EVENT TITLE: Seize the Day: Capturing the Present Tense in Memoir

EVENT DESCRIPTION:

When we think of memoir—literally, “a memory”—we often think of stories that take place in the distant past, that are concerned with what Sven Birkerts calls “getting hold of vanished experience.” But what happens when we’re trying to get hold of experience that isn’t vanished, but all too present? What about memoir that chronicles a more recent history, or that follows a writer through a moment in real time? How do we keep ahead of the story? And how do we separate life from art?

Memoir is, as Birkerts continues, “the genre of our times.” As the form grows, and as writers take on more and more aspects of their lives, the present encroaches more fiercely than ever. This panel, including debut memoirists and serial ones, will address the challenges of confronting not just the deep past but the current moment, offering strategies for writing—and living—through the process.

EVENT CATEGORY: Nonfiction Craft & Criticism

EVENT ORGANIZER & MODERATOR:

Eleanor Henderson is the author of the novels Ten Thousand Saints and The Twelve-Mile Straight and co-editor of the essay anthology Labor Day: True Birth Stories by Today's Best Women Writers. An associate professor of Writing at Ithaca College, she is working on a memoir called Too Much Fire: A Marriage.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS:


Anthony D’Aries is the author of The Language of Men: A Memoir (Hudson Whitman, 2012), which received the PEN/New England Discovery Award. His essays have appeared in Boston Magazine, Memoir Magazine, The Literary Review, and elsewhere. He directs the MFA in Creative and Professional Writing at Western Connecticut State University.

Tova Mirvis is the author of The Book of Separation, a memoir, which was a New York Times Book Review Editor’s Choice, as well as three novels, Visible City, The Outside World and The Ladies Auxiliary. Her essays have appeared in publications such as The New York Times and The Boston Globe Magazine.

Sue William Silverman is an award-winning author of five books of creative nonfiction. Her most recent, a memoir-in-essays, is How to Survive Death and Other Inconveniences named by Bitch Media as “one of 9 essay collections feminists should read in 2020.” It’s available at the
University of Nebraska Press booth in the book fair. She teaches in the MFA in Writing program at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

OPENING REMARKS AND HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Good morning/afternoon, and welcome to Seize the Day: Capturing the Present Tense in Memoir. Thank you all for being here. [Introduce panelists and bios, in order of seating.]

The person responsible for this panel is not on this panel. Joanna Rakoff, who wrote one of my favorite memoirs of all time, My Salinger Year, and is working on another, The Fifth Passenger, united all of us together like a mom wrangling five toddlers on a play date, and then had to bow out because she had the happy problem of having all of her AWP panels accepted this year. So, we carry on without her, but we’re very glad she’s here in the audience, and maybe she can step in with some questions at the end, or maybe some answers. Maybe she’ll just unlock all the secrets if we don’t manage to do it ourselves in the next hour.

I stepped in as organizer and moderator of this panel, and it’s a little odd, perhaps, that I’m the one who hasn’t yet published a memoir, although I am on deadline for one with my publisher, Ecco, that is due terrifyingly soon. So maybe it is appropriate that I’m the one up here with the microphone, still very much baffled by these questions of the present tense, and currently trying to work them out in my book, trying to steal trade secrets from these other memoirists who have successfully worked out these issues at least once. I’m guessing that many of you in the audience are also in the process of trying to work out the use of the present tense in your own memoirs, so in my questions I’ll try to give voice to that assumed audience. And of course we’ll leave about ten or fifteen minutes for questions after our discussion for members of the audience to join the conversation.

So, this panel began when Joanna and I were lamenting the difficulties of incorporating the present in the memoirs we’re working on. I think the idea that a memoir’s job is to “get hold of vanished experience,” in Birkerts’ words, is so deeply embedded in our understanding of the genre that using the present tense can feel a bit radical, a bit scary. Looking to the way that others have taken this risk can be affirmative.

When we say “the present tense,” we may not mean it in a purely technical sense, right? We may be talking simply about the challenges of writing up against the present, toward the texture of our lived lives. We may be talking about the challenges of writing a memoir while the story is unfolding, before we have the chance to see it from a distance. We may be talking about how to gain a foothold when we can’t yet see the whole mountain we’re climbing. We may be talking about the difficulties of moving back and forth between a distant past and a more recent one. The present tense itself—“I am” vs. “I was”—may be one of many tools we unearth to navigate these challenges. But how do we do use it, and why?

I began my memoir, Too Much Fire, as a way of simply trying to, in Courtney Love’s words, “live through this”—in my case, the maddeningly mysterious illness visited upon my husband, from which he’d been suffering for about six years when I began the book. The illness became an occasion for investigating the terms of our own maddeningly mysterious twenty-year
relationship. I knew fairly early on that I wanted to travel back in time to those early years, and I settled upon the structure of “Bedrooms” that we’d lived in: Bedroom 1, 2, 3, etc. That was what I called the “history,” written in the past tense. But meanwhile the “mystery” was still unraveling in the present tense—an endless ongoingness, to use Sarah Manguso’s word—and at present it’s still unraveling. We have more answers about my husband’s health than we do when I started the book, but we don’t have all of them. I’m not sure I could have “come to terms,” as we say, with this not-knowing without having written it, without surrounding myself in the familiar contours of a scene. Writing the book, then, has become for me a way to both craft a narrative of my past and demonstrate the failure of narrative to capture the present. It can’t do everything we ask of narrative. But maybe its beauty is in its limits. Anyway, I’m not sure; I have the luxury of still inhabiting the present! I haven’t hit “The End” yet.

So, I’m hoping some of these illustrious memoirists will help me to the end of my manuscript by revealing all their trade secrets. I’ll ask you all now to say a few words introducing us to the ways the present tense has emerged in your own work. What challenges led you to the present tense, and what further challenges, perhaps, did the present tense create?

**PARTICIPANT INITIAL REMARKS:**

**Elissa Altman:**

I will be talking about the complexities surrounding writing a memoir in real time, from the center of the story while it is still unfolding and its primary character is still alive.

In mid-2016, I began work on a memoir mining my tempestuous relationship with my hyper-heterosexual, octogenarian, personality-disordered mother, told primarily through the prism of the table, and via issues of oppositional sexuality, nurturing, and sustenance. The earliest pages grew out of a year-long, monthly Washington Post column, examining questions of moral obligation, and what it means when roles reverse and adult children are charged with the care of mentally-ill senior parents from whom they are estranged. The column had been a jumping-off point, and much of the first draft of the book was tied to the practical aspects surrounding our story. But a few months into the writing, my mother suffered a catastrophic accident, and our story was turned on its head: the narrative changed, profoundly, as I found myself writing from the eye of a storm, in present tense, and in real time. Writing the memoir this way, while my mother was, and is, still alive also meant navigating the moral challenges of permission and story ownership in addition to questions of craft: would the narratorial persona I had to create and the voice I needed to find to tell the story allow for not only simultaneous contextual distance and immediacy, but fairness? How would I accurately capture and craft the story without knowing how it would end, and without devolving into reportage?

**Anthony D’Aries:**

At some point during the writing of my memoir, *The Language of Men*, my life began to feel like a movie – one that I desperately wanted to pause but couldn’t. While much of the book is about the past – my relationship with my father and his experiences in the Vietnam War, the deconstruction of inherited ideas of masculinity, sexuality, and fatherhood – the end of the book
butted up against the immediate present. Sometimes when we’re deep into the writing process, particularly with memoir, everything in our lives seems like a metaphor – suddenly every conversation or observation seems like it might somehow fit into the narrative. For me, I had to decide where to end the book. After years of interviewing relatives, retracing my father’s tour in Vietnam, and crawling my way through adulthood and toward fatherhood, an event happened that seemed to click as the natural end of the book. There’s something called The Moving Wall, a half-size replica of the Vietnam War Memorial, that volunteers bring from town to town. The year I was finishing my book, The Moving Wall was coming to my hometown, and my father, a man who didn’t identify with his experience in the war before our interviews, had volunteered to help set it up. The event formed a natural bookend to my memoir and seemed to speak to some of the larger themes in the book about language and communication, authenticity and replication.

As I wrote my book, I sometimes felt like a spy in my family. But there came a point during the writing process where I had to consider myself and the people in my book characters. I had to impose some distance between the people in my life and the people on the page. And I eventually realized that it wasn’t my job as a memoirist to pause my life. Even though the book ends, life continues.

In memoir, we live the epilogue.

**Tova Mirvis:**

I’ll talk about how I used the present tense for one thread of my memoir to help solve the structural issue of how to weave together three storylines, the “present day” along with both the far past and near past. I had to keep a variety of timelines moving forward without becoming confusing, and using the present tense for one storyline felt like a clean way of differentiating it.

But the choice of tense was a window into a larger question that arose in writing my memoir. The present tense gives the nice feel of something unfolding right now but as I wrote, I worried whether this came at the expense of the sense of perspective, the long view of events and the wisdom gleaned. In using present tense, I had to clarify for myself the parameters of this present tense. Was it intended to seem like it was me in the actual moments about which I was writing, as if those events had been transcribed so that I knew only what I could know then—or could the present tense still be imbued with the qualities of the later me, who had a richer, wider perspective?

This was a question that was very alive for me not just in terms of the use of tense but in my connection to the material as a whole. Was I still too close to the events I was writing about, some of which had taken place just a few years before and whose aftermath I was still very much inside of? How do you write about a present moment that is still in the midst of unfolding?

**Sue William Silverman**

A while back, I coined two phrases inspired by William Blake to explain why I always write in present tense: The Voice of Innocence and the Voice of Experience.
The Voice of Innocence narrates the literal story of past events. It is an innocent voice because all it knows is what happened. But I write it in present tense because these events are still being lived or “relived” through memory. Memory is the “now.” Or, as Faulkner said: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

The Voice of Experience, on the other hand, is the author-me, a more aware voice, writing now, in the present, reflecting and discovering metaphors to make sense of that surface story.

For example, my just-published book, How to Survive Death and Other Inconveniences, follows a thematic thread through my life. In this memoir-in-essays, I swerve back and forth in time, from memory to memory, seeking the origin of my life-long and on-going fear of death. I relate the surface facts of my death-phobia origins through the Voice of Innocence, whether the event is a traumatic childhood incident in a funeral parlor; a sexual assault I survived as a teenager; or a potentially life-threatening illness. At the same time, I make sense of these “memoried” events, examine how they contribute to my fear of death, through the Voice of Experience. Both voices work in conjunction with each other as I’m actually writing in a now-ness in which events and memories, whatever their chronological relationship, exist equally in the creative moment.

Memoir is a palimpsest: One memory accruing atop the next and the next, yet, through memory, all occurring at the same time. For clarity, when I jump around in time, I insert writerly markers or landmarks so the reader can follow the time sequence.

Creative nonfiction is, at its heart, discovering our metaphors, metaphors we don’t see or understand when we’re living in the moment in which a memory begins. Metaphors only arise from the writing itself, writing in the ever-present now.

MODERATOR QUESTIONS:

1. I’d like to know more about what the present tense has offered you in your memoirs. In 2015 Alexander Chee wrote a Lit Hub essay called “In Defense of the Present Tense,” which is devoted mostly to fiction. But he says, “When I write in the present tense in nonfiction, it’s a kind of withdrawal into all of the available memory and evidence I can find as I look for the shape that might be there.” He continues, “I see the tense as a way to visit a moment as I would visit a place.” He goes on to quote Elizabeth McCracken as saying, “a good present tense is really about texture, not time, and should be as rich and complicated and full of possibilities as the past tense.” I wonder what you all think of these ideas. Do you relate to the concept of using the present to “visit a moment”? And what are the “rich and complicated and full” possibilities of the present tense in memoir?

2. In exploring a little further what we expect of the past and the present, Chee quotes a couple of other writers in his Lit Hub piece. Jess Row says he tells his students that “past tense involves retrospective intelligence and insight, [while] present tense creates a sense of immediacy and what we might call non-insight, a lack of information about what’s next.” This is evident enough. Matt Bell, though, suggests that sometimes we can
craft what he calls “the reflective present tense,” which he says “is the way both memory and trauma often work.” What do you think?—can the present tense be reflective? What does this look like? Or do you embrace the present tense precisely to escape the burden of reflection?

3. Many of these challenges we’ve discussed have to do with choices we make on the page. What about challenges you face in the living of life while you’re working on a memoir? How do you keep yourself from falling into the surreal and disconcerting scenario of thinking, amid the ragged chaos, “Hmm…maybe this would make be an interesting chapter”?

4. We’ve talked about some of the ways in which the present tense in memoir seems radical, needs defending. But it also seems to me that in the year 2020, in our broader American experience, everyone is expected to narrate our lives moment by moment. I mean: Twitter. A “later gram” is frowned upon. “Throwbacks” are designated for Thursdays only. We expect live dispatches, unfiltered, undigested, from the concert, the vacation, lunch with friends. Is this all the more reason to resist the instant transcription of lived life, or are we, in embracing the present tense in memoir, actually adapting to (selling out to) a larger cultural appetite for immediacy?

5. Any final words of advice for memoirists embarking on writing about the present?

6. Now I’d like to open it up for questions from the audience…