**Event Title:** Celebrating Difficult Women: Acceptance and Accessibility in Experimental Prose

**Type of Event:** Fiction Craft and Criticism

**Outline:**

“No one has yet, as far as I know, made a musical about a woman who sits at home gazing at trees, quietly enjoying the perfect emerald-green light, as clouds pile up in the east and the sun once again sets. Perhaps she sits for an hour just gazing at a window, slowly finishing a meal she has prepared for herself and herself alone. As a culture, we tend to revile women who know how to find pleasure in ordinary, unmediated experiences. We don’t like them because they seem, in finding such simple things pleasurable, to feel no shame in being themselves, without any poignant need for anything except what they already have.[1]

[1] Perhaps the problem our culture has had with equanimity is best put by Rachel Cusk in her essay “Couples.” Though she is writing about equality, the same could be said of equanimity: “Children will not be born from equality, nor will empires be built or frontiers expanded, for the pure peace of equality begets nothing.”

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Similar to how Susan Sontag writes about illness in “Illness as Metaphor,” “difficulty” is a symptom of the audience’s perception of what they need more framing for in order to understand, or the matters of the “difficult” are generally too “difficult” to comprehend without discomfort.

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What is difficult for me? While I could argue that there’s psychic difficulty in hewing to a path not my own, the more urgent answer is that pursuing my own deepest, most complicated, most forbidden and risky inspiration is where I’d like to go—how I’d like to be a difficult woman writer. I only accept the term “difficult” if I’m using it myself, as an assessment of the hard work required to do my best work.

“Difficult” is a label slapped on by someone else. In embracing or repurposing it for our own ends, I’m interested in distinguishing between a necessary fuck-you to whoever put that label on me and the self-directed, self-centered reckoning that comes from my subjectivity, that is me nestling right into my deepest, truest difficulty.

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The idea that a woman writer is difficult, is inaccessible, offends and threatens in subtle ways connected to rape culture—the idea that a woman writer would not only own her mind but the product of her mind, her art, and that art is not easily accessible yet still has value is very feminist because it suggests that a woman does not have to make herself accessible, fully available, and “easy” to the public in order to have a place at the cultural table of innovative art.

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When I write about women loving, fucking each other; when I write stories using non-binary pronouns or emphasizing experience over gendered identity, I find that my work seems to generate a different level of critical scrutiny. I feel pressure to tone down my characters’ queerness to make it accessible, not just to men, but to heterosexual women, as well. Ditto for writing non-binary characters, for writing about transwomen and transmen, characters whose range and reach beyond gendered binaries aren’t necessarily “experimental” to anyone but an audience expecting a conventional gender reveal.

**Questions:**

—— What impact does the 'difficult woman' trope have in our present culture? Where do you (audience) experience it most poignantly?

----- Where and how is this moment (or momentum) of “difficult women” a repetition of past literary movements, and where and how is it most urgent now?

------ Could “difficulty” be a metaphor? Or is the use of “difficulty” a space between rational and empirical truth?

—— How / by whom is the 'difficult woman' trope constructed, and how might it be deconstructed?

—— What might a culture look like that welcomes challenging work by women of all backgrounds? Is there any precedent, in literature or elsewhere, for imagining such a culture?

---- Is queer women’s writing frequently regarded as less acceptable, less assessible, simply because of its content?

------ What role does shame, fear, ambition, desire play in our self-censorship? When are we being censored and how? When are we censoring ourselves and how can we stop?

------ How do we work and write through rage, and the exhaustion/fatigue that is a result of the rage? Is it as simple as shifting the language to writing with rage? How do we write and work with each other when the label of “difficult” can so often isolate us in what feels specifically like a personalized blame/shame?