

What's Missing: How Absence Can Drive Narrative

Panel at the San Francisco Writers Conference

Sunday, February 16, 2020: 11:30am – 12:30pm

“Absence, the highest form of presence.” -- James Joyce

Panel Description: Fiction and memoir writers discuss the importance of what’s narratively not present—a missing parent, lost object, or unexpressed feeling—as a major theme in literature, and a creative spark in their own work, shaping plot, character, and imagery. They offer examples from well-known books, share brief excerpts from their writing, and provide innovative craft techniques to illustrate how a focus on what’s missing can be transformative.

Panel Moderator:

Laurie Ann Doyle is the author of *World Gone Missing*, winner of the Nautilus Book Award in fiction, and praised by bestselling author Peter Orner as a “gorgeous debut.” A Pushcart Prize nominee and recipient of the *Alligator Juniper* National Fiction Prize, Laurie’s stories and essays has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review*, *The Rumpus*, *Alta Magazine* (forthcoming), *Dogwood Journal*, and many other journals. She teaches writing at The Writers Grotto and UC Berkeley, where she is an honored instructor.

www.laurieanndoyle.com

Panelists:

Louise Nayer has written five books, most recently *Poised for Retirement: Moving From Anxiety to Zen*, and *Burned: A Memoir*, an Oprah Great Read. She co-authored *How To Bury A Goldfish: 113 Rituals for Everyday Life*, an Amazon notable book. She has taught creative writing for over 40 years.

www.louisenayer.com

Eleanor Vincent is the author of the memoir, *Swimming with Maya*, a *New York Times* e-book bestseller, and finalist for the Independent Publishers of the Year Award. A creative nonfiction teacher at the San Francisco Writers Grotto, she was a visiting writer at Mills College. **www.eleanorvincent.com**

Lyzette Wanzer’s work appears in over twenty-five literary journals and books, and she is a contributor to *The Chalk Circle: Intercultural Prizewinning Essays* (Wyatt-MacKenzie), *The Naked Truth*, *Essay Daily*, and *San Francisco University High School Journal*. She is a two-time San Francisco Arts Commission, and a three-time Center for Cultural Innovation, grant recipient.

Opening Remarks

- In both fiction and memoir, what’s narratively *not* present—a daughter who’s died, a lost wedding ring, a father’s love—can be critically important, driving plot, structure, character, imagery, POV and other elements.
- Absence is a major theme in well known classics such as *The Odyssey* (Odysseus is missing), *Moby Dick* (the famous white whale), and more recent books like Jesmyn’s *Ward’s Sing*, *Unburied, Sing* (the

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father/husband), and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (the girls' mother). Absence plays an important role in other arts, as well, including René Magritte's *The Son of Man*, and John Cage's 4'33".

- As writers, we have found this approach is a great way to invest not only readers in our work, but ourselves as well. For several of us, the focus on what's missing was a creative spark.

Moderator Questions

1. Talk about what's unseen and unspoken in your work.
2. How does the "felt absence" in your story shape its narrative?
3. What advice do you have for writers using "what's missing" to catalyze their work?

Panelist Responses

- **Note:** Since this will be an open discussion, these points are not meant to be inclusive.

1. Talk about what's unseen and unspoken in your work.

* Wanzer:

- In my essay "**Jaywalking**," Father, who while literally deceased, is also tangibly absent throughout, leading to another absence: of absolution, or definitive confirmation of either condemnation or forgiveness. Father's absence is, conversely, extremely present.

* Vincent:

- In my memoir, ***Swimming with Maya***, the opening section is told by a narrator in shock who cannot accept that her comatose child will not recover consciousness.
- The rest of the narrative reveals how the mother finally breaks out of denial and contends with her grief; and recreates Maya through flashbacks so the reader understands who and what has been lost.

* Nayer:

- In ***Burned: A Memoir***, the parents of four year-old Louise and six year-old Anne have disappeared. How could their parents simply leave them? The children are not told the reality of what happened, because the adults find their injuries too difficult to talk about, especially their mother's face.
- After nine months, the children begin to forget their parents. They adjust to life on the farm, and rarely talk about their parents, though they pray to them every night. The phone calls are excruciating. How can they be talking but not come get them?

* Doyle:

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- All the major characters in the twelve stories of *World Gone Missing* are grappling with the void of a lost loved one.
- A few examples: in my story “Voices,” a San Francisco businesswoman becomes increasingly obsessed with a long-lost high school friend. In “Bigger Than Life,” a newly married couple anxiously searches for a brother who seems to have vanished into thin air. In “Like Family,” an insurance clerk sets off to meet her son’s mystery birthmother.

2. How does the “felt absence” in your story shape the narrative?

* Wanzer:

- The essay chronicles my journey from my father’s teaching, drilling, and indoctrination to a separate, wholly noncompliant, oppositional stance on my part.

* Vincent:

- Throughout the book, the image of water serves as a “screen” through which we see Maya and allows her mother –and the reader—to feel that Maya is still present, although hidden in another world, one that intermingles with the living.
- Water served as a metaphor and unifying image. Maya learned to swim as an infant, and one of the earliest flashbacks is of her mother plunging her underwater.
- The memoir closes with an image of Maya surfacing and disappearing in a swimming pool in the narrator’s dream – so mother and daughter swim in and out of a new, more fluid relationship.

* Nayer:

- In *Burned*, I interwove the story of the children on the farm with the parents in the hospital. Both parents and children felt deep anguish about the absence. Interweaving these two stories was challenging, but ultimately rewarding.
- This plot created suspense. Would the mother survive? When Louise ran into the barbed wire, would she be blind in one eye? Would Anne survive a terrible asthma attack after a phone call with her parents? Ending chapters with suspenseful moments helped create momentum.

* Doyle:

- In the story, “Voices,” absence helped shape my choice of POV. Since the narrator’s best friend exists only in the narrator’s memories and imagination, the second person POV was ideal to evoke the girl’s presence and create a haunting effect. The story is addressed to an absent “you,” which brought this character to life.

3. What advice do you have for writers using what’s missing to catalyze their work?

* Wanzer:

- Understand that unanswered questions may remain unanswered. I had to make inferential leaps and assumptions on father’s part, without all of the evidence being in.
- Accept the fact that, no matter how thoroughly and unflinchingly you may write it, there may not be any closure, no approval or forgiveness.

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* Vincent:

- Find concrete ways to make the absent person present through physical objects.
- Use their possessions, their habits, and images that connect to meaningful parts of their characters, for instance in Maya's case, her love of diving and swimming, her penchant for risk taking and speed.
- Allow your themes to surface as you write. You may need to "reverse engineer" this aspect and go back once the manuscript is written to unearth and amplify the themes. Plot and theme interweave. Plot is "what happens" and theme is "what it means" – imagery is the best way to show the underlying meaning.

* Nayer:

- Create a timeline with specific dates and events for all main characters. This helped me interweave the very different stories of the parents and children. Do as much research as you can—in memoir—from letters, and family members, and searches on that exact date.
- In my memoir, absence was felt very differently by adults and then by the children. Stay true to how people would react based on age. Research this, as well.

* Doyle:

- Rather than backing away, embrace what's absent but still important in your story. Evoke the pang of what's been lost with vivid details. This draws your reader deeply into the story.
- If many things are missing, focus on the most important element, e.g. the woman who's physically absent, rather than her lost briefcase.
- Finding a character's most intense desire and putting it out of reach is a way to underline tension and jumpstart the engine for a story.
- Often when something goes missing, people go looking. The search for what's absent can provide much of your story's rising action. Absence can also shape the turning point. What's sought may *or* may not be found. Either way it's interesting.

Panelist Readings

- Wanzer, Vincent, Nayer, Doyle

Q & A Session

- We appreciate your questions! Please pass the microphone to person asking the question.