

2018 Debut Authors

We're so pleased to bring you insight from four UH CWP alums whose debut memoirs and poetry collection were released last year to much acclaim. They are a sample of the hundreds of alumni who are publishing books.



Allie Rowbottom: *Jell-O Girls: A Family History*

For how long did *Jell-O Girls* percolate?

I started *JELL-O GIRLS* the summer after my second year at UH, but didn't get to working diligently on it until the end of year four. I would say though, that being my first book, and being, in part, a memoir, it had procolated for my whole life by the time I started writing. Once that process began, it all went relatively quickly; I finished *JG* in my final year, thanks to a dissertation completion fellowship, and sold it the next.

Did you get support from specific people at UH?

So many! My friends first and foremost. The workload and pressure was often intense, and it was relieving to go through it with comrades. My mentor, then-faculty member Mat Johnson, was the first person who urged me to write *Jell-O Girls* - I'll always remember it. I was talking about dissertation projects and said I could imagine doing an essay collection or...this other project I had in mind but feared I couldn't write (which turned out to be *JG*). Of that second idea he said, "now that's a book I want to read" and it was settled. In later stages of my work on *Jell-O Girls*, Pete Turchi and Nick Flynn, were also so kind with their time and attention. J Kastely was so supportive when it came to the juggling-of-life side of things, ditto Inprint, and the Inprint prize program.

What was your favorite part of being an editor at Gulf Coast?

Hands down the highlight of my experience was curating "The F-Word" Roundtable for issue 25. I featuring Maggie Nelson, Eula Biss and Sarah Manguso. It was mind blowing to imagine my dream conversation with my favorite writers, to reach out to them and then, magically, to actually have that conversation! And then to have it accessible to a wide audience!

What about your book resonates with our current moment?

I like to think of the book as relevant across time for the very reason that it's relevant today - *Jell-O Girls* is a feminist history of an American icon (Jell-O), but it is also a testimony of the experience of American girls and women growing up, aging and, in some cases, dying, in an America that remains governed by white hetero-patriarchy. Which is to say the book is relevant to the #MeToo moment, as well as the moments lived through by generations of unheard, disbelieved and discounted women.



Analicia Sotelo: *Virgin*

How long had *Virgin* been percolating before its publication?

I would say it was percolating right before I walked into the grandiose halls of Roy Cullen, which was about 8 years before it was published. Of course, there was plenty of time in there for waiting by the phone for someone to call, which I filled with camaraderie, cake, agonizing over lines and rewriting them over and over, black tea, coffee, discovering new music on streaming services, etc.

As a "Mexican American fascinator," how did you negotiate potential expectations of identity politics with a strong sense of individual subjectivity?

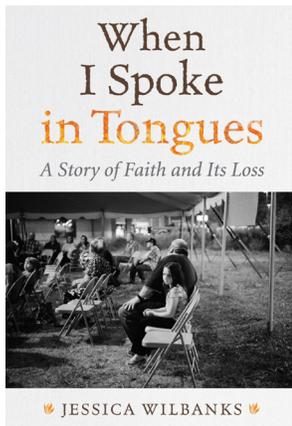
I had a lot of incubation time to figure out how I felt about some key areas of "unknowing," and by that I mean, I try to operate with a Socratic sensibility. Not a clear answer, but a reflection. Because of that, the poems feel a little like a collage made into a monologue. The robust history of Mexican American poetry is important. I suppose the fascinator is a jest, in a way. It says, "I know you think this is a small article of me, but is it?" This is assuming I think about these things when I begin to write, and I don't - they appear, and then I figure out what to do with them.

Did you get support from specific people at UH while you were a student (and afterwards)?

While I was at UH, Kevin Prufer and Tony Hoagland were supportive, as was Alex Parsons though he didn't have to be since I was in poetry. I did get the most support from my peers, which is natural when you consider that everyone spends so much time together. I met one of my best friends in the whole world at UH, and that only energizes the poems.

Are there poets whose freedom of content and style inspired you in writing your collection? Do you have advice for aspiring poets?

I love so many poets who I consider to have irresistible freedom, as well as musicians and artists. Anything from O'Hara to Dalí to Monáe. Elizabeth Bishop is so precise. Dorothea Lasky is so in tune. Sylvia Plath doesn't play to society that well. My advice for aspiring poets is to never doubt what you are drawn to in your reading and practice. If you instinctually don't like something, name why. If you love it so much that you can hear it in your head while you're doing the dishes, figure out why you continue to hear it. Write poems down by hand, those of others, until you start to see what you never saw when you sped past them. There's a beauty in the slow-down.



Jessica Wilbanks: *When I Spoke in Tongues: A Story of Faith and Its Loss*

For how long did *When I Spoke in Tongues* percolate?

All in all, I worked on *When I Spoke in Tongues* for nine years. I started the book in 2009, during my second year in the MFA program. Initially I envisioned it as a narrative nonfiction book about the history of Pentecostal Christianity and its rapid growth over the past century. But, eventually the book became much more of my own story. I finished a first draft in 2011, then graduated and took a full-time job. I worked on individual essays for a while, then got an agent and sold the book on proposal in 2015. After it sold, I rewrote it completely. It was finally published in November 2018.

Did you get support from specific people at UH?

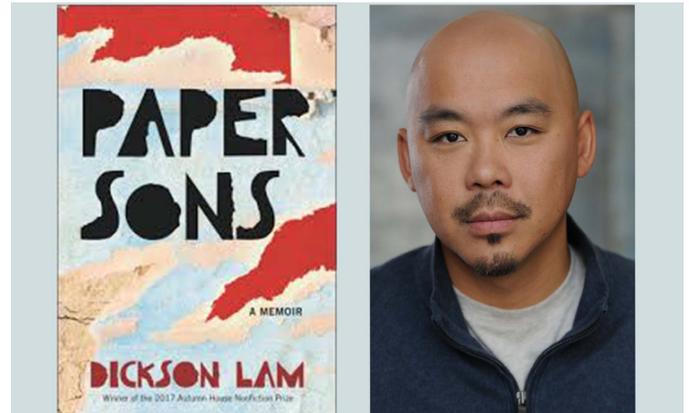
Absolutely. Toni Nelson, Robert Boswell, Mat Johnson, and Alex Parsons taught me how to craft a compelling narrative. Hosam Aboul-Ela opened my eyes to the complicated history of Christianity in West Africa, and held me to a high standard of rigor when it came to my research. Martha Serpas helped me see my story as a kind of reverse spiritual autobiography, and continually pushed me to be even more exact in my story-telling. Nick Flynn and Tony Hoagland woke me up to the power of image and sensory detail in my work. J. Kastely gave me the most important advice I've ever received, which is that writing projects that matter are frequently fueled by a question the writer can't quite answer yet.

What was your favorite part of being a nonfiction editor at *Gulf Coast*?

Since serving as an editor for *Gulf Coast*, I've become a lot less precious about the submission process. I saw firsthand how differently various editors responded to different styles, topics, and voices. I saw that once a piece reaches a certain level of craft mastery, then acceptance becomes very much a numbers game. I also learned a lot about my particular tastes. I realized how much I love nonfiction that explores ideas through sensory detail and concrete images, and incorporates external research seamlessly. I'd much rather read a piece that takes risks in the effort to say something truly new, even though it might be rough around the edges, than a piece that's technically proficient but boring.

What about your book resonates with our current moment?

At the heart of *When I Spoke in Tongues* is the story of what it means to shift your entire worldview—what you gain and lose in the process, and who and what you leave behind. These days, when cultural divides seems stronger than ever before, a lot more people seem interested in the question of what it takes to leave a fundamentalist worldview, and how to be in relationship with family and friends who believe very differently.



Dickson Lam: *Paper Sons*

For how long did *Paper Sons* percolate?

I was in the midst of all this family drama, and I thought, hey, this would make a great book. I knew nothing about the literary world. I wasn't even big on reading literature. I thought I could knock out a book in a year and move on to other things—I had a dream of doing standup. But it took me seven years from start to finish, and that was working on it full-time for those seven years, thanks to two MFA's done back to back.

Did you get support from specific people at UH?

Everyone I worked with at UH shared so much writing wisdom with me and have been as supportive as I could hope for. Toni Nelson's advice in Master Workshop helped me find the structure for my book. She can break down a story like no other. Alex Parsons was a phenomenal teacher. His lesson on motifs and symbols is something I go back to constantly. Mat Johnson helped me tap into my voice, and after that my writing changed literally overnight. Although I never took a workshop with Nick Flynn, I did independent studies with him, and we met weekly at a cafe. It was incredible to pick his brain about story structure. Hearing him talk about structure felt so freeing. I was also lucky enough to work with visiting writers ZZ Packer and Jen Hofer. ZZ helped me develop a meticulous eye for identifying details in my story that were logically inconsistent. Before Jen, I knew nothing about the field of translation studies, but her class on translation was a game changer for me. It made me rethink language and my relation to it in a way I didn't think possible.

Your novel is set in San Francisco and you live in Oakland, but is there anything you miss about living in Houston?

There's so much I miss about H-Town. Of course the obvious: art scene, diversity, BBQ. I even miss its sprawl. The Bay has become so saturated. What I loved most about Houston was the "southern hospitality," even though I realize that Houston is not as "hospitable" as other smaller Southern cities, but coming from the Bay, it's completely different. Here, most people never greet each other walking down the street, even in a residential neighborhood, with the exception of Black folks with one another. But in Houston, I found that more common across the board. A simple "Good mornin'" can make such a difference.

What about your book resonates with our current moment?

Paper Sons definitely speaks to the #MeToo movement, but it's not a book about directly experiencing abuse. It's about witnessing abuse, primarily my father's abuse of my sister, and exploring the responsibility of a witness when both the perpetrator and victim are immediate family members.

Should you have queries or wish to support the cwp: cwp@uh.edu