Title: 2008 Seattle Reads Main Event: An evening with Dinaw Mengestu

Speaker 1:

This is the Seattle Public Library podcast of the main event of the 2008 Seattle Reads, The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears. Author Dinaw Mengestu spoke on Exile, Imagination, and the American Dream, May 9th at the Central Library. Mr. Mengestu's award-winning debut novel is set in Logan Circle, a poor neighborhood in Washington DC. The narrator, Cepha Stefanos, an Ethiopian immigrant who fled the revolution now owns and runs a small corner grocery store. His only friends are two other African immigrants, Joseph from the Congo and Kenneth from Kenya. These men have been in the country for 17 years. They're caught between cultures. None has come close to achieving the American dream. When Judith and Naomi, a white academic and her biracial daughter, move into the neighborhood and befriend Cepha, Cepha is reminded of what it's like to be a family. But a series of racial incidents disturb the community and make clear that they are not welcome in the gentrifying neighborhood and Cepha stands to lose everything.

The novel explores themes of race and class relations, what it means to lose family and a country, what it takes to create a home, what it means to be an immigrant in America.

Deborah Jacobs:

Good evening. I'm sorry for the delay in starting. Those of you that know me know I love to be on time. I'm Deborah Jacobs and I want to welcome you to our central library and thank you all for joining us tonight for the main event of the 2008 Seattle Reads, The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears an evening with Dinaw Mengestu. I think that many of you know I'm about to begin a new position leaving the Global Libraries Initiative at the Bill of Melinda Gates Foundation and leaving the library after 11 incredible years. I can't tell you what an exciting time this has been for me, having the opportunity to work with our community and staff and taxpayers and donors to help bring about their hopes and dreams and bring them to reality for a remarkable library system that's here permanently for all of us.

I want to thank you so much for all of you for helping make this happen. And it's also pretty wonderful for me because in my new job, I get to live in Seattle and I'll be able to use these libraries, which I love, and I can be in the audience with you instead of up here, so that will be great. One of the first things I heard about from Nancy Pearl and Chris Agashi when I got here was this incredibly cool idea that they had come up with and that was about to happen that at that time we called if all Seattle read the same book. We're now celebrating our 10th anniversary of this widely emulated program, a project which is

really... A project designed to deepen our appreciation of literature to foster reading and discussion of works by authors of diverse cultures and ethnicities.

In the past few years, in the past about 10 minutes after we did our first one, so the past almost 10 years, hundreds and thousands of one book community projects have taken place all over the country and internationally. I remember sitting in a meeting in the Netherlands with a librarian from Australia that was saying, "And in Australia, we're doing this very wonderful program." And I was new to this group and very shy, but I had to raise my hand and say, "It started in Seattle." Because we did the first one and I'm so proud of our library in this as in so many other ways leading the way for our world. Seattle Reads is made possible by the Wallace Foundation with additional support from KUO Public Radio, Riverhead Books, and the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Let me take a special moment to thank the Seattle Public Library Foundation.

The foundation represents thousands of people in our communities who make gifts large and small to buy books and materials for our collections, to present free public programs like we have tonight, to provide programs and services to Seattle's immigrant and refugee community, and to support early learning so that children are ready for school. So to all Seattle Public Library donors with us tonight, thank you for making all of this possible.

Thanks also to the Seattle Post Intelligencer for their generous promotional support of library programs. It's been a treat to open up the newspaper and see the library like that. And of course to our friends at Elliot Bay, who have Rick Simmonson and Karen Maeta Alman, who have been our longtime partner in Seattle Reads and especially for bringing now to our attention before he was like a superstar. So Elliot Bay is here with us tonight with the Beautiful Things as well as other works. We also want to thank our community partners who have generously served as panelists and speakers and moderators for a series of programs and events this spring that are tied to this program. Kris Agashi asked me to especially thank Fima Taiwo and Sahid Adijo Moby... Is that okay?Oof Seattle University who helped develop the series and took part in seven different events.

And I really want to thank Kris Agashi, who along with her team in the library has worked to promote this and especially for four years ago, taking my kind of crazy idea that we make this more than just a library program, but make it a community based program where we're reaching out to so many different institutions. We started that with our book on the Japanese internment and it's continued and I think our community is so much smarter and richer because of that. So I really want to thank you Chris for that.

We believe that reading brings our community together and Seattle Reads is a wonderful way to celebrate our diversity and learn about other cultures. Through creative programming, we build connections across cultures and also across generations. Seattle Reads brings brand new communities into the library while at the same time exposing others to a new way of looking at the world. I wish you all could have been with us last Friday night when we had hundreds of teens from every neighborhood of Seattle, many of whom had never been in the library, performing and participating and finding a way to connect with the library that probably none of them thought would have been possible the week before. Two of the library's highest service priorities are cultural programming and service to immigrants and refugees. And I actually came to the Seattle Public Library because of my belief in what we were already doing and to try to deepen those connections to our immigrant and refugee communities.

I love how this has all been tied together with our programming, as I talked about. And I want to give you one example that somehow, and I think Gilbert is still here, we missed. I didn't understand how we missed it. We were there moments before, but Horn of Africa had a cultural day for families at the New Holly Gathering Hall, and I hear there was great food that we missed. And they were celebrating the cultures of Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea through stories, music, dance, and food. It was almost a year ago that Dinaw accepted our invitation to come for Seattle Reads. Since then, the Beautiful Thing that Heaven Bears published in the UK under the title, Children of the Revolution, when the Guardian Unlimited's first book award, its other honors and awards include, it's been like, we send these emails like, "Chris, did you see this yet?" The New York Times notable books of 2007, the Los Angeles Times Bestseller, a Los Angeles Times book prize for first fiction, the New York Public Library Young Literary Lions Award finalist, and I think you were even in Sunday's Style when that happened.

And of course, as often happens in our reading city, it's been on the bestseller list at local bookstores for the past few weeks. Dinaw was born in Ethiopia in 1978. He came to the US at age two with his mother and sister, joining his father who had fled from Ethiopia two years before. He was raised in Illinois as a graduate of Georgetown University and Columbia University's MFA program, and he currently lives in Paris. We're honored and welcome and excited to welcome to Dinaw Seattle and to feature his moving debut novel in Seattle Reads. I think it's really cool that he has groupies with him. His mother and father are here and his sister, and I can imagine how proud you feel of your son. As are his editor from Riverhead Books, Megan Lynch and literary agent, PJ Mark. So welcome to all of you and thank you for being in our library tonight.

The format for this evening is that Dinaw will speak on Exile, Imagination, and the American Dream. His talk will be followed by moderated questions. And as Chris mentioned, and hopefully you've done it because I'm sure you're going to be riveted. You can write your questions at any point, or if you've already done that, the cards we provided to you and pass them to the aisles and we'll collect them and deliver them to this podium. Following that, Daniel will be happy to sign books out in the lobby. And when we get to this point, because we were unsure of the crowd, we'll explain the logistics and how we'll get you in and out, and also where to line up, how to buy books, and then where to exit. Tonight's program is being videotaped by the Seattle channel for later broadcast or viewing on your computer.

So any of your friends that meant to come with you tonight, you can make sure that they watch it. It's also being recorded for our library's podcast, and if you haven't done that yet, you're nuts, but you can subscribe to the libraries podcast at spl.org. So sorry for the long introduction, but this is our program of the year and now really what we're all here to see. Thank you, Dinaw, and welcome to the podium.

Dinaw Mengestu:

I was planning on beginning with a 25 to 30 minute list of people to thank, but I think some of them have already been called to attention. So I'll cut some of those notes of gratitude a little bit short, but I would like to say thank you to each and every one of you for coming out. Obviously, there's something remarkable and special to Seattle when somebody who has only written one book can stand in front of more people than he's ever seen in his life in an audience room and pretend like he's not intimidated by the crowd. Can everybody hear me in the back? Yes. Great.

But I will just take a few seconds to say a very deep thank you to the Seattle Public Library and to the foundation for making the Seattle Reads Project possible and to the people at Elliott Bay for also being one of my earliest supporters and not just of my book, but I think of literature in general. Most young or old writers feel like literature has very little place in our society and in our world. And you go to a bookstore like Elliot Bay and you come to a city like Seattle and you get a chance to feel like maybe your books actually do matter.

A special thanks to Chris Sagashi for being what's probably the most amazing programmer that I've ever had a chance to encounter. And to my agent and editor, PJ Mark and Megan Lynch, writers depend on people to believe in them, especially when no one else believes in them and they kind of became the two people who I sort of trust and depend on the most to make my career and my life happen with the exception, of course, of my parents and my sister, the three of whom have been around for a really long time. In fact, since I was born and their support has been amazing and endless and my gratitude to all three of you is sort of beyond anything I can express without taking up the rest of my time.

I was thinking that it's a little bit difficult to always know how to talk to an audience as a writer because there's these twin pulls inside of you. I think part of you as a writer wants to express all the sort of emotions and convictions that went into writing verbally out loud, but that's not necessarily possible. I would like to tell you how this book began and why it began. At the same time, a part of me would also like to sit behind a computer and hide and tell you how all of that happened by writing it out very carefully and very closely over the course of two to three years.

And to some degree that it's all in the purpose of getting to the same point, which is that you want to kind of explain to people exactly who you are and how you came to be the person that you are. And more importantly, we think why you wrote this book and why you're so honored and delighted to have people respond to this book.

I thought strangely enough as a fiction writer that I would do something a little bit different, which I've never done before, which is normally you begin these events and you read fiction, which is what you do as your profession and your life. But in this particular case, I thought I'd actually begin with facts, a series of facts that I think are important and significant and that do the best possible job that facts can do to explain the context for the narrator of this novel, Cepha Stefanos, who's left Ethiopia during the revolution. And these facts I think will give you a kind of context for who this character is and I think they also kind of serve as a starting point for exactly how this novel began. The problem, of course, is as a fiction writer, you think of facts as the enemy. You think of facts as the people who you would rather not try to spend too much time with because what you believe and trust in is the imagination, but I think these facts are pretty important.

They've been called over... I think now it's been about 12 years of research into Ethiopia's political history. But I'd also like to preface these facts with a quote or sort of a paraphrase of a quote from a novel by Marilyn Robinson called Housekeeping and it says something to the fact that facts tell you nothing. That facts are in fact just really the beginning and that's where we start from and that's where... But facts in the end aren't actually the entire story.

So fact number one, September 12th, 1974, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and Prohali Salasi of Ethiopia was escorted from his palace in Addis Ababa in a blue Volkswagen Beetle by a group of military soldiers.

Fact number two, December 24th, 1977, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. After three months of behind the scene debates, the military men who overthrew 82 year old Emperor Haile Salassie and executed scores of his top officials finally agreed last week on what direction their revolution will take. In a series of official pronouncements, the government pledged to create a one party socialist state and take over government ownership of key industries and resources. Private lands will be nationalized and organized in the collective farms. According to one proclamation, the curse of individualism will be stamped out.

December 24th, 1977. A revolutionary Democratic Ethiopia will be built on the graveyard of counter-revolutionaries. So says the lieutenant who seems to have been the country's second in command. The chairman of the council, Mingusuala Mariam, is ruthlessly pursuing his number two's objective. Last week, his government unleashed another so called red terror. At least 100 people were killed. Some reports say 300 in Addis Ababa in just one night. December 15th through 16th, many bodies were left lying in the streets bearing place cards saying things such as, "We are tired of burying them." February 13th, 1978, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. About 1,500 opponents of Ethiopia's Marxist military governments were paraded through downtown Addis Ababa Ban Monday as part of the campaign to eliminate political opposition. Witnesses said the group, mainly young people, are marched through the streets under armed escort to the National Theater for a three-hour meeting where they apparently were called on to recant their support for the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party.

The underground EPRP, also a Marxist group, is responsible for the assassination of hundreds of government supporters over the past year and has been the major target of a red terror campaign by government supporters to eliminate all opposition. Foreign diplomats say about 5,000 people have been arrested. Addis Abada's mayor said the figure was closer to a thousand. Western television newsmen filmed the parade as it passed through the streets to the theater, but reporters were not allowed to enter the building for the meeting.

The government says it is attempting to rehabilitate the supporters and bring them over to the side of the government. The sound of gunshots continues to be heard in the evening in this capital city and bodies of government opponents can be seen in the early morning hours laid out in streets in the central area. As I said, I think they're facts and they're all taken from newspaper articles and wire reports that I've read over the years and they do a decent job of actually detailing some of the events that happened in the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia, but I think as facts they have their limits and the limits is that they're not there to persuade you or convince you of what it actually felt like to be in Ethiopia during the 1970s and watch the city and the country that you had known slowly erupt around you.

I've often said that this novel began as I was walking down a street one day in Washington DC and I saw an Ethiopian immigrant standing behind the counter of a small little rundown grocery store. And the moment I saw me, I kind of stopped and I looked inside and almost instantly voice kind of popped into my head and that voice had a real distinct melancholy quality to it. And I knew that I needed to understand and figure out that voice and as soon as I thought that a line descended and it was the first line of the book and it was almost nobody comes into the store anymore. And I went straight home that evening and I wrote down what was probably the first three or four pages of the novel and those three or four pages continue to exist more or less to this day, even after all the edits that you go through.

And I was thinking that as a writer, you're drawn to a story like that because it has an easy kind of romantic quality. It reminded me of, there's a line from a poet who I don't remember anymore, of course, because it's hard to remember all the poets who say great poetic things. And the line said something like, "You wait for that one line to descend and when it descends, it seems to descend almost mercifully from heaven." And of course in the end books or poems, whatever the case may be, they don't actually descend from heaven and if anything there, and I'm going to steal another phrase from Joyce and say that if anything, they're actually forged and they're forged out of a larger political and historical consciousness that I think is always greater and larger than a writer's ability to understand, but it's the writer's obligation to try to interpret that as much as possible.

And since telling that story about walking down the street, I've had a chance to really think that if this novel begins or began anywhere, began somewhere in between those headlines, somewhere in between the first day that Emperor Hailey Selassie was arrested in 1974 and the day that I left Ethiopia in 1980 when I was only two years old, all the events that take place, of course, in that period are completely unknown to me. They exist beyond my memory, they exist beyond my ability to actually recall them directly, but yet I'm convinced that they are the central events probably to my life and they're the central reasons why I write and they're the reasons that I write out of. When Chris first asked me for a title of this talk, I wanted to say my title of the talk will be that I'll read for 30 minutes and then quietly duck away.

But then quickly I realized if there was one thing that I wanted to talk about, it was exile. And with a book like this, there's a way in which it often, not only just this book, but I think all books that have a similar sort of tone and feel to this, they're often put into this category of immigrant or refugee literature and I think the people who populate this novel, immigrants from Africa and populate other novels are often also kind of put into this category of immigrants or refugee. And to me, those are... It's not that they're not accurate terms, but they're also political terms. And they're terms that also have limited... They have limited ability to actually tell you anything. A person immigrants from a country, they migrate and they become a refugee, but those are just designations. There's a British writer who I knew and did a panel with once who said ... And one of the great things about being British is that wherever you go for however long, you're always just an expatriate.

You never actually are an immigrant or a refugee, that those are things that are assigned to another part of the population. And that was an interesting idea to me, and it sort of stayed with me. And I think part of the reason why is that those terms immigrant and refugee actually don't describe or do anything to tell you exactly in the ways in which people who have lost something actually live day to day. And for me, that term is actually exile. I think exile is probably the closest thing that we have to understanding that sense of absence and that sense of loss.

For me, exile isn't a political term and it's not a term that happens just because you leave a country, but it's a kind of condition of living and it's a state of being. And the more I've had a chance to think about this novel, the more I've actually thought that also, of course, exile is not something that's at all remotely unique to an immigrant experience. Exile, I think is something that happens out of that profound sense of loss that most people will experience at some point in times in their lives. You lose something and you wake up and you're forced to confront your world and it's an entirely different world and you have to kind of make sense out of that world as it exists now and that's the sort of power of

loss and that I think is also part of what it means to be in a state of exile, is that you're forced to reconstruct and reimagine your life under different circumstances.

The narrator of this novel, he's lost his country and he's lost his family and he's been living in Washington DC and he says for him, now that he's actually gone through this process of being in exhile, that what he wants now is to persist unnoticed through the days through to do no more harm. And that quiet sense of detachment I think is sometimes difficult to translate because it seems like this character or this narrator sitting in a state of stasis, but I think what he's actually doing is he's living completely, but he's living in that state of exile, he's living in that state of profound loss that you don't actually, that you're not able to easily recover from, or that perhaps you can't and maybe shouldn't always be able to recover from. Exile happens, I think, to all of us in different ways and we grow up with it in different ways.

And the trick is trying to also convince people of exactly how and why. I left Ethiopia when I was two years old. I can sort of claim that sense of exile, I think though because of the way in which exiles also passed on from generation to generation. I don't think it's something that's limited to the experience. I think the same way that if you lose somebody, you are always aware of their loss and that person's absence is passed on to your children or to your children's children. I think in the same way, the same thing happens when you lose a country. Growing up, I used to always hear, and it's difficult to say because my father is here, but this invocation of a brother who was lost during the revolution, and that always kind of stayed with me because here was somebody calling back a name of somebody who I never knew, but whose significance to my father always lived large and that sense of loss inevitably sort of permeates the way you see your own particular world.

Exile I think also means that you experience death in a certainly different way. The phone would sort of ring late at night and that means sometimes that somebody has died and it also means that sometimes you don't find out for a day or two because you were asleep at 3:00 AM when the phone rang. It means that also sometimes you're not always quite certain if you can understand your parents or if you're necessarily always sure that you can, or in my particular case, you can actually understand your grandmother. There's that loss of language, which I think is also the kind of greatest and most profound experience of exile and that can continues to sort of resonate.

There's some sort of counterpart also I think is that for those of us who leave, we're also actively leaving a place. And I've had a chance to go back to Ethiopia after 25 years and I went back and I got to go back to the house that my family lived in and the house that my parents actually sort of left and I got to sleep in the bedroom that was once inhabited by my mother and my sister and myself. And after two months I left. And as I was leaving, everybody who I... All of my family members, my aunts, uncles, cousins, almost none of whom I'd had a chance to know before, came out to say goodbye to me at the airport and my uncle's wife began to sort of really cry and a part of me almost had a difficult time understanding exactly why she was so heartbroken that I was leaving.

And just before I got to the airport, my mom's sister, my Aunt Asta explained to me, and I think it's actually like to read her exact words, but she said, "You know when people leave, they always say, oh, I'll see you very soon, but we never do. They go and they don't come back for 10 or 20 years and it's like they died almost." And I think that's one of the ways in which exiles is always completely passed on. And I've sometimes began to think of it as a kind of meat and gene. It's this thing that's transmitted

to the next generation the same way the color of our hair is or the color of our eyes is, and it's a part of us and one of the more interesting questions that I sometimes get is, why are you an African... Why are you considered an African or an Ethiopian writer?

You left America when you were only two years old. And does that really give you the right to say that you are African or Ethiopian? I don't even really speak the language of the country that I was born in. And I'm also imagining characters and creating a scenario of lives that occurred long before I was born. I'm imagining a city that I never actually even knew until after I finished writing this novel. And my first sometimes response is to say, "Well, I went to a bookstore and I'm shelved under the African literature section." So therefore I'm African, right? It makes sense. It doesn't quite always work that way though, I think.

I think if there's anything that makes me that... And I don't know if there's ever even one proper way of expressing that, it's that our histories persist and they linger with us longer than we think, that we don't get to shed them just because we've translated ourself into a different culture or because we can speak a different language. I think that's the sort of profound impact of history on our lives is that it maintains its presence even sometimes when we don't want it to. And if I'm Ethiopian or if I'm African, it's because of that ability to understand and live in that state of exile because I don't always quite understand exactly, or I'm very acutely aware perhaps of everything that gets lost in translation, but I don't want to make this entirely dark and depressing. And I'll also say that there's something about exile and that's in that absence and in that loss, I think that can also sometimes be a writer's greatest gift.

And if you read a lot of writers, you'll see that they've actually done incredible and amazing things with this. And I think that's part of because we have the ability to imagine. And if there's anything that I've learned to sort of trust and really have confidence and faith in, it's the power of imagination. It's the power of imagination to be able to take facts and history and recreate it into something that is more powerful and real than just names and dates on a page. People always say, "Well, what part of this novel is true to you? What part of this actually have you experienced?" And the sort of short answer is none of it. Actually, none of it... I can't say that anything that actually happens in this book has any direct bearing on my particular life. I had the ability to go to Georgetown and Columbia and I grew up in a very safe, secure house.

All the violence and tragedy that I can imagine in a novel were not at all mine. And I think people often ask that question because they don't always trust imagination and they don't always trust the ability that somebody can imagine a past more accurately and more faithfully than you can do it if you're just simply reporting it. I think this novel to me is actually full of facts and it definitely is. I mean, I've named the character after the main narrator of the novel is Cepha Stefanos, which is named partly after my grandfather. The narrator's father who dies and the revolution is named after my father. The uncles who are forced to flee Ethiopia are named after my uncle. And when I was writing it, of course, inevitably you feel this incredible sense of guilt and a deep sense of obligation because you're taking these stories and you're creating something that's sort of fictional out of them.

Before I began writing, I sat down with my uncle and... Long before I even thought I was going to write fiction and I sat down with my uncle and with my father and with my mother and with my grandmother and I tried to get these stories out of them and they did the best they could. And I remember my uncle specifically describing to me what it was like to leave and to see his friends die along the way. And the

best he could come up with was to say, "We lost a lot of friends and a lot of friends dying." I also remember that all the little newspaper headlines that I was reading earlier, they became inevitably a part of my consciousness and a part of my imagination and that particular sign, "We are tired of burying them." Came back to me while I was in the middle of writing this novel and it has to take on a different shape and form.

And in the middle of the novel, the narrator, Cepha Stefanos, he's recalling walking through the streets of Addis Ababa during the revolution and he says about the bodies in the street, "They were lined up in a row. Their feet bear just inside the entrance. They're impossible to miss or avoid. Hung around each of their necks was a cruelly made cardboard sign that simply read traitor."

I think I'd like to go back now to that quote from Marilyn Robinson that facts tell you nothing. Or if anything, it's actually facts that need explaining. By the time I began this novel, I had a small army of facts. I knew the dates and times of the Emperor Haile Selassie's arrest. I knew that when he was escorted out of the palace, there was a group of people who stood outside and yelled thief, thief. I knew where my father was that morning. I knew what my grandmother thought when she heard that the emperor was arrested and eventually I learned other facts as well. I knew that since the end of the colonial era, there have been 180 coups inside of Africa. I knew that Valentine Strasser at 25 years old became the youngest head of state in the world and that he himself was inevitably deposed in another coup.

I know that the current president of Equatorial Guinea came to power after deposing his own uncle in another coup. And that Bukasa, the former head of the Central Africa Republic before being deposed in his own coup, used to own four chateaus in France. And over the years, I've spent dozens, if not hundreds of hours culling this information from books and from websites and you do so partly out of a frustration and partly out of an anger because you get tired of that cycle of coups and that political violence and you also get tired of the way in which those things cease to become or mean anything more to people than names and dates.

You get tired of the fact that these things are just little bits of information that float in and out of the news. I knew that my father missed my brother or that missed his brother, and I know that my grandfather died without my ever getting to see him again, but I think the only way any of those things could matter and the only way they could be anything more to me, and the only way they could be anything more to you, hopefully, other than a list of names and dates and places is if I sat down and wrote them and if I reinvented them and if I made them live all over again. Going to close with a reading, which I think as a fiction, I'm unbiased to my fiction can only do so much with this.

The scene takes place when the narrator of the novel Cepha Stefanos has been walking through Washington DC and he goes to visit his Uncle Berhan, who's been living in an apartment building and his uncle's been writing letters to people inside of the United States government and safely decides to go back to these letters and see what it can possibly tell him. The silver lockbox where he keeps his money hidden is in his bedroom closet behind a stack of cardboard boxes full of letters and newspaper clippings that he's been saving for years. For as long as he has been living in the United States, Berhan has been writing letters to the government. Every cabinet secretary from education to the interior has received a letter, along with the National Security Agency, the Congressional Budget Office, the various speakers of the House, along with the Senate minority and majority leaders, the chairs of every major

congressional committee, the White House chiefs of staff, the heads of the Republican and Democratic National Committees, and every Senator or Congressperson who has ever sponsored a bill he was even remotely interested in.

The letters were all neatly typed and printed out in duplicates on his brother's electronic typewriter. Each response he's received, he has stapled to his own letter and filed away. Taken altogether, they form a running dialogue between one man, himself, and an indifferent, if not wholly silent partner. One of those boxes contains only the letters he has written to the presidents of the United States. Those letters, unlike any others, are personal, although they go increasingly distant with time. The ones written in the past five years are simply the letters of a concerned and active citizen. Berhan is not in fact a citizen, only a permanent resident, which he will remain until he dies because in his heart, he will always be in Ethiopia.

In tone and in content, they are no different from any of the other letters concerning policy that he has written to other government officials great and small alike. These early letters to President Carter and Reagan are my favorite items in this apartment. If he were to die tomorrow, they would be the only things of his that I would want to keep. My uncle doesn't even know that I'm aware of their existence. He has them sword in the bottom of his closet in a blue and white box, unmarked out of embarrassment or pride. I'm not quite sure which.

His first letter was to President Carter. Despite the effort it takes to find it, I searched through the box, skimming past the letters he wrote to Reagan in his second term, frustrated and disappointed and the ones written during his first presidency, desperately optimistic. The letter is near the middle of the stack. He hasn't forgotten about it anymore than I have. Dear President Carter, I'm writing to you as a recent immigrant to the United States. I've come here from Ethiopia where I'm sure you know there's currently a bloody war happening. I'm one of those people for whom nothing is left of their country. Everything I have has been taken away from me. For many ages, the United States and Ethiopia have been close allies. There's a deep friendship between our two countries. Therefore, it is imperative that the United States, along with Ethiopia's friends in Europe, come to her aid at this critical juncture in her history.

I'm confident that with the US assistance, Ethiopia will be able to return to her former state immediately. I think it's the naivete of that letter that keeps us returning to it. I've never seen my uncle's expression while he reads it, but I imagine that there's at least a faint smile spread across his face. I think he would be amused as I am now at that sentence. There's a deep friendship between our two countries. The sentiment is somewhere in between school yard logic and the type of alliances you see only in movies that take place in galaxies far, far away. The awkward sentence. The one that is still difficult to read happens near the very beginning.

I'm one of those people for whom nothing is left of their home country. You can hear the syntax twist and strain as the sentence tries to make clear without revealing too much its full intention. I love the opening of that sentence. I'm one of those people. From that point, the sentence could have gone in an infinite number of directions. I'm one of those people who always cries at weddings. I'm one of those people who are always late for meetings. I'm one of those people who always looks good in red. Losing a country seems like such a casual and mundane affair when introduced that way.

My uncle is a quick learner. Soon, he shed his innocence. He learned to write sentences that were spare and more detailed. He clipped articles out of the New York Times and Washington Post and

included them with his letters. "Dear President Carter, you may have read yesterday's New York Times article on the current crisis in Ethiopia. The newspaper says that there are widespread reports of arrests and disappearances throughout the country. I want to tell you personally that these disappearances are in fact executions. This month alone I have learned of the death of at least 10 friends of mine. There are many more, I'm sure, that I have yet to learn about. Those that died were all taken away from their homes in front of their wives and children. My brother-in-law, [inaudible 00:44:02], was one of those men. He was beaten in front of his wife and two sons by government troops and then carried out of the house.

The soldiers who arrested him said he was an anti-revolutionary because they had found some flyers in his office. [inaudible 00:44:20] was a good man and an excellent father. I implore you not to let his death and the death of so many others like him pass in vain." He was wronged on two counts in that letter. My father was not carried out of the house. He walked out on his own. He was insistent on that point. It was the one thing he begged the troops for. They had beaten him nearly unconscious in our living room. Blood from his nose and eyes doubted the yellow walls and streaked to the chair he used to sit on when he came home from work. Still, he begged them. "I will walk out on my own two feet. That is it. That's all I want from you."

The second thing. The flyers they found did not belong to my father. They were mine. They were not found in his office, but in his bedroom where he had taken them the night before, after he had found them in my room. That was partially why the soldiers beat him so thoroughly. He had refused to tell him where the flyers had come from. Eventually, he said they were his. Of course, they didn't believe him, but that was never really the point anyway. The flyers were inconsequential. All they had was an acronym, Students for Democracy, and a time. There wasn't even a location on the flyer.

When my father said the flyers belonged to him, my mother made a desperate attempt to throw her body over his, but the soldiers were well practiced in handling situations like this. I remember the study to almost board error in which they conducted the whole affair. They saw her coming long before she even took her first step. One of them simply raised the butt of his gun and loved it directly at her chest. He didn't even have to turn around to see her coming. When she fell, it was as if someone had lifted her legs from under her and then pushed her backward while she was in midair. She seemed to float across the living room, light as air and just as inconsequential. And me? Where was I during all of this? Standing in a corner, holding my seven-year-old brother's head against my body. As soon as the soldiers entered the house, my father had made a point of telling them that they lived there alone with their two sons, ages seven and 12.

I was small for my age back then, small and skinny without even a trace of facial hair and a voice that still broke, especially when I was frightened. I'd volunteered to pass out flyers to people I could trust. I was only 16 at the time. I didn't believe in consequences yet. Thank you.

Thank you. And I think I forgot to add that. If you have questions, please pass them down the aisles and we'd love to... If you could stick around for a brief Q&A. Mr. PJ Mark, my agent, and Megan Lynch, my editor.

Speaker 4:

Dinaw, while we look through these questions, I'll just ask, maybe you can elaborate on this one to start. Cepha has a very distinct identity as an African in a community of African Americans. And maybe you can explain that sort of tension that exists.

Dinaw Mengestu:

Yeah. There's that sort of issue where I think it's easy to kind of lump people into a certain category and say that, especially in the United States, that if you have a certain skin tone, then obviously everybody's black. And Cepha being an African immigrant comes from what's, I think, a fairly recent phenomenon of an African diaspora population in the United States. And they bear, I think, a very different and distinct political and cultural history from African Americans in the United States. African Americans have been here for hundreds of years and they are sort of the victims of American history from slavery through the civil rights. And that's an entirely different political legacy than I think an African immigrant who comes here. We come here and we bear an entirely different legacy. We bear the legacy of our own countries and our own political histories, but we also have a different context and a different approach towards America.

And it's really easy to conflate the two. It's really easy to collapse them into one identity and say that it's all the same simply because it's a matter of color, but of course it's not. I think that there's a sort of greater and more profound complexity that we're, I think, just kind of beginning to understand now as we kind of are aware of a larger and more visible African immigrant population and we'll begin to understand exactly I think how those two populations, I think, have a real strong similarity in the United States, but also that there's a distinct difference. And there's been a growing... There's tension definitely between the two communities. And that tension, I think, revolves partly around who has access to certain resources because there's not enough resources for every single community in this country. There's not enough resources for, especially between immigrants and impoverished communities, whether they're coming in from Africa, whether they've been here since the beginning of the country.

Speaker 5:

First question from the crowd is, in many ways, Stefanos attempts to divorce himself from his heritage, distancing himself from the DC Ethiopian community. To what extent do modern day immigrants do you feel have to give up some of their heritage to fit into new lives in the US?

Dinaw Mengestu:

I don't think he's actually divorcing himself from his community. I think what he's doing is protecting his own sense of identity. He recognizes that what he wants and what... I mean, he isn't somebody who comes to America by choice. He's somebody who's forced to leave America because of the revolution and the politics surrounding it. And what he eventually decides is that if he's going to have a life in the United States, it has to be a life that's confined to kind of his own internal reality. He says specifically that, "My goal after being in the United States is to persist unnoticed and to do no more harm." And he also wants to kind of relieve himself of that expectation and that burden that I think a lot of immigrant communities can place on each other that, well, now that you're in the United States, you're supposed

to have a certain success and a certain affluence, you're supposed to perform certain gestures, and he's somebody who doesn't want to do that.

He chooses instead to kind of really isolate himself emotionally, not because he doesn't feel Ethiopian or because he doesn't have an attachment to his country, but actually I think it's the opposite. I think it's because his attachment to his country is so strong that he doesn't want ... There's a way in which you can have that performance of a culture in another country and he doesn't want to engage in that. He wants to sort of keep what he knows of Ethiopia entirely to himself.

Speaker 4:

This question is, what does Judith think of Cepha and is it only Naomi that holds them together?

Dinaw Mengestu:

Maybe I'll ask the audience to answer that question since people are grumbling about it. I think Judith is a character who's actually full of really, actually very good intentions. I think actually in a certain way for me, she really mirrors the kind of internal conflicts that Cepha has, which is that she's a woman who's been moving from home to home. She has this daughter and the two of them are actually, I think, trying to do pretty much the same thing that Cepha Stefanos is doing, which is to create a home inside of a community. It's to feel at ease and at peace and to find other people that they're connected and attached to. She has or potentially finds that ability with him. And at the same time, despite her really good intentions and despite the similar need that she has for home and the similar need that she has to feel connected to another person, I think she kind of also misses the fact that there's this complexity behind race and behind class that slightly alludes her.

Her good intentions are there, but what she doesn't quite see is how small gestures and small comments by her have the ability to really rupture and kind of cause a shift in their relationship. Not because she doesn't want to, but because it's really difficult sometimes to understand exactly what somebody else's experience is, especially when the way people communicate is never quite as honest or as good as it should be. And Judith and Cepha do the same thing. They kind of skirt around their issues and they don't actually communicate directly in the way that they should.

Speaker 5:

On the subject of Judith, here's something that sort of relates to Judith's interest in Tocqueville, which is, do you believe that there is a collective consciousness in the US, in the shared pursuit of freedom?

Dinaw Mengestu:

I think there is. Definitely. I think that was partly why I kind of turned and loved Tocqueville is that he gets parts of American culture really right. He gets an amazing amount incredibly wrong, but he wrote 1,700 pages or something like that. So you have to give him a certain leeway for inaccuracies. But what he does sort of understand is that there's a kind of ability in America to reinvent yourself and there's an ability in America to use language to also recreate yourself. And that is something I think distinctly American. And I think that also is partly why Cepha removes himself from that community. He has the ability to really, if you're in the United States to forge an identity, that's entirely his. He happens to

choose an identity that's very isolated, but that is also an expression of freedom. It's an expression of being able to be detached from obligations, from cultural burden.

It also means I think that you lose a certain historical context as well, which is the sort of flip side to Tocqueville's criticism of America and that ability to recreate ourselves is that we also have a kind of a historical sensibility. We tend to believe that we're always able to recreate ourselves quickly and that history bears little burden on our lives because we have that freedom and because that's a part of our cultural identity.

Speaker 4:

To what extent were the characters reflections of you? For instance, both you and Joseph are Georgetown graduates. Does Joseph's attitudes towards Africa reflect your attitude?

Dinaw Mengestu:

We're all the same people. But I mean, I think almost every writer ends up parceling up parts of their personality and you kind of split yourself into however many characters you possibly have. I don't have that many characters probably because my personality isn't quite fully formed yet. So I chose like five and I made it very easy and Joseph being one of them was really a character who does definitely kind of... You use all of your characters basically. You use them... I mean, they have their own integrity and their own strength as characters, but you are looking for a way to kind of express large parts of yourself through fiction. That's why, as most fiction writers feel like they have to write. And Joseph and Kenneth to the same degree became the ways of expressing some of that political frustration I think that I was talking about, that kind of anger of the way Africa has what it's become since the end of the colonial era.

I mean, the colonial era has its own entire baggage, which I can't deal with right now. But in that sort of post-colonial context and in that context of the America, the way you can see that their great lives and they're great people in these countries and they've been ruined not by their own inability to take charge of their lives, but because there's men and political governance and a lack of institutions that have determined their lives for them. And Joseph was one of those ways for me to really express that. And I love Dante and I use Joseph to squeeze in a quote from Dante.

Speaker 4:

Actually, to that end, can you also go explain a little bit more about the choice of having Joseph Kenneth and Cepha from different countries within Africa?

Dinaw Mengestu:

Well, since I left Africa at two years old, it was easy to just pick countries randomly because that wasn't really... That's not true. I wanted a complexity. There's a way in which obviously Africa... It gets said often that Africa's not a country and everybody apparently is supposed to know that, but every time you read the newspaper, you still see Africa as being a country. You can see it in the bylines, you can see it in the way the subject matter is treated. It inevitably gets reduced in a way that I think no other continent in this world could possibly be reduced. I had a geography professor of mine once say, he

listed all the countries in Africa and he named every single violent conflict that has happened in the continent's history, you see? And he said, what's amazing about this actually isn't that there have been so many conflicts, but that there haven't been more given the diversity and complexity of language and cultures inside of Africa.

It's not that there are that many, but that Africa is more complicated than it generally gets taken for. The best I could possibly do with this novel is to make three characters from three different countries and to give them very different political and historical backgrounds as to why they came to the United States. So Joseph comes for reasons that are closer to Cepha Stefanos. He's a political migrant and somebody like Kenneth is an economic migrant, but they all, I think, definitely bear different and they all come to America for very different reasons and they have very different approaches and attitudes towards America. And as much as possible, I wanted each of them to be able to kind of discuss what goes on inside of their countries. I mean, Kenneth expresses a real frustration at the conversations that Joseph and Cepha have regarding coups and wars because for him, Africa was a place that he grew up in very poor.

He grew up in the sums of Nairobi and he has very little tolerance for this dialogue of, we all left for best political refugees or exiles. For him Africa, as much as he may love it also represents a kind of very bleak future for him. And somebody like Cepha who came from a much more affluent background in Ethiopia is kind of much more tied to his country and is tied to the life that he once had.

Speaker 5:

So this question says, "I'm intrigued by Judith's comment early in the novel when she says, we just fall into our lives, is that destiny? How much can we really decide about our lives, especially from the immigrant perspective?" And sort of as a follow-up to that, I know that sort of implicitly in the novel, the divide in the immigrant experience between those who choose to come to the United States for reasons of economic opportunity and those who are sort of forced to come here for political reasons or reasons of sort of more violent upheaval and how that affects their immigrant experiences. Long question.

Dinaw Mengestu:

I think I remember that question.

Speaker 5:

But so we just fall into our lives. Is that destiny?

Dinaw Mengestu:

There we go. Yes, we fall into our lives. It's very easy. It's that question of agency of exactly how much responsibility a person is able to take over their lives. I think Cepha's response to Judith says, "Sometimes we just fall into our lives and we don't know how we get there." And she asks Cepha, "Well, how did you get to own a grocery store?" And his response is, "Well, luck." And she says, "Really?" And he says, "Or sometimes you just don't care where you land." And that for me is the sort of counterpart to that is that we do have a certain control over our lives. Of course, actually, I do believe that people are able and potentially possible to determine their situation, but for him, the interesting

thing about that conversation is the radically different ways that they both approach that is that for her, she sees it as a kind of slightly facetious serendipity point.

And for him, life has a kind of much more indeterminate factor. He doesn't have quite the agency that she has. He's not able to choose his life in the same way that she has, and he tries to make a joke out of it, but that joke kind of gets lost.

Speaker 4:

In the program this past week, there has been a question that has come up a lot. People are very concerned about the end. So this question is, how do you view the end? Do you think there is no change? Is there any hope for Cepha? And here's another question that says, will you write again about Cepha and tell us a little bit about how he is doing?

Dinaw Mengestu:

He's great. He's in Seattle right now and having a really good time. I don't know how many people have or haven't read the book, and if you haven't read the book, then... Well, what can I do? I'm sorry. But at the same time, I don't really... I am reluctant to always tell anybody how they should read the ending of a novel or how they should read any parts of a novel. I think you write something and it is up to the sort of readers to interpret it. I will say that when I wrote the last few lines of the novel, you see the ending coming and apparently unlike other readers, I was really optimistic. There we go.

But I want to keep factions going. So maybe if we can keep the optimism and the pessimism, I don't want to come in on anyone's side. I want to make sure that there's still a fight between these two opinions. But there is... It's a very kind of quiet and a very sort of restrained optimism because he does lose constantly. And that's maybe the hard thing about the book is that the loss in the book doesn't stop at a certain point. It sort of persists throughout. And I know that's not necessarily always the greatest thing you want to read as a reader, but at the same time, I think that is part of life, is that life is difficult and life is hard. And I tend to have a distrust of books that gave you that redemptive ending at the end. I don't know how many of us actually really get to have redemptive endings in our life.

What we do get, I think, is a kind of certain level of hope that we need. And for me, that's what the book ends on is a note of hope. It's not that everything gets to be better, but there is that possibility and that potential. That's the most I could possibly offer Cepha. If I tried to give him any more than just that, I think it would be cheating the reader and kind of cheating the character out of the reality of just how difficult it is to really create a life and just how far he's actually, I think, progressed by the end of the book. He goes through this long journey of walking through Washington DC and really recalling everything that's kind of made him who he is. And what he ends up with, I think at the end is that sort of small bit of affirmation that's much quieter and that can kind of sometimes sneak up on you.

And it's just that simple acceptance of who he is and where he's come from. And that often doesn't seem like much, I think. And I think maybe that's why people don't understand if it's optimistic or a happy ending because it's so easy to take that for granted. But I think for him, that sense of exactly who he is and where he's come from, regardless of whether it's good or bad, is the hardest thing for him to accept. It's what he actually doesn't have. He's chosen to live in between these two different worlds and he's kind of decided not to be in any one particular place because to be in Ethiopia... Well, he can't be

in Ethiopia and to live fully committed to America means he's also negating his attachments to his country and to his mother and to his brother. And so what he does get at the end is the ability to say, "Well, this is who I am and this is how I came here and this is what I have."

Whether it's good or bad is almost irrelevant because if you can get to that point, then you've at least made the first step, I think, in making a life for yourself. And that's all I really wanted for him, actually. If where he is now, he's in a better place.

Speaker 4:

This has also come up actually a couple of times in these programs and sort of the issue of gentrification and what a community can do. This question is actually, what can members of community do about gentrification? But I know that you have a very specific viewpoint on gentrification and sort of the issues surrounding it.

Dinaw Mengestu:

Yes, gentrification. I've had a chance a few times this week to give my treatise on gentrification. And it was one of those things when I was writing the novel, I actually had no deliberate intention of actually saying anything about gentrification. It wasn't something that you were... I think if you write as a novelist with any ideas about saying anything about anything, you're automatically damned to say nothing about it. But what I was sort of always curious about is the way in which people are always displaced. I'm always curious about the way in which people are forced out of homes and communities and in which the way displacement happens on multiple different levels. It happens, of course, I think with refugees and migrants, but it also happens inside of certain communities. And the term we use nowadays is gentrification. And while I was writing the novels, things unconsciously, gentrification was probably, I think just as it seems to be here, was the term that everybody was using in Brooklyn.

That was our word of the day. Every time we went out to dinner was the neighborhood's really gentrifying. And of course, I'm saying this with my friends who are all from Ivy League universities and we're complaining about the gentrification of our neighborhoods and you begin to think, well, that's not really fair and we haven't actually said anything besides the fact that we wish rent was cheaper and that doesn't really amount to much. But there's a flip side to that, which is also, I think that there's a sense that people are being displaced, that people are being forced out of their communities, not through any fault or through any reason of their own, but simply because we've had this massive economic real estate boom, but we've also had this growing divide between a poorer middle class and as the more we see that divide, the more we can see people being forced.

And we want our communities to get better. A poor community is not a strong community necessarily. It can have a deep sense of community, but it's also lacking basic resources from grocery stores to banks. And you know that's not a viable system. It's not something that anybody would rationally argue for. Well, that we should just maintain the status quo. That's not it at all. You want community development, but you want... I think there has to be a certain way, and I'm not a policymaker. There has to be a responsible way to make sure that our communities can grow and that they can develop and that they can do so in a responsible way. Gentrification has that tricky problem of also being a class issue in the United States, and we're really bad about class here. We really don't like to talk about

it. We've gotten more comfortable with race because it's there, but when class gets introduced, that's very difficult.

When class and race get introduced at the same time, that becomes even harder and gentrification ends up embodying both of those terms at the same time. And until you get comfortable with that dialogue about the fact that gentrification is a class issue, it's also increasingly a racial issue at the same time, but I think class is the superseding problem in that issue. And until we sort of look at that comfortably, then we continue to sit around at bars talking about gentrification.

Speaker 5:

Who are some of your favorite authors and what are you reading now? And I would add to that, I'd love to hear some of the rationale behind some of the authors and books that you referenced in the novel.

Dinaw Mengestu:

Favorite authors is always, I think everybody who's ever written anything would always say that there's an incredibly long list and it would change if you ask me in 25 minutes, but for right now, I will say quickly off the top of my head, Vias Nippal, Virginia Wolf, Tony Morrison, James Baldwin, Saul Bellows, Edward P. Jones. Those are all sort of fantastic writers, but I have very little to do with myself these days, so I read a lot. So I can't quite limit my favorite novels to any one category. When you're writing, I think you tend to find that you return to certain novels over and over. And while I was writing this particular novel, I definitely came back to certain books, all of which you can probably find small references to. So Vias Nippal's A Bend in the River, which is, I think, one of the best post-colonial African novels possible.

And while I was writing the novels, it's a book that it's about a South Asian migrant who's been living in what's the Congo, although it's not named for a couple of generations, and he is somebody who's definitely mirrors the narrator of this novel in a lot of ways. But what really got me was that Nippal was able to take the Congo and to take what was going on during the Mabutu regime and imagine it in a very slightly different way, but also to be really harsh and very critical about everybody who was a part of this world at this time. And he doesn't spare anybody and he doesn't let anybody get off easily. And when I was writing the book, I definitely kept returning back to that because I kind of wanted to be reminded of the necessity of being honest with your characters and being honest with the political reality that you're dealing with.

The Brothers K comes up a lot in the book and it comes up partly just because I read the novel and I really loved it, but also definitely because what happens at the very end of the novel is one of the brothers, Kay Al-Yosha gives what's one of the most beautiful and heartbreaking speeches and literature to a group of young boys about how if they can preserve just one memory from their childhood, then that just might be the means to save them. And I think that's partly I think what a lot of the characters in the book are trying to do is they're all trying to be saved in different ways and there's a sense in which if you can hold onto something beautiful and if you can hold onto something profound, then you can return to that. And that's something that nobody can take from you.

And that sort of mirrors I think what happens between the narrator and Naomi is that the two of them together create these beautiful memories for this child and also for Cepha and what he wants is for her

to remember and to hold onto those memories and he passes on that line to her at the very end or he memorizes that line in her honor and he wishes that something that he was able to tell her directly that if she can hold on to some of the memories that they had, then whatever else she may go through in her life, then she will at least have that.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for listening to this Seattle Public Library podcast.