High Style and Misdemeanors: The Virtues and Vices of Elevated Prose

The hallmarks of high style—elevated voice, obsession with the pictorial, self-consciousness, and poetic devices—are rooted in Flaubert and European realism. Can writers whose work concerns immigration and displacement embrace a stylistic approach that has historically been disengaged and apolitical? Authors of fiction that centers on immigration, intergenerational stories, and belonging, will read their work and discuss the intersection of elevated prose and socially and politically engaged work.

Event Category: Fiction Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer and Moderator: Lauren Alwan

Event Participants and bios:

Lauren Alwan’s fiction and essays have appeared in the Southern Review, ZYZZYVA, Nimrod, Catapult, and others. She is the recipient of a 2018 O. Henry Prize, and the Bellevue Literary Review’s Goldenberg Award for Fiction. She is a prose editor at the museum of americana, and a staff contributor of reviews and essays at Litstack.

Anita Felicelli is the author of Chimerica (WTAW Press), Love Songs for a Lost Continent (Stillhouse Press, winner of the 2016 Mary Roberts Rinehart Award), and Letters to an Albatross (BlazeVox). Her criticism and nonfiction have appeared in the SF Chronicle, the Los Angeles Review of Books, the NY Times (Modern Love), Slate, Salon, The Rumpus, Electric Literature, and elsewhere.
**Lillian Howan** is the author of the novel *The Charm Buyers* (University of Hawai‘i Press). Her writings have appeared in *Asian American Literary Review, Cafe Irreal, Calyx, New England Review, Vice Versa,* and the anthologies *Ms Aligned 2* and *Under Western Eyes*. She is the editor of *Rosebud and Other Stories*, by Wakako Yamauchi.

**Olga Zilberbourg** is the author of *Like Water and Other Stories* (WTAW Press) and three Russian-language collections of stories. She has published fiction and criticism in English in *Lit Hub, Alaska Quarterly Review, Confrontation, Electric Literature,* and others. She serves as a co-moderator of the San Francisco Writers Workshop.


**Opening Remarks and housekeeping announcements**
Welcome to High Style and Misdemeanors: The Virtues and Vices of Elevated Prose. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel (that would be myself, Lauren) know and a printed copy of the presentation will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing perfume.
- 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.
• 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.

• 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.

Welcome and panel introductions
We’re very excited to discuss the topic of high style and its place in contemporary writing, and to share how it has influenced the panelists’ individual work. We’ll begin the discussion by defining high style in its traditional form, and how it has developed to include contemporary writers of fiction, and as a result, taken on broader and more varied meanings. We’ll also discuss how fiction that incorporates what has been thought of as the hallmarks of high style centers on voices and identities perhaps not considered in the context of a tradition that is European-centered. We’re interested in the writers, and voices, who have been marginalized, and we’ll be discussing them today along with our own work. It’s our hope that through this discussion we can broaden the concept of what high style means, and whose voice it can amplify.

Moderator introduction of the panel participants:
Anita Felicelli, Lillian Howan, Olga Zilberbourg, and Aatif Rashid.

Moderator opening remarks
In Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov writes, “...you can always trust a murderer for a fancy prose style,” and indeed, high style carries with it this mix of the untrustworthy and the grandiose. When we think of conventional high style, where less is certainly not more, and in the context of Nabokov’s own sense of fun in ridiculing “fancy prose,” certain formal characteristics come to mind. These include elevated tone, long sentences, use of the lyric, the ironic and the pictorial, a self-consciousness and emotional detachment. This maximalist approach is the one most often associated with stylistic
prose, and whose literary descendants of Flaubert include Nabokov, along with John Updike, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, and other writers we’ll be discussing today. It’s also important to note too that “fancy prose” has a stylistic cousin in the plain-spoken literary style. This refers to a minimalist approach that deploys leaner strategies: short sentences, plain speech, deadpan tone, and what critic Garth Risk Hallberg described as “the power to negate.” James Wood calls its practitioners “stylists of renunciation,” noting that “Flaubert gave birth to Nabokov on one side and to Hemingway on the other.”

In traditional approaches, form forefronts language and voice, and backgrounds content. During the hour’s discussion, we aim to unpack this panel’s interest in writers who descend from Flaubert’s European tradition, such as Zadie Smith, Anthony Marra, and Toni Morrison. These contemporary practitioners have expanded on the conventions, broadening and deepening high style with voice, setting, and subject, and as a result, have advanced stylistic prose in a way that is inseparable from identity, and from story.

One other point to note: James Woods writes that French essayist and critic Paul Valéry, “did not care for Flaubert’s fiction...saying in 1924: ‘Another vice of this style—there’s always room for one more detail.’” So while our discussion will address the virtues of high style, we also mean to look at its vices—its pitfalls and problems for both writers and for readers.

With its capacity for voice and particularity of tone and focused detail, high style is, as Chigozie Obioma notes, well suited to portrayals of difference. “For the truth remains,” he writes, “that more can also be more, and that less is often inevitably less.” All of us on this panel gravitate to stylistic prose and to fiction by non-Western writers that is politically and socially engaged—and to paraphrase Nicola Barker from her novel Clear, as readers, we want to be manipulated, to be led, and artfully so, and we are very happy to be a part of that process.
We’ll launch the discussion with remarks by the panelists on their observations of varied aspects of stylistic prose, and will include examples from contemporary fiction. Following those remarks, the panel will discuss the intersection of high style and their own process, sharing readings of their own work as examples. We’ll reserve about ten minutes for Q & A at the end.

Participant remarks, Part 1
Summary: In this introductory segment, the panelists will discuss different formal aspects of high style, such as voice, wordplay, figurative language, sentence length, and colloquialism, and address the stylistic prose of classic practitioners. We will also discuss contemporary writers who have expanded high style and integrated it into cultural portrayals, as well as socially and politically engaged work. These authors may include Flaubert, Nabokov, Toni Morrison, Chang-rae Lee, Salman Rushie, and Zadie Smith, and others. Panel participants will also read brief illustrative examples.

Participant remarks, Part 2
Summary: In this follow-up segment, the panelists will discuss how they have integrated stylistic traits into their own prose, encountering both its pleasures and pitfalls, especially as the process relates to culturally-centered portrayals. They will also read excerpts of recent work.

Audience Q&A
At the conclusion of the panelists’ readings, we will include time for a 5-10 minute Q&A session.

End of event outline