In Defense of Navel-Gazing: Writing Trauma as a Political Act

Event description:
Confessional, therapeutic, cathartic: words attributed to writing about trauma, often to disregard or deride the writing, and to separate it from serious literary work. But writing about trauma is a deeply subversive act, especially in our current sociopolitical moment. The outpouring of trauma writing from marginalized communities is a viable force for change both within and beyond the literary community.

Five writers, editors, and educators who focus on work that investigates and explores trauma across genres and identities will wrestle with issues of craft, publishing, exploitation, and silencing in order to underscore the necessity and power of this work. We’ll discuss who is served by minimizing writing about trauma, why different kinds of trauma are thought to be more or less “literary,” and what could happen if the literary establishment is forced to take writing about trauma seriously.

Panelists include Melissa Febos, Hafizah Geter, Suleika Jaouad, and Marissa Korbel. Organized and moderated by Rumpus Editor-in-Chief, Marisa Siegel.

Marisa Siegel lives, writes, and edits near NYC. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Mills College in Oakland, CA. Her poems have appeared in Handsome, Zaum, (T)here, and elsewhere. Her essay “Inherited Anger” appears in the anthology Burn It Down (Seal Press, 2019), and her debut poetry chapbook is forthcoming from Burrow Press in 2021. She is editor-in-chief and owner of The Rumpus. Follow her on Twitter @marisasaystweet.

Melissa Febos is the author of the memoir, Whip Smart, the essay collection, Abandon Me, and the forthcoming essay collection, Girlhood. The inaugural winner of the Jeanne Córdova Nonfiction Award from LAMBDA Literary, she is Associate Professor of Creative Nonfiction at Monmouth University.

Hafizah Geter’s poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in the New Yorker, McSweeney's, Longreads, Tin House, Boston Review, Gulf Coast, and Narrative Magazine, among others. She is on the board of Writ. and is an editor at Little A and TOPPLE Books from Amazon Publishing.

Suleika Jaouad is the author of the Emmy Award-winning “Life, Interrupted” column and video series in the New York Times. She has also written for the New...

Marissa Korbel is managing editor at The Rumpus, and a critically acclaimed essayist. You can also find her writing at Harper’s Bazaar, Guernica, Bitch Magazine, and The Manifest-Station. She lives and works as a public interest attorney in Portland, Oregon, and is a graduate of Mills College and Lewis and Clark Law School.

Opening remarks and housekeeping:

Welcome to “In Defense of Navel-Gazing: Writing Trauma as a Political Act.” A few reminders before we begin:

1. For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let our moderator, Marisa Siegel, know and a printed copy of the presentation will be delivered to you.
2. Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
3. Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
4. Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing perfume.
5. Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.
6. We realize the lines for the bathrooms may be long, but please refrain from using an accessible stall unless you require such accommodation. Please also be aware family restrooms located on level 2 are reserved for those with disabilities or those wishing to use a single-stall restroom.
7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding conference accessibility, please call or text the Accessibility Hotline (503) 455-4127 or email events@awpwriter.org.

Our panelists have all been a part of the literary community for many years and in various capacities. We’ll begin by each giving a brief statement about our experiences with writing about trauma.

Following this, we’ll move to answering questions including but not limited to:
1) How do you decide whether and how to write about personal trauma?

2) What are the questions you ask yourself before and during this kind of writing?

3) When editing a piece of writing about trauma, either your own or someone else’s, are there any changes to your usual editing process given the nature of the writing?

4) What has been your experience when submitting and/or publishing work that deals with personal trauma? How do you find the best home for this kind of writing and what do you look for when considering where to publish?

5) In the written description to this event I suggested that different kinds of trauma are treated differently. For instance, writing about sexual trauma is marketed quite differently from writing about war trauma. Why do you think this might be?

6) What are other ways that the publishing industry minimizes and/or silos writing about trauma? How do you think these conditions change public reception to this writing?

7) For those with classroom experience—as students and as teachers—what approaches have been most effective when writing about trauma is taught or workshopped in the classroom space?

At the conclusion of our conversation, we’ll leave 10-15 minutes for audience Q&A. Our moderator, Marisa Siegel, will repeat questions into the microphone so the audience understands what participants are responding to.