Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers

Colorado Gold Conference 2022

**Read It, Don’t Weep:**

**Developing Your Inner Thespian for Better Public Readings,**

**Interviews and Oral Presentations**

**by Rachel Dempsey**

You’ve written the next great American novel, landed an agent (or not), published, and now people want to hear you, gulp, read the thing out loud? But you’re a writer, not an actor. You became a writer so your work could do all the talking. Why is this happening?

Whether the idea of public speaking—especially about something as precious and personal as your own writing—terrifies or thrills you, this workshop will boost your confidence and provide tools of the theater trade to enhance your oratorical skills. Beginning with relaxation techniques and moving all the way through rehearsal to performance, NYU-Tisch-trained and professional singer/actor/director/playwright Rachel Dempsey will demonstrate how to channel your inner thespian for better public readings, interviews and oral presentations. This is an interactive workshop; prepare to move and share your work and audience feedback.

**Ice breaker**

**The Five W’s and One H Approach**

**Why do readings?**

**Where to find/create reading opportunities**

**Who will be there?**

**When will this torture end?**

Relaxation exercises to combat stage fright and vocal/physical warm-ups

**How to prepare**

**Rehearsal**

Selecting the piece

Adapting the script

Practice, practice, practice!

**Costume**

Creating an author persona

**The Set**

Tech elements (mics, lighting)

Furniture

Entrances and exits

What about virtual spaces?

**Exercise 1: Adapt an excerpt (5 min)**

**Tough Girls**, a short story by Erika T. Wurth from the **Denver Noir** anthology

*\*Context: Naiche Becente, an Apache private investigator, is investigating the disappearance of sixteen-year-old Jonnie, a young Native woman who went missing from her home a month prior. Naiche was hired by Betty, Jonnie’s mother.*

Honestly, if Judd—Jonnie’s reputed boyfriend—wasn’t sixteen, I’d have happily beat his ass.

“Like, I don’t know where she is?” he said, absentmindedly wiping at his nose. “The cops already asked me.” His expression was one of pure derision. He wouldn’t look me in the eyes.

“Uh-huh,” I said. I was rapidly losing patience.

The girl beside him snickered. I flickered my eyes over to her. She was no other than Jonnie’s buddy, Macina Begay, who was looking at me beneath her long, straight, black eyelashes with a mixture of fear and hatred.

I’d been to Jonnie’s school before I met with Betty, and a number of kids told me that Jonnie had been partying for a while with this kid—Judd. Even his t-shirt annoyed me. It was a Metallica T-shirt, and when I’d first approached him with “Cool shirt,” he’d merely squinted quizzically.

They were in the alleyway between the 7-Eleven and the diner, right where their friends had said they’d be. When they’d heard me, they scrambled to put a number of certainly highly illegal substances into their pockets.

“Yeah, I think you know more than you’re saying,” I said. “And you’re going to tell me what it is right now.”

Macina snickered again and leaned back on the chain-link fence.

I closed my eyes for a moment, centered myself. Remembered that these two were young, poor—that Macina was just a Din TK kid trying to make it in a highly unfriendly city—and changed tacks.

“Look. If someone threatened you? I can make sure they’re the ones who feel threatened.”

Judd scoffed, and whipped his long, greasy-brown locks over his forehead in one small motion. “Yeah, right.”

That right there told me something. Someone *had* threatened them.

“Aren’t you worried about your friend?”

They looked at one another, Judd turning away then, Macina’s glance moving down to her shoes.

I was getting closer.

**Old Cravings**, a horror romance novel by Joy Jarrett

\**Context: Dylan owns and operates a ranch called the Crazy K that provides elk hunting opportunities for guests. He and veterinarian ex-wife Piper have been divorced for about a year.*

Something on the ranch didn’t feel right. Well, nothing felt right since Piper left last year.

But this was different.

Off in the distance, an elk bugled from the pen. It was high-pitched and haunting, like the screaming of a rusted, ancient gate. Full of sadness and longing, the sound carried far on the still night air. Oddly still, now he thought of it.

Waylon leaned against his leg, and Dylan reached down and scratched the dog behind the ear.

Dylan narrowed his eyes and surveyed the ranch spread around him, the mountains stretching up beyond. For the first time in his life, the forest was menacing. He’d loved exploring there as a kid. He’d fished, hunted and camped in that forest more times than he could count. He and his older brother had scared each other silly with stories of ghosts and the man with the hook and sasquatches. Every once in a while, they’d even mention their great-grandmother’s story of the witherling, a terrible beast that lived among the trees. The story was so scary, his brother and him agreed not to bring that one up too often. But the forest itself? It was an old friend.

Tonight, it seemed to hide some secret threat from him. Like it wasn’t only Piper that was betraying him lately. Even the forest had turned on him.

At his side, Waylon stiffened, and Dylan dropped a hand on the dog’s head. An elk bugled again. Then the sound cut off.

Dylan sucked in a breath, waiting for a scream. Only heavy silence. He was ashamed at his relief because he knew full well if the animal had screamed, he didn’t have the nerve to go investigate just now.

Then Waylon growled low in his throat. Dylan felt the reverberations travel up the dog’s skull. “What is it?”

Waylon gave two staccato barks and backed up toward the house with a whimper. His dog might not have taste in beer, but Dylan trusted his judgement about danger. Dylan followed him across the deck.

That’s when the vibrations moved up through his boots. A deep scratching came from underneath the deck, a long scraping across the underside of the boards.

Dylan raced to the door, slid it open, and he and Waylon launched themselves into the living room.

“What the hell was that?” he said to Waylon.

**Exercise 2: Prepare your own work for reading (5 min)**

**Sharing time: 3-5 volunteers introduce themselves, read for 5 min apiece, audience feedback (2 things each did well, 1 thing each could improve upon)**

**Props/What to bring**

* + Printed copy of piece, plus an extra story or shorter version just in case
  + Charge cord if using electronic device
  + Printed copy of your up-to-date bio
  + Additional reading light if needed
  + Glasses if needed, water, tissues (take care of all bio issues before you go onstage!)
  + An emergency kit (Tide wipes, cough drops/throat spray, lip balm, Tums, etc.)
  + Business cards, author swag
  + Copies of your book(s) to sell/raffle if allowed (change and square, if you have one)
  + Tickets or trivia questions for book raffle if allowed
  + Signup sheet for your mailing list
  + Nice pen for signing books (practice signature that doesn’t match your legal one!)
  + A tote for carrying purchased books of other authors at the event
  + Flyers/information about your next public event and/or the events of other authors in your community and genre
  + A wing person to help with transactions, pictures and moral support!

**Action steps**

Challenge yourself to read work publicly at least once a month

Attend others’ readings

Listen to audiobooks, attend speaking events and performances, keep a journal of techniques that captivated you or turned you off.

**Questions?**

Rachel Dempsey

[rachelsusandempsey@gmail.com](mailto:rachelsusandempsey@gmail.com)

@rachelsdempsey on Twitter and Instagram

[www.rmfw.org/blog](http://www.rmfw.org/blog)

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