

The “Weak” Novel: Radical New Fiction from Graywolf Press

Event Description

In *Weak Planet*, scholar Wai Chee Dimock questions mastery as an ideal in literature and proposes “beginning instead with vulnerability.” This panel convenes novelists who subvert hierarchies of plot and character, “incorrectly” borrow tropes from science fiction or academia, and blur the line between writing and life. What happens when a novel includes a (real) utility bill or a chapter written by a character? How can radically porous novels help us reimagine literature and society?

Event Category

Fiction Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator

Yuka Igarashi is an executive editor at Graywolf Press. Before joining Graywolf in 2021, she was editor-in-chief of Soft Skull Press, founder and editor-in-chief of *Catapult* magazine and the managing editor of *Granta* magazine. She is also founding editor of the annual Best Debut Short Stories anthology series.

Event Participants

Lucy Corin’s fourth book of fiction, *The Swank Hotel*, was published by Graywolf in 2021. She’s been awarded the American Academy of Arts and Letters Rome Prize, an NEA, and teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of California, Davis.

Lucy Ives is the author of two novels, *Impossible Views of the World* and *Loudermilk: Or, The Real Poet; Or, The Origin of the World*, both *New York Times Book Review* Editors’ Choices. She writes frequently for *Art in America*, *Artforum*, and *Frieze*.

Isabel Waidner is the author of three novels: *Sterling Karat Gold*, *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff*, and *Gaudy Bauble*. *Sterling Karat Gold* won the Goldsmiths Prize, and was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction and the Republic of Consciousness Prize. They are based in London, UK.

Mandy-Suzanne Wong is the author of *Drafts of a Suicide Note* (Regal House), a Foreword INDIES finalist; *Listen, We All Bleed* (New Rivers), an EcoLit Best Book of 2021; and *Awabi*, winner of the Digging Press Chapbook Award. Her novel *The Box* THE BOX is forthcoming from Graywolf in 2023.

Moderator Opening Remarks

Last year, a couple of writers I was working with (including Lucy Ives) brought Wai Chee Dimock's 2020 book *Weak Planet* to my attention. I was struck by this quote from the introduction: "While literature has often been depicted as a sovereign domain—the home of masterly authors, hegemonic institutions, and dominant ideologies—turning that narrative on its head and beginning instead with vulnerability can take us outside this muscular preserve, human-centered and coming always in maximum strength."

I began thinking of the novels recently published and to-be-published at Graywolf and about the various ways they engage with Dimock's idea of literary weakness. I'd like to start by asking each of you to introduce your books and discussing how it relates to the idea of weakness or vulnerability.

Participant Initial Remarks

Lucy Ives: My novel, *Life Is Everywhere*, is, at base, the story of a student who gets locked out of her home and only has the bag she is carrying with her as a resource. Yet the novel plays with the concept of scarcity, transforming this apparent lack into a multifarious overabundance by bringing the reader into the protagonist's (messy) bag and asking the reader to explore a number of apparently discredited or otherwise value-free texts contained within it. These texts—a pair of unpublishable novels written by the protagonist, a biography of an obscure nineteenth-century poet who has a gambling problem, a large unpaid electric bill, and a pilfered manuscript scrap—then overtake, exceed, displace, enhance, and, surprisingly, transform the framing narrative.

My novel is weak in that it has too much writing in it, too much text and not enough action. But it turns out that this text is all action and in reading we are really doing something! *Life Is Everywhere* is additionally weak in that, because of the many texts within in it, although it technically adheres to the Aristotelian “unities” (takes place within roughly twelve hours and pertains to a central protagonist in contiguous locales), it zigzags across multiple centuries and continents and comprehends the lives of many, many people, most of whom know nothing about one another and never will—and thus the book simultaneously fails catastrophically to adhere to Aristotle’s laws for narrative resolution. Time and space are very poorly distinguished from one another here. They in fact are not distinct. *Life Is Everywhere* is not interested in these sorts of distinctions—ones that, for better or worse, traditionally define the very genre of novel.

Life Is Everywhere eschews such oppositional pairings as figure/ground and form/content. It rejects the notion that agency and passivity are opposed. It tries to imagine forms of subjectivity beyond singular, autonomous, triumphant or tragic characters of all kinds—pointing up the plural, enmeshed, and interreliant qualities that humans share. The goal of this novel is to fail to tell one story. The goal of this novel is to awaken the reader’s senses to the minor and subterranean but nevertheless thrilling possibilities inherent to being more than one.

Isabel Waidner: *Sterling Karat Gold* performs the real-life effects of governmental control and state violence on marginalised people, and it does so by recruiting time travel and fleets of UFOs into its project. Disrespecting certain conventions that have been seen to accord literary value to a piece of writing—including the reliance on ‘realism,’ and the splitting of literary fiction from other genres such as sci-fi or horror—has been a preoccupation of mine for a while. I have come to think of the novel as a—if not *the*—technology for the reproduction of white middle-class values, aesthetics and a certain type of acceptable nationalism. From this perspective, a concerted ‘weakening’ might mobilise unexpected strengths of the form, and help unrepress the potential of literature itself.

Sterling Karat Gold revels in its referentiality as well as its irreverence, making explicit connections to various cultural artifacts that precede it. Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* loosely informs the novel’s structure and departure point: my main character Sterling, like Kafka’s, is being arrested without having done anything wrong. The Beach Boys play a supporting role, as well as several Renaissance paintings of what to modern eyes look like UFOs: *The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius* by Italian artist Crivelli, for example, painted in 1486, clearly depicts a classic flying

saucer, bordered by small balls of clouds, shooting a laser-beam through the walls of a building and into the head of a kneeling virgin! US artist Robert H. Colescott's mid-seventies painting *The End of the Trail* inspires one of the key characters in *Sterling Karat Gold*, a defiant Black horseman. My main character navigates this context where everyone and everything appears to have greater agency than themselves.

Lucy Corin:

- First, I'm interested in thinking about my reaction to the term "weak." Writing this book was the hardest thing I ever tried to do and it did not feel "weak" to write. My first impulse is to really balk at embracing that word as a term. But a lot of people right now seem interested in naming and advocating for things I value in books and in my own work and provocatively or in the mode of appropriating devalued characteristics, using terms like we are here— weak—or like Eileen Myles is with the *Pathetic Lit* anthology— or in a title like Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (I've been noting these as they cross my path since we convened this panel) to valorize or simply assert as importance of the regularly despised. Things that might be drawing a circle around stuff I often felt was missing in the ideas of the "innovative" or the "avant garde" or the "experimental" or the "postmodern" that I kept not-quite-embracing for my writing identity. I think this article by Michelle Tea's essay about Ali Liebegott's paintings articulates some things I fail to here: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/all-hail-the-guilty-pleasures-on-ali-liebegotts-rooms-and-other-feelings/>
- It is hard to set aside narrative conventions in order to try to access something that feels accurate, honest, and alive. I started writing by taking nothing about prose form for granted, accumulating great mounds of language that I collected from my experience (lived, overheard, read, observed, imagined) and gathered it around my topic, which I felt was beyond me, which and is and remains beyond me, and then I used the formation of a novel to answer for myself: if this is beyond you, why are you still writing about it? I did not even tell myself that I had to actually write a book that anyone would read. That came several years into the process.
- The novel is called *The Swank Hotel* and it is about madness. Madness that is a thing real people experience, madness as a poetics, and madness as a way to read a historical moment (US Obama/housing collapse era).

- Things that are “weak” in my book: there is an evolving and sometimes unstable relationship with POV– I try to layer several objective and subjective stances in relation to what my narrator-self thinks about her own authority over her subject matter. At one point in the book, and late in the process of writing the book, I “give” a section to my real-life-sister so she can have her say about the sister character in the book. Some sections are almost entirely collaged material. Some sections rewrite texts that were core to my efforts to figure out how to write my story. The plot is minimal and the book is maximal. Time is rendered complexly. The voice is capacious. I was unwilling or unable to find my way to being for or against anything with practical applicability.
- You are all so good at saying succinctly and evocatively what your books are about that I am going to have to come up with something in kind, so I leave this here as a marker for myself to do that. I will also come up with a list of qualities that I think are a “poetics of madness” because what is more weak than the “weakness of mind” that is madness. And I will come up with a longer list of the weak things my book does.
- I’ll come up with a list of my favorite books connected to this topic. I’ll read Lucy I’s article.
- Or I will change my mind and do what seems better and more interesting as the time approaches. B/c form & content, right?

Mandy Suzanne-Wong:

- *The Box*, my novel, is about a box. A small box, apparently of white paper. It doesn’t talk. Not even to itself. It does things like fall in the snow when dropped. A fragile, voiceless *thing*, doing nothing whatsoever on its own power. This is my protagonist.
- Composing its story was an attempt to learn whether I could make a novel of which the spark and kerosene was a small *thing* of the sort known as *inanimate*. The plot consists of the box’s interactions with other things. The novel’s primary driving forces are nonhuman, the things that humans do seeming more like consequences or side effects of nonhuman things’ being what they are. When apartments suffer unstable plumbing, buses can’t keep

their feet, snow is rendering everything white and time unmeasurable: humans are as vulnerable as paper in the snow.

- *The Box* lacks any voice of authority. The story of the box amounts to a smattering of rumors, of secondhand stories: a motley bunch of narrators telling tales that aren't their own but which they've heard from strangers.
- All of the narrators are foreigners in the sense that they don't talk the way we talk. Some are anachronistic. Most are inspired by literature translated into English from other languages: foreign rhythms seep into the narrators' untranslated English-in-translation and weaken its integrity, making it vulnerable to elsewhere from within.
- [Most likely there won't be time to actually say all of this. These are just thoughts for the outline. I'm thinking I'd like to read from "Secondhand" or "Remainder" if there's time.]

Moderator questions

- 1) How does a weak novel allow an author to relinquish authority?
- 2) How does the weak novel respond to current conditions within literature, culture, and/or the world at large?
- 3) Is there such a thing as *too* weak?