



Library podcast

Laila Lalami discusses *The Other Americans*

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[00:00:35] Hello how's it going. Thank you all for being here. I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the Literature and Humanities Program Manager here at The Seattle Public Library and as we begin this evening I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral and unseeded land of the Coast Salish people. We honor their elders past and present and thank them for their stewardship of this land. Welcome to this evening's event with Laila Lalami presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company. Thank you to our author series sponsor Gary Kunis to The Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs and we're very grateful to The Seattle Public Library Foundation because private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped the library provide free programs and services that touch the lives of everybody in our community. So to library foundation donors here with us tonight. Thank you very much for your support. So tonight's program will include remarks by Lalami followed by audience Q&A and then book signing. So now without further ado I'm delighted to welcome Rick Simonson who will introduce tonight's author.

[00:01:44] Thank you Stesha. Thank you very much for being here tonight in having Laila Lalami here. We are delighted to have someone who we first met when she was living in Portland and was coming to Seattle. I believe the first time we actually met included being in here she was coming to help attend this remarkable gathering that was staged by hedge Brook of visiting Arab women writers and I think was before it eventually in time Layla herself would be a resident hej Brooke but she was very active online doing a lot of great advocacy about writing and culture and that was how we first knew her. We then knew her got to know her in 2005 when her debut novel *Hope and other dangerous pursuits* was published and then five years later she was here in the library. Her novel was the paperback actually was *Secret Sun* had come out and *Secret Son* was a sail read selection where in this time of year of *Cielo* reads this. This year's selection and being a few weeks TB being here but Layla was here in 2010 for that. Her previous book before the one she's here for tonight the *Moors* account she wrote she also read here from a book which I believe that going by the acknowledgements was worked on hedge book but that book was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize that won the Hearst right Legacy Award.

[00:03:06] It was one the other Arab American Book Award and the American Book Award and also was nominated for the Man Booker Prize a book that so its reach and acclaim was quite extensive and the book she's here for tonight. The other Americans which has just gotten published in this country and in other English language countries is already getting international claims to the Guardian. I'm not a foreigner who's a tremendous writer giving a glowing review in The Guardian and other reviews in the U.S. have also been chiming in similarly. This is a book that she's she's jumped in time where were the Moors account was set several centuries ago. This is a very contemporary book set in a small town the Mojave centering on a Moroccan American family which it's got they've got all the problems of any you know they've got the whole the whole thing of trying to make a small business work is she's got it's all written in the voices of the characters so there's beautiful sort of empathetic thing going on because even people who may when you step back from this a little bit be seen somewhat unsympathetic or at least they're troubled in certain ways.

[00:04:17] She gives them voice and gets the chance to to be heard and known from their inside as well as from the how they're seen by other characters in the book. So you have to weigh the complexities of a long marriage you've got adult siblings you have old histories this young woman who's a protagonist this novel comes back to her task she's come back to the town for because of a tragedy has befallen the family and in many things. And Sue there's a bit of a element of a mystery here because there is a death and how that's looked at solved and worked through is done. That's part of the marvel of this book which also for all the part of what she's doing you know sort of straightforward give is is a very reflective of things that are going on in this country now and actually have been. So she she gives a good voice and sort of perspective on all these things. So she's she is also teaching at University of California Riverside so she's good at taking the questions at the end of this and would be good then for visiting with afterwards. So we again from Elliott Bay and the sale Public Library thank you for being here.

[00:05:28] And now please join in welcoming back the wonderful writer Lila Melanie thank you so much for that amazing introduction Rick.

[00:05:40] Rick is much too humble too. I don't know how much you guys know about him but Rick is basically a legendary bookseller. Everybody in our business knows who Rick Simmons then and he's one of the major tastemakers in the book. Mean book publishing and it's just been my great fortune to count him as one of my friends. I'm absolutely thrilled to be back in Seattle a city that I love and to see the faces of friends and family.

[00:06:10] It's it's just very touching to me. I want to talk to you a little bit about how this book came about. I think you heard Rick mentioned that my previous book was a historical novel about the first African. It is based on a true story the first African explorer of America and I finished writing that book in 2014 and you know I had spent five years on it. Obviously it involved a lot of research and so by that point by the summer of 2014 my copy edits were done. I thought you know I deserve a vacation I'm just going to go and have myself a vacation at and I definitely don't want to do anything historical for the foreseeable future. Too much research and take a break and think about what I want to do next. So we went on vacation to Jackson Hole Wyoming of all places Wyoming of course being Dick

Cheney's home state. So we tried not to hold that against that. And we had a great time in Grand Teton National Park and at the end of this wonderful vacation as we had parks we were ready to leave and go back home. I received the texts from my sister telling me that my father had taken gravely ill and was in the hospital in Morocco and was basically dying and I had to go back home to say goodbye to him. And so you can imagine the sense of panic that ensued and so we just packed up and somehow made it to Morocco. And thanks to the miracles of modern medicine he recovered and he's perfectly fine and he's sharp as a tack.

[00:07:44] My father is 82 but he's he's doing fabulous. But after that a couple of weeks that I spent with him and watching him kind of like be on the mend and get better and then I returned home I brought back with me that fear that sense of panic which I think is something that I share with the millions of immigrants who live in this country. And that is the fear they're going to be away when their loved ones need the most like this is a fact of my life that I've come to accept that this is going to happen to me. And I thought as a way to get emotional even thinking and I thought as a way to sort of exorcise it and to kind of work through that fear to write about it in sort of a fictional landscape. And so I wanted to write a story about the thing that scared me most which was the loss of my father and so the main character in this book is somebody whose father gets killed on the first page. So there's no spoilers is what you find out on the first page. And so I thought it would be a way for me to sort of write a story about grief. That was the initial step like it basically kind of like walk myself through this like what would it be like. And I sort of explore it at the fictional level. I also knew that I wanted something else in the story. Obviously I couldn't sustain a story of grief for three hundred and fifty pages because I didn't want to read that book and I didn't think many people would want to read it.

[00:09:17] And so I wanted to make to do something with that death out about that that time. That summer there had been a spate of hate crimes in the country and I thought well you know maybe if it's a hit and run and it's an accident and it's kind of you know you're not sure you know whether it's intentional or not at least there's gonna be an element of mystery and that can give the narrative sort of a propulsive element just to keep the story going. So those were the two ideas that I fused together to start this book on the first page. The main character finds out that her father has been killed in a hit and run she doesn't know who did it. She has returned home in a hurry to this town a small desert town in the Mojave and to basically attend the funeral and find out what exactly happened. So I worked on this book for about a couple of years. I couldn't. I realized within a few weeks write a story that was about death without also making it a story about love. I think I believe in the necessity of love in our lives. And so in this story there's also sort of a love story going on. So I worked on this book for about two years right. So from 2014 to 2000 then 16 and I probably did two or three drafts. In fact probably three drafts.

[00:10:52] And by that point I had also included a detective as a main sort of character so the story was told in the third person from the perspective of these three characters.

[00:11:04] And so OK it's done you know it's beginning middle and end story somewhere. Bunch of stuff happened. It was pretty good to me. I'm going to send it to the editors see what he thinks. And so I sent it to my editor. His name is Aaron MacDonald at Pantheon. He's sort of a legendary figure

this guy. And he's a man of few words. I remember when my previous book was a finalist for the Pulitzer he sent me a three word email. Big time congratulations. Oh I didn't mind. It's like hey I'm a finalist. It was me a long homily. In any case.

[00:11:46] So I sent him the manuscript and he read it and he sent me sort of like this editorial letter and it basically said you know congratulations on what you've accomplished. Wonderful book. We're very proud to publish it. I have some comments about jazz music. The main character the daughter who returns home to the movie is a composer. And you know I'm obviously not a composer and he's apparently a major major jazz fan and so I had made some missteps in the book and he wanted me to fix those. And also there were a couple of small little things like this he wanted fix and I said OK that's pretty easy. And then he said or you know says you know I just have one question which is that you've sort of short changed your all of these smaller characters that you've created in the book and we don't get enough time with them. And in a sense since you told me that you wanted to sort of honor the solitude of these characters that's not you know what's happening with these smaller ones.

[00:12:51] And I thought well what on earth I thought he was proud to publish it. And so then we decided we would talk on the phone sort of sort it out.

[00:13:02] So he called me up and I remember I was heading to Boston College for speaking gig and my plane is about to board. And my editor calls me and so we're talking and he basically says essentially this meets entirely up to you. We'll publish it the way that you turn it you know after the small fixes or you could really consider this idea about like the smaller characters and what you want to do with them because they're also interesting you know the witness that you have is really interesting the mother is really interesting and we don't hear enough from them.

[00:13:35] And I said Okay but are you saying that this should be like just adding characters it should be in the third person or in the first person. Like what are we talking about here.

[00:13:45] Oh it's entirely up to you.

[00:13:50] And so I said OK so we got off the phone and I remember I was weeping.

[00:13:56] I basically was weeping. I was like you know because as he told me this obviously this light bulb went on for me because I realized exactly the trouble I had been having with this book which is that I really was having trouble in spite of the fact that it was this sort of murder mystery in a way it just wasn't moving along.

[00:14:15] It didn't have enough jump and I had been avoiding dealing with some of these characters and that's something that he picked up on and I had been avoiding doing it in the first person because the previous book had been in the first person I kind of wanted to break.

[00:14:32] And so but he somehow picked up on that and so you know the moment of realization of my God he's got a point was immediately followed by this horrible feeling that settled on me which is that this entire manuscript had to be tossed and rewritten so of course I wept. I mourned that book.

[00:14:54] And then I got on that plane and I was in such a state. And then on the back of my boarding pass just as a way to kind of calm myself down and kind of think through it I thought OK well what would I do with this story if I were to really tell it truthfully how would I do it. And so I started like you know is around some ideas and then in the following week as I was you know continuing to cry I I said to myself I'll I'll try this out for 50 pages. I don't like it I'm just going to you know revise the manuscript the little things that needed fixing and turn it in. And so but as soon as I started working on it in this new way I knew that I had to rewrite the whole thing. So those first 50 pages is why it took another three years to rewrite the whole book.

[00:15:46] And then I can laugh about it now it's done.

[00:15:55] I mean I know I'm telling this story but it's I don't regret it because I love the book the way that it came out. So I have no problem with it but it was it was a pretty desperate.

[00:16:06] It was a pretty desperate thing that happened. So anyway so this book is told from nine characters so of course the daughter who returns home her name is Nora her mother who is an immigrant from Morocco. She arrived here in 1981 with her husband and her young daughter who was only three years old. And then they had another child in the U.S.. It's told from the perspective of the witness to the accident who has some crucial information but he's undocumented. So he faces a moral dilemma. Does he come forward or does he keep himself safe. There's a neighbor who has sort of like the business next door to the main to the the guy who dies because the guy who dies has a restaurant. And so the guy the neighbor is one of the voices. So there's basically nine voices the sister is one of them and they're all in the first person. And the way that it unfolds is each character is sort of like picking up the thread of the story taking the context that like the death of this immigrant this Moroccan immigrant His name is that he's sort of putting it in the context of their own lives because of course for the daughter it's a tragedy but for the neighbor next door is like oh the guy next door just closed why is that.

[00:17:29] Oh I see oh wow there's going to have an investigation for the detective it's like Tuesday morning and that's the case that she has to solve for the witness. As I said it's a moral dilemma so for each character it's really a different story. But it is the same central event. One of the questions that I get asked most frequently about my work is where did you get the idea for it. And as I mentioned earlier this book obviously started out with this one personal element right. My father getting very gravely ill being very gravely ill but there were other things and oftentimes things do start off from a personal experience but that's just a start as I say as the starting point. So for example during the writing of this book I suffered from a major bout of insomnia.

[00:18:17] I just couldn't get a good night's sleep. So I thought why should I suffer alone I'm going to saddle one of my characters. And so then OK well you have a character with insomnia.

[00:18:29] Why does he have insomnia. What's keeping him up at night.

[00:18:33] Well maybe he feels a sense of guilt. What might he feel guilty about. And so one thing leads to another until you know the creation of the character. So there's different things sometimes it can be just the conversation with a stranger.

[00:18:47] And that can give a call. I have plenty of I travel a lot to have conversations with strangers all the time. And those can be really illuminating. People sometimes reveal so much about themselves and they don't realize they're talking to a writer and it's kind of interpreting all of this and using it for inspiration and so one of the characters the neighbor for example is using some of that.

[00:19:10] So it could be anything could be an image. It could be an event.

[00:19:15] One of the characters in this book is a veteran of the Iraq war and an event that I consider the major political event of my generation is transformative not just for the Middle East but I think in some sense here too. So there's all kinds of things that go into the shape of the book so to give you a sense of how the voices are working together to create this. Multiplicity of voices I'm going to read from the mother mother's chapter one of her chapters. Her name is Maryam and this begins the night that her husband is killed.

[00:20:04] I was trying to stay awake so I switched on the radio and looked for Claudia Corbett's show on Katie Geo. Usually she's on at lunchtime and I listen to her while I'm peeling potatoes or chopping parsley. But the show is so popular that they brought rebroadcast it again at 10 p.m. that night a young woman was calling in to say she had gotten married just six months ago. But she and her husband were already fighting because he wanted to move to Portland to be a nature photographer and she wanted to stay at her job with an insurance company in Salt Lake City. And neither one of them would change their minds. Listen Claudia told her sharply the way she does sometimes when callers start to ramble and refuse to face the obvious. Nobody said that marriage was easy. Marriages work. When we moved to America 35 years ago many things took me by surprise like gun shops next to barbershops freeways that tangled like yarn. People who knocked on your door to talk about Jesus 20 different kinds of milk at the grocery store signs that said Don't even think about parking here. I remember pointing them out to these. They even have signs that tell you what you can't think. But above all I was surprised by the talk shows. The way Americans love to confess on television. Men talked about their affairs or addictions or gambling problems women talked about their weight or plastic surgeries or the children they had outside marriage.

[00:21:30] Even teenagers had something to say mostly about how terrible their parents were and all of it like it was a normal thing. I couldn't stop watching the television sat on top of the supply cabinet in the back of the donut shop and while I was washing dishes or mopping floors I would watch Sally or Donahue which in those days were on in the middle of the afternoon when the shop was quiet. My brother had told me that watching television would help me improve my English and I will say I learned a lot of new words like paternity tests and artificial insemination and AIDS epidemic. But my

trouble was pronunciation how easy it was to say Tre when I'm when I meant three or udder when I meant other I needed a lot of practice in Casablanca. I had my two sisters three uncles and cousins. But here in California my brother was the only family I had and he lived a hundred and thirty miles away. I hadn't realized how far that was until we went from seeing him everyday to seeing him only once a month and sometimes not even that often. For me that was the hardest thing about living in America. Being so far away it was like being orphaned one day we went to the state or brothers on the 62. We had been living in the Mojave for about nine months by then but this was our first winter here and we weren't used to the cold.

[00:22:56] So I bundled up Salma in her green wool coat in a green wool coat and bought for her at the Goodwill before we went to the store she sat in the shopping cart which was another thing that was new to me in America but I let her. She liked the feeling of rolling around the store in the cart and I didn't see the harm in it. Looking through the coupons with clipped from the newspaper I found a discount we could apply to a can of hunts that's diced tomatoes but I couldn't see the brand anywhere on the shelf. I'm sure they have it. He said he was like that. He always had faith even about silly little things. So while he looked for the can I waited shivering in my denim jacket. Then a woman pushed her cart past us and in her wake I caught the scent of rose water instantly I was back in Casablanca with my sisters putting our hair in rollers and trying on different colors of lipsticks lipstick looking at our reflections in the dresser mirror where a picture of shadow was tucked into the frame. Her hair in an elaborate bouffant. We were trying to replicate the radio was on. We were waiting for the deejay to play the Bee Gees. Our friends were coming by later to watch an Egyptian movie starring Rosalie Basir. I don't know why I did this but I followed the woman down the aisle and along the refrigerated section where she got milk and butter and eggs and juice enough for a big family and then to the corner display where she picked out one of the new E.T.

[00:24:24] lunchboxes with the Alien and the little boy touching fingers and the light glowing between them the woman had long brown hair almost the same shade as mine. Only she wore hers parted down the middle and I remember that her coat had those huge shoulder pads that were becoming popular. She went into a new aisle and I watched as she tried to choose a brand of baking flour from the dozens that sat on the shelf. Hello I said the woman turned around her eyebrows lifting her lips stretching into a tentative smile. My name is Mariam. I wanted to tell her what is yours. You live nearby. What do you do. Do you have children. I have one daughter. She's three years old. Would you like to have tea with me someday. Are you baking a cake. I know a great recipe. You shouldn't use star flour though it's not good for cakes but when I open my mouth again nothing came out my heart was beating too fast inside my chest. Yes she said Can I help you. This is not good floor. What later I would learn to sound out words in my head before I spoke them the way I had been taught to do at school. When we recited the poems of Alfonso and Watanabe and our teachers would not tolerate a missing inflection or an incorrect agreement.

[00:25:42] But that day all I felt was the betrayal of a foreign tongue. This I said is not good floor. She looked at the ground. I don't understand. Too thick. Lady I have no idea what you're trying to say. Only now that I was close to her. Yet I see that she had a beauty mark on her upper lip. Just like my youngest sister which I hadn't expected and I stared at her even more intently but had already

mangled what I tried to say and I was afraid to make it worse. So I pointed to the flower and rubbed my belly and smiled in a way I hoped. Made my meaning clear. She shook her head and laughed displaying crooked teeth yellowed by coffee then put a box of instant baking mix in her cart and walked off. Standing next to the canisters of frosting I started crying that's where he's found me later crying next to the frosting. What's wrong. He asked taking my hand. I didn't know how to explain that nothing was wrong and yet everything was wrong. Someone was watching me from the cart and I quickly dried my face. I didn't want to upset her especially after she brandished the can of Hunt's state's tomatoes like a prize a consolation prize. Where's the coupon dress. Asked me. I didn't have it. I dropped it somewhere along the way when I'd followed the woman from outside.

[00:27:00] I also retraced my steps but I couldn't find the little envelope where we saved all our coupons. It had taken us weeks to clip that many and now this was annoying because we would have to pay more for our groceries and he bickered with me about it while we waited waited in the checkout line. We had to be extremely careful with money back then because we had just started our business we worked hard in those early years. We worked very hard and maybe we should have worked on our marriage too. Like Claudia Corbett said listening to her that night in the car I was thinking that we should try again. Stop arguing about everything. Learn to forgive ourselves and especially each other for our mistakes. But when I walked in this wasn't home usually. He was in his lounge chair doing his crossword puzzles. That was how he improved his English. He was obsessed with finding all the answers and hardly ever looked up. When I walked past him on my way to the kitchen. But as I said that night the chair was empty and he didn't pick up the phone when I called him. So I called Sonoma instead. It was 9 forty. I remember the time because I was looking at the clock on the microwave while I talked to her and she told me not to worry. Maybe he was having car trouble or his cell phone was turned off an hour later.

[00:28:16] The police came so one of the things that happens when you sort of have this book coming out and you go on tour to try and support it and convince people to buy copies is it's almost like a process of saying goodbye. Formally saying goodbye to the characters I'm already working on something else. But

[00:28:36] But they still feel very real to me and I still get very emotional just thinking about this chapter that I that I read to you.

[00:28:47] And so so it's it's it's been kind of emotional this process of saying goodbye.

[00:28:53] But it's also kind of nice because I feel like you know we're reaching we're reaching closure this book and I in writing this book one of the things I had wanted to do was to not do anything historical nothing would research I thought contemporary it's going to take that long to do it. But I think something happened to me in the process of working on the Maus account which is that I sort of just developed the habit of research. And so as I began working on this book for example if a scene is set in you know 1982 I'm going to think about well what's happening in the culture in 1982 what toys is what toys are being sold in supermarkets little things like that and if I find something that is of use to me I use it. But on a sort of more crucial level there were there was so much research that had to

be done for example it is apparently not enough to say you want to kill a character with a car because you have to figure out well where is the car heading in which direction if it's the guys trying to get away and makes a turn. What kind of a car would it have to be to hit them and result in a fatality and make a turn and carry his body to the other side.

[00:30:08] And I had to research find out what kind of a car could do that. So my job is one of those where you know I'm constantly Googling things like this you know not how to kill somebody with a car but basically that basically you know fatality or whatever you know I have research skills in that. And one of my characters as I said is a veteran. I had to figure out you know what was what were the Marines Kappes called when they were deployed and then where were they located.

[00:30:36] And so all all that stuff so my google searches are pretty scary. I'm sure I'm on every database surveillance database. There is quite apart from the fact of some biological fact shall we say. Some other things I had to research. Let me just think obviously the hit and run with the car but also the legal aspects of it how can you prosecute a case like that. Much to my surprise it turns out that many of these cases don't result in prosecution. So apparently killing somebody with a car is probably the way to go if that is something you want to do because they're very hard to prove in court. Intent is very hard to prove in court and prosecutors it turns out have a great great deal of discretion. So if you you know depending on who is accused of the case they might decide that that person is just not worth prosecuting or you know to the contrary that that's the person that they absolutely must prosecute you know for that case. So I had to do a bit of research on that too. But it's been fun because I feel like it's one of the things I carried with me from the book is learning how to sort of weave that research skillfully into the narrative. And so this is about it for me. Thank you so much for coming. I'm very happy to answer any questions you may have. So the question is and this woman has read this reader has read the book and wants to know who were the original three characters. It was Nora. Yes because she's basically the person who the the return the story of the return home. Right. And then it was Jeremy. And then it was the detective who's Coleman. Yeah. And then now of course it's it's online.

[00:32:48] That's good. Let's get the Guardian called me.

[00:32:54] Can I just say The Guardian The Guardian called me a small woman with a big laugh. So now every time my Erath erupt in laughter I feel very self-conscious.

[00:33:09] He said this is what he said because he's a man of few words. He apparently had a meeting with my agent for something else and he said Oh I think we have a winner here. No he said Okay here's your release date you'll be getting my edits. Which sort of shocked me because with the Maus account he did no line edits like by turned in the manuscript he's like here's your release date and it went into copy edits and it was done. So what you read is what I wrote with this one he did some and I have to say I dislike it very much like I really dislike line edits like if it's something that I agree with. I'm happy to take it. But nine times out of ten I don't agree. So like so I you know hits that. Did you hear the story about Dennis Johnson. I don't know if it's apocryphal or not. So the story is that as Johnson turned in his manuscript the author of Jesus Jesus's son for this. So he turned in one of

his manuscripts and the copy editor returns they would all of these changes and then it's Johnson takes the manuscript writes big giants that which means revert all of the changes just step on the first page and sent it right back like hero. Right I dream of doing that someday but we're not yes.

[00:34:31] Megan Yes.

[00:34:36] Megan and I we went to grad school and we haven't seen each other. And so it's a way to catch up.

[00:34:43] So I teach it at the University of California Riverside. And I teach in both the undergraduate program and the MFA program. So I teach both fiction and non-fiction. Right now I'm teaching and under an intermediate creative nonfiction workshop for undergrads. So basically just the art of telling a story. That's true but using the tools of fiction I enjoy it very much particularly because our students are really really fantastic. So we have UCR is the most diverse campus of the 10 campuses. So you walk into a class and it's like they have these incredible life stories and since particularly nonfiction they use that materials. It's always just so interesting being in that class. Like I have a really really cool interesting job like I learn a lot from my students really great.

[00:35:34] Yeah.

[00:35:42] Mm hmm. So the question is could I expand on what I mean by a story that's true so this is a really actually a really complicated question. Right. So. So just give you an example. The Maus account I said earlier was based on a true story. Right. First African explorer of America. But what we take to be the true story is based on what one of the survivors of the expedition that this man was part of wrote and published in 1542 in Spain. His name is Cubby said Ibaka. And so he was part of this expedition called the Narvaez Expedition and that expedition distinguished itself by being a complete and total failure. And only four people survived. And so ten years later they are found and they were brought to Mexico City and they're asked to provide testimony about what happened and that testimony is collected by the court but only the three Spanish noblemen are deposed and the Moroccan slave because he was a slave is not deposed. So already you're not getting all four of those voices into the official record. So that's problem number one problem number two is those three voices that were included in the historical record they were placed into the hands of Cubby said Ibaka And he was charged with taking them back to Spain and he lost the manager that position en route between what is now Mexico City and the Port of Seville you know where they come back and so that gave him the opportunity to then write the authoritative account of the Narvaez Expedition which he presented to the king and dedicate it to the king. So it's impossible to look at that and think that what you received from Cubby said Ibaka is the truth. And yet that is how historians have been treating it. That is history and that is what is accepted history today about that expedition. But clearly copies either the or had an agenda because he wanted after even after everything that he went through he wanted to sorry once I got into history I guess he had an agenda he wanted to become Governor of Argentina.

[00:37:48] So it was in his interest to present himself to the king as like this hero of this this expedition that even though it failed and a lot of people lost their money and all a lot of investors lost their money he had conducted himself as a faithful servant of the Crown. And please please please make me Governor of Argentina. So when that is your agenda you're going to present the story in a particular way. And that that story is what's considered true. And so my novel is basically rewriting all of thought but minus called fiction.

[00:38:19] Yes sir yes.

[00:38:26] Yeah. So the question is what books that I read when I was a child and which which ones were significant to me as a writer. So this seems like a simple question right I should be able to give you a list of five or six books and everybody goes home happy. But in my case it's actually a really thorny question and I was. It's funny you should ask because I was just talking to Nancy Pearl who is a local celebrity.

[00:38:52] My daughter asked my husband who is Nancy Pearl. He's like she's famous she's the only Librarian that has an action figure. So she was she was she visited us on Sunday to ask me questions like this.

[00:39:06] And I said Nancy I'm sorry is it going to be very complicated answer. And she got all excited. So I was born and raised in Morocco.

[00:39:16] And Morocco is a French colony. Between 1912 and 1956. So that's 44 years which in the grand scheme of the French colonization of Africa is not long. So for example Algeria next door is one hundred and thirty years of French colonization and yet within just that 44 years the damage that was done to sort of like the education system and disruption of history and the economy and like twenty thousand other things was massive. And one of the things that happened is they started a bunch of French schools whose purpose was to train sort of the Clark class that would run the colony. And those schools would train Moroccans but only up to a certain extent like you couldn't you couldn't go to college for example like if you made it to the high school diploma bam that you were gonna get that job.

[00:40:03] And so the idea was to basically keep Moroccans subjugated. And so that's the school system that my father. That's the kind of school system that my father attended.

[00:40:16] And so even though I grew up way you know years later it was already independent. The legacy of that continues. So for example in terms of like children's literature the only children's literature that was available was French literature. So like French children I grew up reading Tintin and Billy Beane and Steve Hicks and you can I read and read it all the time was good then whatever. And you might think well what's the problem. These are all fabulous books.

[00:40:44] The problem is that if your entire exposure to literature which is basically the world of the imagination the world where everything is possible is only about French people and has nothing to do

with Moroccan people. It sends you the message that your story is not worth telling. That your story doesn't belong into this world of imagination that you don't have power. And so that's why it's kind of a complicated answer. You know it's you know even reading is political apparently. So I did read those those comic books you know when I was little and then from that obviously like the big epics and the big adventure stories and romance and mystery.

[00:41:29] Oh my God I was a huge mystery fan so for example in the summers. That's what we read like one book a day. You know Agatha Christie. I read those all of those books multiple times. So most of it the bulk of it was French literature with some translations but the translations for example from American literature were not. We're not talking like Philip proffer you know anything like thought it was like Rex Stout or you know I don't know. Most Muslims are. And then when I was about 15 I started reading adult literature by Moroccans and that was the first time that I really sort of saw Moroccans and literature. So I would say authors like Mohammed Shukri and had been de Lune who I understand is quite famous. And for the moment and see and that he should I be. And so that was kind of a revelation that hits you with the force of revelation when you can finally see characters that look like you in fiction. And as far as fiction in English when I was in the 10th grade I took my first English class. And when I was 18 I went to college and I started an undergraduate degree in English and the very first book that they assigned us was John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* because we had three years of English.

[00:42:53] So it was like a thin book and you could read it and understand it.

[00:42:56] So and then from that it moved on pretty rapidly and so by the time we were graduating we're reading contemporary American literature. So be like I remember one of my favorites that they had assigned us that year was the woman warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston. So it's this I'm sorry it's a complicated answer but I just feel it's important to acknowledge that not all of us have the luxury of having read and put into our hands. That fits into our neatly into our experiences.

[00:43:26] That's why when people talk about diversity and inclusion this is why it's because there are children right now that are growing up in this country that don't see themselves in fiction that don't see themselves in movies that don't see themselves in film.

[00:43:38] Maria Yeah.

[00:43:46] I mean you never question because it's your normal reality. You read Tintin you see the the way in which the Tintin in the Congo you see the way in which the natives are described Tintin in the land of the in the land of black gold.

[00:44:01] That that one is set in the Gulf like you see all of the Tintin series it never once occurs to you that the native in those books is you you're not tinting but when you're reading them you're identifying with Tintin you're trying to crack the mysteries. So so of course you identify with Tintin and so it was only later much later when I was an undergrad you actually I would say maybe even later I probably was in college before any of this started bothering me. And then of course you know later I

read Edward XII and and you returned to these books that you approached with great innocence as a child and you're like

[00:44:37] I mean it's tremendous. You know it's TRUMAN AND I STILL HAVE MY Tintin books I still have them at home I just you know they came home with me they made the voyage that's it.

[00:44:52] Oh my God. Wow. Yes.

[00:44:54] We're going get not conference so the question is how confident was I that I could handle the mystery.

[00:45:07] Not confident at all. I was actually really freaked out and I think part of the reason why the first draft was like thought was because or didn't turn out as well was because it had this problem of not knowing how to handle the mystery. And so for example the main character she returns home she's not going to be doing the investigation she has no idea what's going on with the witness.

[00:45:30] So it was just like narratively speaking it was like a lot of heavy lifting for me to sort of communicate to the reader that this is what's happening with the case. And it was forcing me into scenes that really were not crucial to the book. You know having her be you know go and talk to the detective so we can get information relayed to the reader so it just wasn't working for four for the mystery and doing it this way. However as soon as I started doing it this way I realized how much it could serve the mystery plotline if I did it because having people take turns is kind of a good way to sort of delay resolution and build up suspense. So I was able to use that. I have a friend who's a crime writer. So when I started working on this I wrote him and I said you know can you tell me like recommend a whole bunch of books to me because I haven't been reading crime lately like what's good. Whom should I read and especially if it's somebody who's like really good at the level of the sense.

[00:46:30] And he gave me a list and I went and did some reading so I really enjoyed Dexter. I don't know if you know Oh my God. Very brutal but really really good writer really good. And then there's this book that Nancy actually picked up on it's called a crooked letter crooked letter by Tom Franklin did anybody read thought.

[00:46:50] Yeah yeah. It's really good right. Yeah. So that's so he.

[00:46:54] I mean I have like a whole bunch of those at home that I read just to try and understand oh and of course the grandmaster Richard Price.

[00:47:06] Oh my God Richard Price dialogue like I can never write dialogue like that but you know one can aspire and so just reading that stuff was very very useful to me. Yeah.

[00:47:17] And so not to make it sound that I went home and did one draft and turn it in. I had nine drafts on this book.

[00:47:23] So the three years I just kept reading and a lot of the redrafting was figuring out the order of the Order of the voices in the order of the events so that it maintains the suspense. Yeah.

[00:47:40] You can always someone there's a writer in the room they get really curious about the process. Yes.

[00:47:49] I will let you know well that's an interesting question.

[00:47:57] So the question is how do you sort of diversify the curriculum.

[00:48:00] You know at K12 or you know when you know everything that we know is changing so why is in our curriculum changing.

[00:48:09] I can tell you because I teach at the university level how it works. Right. So every time that we try and diversify the curriculum we get we do get pushback from from people who want us to continue to teach the same things over and over and to always go back to the classics. And my view on it is there is room to do both. Like you should teach the classics but you should also be in connection with who is in the room and what they're learning and do you really need to do. I don't know. Like all five you know Shakespeare plays maybe you could do three Shakespeare plays and then do two of something else so it's it's it's a question of just finding the right balance in the curriculum. Now I'm fortunate because in the classes that I teach I pretty much can teach whatever the hell I want but in in K12 education it's it's mandated by the state and it's and there is all kinds of forces that come into what goes into the textbooks and what gets chosen. And some of those forces are driven by politics and they're driven by money and it's it's not it's not purely like we're not just looking at what this is has educational value for the kids because what has educational value for me is going to be different than what has educational value for somebody else. So I remember this famous case with Texas and Texas textbooks you guys hear about this story about the the workers who were brought from Africa in a description of slavery. So that's the kind of thing that can happen in textbooks when when it's driven by political agendas outside of just education. Yes ma'am

[00:49:51] It is but I mean I get bored and so I I. I like that historical fiction had taught me what it could teach me for a while and I didn't need. I really did need a break.

[00:50:03] And so with this one obviously it wasn't just the myths the mysteries was just the mystery part of the book. That's what I read for. But for example in managing a chorus of voices I had to read a lot of like novels that tried to do that and do that successfully. So when this was in the third person I read this this question came up in New York too. So in the third person I read for example Paradise by Toni Morrison which starts with a murder and goes alternatively like five different characters but it's in the third person on the bridge of San Luis Rey by Thornton Wilder again begins with the falling from the bridge and then it's five different characters but then once I switched to the first person then you know things like I don't know as I lay Dying by William Faulkner and all kinds of books do that now. So it's it's kind of a popular form now. Jennifer Egan had a visit from the Goon Squad. Yeah. So

I mean I just. So that's for example that would be what I would what I was reading to manage the chorus of voices then to do stories of family. I'm I read a bunch of novels about you know so I basically just read in whatever what are it's gonna help me with content or style or technique or anything anything that's relevant to the book I I read so. And one of the advantages of having something like Facebook one of the few advantages of having something like Facebook is that I have a lot of friends who are writers.

[00:51:44] So if you say and they love writers love to recommend books.

[00:51:48] So if you say oh I need a long list of you know novels that have like first person narrators like within minutes everybody's trying to show how well read they are so then everybody is like you have a long list you can start reading. So you know it's it's. And sometimes the writers get very specific like I need a book that starts with a murderer.

[00:52:08] And then people people try to help and so you can get lists of books that way to check out but yes it does involve a lot of reading books are made out of other books Final question sir in the back on the plane over I am reading Stacey Abrams new book. Oh my God. So the book I don't even remember the title but it's I'm terrible with titles OK. What is it called lead from the outside is what the book is called.

[00:52:45] And a friend of mine went to an event that she did in L.A. and she got me a copy that I really need to read it. And so that's when I started reading and it's really moving and you hear about sort of her upbringing and how she got to where she is. But she's it's also very practical she has like very very basic advice on how to get what you want. So it's been kind of resonating with me today.

[00:53:05] So yeah. All right. Thank you all so much.

[00:53:15] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.