EXTREME MOTHERHOOD: Writing about motherhood when circumstances are out of the ordinary
(event outline updated 2/17/20)

Panel Description:
Raising a child is never easy, but some parenting challenges rise to extraordinary levels. What are the complexities of telling your story of extreme motherhood? Why is it important to share it, and what are the special concerns? A mother’s story is, by nature, the story of at least two people. Who does it belong to, and what are the ethics of telling your child’s story? How might these stories benefit individual readers, and what is the value for the larger community? What are the risks? The writers on this panel have written essays, memoirs, and solo theatre works about their children and about their experience as mothers. They will discuss the artistic and personal complexities of writing about their children and themselves.

Event Category:
Nonfiction craft and criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator: Alice Eve Cohen
Panelists: Marie Myung-Ok Lee, Doreen Oliver, and Julie Metz.
INTRODUCTION, MODERATOR:
Welcome to our panel, EXTREME MOTHERHOOD: Writing about motherhood when circumstances are out of the ordinary. I’m Alice Eve Cohen, I’ll be moderating, and the panelists are Marie Myung-Ok Lee, Doreen Oliver, and Julie Metz.

A few reminders before we begin:
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OPENING REMARKS, MODERATOR:
Raising a child is easy—said no-one ever. But some parenting challenges rise to extraordinary levels. Maternal ambivalence is taboo. Mothers are expected to keep their difficult parenting stories private. It takes tremendous courage to go public. Why do some writers choose to share their stories of extreme motherhood, and how do they tell their stories? What are the risks and rewards—for the writer, for their children, for individual readers, and for the public?

The remarkable women on this panel have written essays, memoirs, and solo theatre works about their children and about their experience as mothers, and I’m thrilled that they will be sharing what they’ve learned in the process. I’d like to introduce each participant. After I read their bio, they will share a short reading. I’ll also be reading an excerpt from my writing on the subject.

Marie Myung Ok-Lee reads from her work:

*J Stands Up*

My son, J., has many medical issues and severe cognitive disabilities. Yesterday, at one of the endless meetings about said disabilities, my husband and I were asked to describe how J. got that scar on his face. We shifted, almost in shame, as if it were someone’s fault. It wasn’t. So one of us explained how one day, J. was in so much pain from his gastroenteritis when he came home from school—this is our guess; he can’t communicate what he’s feeling or what motivates him—and we weren’t able to get him his medical cannabis in time. He often bangs his head on things when he’s hurting. That day, he happened to be standing by a window. He put his head right through it, slashing his face open on a jagged piece of glass.

The developmental psychologist then asked us if J.’s ever tried to hurt us “with malice.” My spouse and I considered. We have scars from J.’s bites everywhere—I have one on the web of my hand and
another on my left breast, where he bit me in fear after seeing a dog while I was holding him. My spouse has his own scar on his face, for which he, the least vain person I know, is considering plastic surgery to have removed.

But both of us concluded, no. Our son has never harmed us with malice. “Just like he doesn’t lie,” I added, which made me think of other things: he still has unopened presents from his January birthday, because he isn’t materialistic. He’s on a very strict, hypoallergenic diet, yet he seems to find the simple food we prepare—fat mackerel filets, mounds of vegetables, cauliflower grated to look like rice—delicious. He sees his classmates eat “fun” packaged foods, and at one of his former schools they used “treats” (e.g., Cheetos) in a Skinnerian scheme to coax out “appropriate” behaviors. But he’s never thrown a tantrum for Cheetos deficiency. His default setting is to live fully in the present. Back when he was feeling brain-sizzling pain and no one, to his mind, was helping him, being present meant acting out the only way he knew how.

He is 17. When he was twelve, if I heard him crying at night, I was scared to go into his room because he’d charge at me and start attacking—hitting, biting, kicking—as if he was possessed. I learned to enter gingerly, holding a giant exercise ball in front of me like a green pregnant belly. Often he’d run at me with such force that he’d
bounce away, repelled off the ball. This would make me feel terrible, but at the same time I had to hold on to that airplane-crash pragmatism, adjusting your own oxygen mask first before helping others, even—especially—your child. I was aware that if he hurt me or knocked me out when I was home alone with him, we’d both be sunk.

“What kind of kid does this to a parent?” bystanders say in outrage, presumably taking “our” side. I have to admit I’ve thought this myself, especially through the period when J. would smear his shit stealthily, quietly, on his bedroom walls at night, so in the morning I’d come upon a room painted by an insane Basquiat.

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JULIE METZ is the author of the New York Times bestselling memoir Perfection. She has written for The New York Times, Salon, Dame, Slice, Glamour, Next Tribe and more. Julie has been a podcast guest on Dear Sugar Radio hosted by Cheryl Strayed and Women of the Hour hosted by Lena Dunham. Her memoir Eva and Eve is forthcoming in Spring 2021 from Atria/Simon and Schuster. You can find out more at juliemetz.com

Julie Metz reads from her work:
This is an excerpt from my forthcoming memoir EVA AND EVE. In this scene I am traveling with my 15-year-old daughter on a research trip to Vienna to research my book about how my mother’s family escaped from Nazi Vienna in 1940.

Liza and I were not speaking. Squished next to the window as far away from me as the narrow space would permit, earbuds installed, she let me know that she would have been happy to stay in Brooklyn. Message received, loud and clear... On days like today, I felt like an abject failure. It had been just like this when I was Liza’s age, fighting with my mother over clothes and curfews, a fact that made me cringe. I pretended to read a magazine as I attempted to remember what had even caused this latest fight. I tried to stay calm, determined to repair the damage during the next precious week.

I hated when I felt like I was turning into my mother. Hated it.

I thought about my mother as we lifted off into the night sky and the sparkling towers of New York City faded under a mauve blanket of summer haze. My mother deserved a sincere apology, wherever she was now.

I also thought about the joint wrapped in two layers of tin foil, hidden in an empty medicine vial, camouflaged among my toiletries: tufts of bud from my last season’s modest crop, raised
beneath branches of prickly rose bush and clematis in my Brooklyn backyard. Why had I planted weed in my garden? Because I was tired of fighting with my weed-smoking kid, tired of pretending that I hadn’t done the same when I was her age. According to my teenage diaries, which made for a humbling re-read, I had gotten stoned almost every miserable day of high school. The plants in my garden were like a white truce flag. Turned out Liza’s sense of rebellion was contagious.

THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT returned with meals, surprisingly edible, just as my father had promised. We cut and chewed in silence. Later, I watched with envy as Liza dozed off to the drone of the engines and the sway of trans-Atlantic turbulence. I’ve never been able to sleep in planes. I knew I was doomed to watch at least two terrible movies I would never remember later and arrive in Vienna haggard and unhinged with deprivation.

In the sparkling airport, I hovered outside my body, sunlight too bright, all sounds an assault, desperate for a bed in a quiet room. Only the fuel of maternal anxiety kept me on task. Liza and I boarded one of the efficient high-speed trains into the city, emerging onto a street near the apartment I’d rented. The woman with whom I’d corresponded was waiting for us. On our floor she opened the door to a clean well-appointed studio apartment, very IKEA, the
After our host left, Liza and I began to unpack. I was feeling quite smug that the TSA sniffer dogs hadn’t found my joint. I shared my smugness with Liza, hoping we might bond over sticking it to The Man. But no.

“I’m still mad at you,” she reminded me.

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ALICE EVE COHEN is a playwright, solo theatre artist & author. Winner of the 2019 Jane Chambers Feminist Playwriting Award for her full-length play IN THE CERVIX OF OTHERS, she received the ELLE Literary Grand Prix for her memoir WHAT I THOUGHT I KNEW, a selection of Oprah magazine 25 Best Books of Summer. She teaches creative writing & playwriting at The New School’s Creative Writing Program and at Augsburg University’s low-residency MFA Program. www.AliceEveCohen.com

Alice Eve Cohen reads from her work:

This is an excerpt from my memoir THE YEAR MY MOTHER CAME BACK. In this section, my 8-year-old daughter Eliana is in 4th grade at the only public school in our area with an elevator. She was born with one leg shorter than the other. It’s January, and she is 2
months into a painful, 8 month-leg-lengthening procedure—the first of two.

“Hello, I’m calling from school about Eliana.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask, in that instant, chest-tightening moment of panic every parent gets when they get a call from their child’s school. It’s a freezing January afternoon.

“Eliana is fine, but we have a little problem. Can Eliana walk down two flights of stairs?”

“No. Why?”

“The elevator is broken. But we have a plan. The fire department will carry her out of the building through the third floor window.”

I picture Eliana floating through the icy winter sky, hoisted by a fireman out of the third floor window and onto a telescoping ladder, which slowly, slowly, slowly descends down to the fire truck. I imagine Eliana—who is scared of heights, and who wishes she could be inconspicuous and invisible—being transported out the window in the middle of the school day, attracting stares from children who watch with amazement out their classroom windows, shouting “Look at Eliana!”

“Don’t call the fire department. I’ll take her down the stairs myself.”
“Thank you, Ms. Cohen. We appreciate it.”

I hang up and burst into tears. I have no idea how I’ll get Eliana down the stairs. Mothers all over the world carry their children to safety, but I’m not strong enough to carry her down two flights. Michael is out of town. Maybe I should just let the fire department carry her out the window. I’m afraid that if I try to help her, she’ll fall and break her compromised right femur, which appears, on the X-ray, to be held in place purely by imagination.

My friend Eric offers to help. We meet the assistant principal in the school office. She has a different idea. “We think it’s safest to carry Eliana down the stairs in a wheelchair.”

Eric and I think that sounds riskier.

Eliana has another idea. “The easiest way is to slide down on my butt.”

With no help from us, she slides down two flights of stairs, using the banister to pull herself arm over arm, like a monkey.

“That was the most fun I’ve had since before my operation!” she says, face flushed, green eyes shining.

“You were amazing!”

I tell her about the fireman’s ladder idea, hoping to make her laugh, and expecting to score points with her for finding a less scary and conspicuous solution than being carried out a window.
“Aw, Mom! Why’d ya say no? It would have been so cool to go out the third story window on a fireman’s ladder!”

Damn! I should have let her do it. The maternal perfection business is beyond me. Flying out the third story window on a fireman’s ladder through the frozen air might have scared her out of depression, like the hiccups, like my extreme winter camping trip did for me.

But, you know? Sliding down three flights of stairs like a monkey had the requisite touch of danger. It was good enough. I’m acclimating to the sufficiency of imperfection, settling for being adequate, which is not so bad, in the scheme of things.

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DOREEN OLIVER is an essayist, playwright, and performer. Her essays on autism, race, and the chaos and contradictions of parenting have appeared in the New York Times, Washington Post and elsewhere, and her award-winning one-woman show, EVERYTHING IS FINE UNTIL IT'S NOT, premiered Off-Broadway. A former film producer, she is working on a related memoir and can be followed on twitter @doreenoliver.

Doreen Oliver reads from her work:
The first time I threw myself a birthday party, my hair caught on fire. I was chatting with a friend in a West Village lounge, unaware burning candles hung centimeters away. With a slight tilt of my head to sip my lemon drop martini, my hair lit up like four out of the five rings at the Sochi Olympics.

I’d never been one to throw myself a party. It had always seemed a bit self-indulgent, celebrating yourself when all you did the day you were born was lie there, bawling. But I had felt isolated in the months leading up to that fateful day, and wanted to be feted. For nearly two years, while my husband went off each day to collaborate with colleagues and clients, I stayed home with my lone co-worker: our first-born son, Xavier. I had abandoned my career as a film producer when he was born, and now he and I were new hires in the roles of mother and child, with neither of us doing a very good job. He had high marks when it came to walking and feeding himself, but wasn’t cutting it in the talking department. If I were a better supervisor—scheduling more play dates, labeling aloud each piece of produce in the supermarket, not stashing him in the Aquarium
swing during my morning coffee break with *The View*—I would have been able to help him speak. Instead, Xavier and I were alone together in our Brooklyn apartment, punching the clock. And he hadn’t uttered two words consistently.

I scheduled another developmental review with New York City’s Early Intervention agency. A few months before they had denied my son free speech therapy services, saying his language was “age appropriate,” but I knew he needed help. This time, my case manager prepped me for the upcoming review, advising me to push for at least two speech therapy services each week. “You might only get one,” she said, “but at least that’s more than none.” At the meeting, after probing deeper into how below average our pride and joy was, the agency awarded my son three speech therapy sessions per week and two family training sessions per month. They also recommended he undergo a psychological evaluation. I closed my eyes and finally allowed myself to exhale. A moment later, my eyes flew open.

*Wow,* I thought. *My son must be really messed up.*

Still, my birthday party had to go on, now more than ever! I needed—no, *deserved*—to celebrate something. At the party, surrounded by only adults, I caught up with friends who did things
other than cut up their child’s chicken nuggets. Alison quit her job to ski in Crested Butte. Lorelei started a non-profit in Brazil. Athena, my cousin’s friend, focused on me.

“Your son is so cute!” she said. “The picture you sent of him in the bathtub is adorable!”

“Thanks.” During Xavier’s first year I’d email pictures every week—him at the playground, eating cake, sleeping. Recently I had taken fewer. Only my husband and I knew how hard it was to get him to look at the camera and smile.

“Do you have any new pictures?”

I nibbled the sugar on the rim of my glass. “I’m so used to toting him around I didn’t even think to bring pictures.”

“Where is he now?” she pressed.

“Huh?” I said.

“Where is your son now?” she shouted over the music. “Who is he with?”
“Oh no!” I seized the opportunity to create a diversion and called over to my husband with mock alarm. “Honey! What did we do with Xavier? I thought you had him!”

My husband and Athena looked at me, baffled. I, however, laughed hysterically. I had traded my discomfort for amusement, and I leaned back away from Athena and her questions to take a long, satisfied swallow of my drink.

And then I was aflame.

It was quick and without warning—the low-hanging chandelier caught a strand of my eucalyptus-treated hair and ignited it as if it were the actual leaf. Athena, a parole officer trained in emergency situations, swatted at the middle of my head, extinguishing everything but the smell of burnt hair. A patch in the middle of my head was seared almost to the scalp, and my formerly beautiful tresses now resembled an overgrown lawn, mowed only in the very center.

Within a month after that party, the psychologist diagnosed Xavier with autism, my husband was laid off, and my 35-year-old sister had a stroke. I had tried to run away from my worries about my son, to
focus on myself instead of the nagging guilt that I was failing my child. Instead, I got burned.

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Moderator questions:

1) When did you first decide to write about your children? How do you know when a story must be told, and how do you know when you are ready to tell it?

DOREEN: When my oldest was born, I decided to write about the experience. It was life-changing to leave a career and care for an infant all at once. I know when I'm ready to tell it when it's ruminating in my mind in narrative form for days/months/years on end.

JULIE: It’s not that I wanted to write about my child at all, but being a parent was The Main Event in my life, so pretty much everything that happened to me involved my child. When she was young I tried to make my best judgment about what I could or shouldn't write about. Now, I ask my 23 year-old if I can write about certain times of our lives together as a family. I find myself trying to sell her on this just a bit;-) Fortunately she seems to be now more intrigued than annoyed by my life as a writer.
MARIE: An editor solicited a story for an anthology called Toddler; I told her my son’s story probably wouldn’t fit because it wasn’t “fun.” But she really encouraged me and the feedback made me realize that maybe it would be helpful for other people. Then I was asked to write a piece for Rumpus Women, and it was about my becoming a full-fledged Buddhist, but most people saw it as a parenting story! And I also got a lot of great feedback. So I decided when I had a story, to share it. As he grew older I also started doing more advocacy and political activism about things like medical cannabis legalization and how policing often targets the disabled with lethal consequences.

2) What are the artistic challenges of shaping a parenting story into a compelling narrative? How do you translate such a complex personal experience to the page? What approaches have you used?

MARIE: I think the story picks the form. The piece I read from was from the Paris Review and I normally don’t write such short pieces, but something about that morning and needing to celebrate my son’s taking my hand made me think of all the amazing things he’s
done that aren’t really considered to be “successes” and achievements in our society.

JULIE: For me, the big challenge is finding a way to present the character of one’s child authentically, identifying the salient features of conversations I want to include, recreating a particular child’s voice for a reader, while preserving as much anonymity as possible. How much or how little dialog do I need? How do I write descriptions that capture my child’s essence without being intrusive? So this means a lot of writing and revising till I feel I have created a scene that depicts my particular child but can also speak to other parents who can recognize something relevant to their lives.

3) A mother’s story is the story of at least two people. What are the ethics of telling your child’s story? Can a writer protect their child and also confront the injustices their child faces?

JULIE: I have struggled with this through two books. Now my child is an adult and it is still a challenge. There are topics I might like to write about because I shared certain powerful experiences with my child, but in some cases I have had to say, “no, this isn’t my story to tell, at least not in memoir form.” If my daughter wants to tell those stories, that is her choice. The struggle is real and it
doesn’t get easier. Memoir writing really requires some risk-taking and evaluating the reasons behind narrative choices. And whether the potential pain is worth telling ALL the truth.

MARIE: It’s tricky for me because I can’t really get consent from my son because of his communication and cognitive issues. I do talk to him about it, show him the pieces that are online. He doesn’t really read and I am not sure how much he understands. For me, my main drive is to make him legible to the world - so when people see him and are afraid or repulsed or whatever, it’s a way of showing that he is an individual and a human with feelings and a rich inner life. I think I’m proudest when people read my work and say “there’s so much love!” even though I feel like I’m writing about how hard it is to take care of him. So this makes me happy, but that’s exactly how I want people to feel—that he’s lovable, because he is.

4) Mothers of children with disabilities sometimes wrestle with public opinion and prejudice. Mothers are judged for maternal ambivalence, while many of us know that maternal ambivalence goes with the territory. Have you written about prejudice, judgment, and unsolicited advice? Have you ever been judged for writing about your children?
DOREEN: Yes, I've written about judgement and unsolicited advice in my play. On stage, coming out of the mouth of my mother's character, the audience feels like it's both hilarious and harassment. When you're going through it, it feels like the latter, but when you have enough distance and perspective, you can write it so that it also comes across really funny. I have to say, though, my mother is quite funny.

JULIE: I have been judged and trolled online and been accused of being a terrible parent. In the past this was painful, but the positive feedback outweighed the negative. I have chosen not to write about that judgment. The fact is that for the huge number of women who become mothers, parenthood is the focus of our lives. If we don’t write about it, a huge piece of human experience is missing. I note that more writers are creating books and television about the hard edgy places where motherhood/womanhood intersect. Better Things is a show that really lays it all out. Of course this is fiction. As memoir writers we cannot hide behind “story.” We have to think and evaluate and stress and wrestle with our confusion and guilt and then write as if no one will judge us.
MARIE: In general I feel quite supported and honored that people with neurotypical kids, or even people who don’t have kids read my stuff. Because it’s written for them, too—our experience should be part of the fabric of what it’s like to be a parent, in a family. Yes people do write mean thing, like “How can she take a child like that out in public?” Or how I’m a bad mom drugging my kid with pot instead of… with pharmaceuticals, whatever. It’s gotten so I don’t read the comments often, but I do have someone read them because I’ve also been introduced to some cool diets and things; basically when it comes to taking care of my son, I’ll try anything that doesn’t seem harmful. Right now I’m exploring camel milk!

5) What are the risks and what are the rewards of writing about your “extreme motherhood” experiences—for you, your child, your readers, and for the public? Can it be a vehicle for social justice and social change?

MARIE: It was very upsetting to hear about how a disabled man was out shopping at Costco and jostled another man (just as my son could have done) and while he parents ran to explain, ALL OF THEM were shot by the man, an off-duty cop. The son died and the parents were critically injured. Anything happen? Nope. The cop is still on the force. I wrote a piece for the LA Times where I could
interweave our story and how J also might have been in a situation like this (and has been) and I could also use my reporting skills so show how the cop was in the wrong, how by law they receive crisis intervention training and he at the very least was violating a lot of police rules — it obviously didn’t help him get kicked off the force BUT it was one of the few things in the media that people could post and share and it did made a difference in pressuring the DA to look at the case. My cannabis pieces have put “autism” as a qualifying condition on two states’ medical marijuana programs (as I was told by their legislators) so yes, it can change things!!!

JULIE: I commend any mother or father who writes about parenting, especially the parts that are less than Hallmark moments. For me, it is about telling the truth and since I know that all parents struggle, I hope that by telling my experiences as truthfully as I can I will help other parents feel more empowered to share their experiences and accept that we all have weaknesses and hardship. I know that the more writers share about their real lives the more we can create change for parents who face real challenges caring for and educating their children.
DOREEN: Candor about personal experiences can be a vehicle for social justice and change, if the readers are inspired enough to take action.

Q&A session:
At the end of the event, there will be time for a 5 to 10-minute Q&A session. We will pass a wireless microphone to the person posing the question or we will repeat all questions into one of the wired microphones.