



Recorded Events

2011 Seattle Reads Chris Cleave at Beacon Hill Branch, May 14

00:00:05 Chris Higashi

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[Piano Music]

00:00:44 Chris Higashi

I'm Chris Higashi program manager of the Washington Center for the Book at The Seattle, Public Library. Welcome to this final event in the 2011 Seattle Reads series. So, we first think Beacon Hill branch for hosting us today. Especially Tina Mat, the Librarian here. So, Seattle Reads is a project designed to deepen appreciation of literature through reading and discussion, to foster reading and discussion of works by authors of diverse cultures, and to create community around reading a shared book. This is the 13th year of Seattle Reads- The Seattle Public Library's widely emulated one book community reading program. I always want to tell people that we are the founders, Nancy Pearl and I did the very first one in December of 1998. And since that time, hundreds and hundreds of these projects have been done around the country and internationally. Little did we know what we spawned. So the first thing I want to do is thank The Seattle Public Library Foundation which this year is celebrating its 30th Anniversary. The foundation represents thousands of people in our community who give gifts large and small to support our libraries. It is that private support that makes possible Seattle Reads and so many of our free library programs. So to the foundation donors who are here with us today, we want to say thank you very, very much for your support. We thank The Seattle Times for generous promotional support for library programs. And I also need to say that that the Wallace Foundation has generously supported Seattle Reads. Since the very beginning this year, we also have support from Simon & Schuster and from KOUW public radio. And from our independent bookstore partners on the way out in the lobby- Elliott Bay is here with both of Chris Cleave's novels as well as works from our reading list as well as works from the African diaspora. So I hope you'll visit their table. So, we also want to thank our community partners who served as moderators and

presenters for the series this spring. A couple of ones I wanted to point out to you look, there, these are podcasts on the library's website. Jorge Boron, the director of Northwest Immigrant Rights Project spoke about asylum seekers in our own region, about the detention center and Tacoma talked about Little Bee as though she were a real person and how would her asylum case be handled. It's really a very, very fascinating talk. So, look for that. We had a couple of Nigerian-born writers, a fiction writer and a poet. That's also available on podcast. And then finally Book-it Repertory Theater did staged readings from Little Bee yesterday. It was pretty special because it was done with the author Chris Cleave in attendance so we think we got a good enough recording to have that for podcast. So look for that in a week or so, okay, so one more. Sorry, Sweet Crude, a documentary by local filmmaker Sandy Cioffi, which I believe is just now available, just got distribution. Sandy's film is about the devastation caused to the people of Nigeria's Niger Delta resulting from 50 years of oil extraction. Um, you know, we're talking economic environmental humanitarian, it is an amazing film. Sandy and her crew were detained by the Nigerian military, during the making of the film spent a week in prison. So anyway, that film is I think now available. Okay, Chris, Cleaves debut novel, Incendiary About a London Terrorist Bomb, was published in Britain, on July, 7th 2005. The very day of the London, train and subway things, which was terrible timing pulled from the shelves, went out of print. Chris, had trouble getting a publisher for his second novel, because his first one did so poorly. So, it did go on to win numerous awards and critical acclaim, Little Bee, is his second novel. It's been a New York Times number one, bestseller on the Publishers Weekly, another bestseller lists for very, very long time, Chris Cleave has been a barman as well as a sailor, a teacher of marine navigation, and a journalist and in dreadlocks toured with a rock band. So, the format for today is Chris is going to make some brief remarks and then you're invited to ask him any questions that you wish after that he'll be signing books in the lobby and if you could, please take a few minutes before you leave today and fill out the evaluation form that you found on your chair. Your comments help us plan future library programs and understand how we're doing in our efforts to deepen appreciation of literature through this program. Okay? Thank you very much and let's welcome, Chris Cleave.

00:06:19 Chris Cleave

Thanks very much, Chris. Well, this building is amazing. Each library we've been to has been better than the last. There's I guess, we've been four days in Seattle. Now, spent a lot of time at the Central Library downtown, but we've been to lots of the branch libraries. Now, I come from London and you might have guessed by the accent, and it's a very different place. Culturally, we don't have anything like this each library has been more beautiful than the last and to walk into this one. I think you guys are just frankly showing off now. I can't believe it. I mean, in the UK and I guess here as well, it's a time of austerity and it's a time of severe budget cuts, we've closed, 10% of the libraries in the UK and the last 18 months, it's a disaster. Really. I mean, it's a disaster on a huge scale. If you actually think that these places are important. And so to come to Seattle and to walk around. As I have done here for the last few days, in to see the centrality of the library system to the life of the city has been really inspiring. And I think it's even more inspiring to know that, you know, you guys voted for this with your own money yourselves, right? All of these libraries were renovated and built because you guys voted through a library bond, which I was told was the largest Library Bond ever agreed by a city in the history of the United States which therefore means the largest Library Bond, ever in the history of the world. You guys have the most impressive library system as far as science knows in the

universe right here. You know, it's incredible to be here. And it's important, you know, something the wartime prime minister of my country said, you know, Winston Churchill said when the budget guys came to him in the middle of the second world war. You know they had accounting teams in the war just like anywhere and they came up to him and they said you know prime minister we're really running out of money. We're going to have to cut all of the funding to the Arts in order to carry on. Shooting this war and his instant reply was also, what are we fighting for then? I've been hugely inspired by the, the library system here by how well used it is. And by the Seattle city reads program, which is great fun to be part of, I mean, we've had three days of huge event and it's been brilliant. You really notice touring around with a book, the different characters of the American cities and I have to say, Has one of my absolute favorite places because the level of debate is always really high and the atmosphere of debate is always really friendly. You know, it's a very relaxed and very smart city and it's really fun to do events here. In fact, I've been so intensely involved with the city, even just for three days. Now that I've started to have opinions about it. Let's say they say, you're not really from Seattle, until you have an opinion about the Alaskan Way. I had for the first time in the week, I had an hour of downtime today. So I took a deep breath and was Googling the Alaskan Way Viaduct because I had become concerned about it. And you can actually see. I don't know if you've seen it, you can see a computer simulation of what's going to happen when an earthquake arrives and it's brilliant in his proper Disaster Movie. And you know, I started to get hugely concerned about that and I now have an opinion Will you share your opinion with see the other? That's a great question but I'm not going to rise to it. I've also learned that it's extremely divisive as a know. I'd have to live here for another year. Before I'd have a public opinion about it. I've learned Judo. Yeah, Chris was driving me into town from the airport actually and she decided to tell me just how dangerous that bridge was while we were in the middle of it, so you could have waited till we driven over it. Chris Higashi, by the way, is an absolute Legend and runs an incredible city reads program and I think in a we all owe a huge debt of gratitude. I thought I'd like to talk to you a little bit about why I wrote a Little Bee and I've been talking all week about the geopolitics of it and the way the characters were developed to talk about the life of one particular refugee because I've always believed that if you cannot find one, human example of something that you hold to be like politically or strictly true. Then it probably isn't. I've always thought that if you can't show me one, human example that proves our position then I don't really understand the position and I'm always interested as a Storyteller in taking one human life and saying, if I could tell the story of that life from beginning to end, then we could make a decision about what that human life as worth. That's all I do. I don't hold political opinions and I don't have any answers to these occult moral and social questions about Asylum and about refugees. I think my job is to pose those moral questions in an interesting way. I think one of the problems with real life as that we're all bored of it, you read in the newspapers, the same stories every day and they don't seem to go away. You see on the TV news, essentially the same version of the same story every single day. And it's told to us so often that we get bored of it. And I think one of the things that you can do in fiction is to take something like security or to take something like immigration or to take something like the politics of refugees and you can make it interesting again, and you can ask these questions about society in an interesting way, but I don't think as a Storyteller. You have to answer them. I think you just trying to ask them in an interesting way so that people are engaged with them. And that's what I tried to do with the story of Little Bee. You take one human life and you say "We'll look how much of our own comfortable lives should we be prepared to sacrifice in order to save the life of someone like

Little Bee?" That's all the question is being asked in the book and the book asks it in a variety of different ways, it's actually asking the same question in slightly different ways. There's a scene quite near the beginning of the book, where a little be who is a refugee from a very troubled. Part of Nigeria goes to, she's fleeing for her life from soldiers who are pursuing her, and she's fleeing with her sister and she flees as far as she can from her village in a westerly direction, until she hits the edge of the land. She can't go any further. She arrives at this place called. Iybin Beach. And that's a tourist destination and it's actually a really beautiful place. I've been there when I was a kid. That's the place where Sarah and Andrew who are members of our Western democracies they come from London, have gone on holiday on a little one week break to patch up their failing marriage. Those people meet on that beach and there's a terrible scene because shortly after they meet soldiers arrived who have been pursuing Little Bee and her sister and they asked a terrible question of Andrew and of Sarah. They asked them, would you be prepared to cut off one of your fingers to save the life of a human being that you've never met before? That's no, no more and no less than the than the question. Life asks us every day in a different form? How much of our comfortable lives? Should we give up to help? People who are in real trouble? You don't have to walk far from your own front door to meet people who are in real trouble. You know, every time you meet someone who's asking for spare change, there are asking you the same question. They're not asking you to cut off a finger, but they're asking for a dollar. Later on the book goes on to ask the same question in a different way. It asks, life asks of Sarah the question am I prepared to carry on in my job which is very successful and convenient to me or should I really give that up in order to do something that's more useful to my fellow human beings? It's the same question that the books are asking. It doesn't really answer the question because I'm just trying to set it up in an interesting way. So, I've been talking about those issues this week and it didn't really strike me till this morning. That really what I want to talk about is something different. I want to talk about why I think the answers to those moral questions are important and the reason for me centers on a character that I've hardly spoken about at all this week in the boat and that's the character of Charlie, who is Sarah and Andrew's kid. He's odd, and the book and answers only to the name of Batman. And it struck me that actually there are kids in all of my books and I was asking myself, why? And I think it's because having a child in the book gives me a reason to care about whether we find the answers to these big moral questions about our society. I figure that if we were all going to be the last generation on Earth, and there would be nobody after us, but it really wouldn't matter. It wouldn't matter if we left the World a more just place than the world than the way in which we find it. It really wouldn't matter if we answered these questions. Like, how much of our lives should we give up in order to help people who have less than us? Just wouldn't matter at all. It matters to me because of my kids. It matters to all of us. I think, because we want to leave something behind, if not for our kids, then for the other generation, that's coming up, just because it seems the right thing to do. Yeah. And so, if you ask me, who my favorite character in the novel of Little Bee, it's actually Charlie. He's a, he's a kid, he's four years old in the book and he dresses as Batman. And in fact, he refuses to be addressed by any other name. He's probably the easiest character that I ever wrote. He was based on my kid. There was four years old when I was writing. Now our eldest dressed as Batman. For a whole year relentlessly, right? He would not take no for an answer, he always wore the full costume even when it was sweltering hot, he saw it as his solemn duty and he would have his Batman mask on with this little bat ears, even when he was eating cereal, he would eat it through his Bat mask and he would only answer to the name of Batman.

If you called him by his real name, he would look around. Didn't know what you were talking about. If you asked him what he'd been doing during the day, they would tell you that he'd been fighting crime and he would look at you with this expression. Like what were you doing in the day? Was it as useful as what I was doing? I was fighting crime in his head. The whole world was divided up into good, guys, and bad guys. And if your day had not been involved with defeating evil, then you'd had a pointless day. And it struck me as really sad that we grow out of thinking that way. You know, I don't think that way anymore and it's a shame, you know, it's a shame that we've developed all of these, very specialized ways of living. And we have all of these incredibly specific jobs none of, which involve fighting evil. So I wanted to put some of that into the book, I think. And yeah, he was a really easy character to write, you know? My, my kid was just chatting away and I would take dictation. He had three Batman costumes my kid, he had one that was on him and one that was in the washing machine, ready to go on him and one that was drying ready to go on him and his life was that simple. You know, it was very cheap and easy to look after. He just needed a sort of infrastructure to be Batman and that's the character of Charlie he's in there because he's a reason to care about whether we get to the right answers to the difficult moral questions. That This is asking all of us everyday. Know how much should I give up? I don't know. I really like the way that children think and I was reminded this morning of a story that I'm going to share with you about my own children in a very hard winter that we had in the UK you have. I was investigating with an audience this morning to see if this happens here. You do have Father Christmas here, right? You have Santa Claus and we all believe in him. He comes in the UK on Christmas Eve and fills your stocking. Thanks. So if you put out your stocking under the Christmas tree or somewhere on the mantelpiece, Santa will fill it up now. Santa knows our two boys, very well and seems to make pretty good choices about what to put in their stockings and this Christmas. He put in the usual crop of things that young boys, really? Like, I the most gross things imaginable, they had this stuff called snotty slime. Do you get That here, as this horrible green goo and a little pot, they had this stuff called Fart putty as well. No joke, shop kind of stuff Santa chose well and the kids loved it. But Santa miscalculated in one important respect, he gave them these toys called alien eggs. Now these eggs were little egg-shaped things with horrible rubber alien fetus floating in a kind of purple ectoplasm. They were absolutely gross and I think that Santa thought the kids would love them but he was wrong, right? They played with all of their other toys but these got left in a corner and the boys would look at them, kind of askance out of the corner of their eye and after two or three days, the eggs just disappeared and nothing was said, and we forgot about it. Or a week or so, you know. And then it was snowing really heavily. And I looked out of the kitchen window one day and I saw a lump under the snow and, you know, I hadn't seen our three-year-old for a little while. So I thought it might be prudent to check whether it was him and it turned when I went out there, what, I found under the snow, was a lemonade bottle that I had the label removed from it, you know, a big kind of two liter lemonade bottle. And it had been cut off halfway through and a nose. Cone had been made out of cardboard that had been taped onto the end of the lemonade bottle to make it into a space rocket inside the lemonade bottle with a two alien eggs. And there was a note, which I'll tell you about later handwritten, note in our five-year-olds, terrible handwriting, and so my wife and I had sort of sat down and had a think and we followed the thought processes backwards. Right? And what had happened was the kids had got really freaked out about it because they're smart kids. They know what happens to eggs. Eggs in a centrally heated home are going to be properly incubated and at some point therefore they'll hatch. And when alien eggs hatch.

You get aliens and they were, they were going to hatch into the house with unpredictable consequences for, for the inhabitants. So that's why the kids had been so freaked out. They hadn't liked it at all. So they done the smart thing and put them out into Sub-Zero temperatures, and then secondarily, they'd invented a way to get rid of them out of our planetary orbit entirely, they'd built a space rocket for them. Um, to repatriate them. And this is how I know that that's true. The he the note, which is written in our five-year-olds handwriting but was decorated and illustrated by our three year old. So it was a team effort from them. The note said, dear aliens, we are very sorry. You cannot live with us here on Earth, but we hope you will be very happy on your own planet, Mars. I know the the five-year-old had signed it and the three-year-old had made his mark on it, and that's what they'd done and there. Nothing more had been said and they've been very cheerful because as far as they were concerned, that was the problem. Just dealt with finished. You know, aliens were out of their lives, so it left us with the parenting challenge. No, that's because we discovered this while the kids were asleep and there were two things we could have done, right? In two ways you can go in a situation like that, as a parent you can, you can wake them up or wait till they get downstairs. And then show them the thing that you found and commend them for their construction abilities and their resourcefulness and planning. But you can point out that these eggs really aren't from Mars at all and they're actually made in China, and you can Defuse The Situation commend them for their worried. But say, look Mom and Dad aren't going to give you anything. Dangerous. You don't need to worry about it. It's okay. Or you can go for option b, which is the one we did select in the end where you take the lemonade bottle and alien eggs and you discreetly dispose of it and the trash and we took this stuff called methylated spirits, which is a combustible cleaning product that we use on the windows. We poured it in a little circle on the lawn and we lit it and it made a brilliant kind of scorched patch on the lawn. Anyway, the kids came down the next morning for breakfast and, you know, they were eating their Cheerios that our eldest was in his Batman outfit was doing that. And we said to him, boys, you know, mummy and daddy. Heard a roaring noise in the night and we looked out through the window and we saw a tower of fire ascending up into the sky. Do you guys know anything about that? and the kids looked at each other for a split second and then they looked at us and they were like... Went back to eating this cereal, totally lied to her shamelessly. And as far as they were concerned that was it, they high-fived each other mission accomplished. That was it at have been done. The next thing they did was just went to playing Batman and Robin all day in the house. And nothing more was said, and that's the way their minds worked as I, they'd had a problem with an alien infestation. They dealt with it. It was done line drawn, mom and dad, had it hadn't even suspect And that and then they went on to play, Batman and Robin. That's what they were doing and that's what I completely love about the way kids. Think they live in this magical world where they just deal with problems, you know, in a very sensible way and then move on. And then my there, my reason to care, I think, and when I put them into my fiction, I think the reason is because it sort of points up a sadness. That I feel that we kind of grow out of that, you know, when we grow up and we let ourselves think that the world is more complicated than it actually is in a we let ourselves believe that, that it's more simple than Good and Evil. And that when I was researching little be the story, I met a lot of refugees. You know, I interviewed people from really troubled areas, who'd been through terrible things and had gone through the immigration detention system in the United Kingdom. And it struck me. That actually, the world is not as complicated as we allow ourselves to believe that it is right. These people are effectively superheroes and I've met People who have walked from Nigeria right to

Cairo. Now that involves walking through the situation that they'd escaped from it also involves walking across jungles and mountains and a little thing called the Sahara, right? And you get to Cairo and they were this person, this guy had worked in Cairo doing menial jobs for years to get the money together to pay a people smuggler to take him from North Africa, to southern Europe and having Going through all of that, you'd better be a fantastic judge of character because yeah, if you don't choose the right people smuggler, they'll take you five miles off shore and throw you overboard, because that uses a lot less fuel than driving you all the way across the Mediterranean Sea. Anyway, this guy had chosen the right person. It arrived in Salerno in southern Italy and then he'd walked across Europe to Calais and France and then by a mechanism that I still don't know who had managed to get to the United Kingdom. These people are superheroes now and we let ourselves believe that it's more complicated than just saying. Hi. How can we help? And that struck me as really sad that our response to these people who are some of the most resourceful and resilient and interesting people I've ever met is to assume that there are problem, lock them up and try and Deport them as quickly as possible. And that seems like a shame to me and that's some if I let myself ever think from the point of view of my kids, it seems like even more of a shame. So that's all I wanted to talk about today just because you can you can read the book whenever you like or you can go online and see me talking endlessly about the book till you get sick of me. But I just thought today, I might tell you something really personal about why I write that kind of book and why. Why it's important to me to write from that point of view I wrote from, which is probably naive, and it's probably childlike. But it is that for a reason? No. Because I think that we let ourselves sometimes too easily, believe that the world is more complicated than it actually is. I could I could answer your questions straight away if you'd like to do that I could do a quick reading from the book first if you'd prefer that do reading. Okay, cool. I'll do a reading really quickly and then we'll do. Do some questions. Hey, I'm going to do, I'm going to do a bit about Sarah. The books in alternative voices from Little be who's a girl from Nigeria and Sarah, who is a woman from Kingston upon Thames in London, which is the very dull suburb of Kingston, that's where I live. This is Sarah from the spring of 2007 until the end of that long summer, when little be came to live with us, my son removed, his Batman costume, only at bath times. I ordered a twin costume that I substituted, while he splashed in the suds. So that at least I could wash the boys sweat and the grass stains out of the first It was a dirty green. Need job fighting Master criminals. If it wasn't mr. Freeze with his dastardly ice Ray, then it was the penguin Batman's deadly foe or the even more Sinister Puffin, whose absolute wickedness, the original creators of the Batman franchise had inexplicably failed to Chronicle. my son and I lived with the consequences a houseful of acolytes, henchmen and Stooges ogling us from behind the sofa, cackling Darkly in the thin Gap, beside the bookcase and generally bursting out at us willy-nilly It was one shock after another, in fact. At 4 years, old asleep and awake. My son lived at constant Readiness. There was no question of separating him from the Demonic bat mask and the Lycra suit and the glossy yellow utility belt and the jet black cape And there was no use addressing my son by his Christian name. He would only look behind him and cock his head. And shrug, as if to say my bat sensors can detect, no, boy of that name here madam The Only Name my son answered to that summer was Batman. Nor was there any point explaining to him? That his father had died? My son didn't believe in the physical possibility of death Death was something that could only occur if the evil schemes of the baddies were not constantly foiled. And that, of course was unthinkable. That summer the summer, my husband died. We all had identities that we were loath to let go of My son had his Batman costume. I

still used my husband's surname and little B, though she was relatively safe with us, still clung to the name that she had taken in a time of Terror. We were exiled from reality that summer, we were refugees from ourselves. To flee from cruelty is the most natural thing in the world. Of course, And the timing that brought us together that summer was very cruel. Little be telephoned us on the morning that they released her from the immigration Detention Center. My husband picked up her call. I only found out much later that it was her Andrew never told me. Apparently she let him know that she was coming, but I don't suppose he felt up to seeing her face again. Five days later he killed himself by hanging. I found my husband with his feet trading. Empty are touching the soil of no country. Death, of course, is a refuge. It's where you go, when a new name or a mask and Cape can no longer hide you from yourself. It's where you run to where none of the principalities of your conscience. Will grant you Asylum. Little Bee knocked on my front door, five days after my husband died, which was 10 days after they released her from detention. After a journey of five thousand miles, and two years, she arrived just too late to find Andrew alive. But just in time for his funeral. Hello. Sara. She said, Little Bee arrived at 8 a.m. and The Undertaker knocked at 10. Not one second, two or one second past. I imagine the Undertaker had been silently standing outside. Our front door for several minutes. Looking at his watch. Waiting for our lives to converge onto the precise, fault line at which our past could be cleaved from our future with three soft. Strikes of the bright brass knocker. My son opened the door and took in The Undertaker's height and his impeccable tailoring and his sober demeanor. I suppose The Undertaker did look for all the world like Batman's work a day, alter ego. My son shouted along the hallway to me. Mummy is Bruce Wayne, cheers, thank you, thanks very much. You guys are brilliant. Thank you.

00:36:24 Chris Higashi

Thanks, Chris.

00:36:28 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]