain type of person might think or feel. I pre-plan them in the



sense that I know what sort of characters I'll need to move the story from point A to point B, but there is lots of fun discovery that happens during the actual writing practice! Also, just like in a real family, sometimes characters step up to fill needed roles. (For example, if I'm writing a scene where someone needs to do something to lighten the mood, the shy cousin might suddenly find her voice and surprise everyone with a bawdy joke.)

I never miss an opportunity to mention that I got my official start in high school, where I used to write copious amounts of *X-Files* fanfiction. I strongly believe that fanfiction is the best possible practice for characterization!

“

I used to write copious amounts of *X-Files* fanfiction.

”

—Shannon Sanders

**With linked stories, we have recurrent characters, and characters who we'll view from alternative perspectives. How might a character you invented for one story grow and change as they appear in other stories? In other words, how does linking stories affect how you thought about characters between stories?**

I loved catching up with these characters at different points in their lives! I mentioned above that I didn't

realize at first that I was writing a collection. Once I did, the job of building authentic characters became a lot harder, because I had to imagine how things might evolve over multiple lifetimes. My first instincts were to keep the characters fairly static between stories so that readers would recognize them and believe in their consistency. But that would have been the wrong move, because we are all becoming new people every few years, or so the common wisdom goes. I was lucky to have both an agent and an editor who helped me think through how to keep the characters recognizable across the work while still accounting for the maturing process.

This was especially true for the character of Mariolive, who makes small appearances throughout the book as a very young woman, then features as a 30-something in a story of her own. In the latter story, she is depicted as a bit of a control freak with a whole plethora of simmering anxieties. I did have to go back toward the end of the revision stage to make sure that in her other brief appearances, the reader can detect threads of her frailties and hangups so that they don't seem to come out of nowhere.

**Finally, what's one piece of advice you'd offer to a writer just starting out?**

If you hope to be published (which not every writer does, but of course many do), make quick work of getting cozy with rejection. It's going to pelt you from all sides at all stages — and while it's never fun, the whole business becomes so much lighter once it doesn't bug you anymore. One of the stories in *Company* was rejected from dozens of journals before it was published and won a PEN prize! I used to let rejections bum me out for days; lately, I don't worry about them except to make sure to update my files. It's so much more fun to worry about the sentences themselves!

# BOTH A REALIST AND A SURREALIST

## A conversation with poet Jose Hernandez Diaz about *Bad Mexican*, *Bad American*

By Emily Holland

In *Poet Lore* contributor and TWC instructor Jose Hernandez Diaz's new collection, *Bad Mexican*, *Bad American*, coming out March 2024 with Acre Books, readers are taken on a journey through family, through surrealism, and through music. With a unique blend of prose and lyric poetry, Hernandez Diaz brings us into the intimate relationships between family members and the sacrifices made in order to provide a sense of unity and togetherness in the face of external struggles. Ahead of the spring release, Hernandez Diaz joined *Poet Lore* editor Emily Holland for a chat about his new book, his influences, and his transformation as a poet. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**EH:** Jose! Congratulations on *Bad Mexican*, *Bad American*. There is so much in this collection to talk about. My first question has to do with form — I love the way you are utilizing the prose poem among all of these sections. There is such a surreal and yet realistic quality to the movements. Can you talk about your relationship with the prose poem in particular? What draws you to it? How do you see it functioning within this manuscript, and perhaps your work overall?

**JHD:** Initially, when I started writing in high school and as an undergraduate, I wanted to be a short story writer. So, I think I've always been drawn to condensed writing. When I first discovered prose poetry reading James Tate, I was



immediately inspired by the brevity, the manic pace, the surrealism, the stripped-down narrative... It felt like rock n roll, subversive art in the form of literature. The fact that it was still celebrated with a Pulitzer and National Book Award by Tate was even better... I think my prose poems have range throughout the collection. Some are more personal or autobiographical. Some are more surreal. Some are absurdist. Some are strange, however, they have a Mexican American core or setting. I like the idea by Charles Simic that prose poetry is best when it is subversive. As someone who grew up always wanting to think differently or critically, the enigmatic prose poem is a good fit for my book.

**In addition to these prose poems, we also get tender lyric poems in the opening section. How do you see those lyric poems functioning in relation to the prose poems that feature later in the collection?**

Unlike other surrealists or absurdist, like Tate for example, I did not or could not avoid talking about my real life or family life. My family is everything to me. I wanted my collection to start off with autobiographical linear verse about my real life and then blend in prose poems as well. So far, all of my full-length collections or manuscripts are split like this: first half linear verse, second half prose poetry. Initially, I thought about keeping them separated because I hadn't seen it mixed so much before, but then I thought, no, I will make it my own. This is me. I am both a realist and a surrealist. To



# BAD MEXICAN, BAD AMERICAN



I also feel a special bond with all poets, especially those who feel underappreciated or misunderstood.

“

I could not avoid talking about my real life or family life.

”

—Jose Hernandez Diaz

Many poems reference songs or bands. And there is a wonderful texture of music and sound play within all of these poems (via imagery and even some repetitions across poems). I'm curious, what is the impact of music on your poetic style? How do you pay such close attention to the musicality of your images and lines? And who do you turn to for inspiration in terms of musicality and rhythm (either music artists or even poets)?

represent only one side in a collection almost seems fake or not the whole story. This is why I use roman numerals to separate the collection into distinct sections. Overall, I think you can still see a unified, passionate voice.

**I love the focus on family and lineage, even artistic lineage. Can you talk about the presence of family within this manuscript, especially in the opening section? I am struck by the dedication to your parents as well. And this may connect to the previous answer, too, but do you see the different styles of poetry you are working with able to hold different content, in a way? Thinking of lineage, which poets and artists do you see yourself in conversation with via this manuscript? Who is making a lasting impact?**

As I said earlier, family life is everything for me. Many of the friends I grew up with have faded away but family is always there. I wanted to write about this, my family's sacrifice as immigrants, and the lineage of Mexican American heritage and culture. As far as artists' lineage: I see myself as a student of James Tate, Alberto Rios, and Octavio Paz. But

I grew up wanting to be a lead singer in a band. My favorite musicians throughout the years have been Rage Against the Machine, Pink Floyd, MF DOOM, Chicano Batman, Deltron 3030, Carlos Santana, Get Up Kids, Saves the Day, Fleetwood Mac, The Doors, The Mars Volta, Celso Piña, Ramon Ayala, Thee Sacred Souls, Aurora, Atmosphere, Trish Toledo, Durand Jones & the Indications. I think I fell in love with lyricism and the poetry of music before actual poetry. I spent so much time listening to music, absorbing lyrics, rhythm, pace, flow. I think this manifests itself in my poetry via musicality, pace, and attention to sound, rhythm, syntax.

**We have to talk about the title of the collection and the title poem! In "Bad Mexican, Bad American," you write "It was said before me, it will be said after: how you treat / Folks is all that matters, to the dying question: // How do you want to be remembered?" So my question is, how do you want to be remembered? And what, if anything, within these poems do you see grappling with this idea of legacy or remembrance?**

I think at the beginning of my writing career I

wanted to be known as an avant-garde Chicano poet who was prolific and passionate. Now that I have a couple of books completed and two more manuscripts I just finished, I'm looking to have more of a balanced life, not just writing, but more teaching and editing as well. As a teacher I'd like to be known as a positive influence and someone who could inspire writers to write via innovative prompts and freeing themselves to discovery along the way.

**In the dedication and acknowledgments, you mention your English teachers and their impact on you as a young writer. Perhaps we all have an idea of someone in our past who was instrumental in driving us to be the artist we are today. Can you talk about their impact on you? Since you are now a teacher yourself, I'm curious how you see your role in the writing classroom? What do you hope to teach or show your students?**

I don't think I would've become a poet or writer, teacher, editor without meeting my high school English teacher, Mrs. Weir. She has won teacher of the year back home many times. She has a special

talent for making literature accessible and engaging to a young audience. Right away, listening to her, I knew that literature was something special, exciting, and honorable. I don't remember ever wanting to be anything else other than a writer after that junior year English class. Back then I did not have a lot of people telling me I could make it as a writer or in this world in general. I was playing football getting C's and B's and D's. Mrs. Weir inspired me to take school seriously and from then on I got straight A's. Without her I don't know what I would've become, but likely not a published poet. With my own students I like to be positive and a problem solver. I like to encourage writers to submit and believe in themselves because of their dedication to craft.

**I'll end with a question we ask in many of our interviews: What advice would you give to a writer just starting out, who may be looking for community or looking to submit their work?**

It is a marathon, not a sprint. Every prolific writer is first a prolific reader. Treat people like you want to be treated. Hard work pays off but take time to find balance and peace and community.

**CREATIVITY COACHING**  
WITH MELANIE FIGG

**STAY MOTIVATED**  
AND FINALLY FINISH, OR START, THAT WRITING PROJECT

**GET HELPFUL FEEDBACK**  
ON YOUR DRAFT WITH A CLEAR PATH FORWARD

**TAKE THE NEXT STEP**  
SUBMIT YOUR STUFF, APPLY TO A PROGRAM, OR HAVE MORE FUN

**WORK WITH AN EXPERT**  
WRITING MENTOR AND SKILLED CERTIFIED PROFESSIONAL COACH WHO CAN KEEP YOU ON TRACK, IN ACTION, AND INSPIRED

FIND OUT HOW COACHING CAN HELP WITH A COMPLIMENTARY SESSION

[www.melaniefigg.net](http://www.melaniefigg.net)

Kathryn Johnson is a bestselling author of over 40 internationally published books, an acclaimed motivational speaker, and sought-after writing coach.

Hire her as your editor, book doctor, or coach—and make your fiction project the best it can be.

[kathrynjohnsonllc.com](http://kathrynjohnsonllc.com)



# With Distance and Time

## A DISCUSSION WITH NOVELIST DONNA HEMANS ABOUT *THE HOUSE OF PLAIN TRUTH*

By Amy Freeman

Set in Jamaica and Cuba, Donna Hemans's newest novel, *The House of Plain Truth*, traces one woman's decision to uphold the dying wishes of her father over her sisters' objections and her quest to discover the truth about her family and their home. It's a story about a fractured family and the desire to protect — or discard — what unites them. Donna took the time to answer a few questions about the novel and her writing process.

**AF: *The House of Plain Truth* weaves together themes of memory, loss, and discovery. Were they driving forces in your writing the story, or did you unearth them as you wrote? What do they mean, to you, to the main characters?**

DH: All three themes were there in some form when I began writing the book, but the way they drive the story deepened as I wrote and revised. In a way, though, these themes are inherently part of the Caribbean story. I go back often to Derek Walcott's Nobel Prize lecture, aptly titled "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory." In it he said, "All of the Antilles, every island, is an effort of memory; every mind, every racial biography culminating in amnesia and fog." He was talking about cultural identity, how colonialism and external forces shaped and continue to change the cultural identity of the islands that make up the Caribbean. The effort of memory is a part of who we are as a people.

And as we move around and set down roots in new places, we are always looking back to the place we left, yearning for what we have lost or no longer



remember, and surprised too at what we discover.

**The concept of belonging and the idea of home are also important themes. Where, or how, do they fit into the story?**

Belonging and home are concepts that appear across most of my fiction, largely because as a people our history is filled with movement — forced movement to the Caribbean, migration around the Caribbean, Europe, and North America in search of work and a better life. In *The House of Plain Truth*, Pearline is trying to fulfill one of her mother's wishes: to have a place from which the family members can't be removed. As a family living in Cuba, they'd lived through multiple efforts to remove migrant laborers and were eventually repatriated in the early 1930s. And even though Pearline has lived most of her adult life in the United States, she still felt like an "other." Returning home is part of her wish to be in a place that welcomes her, a place where she doesn't have to keep fighting to belong.

**I haven't been to Jamaica or Cuba, but I have been to other parts of the Caribbean. I feel as though your vivid descriptions of the environment — the vegetation, its vibrant colors and fragrances, and of course the sea itself — are almost characters in**

**your book. How did you think about the setting of this novel and its integration with the story itself?**

The book is set in a place near to where I grew up, so much of what I describe are places I know to a certain extent. I try to write about place through the perspective of my characters. In this case, Pearline had spent a lot of time longing to go back home, so there's a sort of reverence she has for the island that is reflected in the writing. She's seeing Jamaica as a newly returned resident and paying attention to things that her sisters who have always lived in Jamaica may not "see."

**Your novel explores the relationships among extended families over multiple decades, countries, and generations. That's a lot of information to manage! Logistically, how did you handle all those variables? Spreadsheets? Post-its?**

I haven't thought to use spreadsheets to help manage all the variables, but that might be worth a try. I usually have a notebook with me in which I write down snippets that come to me when I am away from my computer and work out ideas and details. I probably have several pages where I tried to map out the ages of the main characters, when Rupert first traveled to Cuba, when the family returned to Jamaica, as well as major historical incidents that could have impacted the family. Plus I have note files on my computer where I try to work out ideas.

“

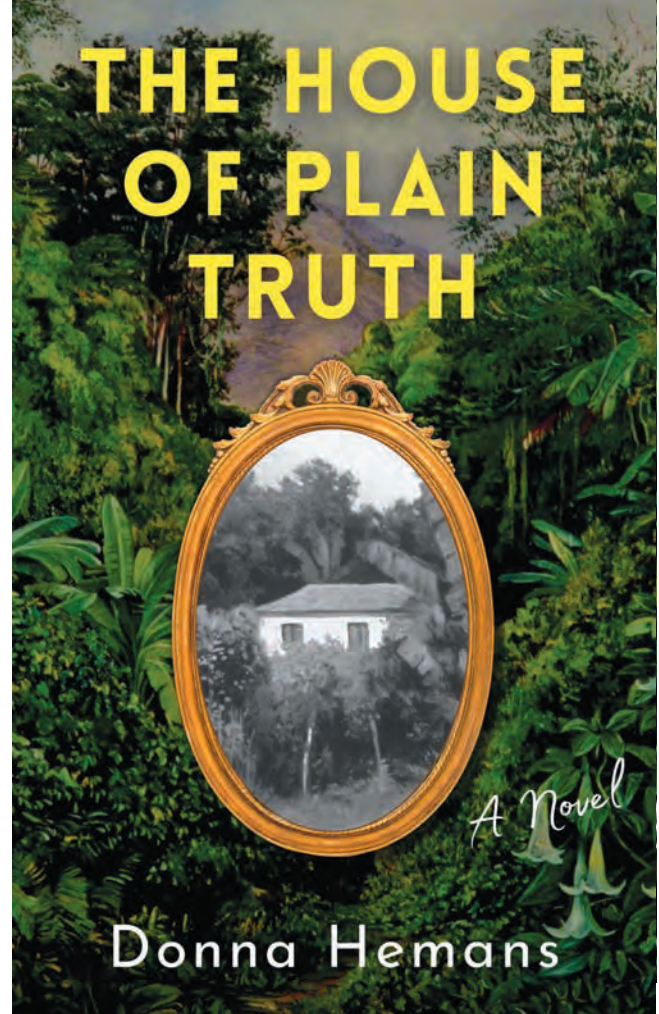
So much of what I discovered surprised me.

”

—Donna Hemans

**Where did research fit in?**

This book required a lot of research. I started with two basic ideas that loosely tracked my family story. My paternal grandparents moved to Cuba in 1917, where they met and got married, and returned to Jamaica with several of their children around 1931. I also knew as a child that one of my grandmother's siblings went to Cuba as well and never returned



to Jamaica. While I had those basic details about my family's connection to Cuba, I didn't know the nitty gritty details of their lives there. Telling this story required a lot of research to understand the conditions in Jamaica in the late 1900s that prompted so many to migrate to Cuba in search of work and the conditions in Cuba that prompted many to return to Jamaica. I read through mounds of research — newspaper articles, textbooks, academic papers, archives of The Cuba Company held at the University of Maryland. So much of what I discovered surprised me and helped shape the story I eventually told.

**How did this book come to be? I saw in the acknowledgements that you completed your first draft in 2008. How closely does the finished novel track with that draft?**

2008 seems like another lifetime now. The book is markedly different from the first draft and that's part of the reason it took so long. When I first started, I had a first person narrator who was in her late teens telling Pearline's story and contemplating how she would take Pearline to Cuba to find her

long-lost siblings. That young woman had no other purpose, nothing driving her except a desire to help her grandaunt reconnect with family. As I worked on the manuscript over the years, I tried to create meaning for this young woman. Nothing felt compelling so I set the book aside and wrote another book, *Tea by the Sea*.

It wasn't until 2016 when I started writing about a woman who gives up her life in Brooklyn and returned to Jamaica that I realized I was writing about Pearline. And what was missing in the story all along finally clicked. Pearline had to tell her own story. She had to present in it. So I went from the first person narrative of an 18-year-old to a third person narrative of a 60-something-year-old woman.

The core of the story remained the same though: reuniting a fractured family.

Thinking about how the book shifted brings me back to the question about research and how important it is to sit with all the research material and sort of

let it percolate. I've realized that when the material has fully percolated and feels second nature to me, I write a better story. I'm not hung up on all the details I've uncovered but am content with including the material that's truly important to the story.

### **What was your path to publication?**

When *Tea by the Sea* was published in 2020, I had the privilege of appearing on Zibby Owens' podcast "Moms Don't Have Time to Read Books." Since Zibby loved that novel when she launched her publishing company, I suggested to my agent that she send her the manuscript. And here we are.

### **What's next for you?**

As with *The House of Plain Truth*, I've gone back to another manuscript I set aside ages ago. The manuscript I'm working on now is the second book I started writing, and also set it aside when it didn't feel quite like the story I wanted to tell. With distance and time, the manuscript now has a shape and structure that I love.



**In-Person & Online**

**Fun, FREE events for writers!**

**writer.org**



# WORKSHOP GUIDELINES

**Write with us! The Writer's Center offers more than 300 workshops every year in all genres and for all experience levels.**

You'll work with published, professional writers as you explore the craft of writing in genre-specific as well as special topics workshops. Take a look below at the basic levels of instruction, and then find our workshop schedule in the following pages. You can find detailed workshop descriptions and instructor bios at [writer.org](http://writer.org).

## WORKSHOP LEVELS

### BEGINNER

If you're new to creative writing, start here! Beginner-level workshops introduce you to the basic elements of the craft of writing. You'll take your first steps to creating stories, poems, essays, novels, and more!

### INTERMEDIATE

Now that you've developed a writing practice, it's time to take it to the next level. Intermediate workshops help you learn new skills and improve your own original work.

### ADVANCED LEVEL

Calling all confident writers! In our advanced workshops, you'll master elements of craft, finish polished pieces, and learn how to get your work published.

## WINTER/SPRING 2024 WORKSHOPS ARE ON SITE & VIRTUAL

## WORKSHOP POLICIES

### REFUND POLICY

In the case of a workshop cancellation, participants can receive either a full refund or a credit toward a future workshop(s). Workshop participants can withdraw (at least 48 hours before the first workshop session) for a full credit valid for one year. No refunds are offered for withdrawals. For our full refund policy, visit [writer.org/refund-policy](http://writer.org/refund-policy).

### CODE OF CONDUCT

No jerks! The Writer's Center is committed to providing a welcoming environment for all program participants, instructors, staff members, and volunteers regardless of race, ethnicity, age, religion, gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, appearance, or class. To view our complete code of conduct, please visit [writer.org/conduct](http://writer.org/conduct).

**LIVE VIDEO CONFERENCE** workshops will be held via **Zoom**. You can view brief tutorials on using the platform at [support.zoom.us](http://support.zoom.us).

**ASYNCHRONOUS** workshops will take place over **Wet Ink**, an online learning forum and discussion board.

**Register now at [writer.org](http://writer.org)!**

# WINTER/SPRING 2024 WORKSHOPS

## KID LIT

### **PUBLISHING YOUR BOOK FOR CHILDREN with Peter Mandel**

2/13/24 • Tuesday • 7:00–9:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

In this one-session workshop, nationally-known author Peter Mandel will pass on the insider's tips writers need to know in order to create a marketable first book and get it into the hands of exactly the right gatekeepers in the publishing world.

### **WRITING LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS FOR KIDS with Sam Cameron**

2/17/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:00 PM

The Writer's Center • All Levels • \$60

In this workshop, we will discuss how the inclusion of LGBTQ+ themes varies by age level, identify the most common problematic LGBTQ+ tropes and stereotypes, and test your project for LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

### **WRITING PICTURE BOOKS with Mary Quattlebaum**

3/7/2024–3/21/24 • 3 Thursdays • 7:00–9:30 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$150

Learn the basics--from story structure to marketing--of writing picture books for children.

### **SUBMITTING YOUR CHILDREN'S BOOK FOR PUBLICATION with Jonathan Roth**

3/23/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

The Writer's Center • All Levels • \$60

In this workshop you will learn where to look for the most appropriate agents or editors as well as how to craft effective query letters that will make them want to read your work.

### **WRITING PICTURE BOOKS II with Mary Quattlebaum and Joan Waites**

4/25/24 • Thursday • 6:30–9:30 PM

The Writer's Center • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$60

Learn how to polish your picture book manuscript before submitting to an agent or editor.

## FICTION

### **INTRO TO THE NOVEL with Tammy Greenwood**

1/5/24–2/23/24 • 8 Weeks • Asynchronous

Wet Ink • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$395

This workshop will help you understand the process of writing a novel so you can get started putting pen to paper.

### **THE EXTREME NOVELIST with Kathryn Johnson**

1/17/24–3/6/24 • 8 Wednesdays • 7:00–9:30 PM

Zoom • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$395

This popular course will help you complete a rough draft of a novel in just eight weeks.

### **SHORT STORY I with Buku Sarkar**

1/25/24–3/14/24 • 8 Thursdays • 7:00–9:00 PM

Zoom • Beginner • \$395

Learn the finer crafts of the short story, with a focus on knowing your character and using form.

# FICTION

## **CREATING CONFLICT & TENSION with Kathryn Johnson**

1/27/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Discover how creating a strong central conflict will make your stories irresistible!

## **CRAFTING SHORT STORIES with Christopher Linforth**

1/29/24–3/18/24 • 8 Weeks • Asynchronous

Wet Ink • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$395

After a recap on the constituent elements of short fiction, we will take a fresh look at contemporary and classic stories alike. Each week, writers will craft a new piece and offer feedback to fellow participants.

## **HOW TO DEVELOP CHARACTER with Sayan Ray**

1/31/24 • Wednesday • 6:30–9:30 PM

The Writer's Center • All Levels • \$60

In this class, you will learn (using specific techniques) how to tell a story as only your character in their particular state of mind could tell.

## **SHORT STORY II with Dana Cann**

1/31/24–3/6/24 • 6 Wednesdays • 7:00–9:30 PM

Zoom • Intermediate • \$295

Each writer will submit at least one short story for constructive critique. We'll read published stories, examine short story elements and techniques, and review short story markets and strategies for submitting work.

## **POINT OF VIEW AND NARRATIVE VOICE with Tammy Greenwood**

2/2/24–2/23/24 • 4 Weeks • Asynchronous

Wet Ink • All Levels • \$215

We will look at everything from the first person point of view to the editorial omniscient, as well as some of the less traditional points of view, to help you choose the best voice to tell your story.

## **YOUR FIRST NOVEL with Kathryn Johnson**

2/3/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • Beginner • \$60

Learn how to generate a handful of plots to choose from, methods for effectively planning your story, and simple hacks for fine tuning your basic fiction skills.

## **GENERATING FLASH FICTION with Hildie Block**

2/7/24–4/3/24 • 8 Wednesdays • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$395

Let's use these eight weeks to explore some new styles, write at least five new stories, workshop them, and figure out where they go to be published!

## **FICTION II: REVISION AND SUBMISSION with Marija Stajic**

2/17/24–3/30/24 • 7 Saturdays • 10:30 AM–1:00 PM

Zoom • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$350

We will read each other's work and offer constructive criticism as well as concrete edits.

Participants are expected to bring finished short stories or excerpts from larger works for peer and instructor feedback.



**WRITING COMPELLING HISTORICAL FICTION with Dave Tevelin**

2/17/24–3/16/24 • 5 Saturdays • 10:00 AM–12:00 PM

The Writer's Center • All Levels • \$250

The DC area is rich with history, and the resources to explore it. This five-week course will be a collaborative workshop that will teach participants a variety of techniques to find what they're looking for and work it into a gripping and informative novel.

**FICTION I: THE ENGINES THAT POWER A STORY with Nick Gardner**

2/22/24–4/11/24 • 8 Thursdays • 7:00–9:00 PM

The Writer's Center • Beginner • \$395

Each week of this workshop will include craft readings, a short lecture, and generative writing exercises that will be good for beginning writers as well as those who are returning to the page and hoping to think more deeply about their craft.

**CREATING NOVEL CHARACTERS with Tammy Greenwood**

3/1/24–3/22/24 • 4 Weeks • Asynchronous

Wet Ink • All Levels • \$215

Participants will explore the main character(s) in their novels-in-progress.

**PLOT LIKE A PRO! with Kathryn Johnson**

3/2/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Build a strong plot for any story with these fail-proof steps!

**INTERMEDIATE FICTION with Jen Buxton**

3/6/24–4/24/24 • 8 Wednesdays • 7:00–9:30 PM

Zoom • Intermediate • \$395

This eight week class will further your understanding of craft elements, and, more importantly, help you see how your own work is coming across to a group of readers so you go forward armed with ideas, skills, and hope.

**WRITING CONTEMPORARY FICTION with Christopher Linforth**

3/11/24–4/29/24 • 8 Mondays • 7:00–9:00 PM

Zoom • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$395

In this class, we'll examine a series of contemporary stories to discover lessons on craft, style, and theme to apply to our own writing. You'll need a full-length story or novel chapter (up to 20 pages) completed or near-completed and an open mind ready to take on suggestions for revision.

**FROM NOVICE TO NOVELIST with John DeDakis**

3/13/24–4/17/24 • 6 Wednesdays • 7:00–9:00 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$295

By the end of our time together you'll be prepared to begin work on a novel and will be equipped with the skills to perfect it. The sessions will include time for writing, and for being critiqued.

**TROUBLESHOOTING YOUR FICTION with Kathryn Johnson**

3/16/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

This fast-paced, half-day class focuses on the ten most common mistakes and concerns, often overlooked by authors before they send their story out into the world.

## DIY NOVEL REVISION with Tammy Greenwood

3/29/24–4/19/24 • 4 Weeks • Asynchronous

Wet Ink • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$215

This workshop will take you step-by-step through the revision and editing process of your drafted novel.

## WRITING COMPELLING SCENES with Kathryn Johnson

4/20/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Learn skills for building effective scenes guaranteed to engage your readers!

# MIXED GENRE

### GETTING STARTED: CREATIVE WRITING with Margaret Coan

1/9/24–1/30/24 • 4 Tuesdays • 6:00–8:00 PM

The Writer's Center • Beginner • \$215

This class will explore a variety of genres from poetry, memoir, journaling, and short stories.

### ELEMENTS OF WRITING: SOUND & VISION with Lorin Drexler

1/17/24–2/7/24 • 4 Wednesdays • 2:00–4:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$215

In this exploratory four-week generative workshop, we will engage multidisciplinary modes of creativity to guide inspiration for writing. Using sound and vision as the aperture to ignite the inner dialogue, each week will integrate these mediums to engage a sensory interplay and weave a tapestry for the written word.

### FIRST SENTENCE, FIRST PAGE with Laura J. Oliver

1/20/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

This workshop will teach writers how to capture readers' attention from the very first sentence and keep them turning pages.

### 10 PROMPTS TO DEEPEN YOUR WRITING with Lynn Auld Schwartz

1/27/24 • Saturday • 9:30 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

By examining your response to a variety of visual and musical prompts including painting, sculpture, photography, short film, dance, and music video, you'll learn to deepen your writing with emotional weight.

### WRITING TENSION with Tara Campbell

1/27/24 • Saturday • 1:00–2:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

This all-genre workshop is a space to ruminate on/write about everything that's been making you tense.

### FINDING YOUR AUTHENTIC VOICE with Lindsey Van Wagner

2/3/24–2/24/24 • 4 Saturdays • 1:00–3:00 PM

The Writer's Center • All Levels • \$215

Look beyond your inner critic and tap into the flow of limitless creativity to discover the powerful impact of your authentic voice.

**INSPIRATION STATION with Patricia Gray**

2/4/24 • Sunday • 1:00–4:00 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$60

After a brief round of introductions, you will be prompted to write in a way that tickles your imagination in whatever genre you'd like.

**UNCLOGGING YOUR BRAIN with Lisa Jan Sherman**

2/6/24 • Tuesday • 7:00–8:30 PM

The Writer's Center • All Levels • \$60

Improv prompts will spark memories, characters, and places, turning them into poems, scenes, dialogues, and stories.

**BREATHING LIFE INTO YOUR CHARACTERS with Kathryn Johnson**

2/17/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Learn how to choose, develop, and employ interesting characters that readers will want to follow through your stories.

**WRITING IRONY/SATIRE with Sayan Ray**

2/21/24 • Wednesday • 6:30–9:30 PM

The Writer's Center • All Levels • \$60

In this lecture, you will learn the specific history that gave rise to our modern understanding of satire and irony, how history informs the mechanics of satire and irony, and how these mechanics when implemented can produce incisive writing.

**BEING AN ACTIVE LITERARY CITIZEN with Melanie Figg**

3/2/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

The Writer's Center • All Levels • \$60

Writers of all genres can expand their circles in a variety of ways—from sharing their work with others to volunteering for literary events and organizations, to attending a writing conference. Learn what's out there and expand your writing life!

**MAPPING STRATEGIES FOR STORY STRUCTURE with Lynn Auld Schwartz**

3/9/24 • Saturday • 9:30 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$60

Consider exploratory questions, mapping exercises, tools, and techniques to discover where your story is going and how you will get there.

**HOW TO WRITE A LOT with Kathryn Johnson**

4/6/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Build an invincible writing routine!

**SHOW AND TELL INTENSIVE with Laura Oliver**

4/6/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Through exercises, lively discussion, and inspiring instruction, you will learn to elevate your stories to submission-quality prose.

# MIXED GENRE

## **READING YOUR WORK OUT LOUD with Jennifer Hamady**

4/9/24 • Tuesday • 6:00–9:00 PM

The Writer's Center • All Levels • \$60

Spend an afternoon practicing and learning about the art of public speaking!

## **HOW TO TELL YOUR STORY with Nikki Frias**

4/15/24 • Monday • 7:00–8:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Join us for an hour as we discuss and learn different effective methods towards building and developing your story.

# NONFICTION

## **WRITING CREATIVE NONFICTION with Christopher Linforth**

1/15/24–3/4/24 • 8 Weeks • Asynchronous

Wet Ink • All Levels • \$395

This class focuses on generating new material, offering feedback to peers, revising pieces, and finally researching markets for the placement of work.

## **PERSONAL ESSAYS FROM START TO FINISH: 10 ESSAYS IN 5 MONTHS! with Hannah Grieco**

1/16/24–5/28/24 • 12 Tuesdays • 7:00–9:00 PM

Zoom • Master • \$2,500

Join us for five months of craft lessons, workshops, editor visits, and personal editorial feedback!

## **WRITING TRAUMA with Buku Sarkar**

1/17/24–3/6/24 • 8 Wednesdays • 7:00–9:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$395

Using the works of Annie Ernaux, participants will write about personal experiences with sparseness of words, descriptions, and detachment to create a striking voice in their writing.

## **BOOT CAMP FOR WRITERS with Beth Kanter**

1/18/24–3/7/24 • 8 Thursdays • 10:30 AM–1:30 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$395

This workshop will focus on both craft and technique. Participants will have the start of several narrative pieces by the end of the class.

## **HOW TO WRITE A GRANT PROPOSAL with Cara Seitchek**

1/20/24–3/9/24 • 4 Saturdays • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$215

Learn how to raise funding for your non-profit organization.

## **STARTING A MEMOIR with Melanie Figg**

1/20/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–1:00 PM

Zoom • Beginner • \$60

Whether you've got a good idea or are in the early stages of writing, learn what you need to start strong and stay on track! Class includes practical discussion, lots of helpful tips, and some in-class exercises designed to offer clarity, direction, and inspiration as you move forward with your memoir.

**JOURNALING TECHNIQUES FOR WRITING MEMORIES**with **GG Renee Hill**

1/21/24–1/28/24 • 2 Sundays • 1:00–4:00 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$115

Use your journaling practice to mine your memories for themes to write about your life.

**HOW—AND WHERE—TO PITCH PERSONAL ESSAYS with Christine Koubek Flynn**

1/24/24 • Wednesday • 7:00–9:30 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Build a list of targeted potential essay publication opportunities to increase your chances of being published.

**HOW TO WRITE A BRAIDED ESSAY with Laura J. Oliver**

2/3/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

This workshop will teach participants what a braided essay is and how to write one.

**NARRATIVE NONFICTION: HISTORY, MEMOIR, AND BIOGRAPHY with Kenneth D. Ackerman**

2/7/24–3/20/24 • 7 Wednesdays • 7:00–9:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$350

Participants will examine each book idea or manuscript, its narrative structure, writing and research challenges, and plan for getting the job done. Participants are encouraged to share up to 20 pages and a book summary for review.

**LIFE STORIES INTENSIVE with Lynn Auld Schwartz**

2/10/24 • Saturday • 9:30 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$60

Learn to identify your story's essence, the truth it reveals, and to engage the reader through fictional techniques.

**WRITING ROUGH DRAFTS with GG Renee Hill**

2/21/24–3/6/24 • 3 Wednesdays • 6:00–8:00 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$150

We will experiment with variations of expressive and intuitive writing, and other techniques that break down barriers to writing. Writers will come away with a rough draft and a new appreciation for the early stages of story development.

**HOW TO WRITE MICRO MEMOIR with Laura J. Oliver**

3/2/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Learn to tell your life story as you lived it, one moment at a time.

**THE ART OF IDENTITY: WRITING ABOUT ADOPTION with Christine Koubek Flynn**

3/6/24–4/10/24 • 5 Wednesdays • 7:00–9:30 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$250

Learn, grow, and connect with other adopted people through shared stories. In this five-session workshop, we'll discuss elements of craft using essays that illuminate it from national and regional magazines, newspapers and spoken word essays. Note: No meeting March 27.

**TRAVEL WRITING with Peter Mandel**

3/19/24 • Tuesday • 7:00–9:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

The insider tips you'll need to turn your own travel experiences into easy-to-compose blogs, posts, and articles that you can publish yourself—or sell to newspapers, magazines, and websites.

# NONFICTION

## **WRITING THE TRUTH: LESSONS IN NONFICTION WRITING with Eric Lichtblau**

3/25/24–4/22/24 • 5 Mondays • 6:00–8:00 PM

The Writer's Center • Beginner • \$250

The workshop is designed for beginner writers looking to gain a footing in nonfiction writing of different length and format, from first-person essays to long-form magazine writing and book-length projects.

## **USING THE TOOLS OF FICTION IN NONFICTION with Rachel Coonce**

4/6/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–1:00 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$60

Whether you are crafting an essay or writing a memoir, the tools of fiction can bring depth and suspense to your work.

## **CREATIVE COURAGE AND SELF-CARE FOR WRITERS with GG Renee Hill**

4/28/24 • Sunday • 1:00–4:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

In this class, you will work through writing exercises that identify limiting beliefs, clarify your needs and motivations, and rejuvenate your creative process.

# POETRY

## **REVISING YOUR POEMS with Natasha Oladokun**

1/16/24–2/20/24 • 6 Tuesdays • 7:00–9:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$295

You can expect to leave this workshop with two radically revised poems, and the tools to approach your drafts as opportunities for renewed creativity.

## **FREEDOM WITH FORMS with Claudia Gary**

1/20/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–1:00 PM

Zoom • Intermediate/Advanced • \$60

After exploring several traditional forms, we will experiment with creating improvised (nonce) forms. Participants may leave with at least one new draft poem and ideas for creating more.

## **THE MYSTERY OF LINE BREAKS with Sue Ellen Thompson**

1/21/24 • Sunday • 1:00–4:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

In this workshop, we will look at different approaches to determining where a line ends and how the relationship between the sentence and the line affects the poem's impact on the reader.

## **JACK GILBERT POETRY WORKSHOP with Dan Brady**

1/22/24–2/26/24 • 6 Weeks • Asynchronous

Wet Ink • All Levels • \$295

Through a deep dive into Jack Gilbert's poetry, we will apply the principles of this "serious romantic" poet and create our own poems that are meaningful, direct, beautiful, and essential.

## **NATURAL METER CRASH COURSE with Claudia Gary**

1/28/24 • Sunday • 11:00 AM–2:00 PM

Zoom • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$60

Guided by an internationally published author of sonnets, villanelles, and other

metrical poems, this one-day workshop includes scansion of well-known poems, writing exercises, and, if you like, close examination of a poem you've drafted prior to class.

### **VILLANELLE CRASH COURSE with Claudia Gary**

2/3/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–1:00 PM

Zoom • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$60

You'll leave this class with at least one new (draft) or improved villanelle, as well as insights about how writing poetry in form can unlock deeper meaning and enhance everything you write.

### **FINDING YOUR POETIC VOICE with Ann Quinn**

2/15/24–3/21/24 • 6 Thursdays • 12:30–3:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$295

Try on a variety of styles and forms on the way to finding your own poetic voice!

### **WRITE THE FREE SONNET with Indran Amirthanayagam**

2/17/24–3/2/24 • 3 Saturdays • 11:00 AM–1:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$150

Participants will define and then write “free” sonnets after studying the traditional sonnet forms known as the Shakespearean and the Petrarchan.

### **USE POETIC TECHNIQUE TO IMPROVE YOUR PROSE with Sayan Ray**

2/28/24 • Wednesday • 6:30–9:30 PM

Zoom • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$60

Learn how to break down the structure of poems, how to embed these structures into prose, and how doing so can add vibrancy to your story and its tone.

### **THE ART OF TITLING with Naomi Ayala**

3/2/24–4/6/24 • 6 Saturdays • 1:00–3:00 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$295

This workshop is designed to give you poem-based tips and strategies for working in the title space, and the opportunity to experiment with other poets as poems evolve.

### **REVISITING RHYME with Sue Ellen Thompson**

3/3/24 • Sunday • 1:00–4:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

In this workshop, we will examine the many different rhyming strategies available to poets writing today.

### **REVISION AS PRACTICE with Naomi Ayala**

3/12/24–4/30/24 • 8 Tuesdays • 6:30–8:30 PM

Zoom • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$395

Designed for those who are eager to grow and polish poems to begin to submit to journals, this workshop focuses on manageably building revision, like writing, into your life as a practice.

### **WHOLE-BRAIN POETRY with Claudia Gary**

3/16/24–4/13/24 • 5 Saturdays • 10:00 AM–1:00 PM

Zoom • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$250

Through writing exercises, close examination of time-honored and recent poems, workshoping of participant poems, and brief reading assignments, we will examine the neurology and psychology of poetry, the relationship between time and memory, how science has influenced well-known poets, how poetry can heal trauma and prevent PTSD, and more.

# POETRY

## **INTRODUCTION TO POETRY with Melanie Figg**

3/21/24–4/25/24 • 6 Thursdays • 7:00–9:00 PM

The Writer's Center • Beginner • \$295

Participants will learn by discussing great poems, reading short, engaging chapters, and doing fun weekly assignments.

## **BIG POEMS IN SMALL PACKAGES with Ann Quinn**

3/28/24–4/4/24 • 2 Thursdays • 12:30–3:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$115

Let's look at some powerful short poems together to come up with strategies for writing our own little gems, and then write them.

## **POETICS OF A QUEER BODY with Saúl Hernández**

4/4/24–4/25/24 • 4 Thursdays • 6:00–8:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$215

Throughout this course we will read & study poems by queer writers, allowing time in-class to work on our weekly prompt to generate new poems.

## **SONNET CRASH COURSE with Claudia Gary**

4/20/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–1:00 PM

Zoom • Intermediate/ Advanced • \$60

You'll leave this class with at least one new (draft) or improved sonnet, as well as insights about how writing poems in form can unlock deeper meaning and enhance everything you write.

## **HOW POEMS BEGIN with Sue Ellen Thompson**

4/21/24 • Sunday • 1:00–4:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

In this workshop, we will explore some of the ways in which poets have traditionally chosen to open their poems and what these strategies achieve.

## **GETTING YOUR POETRY PUBLISHED with Michele Wolf**

4/28/24 • Sunday • 1:00–4:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

This intensive one-day workshop will offer all poets hands-on advice on how to achieve their publishing goals.

# STAGE & SCREEN

## **INTRODUCTION TO SONG LYRIC WRITING with AI Basile**

1/16/24–1/23/24 • 2 Tuesdays • 8:00–10:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$115

This course will start you on the journey of using words to create those memorable feelings, and introduce you to the techniques songwriters have used in popular music over the last century.

## **HOW TO WRITE A STAND-UP COMEDY ACT with Sheila Wenz**

1/23/24–2/20/24 • 5 Tuesdays • 6:00–8:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$250

Learn how to recognize a premise, extract the humor, and hone it into a stand-up act or funny story.



# PROFESSIONAL WRITING

## **THE FUNDAMENTALS OF PERSUASIVE WRITING with James Alexander**

2/1/24–3/7/24 • 6 Thursdays • 7:00–9:30 PM

Zoom • Beginner/ Intermediate • \$295

This six-week workshop teaches you the processes involved in crafting op-eds and prepared speeches.

## **WRITE LIKE THE NEWS with Hank Wallace**

4/24/24 • Wednesday • 7:00–9:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Become concise as news, precise as law.

# PUBLISHING

## **BOOK MARKETING ON A BUDGET with Rob Jolles**

1/25/24–2/1/24 • 2 Thursdays • 9:30 AM–11:00 AM

Zoom • All Levels • \$115

In this workshop we'll focus on over two dozen book marketing tips, with a close eye on budgets.

## **PITCHING AND QUERYING: THE ART OF SELLING YOUR WORK with Aaron Hamburger**

2/1/24–2/15/24 • 3 Thursdays • 7:00–9:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$150

In this three-session workshop, we'll cover the basics of writing pitches and queries and then workshop them to refine them.

## **SMALL PRESS PUBLISHING WITH A DEBUT with Emily Jon Tobias**

2/10/24 • Saturday • 1:00–4:00 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Looking for a publisher to call home for your manuscript?

## **BOOK PROMOTION THROUGH PODCASTING with Rob Jolles**

3/21/24–3/28/24 • 2 Thursdays • 9:30 AM–11:00 AM

Zoom • All Levels • \$115

In this workshop we'll focus on how to prepare your pitch materials, how to get booked on podcasts, how to be a great guest, and even how to create your own podcast.

## **HOW TO WRITE A KILLER QUERY & SYNOPSIS with Kathryn Johnson**

3/23/24 • Saturday • 10:00 AM–12:30 PM

Zoom • All Levels • \$60

Learn how to encapsulate your plot for your own use and as a showcase for your story when you submit to a literary agent or publisher.

**For details and to register, visit [writer.org](https://www.writer.org)!**



## FREE EVENTS FOR WRITERS: WINTER/SPRING 2024

### **CURATED CONVERSATION(S): POETS MONIKA RADOJEVIC & VICKIE VÉRTIZ**

Tuesday, December 26, 7pm ET  
YouTube Premiere

### **OPEN MIC @ THE WRITER'S CENTER**

Wednesday, January 10, 7pm ET

### **CHRISTIAN MCEWEN & RICHARD SMITH READING & DISCUSSION**

Saturday, January 20, 2pm ET  
In-person @ The Writer's Center

### **OPEN MIC @ THE WRITER'S CENTER**

Wednesday, January 24, 7pm ET

### **VIRTUAL CRAFT CHAT ON WRITING WITH JAMI ATTENBERG**

Thursday, February 1, 7pm ET  
Zoom

### **OPEN MIC @ THE WRITER'S CENTER**

Wednesday, February 14, 7pm ET

### **VIRTUAL CRAFT CHAT WITH POET SARAH GHAZAL ALI**

Thursday, February 15, 7pm ET  
Zoom

### **VIRTUAL CRAFT CHAT WITH POET OLATUNDE OSINAIKE**

Thursday, February 22, 7pm ET  
Zoom

### **OPEN MIC @ THE WRITER'S CENTER**

Wednesday, February 28, 7pm ET

### **VIRTUAL CRAFT CHAT WITH NOVELIST KAREN OUTEN**

Thursday, February 29, 7pm ET  
Zoom

### **SCRABBLE FOR SCHOLARSHIPS, A TWC FUNDRAISER**

Saturday, March 9, TBD  
In-person @ The Writer's Center

### **OPEN MIC @ THE WRITER'S CENTER**

Wednesday, March 13, 7pm ET

### **OPEN MIC @ THE WRITER'S CENTER**

Wednesday, March 27, 7pm ET

### **THE WRITER'S CENTER LIVE! A LITERARY VARIETY SHOW**

Saturday, April 13, 7:30pm ET  
In-person @ The Writer's Center

Find more free events and register at [writer.org](https://writer.org)!

# Highlights from The Writer's Center Virtual Craft Chat Series

**NOVELIST SARAH CYPHER  
DISCUSSES HER DEBUT NOVEL,  
*THE SKIN AND ITS GIRL***



## **ON CONTROLLING POINT OF VIEW**

[The first-person direct address perspective] came super late in the process. I thought, you know, when you sit down to talk to someone, you can talk about anything. There's this grounding link between you and me, and that's a wide open space, but it's something also very simple and very intuitive. And I made this fairly lightweight revision [to my manuscript] to add that direct address, and I sent the revision out to my now agent, and he got it. He got it right away. He was reading Matthew Salesses's [book on creative writing] *Craft in the Real World* at the time, which goes into other ways to write a novel beyond this Western simple narrative arc that, as Western readers, we often have it in our bones. And I was trying to do something different, and that direct address created the space for it to be received as something intentional.

I did one of those book recommendation lists for Electric Lit that was all about [books that use] direct address. And I had a similar reaction, like, where is this coming from and who else does it and why? I noticed that it comes up a lot in queer literature, where there was a real reckoning with narrative authority. Because often, as a queer person, you have to come into your voice in this particular way. It's sort of a sad reality in our publishing and literary space that you've got to fight to be heard if you're doing things differently.



When you address [a story] to a specific listener, it opens something up. It's that sort of thrill of overhearing a conversation and there's a specificity to it that edges on generalization, and I thought that was really important for this novel.

I think a really beautiful thing about it, and freeing too, is because it allowed me this radical empathy, or to think through my narrator as being sort of radically empathetic for relatives. In a way, as writers, we can do that for the people around us. But I don't think it is a norm in our culture to really think through other people's experience in their shoes. That's a big part of what [the narrator is] trying to do in the story, because she's looking back at her great aunt. I also step into her grandmother's point of view and her mother's point of view and her father's point of view.

I think there's a lot of gifts in being able to enter those [other] points of view. But in anchoring it to first person, it sort of removed that god-like [omniscient] layer that was uncomfortable for me as the writer.

## POET ALINA PLESKOVA ON HER DEBUT COLLECTION, *TOSKA*



### ON INFLUENCE AND LITERARY ORIGINS

I kind of like to mash influences together and call them out in my work. So all of the detritus that makes up our daily existence, that we are surrounded by. High and low art.

I'm influenced by so many disparate things. I love really stylistically inventive and more formal poets like Carl Phillips, whose work is nothing like mine, but I really learn a lot from him about writing about desire and making interesting syntactical choices, which I myself always attribute to being ESL and not using words correctly. But then seeing someone with like a strong grasp of English using words differently empowers me to keep doing that. But also I love punk music. It's a huge part of like my coming of age. So, that stuff makes its way in.

In general, I'm very influenced by the several generations of New York School poets. Because I was never drawn to the really traditional kind of formal, dare I say lofty, florid kind of poetry. When I read these conversational works that were still very astute, very well crafted, very smart, very interesting, very engaging, but that treated the things that happened in our quotidian existence as poem worthy. That was it for me. I took that and I ran with it. That's where I got [things] like mentioning your friends in poems. All of that is just as valid and belongs in the poem just as much as references to



Greek mythology. It's like you don't actually need to know the person that I'm mentioning [in the poem] to understand what's going on.

Everything that happens to you on a daily basis, like where you eat lunch, what you eat for lunch, what your friend said that was funny, all of that has a place in a poem. I think that's just going to be my mode forever. I am very insistent on my poem sounding the way that I would talk. I don't put anything in a poem that I wouldn't say out loud in some way, which maybe is not everyone's deal.

But, you know, it's like the speaker is me. It's like she talks the way that I would talk. All of that came out. Also, [influences like] Joe Brainard's generosity towards community and friendship and art being something that's collaborative and nonhierarchical and sharing. It's the idea that you produce art primarily for the people around you who get you and who you're in community with and have shared affinities with. It's very important and empowering to me.

## CLEO QIAN ON HER COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES, *LET'S GO LET'S GO LET'S GO*



### ON ENDINGS

I think that there's a lot of pressure on the conclusion or the climax in narratives, in films or TV series or novels. There's a lot of pressure on sticking the landing. And often, it's really hard to do. Often, the landing is not as satisfying as the question or the mystery that was opened up at the beginning of the series or the novel or the short story. I think that I like that feeling of abruptness at the end. I do think that in some of my stories one could say that the ending is quite abrupt, but I like that kind of feeling. Like you think you're driving somewhere and you're on this road and then suddenly there's a cliff drop in front of you.

I think that kind of goes back to contemporary life or virtual connections, where often there are a lot of unfinished questions. There's a lot of things in life that you never get closure on. People or questions or relationships that you never get closure on. So I think it's really true to life to not have a satisfying, pat conclusion.

As for when do I know if a story is complete or if an ending is complete, I feel like for most of my stories, the majority of the ones in this collection, the ending never changed through the editing process. Maybe a lot changed in the middle or a lot changed throughout, but the ending was something that I always kind of stuck to.



photo by Casper Yen

I definitely don't know the whole thing when I start and sit down and write the story. When I write the first draft, I think I am always looking to surprise myself. So when I get to the ending of a story, and I feel like I've successfully surprised myself, I'm like, Oh, that was a surprise to me. And I like that feeling. I'll be like, how do I make the story that came before better, so that it can live up to this ending?

### THE WRITER'S CENTER VIRTUAL CRAFT CHAT SERIES

presents writers from the  
Washington DC region and around  
the world. Visit [writer.org](http://writer.org) to watch  
recordings of past events and browse  
the upcoming schedule.



VOLUME 118

1 / 2

**Ben Kline**

**Abecedarian in which my mom leaves**

after twenty-six hours of cardiac arrest, my dad  
alone for the first time in five decades,

because making sense of sudden death  
benefits from a strict form

chosen at random, any meter or pattern  
calming my headache, my appetite for gin, gin fizz, gin again.

Days later Dad returns to tractors, plows, newborn calves,  
driving his pickup without a seat belt, moving barn-to-barn,

ensuring no babies are stuck in breech. I remember  
eating hamburgers made of calves we'd named, thinking we're all

food at the end, meat ground, wrapped and frozen  
for grilling after the funeral, Dad giving me a quick

glance and *Does it feel like she died years ago to you too?* Every  
god I disbelieve wouldn't

hazard an honest answer, despite  
hundreds of miles between us

in the following weeks, my big manuscript plans  
interrupted by pink casket sonnets, gin again, calling Dad

just to feel like I'm doing something between gins,  
juggling work, my lover, a conference, these line breaks,

kicking myself for not just texting everyone I tell. They offer  
kind words, touch my arm, buy me gin.

Listening to their sympathy salves no sorrow and  
lying about it requires Daytime Emmy award winning work. Yes,

maybe Dad rushed the burial, refused a reception  
many cousins wished to host. I applaud him

not offering himself past the visitation, where,  
nearing the blush coffin like a bashful bachelor, Mom's

old boyfriend tried to stop grief  
oxidizing out of his body, and he didn't

pretend Dad would know who he was, shaking hands,  
pivoting to the record eighty-one degree day, the climate

## From Ruben Quesada's Folio on *Traditional Poetic Forms*

queer as my sneer when my sister-in-law Annie  
queued up *Are you trying to avoid me?* I wanted to shout

*Really bitch?* so loud Mom cackled from the casket,  
resurrection as a Pelosi clap

snapping every bead-counting Catholic back to reality.  
Some nights I gin a wormhole, fantasize I slapped sis,

tackling her guilt, mine, the room's surprise  
that Mom died the same week she ran five miles, further

umbrage I'll tuck between the condolence cards  
under the stack of blank notebooks

vying for my tears. I'm certain, very,  
very certain I'll never open any of them. My brother says

we've entered this new phase called  
*waiting to see if he follows suit* as if love is two

x's over her eyes, his eyes, my eyes  
xeric still, waiting for that moment when I realize

you live, you love, and then  
you don't. You call yourself

*zealous with decay.* You drink gin, buy  
zoo tickets, wander under stars you'll return to.

## Tess Taylor Egg Ode

*for Emeline*

When I feed you the egg  
food of dinosaur, rat & lizard,

food of raccoon, food even of chicken,  
embryo-food, amino, omega,

elegant inner fat-protein ocean  
I watch you become

the ouroboros swallowing  
again the bright seed of animal life.

I too feel the snake  
behind my own eye, I too admire

each vowel-ovum.  
I crack for you, bright omnivore.

O speckled, breakable plunder:  
Your mouth opens & opens for more.

## Rebecca Maker Found Solace

The markings my heart knows by heart along  
some dead-flat dusty ridges, these are all  
etched-in. There's something pure about being  
so parched. A purple velvet lilac heft  
consults the fishbowl sky, and shadows drift  
where hedges hold small rabbits, bobcats; all  
my daytime dreams invoke these layered blooms,  
the flowers always proud and hopeful, too.  
Right here is where we held soft hands in fear  
and stood on sure rock places for our feet.  
A petal's shell-pink drop unveils itself  
in hatched-end ribbons, knitted branches' swirl;  
the smallest one surprises me most, white  
fine wisps, an errant cloud, a painted sky.

# JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE PAGE

By Jillian Danback-McGhan

Despite having navigated all the world's major oceans, it took me over a decade for my words to find their way to the center of the page. For years, I wrote stories exclusively in the margins of notebooks, on the backs of bank statements, sections of torn envelopes — only on pieces of paper meant to be discarded. An unusual habit, considering that, for as long as I could remember, I had two ambitions in life: to be a writer and to join the Navy. While I realized my dream of graduating from the United States Naval Academy and commissioning as an officer, becoming a writer seemed improbable.

The irony didn't escape me — I attended a highly selective college with the intention of pursuing an arduous, dangerous profession... but demurred from sharing my writing with others. The fear of exposing my work to rejection and misinterpretation immobilized my every attempt at serious writing. I had always been a strong storyteller, yet the words I committed to the page never seemed to capture the vision I had in my head. Writers I studied seemed possessed of a natural genius. I was convinced art came from inspiration alone — you either had it or you didn't. I hadn't yet realized writing was a skill one could hone, an art which depended on both creativity and diligence.

Storytelling and military service are not as distinct as one might imagine. The military, especially the Navy, has a strong tradition of storytelling. Evening watches are prime occasions for exchanging stories, Sailors' way of passing the long, dark, often dull hours spent navigating open stretches of water. My own penchant for storytelling proved useful after I commissioned. On my first ship, a guided-missile destroyer, I led the Executive Division, which consisted of administrative professionals, corpsmen, and training staff — roles as essential to at-sea operations as ammunitions specialists and flight controllers, though not quite as exciting. Our division often worked for eighteen hours a day while we were on deployment, often on little to no sleep. To encourage them and raise morale during these arduous days, I would tell them funny stories or make connections to how our contributions supported

larger war efforts during our morning musters. Sometimes, I told tales of mishaps that occurred on other ships or stories of other crews' bad behavior during port calls, embellished for dramatic effect.

True to form, I recorded the stories I told my division, along with other stories I collected or created along the way, in the margins of notebooks I carried with me during the four years I spent at sea. These stories never made it to the center of the page; they never seemed important enough. Operations supporting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had been conducted for over a decade at that point, yet most of the public seemed oblivious to day-to-day operations. I was young and female and didn't have direct combat experience — who could possibly be interested in what I had to say? Instead, I scribbled these stories around to-do lists and training notes, squinting in the dim light of darkened ship compartments during evening watches, my handwriting wobbly from unexpected sea swells on pages puckered with salt spray.

Following my at-sea assignments, I was assigned to the U.S. Naval Academy to teach English. My time as an instructor corresponded with what would later be known as the first wave of literary fiction depicting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The stories published during this time both encouraged and frustrated me. While many important and captivating stories about the War on Terror gained critical attention, perspectives from and stories about women service members were conspicuously absent from these narratives. When mentioned, the women in these stories were typically subsidiary characters, commonly portrayed as victims lacking agency or superwomen lacking vulnerability. They didn't possess the complexity of male characters. There were a few notable exceptions published during this time, though military literature written by women rarely achieved the same acclaim as male authors.

I continued writing in the margins of my notebooks. Years would pass before I recognized how this act echoed what I saw and experienced in both literature and the military.

Once my tour at the Naval Academy ended, I transitioned out of the Navy and into a civilian job. My colleagues' interest in my stories about Navy life astounded me and inspired me to start writing in earnest. Perhaps my stories were worth telling, I reasoned. Fears of my work being harshly criticized and rejected still existed, of course, but a new type of fear burned more prominently — the fear of being



disregarded. I was done waiting for other writers to tell the types of stories I wanted to read or create the types of characters I wanted to see.

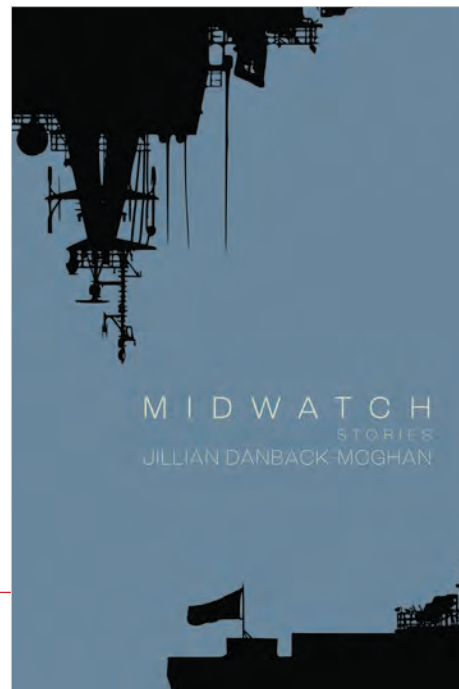
Eventually, the idea for a collection of short fiction depicting women servicemembers coalesced in my mind. I have always loved the potency of short fiction. Every word is deliberate. Authors can capture an entire life's worth of emotion in only a few paragraphs. While deployed, when free time was scarce, I could still commit to reading at least one short story each day. The form mimicked the military's storytelling tradition while capturing the multifarious perspectives of women who served. Still, I needed assistance. My first attempts at these stories were terrible, even by the most generous estimations. Enrolling in an MFA program was out of the question due to the demands of my work and family life, so I researched writing workshops that could help me develop the craft of storytelling. The Writer's Center's courses on short fiction provided to be invaluable, and course instructors offered kind, specific, and actionable feedback which immensely improved my work. I no longer saw myself as only a storyteller. With practice, support, and a commitment to revision, I became a writer.

The true turning point in my writing came in 2020 when I enrolled in the year-long Short Story Intensive course offered by The Writer's Center and taught by Ivelisse Rodriguez. I had read *Love/War Stories*, her incredible short story collection, a few months earlier; seeing an author whose work I admired as a faculty member seemed serendipitous. This workshop surpassed my wildest expectations.

Workshop participants included a mix of published and emerging authors, and we built relationships which would outlast the course's duration. Ivelisse created an atmosphere where we could learn as much from each other as we could from her expertise. She provided insight and lessons on craft, taught us how to discover our own writing process, and provided practical insight into how to pursue publication. She remains a trusted mentor to this day.

During the Short Story Intensive, I drafted and refined *Midwatch*, a collection of short stories about women service members trapped in the liminal spaces between past and present, reality and delusion, trauma and recovery. Applying the lessons learned from the Short Story Intensive, I submitted *Midwatch* to small presses for publication. Even with my former workshop participants offering support, each rejection felt like an admonition: *See? You should have kept your stories in the margins of your notebooks where they belong.* I didn't retreat, though. I kept writing, revising, and even started new projects. I had no intention of abandoning my writing. The journey to the center of the page had taken me too long. And while my vision for my stories still didn't quite match up with the vision I had for them in my head, I started to close the distance between concept and reality through a dedication to revision, peer reviews, and studies of other texts.

In May 2023, after a year of querying, I received an email from Split/Lip Press. The subject line: "We Love *Midwatch*!" Thanks to the support from others, including those instructors and participants I'd encountered at The Writer's Center workshops, my words have not only made it to the center of the page, they will now appear on someone else's bookshelf.



# Beautiful Lives

## A CONVERSATION WITH ELYSSA MAXX GOODMAN ON HER NEW HISTORY OF DRAG IN NEW YORK

By Zach Powers

*In Glitter and Concrete, journalist and photographer Elyssa Maxx Goodman crafts a deeply researched and readable history of drag in New York City, going back over 150 years. She joined us via Zoom for a discussion of the writing behind this expansive, important project. Edited for length and clarity.*

**ZP: I think this book is a great example of a subject inspiring a writer. You've written about drag before, and now that subject has sustained 350 pages (not counting the notes!). Why does your interest in this subject lead to words, as opposed to, say, just photos or simply attending a drag show?**

**EMG:** No one has asked me that before, so thank you. There's so much more to the stories of drag than happen in a photograph. Photographs are really important to drag — how do we see it without them? But I knew that these performers had such incredible stories that weren't getting told, and I wanted to make sure that they were told. I wanted the people in the book to be as much of a household name as RuPaul. I wanted to be able to share their stories and to let people know that the history of drag goes much further back than a television show, even though the television show is very important to its current history and is also deeply influenced by its past.

**What are the risks of writing about a subject you care about so much? Because I don't think interest alone necessarily leads to interesting writing. How did you know or at what point did you know this was a thing worth writing about?**

I knew it was a thing worth writing about because it was something I wanted to read, and it didn't exist.

A lot of the writing that had been done about drag previously was academic. Or there were very beautiful coffee table books with very nice interviews and very informative captions. But I knew that drag warranted a history because of all the different ways it's influenced culture and history and queer

history and American history. Something I always say is drag history is New York history is American history. I knew that there were stories to tell that hadn't been told.

I think the best answer I can give is that I knew there was this audience for drag, and I have been this audience for drag for almost 30 years. I just thought that if I wanted it that other people would want it, too. And I'm glad that I was right.

**Was there added pressure in tackling a subject you care so much about? Were you worried about the effort coming up short?**

I was definitely worried about doing the subject justice. That was my biggest goal. I wanted to be proud of the book, and I wanted it to do right by the subjects who were in it. What I had been hoping for from the beginning was to honor their lives and to honor their stories.

That can be either an extremely paralyzing force, or it can be one that propels you forward. There were some days where it was really difficult, where I was like, I just hope that I'm doing what I hope to do. I think the other part of it is that when you are so invested in a subject, there becomes more of an emotional attachment to the stories than someone who is encountering them for the first time.

**Is this your "main" subject right now, or is this one among many? Is there more drag on the horizon, or will new interests drive new projects?**

I would say this is one of my main topics, certainly. I just actually wrote a piece on the relationship between drag and photography, which is another big subject that I write about. That was a dream to be able to combine my photography and journalistic interests. I would say broadly I write about arts and culture. I became interested in queer history through drag because these were those stories that weren't getting told. So to be able to bring those to

the surface for new audiences is — it feels so tacky saying this — it feels like a calling. I don't know what else to call it.

I really love being able to unearth these stories and share them with people who, especially at this time in our culture, are facing such pushback again and again. I think there's something very powerful about knowing that you're not alone and that you aren't the first person to have faced this and that you're part of this legacy of people who have built beautiful lives and artistic lives.

**I want to turn to the topic research. How and where does research come into play in your process? How much research do you do beforehand? How much as you're drafting?**

I remember many years ago, I saw the fabulous journalist Taffy Brodesser-Akner give a talk. She talked about how she prepares to do these profiles that she's now become very famous for. And she said I take in everything that I can possibly read or watch or consume about a particular subject to prepare to ask questions. So I started doing that, and that is just for the interviewing process.

For my book, I did [around 90 interviews with more than 80 people], and before I did each interview, I was doing research to prepare. That was in part because you don't want to ask someone something that they've been asked thousands of times. That's not enlightening for you or for them. And you want to get at these smaller details that really make up a story.



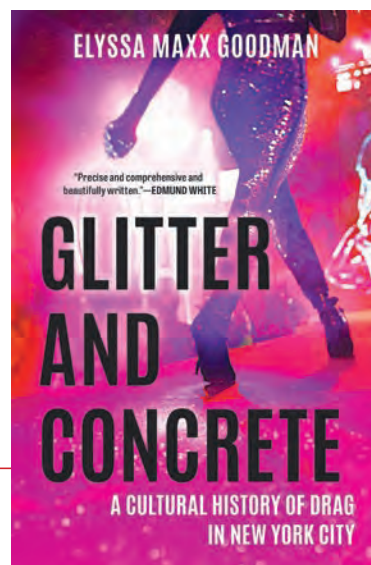
One of my favorite details from the book is — I interviewed Mistress Formika, who used to host a party in New York called SqueezeBox! where there was a live punk band and the drag artists had to sing live along with them. People loved this party so much. Musicians would come through when they were on tour. One night Courtney Love and Billie Joe Armstrong from Green Day came through, and they all went downstairs and got star tattoos on their wrists. You have to spend time with the information to be able to get a story like that out of a person.

Sometimes it's because you've done your research, and you know what to ask. And other times it's because you've shown them that you've done your research and invested time in them already, and then they want to give you more of themselves.

**Finally, what's one piece of advice you'd give to a writer just starting out?**

I think one of my biggest pet peeves is when people call themselves an "aspiring writer." Because to me, there is no such thing. Either you write or you don't. And that's the end of the story. It is very much a binary. If you want to be a writer, you have to write. And if you are writing, no matter what it is, you are a writer. It's about the act of doing it. You can't gauge your value as a writer on whether or not you've been published. You can only gauge it on whether or not you do it.

So my advice to writers just starting out would be to write and to find a way to make yourself do it. And make sure that you're engaging with other writing as well, just to see what's out there and what's possible. I think you have to know what's out there as you're creating your own work to expand your knowledge of the possibilities. Read and to write — it sounds so simplistic — but those are the most important things.





# Publication Mountain

## ONE AUTHOR'S JOURNEY TO A PUBLISHED BOOK

By Christine Kessides

In early 2022 I was basking in the satisfaction of having scaled an uncharted mountain — completing the draft of my first novel. It was not an easy exertion as several instructors, beta readers, and a professional editor had pointed out numerous stumbles and missed turns, and I suffered spells back in base camp. But finally, I figured that I had cause to celebrate.

Then I looked over the horizon. Another peak to climb — publishing — appeared just as formidable, with many ravines to get lost in.

As a debut author I'd been told about the basic choices for publishing. Everyone's first preference is to write a sparkling query letter to a reputable agent, who ideally will sell the manuscript promptly to one of the traditional publishers — the “big five” or their many spin-offs, called imprints. In the rare case (probably under 1% of queries), the author might hear from an interested agent, who may or may not be able to find a taker. More likely, prepare to wait months for possibly no response. Get rejected, repeat, rejected, repeat until exhaustion.

Another option, increasingly common, is self-publishing, whereby the author submits the text to Amazon or another service for processing, with quality control the author's responsibility. This track can produce a nice-looking product if the author is willing to take the trouble to hire contractors for editing, design, and production — which means searching among myriad offers on the internet, some of them scams, and all carrying unpredictable expenditures and risks.

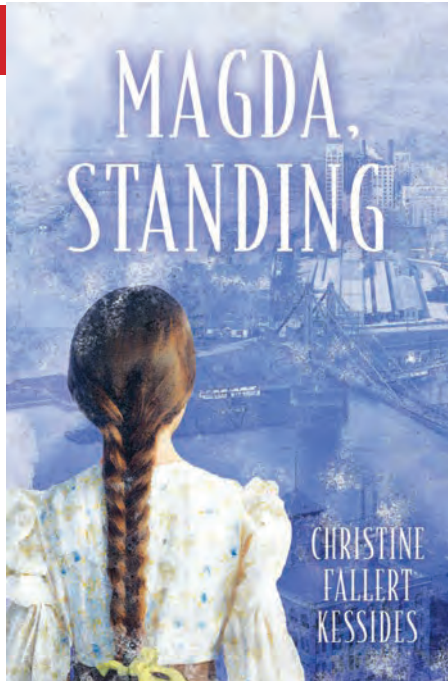
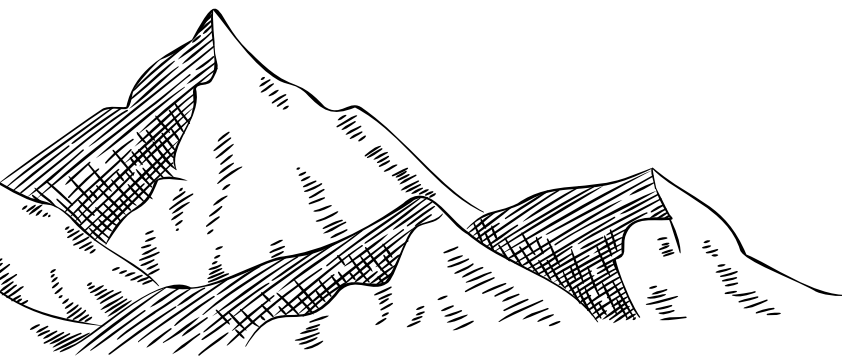
So I sent out a couple dozen query letters to agents listed for Young Adult and/or historical fiction,

and collected metaphorical pink slips. Three agents I'd met at conference pitch sessions, who had been quite encouraging, chose to put submissions on hold indefinitely. I started to prepare another round of queries while researching the process of self-publishing, which felt like throwing myself off the mountain without a parachute.

Seeking non-writing distractions those days, I checked my email about every 10 minutes, usually seeing listserv notices for a lost dog or cat, treadmills for sale (“carry away as is”), and requests for plumber or caterer recommendations. Then one caught my eye. A neighbor announced that she had opened a publishing company in Chevy Chase and was holding an informational webinar on Zoom.

The rest is history (and not fiction). A former McGraw Hill Editor in Chief, Emily Barrosse had recently moved from New York to Maryland and founded Bold





Story Press in 2020 to focus on women writers. Her mission is to “elevate women’s voices” using a “curated, hybrid” model. With her experienced staff she selects manuscripts that meet their publication standards and provides professional editing, design, and production management for one upfront fee. I found that for the expert services and advice, this hybrid approach was definitely a cost-effective and timely option for me.

So I summited the publication mountain in good company. But there’s no resting, as I’ve discovered that promotion and marketing mean another long hike with yet more twists and turns — and one never fully “arrives.” At least this time, my protagonist is along for the trip.

*Magda, Standing was released by Bold Story Press in June and has received a bronze medal from Moonbeam Children’s Book Awards for YA historical/cultural fiction.*

# Telling an Emotional Truth

## LEARNING ABOUT SPECULATIVE NONFICTION

By Annie Rehill

In speculative nonfiction, writers discover unexplored spaces that open like caves, leading to an underground lake or a secret exit or a city of dreams. Creative forays can shed light on an event that actually occurred. I learned to play with these techniques from Hannah Grieco in a workshop at The Writer’s Center.

I’ve been writing in one genre or another since age ten, when I won a contest, sponsored by our local newspaper, on littering. “Children should be taught to throw away their orange peels,” I wrote. My paragraph was published, and I spent the \$10 award on a Barbie doll for me and a carved Indian mini-table for Mom.

Inspired by this journalistic success, I turned to fiction, writing and illustrating a tale about a girl who recaptures her escaped canary. I mailed it to Golden Dell books — a kindly editor replied, “We receive so many stories, we can’t possibly publish them all.” She encouraged me to keep writing.

Skipping ahead a century, in 2000 I completed a master’s in creative nonfiction, and my main mentor was the illustrious, terrifying memoirist Vivian Gornick. In workshop, if a student suggested an element that was not in the story, Vivian thundered, “Oh, you wanted chocolate! This is a lemon cake!” That piece of wisdom has been useful, as I’ll demonstrate.

Vivian introduced me to speculative nonfiction, without calling it that. She advised us, “Your responsibility as a writer of creative nonfiction is to tell an emotional truth. The rest, you can *make up*.” Only recently, in Hannah’s workshop, did the label “speculative” induce a mental click as I

thought back on Vivian’s words. “Speculative” acknowledges that memory is a re-embroidered version of the past. How are humans supposed to remember exactly what happened? We can only recall impressions or flashes of scenes. As writers, we find ways to convey the context in which the memory imprinted the event on the imagination.

To tell my stories, I had to reimagine the past and bring it alive, flesh it out into scenes. Even when I remembered (or thought I did) every second of what happened, without opening up the events into a series of dramatic incidents acted out by believable, interesting characters, I would bore readers. Vivian taught me this, and Hannah refined my understanding.

“

Memory is a  
re-embroidered  
version of the past.

”

—Annie Rehill

Two published creative-nonfiction pieces resulted from that MFA program. In both, I pushed the edges of precise reality as I recalled the moments, focusing on the emotional truths to convey those vividly. This meant crafting reimagined dialog, projecting speculatively into others’ minds, reviewing notes and geography, tinkering with timing, and other dramatic techniques to make the acts in my play hold together engagingly.

I didn’t push my speculative techniques as far as we’ve done in Hannah’s workshop, but I learned that what Vivian called “making it up” can streamline the telling of a truth. For instance, writing about dreams has helped me see patterns in my motivations. If my father had made one different job choice, those dreams would have been different. And then? Speculate.

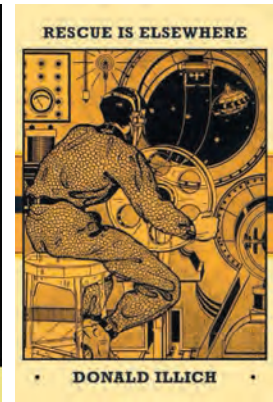
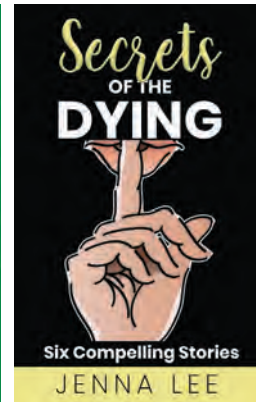
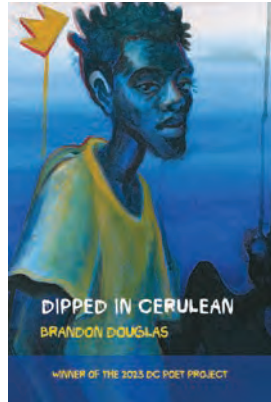
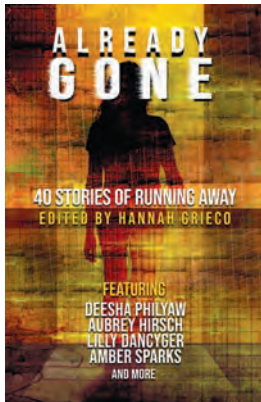
After those two creative-nonfiction publications, I veered into academia and completed a PhD in Modern French Studies while publishing academic articles. Now I had lots of scholarly papers, a book chapter, and a book.

About a year ago, I was revising an article after peer review. The reviewer had recommended that I read and include a critical work that was not essential to make my case. But I was curious, so I read the book and included it, despite a growing feeling that I was adding chocolate to a lemon cake. Vivian’s words echoed through my musing. What exactly was I doing here? I’d become an independent scholar. But who was going to tell *my* stories?

That experience was a pivot point. I made the article work, but as it went to press, I was already turning back toward creative writing.

I pondered, cast about, approached a few venues on my own, then found the Writer’s Center and Hannah’s workshop—which brought me back to thinking in depth about what my experiences have taught me, and how others might connect with some of them. In this memoir work, I ask myself, remembering Vivian: Am I telling an emotional truth here? I interweave that core question with what-if’s inspired by Hannah’s speculative-nonfiction exercises. What do I regret? What could I have done differently, and how might that have changed things? What are my recurring dreams?

Sometimes it’s hard not to descend into whining, or, alternatively, to linger on painful memories, as I do have regrets and have made lots of mistakes. I’ve also done things I don’t regret, such as marrying my husband and helping my father as he lay dying. It’s all part of the human journey, and striving to peer into one’s spirit honestly, without blame or judgment but also without self-pity, might help a few others do the same. To get there, I step away mentally from the real past and consider the version I’ve recrafted. Does it stand alone as a story? If I detect spots that either yawn or occlude, I strap on my speculating gear and get ready to explore some caves.



## NEW BOOKS FROM THE WRITER'S CENTER FAMILY!

### Watershed - new Finger Lakes poems

By Carolyn Clark  
kelsaybooks.com

Do you even know what watershed you live in? *Watershed – new Finger Lakes poems* poses this question, feeling the effects of water and climate change while offering a sense of both community and solitude, among woodlands, strawberries, and free range blue eggs, in a world populated by Artemis, Eurydice, Apollo, and horses.

### Dipped in Cerulean

Brandon Douglas  
dayeight.org/books

*Dipped in Cerulean* is the debut poetry collection by Washington DC poet Brandon Douglas. The book documents the author's coming of age, including his experiences from youth to fatherhood and from student to teacher.

### Rescue is Elsewhere

Donald Illich

In *Rescue is Elsewhere*, humans are abducted by disappointed UFOs, an astronaut is returned home to Earth by aliens, and moon creatures steal our comedians. Serious and satirical, Donald Illich explores the phenomenon of UFOs and how they shape our imagination and lives in his collection of poems and stories.

### Already Gone: 40 Stories of Running Away

Edited by Hannah Grieco  
alansquirepublishing.com

Did you ever wish, with every cell in your body, that you could run away? From home, from a person, from your job, from yourself? Physically or emotionally, on foot or purely in your own mind? In *Already Gone*, forty of today's most exciting writers take flight in all these ways and more.

### Secrets of the Dying

Jenna Lee

Six compelling stories that reveal family secrets of the dying: Jean, the loving wife, married to Bernard who is sterile but they have four children. Jeff, the golden boy who is really a thief. Denise, the Southern belle, knows before she dies her husband will have a love child. Zonder and Vera have HIV, who will succumb to AIDS? Grandpa's robe, a thing of the past or present? Vaughn and Barbara's dreams come true with numbers, or do they?

THE  
WRITER'S  
CENTER

4508 Walsh Street  
Bethesda, MD 20815  
301-654-8664  
Writer.org

NON-PROFIT  
US POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
PERMIT NO. 3007  
SUBURBAN, MD

Address Service Requested  
CONTAINS DATED MATERIAL

---

# POET LORE

---

America's oldest poetry magazine

Subscribe & submit at [poetlore.com](http://poetlore.com)