Title: 2009 Seattle Reads 'My Jim': Main Event with Nancy Rawles

Speaker 1:

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For this, the main event of the 2009 Seattle Reads, My Jim, author Nancy Rawles, spoke on living with passion. My Jim, Ms. Rawles' third novel, tells the story of the family left behind when Jim from Mark Twain's adventures of Huckleberry Finn escapes down the river with Huck. Ms. Rawles notes that Twain's novel has a brief passage where Huck comes across Jim, crying, longing for and missing his wife and children. It's a moment when Huck realizes Jim's humanity. But Twain doesn't say anything more about that.

So, Ms. Rawles decided to create a wife for Jim, Sadie, and write her literary response to Huckleberry Finn. In the novel, we get a fuller picture of Jim and in Sadie's story, that of a woman who survives slavery and reconstruction.

Susan Hildreth:

Good evening. I'm Susan Hildreth and I'm the fairly new, almost new city librarian. Can't be new for too long, but I'm welcoming all of you to the Seattle Public Library, our Central Library. And I am just astounded. It's a tribute to the Seattle Public Library, and of course, to our wonderful local author, Nancy Rawles, that we have this huge crowd on Memorial Day weekend when the weather is good outside. I'm so impressed.

I would really like to thank all of you for joining us for this main event of our 2009 Seattle Reads, My Jim, and evening with Seattle author, Nancy Rawles. This is the 11th year of the Seattle Public Library's renowned Seattle Reads series, our first to feature a local author. In the past few years, hundreds of one book, community reading projects have taken place all over the country and internationally. The project, which is a wonderful project and has been modeled by the National Endowment for the Arts and is used all over, including my former state of California, originated here in Seattle, the Reading City. Absolutely.

And this program was the brainchild of Nancy Pearl and Chris Higashi, who did the first series in December 1998, and I'm very proud of our library for leading the way. I would first like to give a special thanks to the Seattle Public Library Foundation whose support makes possible so many of our free

library programs. We have many library foundation donors here with us tonight, and we want to say thank you very much for your support. Thank you, Library Foundation. You make a big difference.

We are also grateful to the Wallace Foundation for generous support for Seattle Reeds since the inception of the program and additional support comes from KUOW Public Radio and the Three Rivers Press. We also thank The Seattle Times for generous promotional support for library programs. Also, our ever-fast friends at the Elliott Bay Book Company, Rick Simonson and Karen Maeda Allman for being our longtime partner in Seattle Reads. Elliot Bay is here with Nancy Rawles' novel as well as other works from our recommended reading list.

And we have our community partner Central District Forum for Arts and Ideas and the Northwest African American Museum. Now, I'm going to turn things over to our wonderful staff person, Chris Higashi, program manager of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library who directs our annual Seattle Reads series, and she will introduce the rest of the program. Have a great evening. Thank you.

Chris Higashi:

So, I too want to say thank you very much for coming tonight. It has been a pleasure and a privilege and so much fun to spend the last few days with Nancy Rawles. So, here's what I have seen. Nancy, the writer, novelist, playwright, journalist, history major, teacher, performer, actor, and vocalist. Wednesday afternoon at the Northgate Community Center, I think she was answering a question about the language that she chose to tell Sadie's story, the music in those words.

And she sang a little piece in Creole and then another little piece in Amharic. I mean, oh, my, it was wonderful. Nancy was also on KUOW Public Radio on Wednesday morning. She did a live one-hour conversation with weekday host, Steve Scher. It was an amazing, amazing conversation and you can listen to it online at kuow.org. Then yesterday at Seattle Central Community College, she told me in advance, "I'm bringing 19 5th graders, my class." "Okay," I said. And then she said later on, "They're going to read excerpts from My Jim." "Okay." And then she said, "It's a performance." "Okay."

Well, so what happened was pairs of students performed, I mean, recited passages from My Jim. The first was young Jim and Sadie declaring their love for each other. After which little James, a student, broke into song. The Temptations, My Girl. With three other boys, they danced and sang My Girl. I mean, we were absolutely charmed and I cried. Okay.

So, this spring, we've had this great series of programs, films, panel discussions, author readings, a most amazing concert of gospel music at Seattle Pacific University. Now, that program, which probably many of you missed was videotaped by the Seattle Channel. It's going to start broadcasting and you can also watch it on your computer. We have one more of those yet to come after today, and that is the third in a three-part film series, film and discussion exploring the legacy of slavery that was developed and hosted by librarians in our arts and history department, and that will take place on June 21st. There are flyers and program brochures on the book sale table.

Twenty-nine library book groups have read and discussed My Jim. This is in addition, of course, to scores of other book groups. And what I heard over and over and over again was we thought we understood something about slave. We thought we knew about slavery from studying it as history, but it

took this work of literature to make us feel and understand what slavery did to people, its emotional toll and the suffering that it caused.

So, people have also asked me, "So, are other communities doing My Jim for the one book programs?" And I say no. But I hope what's going to happen is that other places take note of what we do for Seattle Reads, and I really do hope that other cities will choose My Jim. I mean, Nancy's beautifully written, powerful, painful, moving novel. I just know it's going to get more legs.

Okay. So, the format for tonight is that Nancy's going to talk about living with passion. Following that, she will answer some questions. Okay. So, with that, ask you to join in welcoming the wonderful, amazing writer, Nancy Rawles, to the Seattle Public Library. Thank you.

Nancy Rawles:

Thank you. It is so lovely to be here. I'm sure no other Seattle Reads author has been able to look out into the audience and see all these friends and family. It is just marvelous. So, thank you and thank you for your support over the years. I really want to start by thanking the library and especially Chris Higashi. This is such a big job to produce something like this, and it just has been seamless and I so appreciate the work that the library has done. So, thank you very much to everyone at the library.

I'm going to read to you tonight, and I'm also going to talk about living with passion and about the word itself. I want to start with just some really beautiful words that are ... I just love this passage. And the book I'm reading from is called Touch the Earth, and it's a collection of Native American speeches mostly, and it was put together by a young woman named T.C. McLuhan. I think she's Canadian in the '70s.

I was visiting with my aunt and uncle in New Orleans. They're both professors at Tulane, and they had this lying on their coffee table. And as the family was talking, and I think I was probably about, oh, I don't know, maybe 12 and bored. And I picked up this book, and it was just the most amazing revelation to me to read these words.

So, a great hunter, brave warrior, an eloquent spokesman, Crowfoot was born in 1821 at Blackfoot Crossing on the Bow River, now territory in the province of Alberta, Canada. He quickly rose as an orator for the Blackfoot Confederacy. In September 1877, on behalf of his nation, he unwillingly but trustfully ceded 50,000 square miles of its prairie land to the Canadian government, a treaty which led to the rapid disappearance of the buffalo and the near starvation of the black feet. I'm sorry. In April of 1890, in his dying hours, his last words were of life.

And since we're going to be talking about all those big subjects, life and death and passion and everything, I thought I would start with the last words of Crowfoot. What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset and that's it. That's life.

Okay. My topic for tonight is living with passion and I love etymology. So, I picked this topic not lightly. I knew that passion had a huge story behind it. It comes to us through the Latin and it also comes through the Greek. The Greek is Pathos, Pentos, which actually has to do with suffering. And any of you who grew up, I don't know if it's specifically Christian or Catholic or what, I grew up Catholic and

there was this wonderful phrase about the Passion of Christ, which when I was young, I thought, isn't this marvelous that Christ was passionate? Oh, great. Who knew?

But then I found out that to the Catholic Church, actually the Passion of Christ were His last day's living, His suffering. And that when you look at passion in the dictionary, it says, any strong feeling, love, hate, anger, envy. And when you look at the dictionary, then it has a bunch of other definitions and you think, "Well, this is not a very precise word," until you realize that especially through the Latin, passion is equated with feeling. So, basically, what they're saying is, if you feel, you will suffer. That's the meaning behind the word.

So, any of you who came thinking that I was going to be really passionate tonight and talk about wonderful, passionate, hot, sexy things should probably leave right now, because that's probably what we mean when we think passion nowadays, but that is certainly not the root of the word. It's a very complex word. It's a very complicated idea. So, I wanted to talk tonight about living with passion and living with feeling and suffering because of that.

Compassion, of course, is being able to suffer with somebody or to be with somebody and suffering. And when the Dalai Lama was here last year, all of the schools in Seattle and everybody around, we did these programs on compassion and we said, "What is compassion? What does compassion mean to you? " And all of our kids wrote these wonderful things and made these wonderful designs about it means being nice, it means being kind, it means being gentle. Well, no. I mean, you certainly could be kind and gentle and nice if you were being compassionate, but it really means sitting with, standing with, holding the hand, being with somebody, being able to look in the face at suffering. That's what compassion is.

And I had a student last year who was ... So, of course, my poor group, and I know there are former students here from Lake Washington Girls Middle School. Actually, could you guys just clap so I can see how many of you are in the audience? That is so wonderful that you came back to hear yet another diatribe by your former teacher. But at Lake Washington Girls Middle School, wonderful school that my daughter attends, and I was fortunate enough to teach there for two years, really excellent students. And we got to talk about all kinds of things.

And my R&R group, each teacher has a kind of an advisory group. They had to listen to me go on and on and on. It's like all the other groups could do nice posters and say it's nice and kind and let's all be loving and get along. And my poor group had to listen to me go on and on and on. No, it's suffering, kids. It's suffering. So, I remember that one girl when we were talking about this, she talked about how she was feeling bad and she was ... I think she might have been crying and how her friend just came and sat with her. She said nothing. She just sat there for hours. That's compassion. That's what it's about, being able to sit with suffering and stand with suffering.

And I think I had ... I really don't go to church very much anymore. So, anybody here from St. Therese knows that's true because you don't see me anymore. But it's a wonderful church and actually is acknowledged in My Jim because people there helped with just by reading Huckleberry Finn and talking these endless talks about what it meant to them. But I've gone through many, many different stages with my Catholicism and growing up Catholic and I was going through a stage where I wouldn't take communion, because I just thought that whole body and blood of Jesus thing was creepy and I just didn't want to have anything to do with it.

And then I, one day a lightning bolt, I got this, "Oh, my God, that means I'm standing with people and suffering the sacrificial lamb. It's a beautiful thing. Let me run up and get that host and really be part of this communion and community." So, I've obviously thought a lot about these things. And writing My Jim put me in a place of so much feeling and I want to just say sometimes despair. Anybody who has ever lived with me and you don't have to stand up or anything, you know who you are, knows that when I am writing and when I am writing a book like this, it is no fun to live with me. I did not really want to be in the 1,800s for very long.

So, the first draft I went through very quickly because it was some just intense months of trying to feel even a 10th, 100th, 1,000th of what people must have felt going through those experiences. And it was really, really difficult, very, very difficult, but I'm not going to bore you with that. What I want to do is I want to read to you. I want to talk to you about different influences on me. I want to talk to you a little bit about growing up as a very feeling child, which I know there are a lot of other people in this audience who grew up as very feeling children. I have a class that is ... I mean, I've been teaching for about 25 years and they are maybe the most sensitive class I've ever had in my life.

There's one root connected to passion, which is Pei, P-E-I. And I was so struck with how much that sounded like pain, so I looked up to see if it was connected to pain, only in the sense that it meant hurt, and it was in the sense of feeling. So, to hurt, but not to hurt somebody, to hurt because you feel so much. And I'm used to working with students and often I have students who are this way, and I was this way as a child. It probably helped that I was a child at the time of ... Well, my biggest year, the year I remember the best, was when I was 10, and it was 1968. And I remember the assassination of Dr. King, and I remember the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, and I remember the Democratic Convention in Chicago, and Mayor Daley's order to shoot to kill the protestors.

I remember how my brothers so relentlessly teased me by claiming they were for Nixon, just so they could make me furious and make me cry and run out of the room and beg my parents to make them stop. And this was the year that my baby came into my life. It's a good thing she isn't here. She emailed me and said, "Good luck tonight. Wish I could be there." And I wrote back and I said, "Oh, honey, you're always here. You're always here in spirit and it's a good thing you're not going to be here tonight because I'm going to talk about you."

This is my sister. She's 10 years younger than me. She was born in 1968 and I just knew that my parents had had that baby for me. In fact, I was so sure of it because about seven months earlier, I had asked them for a dog. And my father said, "Hmm, that's an interesting idea, dog." He said, "Well, you think you're big enough to take care of a dog?" I said, "Oh yeah, dad. I'd love to take care of a dog." He said, "Well, you know what? You can either have a dog or a baby, which would you prefer?" And I said, "Let me think about it." And I went away for two days and I thought really, really hard. And then I came back and I said, "If the baby can be a girl, I will take the baby."

So, in September of 1968, after the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, after the assassination of Martin Luther King, a really tumultuous time, we were living in Crenshaw. We had moved there after the Watts riots from Watts. I mean, this was a heavy-duty time to be growing up. My first, earliest memory, historical, political memory is John Kennedy's assassination. I was in kindergarten. I'm in the last group that can remember how upset the nuns were, how upset our parents were, how it was announced over the loudspeaker, how some of our parents, our grieving parents came and got us and took us home

early and we sat in front of the TV and we knew we weren't supposed to say anything because all the adults were so upset and we sat in front of the TV and we watched John-John and Carolyn who were our age and tried to understand what was going on in our country.

So, this was a pretty heavy time to be growing up, as many of you remember. And here comes this baby, here comes this hope, here comes this new life, and she was just my baby. So, the picture of me, Christmas, sitting under the tree in my new robe, which I just so desperately needed, with that baby in my arms, that three-month-old baby, a little bit more, I guess, and the book, the first book that had really, really hooked me. I didn't get hooked on books until 5th grade. So, I like teaching 5th grade because a lot of my kids are not yet hooked on books and I might have a chance to help them out there. And I've helped quite a few this year and it's a nice thing.

Reading is not the easiest thing for me. I'm an audio person, I'm a listener. A lot of meaning comes to me through my ears. Usually, when I'm reading, I can hear the voices in my head. I'm a very slow reader. So, I was not one of these kids who devoured books. But in 1968, I got a book for Christmas and you're going to look at scans when you hear what it was. I was growing up in LA, okay? Just give me a break. This is the home of the movies. It was segregated. All the Black stars lived in the neighborhood. Well, not quite in the neighborhood. They lived up in the hills, but you'd see them and you'd see them shopping at the Crenshaw Broadway.

Nobody probably remembers Leslie Uggams, but there she was at the table right out front where the bargain clothes were. I mean, this was the way it was in LA. Everybody knows somebody in the business. It's a very strange town. Little aside, when we visited New Orleans and my cousins would be watching Soul Train and we'd come in and we'd go, "Oh, wow. Look who's on this week. Can you believe they put St. Mary's on? They can't dance. Look at that boy. Oh, my God." And we knew all the kids on Soul Train and they'd say, "You know people on" ... I mean, this is LA. If you've lived in LA, you understand this phenomenon.

So, here I am in LA with the movies and the wonderful movie that I just saw a live reprise of from Lake Washington Girls Middle School, Oliver. Oliver was out and I had loved Oliver. So, my parents bought me the book, not Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens. They bought me the movie book that are all the pictures in it, they're black and white. But it did have also some really moving writing. And I was just in love with the fact that Dickens would write about these poor people who were outcast.

And when I later was introduced to Mark Twain, I really loved that Mark Twain wrote about poor people who were outcast and I started reading books and devouring books and going to the library and checking everything out. And the books that really grabbed me were about poor people who were outcast and they were books about, or even photographs, those photographs of the WPA. And that's what loomed large in my life, the poems about working people. So, this is really what influenced me and the fact that it was at that time, at that heady time, historically, I feel that I'm very much a person of my time, very much influenced by my time, which is probably why I love history so much because it's so palpable to me. It's not something away, it's something very, very close.

So, here I am with Oliver. My mother does the most wonderful thing that any mother could possibly do in the world for a child living in the Crenshaw District of Los Angeles. I don't know where she got the tickets, but somebody gave her tickets and she took me, only me. She left those awful brothers at home

and we went and saw Fiddler on the Roof. Oh, my God. I was in love with musical theater. In fact, the first thing I ever wrote was musical theater.

Again, poor people who were outcast. This theme kept coming up. We didn't feel poor. I mean, my dad would always tell us we were poor, but we didn't feel poor and I don't think we really were poor. And certainly, for Black America at the time, we were middle class. It would have been maybe lower middle class or working class in white America, but it was solidly middle class in Black America. We were going from Watts to Crenshaw. I mean, Crenshaw had been a Jewish neighborhood and it was still very heavenly Japanese neighborhood and everybody had their little houses and that was a nice middle-class upbringing. People were accomplished. People were proud. But wow, did I ever feel outcast? And the rest of Los Angeles was so foreign to me.

I remember leaving. That happened also the year I was 10. My parents decided that we needed some integration. Actually, it wasn't them. It was a friend of theirs who worked for the school system who said, "Look, there's this experiment happening in integration. We need a bunch of little kids from this neighborhood to go over to the West Side, so I'm calling up all my friends and you're sending your kids." He was with the school district. So, they put us on the bus and we went over to Overland Elementary School in the West Side and it was frightening. It was weird getting off that bus.

And then it was just really pretty terrific because those kids had classes we didn't have. I mean, they could take TV, they had cameras, they could make their own shows. They had sculpture and photography and all this stuff we didn't have. So, it was pretty darn cool after we got into it, but it was scary. And I remember really just shaking and being really scared. And then having this pretty good first day and my brother was with me and he'd had a pretty good first day. So, we come home and my mother, the first thing she says is how many Black kids were there? And I said, "Mother, you're putting us through this ordeal because you believe in integration. So, why is that the first question out of your mouth?" I was really offended.

Of course, later, when I would go back to that side of town or to that college, the first thing I did was look around and go, "How many Black people are there here?" But then I wasn't quite sure about the whole thing. And it was a tremendous experience. A lot of people who write and talk about culture say that things that happened before you're 10 really are important, because you can go back to them and you can do them again and you feel not so scared about them.

So, all of those programs where they took us to the symphony and we talked through the whole symphony and we chewed gum and we were those awful little ghetto children. We were horrible. I mean, to think what Zubin Mehta or Mahle Mehta was actually his dad who did the symphony for us put up with. It horrifies me to think about it. They took us to four concerts. And here's the really bad part, but maybe some of the teenagers here will appreciate this because you know how much you get into your teenage culture.

Well, our teenage culture at the time was Love American Style. This really awful TV show that was a little bit racy. And so, we went to gab about it and we sat there with the Los Angeles Philharmonic talking about Love American Style. I mean, how inane and just insulting could that be? And they played all this beautiful music and none of us could relate to it at all. Then for the last concert, they played the music of Leonard Bernstein and Westside Story. And we sat up in our seats. We said, "Wow, this is really good." We don't know what it is, but it is fantastic.

And later, as a teenager, as an adult, a young adult, a college student, I thought I could go back to the symphony when I lived in Chicago, that that was my place. I could go there, because I had been taken there as a pretty ignorant child. So, these experiences are really important. And those of you who support them and fund them and everything, teachers don't underestimate how important it is for children to experience even once something outside of their world. It's so important, especially young.

So, now you've got the background. Well, fast forward a couple years to Audubon Junior High Summer School with Mrs. Evelyn Kruse. K-Ruse, I've heard it. It's really pronounced, K-R-U-S-E. It's Lebanese name. And she did not call herself a Lebanese-American. She called herself an American-Lebanese. She thought the American part should come first. Talk about passionate and just loud and just wonderful. This teacher who was just on fire for teaching us creative writing, she really is the reason I am a writer today because she saw me and she wrote this note home to my mother saying, "I teach a lot of kids, but I don't know. I think this kid might have it. She's really special."

And my mother showed me the note and read me the note and I loved Mrs. Kruse. I took Mrs. Kruse every subject I could, and she is the reason why I'm standing here today. She's a wonderful, wonderful woman. Well, besides teaching me and ... She would put on Simon and Garfunkel. That's what she would do. That was her idea of a class. Her idea of a class was put on I am a rock and make these kids write. What does it mean? Come on, kids. I mean, she was Sound of Silence. Put on the Sound of Silence and make these kids write and talk about the poetry in the music. I mean, she was quite amazing.

Well, when I was finally out of junior high and too old to take Mrs. Kruse's classes anymore, she gave me a gift of a book. And the book she gave me had particular resonance for her because it was a book written by a Lebanese man, Druze man out of Lebanon named Kahlil Gibran. It was The Prophet. Well, I was so impressed with the words, but I was also just mindly impressed that a school teacher would give me a book with drawings of naked people in it. I mean, I thought she must really think I am mature. I was about 13 and I showed the book to my parents and they just acted like there was nothing unusual about this book. I'm sure there were naked people and hey, they believed in reading everything.

I had no restrictions when I went to the library. Check out anything, ask them questions about it, they would be amused and try not to laugh and it was just fine with them. So, here are some of the words that first inspired me and made me think as a young person. And I do think they are pertinent to this topic today of living with passion. If in your fear you would seek only love's peace and love's pleasure, then it is better for you that you cover your nakedness and pass out of love's threshing floor into the seasonless world where you shall laugh, but not all of your laughter; and weep, but not all of your tears.

Passion is about laughing all of your laughter and weeping all of your tears. And if you live with passion, you will suffer and you will be able to bring meaning to that suffering and turn it into something. That's what artists do and that's what many people do. We bring meaning to difficulty and sometimes we bring beauty and make something beautiful out of it.

Here's Gibran again. You have been told also that life is darkness. And in your weariness, you echo what was said by the weary. And I say that life is indeed darkness. Save when there is urge and all urge is blind. Save when there is knowledge and all knowledge is vain. Save when there is work and all work is empty. Save when there is love. And when you work with love, you bind yourself to yourself and to one another and to God. And what is it to work with love?

It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth. It is to build a house with affection, even as if your beloved were to dwell in the house. It is to sow seeds with tenderness and reap the harvest with joy, even as if your beloved were to eat the fruit. It is to charge all things you fashion with the breath of your own spirit and to know that all the blessed dead are standing about and watching you.

Those of you who have read My Jim, you can probably hear some Nancy Rawles philosophy that squares with Kahlil Gibran philosophy. This was one of my favorite lines as a child. Work is love made visible. And if you cannot work with love, but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy. That so struck me. It so struck me. And I have tried to work with joy all of my life and sometimes it's really, really a struggle and I understand that struggle.

Okay. One more thing. This is Gibran on your reason and your passion. Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul. If either your sails or your rudder be broken, you can but toss and drift or else be held at a standstill and mid-seas. For reason, ruling alone is a force confining and passion unattended is a flame that burns to its own destruction. Therefore, let your soul exalt your reason to the height of passion that it may sing and let it direct your passion with reason that your passion may live through its own daily resurrection and like the phoenix rise above its own ashes. So, young people and all people, this book is maligned by the cynical sometimes, but this was a book that set me on a path.

All right. A couple of other books in that vein, and then I'm going to move on to my work and some of the work that you see here. I'm not going to read this. I'm going to just tell you some of the other books and some of the other things that one was To Kill a Mockingbird, of course, of course lives on, and the speech that Atticus Finch gives on behalf of Tom Robinson at that trial is just one of the most beautiful things I've ever read. And it is so passionate and is so reasonable, both together.

Another man who was such a great influence, I checked out everything I could from the library of James Baldwin. And I wanted to read to you some Jimmy Baldwin tonight because boy is this passionate stuff. This is Go Tell It on the Mountain, but I am out of time. It's too bad. Okay. Those of you who've had me in class know that one of my favorite things to read is especially the first scene of Richard Wright's Black Boy when he sets the curtains on fire. And those of you, I don't know if any of you fall into this category, hopefully not, but any of you who have been not very good students, who don't take responsibility for your own actions, have heard me read another story from this book, which is when he kills the cat.

And his mother says, "You can kill it, but you can't make it live again." And she makes him go out in the night and bury the cat. And then she says, "You owe a debt you can never pay." I lay that on my poor little 10-year-olds. Isn't that just horrible? All right. The books that led up to My Jim are really different books from My Jim, but because you've listened to me go on and on and on about this and my childhood and everything, you will understand the connection between these books. I'm going to read a little part from Love Like Gumbo, which is just about mourning.

And this is a very different book than My Jim and these books try to use humor. So, if you find anything funny, please don't feel that you will be making me upset because I like to talk about suffering. Okay. Here we go. This is from a chapter called The Cemetery and it's Monday, December 25th, 1978.

Mourning was what the Broussards did best. On any given day, family members of every age and ability could be found engaged in the soulful activity. They mourned the passing of trains, the bulldozing of buildings, the demise of neighborhoods. They mourned when they were apart, when they were together and when they were in transit.

Love was tied in their hearts to mourning. Even a recalcitrant Broussard like Grace knew that love and death went hand in love. Boy, I was a gloomy child. Okay. This actually, this is Crawfish Dreams, which follows the same Broussard family. And I don't have time to read this, so I'm not going to, but I was going to read for you a scene in which the grandson, "Why don't I have time? Is it because I have to take questions?" You guys don't have any questions, do you? Come on. I'm telling you my whole life. Who could have a question? Okay. I'm going to read you this scene.

She called to her grandson who was lingering on the porch. She called him into the kitchen where she was washing the dishes from Mother Gibson's last meal. She looked at all 20 years of him and struggled to make sense of it all. At 20, her father was a fisherman-farmer out in his boat at 4:00 in the morning. Home by 7:00 with the morning's catch, eating grits while her mother cleaned fish, working the fields till sundown, chewing tobacco, coughing all night.

At 20, her husband was measuring the dead, smoothing their boards, finishing their beds all the while they were watching him work. At 20, her sons were unloading ships, hauling lumber, crawling under cars, sweating over books, killing people for their government. Nicholas was 20, but he was still not a man in her eyes. He was 16 when he had come to her while she was chopping vegetables and asked her to give him some money. When she refused, he became threatening, coming up behind her as she stood at the stove, pressing her arms together and shaking her before he stormed out of the house.

When she went back to her cutting board, she saw that the knife was missing. In a fog of panic, she followed him down the street and there was her best friend coming out of church with her cane. She watched in horror as he pushed Mother Gibson to the ground and pulled her purse from her shoulder. It was Camille's knife that he had stabbed her with. Mother Gibson had forgiven him, but Camille still couldn't find it in her heart to do the same.

She remembered her friend's broken face at the trial, the description of how she tried to raise herself from the pavement after Nicholas pushed her down, her realization that she was bleeding, her fear of returning home from the hospital. "Why are you here?" Camille looked at her grandson hard. In her hand, she held a wooden spoon. He shrugged his shoulders. "You come now when it's too late." "All that time I wanted you to come and you didn't have the courage." He chewed his bottom lip. "You had the audacity to stab her and throw her to the ground." She picked up a glass and threw it against the sink. He looked at his shoes. "But you didn't have the courage to come here and tell her you were sorry."

Her eyes flashed with the fury of the betrayed. "I'm sorry, grandma. Tell it to the dead." Camille shattered the plate she was washing. Nicholas looked down at his hands as if he might find blood there, but it was Camille who was bleeding. She wrapped her hand in a dish towel. "You drove her from her home. Why are you here?" She railed at him. "How dare you carry her body?" "I need you to forgive me." His voice was so small, it took him by surprise. He had not sought forgiveness from anyone since he was seven years old, forced to go to confession as part of his first communion. "Bless me, father, for I have sinned." He didn't know why he was confessing since he hadn't committed a crime.

It was only now standing in his victim's house that he understood the difference between a crime and a sin. A crime you commit against an enemy, the weak. Sin, you save for those closest in hand. Crime is created by law. Sin is forged in longing. Crime comes and waves, rides for revenge, seeks public recognition for its cunning and prowess. Sin happens in the silent spaces of the heart. You pay for your crimes. You starve for your sins.

Camille slammed two pants on the counter, rattling the spoons inside. She could feel the tension rising from the base of her spine to the base of her neck. "You can't just say sorry, not if the sin is a big one. You have to do sorry every day to show that you understand the harm you caused." Nicholas shook involuntarily. "You're going to let me stay on at the restaurant?" How else are you going to pay me?" she said. "How else I'm going to pay you?" "That's what I've been trying to do, you know. I should have stopped your father from beating you and your grandfather from beating him. I was so busy trying to protect y'all from the streets and that wasn't where you needed me."

Nicholas was crying. She took him in her arms and cried along with him. Their tears fell free and easy. She mourned Mother Gibson and her own mother. She cried over the loss of her infant daughter who died in 1944. She grieved for T-Papa and his violent humanity for her long ago rape and the rape of their neighborhood, the mangled vengeance of her grandson's sin. God had put this man child in her path. Together, they had discovered a way to come clean, which didn't involve any purifying flames, saltwater dripping down your chin.

Okay. I guess I can't read much from My Jim because time is up, but I'll read a little bit. Who cares about this book anyway? Okay. I'll just read my favorite thing to read, which only takes a minute. It was one of my favorite things to write too, and it was the hardest thing in a way. When freedom finally come, I ain't feels it right away. They call us up to the house, troops at the house, mass in New Orleans. Colored soldier read us a letter about freedom. Say those of us wants to stay on can stay on for pay. Andrew ain't want to hear nothing about staying. He got a brother living along the Red River. They can get some a place to farm and work for their cells. We leaving soon as we wakes up in the morning.

We packs up some food and water and joins the lines moving north. We walks and walks. None of us got no money to ride the steamer. We used to ride as slaves. We free, so we got to walk. Folks think freedom going to look one way, but it look all kind of ways. Sometime it look like slavery. Folks think freedom, something like a button or a tooth. Something you can hold onto ain't going to break, but you can break a button with a tooth and break a tooth with a button and both of them really easy to lose. Even when you know right where they drop, you still going to look and can't find them. Is freedom a place? It's a place you pass through.

That was my favorite part to read and write and think about because I had to meditate on that. But you know what? That's a gloomy thought to leave people with. So, I'm going to read the last three paragraphs of the book, which are less gloomy. I think I read this on the radio though, this is redundant. But you know, Chris, a little redundancy for Chris. Come here, Chris. Chris has been with me through this whole ... I mean, she's been just so amazing. Come here.

And I have tried to honor her by doing different things at every presentation because I thought nobody may show up, but Chris will be there. And Chris might be bored. So, if you've heard this before, oh, well. Everybody who love come back. Sooner or later, they come for you. You feel a hand on your shoulder or their spirits in the room with you? Some sitting quiet, some raging, settling over you like

dust. Sometimes it's their voice that come or their fingers pulling your hair in the night. I gives you my first heart, Marianne. The heart I got from my mama and the heart I got from my Jim. You show me my heart again when you ask me about my things. There's spirits and things. You take that quilt wherever you go. When you old and wore, you think on me and all the others love you. You close your eyes and feel our love coming up behind you. That's all you got in the world.

Thank you. So, Chris, do people get a break to go to the bathroom or anything? I mean, do they get a break? Can they stand or do anything? I'm a teacher and these chairs are not the most comfortable chairs. I just know they're not. I've sat in them. I do want to just say one last thing, which is that the quilt referred to in the book was actually fashioned by some wonderful artists, a family of quilters in Virginia. Anybody who knows Jimmy Watkins in town or the chef, the great chef. These are his relatives, his aunt Nancy Gibson and her daughter and her daughter and her daughter in a small town in Virginia. Aunt Nancy sewed quilts all of her life, made quilts, peace quilts, and she actually taught a masterclass at the Smithsonian.

And Tina Hoggatt, who did the illustrations for the book and did the centerpiece for the quilt, worked with them to put together this quilt. So, we've draped it over the piano and you're going to be really free to look at it. The other thing I want to turn your attention to, which if I were sitting in the audience, I probably would not even be able to look at me speaking, but would have to look at this because this is amazing. It's Sadie and probably making this piece took as much passion and suffering as making the book, maybe I kid you not.

But the model for it was a much, much loved woman in town named Monica Spooner-Jordan. She has died maybe a year and a half ago. I don't remember. It was a year and a half ago? And she was from Louisiana. She knew what it was. She knew what a hard life was. And she read the book and she said, "Oh, man. I could so be Sadie." And after a while she was walking around her house going, "Jim, don't leave me." Monica was very dramatic. And Monica was the model and the sculptor, amazing artist who fashioned this work, is Maureen O'Neill, who's here.

So, you were able to come down and you look at it, you can touch it. Just don't rock it. It will kill you. It is bronze. Do not let it fall, but actually it's very sturdy on that stand, but feel free to touch it. It's a very nice experience touching this Sadie. Okay. Questions? Nobody asked me. Come on. Come on. Give me a break. Amazing questions. Okay.

Chris Higashi:

Okay. How did you research the herbal lore?

Nancy Rawles:

How did I research ...

Chris Higashi:

The herbal lore?

Nancy Rawles:

Oh, the herbal. Yes. That was actually the most difficult part for me to research. It took a whole lot of reading and I didn't get to visit. When I was in Missouri, I didn't visit the botanical gardens. I'd been there before the Shaw Gardens in St. Louis. But they have information about it. There are actually books written in the 1800s about what we would call herbal medicine. And it was amazing to me how much tobacco was used for things. I was readily available and apparently good for a lot of different things.

I did go to Hannibal and I did study and find out what would have been the roots and the trees and everything available to her at that time. But it took me a lot. It probably took me six months to research that because I really didn't know about it and I had to talk to people. Also, somebody who's acknowledged in the book is Sharla Fett who wrote a wonderful, wonderful book called Working Cures about slave healers. And we saw her at that great conference on slavery at the University of Washington. And I got her book and talked to her and she read this book in its first draft form and was my really just right arm historian. That was the left arm, right arm. She teaches at Occidental. Yeah. Really great woman.

Chris Higashi:

The song, Motherless Child, did it have its origins in the 1800s in the slave times?

Nancy Rawles:

I actually think it was around before then. It's a spiritual. So, like all of the spirituals, it's one of the earliest songs associated with the Americas. I mean, it's just one of the earliest songs thought to have been sung by people here along with a lot of other spirituals.

Chris Higashi:

Why didn't Sadie go with Jim in the end?

Nancy Rawles:

These hopeless romantics in the aisle here. No. Actually, I get that question. I love that question because it was hard for me to decide whether or not she was going to go. And then it wasn't hard at all when I finally figured out who she was and what it meant for her to be with her children. When I figured that out, then I knew she wouldn't go with Jim because Jim was this almost sacred person from her past and from her youth and she held onto his love and that helped her survive just like it helped Viktor Frankl survive the death camps, holding onto the love of his wife who didn't know if she was alive or dead.

And Sadie has, this has been Jim's ... This was her great love and her worth, a lot of her worth when she wasn't getting that from other places. So, it is very sacred to her, I would say, but she's a practical woman and she's a woman who has lost children, who has had children torn away from her, and she is not going to leave children. She is not going to leave that grandchild. She's not going to leave her kid. She's not going to leave that home and family that she's made again after ... You can imagine surviving traumas like slavery and the Holocaust and the Cambodian genocide and all the things that people

walking around us on the streets have survived and then love again and reconstitute a family and really do that and really be there with people. So, that's why I think she's not going to leave.

I do want you to know though that I got one movie offer on the book and that was a while ago and it didn't happen. But one of the reasons it didn't happen is because they said to me, "We really want you to change that ending and we want Sadie to go with Jim off into the sunset, kissy, kissy, huggy, huggy." And I said, "No."

Chris Higashi:

Okay. This question is to me, Huckleberry Finn's treatment of slavery was very double-edged, both pointing out the cruelty and senselessness of slavery and treating the escape of Jim as a lark for Huck and Tom Sawyer while your book is more realistic. Did you consider different approaches and tones and how did you decide which to use?

Nancy Rawles:

Wow. There's a scholarly question. Yeah, Huck Finn is ... Mark Twain was schizophrenic in his writing. I mean, actually he wasn't schizophrenic, but he was thought to have surely been a manic-depressive. And that book was written serialized in magazines or journals or whatever at the time and sold door-to-door kind of thing. And written over seven years, it was a very difficult book for him to write. He wrote it at the end of Reconstruction in response to that. So, he is definitely saying, "Come on people, Black people are human. They're already free. Let's stop all this trying to re-enslave."

But then on the other hand, he's trying to make a living and you know any artist here know what it's like trying to make a living? So, if you can go yuk, yuk, vaudeville, funny, funny, and the American public will swallow that when they wouldn't swallow his essays and they wouldn't swallow his journalism, and he got fired for saying what he really thought about the racist treatment of the Chinese in San Francisco in a very biting way. And that was the end of his career and he was 28 and he wanted to kill himself because part of his manic-depressive nature was that he was such a celebrity. Mark Twain was so into being a celebrity. His daughter, Susie, said she wished Mark Twain had never existed.

She liked Samuel Clemens. She said when daddy's around and he's being Mark Twain, he is always on. Nobody can do anything. So, his falling from grace, this pretty poor guy who'd made his way to San Francisco, he was an adventurer, falling from grace from high society, San Francisco, which has a high society like nobody's business and did back then. And Mark Twain was the darling. They thought he was just funny and great and he was doing these articles for the newspaper and they were searing and clever and wasn't he smart and witty?

And then he said, "Well, isn't it odd that the good people of San Francisco are so upset by the beating of a Chinese boy when the police beat Chinese boys and men and women every single day and nobody says anything?" And they went, "Okay. You're fired." And that's when he wrote The Jumping Toad. That's when he started really using humor when he decided not to kill himself and to try to write again. So, Huckleberry Finn, very mixed, the tone, everything. You got a little bit of everything in there. He's commenting politically, he's writing an adventures tale, he's doing beautiful metaphorical, poetic things with the river. He's going yuk, yuk, vaudeville, slapstick. And he was a good old boy.

I mean, he was a Connecticut Yankee, but when he wrote letters to his friends back home, they were very much in that vernacular, in that tone of his growing up. And God love him, but the whole question of, is it a racist book? Was he racist? I mean, I don't really care, right? I mean, big deal, so was everybody. And in some ways, he was an admirer of African-American culture. He sponsored the Jubilee singers. He put through law school, the fellow who became Thurgood Marshall's mentor. You can see from his writing that elevated picture of Jim, Jim being more human than other people in the book being this ... So, he had this admiration for African-Americans, particularly for this survival of pain and suffering and the songs.

He thought the sorrow songs were the best thing ever in the world. He wanted the whole world to hear them. So, he sponsored the Jubilee singers to travel all over Europe and all around. He was an interesting guy. But I hope this never happens to me. This is the worst thing that can happen to a writer. You're writing a book, you're in an early, early draft. You were probably at a point before you decide to throw this away because it's so bad, and then you die.

And then people go through your papers. I mean, heaven forbid this should ever happen to us. I don't think it will. Do you? Anyway, this is Anna Balint, wonderful writer, short story writer in town. And people go through your papers. The University of Berkeley has all of Twain's papers and they publish this unfinished thing. Well, if you want to read, maybe the worst thing Mark Twain ever wrote, there's a collection of his unfinished work and he decided to write a sequel to Huckleberry Finn about Huck and Tom and Jim lighting out for the territories in the West.

And what he has to say about Native Americans will make you wretch. He was completely unsympathetic to Native Americans. Well, hey, I mean, there he is. There we are. We're people, human. There's this whole ... So, even though he was able to take Jim and had this particular view of Black people and Black culture, Native Americans, it was just savages and they should lose their land. And I mean, really horrible stuff. And I'm not going to write anything like that, so nobody has to write. But still, I might write something really, really bad. And then the University of Po Tim Vil in some state will go, "What did she mean by that?"

Chris Higashi:

Since we're talking about Huckleberry Finn, would you talk about the, you call it a controversy around the teaching of Huckleberry Finn in schools? What are the issues around?

Nancy Rawles:

The issues are, the use of the word Nigger and the issues are Jim, the character of Jim. For African-American families who don't want their kids to read the book or be ... It's really the families who have protested are people whose children have been subjected to the book where it's been taught in an extremely racist fashion at kids at schools that are not used to having African-American students who trot out Huckleberry Finn, along with all the great white authors and literature, have never even considered having a Native American or an Asian or a Latino or an African-American writer in their classes and they've been doing this merrily and getting away with it in a way that you can only get away with it in Pacific Northwest. What is going on here?

I mean, sometimes people are like, 40 years never happened. In fact, I had people tell me that when I first came here. They said, "Oh, the civil rights didn't happen. I mean, we didn't have the '60s." I say, "Excuse me. I'm working at Pratt Fine Arts Center, and this man on the wall was assassinated in 1969 in this town, so don't tell me you didn't have the '60s." But there are people who want to pretend we didn't have the '60s, so they tried out Huckleberry Finn. And I don't really want to say this. I mean, education has changed a lot and it stayed the same a lot.

That terrific coach who should have stayed coaching, and then they gave him the social studies class, and then he became the principal. You know how that used to be like in certain places? Well, so that teacher trots out Huckleberry Finn and goes, yuk, yuk, yuk, [inaudible 01:10:06] with all of his white students every year. And then all of a sudden, here is some student who doesn't think that's funny, who thinks is cruel and racist and awful and unbearable and painful. And here are the parents and grandparents who want to protect their kid. That's the controversy over Huckleberry Finn.

When it's taught at Garfield and they've already read Tony Morrison and they've already read Richard Wright and they've already read everything under the sun Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, and they've read Louise Erdrich and they've read everybody. And then you tried out Huckleberry Finn. It's in context. You can talk about everything in Huckleberry Finn. It's a fabulous book to teach if you're going to teach it that way.

When there's a controversy over a book, the book is the scapegoat. The elephant in the room, whether it's racism or ... I had a friend who almost lost her job over teaching the Crucible. She'd been teaching it forever. And all of a sudden, half of her school district, like overnight in three years, was fundamentalist Christian. And her principal did not support her and they were ready to run her out of town on a rail.

And if it hadn't have been for the librarians who came to her aid with that wonderful organization about banned books and banned books week and all that got behind and said censorship and we won't have it, she would have lost her job. And she was a veteran 25-year teacher. Okay. But they said, "We cannot have witches. We cannot have" ... So, this school, of course, had changed and expanded greatly overnight with this new population and nobody had dealt with it. Everybody had just gone, "Oh, let's just keep doing what we're doing."

When you have people come who haven't been there before, who have different customs and everything, you have to think just like you would for a guest in your house, what do they want to eat? Where do they want to sleep? What's going to be comfortable for them? And a middle school that will remain unnamed in North Seattle ... This is years ago, so who knows what they're doing now. But I taught there through Seattle Arts and Lectures probably for seven years. And finally, I just said, "I ain't going back. Do not send me there."

Because there were teachers who were still ringing their hands in the teacher's room saying, "This was such a good school before they came." That's what people are objecting to. It's not Mark Twain. It's not Huckleberry Finn. It's, "Hey, we're here." Can somebody acknowledge that and maybe think before they serve us shrimp when we have an allergy that's going to kill us? It's just decency, really, but you'd be surprised or maybe you wouldn't and how much it is not done in schools where people just merrily go along. This is the curriculum. This is it. It's the way we do it here.

So many brown kids went through that. I mean, just, "Hey, this is it. We don't speak that language. Nope, nope, none of that. Teach you with the ruler." I mean, yeah, what a way to teach and welcome somebody and think they're going to learn something. So, that's the problem with ... It's not. I mean, the book is there, but it's a symbol.

Susan Hildreth:

Okay. We're going to put you on the spot here.

Nancy Rawles:

Oh, yeah, put me on the spot. I like that.

Susan Hildreth:

Please sing again.

Nancy Rawles:

Oh, man. I think if I tried to sing, I'd have to blow my nose and that would not be a good thing. Okay. I'll tell you this. I meant to bring these tonight and I forgot. Anyway, there was a wonderful project I did with a bunch of musicians in town and out of town and singers and composers and people who sang some of the songs that are in My Jim on a tape. It's a free cassette. It's from Jack Straw, produced it, and I meant to bring some tonight and I just was trying to carry the statue.

So, some of them have taken words from the book and taken text and said it to music and song. Well, on that CD, I'm standing here as an English teacher going, not really an English teacher. But I'm standing here going, "Me and my cousin." That's not right. I'm not supposed to say me and my cousin. But anyway, me and my cousin and my friend sang a song that came to me. It was one of the first actually, it was probably the first full paragraph of the book and it came as a song and goes like this. You want to sing with me? Do you remember it?

Speaker 5:

No.

Nancy Rawles:

No, no, not you. Not you cousin, the other cousin next to you. See, that's what you do when you're local, you pack the room with cousins. You call up your cousins even if you don't see them very often and you go, "You got to get here because I'm doing this thing and people may not come." Okay. So, this is my cousin and we are not offended when people confuse us for each other. We just think that is so much fun. She loves when people come up and ask her to sign books. And I love when people say, "When is your daughter singing again? She is such a great jazz vocalist." I know just who they're talking about and I tell them, I go, "She'll be at Tula's on whatever." Okay.

MUSIC:

Guess I'm going to be in heaven.

Guess I'm going to be in heaven when I see my Jim.

Going to greet the good Lord for I host him again.

Guess I'm going to be an angel for the light of his smile.

Touches my ...

Nancy Rawles:

I can't do the harmony. I'm so sorry. I forgot it. Thank you. Anyway, thank you, Edri. It's on a CD and I've got some of them at my house, but I forgot to bring.

Susan Hildreth:

Did you introduce her?

Nancy Rawles:

Yes. Edri, [inaudible 01:17:34].

Chris Higashi:

Okay. Okay. I think you guys are all being shy about questions. So, I'm going to end the program here. I'm going to say thank you so much to Nancy Rawles. Thank you all for joining us tonight. Please do come down and meet Nancy. I'm going to whisk her over to the corner here where she'll sign books, visit the Elliott Bay table. Be really careful. I mean, Nancy really is inviting you to look at and touch Sadie and to look at this beautiful quilt. Thank you so much.

Speaker 1:

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