We find solace, community and strength through reading, and I am grateful to literature for bringing me to this [AWP panel on Thursday, March 5th at 12:15 p.m](https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.awpwriter.org%2Fawp_conference%2Fevent_detail%2F18920&data=02%7C01%7C%7C2f749320fe4c409059a808d79a12239c%7C84df9e7fe9f640afb435aaaaaaaaaaaa%7C1%7C0%7C637147275006173589&sdata=M5FdkA7a4K2PfATzKwN%2BOBlX%2BcZvTjBnSqnlXfIRdLs%3D&reserved=0), also seen on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/events/491936071453626/).

Today’s panel topic: Four powerful female authors read their work and discuss shared themes of families torn apart by history and war. Each of their novels chronicles a quest to find lost siblings and daughters and sons, each story a lyric tale of the strength of family against life's unforeseen obstacles.

Ellen Meeropol, Donna Hemans, Aimee Liu and Kristen Millares Young will discuss the importance, impact and necessity of telling these fraught stories in the real world of today. So much connects these writers, not the least a shared faith in family bonds and the power of stories to save us.

This Red Hen Press panel will featuring brief readings from *Her Sister's Tattoo* (Meeropol), *Tea by the Sea* (Hemans), *Glorious Boy* (Liu), and *Subduction* (Young), followed by a discussion moderated by Kristen Millares Young.

For now, an opening question, to which each author will respond with a selection of a 5 minute reading:

**“You each tell a story that confronts family separation. What is the importance of telling these stories, and the impact these stories have on our lives, right now?”**

For our 75 minutes together:

1) I introduce myself, thank Red Hen Press and the AWP audience, then I will introduce you as a group by giving brief remarks that reflect on the connections between your work. (3 minutes)

2) I deliver Donna, Ellen and Aimee Liu’s bios, all as one, clearing the way for the art and conversation (2 minutes)

3) I share with the audience the question/conversation starter I gave you: “**“You each tell a story that confronts family separation. What is the importance of telling these stories, and the impact these stories have on our lives, right now?**” (1 minute)

4) We each read (5 - 7 minutes, with intro) I suggest that we read in this order: Aimee, Donna, Kristen, Ellen. Together that’s 25 - 30 minutes, allowing for applause and very quick transitions (30 minutes)

5) 30 minutes of moderated conversation

6) 8 minutes of audience questions

7) 1 minute for the moderator to say goodbye and thank the other panelists, Red Hen Press, AWP and the audience

1. Maxine Hong Kingston says that the present affects the past, that time and energy go back and forth. Due to political circumstance, child separation rose to the fore of the public imagination in 2020. Did you anticipate this cultural moment? What made you want to write about this topic in the first place?
2. Ellen, your extended family has suffered extreme consequences of the misjudgment of news media and the court systems. Could you talk about their case and how it influenced your framing of *Her Sister’s Tattoo*?
3. Given today’s political discussion about the separation of children from their parents, can each of you reflect on the family divisions in your books and how they reflect on the current political climate?
4. Aimee, can you discuss the relationship between emotional resilience and attachment, especially in the context of violent separation, as seen in *Glorious Boy*? Quite simply, how does the human spirit survive the brutal, primal loss of the ones we need and love the most? That trauma is one of the most urgent and neglected question around family separations, and it’s a common thread in all of our books.
5. The whole notion of rescue looms large in each of your novels. Whether of a person, a group or the self, rescue involves hubris as well as courage. It’s usually considered man’s work when it involves physical and intellectual rescue, and women’s work when it involves emotional rescue. Can you talk about the problems that arise from this divide?
6. Ellen, *In Her Sister’s Tattoo*, you explore the clash between activism to change the world and loyalty to our families. How do you feel about the decisions made by your characters?
7. Donna, in *Tea by the Sea*, you wrote of the Jamaican parents of Plum, your protagonist, that they prioritized "ambition over personhood, attaining wealth or power or status no matter the cost to themselves or others. It was ingrained in the immigrant dream. Work three jobs if you have to. Double your shifts. Send money home. If necessary, create the illusion of success, especially for family back home." --- all of that to "be someone who mattered." In their efforts to gain a place in American society, these parents created an expectation of achievement for their children that emotionally distanced the family so that, even when together in the same room, they felt thousands of miles apart. How did that expectation and isolation affect Plum's life choices?
8. Set in a penal colony in the Andaman Islands, *Glorious Boy* chronicles the fallout of one family's separation during the British evacuation under threat of a Japanese invasion. Your protagonist Claire is an anthropologist ahead of her time, in that she seeks to escape the constraints of patriarchal and genteel American cultures of the early 40s, and yet she is also of her time, in that she accepts those very same constraints as necessary for the care and upbringing of her son Ty, who becomes her primary responsibility until she engages the help of a local girl named Naila. How did gender roles and cultural norms condition this family toward the situation they find themselves in, where Claire has been forced onto a ship to Calcutta while her husband stays to search for their son? And how did she subvert those very same protocols to effect their attempt at reunification?
9. Donna, you wrote, "She hadn't been allowed to return to Brooklyn, to the brownstone on President Street, to the friends she hadn't bid goodbye...A single summer vacation had turned into one long, unexpected expulsion from the only life she'd known. Expelled. Excommunicated. Exiled…Each day she had another word for what her parents had done, for how they had re-engineered her life without her knowing it, for how they had sent her away as if she hadn't mattered at all." Why did Plum's parents send her back to Jamaica without telling her of their plan? Why did they find Jamaica to be a safer environment than Brooklyn for her, but not for them? Could you talk about the cultural norms of decision making for Caribbean families in diaspora?
10. "Agency" and "freedom" are recurrent themes of *Tea by the Sea*, whose characters work and strive and try every day and yet never seem to gain control of their own lives, even as they make new life, whether intentionally or not. When Lenworth steals their newborn while Plum sleeps off the effects of her traumatic birth, he explains his betrayal as giving Plum the agency to achieve her personal ambitions through freedom from the burdens of motherhood. Of course his actions devastate all three of them, though they each, in their own way, effect a kind of healing. Why do these characters suffer from a lack of agency? Is agency something they can give themselves? What kind of societal shifts would be needed for these people to find real freedom?
11. Donna, can you talk about the struggle in *Tea by the Sea* between the two parents over which one has the right to the child?
12. Aimee, in order to see her family again, your protagonist Claire become a codebreaker, drawing upon Aka Biya, the indigenous language that she learned on the Andaman Islands, an effort whose long labors first disrupted her bond with her autistic son and then helped her have a chance to see him again. Could you talk about your research into indigenous codebreakers, whose efforts helped bring so many Americans home to reunite with their families after WWII?
13. Ellen, in *Her Sister’s Tattoo*, you wrote, “most of all she loved feeling bonded cell to cell, not only to Rosa and Maggie, but every single one of the tens of thousands of people in the crowd as they all marched for a single shared cause: ending the Vietnam war.” Do you sense a similar bond among the American population for a single shared cause today? If so, which one? If not, what might be needed to create a sense of civic unity in our disunited states?
14. In Glorious Boy, when the Japanese Army invades the Andaman Islands, they use the language of Asia for the Asians to gain local support, which does not spare the island's residents from suffering under the brutality of this latest imperial presence. Their emphasis on ethnic purity left many of the island's mixed-race families in limbo, endangered by physical persecution and social shunning. How did each of the colonizing forces use the language of morality to divide the communities over which they wished to rule? As a Chinese American, do you see parallels to the national rhetoric in use by our federal government today?
15. Ellen, in your story, the inciting incident – Rosa and Esther throwing apples at a police officer who was beating innocent protesters – becomes national news because a member of the media took a picture of their action, ignoring that it was in response to police brutality. Do you see parallels with the media framing of current protests by marginalized populations in response to current federal policies?
16. There are so many kinds of family separations — legal, geographic, and also emotional, as the sisters in your novel are divided over the perception of disloyalty, though they share so many values. Reflecting on the lessons of past schisms, how can our current social damage be repaired so that we as a nation can be made whole?