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## KNOW & TELL

# THE LITERARY RENAISSANCE OF TRANS WOMEN WRITERS

by [Katherine Cross \(/profile/quinnae\)](#) | Vivian Shih

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*"By morning a family  
of baffled new bodies  
caress one another in the sun  
& each by each,  
we teach ourselves to dream."*

**—Rachel K. Zall, "A Body Wakes Beneath a Sheet of Lightning"**

For transgender women, the tides of each day bring triumph one morning and tragedy the next. Today's legal victory or affirming media portrayal is chased by tomorrow's murder or incarceration. But this duality is rarely captured in its full, panoramic spread by a media too interested in pat stories about trans women. For so long, the people who wrote about us were not us. Finally, that is beginning to change.

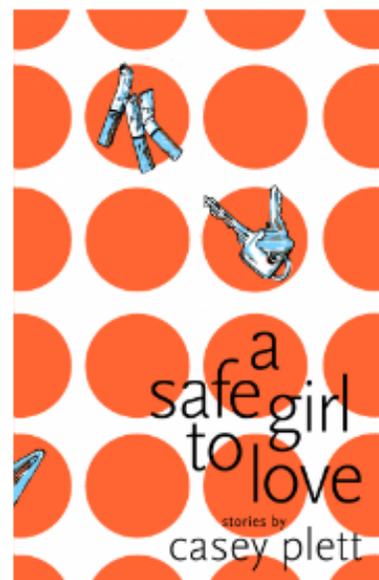
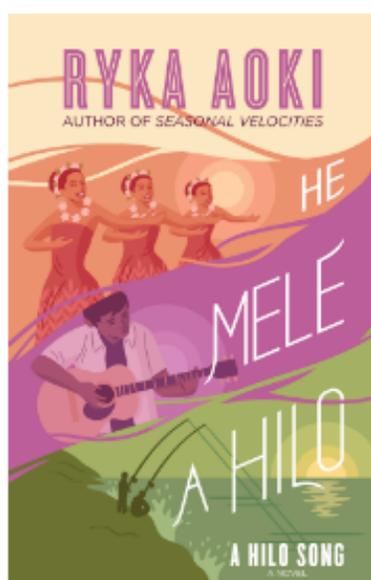
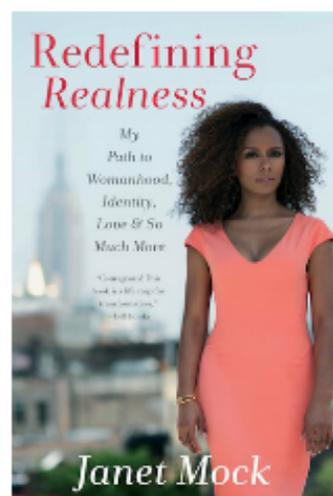
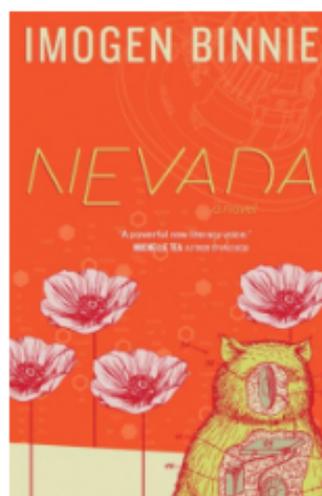
One of the most hopeful currents amid the contradictions is a recent renaissance of trans women's literature granting voice to both a new generation and new perspectives. Two publishing houses at the forefront

are [Biyuti Publishing \(https://publishbiyuti.org/\)](https://publishbiyuti.org/), which specializes in the writing of trans women of color (most recently, poet [Morgan Robyn Collado's searing collection \*Make Love to Rage\*](#) ([https://publishbiyuti.org/blog/2014/07/\\_make-love-to-rage\\_-by-morgan-robyn-collado-is-now-available-for-purchase/](https://publishbiyuti.org/blog/2014/07/_make-love-to-rage_-by-morgan-robyn-collado-is-now-available-for-purchase/))) and [Topside Press \(http://topsidepress.com/\)](http://topsidepress.com/), which published [Imogen Binnie's novel \*Nevada\*](#) (<http://topsidepress.com/titles/nevada-2/>) and the [short-fiction anthology \*The Collection\*](#) (<http://topsidepress.com/titles/the-collection/>), as well as a whole passel of novels that have debuted this past year.

Trans women writing literature is certainly nothing new. Rachel Pollack was writing well-received feminist sci-fi before I was born, and a cottage industry of trans women's memoirs has stocked shelves for decades now. Yet for their many literary merits, older memoirs, like Jan Morris's *Conundrum* or Jennifer Finney Boylan's *She's Not There*, were negotiations with the demands of a cisgender public's lurid taste for intimate details of transition. Although such memoirs were landmarks that have done much good in the world, their template became the only kind of story trans women were allowed to tell: a transition story with its intimacies packaged into anecdotes shorn of politics and designed to answer puerile questions about our bodies.

It became hard for trans women in particular—often fetishized and metaphorically dismembered in a media that lingers over depictions of breasts, necks, legs, and genitals—to mine our experiences to tell stories that weren't about transition, or, for that matter, stories that went above and beyond being trans at all.

But that has changed rather dramatically. The current renaissance—and it is very much a rebirth—draws on a different, more insurgent tradition of unapologetic writing. From zines to poetry to literary groups to new publishers to video games to a cavalcade of published short stories and novels, trans women are speaking in a soaring, beautifully dissonant literary chorus as never before.



Casey Plett's collection of short stories, *A Safe Girl to Love* (<http://topsidepress.com/titles/a-safe-girl-to-love/>), debuted from Topside Press this past June. Some of these stories evolved from her old column on McSweeney's Internet Tendency, "[Balls Out: A Column on Being Transgendered](http://www.mcsweeneys.net/columns/balls-out-a-column-on-being-transgendered)," (<http://www.mcsweeneys.net/columns/balls-out-a-column-on-being-transgendered>) which established a style that both refused submission and spoke with a humble vulnerability. As with many of the new crop of trans women writers, Plett's vulnerabilities take the shape of close-to-the-bone writing that evokes the tragicomic interiority of trans womanhood—the unpleasant spaces in our own minds where insecurities are driven nail-like into our thoughts by patriarchy.

Her story "How to Stay Friends," which appears in *Safe Girl*, is written as

advice to trans women trying to maintain a sense of dignity and normality when remaining friends with a cisgender ex whom they'd dated pre-transition. It's a stark showcase of Plett's skill in painting suppressed pain with words:

Take a sip of your wine. She will smile, then frown, and say, "We've gotta teach you about lipstick though.... I know you've said before you don't want to look like a drag queen, but it really is the look you're giving off right now." Nod and say, "You're right, it's totally fine, thank you for telling me and being honest." Mean it a little, hate yourself a little, die a little.

If she uses the teaching-a-16-year-old voice again, if she snorts and says, "Sure you want to do this?" If she bitterly says, "Welcome to being a woman!" If she says, "Hon, I know exactly what you're going through," swallow and shutter windows in your heart.

The story is typical of what much narrative fiction in this budding genre is now doing; it reveals the world from our perspective and tells the reader what it is like to be on the other side of that conversation—not bathing in the good intentions of the cis speaker, but in understanding why the road paved by those intentions can feel like perdition to so many of us. In the process, with an origami-like transformation, Plett reveals the reality behind the theory of concepts like transmisogyny.

The talents she shares with other luminaries of this new wave of women—Ryka Aoki, Red Durkin, Cat Fitzpatrick, Lovemme Corazón, Sybil Lamb, Trish Salah, and a legion of others—include what may be a fiction writer's most important ability: making the familiar strange. The themes of much of this new wave of fiction are dark and occasionally depressing—the terrain of trans women's lives does not lend itself to naive hope—but they also refuse the easy tragedy beloved of so many pseudosympathetic and ciscentric narratives. The trans women in the stories and poetry put forward by many of these authors are alive; they are staggered by the Stygian flood of transphobia but still find joy, love, laughter, sex, and deep

wells of human flourishing amid the gloom. Sometimes the gloom consumes them, and we learn to embrace lives of marrow-deep pain that do not lend themselves to cheerful “it gets better” narratives; we embrace their humanity. This sounds like most good literature, and, indeed, that is the point: Trans women can now write such literature about our experiences.

*"As I take another pill, get another day older,  
and all I've managed is to live a little longer in a world  
I can't find a place in:  
That I might be more than a pill or a syringe,  
or memories or scars.*

*That I was made in the image  
of someone who said her body was okay as it is,  
but stays up at night wondering  
what it would be like to carry a child."*

—**Ryka Aoki, “Deal With the Devil”**

Perhaps the most visible signs of this sea change can be found in bestsellers like [Janet Mock’s memoir \*Redefining Realness\*](http://janetmock.com/books/) (<http://janetmock.com/books/>) or Binnie’s novel *Nevada*, a dark cross-country adventure that’s proven to be a hit with the queer community and beyond.

Although *Redefining Realness* follows the structure of earlier trans memoirs, it transcends their tropes time and again with an unapologetically political voice that weaves the lanyards of race, class, sex work, and gender together into one story. Unlike past writers, Mock puts politics front and center, shattering the genre’s apolitical confines and refusing the stultifying individualism that tends to crib many trans women’s stories into hyperfeminized confessionals packaged for daytime talk shows. Mock bares her scars, but never lets the reader forget about the society that put them there. She contextualizes issues like child abuse, rape, and sex work in a cloud of social scientific data and activism that keeps the bond between the

personal and the political airtight. ([Read our interview with Janet Mock here.](http://bitchmagazine.org/article/janet-mock-interview) (<http://bitchmagazine.org/article/janet-mock-interview>).

Binnie's *Nevada* challenges another convention of the classic transition-confessional memoir: the happy ending where, by necessity, all or most conflict is resolved by the time the curtain drops. In past memoirs, the ghosts of transphobia and misogyny (always personified by a few mean individuals whom one either converts or escapes from) had to be dispelled, preferably not long before one got sexual reassignment surgery and the happy denouement commenced.

*Nevada* offers no such comfort, instead treating readers with a dose of reality and a story that weaves in and out of trauma and slapstick. This is, after all, a story about bitter and hopeless mentorship, where a trans woman on a cross-country road trip takes a young person she suspects is trans beneath her ambivalent wing. With anxious ennui, thwarted ambitions, and a glove box full of cocaine, they try to get what they need from each other.

Humor here is of the gallows variety, and yet *Nevada* sparkles with so much more verve and personality than, say, films like *Transamerica*—a very different story about a trans woman on a road trip—that gin up their narrative tension with mawkish tropes about transition. The tale Binnie spins of Maria and James, her principal characters, is one spoken in a riotously unchained voice. As if to illustrate this with the maximum irony possible, [a \*Publishers Weekly\* review of \*Nevada\*](http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-4802-3242-6) (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-4802-3242-6>) lamented in its final sentences that “There’s something immature about Maria and something pat about her thinking. Neither James nor the reader ultimately stands to learn much from spending time in her company.” The critique hit upon a distinguishing feature of this new wave of trans women’s lit: It is not meant to be didactic for the cisgender reader. At least, not in the traditional sense that is implied by imperious questions from speakers who wish to be “educated,” often at the expense of one’s dignity (“Have you had the

surgery?," "How do you have sex?," etc.).

For a book reviewer to deride *Nevada* as devoid of lessons feels like a dark joke that Binnie herself would have written. But there were lessons aplenty; what sets *Nevada* apart is that its lessons were of the kind that seduce you across long bridges into the mist. They are hard lessons: a look at the everyday, common nonsenses of trans women's existence, what sex is really like, what work is like, what living on a shoestring at the margins means amid mounting healthcare costs, what the relationships between gender-nonconforming people evince about the troubled psyches we must nurse under patriarchy, and what it can mean to be "fucked up."

What Binnie's novel gives us, as surely as Mock's memoir does in its loftier register, is a portrait of the trans woman as human. Not inspiration porn, not a feel-good story of triumph over lone bigots, not lurid medical examinations, but a decidedly human story. For all the differences we have with cisgender people, we share the bonds of humanity that ought to make such stories intelligible, and thankfully many cis people have walked away with a better understanding of who we are from this new bounty of poetry and prose.

*"3 distinctive perceptions placed on my person by strangers*

*Wait? is that a boy or a girl?*

*What the fuck is that? son thats a dude*

*Baby? whats that? o, yeah thats one of them things.*

*She told me i was beautiful, that i was worth loving...wow i believed her"*

**—Olympia Perez, "Triceratops"**

*"It's not beautiful or brave or redemptive. It's like a light case of mono that never goes away. I don't want to be brave. I want us to be okay."*

**—Casey Plett, "A Carried Ocean Breeze"**

*"She looked like a battle-weary hardened survivor, and being that meant you*

*decreased in value to almost nuthin'."*

**—Sybil Lamb, “I’ve Got a Time Bomb”**

The past 10 years have seen a general surge in trans awareness and trans activism, driven in no small measure by the connections, community, and ferment made by the spread of Internet access and the undying work of trans people of color who have kept the nascent movement on life support since Stonewall and through the aids crisis.

Though it is a recent phenomenon to see so much ground-breaking work published so quickly, much of this writing owes itself to deep and wide historical roots. For decades, we chatted on AIM, networked on LiveJournal, met in bars, and lent ever more of our fire to the long-running insurgent medium of zines. We learned to write from other women who wrote in lightning, iron, and blood. Many of us cut our teeth in role-playing games and multi-user dungeons, while still others had writing collectives (which continue today in the form of groups like Philadelphia’s [Metropolarity](http://metropolarity.net/) (<http://metropolarity.net/>)), and too many others were alone but for the solace found on bookshelves and during late nights on the computer.

This is trans women’s moment in modern literature, and amid the many currents of transgender existence today, it is singular. So much discourse around trans women’s existence has been spun by everyone but us: cisgender male psychologists, cis feminist academics, trans men and queer cis people. All have had their say about our lives and what they supposedly signify to them: protean radicalism, a crypto-conservative conspiracy, a tangle of pathology. But it is very rare that trans women themselves are heard when we speak about who we are and what we mean.

What emerges from all of these works is a clear picture of trans women as human beings, thinkers, and artists, with mastery and control over the kinds of stories they wish to tell. Neither genderfucking superheroines nor the nightmare of queer radicalism, we are, at last, human.

“To me it’s just one arm of a larger birth in trans lady culture that is really

starting to come into its own,” said Casey Plett when I asked her about the significance of this new wave, “one I see in the proliferation of various Internet communities, of the Twine game explosion, of the visibility of trans women in the media who are smart and unsolipsistic and speak to stuff that matters.”

To wit: This new literature speaks the truth about violence, both within and outside the queer community, as well as the way racism and classism have inflected the experiences of so many among our number; this emerging canon stands in a long tradition of writing by women who dared to tell the truth about their experiences.

And it spirals ever onward and upward. This renaissance has its roots in online culture, and thus some of it speaks through the media of that culture. Trans women game designers like [Merritt Kopas](http://mkopas.net/) (<http://mkopas.net/>), [Mattie Brice](http://www.mattiebrice.com/) (<http://www.mattiebrice.com/>), [Samantha Allen](https://twitter.com/SLAwrites) (<https://twitter.com/SLAwrites>), [Anna Anthropy](http://auntiepixelante.com/) (<http://auntiepixelante.com/>), [Autumn Nicole Bradley](http://www.lifeinneon.com/) (<http://www.lifeinneon.com/>), and [Porpentine](http://aliendovecote.com/) (<http://aliendovecote.com/>) are part of an online vanguard using digital media to tell new stories through and about trans women—and sometimes about cyborg BDSM, intergalactic llamas, or hugging.

Bradley’s latest project, for instance, is a serialized novel available online called [Trash Romance](http://trashmance.com/) (<http://trashmance.com/>), which follows the tale of a grown-up *Sailor Moon*-esque magical girl and her girlfriend who makes magic with trash. But the novel is not wedded to a portrayal of trans people either—it achieves a synthesis between commentary on trans existence and wider literature, redolent of Trish Salah’s evocative poetry about protest politics or Ryka Aoki’s resonant *He Mele A Hilo*, which is not ultimately “about” trans people.

This article is an impossible one; it could only ever serve as a light index to an already prodigious body of work that breaches boundaries—such as Lovemme Corazón’s mixed-media memoir *Trauma Queen*, Sybil Lamb’s *I’ve Got a Time Bomb* (which she both wrote and illustrated), or the rising tide of

performance poetry in searing collections like the anthology *You Have Ripped Your Dick Off*. Our world is remorseless in its attempts to foist a single story on trans women; if these stories teach anything, in the sense meant by the *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, it is that we too contain multitudes, and that we too write with authority beyond ourselves.

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