

Baltimore literary whiz Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson talks writing

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The 2017 Rubys grant recipient shares her thoughts on memoir writing, the power of storytelling, and this Saturday's CityLit Festival.

by Cassandra Miller

Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson's professional writing accolades and experience are what literary dreams are made of. Her articles and essays have been published in *The New Yorker.com*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic's CityLab* and many others, and her short stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and recognized in *Best American Essays*. The Baltimore-based writer and 2017 Rubys grant recipient on Saturday, April 14, is hosting a panel with other Rubys recipients at the annual CityLit Festival, which is chock full of workshops, readings, lectures and panel discussions with dozens of new and established writers. The keynote speaker is *New Yorker* staff writer Philip Gourevitch. CityLit is 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, April 14, at William H. Thumel Sr. Business Center at the University of Baltimore, 11 W. Mount Royal Ave.

Photos by Yalda Nikoomanesh

Cassandra Miller: You're hosting the "Writing From the Margins: Uncovering our Hidden Narratives Through Creative Nonfiction" panel, when you'll be talking with local writers and fellow Rubys grant awardees Saida Agostini, Celeste Doaks and Anthony Moll – all of whom are challenging notions of race, class, gender, ethnicity, family and identity through their storytelling. What issues will the group be talking about at CityLit?

Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson: This is going to be a great panel for anyone who enjoys nonfiction and memoir, and for those who are struggling to write stories based on their own experiences. Each of the writers on this panel is tackling compelling, raw, topical stories, and they do so using a variety of forms, from poetry and essay to journalism and book-length memoir. You'll get to hear them read from their work, and then we'll have a discussion about craft and process.

How do you broach a difficult topic? How do you choose the best form to present that story, and how do you do so using an authentic voice? Do you tell your story straight on or do you, as Emily Dickinson once wrote, “tell all the truth but tell it slant”? What challenges existed in getting their stories down, and what advice can be offered to help the rest of us do the same?

I titled this panel “Writing From the Margins” because I also wanted to acknowledge the fact that too many stories never find an outlet. The publishing industry doesn’t always provide us with the diversity of voices and perspectives that we need, and the official path to becoming a published writer can discourage many, particularly those who have been told along the way that their stories aren’t “mainstream” enough to matter. Finding your voice and speaking your truth is a powerful thing. So we will talk about the experience of publishing and getting stories out there.

CM: This program is made possible in part through a Rubys Artist Project Grant. You received a Rubys grant to support work on a memoir that explores different topics related to your grandmother’s suicide at age 48. How did you start work on something so personal?

ED: I’ve been a journalist for over 20 years, so writing and publishing isn’t new to me. But this kind of personal exploration in my writing definitely is. I’ve always been one to write about deeply personal and challenging subjects, but I always did it privately in my journal. It wasn’t until six years ago that I decided to start putting these stories out into the world. The reason was my daughter. I had a confluence of things happen all at once. My father died of cancer, I became a mother six months later when my daughter was born, and I was on the precipice of turning 40. I realized that life is short, that I had stories to tell, and I wanted to be brave and take my work to a deeper place. I also didn’t want my daughter growing up under the veil of secrecy the way I had. My grandmother’s life was shrouded owing to her death, and I wanted to acknowledge her existence. Who was she? What did she experience? My grandmother’s suicide has haunted my life, and I have always felt pulled to understand it. The writer Dani Shapiro once said that we don’t choose our stories, our stories choose us, and if we don’t tell them, then we are somehow diminished. I believe that.

CM: What are a few things you learned through exploring the nature of inheritance and family history in the memoir?

ED: First, I’ve learned that every family has secrets of some kind. The challenge with suicide, in particular, is that the act tends to obscure the life that came before it. The writer Joan Wickersham, whose father killed himself, observed that suicide is the only form of death that is both a noun and a verb. We do not, for instance, become a “cancer” but we do become a suicide. We tend to redefine everything through the filter of that person’s final choice.

In researching my grandmother's story, I have seen her life mirrored back in the culture at large. My grandmother, born in 1917, was brilliant, but she was denied college, she was denied a lot of things. She was marginalized and I think, in the end, it contributed to killing her. It's about a woman's struggle to be seen and heard and to live a full and viable life with agency. The process is also helping me to reconcile why my father rarely talked about my grandmother when he was alive, and why so much of our family history was never discussed.

My vision of family is also changing as I get this story down. That is the beauty of writing. The process is alchemical. It's transformative. The end product is important, of course, because the end product is the thing that we share, but for writers it is the process of writing that allows us to come out the other end having learned something about ourselves, and our assumptions. I'm learning that family is defined in the narratives we create to encapsulate it. By challenging the stories I was handed down by my parents, the ones I was explicitly told and the ones that I intuited, I can shape family in the way I hope to see it. I can't change the fact that my grandmother killed herself. I can't change the fact that my father kept his family a secret, or that previous generations of my ancestors made decisions that broke our branch off from the larger family tree. What I can do is reject my family's legacy of secrecy and isolation and choose, instead, the harder path of openness, dialogue, and a family composed of both my blood relatives and the people I choose to belong to it.

CM: You are widely published and have made a career as a professional writer and editor. When did you know that is what you wanted to do, and what keeps inspiring you to write?

ED: I write because I believe in the power of storytelling to connect us through the shared truths of human experience. In the specific and thoughtfully rendered details of one person's story we can see the universal. Literature is an act of empathy; it is a conduit for illumination. From a young age, I recognized writing as my tool for examining the world. I was an inquisitive kid and writing became the infrastructure for exploring that curiosity. I keep writing because I am still, at heart, that questioning little kid. For me, a successful life is one spent stoking that innate human curiosity and being fully engaged in a dialogue with the world.

CM: What advice can you give first-time creative nonfiction writers who want to write about identity and other personal topics?

ED: I think the first and most important thing to consider is this distinction: Writing as therapy is valuable, but *publishing* as therapy can be dangerous. If you are dealing with something that feels fresh and unexplored, something that you're still processing, consider whether the writing stays private for now. Every writer worth her salt feels vulnerable sharing her work, but there's a difference between getting nervous about publishing a piece of writing, and sharing an unprocessed experience with the world. Once it's public, the reader gets his or her say. And this is something that

honestly concerns me about the publishing world right now, particularly for women. There are a rash of Web sites and publications clamoring for what I would call confessional stories—where writers bare their most intimate moments. That kind of writing can be very empowering, but only if *you* feel empowered. So as a test, ask yourself how you would feel if someone you didn't know walked up to you at a party and talked about this story you're trying to tell. If that idea makes you supremely uncomfortable, let that be your guide. Take your time. This is your writing, your journey.

CM: Is this your first time being a part of CityLit? What panels and talks other than your own are you looking forward to at this year's festival?

ED: This is not my first time at CityLit. I've participated on panels in the past, and I've come often as an attendee. What's so great about the CityLit Festival is that it offers a mix of national talent—like Yrsa Daley-Ward— along with the best of the local literary community. You can meet regional authors like Jane Delury and Leslie Pietryzk, who both have exciting new novels out, and you can meet publishers from places like Baltimore's Mason Jar Press. The Festival is a wonderful blend of master classes, craft, the business of publishing, and literary readings. I'm definitely attending the Funding & Advocacy panel, which in addition to the GBCA includes organizations like the NEA and creative capital. There are also many timely panels this year, like the #MeToo Movement panel being hosted by Jen Michalski. I need to clone myself to get to them all.

Learn more about The CityLit Festival

Download the 2018 CityLit Schedule

CityLit is 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Saturday, April 14th 2018

William H. Thumel Sr. Business Center at the University of Baltimore
11 W. Mount Royal Ave.
Baltimore MD

Categories: Limelight

