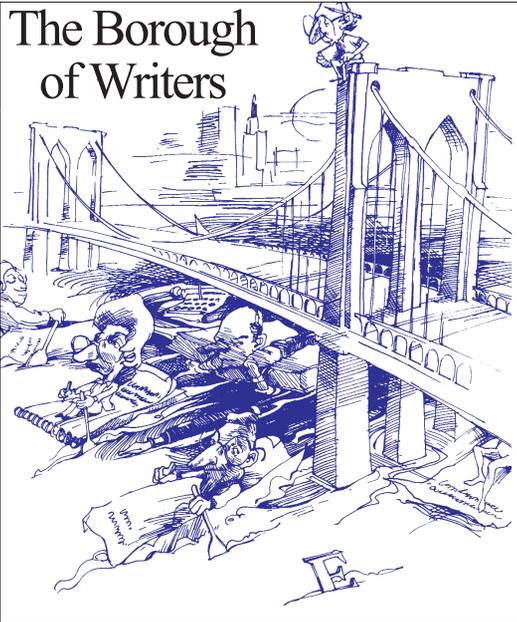


## The Borough of Writers



## Whips, Chains and... Balloons?

Brooklyn Author Releases Book About Stint as Dominatrix

By Jess Goodwin

Melissa Febos has, quite literally, made men crawl on the floor for her. For a good chunk of her life, while most people were throwing on their best suits and ties to go to work, Febos was donning spiked heels and leather. Her days weren't spent in an office, but at the Red Room, a chamber of the "dungeon" in which she regularly flagellated men — and got paid for it.

According to her upcoming book *Whip Smart*, it was never part of the plan to become a dominatrix, or "domme," when she moved to New York. After two years of living in Chelsea she moved to Bed-Stuy, where she discovered that one of her new neighbors was a professional domme. After a chat with her about the job, Febos answered a classified ad looking for a sexy nurse. For the next four years she led a double life: Mistress Julianne by day, a student at the New School by night. She's seen every kind of fetish imaginable: dental fetishes, balloon fetishes — even a sweater fetish.

"He used to come in with a

Melissa Febos



giant duffel bag of sweater garb: sweater pants, sweater underpants, sweater booties, and so on," Febos recalls about one of her clients. "He just wanted to be dressed in them all, and tied up."

At first glance, Febos, who stands at 5'2" and has a kind, composed aura about her, does not give off the air of someone who used to physically and emotionally humiliate men for a living.

But when you listen to her speak, you realize that Febos is a somewhat intimidating presence (the collection of tattoos doesn't hurt either). Something about her commands attention — even when she's not brandishing a whip — a feistiness and acumen that bring a new meaning to the title of her memoir.

She ended up being a natural at domming and enjoyed being able to shock people who asked what she did for a living, but after about

three years Febos began to feel uneasy about the work. Still, she stuck with it for another year.

"After years in the business, it became a very integral part of my identity," she explains. "That was hard to let go of."

Even after she did finally quit domming for good, Febos didn't leave it all behind. To this day she's still best friends with the woman who trained her on her first day, and even maintained a close friendship with one of her clients for some time. She kept her domme gear for a while, before finally putting it up for sale on eBay, and, of course, has written a full-length book on her time at the dungeon.

"While they were happening, I was pretty emotionally disconnected from a lot of the experiences included in the book, so relieving them was painful," says Febos, when asked if it was difficult to go back over that part of her past. "In many cases, I experienced them emotionally for the first time while writing them. The writing came pretty easily — I mean,

relatively — writing is never easy per se. It was a story I needed to tell. I had to write it in order to understand the experience, and I had a strong desire to understand it."

Despite what people may think about what kind of childhood must have led her to such a profession, Febos maintains that she had a wonderful life on Cape Cod with her parents, a sea captain and Buddhist psychotherapist.

"I was terrified when my parents read [the book], as I'm sure they were," confesses Febos. "In many ways it's a book about all the things no parent ever wants to imagine their child doing. But they are amazing, open-minded, and loving people. It was a big pill to swallow, but they did so with grace. Ultimately, we are closer as a result of it."

Domming aside, in *Whip Smart*

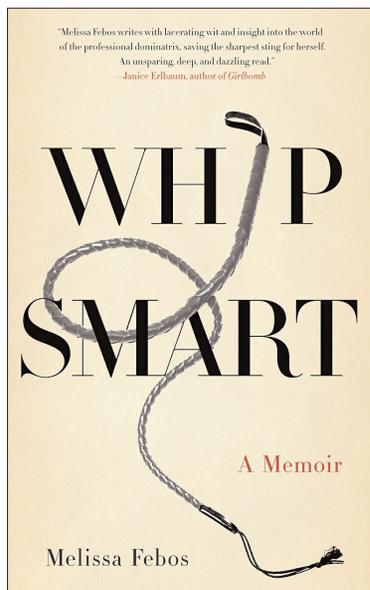
Febos reveals other parts of her life that some might consider shocking, specifically tales from her teen years:

"When I was drinking and lying about my age to high school boys at twelve years old, it was my cover," she writes about school and her grades. "When I was tripping on acid, sniffing coke, and skipping every afternoon in high school, it covered me. When I was smoking crystal meth, popping ecstasy pills like aspirin, and robbing the cafés and tattoo shops that employed me, I was also

getting A's at Harvard's night school, and no one asked questions." She sugarcoats nothing, whether describing speedballing or the things she did to her clients.

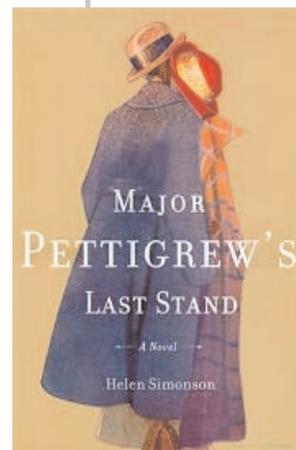
Though her current employment is much tamer, Febos still, in a sense, has to "crack the whip" at times — at her students. She teaches writing classes at SUNY Purchase and with the Gotham Writer's Workshop in Manhattan, and has also been hosting Mixer, a reading and music series held at Cakeshop in Manhattan every third or so Wednesday of the month, for the past three years. Recently, she's started giving private lessons, to provide writing critiques and advice to those trying to get their own materials published. Febos has several readings coming up in New York City before she heads out to the West Coast to promote her book.

*Whip Smart* is available to purchase now.



## Readings

Helen Simonson, who was a Brooklyn Heights resident until last summer, will be reading from her first novel *Major*



*Pettigrew's Last Stand* at BookCourt on Friday, March 5 at 7 p.m. Local lore has it that when Simonson was enrolled in an MFA program, a short story that she wrote as a class assignment caught the attention of a professor who urged her to

expand the work. A bidding war among publishers eventually ensued. Foreign rights have been sold, and there is even talk of a movie. BookCourt is at 163 Court St.

Brooklyn resident Tiphanie Yanique will read from her debut work of fiction, *How to Escape from a Leper Colony* at Greenlight Bookstore on Monday, March 8 at 7:30 p.m. Her book is a collection of stories, plus a short novel set in her native Virgin Islands. Part oral history, part postcolonial narrative, the book tells odd and magical stories that are both epic and intimate. Joining the reading in discussion with Yanique will be author Tayari Jones (*Leaving Atlanta, The Untelling*). Greenlight is at 686 Fulton St.

The monthly Sundays at Sunny's reading series will welcome three authors this Sunday, March 7 at 3 p.m.: Victor LaValle, author of *Big Machine* and *Slapboxing With Jesus*; Jennifer Mascia, author of *Never Tell Our Business to Strangers: a Memoir*; and Tom Zoellner, author of *Uranium: War, Energy, and the Rock That Shaped the World* and *The Heartless Stone: A Journey Through the World of Diamonds, Deceit and Desire*. Sunny's is at 253 Conover St. in Red Hook (around the corner from the Fairway supermarket).

—P.N.