Kathleen George was co-keynote with Lee Gutkind at our 2022 conference at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. She is a professor of theatre and writing at the University of Pittsburgh and the author of acclaimed novels set in the city, including *The Odds*, which was nominated for an Edgar® award for best novel. She is also the author of The Johnstown Girls and the editor of the short story collection *Pittsburgh Noir*.

We shave Kathleen's intimate account of recognizing her self as a citizen of northern Appalachia.

Thank you PJ, Thank you to all who put this conference together and to all of you who woke up and got here to get started on this Saturday morning. It is my honor to be here as your keynote speaker and my greatest wish is to be helpful to you. I'm going to tell you some of the lessons I learned as I became a writer. Save up your questions because I love questions.

When PJ asked me to do this speech, I said OK and promptly wondered why he had chosen me. I wrote back to him saying something like, I don't know anything about Appalachia. And he said something like, Isn't that interesting in itself?

Friends jumped in to help. Or not. One said, "Well, you're from Johnstown but that's the *Laurel mountains*, isn't it? A Pittsburgh neighbor loaned me a scholarly book about Irish Presbyterians being the population that pretty much dominated Western PA. That was not in my immediate experience, but okay. I knew the cliches--rural, incestuous, hardscrabble lives. Poverty. Minimal education. Hard, dangerous dirty work. Miners, yes, north and. Right, right. There is Jennifer Haigh who set a number of novels in a town based on her hometown, a poor mining town. And I happened to be reading her newest book *Mercy Street* which (though set in Boston) made plenty of reference to the rural mining community of her protagonist's background. Then there is Tawny O'Dell whom I had read, though not recently, and she was famous for Pennsylvania mining stories! But I guess they weren't available.....

So I'm your Appalachian. Who knew? I grew up around Catholic families who worked in the Steel mills. Was this analogous? Poor scrabble smalltown steel much like the population that depended on mining. I googled madly and learned about mountain ranges. I learned there are plenty of opinions about where exactly the Appalachian range starts and ends and what it includes. Some sources start the map in Newfoundland. Others choose the bottom ridge of New York's border. At least there is some consistency in choosing Georgia as the end point. One source –and this one I am hanging onto—because it places me here says Appalachia in PA includes: Pittsburgh, Erie, Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, Altoona, Johnstown, Williamsport, State College.

And as we know Pittsburgh is the only sizeable city in this long expanse. I ran out and bought the book I'd been hearing about: Brian ONeil's *The Paris of Appalachia.* But the most helpful Brian ONeil quote is the title of a PG article: "Yes, we and yinz are part of Appalachia." In other words, we're here. We're part of it. It's us.

There is something about Pittsburgh--its spotty identity and its name and its hidden glories. Have you noticed that in almost every novel, when a novelist needs to name a place that someone lived in for a year, a place an acquaintance or lover went to school, a place a criminal hid out for a while, they choose Pittsburgh. I think it could win a contest of most-named place.

Paul Simon might have started this in song. "America."

"Let us be lovers, we'll marry our fortunes together
I've got some real estate here in my bag"
So we bought a pack of cigarettes and Mrs. Wagner pies
And walked off to look for America
"Kathy", I said as we boarded a Greyhound in Pittsburgh
"Michigan seems like a dream to me now"
It took me four days to hitchhike from Saginaw
I've gone to look for America

I'd been setting novels in Pittsburgh and I'd sent my criminals to Johnstown and Keystone State Park and Sugar Lake when they were on the lam.

So I guess I fit.

I am going to assume you are all here because you want to write and keep writing and get better at it. That's exactly how I always feel. When an acquaintance of an acquaintance approaches me and says, "Oh, I hear you like to write, I'm always a wee bit taken aback. Is like the right word? Some days it is, yes. On a *good* project, most days. Sometimes it's "love to write." But for many of us it's more like "have to write" because nothing solves the ache in us the way writing does. I write, and I think most of us do, because ideas and feelings and words are bugging us and we need to straighten something out. We're thinking: What do I do with this longing? With this view of something gorgeous or something ugly? With this puzzle I can't solve. What do I do with the memory of someone I loved? How do I preserve experience, life, people, in the face of ultimate death?

Here is how the novelist Rosellen Brown describes writers: "We are half obsessives who can't get those melodies out of our heads, and half--to change the metaphor midsentence-- half frugal housewives, practical cooks and seamstresses who will find a way to use a turnip or carrot or leftover end of meat to make a stew or cotton to sew a pillow-cover rather than let it go to waste. Just as every experience is useful to a writer, joy and misery included, so is every intuition of a useable situation if you've got the craft to bend it to your will."

Rosellen got me there. I've always hated waste. When someone throws a plate at a wall in anger, I think, "Oh, why destroy it. Couldn't someone use it?" The idea of using everything and finding a use for everything is very appealing to me.

To add my own little bit of wisdom to how and why we write: I think we write to discover what we think, what we feel, who we are. It's a way of placing our thoughts in the larger world.

I'll start with my life in Johnstown. Like other small towns and even smaller towns in our area, there were two places most of the men worked. The mines. And the steel mills. In my neighborhood almost everyone worked in the mills. There were mostly Catholic churches and a few Eastern orthodox churches which is where my siblings and I went. Most of the families were the children of immigrants from Poland, Croatia, Italy, Czechloslovkia, and in my family's case, Lebanon.

Place is important. It's like the setting in a play, more than itself, metaphoric. You'll have sessions on place at this conference. Place is physical. What does it mean to a person to be surrounded by hills? Are those hills beautiful (natural) or mined and stripped of their beauty? Do we feel protected when we're surrounded or do we feel penned in? But place is more than the setting. It is the food on the table. The habits of prayer. The tasks of the day. The income earners workday. The amount of money in a character's pocket. The friendships and enmities. The whole feel of a place. The people with their language and their clothing and their bodies.

Language. Pittsburghers say YINZ. Johnstowners say YOUNZ. In fact in my hood, they didn't find YOU-uns or Younz plural enough and so the neighborhood kids addressed any group of three or more as YOUNZES.

I love thinking about my old neighborhood. I wrote about it when I first started writing. Now I want to go back to it and that might be my next work. If I looked across the alley to the small houses set fairly close together, I knew who lived where. Matejko, Pupak, Dudash, Petrosky, Laslo, Laslo, Laslo, Reeves. Mostly Eastern Europe. Catholic. Steel workers. I can remember clearly how I learned to ride a bike in that alley. Not being an athletic kid, that was quite an accomplishment. I was usually reading and writing.

Stories were my life. In first grade I cried non-stop, not wanting to be away from home and my mother--that is, until the teacher read a story. After that I was ok and willing to go back. I would make up stories and tell them to my sibs. I would write them down when I could, bothering people for information, definitions. "What does simmultanneously mean?" I asked my cousin Eileen. She told me how to pronounce it and what it meant. I was reading so much, in fact, that my mother hid my books so I would go out and play.

I was restless but I learned that when I was reading or writing I could settle down. Stories were medicinal. I declared early on that I wanted to be a writer. I didn't know any writers. I didn't even know it was a thing a person could do. I just wanted to do it.

I kept showing things I wrote to teachers. The ones I can remember were really awful. Once, in eight grade, I wrote something about “cold hell.” My teacher told me I couldn’t say that, that hell was hot. I don’t know. That might have been one of the better things I wrote.

In high school, I had an amazing teacher--Marian Varner. We were terrified of her. She was strict. She once left the lunchroom to yell at me because I didn't shine on a standardized test. I couldn't have guessed how much my success meant to her. I learned that later. I went to visit her and we became friends. She told me about bicycling through France running after a well-known poet she’d been in love with. It was wonderful to learn she had a life when all of us dumb kids assumed she didn’t. When she couldn’t move well, she got people to bring her to one of my early book events. There is nothing like that kind of encouragement, nothing.

I went to Johnstown Pitt (the college was in a grade school building, and ll the water fountains were at the height of our knees) and majored in English with a focus on Creative Writing. A number of us, Pat Polino, Carol James, Tom Kane, Annamae Pavlosky, piled in a car once a week to take a writing course on the Pittsburgh campus from a wonderful teacher--Montgomery Culver. How many people owe their lives to him! He was a scattered, alcoholic, shy person with a huge heart. He sat with a stack of papers and a red pen at the Pitt Tuck shop every day. And he paid such attention to every word. Nobody has ever been edited as closely as his students were. Every line—questions or fixes or transpositions and…..if you were lucky, a star. In his quiet way he let us know what was what. When Annamae wrote about a woman who committed suicide, I thought oh, how gutsy, how brave to write something so dramatic. Monty Culver was a kind critic. But with a series of hms and huhs, he let us know he didn't buy it. Through him, we saw it was overly dramatic, avoiding the guts of a real story, and yet he did it softly and gently. So here was an important lesson. **LESSON**. You don’t have to write extreme actions to be dramatic. You have to find the real moments, the real person. [I was to learn this same lesson in graduate school when I was reading the Stanislavski acting theories. He tells of asking student to act out finding a missing brooch. They go crazy, slapping at stage curtains, being very busy, showing they are searching, searching. Then he tells them to sit and he asks one of them to approach and wait for instructions. She stands there while he looks through a book. He points out that she is far more interesting waiting eagerly for a direction, concentrating her attention on the teacher and the task, that any of them were when pretending to search.]

Pitt in Johnstown was not a four year school. Eventually everybody came to Pittsburgh. I and my friends took more courses in writing. And I chose my “cognate” courses in theatre. When I reached my senior year I had two teachers who wanted me to go to grad school in writing. They were Monty Culver and Edwin Peterson. They sent letters of recommendation for me. And I got in to the two most prestigious schools at the time. But I didn’t go. This was a major crossroads in my life. The two schools had admitted me but didn’t offer me money. I could not imagine A. going across the country or B. asking my Dad for money or C. getting a loan. But the truth is, I didn’t want to leave home. I sat on the back porch steps and I thought, Who was I kidding? I could never be a writer. At the same time all this was happening, I had an offer (*with* money) from the Pitt English department and one from the Theatre Department. Why not get an MA? I made the decision so many make today. Delay real life. Go back to school where they pay you

for it. A faculty member from theatre told me in the hallway I should choose the theatre fellowship. Sometimes a person lets other people decide. LESSON. Sometimes taking the long way around is okay. There are lots of ways to get home again.

Pretty soon my teachers told me, "Well you're no actress. Let's make you a director. You have the mind of a director." I became a theatre director. And slowly I realized that directing was . . . writing. I was writing with people, colors, movement. "Move the coffee cup a half inch away from you. Look down. Look back up at him." Yeah. I was writing. I was writing scenes. LESSON. **Theatre and writing are very close cousins.** There is some reason that half the novels I read make references to theatre. Many writers have dabbled or studied theatre. Especially mystery writers. One of my professors was crazy about mysteries and used to list the ten best ever for anyone who would listen. *Murder Must Advertize. The List of Adrian Messenger. The Tiger in the Smoke.* I read them all.

I had an almost PhD when I got hired at Carlow to teach speech and theatre. What did I do with the writing part of me? I directed and directed. A play every semester. I finished a dissertation (that is a whole other story! I was supposed to be writing a stage history of *Measure for Measure*, but I kept looking at the piles of microfilm and stacks of note cards and could not make myself do it. What do I *want* to write about? I asked myself. I wanted to work out what I was learning as a reader of plays and as a director. I wanted to write about rhythm.) LESSON. When faced with what you should write and what you want to write, you can make that decision to go with want. Without an advisor, I sat down and wrote a book on rhythm. It was the right decision at that time. The chair at Pitt liked it so much he hired me away from Carlow and I was back to Pitt. Where I once more directed. Shakespeare. Lots of period pieces. Costume dramas. But I was still a restless person and thus out of my mind when I didn't have something to direct. One summer, crazy without a project, I pulled out a tablet and a pen and began writing.

Oh, my God, it felt wonderful. I realized I could always do this, couldn't I? I didn't need anybody else. I could always find a pen and paper. Prisoners managed, after all.

One day I trotted over to the Cathedral of Learning to find Monty Culver who I had heard ran free workshops for people in the community on Monday nights. He welcomed me. I wrote stories again. That thing I thought I had given up.

As I got more and more serious I thought, Why not actually take classes for credit. I liked the push and challenge of a degree program. Again, I had some wonderful teachers, Culver included. There was Lewis Nordan, known as Buddy. His darkly comic novels have a whole cult following. Buddy liked painfully honest humor so he encouraged it. There was Chuck Kinder, an Appalachian writer from West Virginia. Chuck was crazy for people writing about childhood, parents, siblings, first loves, youthful rebellion. LESSON. Look to your past. There is gold there.

I began writing about Johnstown. I started getting stories published. A good half of them were based on family and the neighborhood I grew up in. "The Dance at St. Theresa's." "Rites of Burial." "The Man in the Buick."

But then I wrote something different--a crazy humorous piece, maybe wanting to get a star on my forehead from Buddy Nordan. The story I called "Martial Art" was based on a woman I saw at Club One in Shadyside. She was big, serious, lusty and such an avid exercise/dancer in aerobics that she didn't seem to notice she kept knocking people out of her way and one day said something about people at work avoiding her. I thought she was hilarious--innocent, well meaning, clumsy-- I came up with a story about her. Buddy said, "This one will get published. And Mademoiselle published it under the title "Too Much Woman." Then I made a mistake that led to a big lesson. People loved my character Willa. I should write more about her, correct? I tried to make a novel of her. I tried for years. She didn't want to be a novel. Her story didn't have the heft of a novel. **LESSON**. Success can lead you astray. It can lead you to what you think you ought to write even when the gears are grinding.

In the meantime, I was still writing a lot about my childhood and at this point I met the man I would marry. He was a writer. He said, "Can you make it bigger? Bring in history and politics and a bigger story." Could I? That was exciting to consider. So I began to research the Johnstown Floods. Plural. Three of them. This was in 1988. I thought, "Oh, I will write a novel in time for the 1989 centennial of the GREAT FLOOD and someone will definitely want it! **LESSON**. It takes time to write a novel, never mind time to get it accepted and through the publishing mill. And I was just a piker. Another **LESSON** followed. The writer I was dating was a patient man. He'd already been through it all. Success, failure, writer's block, more success. He said, "Just write one good sentence a day." That seemed unambitious to me but I learned it is a very good goal. Good things take time.

Sometimes people ask, "How long does it take you to write a novel? The answer is, Every one has been different. My first mystery, TAKEN: A year and a half. Another year and a half to get it published. But other books have taken more like six years. And THE JOHNSTOWN GIRLS, twenty five years. It went through a thousand revisions and rethinkings. I missed the centennial, but I made it in time for the 125th anniversary of the Great Flood.

When I couldn't make Johnstown Girls work or the "Too Much Woman" novel (which I had titled *Feast Days,* work, I decided I needed to have some fun. I was burnt out from constant revision that didn't improve anything. I thought about how the screenwriting guru Robert McKee had told a group that there could be a stamp for Hollywood script readers. *Great characters, great writing, no plot.* Why did so many writers I knew say they were rebelling against plot? I decided plot was a little like being naked in public. It was taking chances. It was giving your story and your characters actions and consequences. And then I thought, I *know* about plot. I teach it in theatre classes. Why am I avoiding it? And the answer was, Because plot is embarrassing. It's risky. You're sticking your neck out. The reviewer will eat you alive.

Like so many before me (and after me), I decided to plot out a mystery. After all I'd read the greats and I taught theatre. I wasn't going to *write* it, my idea was just to *imagine* it. But I started and I .. . couldn't seem to stop. I called the police. I called the FBI. What I learned is that research is fun. People generally want to answer your questions. So pretty soon I was writing the thing. Even then, I didn't think I would send it out. It was simply relief from my Willa book. For a year and a half, I would come down from the study and say, "Man, I can't believe what I'm doing. It's so ....bold." My husband kept saying, "Sounds good!" He didn't know what it was about and I didn't tell him. **LESSON.** This was one of his lessons. Don't talk about it. If you talk about it, you will ruin the writing of it.

After a year and a half, I had a ms. Things happened in it, lots of things, and it came to an end. I let him read it. He said, "Send it out."

Not so easy. It took quite a while to find an agent. One potential agent said, "I don't understand why your guys aren't raping the woman and dealing with the effluvium." I had to look up effluvium. **LESSON**. There are some agents who want to write your book their way. Every story isn't for everyone. I got a significant number of rejections. And then suddenly I had an agent who liked the book and soon I had an editor who proposed a two-book contract. She wanted a second one? I asked stupidly, "You mean another mystery?" It hadn't occurred to me that I was making an identity, a career as a genre writer. Oh, I thought, that's who I am? That was both pleasing and not, being pigeon-holed. Rosellen Brown said something about this too in the essay in which she compared writing to being a frugal housewife. She said, publishers and academics don't want you to move out of your box but that is where creative life is, in trying new things. In time I wrote other things in addition to the mysteries. I went back, for one thing, to the Johnstown Flood book. And since I was more seasoned in plotting, I added a whole new plot engine and *Birth Offerings* became *The Johnstown Girls.*

It turns out I am still a home body, a Western Pa girl. I like the people who live in Western PA. Pittsburgh. North Side. I never had success setting something in Paris. Oh, I wanted to. But it didn't click. In some ways I'm still refusing to leave home. This is it. Johnstown and the Paris of Appalachia and the roads in between. It's full of everything I need.