

2015  
2016

**Inprint**  
**Margaret**  
**Root**  
**Brown**  
**Reading**  
**Series**

**Sandra Cisneros**

**Anthony Doerr**

**Jonathan Franzen**

**Tony Hoagland**

**Mat Johnson**

**Sharon Olds**

**Helen Oyeyemi**

**Salman Rushdie**

**Tracy K. Smith**

**HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE SEASON**





**Jonathan Franzen**





**Sandra Cisneros**









**Salman Rushdie**





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**Anthony Doerr**











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**Mat Johnson & Helen Oyeyemi**









**Mary Karr**



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INSPIRING READERS & WRITERS





## News Clippings and Publicity

## ALASKAN ART

An exhibit at the Menil Collection gives viewers a look at life in 2 inches. **Page G11**



## LOCAL STYLE

Collector Dawn Bell is a force behind the Houston Vintage Market & Festival. **Page G10**

Houston Chronicle @HoustonChron

Houston Chronicle | Sunday, September 6, 2015 | HoustonChronicle.com and Chron.com

Section G ★★★

# ZEST

BOOKISH

## Inprint reading series turns 35

How much would you pay to hear Salman Rushdie — onstage and in person — spin some tall tales?

To hear Jonathan Franzen dish about “Purity,” his new opus that reaches to Bolivia and beyond? To listen as Sandra Cisneros, author of “The House on Mango Street,” reminisces about her writing and her life?

If you’d pay \$5, for each, you’ve got three nights planned for the coming months.

Inprint, Houston’s leading literary nonprofit, has



MAGGIE  
GALEHOUSE

been luring literary icons to the city for 35 years. For all that time, a general admission ticket to Inprint’s popular Margaret Root Brown Reading Series has held

steady at one low price.

Five dollars. That’s less than a movie. Less than two fancy coffees. Less than lunch.

“Each seat costs about \$44,” confides Rick Levy, Inprint’s executive director. But the nonprofit helps recoup that through \$180 season tickets — whose perks this year

*Bookish continues on G5*

# Bookish: Big names part of series

*Bookish from page G1*

include reserved seats, a spot at the front of the book-signing line signed copies of “Purity,” and more — and the annual Poets & Writers Ball, a fundraiser that supplies close to one-third of Inprint’s annual budget, which this year is \$1.2 million.

This season’s reading series — nine authors over seven evenings — mixes big names with going-to-be-big names. The readings will be held at the Wortham Center’s Cullen Theater or Rice University’s Stude Concert Hall. Each will be followed by an onstage interview with a local writer, a book sale and book signing.

Here’s a look at the coming season:

Jonathan Franzen opens the series with “Purity,” on Sept. 21. On the run from her overbearing mother, aimless college graduate Pip Tyler moves to Bolivia to work for a WikiLeaks-esque outfit and then to Denver to write for a magazine. But because this is Franzen — National Book Award-winning author of “The Corrections” and “Freedom,” formerly at odds but now friends with Oprah Winfrey — the text goes several subplots and many characters deep. “You don’t necessarily see how the pieces are going to fit together,” Levy said.

Speaking of pieces fitting together, Sandra Cisneros brings her forthcoming memoir, “A House of My Own,” to Inprint on Oct. 12. “It’s not a straight memoir, it’s more of a collage about her life and the life of a writer,” said Krupa Parikh, Inprint’s marketing director. The memoir compiles true stories and nonfiction pieces by Cisneros; a self-critique at the beginning of each section gives readers a sense of place and helps put her life in perspective.

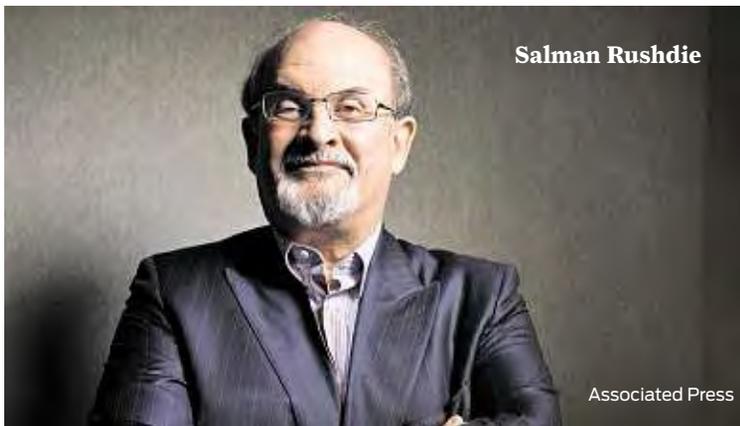
Some math is required to solve the title of Salman’s Rushdie’s forthcoming story collection, “Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights.” Rushdie, who appears with Inprint on Nov. 9, riffs off “One Thousand and One Nights” in this fresh collection of tall tales. The author of many books, including “Joseph Anton,” Booker



**Jonathan Franzen**



**Sandra Cisneros**



## Inprint 2015-16

**Doors open at 6:45 p.m.;** readings begin at 7:30 p.m.

Readings are held at the Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas, and Stude Concert Hall, Rice University.

Season tickets, \$180, are on sale now at [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org). General admission tickets, \$5, will be available at the door.

Prize-winning “Midnight’s Children” and “The Satanic Verses” — which famously drew a fatwa from the Iranian government — Rushdie enjoys a long-standing relationship with Inprint and Houston. He just keeps coming back.

Anthony Doerr, who won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for his novel “All the Light We Cannot See,” launches the first event of the new year, on Jan. 25. A fixture on best-seller lists for more than a year, Doerr’s book delivers a World War II story about a blind French girl and a German orphan boy who learns how to fix radios. “It’s written with a lot of humanity,” said Marilyn Jones, Inprint’s associate director. “You can feel the momentum building as you realize their lives are going to conflict and converge.”

On Feb. 29, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Tracy K. Smith will read from her forthcoming prose memoir, “Ordinary Light.” A more traditional memoir than

Cisneros’, Smith’s recalls her suburban childhood in California and her special bond with her mother, who came of age in the civil rights era.

Local author and University of Houston professor Mat Johnson appears March 28, along with Helen Oyeyemi, a Nigerian-born British novelist. Johnson will read from “Loving Day,” his recent novel about a mixed-race man who identifies as black but looks white. Showtime has optioned the book for a television series. Oyeyemi will read from “What Is Yours Is Not Yours,” her new novel-in-linked-stories coming in March 2016. In this work, Oyeyemi plays with the notion of keys to unlock secrets about her characters and their lives.

The final night of the season, April 18, delivers two poets: UH professor Tony Hoagland, reading from his recent collection “Application for Release From the Dream,” and Sharon Olds, who won a Pulitzer for “Stag’s Leap,” a collection of poems about her divorce. Hoagland, who writes with candor and humor, positions his collection as a critique of the American Dream. Olds writes frankly about sex, divorce and children. Both poets, Levy said, are extremely accessible to people who don’t read a lot of poetry.

[maggie.galehouse@chron.com](mailto:maggie.galehouse@chron.com)

Maybe there  
really is a  
heaven  
on Earth.

Page G16

# ZEST

KEN HOFFMAN

What does it take  
to get the 'official'  
stamp of the  
Houston Texans?

Page G2

Houston Chronicle @HoustonChron Houston Chronicle | Sunday, September 20, 2015 | HoustonChronicle.com and Cbron.com

Section G \*\*\*

BOOKISH

## Family secrets at the heart of 'Purity'

"Purity," Jonathan Franzen's recent novel, sprawls across three continents. At the same time, the story twists itself up inside the kinks of the most intimate relationships: between mothers and daughters, mothers and sons, young husbands and wives, and middle-aged partners on the



MAGGIE  
GALEHOUSE

edge of fertility, after the threat (or blessing) of children has passed.

This is a book about the paradox of secrets: "How do you know that you're a person, distinct from other people?" Franzen writes. "By keeping certain things to yourself. You guard them inside you, because, if you don't, there's no distinction between inside and outside. Secrets are the way you know you even have an inside. A radical exhibitionist is a person who has forfeited his identity. But identity in a vacuum is also meaningless. Sooner or later, the inside of you needs a witness."

Is this a good book? Oh yes. Does it do what all Franzen books do — dive deep into the river of how it feels to live now? Yes again. In the case of "Purity," *now* is an era in which one new truth — social media and the Internet have made it increasingly difficult to keep personal and political secrets — bumps up against an old truth — you can never escape your family. Rounding out the saga: socialism, murder, spyware, a nuclear warhead, drugs, feminism, breathtaking Bolivian vistas, and billions and billions of dollars.

So why, then, does reading Jonathan Franzen make me so irritable?

It stems, in part, from the sort of mega-book Franzen prefers to write. Like 2001's "The Corrections," which won the National Book Award, and 2010's "Freedom," "Purity" hovers around 600 pages, which means it's a strap-yourself-in sort of read. I liken the reading of "Purity" to wandering into a new city early in the day, getting lost in

*Bookish continues on G12*

### Jonathan Franzen

Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Monday

**Where:** Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas

**Tickets:** sold out; [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)

## ZEST

# Bookish: 'Purity' is a coming-of-age story

Bookish from page G1

its Byzantine architecture and seduced by its inhabitants, and then by late afternoon (around page 350 or 375) panicking when you're ready to leave and can't see a clear way out.

A major character in "Purity" falls off the edge of a cliff. As a reader, Franzen pushes me to the edge as well. To the edge of my patience. The edge of my free time (563 pages!). To the edge of my willingness to keep on acknowledging his intelligence and cleverness.

In fairness, Franzen knows all this. One of his minor characters, a writer, makes a joke about the essentialness of writing a "big book," and there's another joke about the deluge of Jonathans on the pages of the New York Times Book Review.

Perhaps bigness is part of Franzen's brilliance. His characters, certainly, get under our skin; he takes the time to let them enrage and provoke us so that they may ultimately disarm and charm us.

But a part of me wishes he wasn't such a show-off (his vocabulary is particularly show-offy) because it distracts from the story. And I do have a formal bone to pick with "Purity," which is that Franzen reveals one of the book's central secrets — the identity of Pip's father — too soon, about one-third of the way into the story. That revelation makes the denouement of Purity's plot-line far too long. Hence my irritability.

Purity Tyler, nicknamed Pip, is a young woman who disengages from an overbearing mother to strike out on her own, chip away at \$130,000 worth of student-loan debt and find her father. She works for a while in Oakland, Calif., relocates to Bolivia to intern for the Sunlight Project (a WikiLeaks-esque outfit), on to Denver to report for an independent newspaper and, finally, back to Oakland.

Pip's mother is excellent secret-keeper. Pip doesn't know the



Brent N. Clarke / FilmMagic

Jonathan Franzen's "Purity" comes in at 563 pages, which makes it a strap-yourself-in sort of read.

***Purity Tyler, nicknamed Pip, is a young woman who disengages from an overbearing mother to strike out on her own, chip away at \$130,000 worth of student-loan debt and find her father.***

identity of her father or even the true identity of her mother. Still, Pip is devoted to the fragile woman who raised her in a tiny cabin on the edge of the Redwoods: "The love that was a granite impediment at the center of her life was also an unshakable foundation; she felt blessed."

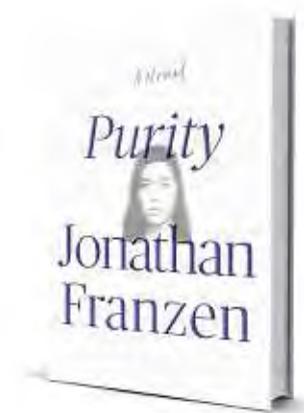
Initially, Pip doesn't quite understand how her youth, beauty and searingly direct demeanor effect men of all ages. "Purity" is thick with guys doing impulsive, even tragic things because of breathless, member-hardening love — or is it? — for beautiful girls. These girls are interesting, victimized in various ways by their families, but too inexperienced to wield any direct or delib-

erate power over the men or their own destinies. The men, on the other hand, are held captive by their sex drives, which lead them to extreme behavior.

One man, for example, hooks up with a woman who "could only achieve satisfaction in the three days when the moon was fullest." Is it any wonder they fought?

Tom Aberant, a major character, is Pip's editor in Denver. Andreas Wolf, an East German charmer who rose to fame as a dissident when the Berlin Wall fell, is Pip's boss in Bolivia. Both men have prickly relationships with their mothers (is there any other kind?), and both love Pip, but in different ways.

Irony abounds. The



## 'Purity'

By Jonathan Franzen.  
Farrar Straus Giroux, 563 pp., \$28.

man who unlocks secrets for a living might become undone by his own terrible secret. And Socialism, it turns out, isn't so different from the "New Regime" of social media: "There were a lot of could-be Snowdens inside the New Regime, employees with access to the algorithms that Facebook

used to monetize its users' privacy and Twitter to manipulate memes that were supposedly self-generating. But smart people were actually far more terrified of the New Regime than of what the regime had persuaded less-smart people to be afraid of, the NSA, the CIA ..."

"Freedom," Franzen's previous book, was a long, uncomfortable look at marriage and child-rearing, American-style. The heroes were also the victims: Walter and Patty Berglund, a couple who settle in St. Paul, raise two children, and reach for their version of the American dream. "Freedom" dared to explore disappointment — in our parents, ourselves, our children, our choices and the state of the world.

"Purity" is a coming-of-age and coming-of-middle-age book about leaving our parents behind and finding our way back to them as they, and

we, age. It's a novel about staying true or "pure" to ourselves, even if the cost of that authenticity is terribly steep.

Pip's forward arc intersects with another character's downward spiral. The unfocused, ineffective young woman of the opening pages is transformed by story's end. Slamming tennis balls against a wall and a stiff talk from an older woman help set her straight: "You don't owe these people anything. They owe you, big-time. It's your turn to call the shots now."

And the quivering question at the heart of "Purity," as raw as any question gets, is why Franzen remains such an important writer in contemporary fiction. "Purity" asks: Once our deepest secrets have been revealed, can we be loved for who we truly are?

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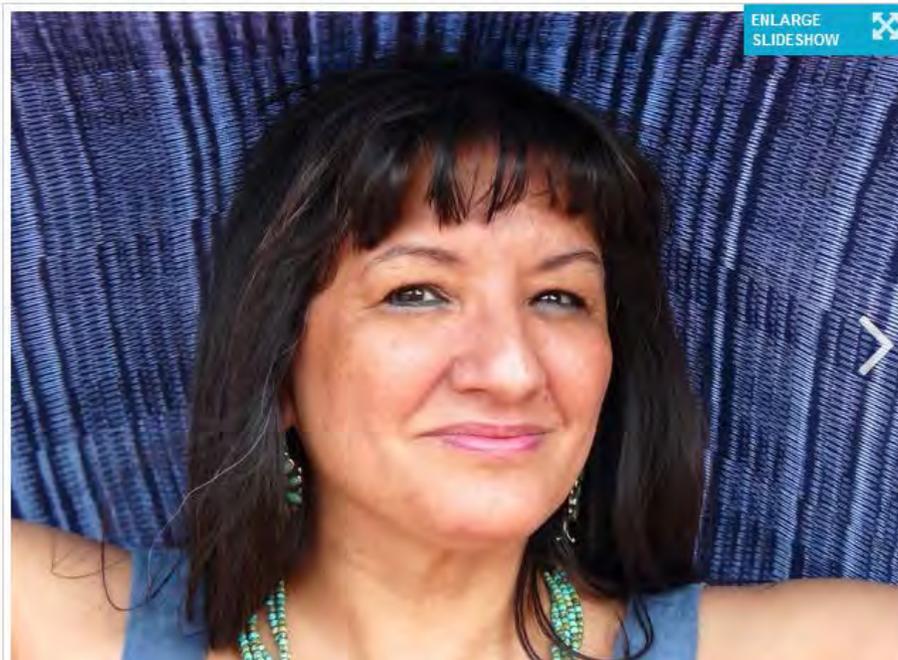
[Home](#) » [Arts](#)

LISTEN UP, RU PAUL!

## Drag Queens, death and Texas: Many stories in the house of Sandra Cisneros

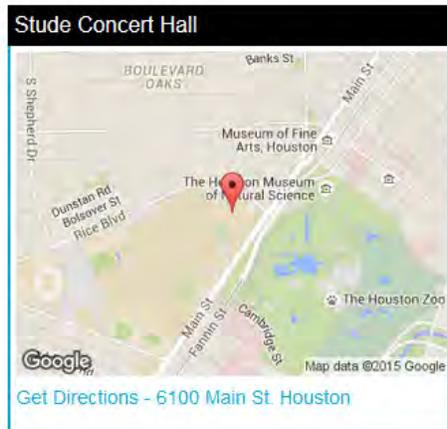
By [Tarra Gaines](#) 10.11.15 | 12:00 pm 0 Comments

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**Sandra Cisneros**, beloved and best selling author of *The House on Mango*

*Street*, *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Caramelo*, recipient of a MacArthur Foundation “genius” fellowship and a Texas Medal for the Arts, would like me to take time out of this profile of author Sandra Cisneros to mention that if [RuPaul](#) should by some chance be reading this, she’d really like to be a guest judge on [RuPaul’s Drag Race](#).



To be fair, I was the one who brought up the whole Drag Race subject while speaking to her by phone about her forthcoming visit to Texas and her new book, [A House of My Own](#).

While the book is being called a memoir, Cisneros thinks of it more as many “stories” from her life. I wanted to ask her how she classified the book because it’s a bit of hybrid. At first it seems like a collection of essays and lectures she’s written over many decades, but when read linearly they become something of an autobiography, a group of true stories that together tell the tale of how a young woman writer searched for and found many homes of her own.

“I think it’s a kind of memoir,” she described. “But you know I’ve always been writing from borderlands. My poetry reads like fiction and my fiction reads like poetry, so I’ve always written things that defy genres.”

### **Impersonating Sandra Cisneros**

In one of those stories from her life, “Straw into Gold,” which was originally a lecture she gave at the University of Texas while living in Austin in the 1980s, the older Cisneros of 2015 makes a footnote to this story to tell the readers all the things she would have preferred to be instead of a writer, including: milliner, cartoon voice-over actor, popcorn vender and lastly, judge on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

This brought us to our discussion on why she would make a great judge. She’s not only a big fan of the show, watching it regularly when she lived in San Antonio and then subscribing to a pay TV service after she moved to Mexico, she even binge watched while she worked on *A House of My Own*. She wanted RuPaul to write a blurb for the book, but that dream didn’t come true.

I learned very early in my talk with Cisneros that asking her even the silliest of questions can lead to detours into both the hilarious and the profound, and one about why RuPaul should pick her to guest judge on his competitive reality show was no exception. That quick question diverted us into a conversation about the nature of femininity:

“Drag Queens are about imitating femininity so that they’re more feminine than women, and I try to do that too. That’s why I think should be a judge on RuPaul’s Drag Race.”

Which led her to a self-evaluation of her own relationship with femininity: “I’m a kind of female impersonator. Female impersonators really are more female than females. Females are restricted by patriarchal society. Female impersonators are not. Women have to be terrified of what men might say, or their mothers. ‘I can’t look like that; I’ll look slutty.’ But female impersonators don’t have to think like that.”

When I offered that maybe female impersonators are even rewarded for not thinking that way. Her immediate affirmative then led to this remarkable realization: “I guess maybe I’ve lived my life as a female impersonator without knowing it.”

### **Leaving Texas**

The irony of *A House of My Own*, which chronicles her trying on different homes for size and ending up settling for many years in Texas, is that recently she found her [infamous purple](#) then pink San Antonio home — with its closets filled with enough parasols, opera gloves, feathered boas and tiaras to satisfy the most fashionable drag queen — was not the home for her anymore. She has since moved to central Mexico, but not before giving anyway many of her possessions.

When I asked her what the emotional toll was in leaving another home, she compared it to death, but a most delightful passing away.

“I felt like I died — and a part of me did die — and I was the executor giving away my material possessions, finding homes for my art, finding home for my animals, everything that had mattered, a record of my life. I was shedding. It was a good feeling. I didn’t feel sad. I feel like I did when I looked at my house in that last paragraph of the book: let’s go. I’m ready. I felt very happy,” she described.

It was around this time that Texas State University came calling not for her art, animals or even the boas but to acquire her literary archives for their [Wittliff Collections](#). So while her new home is across the border, much of the creative work she did here will stay in Texas.

“I’m so happy that the archives are going some place that they’ll be respected and taken care of. It was important that they stay in Texas and they stay in an institution that I felt respected me. It was important that people who are studying my work have to come to Texas. You have to if you’re going to study my

“I’m so happy that the archives are going some place that they’ll be respected and taken care of. It was important that they stay in Texas and they stay in an institution that I felt respected me. It was important that people who are studying my work have to come to Texas. You have to if you’re going to study my work.” she said.

As a Chicago native, when she first moved to San Antonio she felt sometimes like an interloper, a carpetbagger, but now after living here for decades she’s quite happy to return to Texas as a tourist.

“One of the tricks I realized of Texas is that if you come as a guest, you get treated really well.”

*Sandra Cisneros reads from A House of My Own at Stude Concert Hall, Rice University as part of the [Inprint Margaret Root Brown Series](#). The event is now sold out.*

ON THE TOWN

# H Town Picks



CONCERT

## Voca People

When a performance group consisting of self-described “friendly aliens from the planet Voca” comes to town, you can’t *not* go see their show. The a cappella singing crew, whose members dress up in identical white suits and face paint, injects comedy and beat boxing into a repertoire that ranges from Madonna to Mozart.

Oct 16 at 8. \$28–68. Cullen Theater, Wortham Center, 501 Texas Ave. 713-227-4772. [spahouston.org](http://spahouston.org)



LECTURE

## Ann Romney

The former First Lady of Massachusetts comes to Houston to speak about political life, faith and family as part of the Brilliant Lecture Series. With any luck, we’ll get some tidbits on what it’s like to be the spouse of a Republican presidential candidate, too, and perhaps a smidgen or two on the current GOP field.

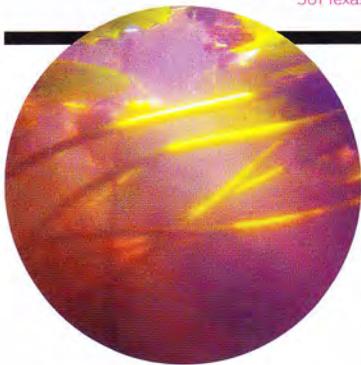
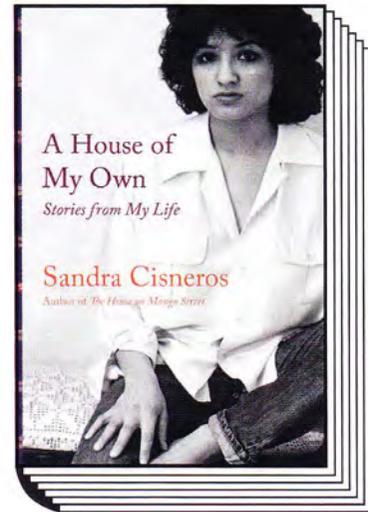
Oct 21. Breakfast at 8, The Club at Carlton Woods, One Carlton Woods Dr. Cocktails at 5:30, Asia Society Texas, 1370 Southmore Blvd. \$80 each. 713-974-1335. [brilliantentertainment.com](http://brilliantentertainment.com)

READING

## Sandra Cisneros

The beloved author, who made her name with groundbreaking work *The House on Mango Street*, reads from new memoir *A House of My Own*, which draws on poetry, essays and talks she’s written over the last 30 years.

Oct 12 at 7:30. \$5. Stude Concert Hall at Rice University, 6100 Main St. 713-521-2026. [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)



VISUAL ART

## Giverny: Journal of an Unseen Garden

New York artist Mark Fox dived deep into Monet for this video installation, spending three months filming high-def footage beneath the surface of Monet’s famed lily pond, all to explore the interplay of light and the water.

Oct 3–Nov 28. Hiram Butler Gallery, 4520 Blossom St. 713-863-7097. [hirambutler.com](http://hirambutler.com)



COMEDY

## ODDBALL COMEDY FESTIVAL

It’s a who’s-who of comedy all-stars at this annual stand-up event in The Woodlands, with comedians Aziz Ansari, TJ Miller and Nick Kroll showcasing their offbeat, observational humor in advance of hilarious headliner Amy Schumer taking the stage.

Oct 16 at 6. \$29–99. Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion, 2005 Lake Robbins Dr., The Woodlands. 281-363-3300. [woodlandscenter.org](http://woodlandscenter.org)

*HCC's Suzette Brimmer has always known a thing or two about quality.*

Page G8

*See how to nominate someone who gives of time, money or both for a spot in our special section.*

Page G6

ART HISTORY

# Exhibit widens lens on legendary photographer

By Molly Glentzer

The photographer Roman Vishniac has long been known for about 350 iconic images that portrayed harsh life in the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. But if it hadn't been for an inquisitive graduate student, his legacy might have ended there.

The International Center of Photography curator Maya Benton ultimately found her life's work in Vishniac's cache of about 10,000 negatives, which are now digitally archived. A fine selection of prints has been traveling the world in her exhibition "Roman Vishniac Rediscovered," which arrived at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston this fall.

The show doesn't just expose Vishniac as prolific. It repositions him as one of the 20th century's greatest



International Center of Photography  
**"Roman Vishniac Rediscovered" features his "Sara, sitting in bed in a basement dwelling, with stenciled flowers above her head, Warsaw."**

photographers, Benton said.

A smaller companion show of classic Vishniac images is on view at Holocaust Museum Houston.

Vishniac's best-known images represent only about four years of a career that spanned nearly six decades of passionate picture-making. The exhibition illuminates his keen eye for formalism, diverse humanity and — this one comes out of left field — microscopic organisms. Vishniac, a lifelong scientist who died in 1990 at 92, was also a pioneer of photomicroscopy, taking photos using a microscope.

The show focuses primarily on his evocative black-and-white documen-

*Vishniac continues on G7*



David Levenson / Getty Images

# SALMAN RUSHDIE'S NOVEL TIME IN HOUSTON

By Kyrie O'Connor

Salman Rushdie, who will speak Monday in Houston to a sold-out house as part of Inprint's reading series, has a strange and bitter-sweet relationship with Houston.

On Sept. 10, 2001, the Booker Prize-winning novelist spoke at another Inprint event and planned to fly out in the morning, the official publication date of his novel "Fury." But when planes hit the World Trade Center and Pentagon, he couldn't leave Houston.

"The Inprint folks took care of me," Rushdie says now. The literary nonprofit found him a place to stay, the home of poet Edward Hirsch, who was stuck in Washington, D.C.

Rushdie fed Hirsch's dog and found solace at the Menil Collection and Rothko Chapel. "It was a strange beginning," he says, of his relationship with Houston.

Nearly 10 years later, Rushdie found himself in Houston, again at a poignant time. His dear friend, the writer and outspoken atheist

After memorable experiences here, author returns to discuss latest work in which city has cameo

Christopher Hitchens, was dying of esophageal cancer at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. "We had one last birthday while he was still well enough to leave the hospital," Rushdie says. "Now I have a large, Christopher Hitchens-size hole in my heart."

Rushdie's Monday-night visit should be less solemn.

He'll talk about his latest novel, "Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights" (think: 1,001 nights), a swirling, jam-packed, fantastical salmagundi. The phrase "laugh-out-loud funny" is overworked but entirely applicable here.

The book passes through many centuries, beginning with the love between a fictionalized version of the real medieval Andalusian phi-

losopher Ibn Rushd and a female jinni (genie) named Dunia, who has slipped through a slit between her world and this one. The romance lasts 1,001 nights and produces, miraculously, dozens of children.

Hundreds of years later — in our time — Dunia returns to gather up her descendants, none of whom have earlobes, to fight four evil jinn who also have entered our already-too-crazy world and created even more havoc than humans.

One swallows the Staten Island ferry.

Houston also makes a cameo: A curator at the Menil offers an insight into what's going on in a Magritte painting when real people start levitating.

Rushdie's family name derives from Ibn Rushd's, but the resemblance stops there.

"I have earlobes," he says. "It's not me. The idea of the earlobes was stolen from the Habsburg dynasty."

In its dense storytelling, reliance

*Rushdie continues on G6*



Salman Rushdie's newest novel is "Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights."

## ZEST



Ilana Panich-Linsman

**“No pressure,” Salman Rushdie says sarcastically of speaking before author Gabriel García Márquez’s family, including widow Mercedes Barcha and son Rodrigo García Barcha, center, at the opening of García Márquez’s archive at the University of Texas at Austin.**

# Rushdie theorizes writing taps into realm of dreams

*Rushdie from page G1*

on myth and fairy tale, and over-the-topness, “Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights” is a unique story. “I think the book does take risks,” he says. “I have taken it as far as it needs to go.”

Many people have told Rushdie the book would make a perfect high-end TV series (with ample CGI). “Hollywood tends not to stampede toward my work,” he says wryly, though he is up for the idea of TV and enjoyed writing the screenplay for his great novel “Midnight’s Children.”

The new novel is narrated from a millennium (or more

probably 1,001 years) in our future, and it’s not giving away too much to say that the future is not entirely happy.

“One of the great classic lessons of fairy tales is to be careful what you wish for,” Rushdie says. “More than one friend has said, ‘How can you stop there? You can’t stop there.’”

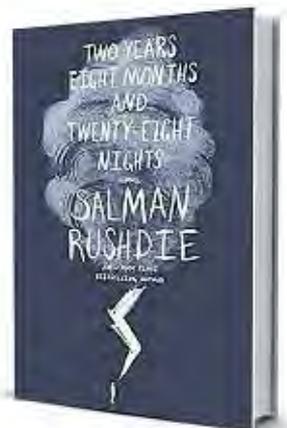
Dreaming plays a key role in the novel, and Rushdie says his own dreams, when he’s writing, tend to be exquisitely dull. “I’ll dream I’m getting coffee or going for a walk.”

That’s led him to a theory. “I think writing taps into, in our waking lives, the part of the brain that does the dreaming.”

This is Rushdie’s second trip to Texas in just a few weeks. Most recently, he traveled to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin to speak at the opening of the archive of Nobel Prize-winning Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez. “The front row was entirely filled with his family,” Rushdie says. “No pressure.”

But he looks forward to the talk Monday. “It’s always a little extra-touching to do an Inprint event. Wherever you were on 9/11, there is an odd, deep bond. In my case, it’s them.”

[kyrie.oconnor@chron.com](mailto:kyrie.oconnor@chron.com)



## ‘Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights’

By Salman Rushdie.  
Random House,  
304 pp., \$28.

THINK ABOUT IT

Read more about what concerns us in Gray Matters, found at [houstonchronicle.com/graymatters](http://houstonchronicle.com/graymatters).

# STAR LIVING

TELEVISION

FBI Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully are back in the reboot of 'The X-Files.'

Page E3

Houston Chronicle Life & Entertainment

Houston Chronicle | Friday, January 22, 2016 | [HoustonChronicle.com](http://HoustonChronicle.com) and [Chron.com](http://Chron.com)

@HoustonChron Section E \*\*\*

BOOKS

## Catching the 'light'



Gladys Ramirez / Houston Chronicle

By Kyrie O'Connor

**A**NTHONY Doerr had no idea he was writing a blockbuster when he began the novel "All the Light We Cannot See." In fact, he had serious doubts that anyone would want to read it.

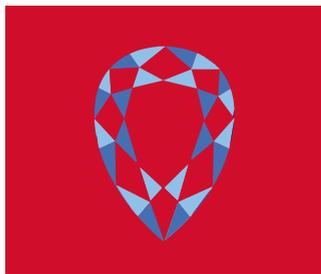
After all, he was inviting readers to entertain sympathetic feelings about Nazis.

"I was nervous and anxious to ask readers to do that," the author says.

Doerr needn't have worried. The novel, published in 2014, had an 82-week run on The New York Times best-seller list and recently shot back up to the top 10, presumably on the strength of December holiday sales.

Set in France and Germany during World War II, "All the Light We Cannot See" also won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and was named one of the Times' 10 best books of 2014.

Pulitzer-winning novelist Anthony Doerr tapped into greater humanity for World War II tale



Not bad for Nazis. "A mass murderer who is also quite sweet," is the way Doerr describes one of the characters.

Still, on Monday evening's sold-out event at the Wortham Theater Center, where Doerr will appear as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, the author will read from one of his award-winning short stories instead. He's not too keen on reading from the middle of the book.

On the day Doerr began

**"Fundamentalism is about making assumptions about a group of people. Literature is an antidote to that."**

Anthony Doerr, author

writing "All the Light We Cannot See" in 2004, he was riding on a train from Princeton, N.J., to Manhattan.

A man in front of him was yakking on his cellphone. The train dipped underground, and the man's call dropped.

"He became absurdly angry, and he was swearing," the author says. "What we're all forgetting is that using these devices is a miracle."

That sort of miracle figures prominently in the

novel in the form of radio. The title refers to radio waves — electromagnetic radiation with wavelengths longer than infrared light.

"It was invisible light from a thousand miles away," Doerr explains. "For so many generations we could not do that."

In the delicate but sturdy novel, short chapters alternate between two perspectives. One belongs to Marie-Laure, a blind girl who flees Paris with her father, a master locksmith at the natural history museum. They go to live with a reclusive great-uncle in a tall house in Saint-Malo, a walled seaside town in Normandy.

The other is Werner, a white-haired German orphan from a coal town whose natural talent for fixing radios garners him an appointment to an exclusive German army training school.

Doerr, 42, knew a few things when he set out to write the novel, which took

**Doerr continues on E4**

# Doerr turned classic fairy-tale notions on their heads for 'Light'

*Doerr from page E1*

10 years to complete: It would include a blind girl, a boy who was trapped somehow, and the boy would listen to the girl on the radio.

Doerr also has published a memoir, two story collections — “The Shell Collector” (2002) and “Memory Wall” (2010) — and the 2004 novel “About Grace.”

Most of his work is set in the present, but for “All the Light We Cannot See,” he had to invest in research and, of course, trips to France. That one was tricky, he says, having to explain to his wife back in Idaho that

she should stay home with their two young boys while he went off to France to work on a novel.

The careful clockwork of the book’s structure mimics elements of the plot, such as the tiny wooden scale model of Saint-Malo that Marie-Laure’s father builds for her to memorize so that she can move about the city on her own.

Doerr says he consciously played with classic fairy-tale notions as well, but turned them on their heads. There’s a magic stone — but is it magic after all? The covetous Nazi is a kind of ogre. Marie-Laure is the princess in the castle — but is

## Anthony Doerr appearances

Houston Public Media and Inprint will live-stream the sold-out Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series program featuring Anthony Doerr, 7:30 p.m. Monday at [houstonpublicmedia.org/inprint](http://houstonpublicmedia.org/inprint) and [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org). Earlier, Inprint also is hosting a free craft talk with Doerr, 1-2 p.m., University of Houston Honors College Commons, 2nd floor of M.D. Anderson Memorial Library, University of Houston, 4800 Calhoun.

she? And how princelike is Werner?

“The language of fairy tale and fable is blended into a hypertechnical realism, mashed together

with the history of electromagnetic radiation,” Doerr says.

Ultimately, he adds, it’s a humanist story, one that asks readers to care



“Fundamentalism is about making assumptions about a group of people,” the author says. “Literature is an antidote to that. You invest so deeply in another human, who laughs and cries for the same reason you do.”

Doerr won’t say what he’s working on now. It might change, after all.

“I think it’s a novel,” he offers. “It’s a lot of words, and it involves Turkey.”

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deeply for other humans about whom they might ordinarily make automatic judgments.

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**O'NEILL AT UNDERMAIN**

**DALLAS** — Undermain Theatre presents Eugene O'Neill's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, directed by Katherine Owens, Feb. 10 – March 6. [undermain.org](http://undermain.org)

Joanna Schellenberg and Bruce DuBose in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Photo by Katherine Owens.

**TRACY K. SMITH AT INPRINT**

**HOUSTON** — Tracy K. Smith reads from her memoir, *Ordinary Light*, as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, presented in association with Rice University Multicultural Community Relations in the Office of Public Affairs, Feb. 29 at Stude Concert Hall Rice University. [inprintheouston.org](http://inprintheouston.org)

Tracy K. Smith. Photo courtesy of the artist.



**ORCHESTRA OF NEW SPAIN**

**DALLAS** — Orchestra of New Spain presents José de Nebra's Spanish Baroque masterwork *Iphigenia en Tracia*, featuring Mexican sopranos Carla Lopez Speziale and Eugenia Ramirez, Dallas's own Anna Fredericka Popova as Iphigenia, and Spanish dancer and choreographer Jaime Puente, Feb. 13-14 at Dallas City Performance Hall. [orchestraofnewspain.org](http://orchestraofnewspain.org)

Carla Lopez Speziale. Photo courtesy of the artist.



**DANIEL KOREN AT THE MATCH**

**HOUSTON** — Lott Entertainment Presents brings in *Daniel Koren: The Most Important Thing*, Feb. 18-20 at the MATCH. [lottentertainmentpresents.com](http://lottentertainmentpresents.com)

Daniel Koren. Photo courtesy of the artist.



**HOUSTON SYMPHONY AT HBU**

**HOUSTON** — Houston Symphony presents *A Black History Month Celebration* with Reginald Smith Jr, guest conductor Kirk Smith and members of the CityWide Grassroots Chorus plus Prairie View A&M, Texas Southern University and Houston Baptist University choruses, Feb. 20 at HBU's Morris Cultural Arts Center. [houstonSymphony.org](http://houstonSymphony.org)

Kirk Smith. Photo courtesy of Houston Symphony.

**RUDE MECHS**

**AUSTIN** — Rude Mechs present *Fixing Timon of Athens*, written by Kirk Lynn and directed by Madge Darlington, Feb. 4-27 at The Off Center. [rudemechs.com](http://rudemechs.com)

Tom Green as Timon of Athens. Photo by Bret Brookshire.



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Fri, Mar. 4, 8:00pm

TICKETS

# ORDINARY LIGHT BY PULITZER PRIZE WINNER TRACY K. SMITH LOOKS AT THE EXTRAORDINARY OF THE EVERYDAY

AA BY HOLLY BERETTO

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2016 | 9 DAYS AGO

f 26 t 0 + 0



Tracy K. Smith will read from and discuss her memoir, *Ordinary Light*, as part of the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

Photo courtesy of Inprint Houston

"Memory is a flawed lens," says Tracy K. Smith, author of the widely acclaimed *Ordinary Light*, heralded as one of the most anticipated books of 2015 by Time Out New York. "And it was exciting to be an investigator of my own life."

Smith's memoir is her fourth book, and her first of prose. Her three others have been poetry collections; she's won multiple awards in the genre, including the 2012 Pulitzer Prize, the James Laughlin Award from the Academy of American Poets and an *Essence* Literary Award. The Princeton professor of creative writing will discuss the book and her experiences as part of the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

For Smith, probing her life meant coming to terms with the times she felt something was just slightly amiss. As a child,

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6 days ago

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she was aware that she was somehow different, although it wasn't something she could pin down.

"These were things I had a sense of, but never a name for," she says about her childhood. "So the ideas of race and religion went unspoken. And they were definitely things that you couldn't quite express to a non-black person. Teasing out those thoughts, and realizing the kinds of things my parents must've gone through, was interesting."

For Smith, telling the stories of her family meant looking deeper at her own experiences. She was surprised when she would mention an event to her brothers and sisters, only to discover that they recalled it in a completely different manner.

"My siblings and I are close," she says. "So, they trusted my truth and the way I would relate it. This was a way to affirm our family."

*Ordinary Light* looks deeply at the dual shadows racism and religion cast over Smith's growing up in the 1970s. Her mother's family had roots in the Jim Crow South, and in her book, she examines her mother's death and life.

"There's so much [about race] that we haven't figured out yet how to say," she says. "But there is a grief to it, this idea of what happened to people who look like me."

She'll explore those themes at her reading, presented in association with Rice University's Multicultural Community Relations and the Boniuk Institute for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance. It is part of the celebration of 50 years of black undergraduate life at Rice University. Smith says she plans to acknowledge that milestone and says she recognizes that race is a central theme on campuses across the country now.

"I think that we have to think about how students can feel validated, and we can draw all their potential out," she says. "And these are good things to think about and talk about in public."

"I teach my students that in writing, you have to be risky, you have to be willing to fail," she says. "It was exciting for me to come in touch with all of these memories, to think about why they felt the way they did at the time, and compare them to my knowledge as an adult."

*Tracy K. Smith's reading and discussion of Ordinary Light is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. February 29 at Rice University's Stude Concert Hall, 6100 Main. For information, call 713-521-2026 or visit [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org); \$5.*

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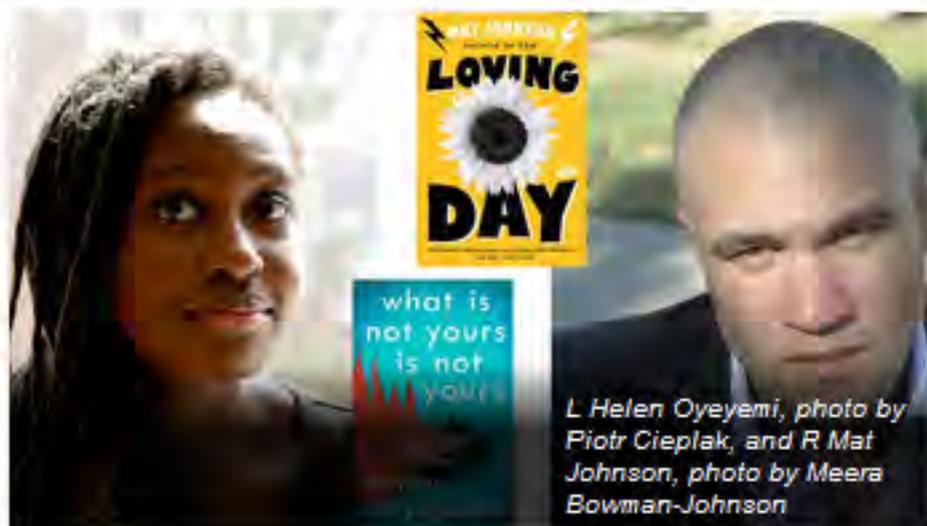
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L Helen Oyeyemi, photo by Piotr Cieplak, and R Mat Johnson, photo by Meera Bowman-Johnson

By *Susie Tommaney*

It's a double-header at this month's **Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series**, with writer/graphic novelist Mat Johnson (our pick for **Best Author last year** for his hilarious take on contemporary race relations) and Helen Oyeyemi, a British novelist debuting her first collection of intertwining short stories (literary magazine/publisher *Granta* named her one of 2013's best young British novelists). "The links between the stories and the reappearing characters emerged quite naturally, partly as a reflection of the way that a single key can have a number of keepers with equal claims upon it," says Oyeyemi. An avid collector, she's working on "resisting all teapot shopping impulses" as the trip from Prague to Lexington via London was perilous enough for the five pieces she brought with her (she's currently a writer in residence at the University of Kentucky). Johnson will read from his book *Loving Day*, and Oyeyemi will read from *what is not yours is not yours*. 7:30 p.m. Monday. Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas. For information, call 713-521-2026 or visit [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org). \$5.

**PROMOTIONAL EVENT DESCRIPTION**

*Mat Johnson & Helen Oyeyemi Reading this Monday*

The 2015/2016 Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series continues with prize-winning fiction writers Mat Johnson and Helen Oyeyemi, reading from their latest books *Loving Day* and *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours*, followed by an on-stage interview, book sale and signing. **Inprint Mat Johnson & Helen Oyeyemi Reading on Monday, March 28, 7:30 pm at Wortham Center, 501 Texas Avenue** Tickets: \$5 [www.inprinthouston.org](http://www.inprinthouston.org)

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**Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series**

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**Time:** 7:30 p.m. March 28

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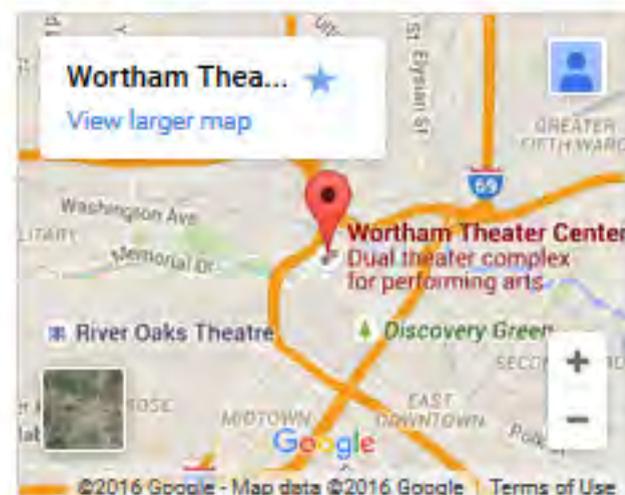
**LOCATION INFO:**

**Wortham Theater Center ▶**

500 Texas  
Houston, TX 77002  
713-237-1439

[Downtown/ Midtown](#)

<http://www.worthamcenter.org>



**DIRECTIONS** ▶

# GENRE BENDER

## MAT JOHNSON ON FATHERHOOD, IDENTITY & BELONGING

**M**at Johnson crosses fearlessly between distinctions, clarifying them with every zig and making them more meaningless with every zag. University of Houston professor, fiction writer, graphic novelist, blogger and prolific tweeter, much of Johnson's literary energy tracks through his own mixed identity. The writer, of Irish and African descent, locates his narratives in and around an American fixation: race.

Johnson's work has garnered major attention, including the *New York Times* and NPR. His fourth and most recent novel, *Loving Day*, follows Warren Duffy, a recently divorced, flailing comic book artist, who returns from England to a deteriorating home in Philadelphia to settle his dead father's estate. At a comic convention, Tal, a teenage girl, introduces herself to Warren, as his daughter. The artist and his daughter begin to forge a life together, navigating their connection to each other and the world, through the exploration of their identities. Johnson is currently adapting, *Loving Day*, into half-hour "dramedy" for Showtime.

Johnson will read with Helen Oyemi at the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series on March 28 at Wortham Center's Cullen Theater. Nicole Zaza visited with Johnson about how lives, identities, and communities get written.

### ***Loving Day* has some connections to your own story, right?**

Yes, a lot of the pieces. Nothing in the story actually happened, but what I like to do is rip up my life into tiny little pieces and then rearrange it like a collage. What I finish with is never anything that actually happened, but you hope that the emotional truths actually work—that emotionally you're hitting something real. That is why I write fiction and not non-fiction. To me, the story gets closer to the truth sometimes than the facts.

### **Everybody's focused on racial identity as being most important theme in the novel. It seems to me that there are many questions about fatherhood.**

To me, that's really what the story's about. The racial aspect is the setting more than anything. It's a context, but the heart of the story is the father/daughter relationship. The racial thing, how much can you talk about it? It's there. It is what it is. At some level, that's it.

... I really wanted to write about being a father. ...I started it before I had a teenage daughter, and by the time I finished I actually had one. That was helpful in the last years of editing. A lot of times my editor was like, "This is a cliché about father/daughter relationships." He was right, but at the same time, there are so many clichés that end up being true. It was tricky how to get around those and get to other places.

### **Is there the question of what kind of world do I want my children to live in? Or about how the world perceives them?**

More, it was questions to me about mixed race identity, what black/white mixed race identity is in America. When I grew up, if you had a black parent, you were black...That idea goes back as far as the 17th century. The reasons behind it were literal... because a majority of the time, even if you had a white parent, you didn't grow up with that white parent .... You might have grown

up around that white parent, perhaps as your slave master, but you weren't considered a part of the family.

That changed slowly, but it really started changing dramatically in the 90s. I grew up in the last era before that. When I was a kid, I didn't hear that word biracial at all. Nobody used it.

There's been a shift. I was interested in what that [shift] meant, not just on an individual level, but as a community. There has been a lot of writing about black biracial experience, what I call mulatto experience. Mostly, it's an individual experience...There has never been anything written about mixed, biracial, group experience. ...With my kids, I look at what I think of as a mulatto experience. It's not a race. It's just an experience. Genetically, the entire African American community is mixed. What we're really talking about is an individual experience within an ethnicity. With them, and by their standards and the world's standards, both their parents are black. That's their experience. If they were to decide to choose to identify as mixed or whatever, it's up to them, but for the most part, they just had a type of black experience.

### **The novel seemed to be interested in the idea of being rescued...**

I think that's part of connecting, too. That's why we need friends. That's why we need lovers. That's why we need children. There's always some level of 'take me away from the type of lifestyle I'm living.' I think with parents too: I rescue my kids and my kids rescue me...

I think that's true of most of the people in the book, and in particular with the father and the daughter. The daughter is at a point in her life where she has to figure out who she is anyway. Her life is crumbling. The same thing with the main character: we start a point where his life has completely collapsed. He doesn't really have a persona. He hasn't succeeded in anything in his life.

They're in a position to help each other, and I think that's ultimately what they're doing. His ideas about what he needs to be rescued, and what he actually needs to be rescued are probably two different things.

I think all that is connected to community, too. We look for a community where we can belong and where we can feel like, if somebody shakes the world, we won't fall off.

### **Do you think the novel is asking any questions particularly to the readers?**

Sure...When you're writing a novel, it's a dream. You're telling your dream, right? It's just this vivid dream and there's a story there...

To me, the overall thing was capturing this feeling, this feeling around identity and not just in the sense of race, but in the sense of self identity, period. Invariably, that just brings up tons of questions.

I went around with it a bit. I don't like doing readings; I don't like being in public, honestly. It's interesting how people react. Invariably, people have

(Continued on page 61)

**MAT JOHNSON**

AUTHOR OF PYM

**LOWING**



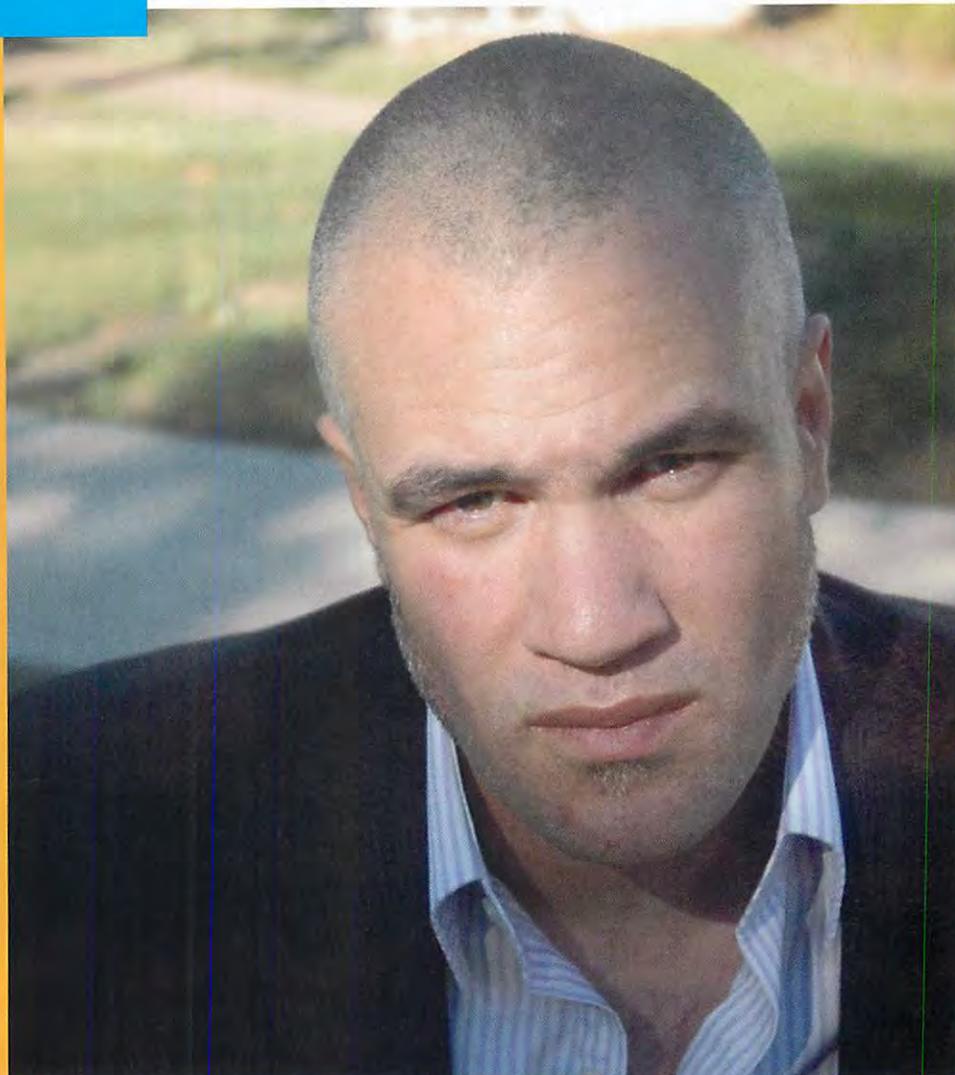
A  
NOVEL

**DAY**

“Mat Johnson’s satirical vision roves as freely as Kurt Vonnegut’s.”

THE NEW YORK TIMES

**"I think that's part of connecting, too. That's why we need friends. That's why we need lovers. That's why we need children. There's always some level of 'take me away from the type of lifestyle I'm living.' I think with parents too: I rescue my kids and my kids rescue me..."**



their own questions and reactions. Sometimes I can foresee them and they're similar; and then other times they have interesting, valid reactions that I've never imagined.

#### How do they react?

It's been interesting. I get white readers who are very self-conscious about their own ideas about race, and they come and basically vomit up all their guilt on my blazer. This time I got people who thought about their own fathers and the relationships to their kids; that was a really big one. Then I got people who were violently upset about how I was defining race, or how the characters are defining race.

Race obviously is a perspective, not anything biological. In part, it depends on how we as a group choose to define it. When you question the way people are choosing to define it, they get very upset because they need everybody to agree with them in order for their version of reality to exist. For some people, the novel challenged the way that they look at the world, or challenged the way that they classify race. They would get upset...

One of the armors that I've made for myself when people get upset about something I wrote is that it must be threatening, because if it wasn't threatening they would just shrug it off. ....

**One of the things I really admire is that you cross into different spaces. You seem fearless about doing that.**

Dennis Leary has this comedy album, *Lock n' Load*. He talks about his father being a smoker, but unlike a lot of smokers, he didn't have a brand. He just didn't care. He'd smoke any cigarettes. He would just pull a branch off a tree and start smoking it. He didn't give a shit. That's how I am. I care about story, and I get excited about story. I really don't care about the genre. The similarities between the different genres are so slight that I feel like a lot of people make a real big fuss over what genre they're writing, in part, because they're just scared they're going to fuck up, not because it's actually that different.

With all this stuff, I'm just going with it. Whether it's writing comics, which was really cool and fun, or writing scripts, or doing genre-bending stuff like having ghosts in *Loving Day* and monsters in *Pym*, I'm just trying to get to the story and I'm not scared of failing, because you fail as soon as you start. There's nothing that's going to be perfect, and there are always people telling you that you suck. It frees you up to just do whatever the hell you want.

—NICOLE ZAZA

*Nicole Zaza is a Houston writer and teacher.*

ZEST

BOOK EVENTS

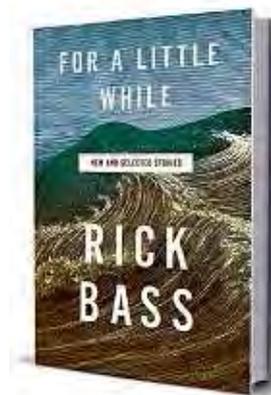
MONDAY

**Jacqueline Winspear:** Author will discuss and sign "Journey to Munich," 6:30 p.m., Murder By The Book, 2342 Bissonnet; 713-524-8597, or toll free 888-424-2842 or murderbooks.com.

**Helen Oyeyemi & Mat Johnson:** Authors will discuss and read from "What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours" and "Loving Day," respectively, as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m., Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas. \$5 general admission. Information: inprintheuston.org.

TUESDAY

**Kristin Rae:** Author signs "What You Always Wanted," 7 p.m., Barnes & Noble, 1201 Lake Woodlands Drive, The Woodlands; 281-465-8744.



**Rick Bass:** Author will discuss and sign "For a Little While," 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet; 713-523-0701 or brazosbookstore.com.

WEDNESDAY

**Charles Neu:** Author will discuss and sign "Colonel House," 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

FRIDAY

**Philip Kerr:** Author will discuss and sign "The Other Side of Silence," 6:30 p.m., Murder By The Book.

**Michael Sofranko:** Poet will discuss his work as part of the First Friday Reading Series, 8:30 p.m., Inprint House, 1520 W. Main; for more details, email houstonfirstfri@aol.com or HPFest@aol.com.

SATURDAY

**Teen Book Con:** With keynote speaker Ruta Sepetys, plus authors including Michael Buckley, Monica Hesse, Katherine Howe, Ray Villareal, Jeff Zentner, Amy Zhang and more, 9-5 p.m., Alief Taylor High, 7555 Howell Sugar Land Road (in Houston). Information: teenbookcon.org.

**Dee Leone:** For story time, author will read her new children's book, "Bizz and Buzz Make Honey Buns," 10:30 a.m., Brazos Bookstore.

**Alice Schiel:** Author signs "Nora Mae, a Remarkable, Insignificant Person," 4 p.m., Barnes & Noble, The Woodlands.

**Amanda Stevens:** Author will discuss and sign "The Visitor," 4:30 p.m., Murder By The Book.

**Kermit Roosevelt:** Author will discuss and sign "Allegiance," 5:30 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

Maggie Galehouse

REVIEW

# Unlocking nine stories

By Maggie Galehouse

In Helen Oyeyemi's weird and wonderful new story collection, "What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours," each of the nine linked stories involves keys — objects with the power to lock and unlock, exclude and include, imprison and release.

"A key ring gets left in your care and you reject all responsibility for it yet can't bring yourself to throw it away," one of her characters observes. "Nor can you give the thing away — to whom can someone of good conscience give such an object as a key? Always up to something, stitching paths and gateways together even as it sits quite still, its powers of interference can only be guessed at."

Oyeyemi says she started thinking about keys while writing her 2011 novel, "Mr. Fox," an imaginative reworking of the Bluebeard myth, in which an innocent young wife with a murderous husband is betrayed by a blood-stained key.

Similarly, her 2014 novel, "Boy, Snow, Bird," reinvented the Snow White fairy tale, and a different object — the mirror and its reflective powers — became integral to that story.

"I get angry at objects," says Oyeyemi, chuckling in her soft British accent. "They live with us and offer no assistance. Because I have this latent belief that we can communicate with everything around us, I wonder why does everything stay silent? Maybe these objects think humans just wouldn't understand."

At 31, Oyeyemi already has published five novels and, now, one collection of stories. She won a 2010 Somerset Maugham Award for her third book, "White Is for Witching," and the 2012 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for "Mr. Fox." In 2013, Oyeyemi was named one of Granta's "Best Young British Novelists."

Brief biographies describe her as a British-born Nigerian who makes her home in Prague, but she sloughs off these points of reference.

"I'm British, but what does that matter?" asks Oyeyemi, who's currently living in America, a writer-in-residence at the University of Kentucky. "I don't think it adds to understanding me. I don't think nationality works that way anymore. I don't know how to describe myself. Lots of times, I'm not even sure I'm human. That's why I like fiction so much."

She pauses. "I'm a reader. And a tea drinker."

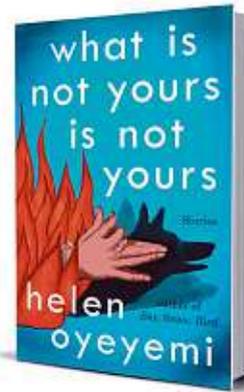
Such reluctance to submit to a pre-fabricated version of her own life is in keeping with Oyeyemi's casual omniverousness as a writer.

"What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours" may send readers on

a Googling tear, searching for Catalonian festivals, the psychology of teenagers obsessed with celebrity musicians and the liminal world of puppetry. Her lovers are gay, straight, happy, sad, suspicious. And the international cast also operates on a sliding scale of animation: people, puppets, ghosts, characters suspended in an experimental alternate reality, even a swamp of undead townies haunts these pages.

As a reader, it's best to approach Oyeyemi's work with an open, elastic mind. Anything is possible. A puppet named Gpetta narrates a chunk of "is your blood as red as this?," a thorny love story about hurting and healing. And in the collection's final tale, titled "if a book is locked there's probably a good reason for that don't you think?," a diary unfolds to "fill or absorb the air around it so that the air turns this way and that, like pages."

The life force is everywhere in



**'What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours: Stories'**

By Helen Oyeyemi.  
Riverhead, 325 pp., \$27.

**Author appearance**

Helen Oyeyemi and Mat Johnson will appear 7:30 p.m. Monday at Wortham Center, 501 Texas, as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. General admission tickets: \$5. Information: inprintheuston.org.

*"I don't know how to describe myself. Lots of times I'm not even sure I'm human."*

*That's why I like fiction so much. I'm a reader. And a tea drinker."*

Helen Oyeyemi



Piotr Cieplak

Oyeyemi's work.

Her penchant for crimping fables and fairy tales to her own design is evident in "What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours" in subtle and obvious ways. Hanging about each story is an out-of-timeness; although most are set in near present-day, the stories take place in worlds where magic is palpable, where communication with objects and beings beyond mortality feels possible, even probable.

Though the author says she's not completely sure why she's so drawn to fairy tales, she allows that it's "possibly the element of time travel. The minute you say 'Once upon a time,' you're joining other stories and storytellers stretching back and going forwards. It makes you feel like you're part of some continuum. Also, you get to establish your own vision on that continuum."

Oyeyemi, who graduated from Cambridge University in 2006, sets the most rollicking tale of the new collection at her alma mater, pitting a 19th-century male club, the Bettencourt Society, against a newer women's club, The Homely Wench Society, which developed in response to a sexist Bettencourt tradition.

The "homely wench" own the label, endow it with pride, and Oyeyemi beautifully weaves institutionalized feminism and horny undergraduate shenanigans when the wench breaks into Bettencourt headquarters and replace the club's "stimulating-looking books, less than 10 percent of which were authored by women," with a cache of books by women, including Edith Wharton, Elaine Dundy, Maggie Nelson and Lisa Tuttle. Protagonist Dayang Sharif, who appears as a minor character in an earlier story, softens to a would-be beau when she catches him reading Ntozake Shange's 1970s feminist anthem, the choreopoem "for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf."

This is enough to melt the heart of any feminist-lit major of the 1970s or '80s.

One unassailable truth that emerges from Oyeyemi's collection: Books are living objects, the keys to limitless worlds. In the first story, "books and roses," one key unlocks a family secret and a love story that blooms in a library and a garden. "A library at night is full of sounds," one character observes, in a letter to her daughter. "The unread books can't stand it any longer and announce their contents, some boasting, some shy, some devious."

That's an apt description of the stories in Oyeyemi's new collection as well.

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ON THE ROAD AGAIN

# Best-selling author Mary Karr admits to committing a certain literary sin more than once

By [Tarra Gaines](#) 9.16.15 | 9:30 am [1 Comment](#)

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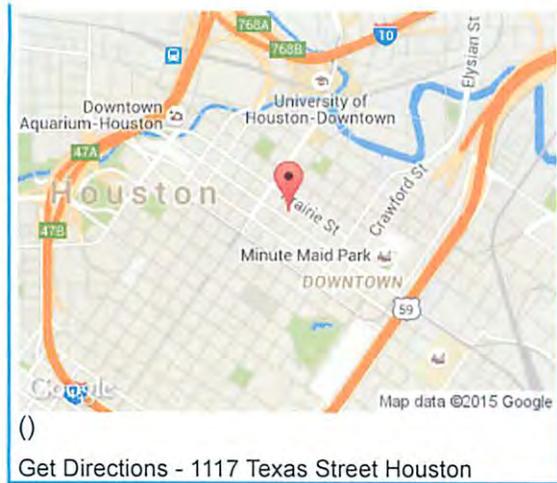
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Mary Karr comes home to Texas to talk about *The Art of Memoir*. Photo by Deborah Feingold



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Having interviewed more than a few authors, I can admit with some experience that it's not often one asks me a question about her own book. But then Mary Karr(<http://inprinthouston.org/event/mary-karr-and-the-art-of-memoir/>), acclaimed writer of three bestselling memoirs including *The Liars' Club*(<http://www.marykarr.com/books.php>), is a rare author, indeed.

Many critics credit Karr's memoirs and especially *The Liars' Club* with bringing about a resurgence and new respect for the genre. So she doesn't seem like the type who would be concerned about sharing an integral part of her life with her readers. Yet, this was the worry she voiced when I had the chance to talk to her by phone before she set out on the Texas leg of her book tour. Had she revealed too much of her own writing process in her latest book, *The Art of Memoir*?

### The Sin of Memoir

*The Art of Memoir* is not a memoir. At first glance it seems like a how-to book, but Karr resists this category and readers probably will too once they begin to explore the short but rich chapters all dedicated to honoring both the form and her favorite memoirists from Nabokov to Maxine Hong Kingston to Harry Crews(<http://www.brazosbooksstore.com/How-to-successfully-tackle-one-of-life-s-biggest-challenges/alerts/2536>)

/book/9780820317595). Karr also throws in some of her personal rules for memoir and, yes, her observations and insights into her own writing process.

“I knew two things,” she said when describing how the book began. “I knew I would have the lessons I learned from writing three of these, for committing the sin of memoir three times. But I also knew that that wasn’t the focus of the book. It wasn’t a memoir about my writing memoir, even though to some extent that’s all I have.”

She wondered what I thought about those sections where she reveals her struggles at digging through her own past and putting those excavations to page. Others had advised her not to use herself as an 15example. When I told her I thought her writing life was a vital element in *The Art of Memoir*, she said her writing story is also what many readers want to know.

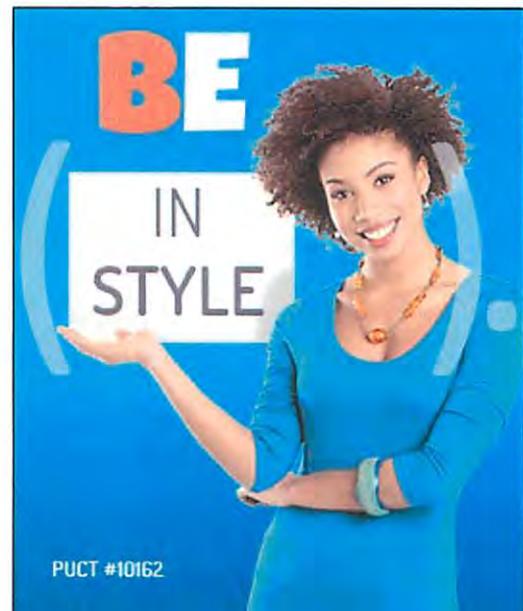
“When I travel, I’m also asked in great detail about these reversals I’ve had in writing,” she said, even though revealing these reversals in a book about memoir as a literary form makes her sometimes feel like a “used car salesman.”

“In a way I felt vaguely embarrassed writing about it, but it’s also stuff that I’m always asked. To not write down the answers seems almost disrespectful to my readership.”

### A Life Examined

Karr’s Houston fans completely sold out her first Texas stop, a talk at Christ Church Cathedral(<http://www.christchurchcathedral.org/event/mary-karr-and-the-art-of-memoir/>) on September 17. I asked Karr if she thought those over 500 audience members would be seeking her advice to go home and begin their own memoirs, or if they were

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fans supporting her latest book.

She was quick to correct with a joke. Those readers could easily be her “assassins“ she said dryly, adding “I have no idea. I’m as clueless as you are.” As a poet for a “long time,” she’s always just grateful when anyone shows up.

When I asked her if she thinks every life is a life worthy of its own memoir, that poet shines through her answer.

“I always say that the most privileged person in every room suffers the torments of the damned just going about being a human being. Every life has great nobility and suffering and tragedy. Everybody gets sick and people they love die. It’s not all that, but we all suffer.”

15-

Yet she explains both in our talk and in the book that it’s not the most dramatic life that necessarily makes for great memoir but the sifting through the past, understanding and then putting words to page.

“It’s not the events, it’s how they’re written.”

### Truth vs. Drama

*The Art of Memoir* explores many types of memoirs and a very diverse group of masterful memoirists. Along the way, she “peppers” the book with advice for budding and experienced writers. What she doesn’t have patience for are memoirists who write fiction labeled as their life, for those who make up elements of their life story in order for that life to read as more dramatic or tragic. For Karr, those writers should just go ahead and write a novel, as they’ll probably be more “respected” for it.

“I think making stuff up often denies them that deeper truth,” she said. “It’s not just that the reader loses out. They lose out.” **promo ALERT** How to successfully tackle one of life's biggest challenges(/alerts/2536)

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Reading the book and talking to Karr, I soon got the impression that the writer of *The Liars' Club* had no time for liars who sell those lies as the truth to an audience.

"As a child I was lied to often and with conviction, starting with the line 'I'm not drunk' which is always a lie," she explained, going on to add that the greatest memoirists have a "desperate" need to find the truth. "Most people who really succeed at this are driven to know what actually happened."

Though east Texas plays a prominent role in her own childhood truths in *The Liars' Club*, Karr is a New Yorker now, but says coming back to Texas is coming home too.

15- "I left home so long ago. I've been away for a long time. I have people there I love. I love the people and I love the language. I love all of it. I do feel at home even though I'm obviously a New Yorker. I can't bullshit myself or anybody else."

## WHERE TO EAT

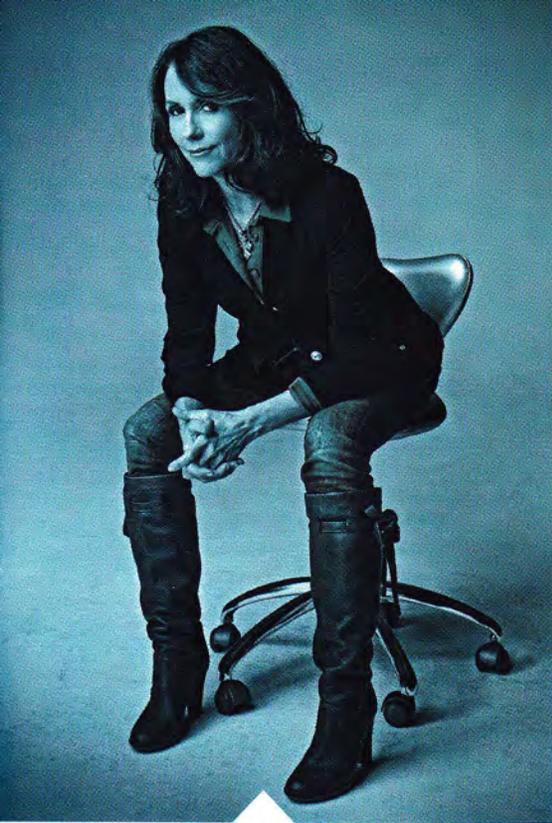
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# Mary Karr

**THIS MAY BE THE GOLDEN AGE** of the comedian-penned memoir, with standouts like Tina Fey, Aziz Ansari, Amy Poehler and Lena Dunham all having written best-sellers filled with self-effacing stories set in the world of stand-up or sketch comedy. But there are other golden memoirs out there, some dealing with harsh realities, devastating losses, and themes of abuse, addiction and broken hearts. Mary Karr, for instance, who rose to literary fame with her 1995 memoir *The Liars' Club*. In conjunction with the release of her fourth non-fiction book, *The Art of Memoir*, the writer will return to her southeast Texas roots for a special reading of pieces from her new book, an ode to the genre. "We're in for a treat," says Rich Levy, executive director of Inprint, which is holding the event at Christ Church Cathedral. "Reading memoirs gave Karr the voice of an author speaking directly to her and guiding her through his or her own survival." Attendees can expect to hear the author's universal takes on addiction, love, love-loss, self-discovery and redemption, as well as the nature of memoir and what it's like to grow up in a small Texas town.

Sep. 17. [inprintheouston.org](http://inprintheouston.org)

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