



# Library podcast

## 2010 Seattle Reads 'Secret Son': Main Event with Author Laila Lalami

### 00:00:05 Chris Higashi

[♪ Piano music♪ ] Welcome to The Seattle Public Library's podcasts of author readings and library events; a series of readings, performances, lectures, and discussions. Library podcasts are brought to you by The Seattle Public Library and Foundation. To learn more about our programs and podcasts, visit our website at [www.spl.org](http://www.spl.org). To learn how you can help up the Library Foundation support The Seattle Public Library, go to [foundation.spl.org](http://foundation.spl.org). The podcast you are about to hear was recorded in 2010. [♪ Piano music♪ ]

### 00:00:45 Performer

[indiscernible] and we're Moroccans. We're here to celebrate the program and celebrate Laila... Laila's book. And we're just amateurs, so not take it too seriously, but we try to have fun together, share with you some Moroccan music. So I hope you enjoy. [♪ Music playing ♪]

### 00:01:14 Performer

[♪ Drumming with singing in a foreign language. ♪]

### 00:07:04 Performer

[Applause.] Thank you. [♪ Drumming with singing in a foreign language. ♪]

### 00:08:36 Susan Hildreth

I know that Chris is going to introduce our wonderful gentleman entertainers there. They were great. So I am Susan Hildreth, and I'm the city librarian of The Seattle Public Library. I'd like to welcome all of you and thank you all for joining us for Seattle Reads, "Secret Son," and this evening with our author, Laila Lalami. And we're so excited to have her here with us. This is the 12th year of The Seattle Public Library's renowned Seattle Reads series hundreds of one book, community reading programs have taken place all over the country and internationally. And I personally am just really proud to be here in Seattle, the home of one city, but one book. And I hope everybody knows that. It started here. We're a city of innovation. And innovation in reading is a hallmark for us. And I want to acknowledge that the project was the brainchild of Nancy Pearl and Chris Higashi, who did the first series in December of 1998 so we're really leading the way, but we also have to take this opportunity to give a special thanks to one of our wonderful partners, The Seattle Public Library Foundation, since its founding in 1980, the foundation has raised more than 100 million dollars to help us build new and revitalized libraries across the city. Present programming for children, teens and adults; buy

books and materials; offer services for people with special needs and provide technology for library users. The foundation represents thousands of people in our community who make gifts small and large to support our Public Library. So to all of you Library Foundation donors- and I know there's some out here in the audience with us tonight- we want to say thank you very much for your support. We're also very grateful to the Wallace Foundation for their generous support of Seattle Reads since its inception. Additional support this year comes from KUOW public radio and Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. We welcome, and thank you, our new sponsor Seattle Arts & Lectures, who will present an evening with Laila Lalami me at Benaroya Hall on Monday. So we're looking forward to that. And also thank you to The Seattle Times for generous promotional support for library programs. When you see those big ads in the Seattle Times for all our great activity, I think it says a little bit about advertising space in the Seattle Times. But it is free. We're not paying for that. It's there in kind gift for the library. So we really appreciate The Times for that. Thank you also, to the Elliott Bay Book Company, Rick Simenson and Karen Madalmond for being a longtime partner in Seattle Reads. Elliott Bay is here with Miss Lalami's two books as well as other works from our recommended reading list. We thank our community partners who have generously served as speakers, panel panelists, moderators and presenters for a series of programs this spring all around Morocco and "Secret Son." This event is being videotaped by the Seattle Channel for later broadcast on channel 21 or viewing at [www.seattlechannel.org](http://www.seattlechannel.org). And for those of you who have friends and neighbors who couldn't make it tonight, please remind them that this is available via podcast. Our podcasts are one of the fastest-growing parts of our library collection, and they're a great way to share our wonderful evenings of people can't make it for many reasons on this beautiful spring evening to have a crowd like this on a beautiful spring evening says that we're all committed readers here in Seattle. Right now, the library has closed for the evening. So the garage will stay open for the duration of the program at the end of the evening. Please exit through the 4th Avenue entrance on this floor. This very floor were on or from the parking garage. If you pre paid for parking when you arrived, you can drive directly to the gate. If you did not prepay, you'll need to stop at the booth to pay five dollars for the evening rate, which is a good deal. Vouchers are not necessary. Now, I'm going to turn things over to Chris Higashi, program manager of the Washington Center for the Book at The Seattle Public Library, who directs our annual Seattle Reads program to introduce the rest of our evenings activities. Thank you.

**00:12:48 Chris Higashi**

Okay. So, first, our performers tonight. That was Amin, the vocalist. That was Yazeed on the jet, sorry, djembe and Zack on darbuka. So thanks so much. So as part of Seattle Reads this spring, we presented a series of programs, films readings by local Arab American Writers, staged readings by Bookit Repertory Theater, panel on facets of Islam, Faith, culture and politics presented originally at Seattle University shortly after September 11th and recreated for our Public Library audience this year, a most wonderful, Arab cultural day, focus on Morocco, a couple of weekends ago at Town Hall. And we thank the Arab Center of Washington and Washington Moroccan Association for presenting that we had mint tea and sweets a way of Moroccan arts and crafts storytelling live music such as we heard tonight and some spontaneous belly dancing. So the point of this program in programming is to put "Secret Son" in context and help the readers understand its themes. This year, we had 26 library book groups that read and discussed "Secret Son," or are scheduled to do so. And this is in addition

to scores of private independent, including councilmember Conlon's book group. So we believe that reading brings our community together. And Seattle reads is just a wonderful way to celebrate our diversity and learn about other cultures. The program brings new communities into the library. Well, at the same time, exposing others to new ways of looking at the world through literature. It's a great pleasure to welcome Laila Lalami to Seattle. I've spent the past two days with her like another young immigrant writer we featured two years ago, Dinaw Mengestu, she is eloquent and wise way beyond her years. She's also a very good sport. We really put her on the spot to see and hear Bookit do some staged readings to transform her words into a dramatic reading, which she later said was kind of an out-of-body experience. So Laila Lalami is a writer and novelist, a short story writer and essayist and activists a blogger, a book and film reviewer and a teacher. She's an associate professor of creative writing at the University of California Riverside. Laila is the author of an acclaimed story collection "Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits" that was published in 2005 and translated into several languages. And this novel, "Secret Son," which was published in 2009. And by the way, Laila's publisher, Algonquin Books moved up the release of the paperback by two months, especially for us. Powerful, huh? So "Secret Son" is set in modern-day Casablanca. It's a novel very much of our time, but also a timeless story. Youssef, a poor young Casablancon, discovers that the father he believed dead is very much alive. A member of the country's elite, Youssef embarks on a quest for identity in a confluence of westernization and conservative Islam, modern and traditional, rich and poor, with disastrous consequences. So here's what the Harvard Review said about her book: "The story Lalami has chosen to tell ,that of the illegitimate son, has been written for centuries, yet it feels fresh and original here. 'Secret Son' is like a many-sided invention, which continues to revolve under the readers gaze. Lalami keeps surprising us up to the very last page. She understands how to tell a good and riveting story. Laila Lalami is a native of Seattle who now lives in Santa Monica. She's known internationally for her blog "Moorish Girl," which she started shortly after September 11th. She's the first fiction writer from Morocco, whose work written originally in English has been released in the United States by a major publisher. She's the recipient of numerous awards, including being named a young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in 2009, a rare writer among more than 200 notables. Her literary awards include a Fulbright Scholarship, which took her to Morocco, to live where she wrote and revised much of "Secret Son." Olufemi Taiwo, professor of philosophy and director of Global African studies at Seattle University kindly agreed to moderate the panel I mentioned on Islam and also tonight's event. So the format is an on-stage conversation. And then following this portion, Laila will answer your questions. So nice you to join and welcome Laila Lalami and Olufemi Taiwo to The Seattle Public Library.

### **00:18:08 Olufemi Taiwo**

We just pretend it's a waterfall. Good evening everybody. And thank you. And welcome. My name is Olufemi Taiwo, I teach at Seattle University and I direct the Global African studies program there. I would like to thank Chris for asking me to be associated with this. I always complain that she gets me to work for her, but I'm sure she doesn't take the complaint seriously, because she's such a joy to work for and with. And I really appreciate the opportunity to do that, that... thanks. And to Laila who I am meeting for the first time, but not quite. I read the book. But of course, the book is not autobiographical. So it's correct that I'm meeting her for the first time. I said to myself that, you know, it is an honor to share this stage with you, not just because this is one heck of a book, but also

because, you know, it's not often that one reads material from our part of the world that tells a universal story from its particular nook of the world, but is able to capture the human essence, The Human Condition and actually educate us all over again about how universal The Human Condition is. And I would like to hope that you all felt that as you read this wonderful book. So without further ado, what I have decided to do is, you know, I have a few questions and topics that have put down, it's not going to be an interview. I'm just going to use them as leader of, you know, for her to be able to expound, I hope some of the things that might enrich your understanding and experience of the book. And I hope that at the end of the evening, you are much better, you know, enriched in terms of the book and its context than when you walked in this evening. So by you tell us if that happens. The characters I find quite instructive. And I find there are a whole lot of strong women in the book. That's not an accident. Or was it?

**00:20:21 Laila Lalami**

This question about strong women is one that has come up before. I think the reason that that it comes up is because we are so used to hearing stories about women in that part of the world. And by that part of the world, I truly mean not just Morocco, but also all of North Africa, many parts of Africa and the Middle East. And we're used to seeing... to hearing these stories about how women are silent and they're oppressed and they're weak, and it's always in this very sort of negative ways that we hear about women. And I suppose, in the book, because each woman is her own self... is her own character and does things her own way, I think that's where the perception of strength comes from. To me, they seem rather ordinary, but perhaps that the reason that they seem so strong has to do with how... the contrast between the way in which they're portrayed in the book and the kinds of images that we're used to hearing about... seeing about that part of the world.

**00:21:28 Olufemi Taiwo**

How reflective are they of what really happens in those parts of the world?

**00:21:32 Laila Lalami**

How reflective are they?

**00:21:33 Olufemi Taiwo**

Are the women? That... how representative are they of the kinds of strength that you're talking about that is not always projected when people talk about?

**00:21:44 Laila Lalami**

Yeah, I mean, it's... this question of representation is also another question that comes up quite a bit. It's interesting. And I suppose it has something to do with the fact that there is very little literature from Morocco that is translated and published in the United States. As you all know, the United States translates and publishes only a few hundred books every year. So it's a remarkably insular country when it comes to literature. And, I mean, I could name so many Moroccan writers right now who are not published at all in the States. Really, the only Moroccan writer who's published with any regularity, I was talking to Chris about this earlier, is Tahar Ben Jelloun. And of course, the Horseman is known is not representative of the diversity of Moroccan literature. So in the same way, how can one book,

such as this book, be representative of all of Moroccan experience? So, or all of the women in this book cannot also be representative of the women of Morocco either. Right? They're just their own selves, their own characters. I think the desire to see them as being representative comes from the fact that that we don't have that many representations of women. So then of these women in American literature. So when we do actually come across them, there's this desire to want to make them into representatives rather than just individuals.

**00:23:07 Olufemi Taiwo**

So let's talk about mothers, whose situations are radically different book. All... no offense. My question is, you know, what do mothers know? And what don't mothers know? And here I'm talking about Rasheeda and Myreka.

**00:23:22 Laila Lalami**

I think... I promise not to fidget anymore. I just got really hot when they started talking about women... [laughter from audience and Olufemi] I just felt myself getting worked up and so...

**00:23:32 Olufemi Taiwo**

Well, yeah, yes, I thought it was a good place to start. Yeah. So now we talk about mothers, you know, and I was just intrigued by how prescient, you know, both mothers were in terms of the choices being made by their children in different locations. Is there something there in motherhood? You know, that gives mothers this kind of inside knowledge of where things are going?

**00:23:59 Laila Lalami**

I mean, it's true that both of the mothers in the book seemed to be somewhat attuned to what is going on in their children's lives, although in the case of Myreka, she can also be remarkably ignorant for much of her life about what her husband has been up to. But when it comes to their children, it seems that both Myreka and Rasheeda are remarkably attuned to what's going on. So so yes, it seems that for these two women, that's definitely the case.

**00:24:29 Olufemi Taiwo**

For Myreka, was it really ignorance or avoidance?

**00:24:34 Laila Lalami**

When you... would do you mean?

**00:24:36 Olufemi Taiwo**

In the culture that I grew up in, you are told that the price of living is averting your gaze often enough from stuff that might hurt you if you focus on them. Might she be doing that in terms of what Nabil was doing? And was she pretending not to know?

**00:24:57 Laila Lalami**

Oh, I mean, that's true. You're right. It is possible that she had an inkling about what was going on. But but in a sense, didn't really want to know exactly what but what was happening. But then when it

all came to her, she had proof of what he was doing when she was confronted with reality. It's true in some situations like that. Then you lie to yourself and pretend not to know.

**00:25:21 Olufemi Taiwo**

Well, we'll come to that later, you know, when we talk about Nabil. But for now, let me take you now to the two young women in the book. Alia and Amara both demonstrate some significant self-will and some very significant views about their sexuality and how they handled it. But what intrigued me was, you know, Amara was in the US. So it's very easy in a situation where people say: oh, you know- it's America that has turned her head, but then Alia was right there in Morocco.

**00:26:01 Laila Lalami**

And also showing quite a bit of Independence. Well, I mean, the thing is, is that the thing to remember is that both Alia and Amara are members of the upper class are members of the elite, where there is a greater sense of sexual freedom, if you will. Either way, it's true that there are social mores, and that people do generally abide by them. But when you and when you sort of belong to that upper class, if you decide to go against those, those social mores, the consequences are not as large as say, if you were somebody from the lower class, because you have options, the fact that you have money gives you a few options. And so, in the case of those two girls, that's definitely the case. They they, they and I wanted them to be that way, because I was tired of always having the same images of young women that, again, that they all have to behave the same way. And I just thought it would be interesting if they did, if they were more sexually independent, and they wanted to do. Now, naturally, in both cases, or in each case, the the consequences are somewhat different. In the case of Alia, she doesn't care. It's just, you know, it's just a one-night stand. And so it doesn't matter, and she's going to marry the man that her family picked for her. But in the case of Amara, it's much more serious in the sense that this is somebody who does it, and he's prepared to accept the consequences of it, which isn't the case with Alia.

**00:27:37 Olufemi Taiwo**

Yes. So now, let's talk about some of the men.

**00:27:42 Laila Lalami**

My favorite.

**00:27:44 Olufemi Taiwo**

Good. Part of what intrigued me about the men. And I'm talking from the perspective of one of them- is how much we think we're in control. Is Nabil different? Am I missing something?

**00:28:06 Laila Lalami**

Well, certainly he likes to think of himself as being in control. And there's a scene you know, when he, when he gets into a fight with his wife, where he gets increasingly frustrated because he can't make her and do what he wants her to do, get it gets him. Really, I'm frustrated with her. And certainly in his case, he ends up submitting to her will and doing what she wanted. I wouldn't assume that that's the case of every man, but definitely for this one character. Yeah, he's definitely overtaken by his wife.

**00:28:42 Olufemi Taiwo**

What do you mean you don't think is the case for every man? Look at Youssef.

**00:28:48 Laila Lalami**

I mean, the thing is, is that the women in the book, I mean, if you look at Youssef's case, yes, his mother did try to break off the relationship that he had with his father, but she genuinely did it because she thought that this was what was best for her son. She wasn't doing it because she was trying to hurt him. She was doing it because she felt that things had gone too far, and she was trying to bring him back. So it was a genuinely innocent sort of desire. And so the only problem is she went about it in a sort of, sort of an underhanded way. And then the consequence of that is that she is essentially unwittingly has pushed him into the hands of Hatim.

**00:29:35 Olufemi Taiwo**

Well, but Youssef thought it was in control.

**00:29:40 Laila Lalami**

I don't actually think that Youssef is somebody who thinks of himself has been much in control of anything, because he's very much at the mercy of his father. He is so desperate to have this relationship with his father that he's really willing to accept all the terms that his father sets for their relationship. Even if it's frustrates him personally, he's willing to accept those terms and to go sort of go with the flow, if you will.

**00:30:03 Olufemi Taiwo**

Well, but the chosen, you know, preference to his mother.

**00:30:07 Laila Lalami**

Well, I mean, I think if you grew up without a father for 18 years and then your father suddenly says, you know, come and live with me, and, you know, wouldn't you be tempted? I mean, I think if I were in his shoes, I'd be tempted to go and see what it was like just for bring you just even ever so briefly. And I'm sure, in the case of Youssef, he feels, and rightly, that he is at the center of his mother's life, and his mother is always going to be there for him. So for that one moment, he just wants to know what

**00:30:35 Laila Lalami**

it's like to have a father, and he's willing to go along that journey with him. But that's okay. We don't have to agree. [laughs]

**00:30:49 Olufemi Taiwo**

No, I know. But just because...

**00:30:52 Laila Lalami**

I mean this, you know when you, when... obviously I wrote the book, but when I, when I read it, it means something quite different to me than it might mean to a different reader, because we're each bringing different experiences to a different readers agendas, different traditions, literature, different, there's there's all these personal differences that come into play when we're interpreting the book. So of course, you know, my interpretation doesn't mean...

**00:31:19 Olufemi Taiwo**

Oh no, I just found it interesting that he thought that he was on the road to finally nailing his identity. And he was willing to do whatever it took to write and write down to sartorial choices. You know, yes. And so on. And so forth, he was willing and part of what I find in that, you know. And this is something that you know, many people have gone through. What is it about boys that makes them crave fathers, especially when the father's abandon us? So I was talking about how, again talking about universal themes. You know, how boys crave the presence of a father, even in situations where they are victims of horrible abuse, you know, by fathers who have abandoned them.

**00:32:15 Laila Lalami**

I mean, I think I don't know that it's necessarily fathers and boys. I think it's basically child and parent, I think, you know, if you've been abandoned in that way, and then you always are going to have that that sort of need to get to know that parent and need to have a relationship with that parent, even if that that relationship is fraught with difficulties and and probably going to bring you, you know, more misery. I think it's natural that we have that yearning for the parent. And that's what's happening with him.

**00:32:54 Olufemi Taiwo**

How much of Nabil's arrogance has to do with wealth? How much has to do with personal feelings?

**00:33:02 Laila Lalami**

I would say a lot of it has to do with wealth. A lot of it has to do with with his position in society. Nabil is somebody who is a part of... he's, so his family is from Fez, and in Morocco is a we call people who are from Fez Fezi, meaning one who is from Fez, and for a long time in Morocco's recent history anyway, the sort of the political and economic life of the country has really been in the control of families that are from Fez. And so he looks at himself as being part of this ruling class. So there's a sort of there's a way that he looks at himself. And then compounded with that is the fact that he's also extremely wealthy. So, yes, he definitely... that arrogance comes from that. From, from knowing exactly where he is in that society, and knowing that his place is assured, having actually a very clear sense of his identity, which is something that Youssef doesn't have. And, and what use of this cover is in the book is that, despite his desperate attempts, for example, you mentioned the sartorial choices. Well, he's going to discover that the clothes not make the man basically. So, so for use of that, that sort of identity, because he didn't grow up with a father because he had all of that happening in his life. It becomes a much more complicated for him. Identity becomes much more complicated for him than it is for somebody like Nabil.

**00:34:29 Olufemi Taiwo**



So let's talk a little bit about the context about Morocco. I am amazed by how much history is hinted at in the book, going all the way back to American rule of Spain. You know, the Iberian Peninsula and all that. And I just wanted you to talk about that a little bit.

**00:34:49 Laila Lalami**

So about the context for the book? American history, and how it featured, you know, in this book look well, I mean, I think that because the book is set in current in modern-day Casablanca, and because it deals with an issue that we hear about in the news, one of the things I wanted to do in the book is to make sure that you had a sense of, historically of where all of this come from. Because, for example, you see this, actually, it's very interesting because you see this with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict a lot where people start framing it in terms of a fight between the forces of Islamic radicalism, collision and everybody else. And that's definitely not the history of the conflict and didn't start there. This is its you know, there's manifestations of it currently, but that's not what happened in the 70s, for example. So there's a lot of sort of rewriting of history. And so with this book, because it deals with that topic, one of the things that I wanted to do is give a sense of the larger historical picture. So I think that's why it's hinted at in the book. It's, you know, the colonial era, the the Years of Lead, which is this period in Moroccan history between the 1960s and the late 1980s. When thousands of people were kidnapped and tortured and and just arrested for just taking part in in a student demonstration and then made to disappear. Some of them never even saw the face of a judge. And so there's this. It's a very dark period in Moroccan history that's called the Years of Lead. And it's obviously referred to in the book, because all of this leads to the situation that you see described in the book. It's not, it didn't just spring out of nowhere. It's not something that comes from that ever-shifting concept. We call culture. It's just something that arose out of very, very specific historical circumstances.

**00:36:43 Olufemi Taiwo**

And I notice that there's a whole lot of transition going on in Morocco right now, especially in terms of the relationship between, you know, the Berber, you know, population and the Arab, you know, population. And I found it quite nifty you know, they bringing in the, you know, Berber element that's not always being a... yeah.

**00:37:04 Laila Lalami**

I mean, that's something. Yeah, that was something that I was interested in again, because it is part of life in Morocco. I mean, 99% of Moroccans are Arab / Berber. They're a mix of both of those things. And so it made sense to have Youssef be half Berber in the book, because it just seemed to me to make the most sense. And the other thing, too, is that I mentioned a couple of people in the book. So there's this mention of Berber. There's a line. There's a couple of lines of Berber in there. And then I also wanted to mention the people from the Sahara that's also part of the culture. And I also mentioned Moroccan Jews. So there's it's all kind of a way to hint at the multiculturalism of modern Morocco.

**00:37:51 Olufemi Taiwo**

Oh, well, I'm glad you brought up the Western Sahara, you know. So where's that right now, in terms of American politics? And well, as we had, there's a new King. So.

**00:38:03 Laila Lalami**

You know that the most recent that I've heard about... the most recent news that came out of Western Sahara's, that the United Nations has decided to extend its mission in the territory for another year. So as of right now, it's the status quo continues, meaning that Morocco is going to continue to push autonomy plan in the United Nations. And the Polisario front is going to continue to fight it. And that's probably going to be the situation in five years from now. So so that's what's going on.

**00:38:35 Olufemi Taiwo**

And Morocco is fast becoming a staging post for African migrants to Europe. And you did talk about that.

**00:38:42 Laila Lalami**

Yeah, it's definitely it's the irony of this whole immigration debate. So Morocco is a country of 30 million people, and it has three million immigrants, meaning one out of every ten Moroccans lives abroad. So it's impossible if you're in Morocco, and you ask someone, do you know somebody who lives abroad? And the answer most likely is yes, because if it's not somebody in their family than it's a neighbor, or it's a cousin or classmate. And so so Europe has been complaining about these waves of immigrants. And but so the irony of this whole immigration debate is that now Morocco has its own immigration problem, because all sorts of people are coming from all parts of Africa. And sometimes they walk for a couple of years before they even get to Morocco. And then what often happens is that they run out of money, and they can't manage to cross. So they end up staying in Morocco and often times working in very menial jobs. They're not working at all and begging on the street. And the government of Morocco has really not done anything to handle the situation of these immigrants. And so often times you hear quite racist things actually being said about these African migrants. So it's a situation that I personally think is going to continue to worsen unless it's I'm not sure what's going to happen.

**00:40:07 Olufemi Taiwo**

And there's the enclave of Ceuta.

**00:40:10 Laila Lalami**

What about Ceuta?

**00:40:12 Olufemi Taiwo**

Oh, because, you know, that's sometimes where the Africans want to go through, but...

**00:40:18 Laila Lalami**

So, Ceuta and Melilla are two presidios... Spanish presidios on Moroccan land. So basically, it's a land border in Morocco, and if you cross it, you are technically in the European Union. So what happens is that all these African migrants come, and then they try to cross that border somehow. And in 2005 what happened was that a group of immigrants got together and staged an attack on the border fence at the same time in the middle of the night. Now, normally the Guardia Civil, the Border

Police on the Spanish side, I'd try to stop people, but they usually stop them a few at a time. But if a few hundred people come in at once, they couldn't stop all of them. And once the immigrants were on the other side than they were subject to amnesty laws, and I mean to to European law, so they could ask for, for example, political Refugee status and all that. So what they did was they ended up shooting at them. And 11 people died. And actually the Moroccan police shot at them when they tried to go to the other side. So it was just a complete nightmare that what happened in 2005. So now they've erected this 10 foot high fence. And so they're constantly monitoring it for people trying to cross. The people still try. So it's ongoing.

**00:41:41 Olufemi Taiwo**

And of course, this is not a problem that is limited to Morocco is a problem for all the North African countries, especially Libya is another Center you know, that is having to cope with this problem.

**00:41:53 Laila Lalami**

Right, and Malta, on the other side, is not a country that you think of as being a huge recipient of immigrants, but because it happens to be so close to the North African Coast, it now has a major problem with all these boats arriving full of would-be immigrants.

**00:42:10 Olufemi Taiwo**

Yes, I know that freedom of the press is something that you are very interested in and have written about. How is the transition going in Morocco, you know, with the opening that people are writing about now?

**00:42:27 Laila Lalami**

I'm actually going to be talking about this at Benroya Hall on Monday, but I can give you a brief, a brief account of what I'll be saying. Basically under the Years of Lead that I mentioned earlier, let's say you wrote something that was that the government didn't like. Well, you just walked out of your home one day, and you got kidnapped and put in prison. And that's was the last anybody heard of you. Things don't... this doesn't happen anymore. So [nervous laughter] that stuff doesn't happen. But what happens now? So what happens since what's been happening since 1999 is that there's been a initially, there was an opening, meaning that journalists had much larger freedom of press than they had ever had before. But then in the last five years, we've been noticing that the government has been using libel laws a lot. So let's say that, for example, one journalist wrote a blind item, meaning he didn't say the name of the person. And he just said that she had worked as a dancer, and she's now A Member of Parliament, but he didn't say the name of that, that person, but the person in questions sued and the judge found for them and found this huge fine. And so it just becomes, when you have a string of these libel judgments against you, it just becomes absolutely impossible to run magazine or a newspaper. And actually this week, I just heard that the journal deÁLULA has decided to stop publication, because they obviously, were going out of business.

**00:44:05 Olufemi Taiwo**

Thank you. So let's talk a bit about Hatim. And here, I think, because Morocco has been the victim in recent years of terrorists, you know, bombings, you know, and so on and so forth. And the character

of Hatim does not really reflect the popular imagination around here in terms of, you know, who is an Islamist, you know, who the Salafist, you know. And so on and so forth. So maybe want to elaborate on that a little bit.

**00:44:35 Laila Lalami**

Well, just just like all the other characters in the book are supposed to be their own individual selves, I wanted this person who supposed to be, you know, because what could be a greater caricature than somebody who's the leader of an Islamic radical is party, right? Because that's the greatest caricature. That's what you see on TV, and you see it in very simple ways. And so I really did endeavor in the book to make him sort of be and as complex as I could manage to make Hatim. And so that's why he's, he is probably a bit different than what most most people expect the leader of such a party to be.

**00:45:14 Olufemi Taiwo**

And how are the Marxists fairing now in Morocco, because you talked about the Marxists leading this group. You know, the... [laughing]

**00:45:22 Laila Lalami**

I'm afraid they're not doing very well. [laughing]

**00:45:26 Olufemi Taiwo**

What happened?

**00:45:27 Laila Lalami**

No, no. What happened was that a number of them ended up joining more mainstream political parties. And what's happened over the years is that they've slowly been co-opted. So, for example, members of particular parties have been offered cabinet positions. And then suddenly, they're not quite as radical anymore. So, so that's what's been happening in... You actually see it even most recently, with, with one of the major leftist parties in Morocco, where there's a split, because there's a great disagreement between between its members about whether or not they should have accepted cabinet positions, because they feel that now it's almost there's the reforms that they were acting have not taken place because their members essentially joined the government.

**00:46:15 Olufemi Taiwo**

I see issues of identity, you know, for some of the characters, definitely for Youssef. And I don't know how one goes about resolving that, you know, in the context of the multiculturalism, the multi-ethnicity that you talked about and all the efforts by his friends to sort of say, this is who you are. The effort, his mother, this is who you are. The effort by his father, this is who you are. His own struggle with finding out...

**00:46:47 Laila Lalami**

...who he is. I mean, I think, when, when at the beginning of the book, I think you have truly believes that that there is, there is such a thing as a simple identity. I am- fill in the blank. And I think when he

discovers, as he goes through the book is that that is just such a simplistic equation, right? Because any of us has multiple identities at any one moment. So I get asked this in this question myself in a different form. So for example, I'll get asked, are you a Moroccan writer, or are you an American writer? Are you? Do you consider yourself a woman writer? Do you? Which part of my favorite is? Which parts of you are Moroccan? And which parts me? [audience and Olufemi laugh] usually say, well, the hair is Moroccan, the eyes are American. [laughter] So, I mean, it's obviously much more complex than that. I mean, I think that we experience our identities in different contexts in different ways. So, you know, right now, the identity that I feel the most being on this stage is that of the writer, right? But when I go home, you know, and I watch TV, and I get aggravated by what Glenn Beck is saying, then it's my identity as, as a citizen that gets that, you know, that's that's that's how I identify at that moment. And I get riled up by that. And then I did another moment. I might feel my identity as a woman, and so on and so forth. So we are many things. And the idea that we must choose only one to me is actually a very dangerous idea, because it is an idea of purity. And anytime anybody talks of purity, it just it makes me nervous, right? I think that the complexity and nuances is, is what makes us who we are.

**00:48:50 Olufemi Taiwo**

You know, I like you to say a few words about Benabud.

**00:48:56 Laila Lalami**

Let me tell you, ah Benabud. So I wanted again with the journalist, I did not want to turn him into some sort of martyr, a free speech I did not want him to be asked squeaky-clean journalist who is being preyed upon by big bad, you know, Islam as that's why Benabud in the book is somebody who is doing investigative journalism is doing good investigative journalism, but it's somebody who makes mistakes and has made mistakes. For example, in his reporting about her team. He is also somebody who asks for favors to have his child enter particular elite school, which is obviously not a you know, on it's not something that's on the up-and-up, right? He's trying to to flout the rules himself. And so and I did that because I did want him to be to be more complex. That's why I say that there really aren't. There is nobody in this book that you can say this is a good person and this is a bad person. They're all somewhere in between. And in a sense, they each have a certain amount of responsibility in what happens at the very end. Just as I think- I really believe this- that when we are confronted with, with these large events that we see on television, we, each of us have some sort of relationship to that event in some sort of responsibility to that event.

**00:50:18 Olufemi Taiwo**

And where does that leave the whole question of Islam and politics? You know, given Youssef's eventual sympathies, you know, for Benabud, you know, to the extent of trying to save him, and how much of a Hatim's animus, you know, towards Benabud, had to do what he had written against him, and how much of it had to do with a genuine commitment to social change, you know.

**00:50:48 Laila Lalami**

Right. That's why one of the one of the epigraphs of the book is aligned from "The Secret Agent" by Joseph Conrad. And he wrote that "the way of even the most justifiable revolutions is paid for by

personal impulses, disguised into creeds" There's, of course, a relationship between the personal and the political. There is no way that even the people that you hear about that and you hear these leaders on the news, spouting all of that. There is a personal dimension to them as well. And there is something that personally drives them to do what they do. And so, of course, Hatim having this article written about him. Well, you know, he might have been annoyed with Benabud before. But now that the article is out, that that pushes him further down that path and makes him want to plot something against me.

**00:51:42 Olufemi Taiwo**

Do you foresee a time in Morocco when it will be safe to joke about Islam?

**00:51:48 Laila Lalami**

Not in the foreseeable future. I do not advise it. [both laughing] I think, in Morocco, there are three big taboos: God, the nation and the king. And God, by God, I mean, basically Islam. And so if certain things are written, and and you, you say, for example, you were to reprint cartoons like the Danish cartoons. I mean, those are things that really offend people, and the government is in a rush to prove that it's that it's right there defending people's emotions. And so it gets into it and puts journalist in jail for that. The second thing is, the nation in this basically means western Sahara. So there's, again, great popular support for the Sahara being part of Morocco. So if you write something different than that, then there's problems.

**00:52:42 Olufemi Taiwo**

You say a few words about the Sahara component, because I'm not sure that, you know, because that's not something that's well known in the United States so well.

**00:52:51 Laila Lalami**

So. So the Sahara territory is basically this large swath of desert, and it's to the north of Mauritania and in 19th so, so Morocco was colonized in 1912 by France, but northern Morocco and Southern parts of Morocco were colonized by Spain. So Morocco had two Colonial presences at the same time. So in 1956 when Morocco gained its independence from won its independence from France, it also gained back some of the Northern Territory. So Tangier and places like that and other and places like that, but didn't get back the the Sahara. And then in 1975 that's when there was... I'm sorry?

**00:53:46 Olufemi Taiwo**

The coup in Spain.

**00:53:48 Laila Lalami**

Well, I mean it... Franco was dying is what was happening. And at that time, Spain didn't really want to retain the Sahara anymore. And so Morocco took it back. And at that point, the there was a rebel movement that had been started back in '73 to fight the Spanish presence that then turned against the Moroccan government and has been fighting ever since. And it's now been 35 years. The Moroccan government has been engaged in this in this, in this military fight with the polisario front. But a ceasefire was declared in 1991 and regardless of what's happening and who is right about this,

the fact remains that more than 450 Moroccan soldiers spent approximately 30 years in captivity in the hands of the Polisario. So at one point, they had become the longest held prisoners of war in the world, and they were eventually released. And there's also thousands of people who are being that are, who are gathered in these camps run by Algeria, and have absolutely no way of sustaining themselves. They live exclusively on International Aid. So if you go to one of these camps, you can't even see currency. There's no currency, because everything that these people have is just International Aid, just food and education and whatever. So there's a humanitarian dimension to this crisis that, unfortunately, has persisted for 35 years. And I really believe it's going to continue, because I don't see for it to change. There would have to be something, some dramatically different context. And right now, there really is no, it's, there is no war if there's been a ceasefire for the last, you know 15 years. And, or 20 years. And so it's not a high enough conflict on anybody's priority list, meaning, Western powers. And so that's why I think it's going to continue to stay like this in the status quo for a few years. And I thought, then that is the. So, the third sort of thing that is a big taboo is...

**00:56:11 Olufemi Taiwo**

The King.

**00:56:12 Laila Lalami**

That's right. The King. So taboo that I totally blocked it out, no. So the King. So basically there's been actually, what's interesting is that when this new King came into power, there was a period of time where people could write a lot more about him. So, for example, there was a cover story in this magazine called [undiscernible], where I remember when it- cuz I was in Morocco at the time- it said: "The Salary of the King." And of course, you know, everybody just goes out and buys it, because they want to know, you know, how much is this guy getting paid? Right? So that was it was nobody had ever seen anything like it that this kind of investigative journalism could take place, like people would say, well, how much is he paying? Is he getting paid two hundred seventy million dollars a year. And yes. And and, and where is that money coming from? And how is it spent? So that was what the dossier was about. And nothing happened. And so that was a big difference. But nowadays, you know, for example, recently there was a cartoon of the cousin of the King that led the cartoonist to to be prosecuted, you know. So, you know, so it continues. So those are the three things.

**00:57:27 Olufemi Taiwo**

Thank you very much, I think. Thank you. So very much for your responses. Now we're going to throw it open, collect the questions.

**00:57:37 Laila Lalami**

I was telling him... I was telling Femi that me that we were talking about Frantz Fanon, you know, major post-colonial thinker and who had spent many years in Algeria. So, you know, you would think that in North Africa, everybody would know who he is. And I was telling him I was in Casablanca few years ago, and I wanted to find a copy of "The Wretched of the Earth" in French. So I walked into a bookstore, and I said, you know, do you have Fanon? And there were like, who? And I said, Franz Fanon, you know? And it was just, and I said, "The Wretched of the Earth." And then the guy came back with, I don't know, something else of the earth. Like he had no idea what I was talking about.

**00:58:16 Olufemi Taiwo**

I mean, just looking at the character of Nabil, you know, I need, you know, total alienation of the culture from itself.

**00:58:27 Laila Lalami**

Yeah, that's true. So so what Femi is talking is that the character of the father is so steeped in French language, French instruction and French culture that he's completely divorced from his culture and from his people. And that's what Franz Fanon was writing about in "The Wretched of the Earth."

**00:58:49 Olufemi Taiwo**

He just is a prospective son-in-law because he couldn't call consommé. [Laughter]

**00:58:58 Olufemi Taiwo**

[Reading question from audience] "In an essay about the late Edward Said's work you opine that Arabs could be orientalists. Do you think 'Secret Son' is an orientalist work?"

**00:59:09 Laila Lalami**

It's funny, you know, when you write something and then it comes back to bite. So a few months ago, the City University of New York was running what it was calling The Great Issues Forum. So where it was asking different thinkers to read a particular work and right commentary about it, and they asked me to write. Or maybe, yeah. So they asked me to write about Edward Said's "Orientalism," have our people- do people new know about this book? So "Orientalism" is a book that was published in 1978 by a professor of literature at Columbia named Edward Said and it's a, it's a book whose central thesis is that much of the literature about the part of the world that is referred to as the Orient or the East. And that part of the world would subsume areas like North Africa and the Middle East, much of the Islamic World. Much of that writing was writing that was that

**01:00:19 Laila Lalami**

relied on clichés that relied on basically creating a very simple view of that part of the world, and for the, for the very purpose facilitating power, the the exercise of power over that part of the world. So for example, a person would go and write a travelogue about, oh, I don't know the Congo, or write something like "Heart of Darkness." And next thing you know, there's Colonial Powers actually enter in the Congo, because the book basically becomes an argument for why these people need to be civilized. These people need our help. And so we have to go there and help them. So "Orientalist" refers to basically any piece of work that that is in service of that exercise of power that is inserted in service of these very simplistic ideas about the Orient. So that's so, this person who's asking this question is asking me if this book is orientalist, you know, it's perhaps you should, if you think that perhaps you shouldn't be asking the author, because obviously the author have been written that commentary about Edward Said is going to answer with a resounding no, right? It would be surprising would be, you know, surprising? I said, well, yeah, actually, as a matter of fact, yes, my book is in service of that, you know, just know. So obviously, my answer is no. And the reason that my answer is no here, I'm going to build an argument for it is that as we have been discussing each of these



actors in turn: Youssef, Rasheeda, Myreka, the mother, Nabil, the the Hatim, the journalist Benabud. In each case. I hope I've made it clear how the character actually takes what you expect, and then eventually subverts it, because it changes what you expect of them. So that would be my argument for why this book is not orientalist. The person who wrote this this question, however, might wish to be an argument for the opposite. And, you know, good luck to you.

**01:02:30 Olufemi Taiwo**

[Reading audience question] "There were two instances in the book that were told from the perspectives of both participants, and were told in slightly different ways. Was their reason for choosing this specific conversations to show from both sides? How much misunderstanding or divergent views come from interpreting the same event in different ways in the book?"

**01:02:50 Laila Lalami**

Right. So, because the a book uses a third person limited point of view, it means that when you are in like say, for example, you're in one of the chapters where you're following Youssef, you as a reader, have no inkling about what any of the other characters is thinking. You only know what Youssef is thinking and what he's seeing. So I wanted readers as they are going through all these events with Youssef to get occasional moments when they get somebody else's perspective on the very, very same event so that they can see this guy how others see him, not just how he sees himself. So even in a simple scene in which he meets his father for the first time, he is really worried, because he's never been in a nice restaurant like the one that his father takes him too. He's worried about his table manners. He's worried about how he's going to eat that fish. He's, you know, that's where his mind is occupied with. And his father doesn't even notice any of this. His father is occupied with other thoughts, and I wanted readers to be able to see the other side, if you will, of those scenes. So yes, that. And that actually, by the way, another argument for why it's not orientalist, but I won't bore you. [laughing]

**01:04:06 Olufemi Taiwo**

[Reading audience question] "When you return to Morocco, to write the book after living in the US, did you see new things that you wanted to include in the book that hadn't occurred to you when thinking of the book in the US?"

**01:04:18 Laila Lalami**

So I started working on this book when I was living in Portland, Oregon in 2003. So by the time I arrived in in Morocco, I already had several. I was already several drafts into the book. And yes, that year I spent there really had a dramatic effect on me and on the writing of the book, because there were so many details that that I was able to sort of change. So to give you one example, at one point in the book I was talking about buying 10 pounds, the bag... a 10 pound bag of sugar. Well, they don't tell 10-pound bags sugar. They sell them by different denominations. That, there were things like a small little thing that by going back to live, I was able to catch some of those things that I hadn't remembered very well. And I was really trying as much as possible not to not to misremember things, because I made the unforgivable mistake with my first book and making a misnaming a soccer club or

a football club. I cannot tell you how many emails I got, angry emails from my compatriots, you know, informing me about which, which football club belonged with where so...

**01:05:38 Olufemi Taiwo**

I was going to live football out of this. I think I'm free now to you know, I was going to ask you for your club. You know?

**01:05:49 Laila Lalami**

Oh, please, don't get me in trouble.

**01:05:51 Olufemi Taiwo**

So that's why didn't do that. But, you know, I hope you share it later. [Reading audience question] "What is the status of Berbers?"

**01:05:57 Laila Lalami**

The status of Berbers? That's it? With no other...? Okay, well, it's hard to answer, because status can mean so many different things, you know, do you mean in terms of civil rights? You know, there's no, you know, or do you mean, you know? So basically in terms of civil rights, one thing that stands to mind is that for a long time.... So let me give a little bit of context here. The as I mentioned earlier, most Moroccans are a mix of Arab and Berber, but it's also true that there are Moroccans who primarily speak one of the three, one of the three variations of Berber. And then there are others who speak Moroccan Arabic. So they come from different linguistic backgrounds, if you will. And when Morocco had its independence, most of the schools at the time taught Standard Arabic, Modern Standard, Arabic and French. But Berber was not taught. So one example of the ways in which Berber is in Morocco have not had access to things like like, because your language is a civil right? Right? So Berber was not taught in schools. So one of the big things that happened recently is, is that the government finally started to, for example, have news broadcasts in Berber. They finally started having children's books in Berber. You could start seeing language being introduced in schools, but these are still very small efforts, because the larger question here in general, is that there's a 50 percent literacy rate in Morocco. And let's far more troubling than whatever language is being taught. And that hasn't even been addressed successfully yet.

**01:07:50 Olufemi Taiwo**

Okay. [Reading audience question] "Why does Youssef invite his mother to go to his father's apartment with him? Does he really think that his mother would be welcome to live there?"

**01:08:00 Laila Lalami**

Well, that goes to show how naive he is, right? He thinks that just because he's being given this, this, this key that somehow it includes his mother. I mean, I'm sure that when Nabil gives him the key, he knows the mother is not going to want to go there.

**01:08:16 Laila Lalami**

So, but poor Youssef, I mean. I think he just he genuinely just wants to believe that that the appearance of his father is going to be the end of that absence. And yet it's not. You know,

**01:08:30 Olufemi Taiwo**

I have to ask this because it's here, but it's intriguing. [Reading audience question] "What are you telling your readers when you write in English? Why not French?"

**01:08:40 Laila Lalami**

Why not French? Well, for a number of reasons. When I was a young girl, my parents enrolled me in a French language school. It was one of the schools that had been started by the nuns in Morocco. So it was a mission school. So the purpose of it obviously, was to to Christianize the natives. This was during the early days of colonization. But after Independence, the nuns stayed on the condition that they were going to run the schools, but not teach catechism or anything like that. So it's a Catholic school, and it was the school nearest our parents house. And even though I came from a lower middle class family, somehow they manage to afford the fee. So they sent me there. So the earliest years of my education, my whole grade school experience, was with in a context in which French had French basically was, was the language that we were made to learn. And then Arabic? Yeah. You know, if you didn't have great grades in it, it was okay. Didn't matter, because basic it was all about learning French. That's what you were there for. And so it was just really a context. It was a very neo-colonial context is the best way that I can explain it. Afterwards, I went to public school. And the problem was that the damage was done because my fluency in Standard Arabic, did not at all match my fluency in French, you know, as far more fluent in French. But worse than that, my earliest exposure to literature was in French, right? So basically, all of the characters that you meet when you're a child, you take it for granted that you're going to meet characters who look look like you or who sound like you, or who come from the same country as you. Well, imagine if all of these characters were from a different country and spoke a different language. And that's really was what my experience was like, because having all of those children's book- books and they all were French, and it was TinTin here and Asterisks there, and, you know, and then later [undiscernible] and so on and so forth. And it really gets you into a situation where I truly believe that. And this we go back to Fanon, where you feel as if your imagination itself has been colonized, right? And I when I went to high school and I was in the tenth grade. So I went to public high school after that. And so I, when I was in the 10th grade, I took a third language, and that was English. And then when I finished high school and wanted to go to college, I thought, maybe I'll study English. And I didn't think you know much of it at the time, and it really wasn't until I left Morocco to go to graduate school, and I would go back in the summer, and that I would start to notice the relationship between French and Arabic and how much more powerful French was and how how devalued Arabic was. And it just really became very complicated for me to write in French, particularly because by then I was already working on this dissertation in English. And I was using English every day at school and all of that. So that's what that's why I decided to start writing in English, and I haven't looked back since.

**01:11:47 Olufemi Taiwo**

The reason I shook my head was, you know, I would have thought the question would be, why not write in Arabic, you know? But...

**01:11:51 Laila Lalami**

I thought you made it up!

**01:12:01 Olufemi Taiwo**

[Reading audience question] "Please discuss how you develop the complex characters in your book."

**01:12:08 Laila Lalami**

Indeed.

**01:12:08 Olufemi Taiwo**

Hey, I didn't write that. [laughter]

**01:12:12 Laila Lalami**

Well, it's hard. I mean, it's hard to answer this, because it comes to... Creating a character is something that begins sometimes with the smallest things. It can begin with the detail that you notice; it can begin with an image; it can begin with something you heard, a phrase that sets off your imagination. And with this book, I began with this image of Youssef, and I had to follow that image and all of the characters that came with it. And I did this for five years as I was working on the book. And I think just having the patience to listen to the characters and to write and rewrite. And rewrite is what gives it complexity. Because obviously, in a first draft, or is not necessarily going to be that much complexity.

**01:13:00 Olufemi Taiwo**

[Reading audience question] "How do you decide which Arabic words to retain when writing and which to translate? I found the transitions between English and Arabic very smooth. And if I didn't know the meaning I could guess it from the context, the the mix come about in the editing process, or in the original draft".

**01:13:19 Laila Lalami**

No, I mean Arabic was included from the very first draft. And so there's different different cases for for when I used Arabic. So for example, one case, a very simple one would be for greetings. So in Morocco, if somebody says, how are you? Your answer is not, I'm fine. Your answer is, thanks be to God. If somebody says, you know, so, shall we make a date till we see each other tomorrow? And you say, instead of saying, yes, you say, if God wills it, so that just those are just the greetings that those are not. You know, it wouldn't make sense not to include them. And so because they're not so nicely translated in English, I chose to use them in Arabic. Another situation might be, if you have an object that is very really specific and doesn't necessarily exist in in the United States. So a simple example of that might be food items or dishes, or, you know, even the actual glassware that you use might be different. So for those that would be another example for words that were used in Arabic. And then there's little things like, for example, "hanout". It's impossible for me to use grocery store, because the concept of grocery store isn't quite the same as that of hanout. Hanout is basically it's in every street in every literally, every street there's one or two, you can't really, you know, go very far

without seeing one, and they're all very tiny, and they carry everything you could need in the house. So basically, even if you go to the market, and even if you go to the supermarket, what you're going to run out of milk at some point, you just go run downstairs and go to the hanout and get milk. They carry. I mean, even glue something broke. I mean, everything like every little thing. And I don't know how they they fit it all in there, but it's basically a hanout is what you run to when you run out of stuff. And so, yeah. So that that was why that's one word that didn't get translated and on and on. So these are some examples.

**01:15:20 Olufemi Taiwo**

[Reading audience question] "How did you conduct your research for the book? They do go to street corners in Casablanca. Talk to people?"

**01:15:30 Laila Lalami**

Can you imagine? You know, I just stopped strangers in the street. [laughing]

**01:15:36 Olufemi Taiwo**

Can I talk to you?.

**01:15:39 Laila Lalami**

I mean, yes, I did research. But the research I did was not about personalities or about emotions, or about what drives people, because the only thing I need for that is imaginative empathy. It basically is my own ability to imagine what they're going to be feeling like in in particular situations. When I say that I did research the kinds of things I mean are, for example, that pound of sugar I was mentioning. I mean, the bag of sugar was mentioning earlier, or just little things like street names, maybe. Or, you know, that's what I mean by research, something that is objectively observable, not something like emotions or talking to people or personalities, or anything like that.

**01:16:21 Olufemi Taiwo**

Right. [Reading audience question] "You spoke about strong women and the challenge of presenting them in the cultural context, as it is usually perceived, what did you think of 'Girls of Riyadh'? Is that a breakthrough in strength of female characters in new generation?"

**01:16:36 Laila Lalami**

So "Girls of Riyadh" is a that, was published in Saudi Arabia and was passed from hand to hand and had quite a bit of an underground success before it was translated into English. One of the rare books that has been translated in English, I haven't read it. So unfortunately, I can't offer any opinion about it.

**01:16:55 Olufemi Taiwo**

Okay, I'll ask this one last. [Reading audience question] "How did you decide not to let Youssef meet his sister?"

**01:17:03 Laila Lalami**

I am so harsh aren't I? [laughing]

**01:17:10 Laila Lalami**

You know, I think it was out of a desire to make it as truthful as it could be. I think the unfortunate reality is that the mainstream culture in which we all live all of us is basically a culture in which we want these Happy Endings and things to be tied neatly. So, you know, when you go to, you know, see a movie that's really what you expect is that you're going to have that happy ending and that things are going to be completely explained at the end. And everybody's going to, and you get upset, because you've been trained by all these movies. So you get upset if you don't get that, I think in fiction, it's maybe a little bit more complicated than that. I just wanted to have the book be as truthful as I could make it to be. And it just didn't seem to me to make sense that they would meet just to satisfy an urge that the reader has, rather than an urge that the characters themselves have. So I chose to go with what they wanted. I'm sorry, [audience laughter]

**01:18:06 Olufemi Taiwo**

Well, last but definitely not the least. [Reading audience question] "After you experience living in Morocco, did your perspective about the US and its cultural place in the world change?"

**01:18:16 Laila Lalami**

After I went to experience life in Morocco- living in Morocco? I was born and raised in Morocco. [laughter] So maybe it's the opposite, right?

**01:18:27 Olufemi Taiwo**

Maybe the person meant when you're going back to do the writing of the book.

**01:18:32 Laila Lalami**

Well, I mean, because another thing that people have asked is that what's it like to go back by the time that I went back to live there? I had lived in the US for almost 15 years. And it definitely was interesting being back because I had been back on short trips, but not to live there. And I really did begin to notice all the small ways in which I had changed by virtue of being here. So, one of which was that you know, I often wanted to make appointments with people 3 weeks in advance, you know, to have a cup of coffee. So if somebody wanted to talk to me, I'm like, wow, I'm kind of busy this week. How about we meet, you know, Tuesday, the 23rd at 2:30 pm. How's that? And they would look at me like I was I was an alien, would be like, you know, what is wrong with you? It's like how is now? Is now a good time? You know? And just it was just like, you know, and then and I, you know, and people just drop in and drop in and drop in. And I was like, I'm trying to write a book people, you know, it was a out of tea drinking and a lot of socializing, but it was a wonderful experience.

**01:19:37 Olufemi Taiwo**

But I hope they all set to you welcome back home.

**01:19:40 Laila Lalami**

They did. [applause]

**01:19:43 Chris Higashi**

Okay, I'm going to save myself having you write your evaluation forms and get mad at me, because she didn't do a reading. Do you want to stay for just a minute and hear a brief reading? Okay,

**01:19:56 Laila Lalami**

You better give her good evaluations after this right? Okay, oh look, this is so cute. His copy's all annotated. I mean, almost every page, man. I've been reading from the beginning of the book. So I thought I'd read from the middle. This is a chapter called Lost and Found. And this is when the father meets his son or the day that the father meets his son.

**01:20:25 Laila Lalami**

"At the precise moment Nabil Amarani picked up the phone to call his wife. His secretary buzzed him all morning. He had been undecided about whether to return Myreka's call because he knew their conversation with inevitably end in a bitter argument. This was how it had been since they had returned home from their trip to Paris two weeks earlier. It was supposed to be their first vacation alone as a couple, since Amal had left home to study at UCLA and 4 days, they talked about how a return to the city where they had spent their honeymoon was the best 20th anniversary gift they could give themselves. It was all ruined, though by a simple phone call, they had been walking in the Luxembourg Gardens. When Myreka pointed out the little children sailing boats on the pond. 'Do you remember?' She asked, as she linked arms with him, 'When Amal insisted on having a red sailboat? The rental man said, he only had blue ones left. But she said, no. And she waited for an hour until a red one was returned. She was five,' I think Nabil smiled and pressed his hand upon his wife's how the years go by in a blink. He thought she was a stubborn child, always sure of what she wanted. 'Let's call her right now,' Myreka said, stopping, but it will be late in Los Angeles. Nabil protested, looking at his watch. He said it's 1:00 in the morning over there. If only she had listened to him, they would still be blissfully ignorant and happy. But as usual, Myreka had I listened, she dialed the number on her mobile phone. The line rang for a while, but Amal did not pick up. She sleeping Nabil said, leading Myreka by the arm. He smiled again when he saw a little boy trying to pick a daisy from one of the flower beds his mother, his mother caught him in time. In the distance, a violinist was playing a Sonata by Bach. A cool May breeze blew. Nabil buttoned his jacket. Myreka kept dialing the number until finally someone picked up. It was not Amal. It was her roommate. Lyndsay. Myreka did not speak English well enough, so she immediately placed the mobile phone to his ear, forcing him to take over. Thus, it fell upon Nabil to ask, to speak to his daughter, only to be told that Amal was in San Francisco for the weekend with her boyfriend, 'What boyfriend?' he asked, stopping. The worst of it, of course, was that when they finally to reach Amal, she did not show any remorse, nor did she have the wisdom to deny the relationship. Maybe you could have said he believed her, even though he didn't, and the matter would have been closed. But his daughter had never been the deceiving type. She readily admitted that she was dating an American photography student. Naturally, Nabil had to do what any sane father in his position would have done. He fumed a yelled he threatened. Then he hung up. Myreka wanted to get on a flight to Los Angeles immediately to talk some sense into her man. But Nabil forbade her categorically. It was up to Amal to apologize. The day wore on their stay in Paris ended. And still she did not call when they return to Casablanca. Nabil, told his

bank to stop automatic payments to Amal's account in Los Angeles. His reasoning was simple: Amal claimed that she was old enough to make up her own, to make her own decisions. And if she was old enough for, and surely she was old enough to pay for her own studies. Myreka, of course, was furious. She called him morning and evening to argue that he should stop the nonsense that he needed to get on with the times. Maybe I knew better, though, if he let Amal get away with this, then what next? She might get the idea that she could marry an American whom had he been working for all this time? And to whom would he leave his share of the business? Some Foreigner who would take her away to his country away from from her family? Her home, her Homeland? A few lean weeks would convince amount of her mistake, and she would fly back home to ask for his forgiveness. But Myreka did not or refuse to understand. She said that their nephews, the harsh Sun and Earth man's son were dating American girls while studying in New York without the slightest risk of being cut off. But it is not the same Nabil wanted to scream. They are young men. And that is what young men do. Of course, none of this would have been an issue if Amal had been a boy." Thank you. [applause].

**01:25:15 Chris Higashi**

[♪ Piano music♪ ] This podcast was presented by The Seattle Public Library and Foundation, and made possible by your contributions to The Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening. [♪ Piano music♪ fades out].