



Recorded Events

2012 Seattle Reads Amy Waldman, May 4

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[00:00:40] Welcome and I'm Marcellus Turner of the City Librarian and welcome to Seattle Reads. I would have you know that this is my very first Seattle Reads and I've experienced Seattle Reads from other parts of the country where we've tried to adapt it. And so I've called back and said, "I don't think we were doing it right." [laughter] So I am really excited to experience Seattle Reads as you do it. Welcome and thank you for joining us for Seattle Reads, *The Submission*. And this evening with author Amy Waldman. This is the 14th 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. The project originated here. The brainchild, Nancy Pearl and Chris Hagashi, who did the first series in December 1998. I'm very proud of our library for leading the way. Let me start with special thanks to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. The Foundation represents thousands of people in our community who make gifts

[00:01:47] small and large to support our library. This private support is what makes possible evenings like this and so many of our free library programs. So to the Library Foundation donors who are here with us tonight, we say thank you, very, very, much for your support. We're grateful to the Wallace Foundation for generous support for Seattle Reads since its inception. Additional support this year comes from Picador Books. We thank our media sponsor KUOW Public Radio, and thanks as well to the *Seattle Times*, for ongoing generous promotional support for library programs. Let me turn things over to Chris Hagashi, Program Manager of the Washington Center for the Books at the Seattle Public Library, who directs our annual Seattle Reads series, to introduce the rest of the program. Thank you. [applause]

[00:02:45] The tall and short. [laughter] So I too say, thank you very much for joining us for the 2012 Seattle Reads, *The Submission*. This is a project that's designed to deepen appreciation of literature through reading and discussion, to explore literature of cultures that may be different from our own, to

create community through reading a shared book and to make these kinds of opportunities for readers and writer to talk with one another. So the point of the Seattle Reads supporting programs that we do prior to the author's visit is to put the book in context and help readers understand its themes. I just want to point out a couple of these events that you can watch or listen to. One was that we did a screening of the documentary, *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* about that controversial selection of her, as the designer for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It's a wonderful documentary. It's in the library's collection. You can reserve it, check it out. Another was a program the other night about the Oklahoma City National

[00:03:56] Memorial and Foundation, our own Seattle's Sydney Dobson who has directed the Seattle Architecture Foundation for several years, was the first Executive Director of the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation. She directed that whole process to choose the design for the Oklahoma City Memorial. They learned a lot from that Vietnam Memorial and that will be a library podcast within a couple of weeks. And today, Book-it Repertory Theater did staged readings of excerpts from *The Submission*. They brought to life Mo Khan, Claire Burwell, Alyssa the journalist, Sean the firemen's brother, Asma the Bangladeshi widow. Other characters from the novel, Book-it describe the experience beforehand, as slightly terrifying, for the actors to present this performance before the author and possibly so for her, but I will tell you that at the end of that performance everybody was all smiles. You can also listen to an interview between Marcie Sillman and Amy Waldman on KUOW weekday program this morning, that's archived

[00:05:12] and available now. So it is my great pleasure to welcome Amy Waldman to this, the main event of Seattle Reads this year. We do have two more events to follow, tomorrow morning at the Ballard branch and tomorrow afternoon at Columbia. So as part of the *Seattle Times* generous media support for the library programs, we look for opportunities to bring together our two audiences, Times readers and people who attend library events. So to that end we are, well, and to put the spotlight on *Seattle Times* personnel. So to that end, we're very pleased tonight to have Amy Waldman be joined on stage by *Seattle Times* book editor, Mary Ann Gwinn. Mary Ann has been the book editor for the *Seattle Times* since 1998. She puts out the Sunday Books page. She writes about books and authors in her Lit Life column that you know appears every Monday and she assigns reviews to writers in the city. She was a member of the National Book Critics Circle Board until I think just recently. Amy Waldman is a former *New York Times*

[00:06:26] reporter in New York. On September 11th, she took down the stories of people on the ground at the towers that day. She covered the aftermath intensively. She talked the other night at Northeast branch of doing stories about children, whose parents died on September 11th and going home, lying on the floor, in the greatest grief she has ever felt. The *New York Times* sent her overseas, she reported from Afghanistan, was co-chief of the South Asia Bureau of the *New York Times*. So all of this life experience, it seems to me, informs the writing in this amazing book. *The Submission* is her debut novel. It was chose, it was named, *Entertainment Weekly's* number one novel of the year, *Esquire's* book of the year. It made virtually all of the Best of Year lists. It opens with a Manhattan jury[s charge to choose a memorial for the victims of the terrorist attacks. It in a

blind submission, the jury comes down to two designs and chooses The Garden, a foursquare geometric design with the pavilion. When the jurors discovered

[00:07:51] that its creator is Mohammad Khan, an American Muslim, they know immediately that this choice is going to be controversial and of course they are right. And as Marcie Sillmans said this morning, "All hell breaks loose." So on your way in you were offered a card to write a question if you have one. You could do so during the program. We will pass them please to your left. We will collect them or hold onto your cards and write a question if you have one that occurs to you during the discussion. You'll also have a chance to just raise your hand and ask something afterwards. Following the program you're invited to meet Amy Waldman. She'll be signing books at a table in the lobby. Thanks again to Elliott Bay Book Company, and one last thing. At the end of Seattle Reads, we're going to do a brief online survey instead of all those pieces of paper I usually hand out. So if you would be willing to participate, we would really appreciate having your email address on the pad that I think was passed around

[00:08:58] and will also be here at the front table. It's one of the ways that we learn about the effectiveness of our efforts to deepen Seattle, sorry to deepen engagement in literature through this reading and discussion program. Your comments also help us to plan future library programs. Okay, so we're going to start with a very brief reading, I think, by Amy Waldman so you can hear her words, in her voice. And now please join me in welcoming Mary Ann Gwinn and Amy Waldman to the Seattle Public Library. Thank you. [applause]

[00:09:38] Thank you. Thank you all for coming. I'm going to read a brief section from near the beginning of the book. It's from the perspective of Mohammad Khan or Mo. It actually takes place before he enters the competition and very soon after the attacks on New York. He's in Los Angeles, trying to fly back to New York when he gets pulled aside and interrogated by federal agents at the airport. So this is just at the end of the interrogation. The interview ended as capriciously as it had begun. Without explanation, they asked to photograph and fingerprint him. Instead of refusing, as he believed was his right, he allowed them to press down his fingers as if he were a paralytic, an acquiescence that marked off the man who left the room from the one who had entered. At the agent's physical touch, the hand lifting his, there was a brief flare of fury, an impulse toward violence, then the almost instantaneous checking of it. Returning home, he found that they had pillaged his suitcase, crumpled his precisely folded

[00:10:42] shirts, unpaired his socks, uncapped his shampoo and toothpaste so that a nebulous ooze coated his toiletries. He upended the suitcase on the bed, dumped the toiletry kit in the trash, kicked the wastebasket to the wall. But his bitterness was overwhelmed by the magnitude of mourning around him. The city reeled, the air ashy, the people ashen, the attack site of suppurating wound you felt even when you didn't see it. One night, soon after his return to New York, Mo walked toward the zone of destruction. The moonlight picked out a strange fine dust clinging to leaves and branches; his toe rested on a paper scrap with charred edges. The eternal lights were off in the nearby office towers, as if the city's animal appetites had been quelled. A quilt of the missing, bright portraits of tuxedoed men and lipstick women, had been pasted on fences and construction plywood, but the

streets were empty, and for the first time in memory, he heard his own footsteps in New York City. He imagined, couldn't avoid it, the shaking

[00:11:45] hands that must have placed each of these photos on a photocopy machine, that roll of blue light, cold, mechanical hope. False hope. The centers of hundreds upon hundreds of webs of family, friends, work had been torn out. It staggered Mo, shamed him. These men who had given vent to their homicidal sanctimony had nothing to do with him, yet weren't entirely apart. They represented Islam no more than his own extended family did, but did they represent it less? He didn't know enough about his own religion to say. He was the middle-class Muslim son of an engineer, a profile not all that different from some of the terrorists. Raised in another society, raised religious, could he have become one of them? The question shuttered through him and left an uneasy residue. Behind a police sawhorse an Indian man in a bedraggled white jacket and black bow tie held a sign: WE ARE OPEN. The man motioned to a tiny restaurant down the block, and although Mo wasn't hungry, he followed and ordered a sympathy entrée. The waiter left

[00:12:47] him to the cook, who also served, and alone, Mo picked at his chickpeas and naan. Here he could hear himself chew. What was it he was trying to see? He had been indifferent to the buildings when they stood, preferring more fluid forms to their stark brutality, their self-conscious monumentalism. But he had never felt violent toward them, as he sometimes had toward that awful Verizon building on Pearl Street. Now he wanted to fix their image, their worth, their place. They were living rebukes to nostalgia, these Goliaths that had crushed small businesses, vibrant streetscapes, generational continuities, and other romantic notions beneath their giant feet. Yet it was nostalgia he felt for them. A skyline was a collaboration, if an inadvertent one, between generations, seeming no less natural than a mountain range that had shuttered up from the earth. This new gap in space reversed time. Thank you. [applause]

[00:13:44] I know that. I was, I was googling Amy today and I kind of went through some of her background, some of which you heard in Chris's introduction. She was a journalist for many years. She started out in South Africa, is that right? It was pretty gutsy. She was a freelancer in South Africa and she attracted the notice of Bill Keller who is, was the editor of the *New York Times* and one thing led to another and she went to work for the *New York Times* and you were there, on 9/11, in the newsroom. And then were later sent to South Asia to report, including Afghanistan and other countries. So that's, that is a hefty journalistic resume right there. So my question is at what point in the middle of the night did you wake up or did you stare at the ceiling and go, "I really would like to write a novel that relates to all this?" [laughter] Never, because yeah, I never thought about writing a book about all of that and certainly not a novel, and it really came out of a very specific conversation not in the middle

[00:15:08] of the night, just regular afternoon with a friend about the actual memorial competition, which was ongoing for the September 11th memorial and then we sort of segued into talking about Maya Lin, and her experience in the fact that she was an Asian-American selected to design the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and how there was a piece of the backlash against her when she was chosen. Can you tell people a little bit about that in case they don't remember? Sure, so Maya Lin

was selected in an anonymous competition. Her design was picked for the Vietnam Memorial, you know, and they went to look at who it was and figured out she was actually a senior in college at Yale at the time, which is still astounding to me. And, but initially her design which today is revered really was very controversial, you know, the black, the scar in the earth, many different elements of it. But also the fact that she, although she had grown up in Athens, Ohio, the fact that she was Chinese American, some people said that's wrong for this memorial.

[00:16:07] So we were talking a little bit about that and I started thinking what would the equivalent be for September 11th, and I thought it would be of a American Muslim, won this memorial competition. And I literally in that moment thought that's a novel and somebody should write that. [laughter] So that was sort of the first thought I even had and I didn't necessarily at the time think I should write that because I didn't know how to write fiction, you know, so outside my experience. Nor did I have time at that point. So it took me three years to actually get to the point of starting to write it, but the idea really stayed with me that whole time. Did you feel that you needed to get some emotional distance from the events that you would reported on to start writing a novel? No, I didn't really think about it that way and if anything, I felt in the end that the converse turned out to be true, that it was I think racing around South Asia for four years I had almost put too much emotional distance

[00:17:06] between some of the reporting I had done, and it was only when I sort of sat still and started working on the novel that a lot of it fully came up or came back for me. But I think, I do think just time, the distance of time was helpful just to have some perspective on everything and yes get some distance from it.

[00:17:29] There are a lot of, lot of interesting characters in this book and they each, I don't mean represent in a heavy-handed sort of English essay way, but they do represent certain elements of society and the first person the, the central character is Mohammad Khan. He is raised as an American, you know, completely secular upbringing in a Virginia suburb and my reading of it is, you know, he's just an ambitious guy, you know. I mean, he's pretty much out for, you know, recognition. He enters this competition and probably had no idea initially of what the fallout would be, but as things accelerate he, he almost, he stands almost in opposition to this other character Claire Burwell, who is the family's representative on the design jury. She is there to represent the families who lost somebody in 9-1-1 and she has a you know, a very strong mission and she and, she and Mohammad have a real interesting tension in relationship throughout the book and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about that? Sure. I mean

[00:18:54] for me I was always interested. I mean, I think this is what a novel can do is trying to understand how personal histories and psychologies shape public and political events. And in some way shape the arc of history, although we don't always think of it that that way. And so, and also the idea that it you know, especially in Mo's case that he wasn't just a victim, that his own nature was shaping events as well. Right. I thought that was really important to me that he wasn't just this passive recipient of external events. So, and then it became. So, he has as you said, quite ambitious, quite stubborn, nature. I think it's further shaped or distorted. However, you want to describe it by the he has after these attacks is suddenly having his Muslim identity, which was not important to him

thrust to the fore and you know sort of anger rising from that so his motivations, you know are complex. But his character is central to what happens and then you have Claire, as a widow, sort of trying to figure herself

[00:19:58] out through this very public process and you know after since her marriage is gone, who is she? And and so I wanted it to be a lot about the alchemy between them and also the way people make assumptions about what other people think based on who they, what their profile is, which I felt Claire and Mo are both doing to each other. The both really wanted something from each other. They want something from each other and yet can't quite deliver it and, and why is that and some of it has to do with their perceptions of each other and they're reacting to their perceptions of each other rather than the person in front of them and so they often don't hear each other, which I feel like it's so much of human communication and miscommunication, so that was part of their dynamic. All this sort of human dynamics is taking place in a context where everything that happens is, is magnified a hundred times by the media. And you know, one thing that you write about that I didn't maybe because we live in this sort of

[00:21:02] cool, calm and collected Pacific Northwest, but there are a number of things that I didn't realize happened in the aftermath of 9/11 and one, one thing was the, the scarf pulling. Could you explain what that was about? Sure. I mean that's totally invented. That did not actually happen. [laughter] Oh, it did not. Yes, an idea I had. I didn't even know, I found some cases of it, I'm afraid. Wow. Ohh. [laughter] Maybe. No, that's so interesting. Yeah, she made that up. Really? Yeah. I totally made that up. [laughter]

[00:21:40] That's very funny. Yeah, it really came out of trying to figure out the character of Sean, who has lost his brother who's a firefighter and not on the jury and wants to be and just frustrated by the whole situation and in opposition to Mohammad Khan and I was struggling with him a lot as a character and finally just kind of let go and he started sort of just doing things and things I hadn't expected and that was one of them. I mean, I had planned this rally against Mohammad Khan but I didn't know as I started to write the scene of the rally that it would end with him storming across the street and yanking off this woman's head scarf. So that's how that came about. Interesting. Well go back, go check it out. I will. Cause it has happened. [laughter] Very interesting. And another interesting thing about this sort of echo chamber of things that happen and then get blown out to a hundred times their significance is his design of The Garden. Can you talk a little bit about how that sort of fed the flames? Sure. I mean

[00:22:40] I always felt as I was thinking about the novel, that it would, to just have it be about Mo being a Muslim would not hold my interest and would not be complex and deep enough for a reader. I felt like it just, I didn't feel that I could do enough with that. And so I started thinking about his design and feeling that, that also had to be a part of it and I'm very interested in how we don't just ascribe motives and thinking to people but also how we read symbols, and visual material around us, and how our readings get changed by information that is given to us, where once we have certain information, we suddenly see in a different way. And so, his design is this garden that initially seems so beautiful and benign, a walled garden. But once his identity is revealed, its, the questions arise

about whether it's an Islamic garden. And so it just, when I was reporting in South Asia I had visited a lot of Islamic gardens, became very interested in their history and the form, so it was actually fun for me

[00:23:44] as a novelist to just get to read about that and think about it. But also this battle over the meaning of his design. And then it allowed me to then take it to the place where there is pressure on him to explain, and is he writing that to explain, or is he a memorialist? Does he have an obligation to explain? And there were just a lot of interesting things the way the forms of Islamic gardens overlap with sort of the modernist grid. Right. So, who gets to decide what something means when you look at it? And it was just really interesting to think about. And there were some interesting talk about whether it should even be a garden because, the garden by its nature has to be tended, and this is supposed to be memorial and perpetuity and if you have to tend it, what if it goes to you to weeds and ruin when civilization collapses or anything? But they're all they're all kinds of interesting conversations around architecture and design in the novel which I personally really enjoyed. It's also,

[00:24:49] if I can say one more thing, it was, it's a lot about the nature of memorials because I mean, I'm sure in Seattle, there's probably countless memorials that you walk around and you don't even see anymore. It's certainly the case in New York that, at one point they had very powerful meanings to people, and now we literally don't notice them or their kind, or birds have, you know, left droppings all over them. You know, they no longer are tended because society has moved on in some way. So a garden seemed just an even more potent way to think about that question, over time what happens to memory and mourning and these things that a memorial is supposed to represent. Well, there's another character in the book who was probably my least favorite character. [laughter] Alyssa Spear, the journalist, who is like the worst journalist since Rita Skeeter of Harry Potter.[laughter] I mean, she is the incarnation of the Rupert Murdoch, you know, "If it bleeds, it leads" philosophy. So as a former journalist who worked for

[00:25:54] a lot of really respectable news organizations, I would like to know why you chose her to represent the profession and drive the plot? [laughter]

[00:26:06] Well, it's funny that you bring up Murdoch because you know, a lot of readers have, including many journalists, have issues with Alyssa, but they always say no journalist would ever go that far. And then when all the Murdoch's *News of the World* stuff broke, I kind of thought, you just can't make it up. Really? Nobody would go that far, hacking into a dead girl's voice mail is not actually worse than anything Alyssa did? I think, I never meant her, for her to stand for a whole profession so it's always interesting how many, I think because I was a journalist so many readers assume that she does but to me no more than Mo stands for Islam or Asma stands for Islam or, you know, I never had that in my mind. I was interested in just the way the media shapes events and controversies, especially today with the internet and 24/7 news cycle and all of that. So, I knew I wanted the media to kind of be an actor and just in thinking about her character, I also, you know, she's actually quite instrumental

[00:27:08] in moving the plot forward. Yes, she is. So there was that point of it . You know, just thinking from a novelist craft point of view, but I just to me she carries a lot of qualities I saw in journalists over the years and sort of the tricky business of rationalizing what you're doing so much that you no longer recognize even the rationalizing that you've done. I think a certain hardening that often takes place after years of knocking on peoples door and asking for their stories. At the same time and at a very sort of to me human kind of striving and ambition, you know an ambition that to me always sort of mirrored Mo's in a way, you know, they're both a little bit corroded by ambition in some unhealthy ways I think. So all of those qualities and then I felt like in her defense, she stands for the democratization of information to put a fancy label on it which is, you know, Paul Rubin, the chairman of the jury wants to control what information gets out into the world. He kind of is the gatekeeper, and she's saying

[00:28:12] no, you know, it all gets out there you don't get to decide that. So, that's you know, some to me the complexities of Alyssa. In some reviews have compared your novel to Tom Wolfe's, a bon, you know, *Bonfire of the Vanities*. You, you probably remember Tom Wolfe wrote a essay I think back in the late 1980's, probably? He was you know, he decried the, the turn of the novel inword and he was asking people to stop, you know, writing novels, you know on academic campuses based on the you know, existential crisis of a middle-aged English professor, you know and start writing about real life. And, and you know in my opinion that's what you've done. I mean, I think that you've mentioned yourself, Richard Price who is another author who really tries to do that. I mean, do you, do you think, I mean you, I assume you think it's important because you did it. But why do you think it's important? Why do you think it's important to take the novel form to examine and illuminate what's going

[00:29:27] on in our society? Well, it's, it's, I do think it's important. But I also think it's not something I can prescribe for other writers to do, you know. I guess, I wish more writers would but I don't think if that's not your interest, you know, you can't take it on. For me, I just think you know, not just my background of being a journalist, but just always kind of been attuned to events and politics and one of my high school teachers is here tonight, who is probably responsible for that. So, it's just, it just seemed natural to me when I turned to fiction to, to weave those things together. And I think, I do think there's so much you can do with fiction that you can't do with journalism in terms of, of I mean just things I did in this novel of the multiple perspectives, the you know interiority and exteriority, you know what people are seeing characters actions and yet you could then be in their head, understanding why they're acting a certain way. You know, there's just there's so much you can do but

[00:30:41] I think, I just think I don't know why more writers aren't interested in know. Well, it's hard. I was saying today, I wanted to teach a course where you know writers, fiction writers kind of have to go through the newspaper and find ideas for short stories because, I read the paper and there's so much that I am instantly kind of turning into fiction in my head and thinking about that way, but I don't, I think a lot of the MFA programs is just not kind of where our interest is right now. When you were writing the novel, which character did you, did you like the most, which one did you want to spend the most time with? I felt like whichever character I was working on at any given time, completely ran

away with the novel, and so I would become so absorbed by, and obsessed by their perspective that all the others would start to seem irrelevant and then I would move on to the next one and the same thing would happen. But I think for different reasons, there are few characters who really, probably even now stay with

[00:31:45] me more, and one is Mo, just because partly as I kept working on him. I realized a certain inscrutability was important to his character, a little bit of mystery about why he's doing some of what he was doing. And so I actually made him somewhat mysterious even to me. And so, you know, I'm still just fascinated by him and kind of what motivates him, and just intellectually the position he took is it the right position, is it not the right position? Asma the widow, from Bangladesh definitely just, she was the easiest to write in a way. And I just really felt for her situation. Sean, you know, I mentioned before was by far the hardest for me to write, and he went through a lot of transformations along the way, but I think in some way I learned the most about writing fiction through writing him, and that kind of just letting go and seeing what happened, and so, in a way, he was the most rewarding, and figuring out his character out of the way he just impulsively acts, and then has to deal with the consequences became

[00:32:52] very moving to me. So each of them has sort of a special place in my heart, I guess. I lived with them all for four years. So, you lived with them for quite a while. Yeah. This, this book, this book really threw me back to the period after 9/11 when there was so much anger, and so much fear, and so much confusion. And the book, if I'm, if I'm understanding correctly what we were talking about out in the hall. It actually came out just about on the 10th, anniversary of 9/11. So what, what is your feeling about what has happened in the country between then and when your book came out? I think the country is kind of gone through cycles in a way, you know, there was a sort of intense period after 9/11, which I think I benefited from being out of the country for a lot of that, cause it gave me a little distance from that. Then I felt like things kind of quieted down for a while to the point that as I was working on the novel, I thought maybe, it wouldn't be that big a deal if Mohammad Khan

[00:34:04] won, you know, maybe, I've just, because I wasn't, you know, that period already seem like history right after 9/11 and I thought, things seem fairly normal, maybe it wouldn't be that big a deal. And then I finished my first draft in the controversy around that proposed Islamic community center near ground zero exploded and I thought, "Oh, yes, it would be a big deal, actually now, I see again." Then that kind of disappeared because the media lost interest in it basically. And I feel like like now there's, we're kind of in another cycle, where I think there is just continuing fear and suspicion still and, and just an acceptance, that we're in this sort of new security regime that we will sort of indefinitely extend, that maybe gives us a feeling of security without actual security. And, and I think there's been a lot of political manipulation in a way of, of you know, the fear of sharia of that all Muslims want to impose sharia in the US, which is a red herring essentially, but you know has just created and

[00:35:07] also, you know is Obama a Muslim, not a Muslim? So, I think there's just kind of percolating suspicion a little bit, mistrust, which is I think that's where we are now. I'm not suggesting this in terms of a sort of, what not a, not a policy position, or moral position or anything, but what

would you like readers to take away from the novel as they go forward in terms of looking at what is happening in the country, some of the things that which we just discussed? I, generally don't answer that question because, I don't want to prescribe how people read it, and what they take away because now, you know, it's been out, eight, seven, eight months, I guess and almost every reader that I've encountered responds differently and take something slightly different from it. And so I just don't, I don't like that color, or say here's what I want you to take away. Yeah. So, sorry if I'm ducking that one, but. [laughter] Well one thing that I think is one of the novel's strengths is that at the end and we're not going to talk about

[00:36:23] the ending, but at the very end, you're deeply unsettled. I mean there's, there's not a real resolution in the way, you know in the sense that you know, it's people have got their minds straight and they're going forward and you know, it's not that way. It's still messy, and I think that's the way real life is and the way things in the country are so in that sense, it's social realism for sure. These are tough questions. [laughter]

[00:36:56] You want me to start with these and then we can just keep feed, will keep feeding the fire. I think this might be partially based on your experience as a journalist covering 9/11. What did the first responders think about the reconciliation that needed to take place? Anger, other stages of grief, when some healing time had healed or did it? I feel like that's a hard question for me to answer. I mean because the reporting, you know, I was in New York for six weeks afterward, and it was so immediate and new then, that I feel like I can't speak to what their process. Right. Was over time. Yeah, they're still processing it. Yeah. For sure. Here's a good one. How have Muslims responded to the novel? They, I've, I've

[00:37:47] heard from a lot of Muslim readers and, and some have written about it in various publications, and I spoken with a Muslim book group in New York and another group in Washington and they, I guess have responded really well, in the sense of feeling, I think a couple things. One is there just haven't been that many novels that treat American Muslims as sort of just ordinary complex people, who are not terrorists or aspiring terrorists. And so I think partly just to have that in the fictional public domain is appreciated. But more interesting to me has been to hear some of their conversations and, and see their response to Mo's particular kind of dilemma. This, this question of is it our responsibility to assuage the fears about us, and make people, do we have to work to make people trust us? You know, why should we have to do that as Americans? So there's, it's a very almost wrenching issue for people, you know, feeling like they should have no obligation to do that and yet is there still an argument

[00:39:01] for doing it. You know trying to create some kind of dialogue and you know, just these continuing sense that in some respects they are not fully Americans, and so I think that question in the novel resonates with them a lot. So it's been, it's you know, I think they've been very receptive but it's actually been as interesting for me to hear. It's almost an extension of the novel and some way to hear their conversations. The funny thing was there's this Muslim Council in the book. Yes. That's quite fractious. Quite political. Opportunistic in different ways, and as I was writing, I thought, you know, I don't know if people are gonna like that so much but actually and this goes back to the

question of people just want to be portrayed honestly. So many Muslims are like, "You got that right, you know. [laughter] "So great to see that," you know. "Kind of thing written about," because, I think they would just would rather have an accurate representation, than a sanitized one in a way. I think anybody's ever been on a

[00:40:00] committee like that could relate. [laughter] Any interest group, basically functions like that.

[00:40:08] All right. This person asked two questions. I'm just going to arbitrarily pick one. Do you feel that the level of violent, partisan, aggressive, and uncivil, political rhetoric in our country today, was an outgrowth of all that was unleashed by 9/11, in the wars after, or is it something else? I think, wow that's a, that's a big question. I don't think it's all a product of September 11th. I mean, I do think, you know things like Iraq in particular, really led to greater polarization, but I think our politics have been trending that way. I mean if you look at the Clinton years and sort of the, you know, Whitewater impeachment fight, I mean, it was, things were already so vicious then. Yes, that's true. So partisan then, then that. I think predated 9/11. That's for sure. Everything fed into that, but I think that's where we've been going. Here's, that was a macro question. This is a micro question. Why were the trees in Mo's design upside down? Uh-huh. Well, this is a little bit talking about that ending, so I don't know if I should answer that one.

[00:41:26] I mean, I can just very generally say, I wanted to reflect a sense that things could not be exactly as they had been before, that there had to be sort of some representation or acknowledgement of kind of the trauma for everybody that had come. Good point. Here's another question about Mo. Why does Mo begin to explore Islam? For example, his lonely observation of Ramadan. I know, for every character in the book, I was very interested in what happens to you under this kind of pressure? Because most of us in our daily lives, we will never be engaged or involved in any controversy or public debate like this. So, for Mo in particular, you know, as I started thinking how would he react to this kind of pressure? I started thinking, okay, you might and also, so two things the pressure he was under and also, this continual effort to make him a Muslim when he actually starts out knowing quite little about Islam, and so he's almost responding to that as well as the pressure and saying okay if that's what I am,

[00:42:42] what is that? And, so I think partly it's just, you know. If that's my identity, if you're saying that's my identity, I don't even know what that means. So trying to explore it, but also I think slightly on a different plane, you know, just groping toward God a little bit because of the pressure he's under and trying to figure out what is his relationship to God when he's never had one his whole life. This goes back, this question goes back to your career as a journalist and then your career as a novelist and I'm interpreting a little bit. It says is the novel a safer lens for you to process your grief? And I'm guessing that the questionnaire, questioner is asking, you know, you went through hard times, I'm sure in covering 9/11. Is it, is, is the novel a safer or more fulfilling way to write about these things than it was to write about them as a reporter? I think yes, I mean, I don't know if I would say safer or just the fact that it's, a it's a much more private enterprise and therefore I think, you

[00:43:59] know as a journalist, everything is, you know, you're interacting with other people, you're sort of processing it for, you know, your newspaper. And where as a novel, you actually are in repose in a way, and I think in a way that brings you in confrontation with deeper thoughts and feelings. I always felt as a journalist, I'm just in constant motion and couldn't think literally half the time. Cause you had a deadline? That's cause I had a deadlines. Although I ended up having a deadline with the novel but that was a different thing. [laughter] And so, I think yeah, I don't know if it's safer cause in some ways it's more painful to actually sit, and write, and feel but it definitely, I think kind of the privacy of it, to me and was, was important and I did find it more fulfilling. I mean, I am so glad I was a journalist and had incredible experiences and could not actually have been a novelist or written this novel without having done that. But something about just the creativity in fiction did feel, I just felt

[00:45:04] like I could get at some other kind of truth or meaning through fiction that I could never approach through journalism. Should go to my stack. In your pile, in your stack. Okay, so two questions. In writing this book you must have learned about many memorials for September 11th. Can you share some of the ones that you learned about which were most moving, or uplifting, etc and any observations about the real competition, the 9/11 competition?

[00:45:36] Yeah, I mean interestingly the, the September 11th memorial, I spent the most time reading about was not a very uplifting situation and that it was in Pennsylvania where Flight 93 had crashed on September 11th. Right. There was a competition, a design selected by an architect in Los Angeles that was a crescent of maple trees in a tower with wind chimes and someone decided that it was the Islamic crescent, and the tower was like a minaret. And this became a huge fight actually, among a very small number of people because you had kind of some bloggers, and a few family members saying this is an outrage. You had a few other family members saying, what are you talking about? There's nothing there. But the pressure was enough that it was the architect agreed to remake it under pressure also from the parks service and it became a circle instead of a crescent. So, not uplifting but that to me was very, you know, that happened a couple years after I'd had this idea, but it was again, the overlaps between, between fiction

[00:46:37] and reality were really interesting to me. You know, a lot of the memorials that were, I looked at were not necessarily for September 11th, just because I wasn't aware of so many of them. I mean, I spent about six weeks in Berlin in 2010. And there's those sort of official monument Peter Eisenman designed, the murdered Jews of Europe. But the one that really was most striking to me was this, artist started doing these little brass cobblestones that are sort of embedded all over Berlin and other cities in Germany and Europe, called in German, stumbling blocks, basically, and he placed them outside the houses where people were deported to the camps and killed and they just have the name of the person who was taken, and the date they were, where they were taken and the date of their death. And to me there's something, there was something so powerful about when you're not expecting it and you're just walking down the street and it's ever present, because there is something about memorials and

[00:47:42] just them being in this kind of segregated confined space that in a way, they almost provide too much closure and it's very easy to sort of wall off the event . But the experience of just

having this under your feet when you least expect it, that's probably one of the memorials that's made the most, strongest, impression on me. Please comment on the tactics used by Alyssa in obtaining information and on her journalistic ethics. [laughter] Right, let Mary Ann comment on that one. [laughter]

[00:48:13] No, she goes she goes,

[00:48:18] she goes very far, much farther than almost any journalist, I know. Unless, you worked for *News of the World*. That's all I'm going to say about that.

[00:48:29] Did you discover or learn some detail or aspect of your subject that was significant to your story after your book was printed? Not that I can think of. It was printed only last year and I don't think that there's anything that's dramatically changed my sense of what, what I would do. Does anybody have a question that they, that, that just occurred to them? Yes. So, say the question and I'm going to repeat the question, so everybody can hear it. She said, "Unless you're Charles Dickens and basically a genius, you know when you go from journalism to fiction, it's a big transition. So, how did Amy do that? Did it take a lot of drafts? Did she make a lot of mistakes? Did she want to throw the whole thing out the window a number of times? All of the above?" Yes. It was, it was a messy process, I would say. When I first started, I thought this is easy. It's just so free, I felt like I was flying and then I started to hit the road blocks, which, you know, just your imagination goes dry. So how do you deal with that? That most definitely

[00:49:48] one of them. But I think more, I am not a great outliner. I tend to make, start to make outlines and then halfway through get so interested in something in the outline or have some idea that I just go back to working and forget about the outline. So I, I would make what I called a reverse outlines where I would write, and write, and write, and write and then I would outline what I had done to try to figure out how to actually structure it in a, in a coherent way. It's funny because people always say, oh the book is so carefully structured and I think, yeah because I was kind of cutting and pasting scenes all over the place. I wrote and threw out a ton. I mean my first draft was 800 pages and I just think, partly I think by writing and I think I had to do that to figure out a lot about the characters, but then I had a really good editor who said, "Maybe you know, the 10 pages inside Mo's head could happen in five paragraphs, [laughter] you know, just give it a try." And, I did. And she was right. So there was a lot of

[00:50:50] that kind of compression that took place. There were a lot of scenes, I wrote and really loved and, you know, would do everything I could to keep them in the novel, be arranging everything around them just so I could keep that scene there and the harder I had to work to keep it in, the more I knew it had to go. And so a lot of scenes, you know, that I was very fond of, I just cut because I felt like they just didn't work, or didn't add something, or were kind of self-indulgent. So it was a lot of writing and rewriting. I can't even exactly say how many drafts I did because there was a huge first draft and then after that I was often, I mean there were probably two or three more full drafts after that, but then in between there was just so much, kind of rewriting pieces, you know, especially as I was saying Sean took a long time to figure out. And then when I did figure him out, and he sort of pull

the head scarf or do something else, suddenly, I had to rewrite 10 other scenes in response to that because

[00:51:54] I couldn't just have every character ignoring that, that had happened. So there's a lot of trial and error. I keep thinking on the next novel. It's going to be much more organized and linear but I doubt it. The question is, "What's next for Amy, what is she working on, what's in the future?" So I am, starting another novel and, and, you know, if I can make it work, that's what I would like to be my main thing. I kind of thought, you know, if I never have an idea that interests me as much as this one did then I'm not going to write another novel because now that I know how hard it is. I know if I don't have an idea that's extremely compelling to me, I cannot do it. But I did have an idea that it's actually going back to the fiction about reality. It's somewhat about the war in Afghanistan and, and other pieces of reality I guess. So I'm mostly right now, just trying to read and think a little bit before I start writing this time. I want to think a little bit more before I write in the hope of avoiding

[00:53:02] some of the heat. And less writing and rewriting. So that's mostly what I'm doing and then I'll do a little journalism as well. So just trying to figure out how to make it, you know, work as a writer and I have little kids so then I have that too. By the, sort of the, there was a Book-it Theater presentation here and the, if you're familiar with Book-it, you know, they, they, they dramatize books and they dramatized Amy's book and there were several characters that, there, there they were larger than life right in front of her, so she wants to know what that was like? It's definitely a little surreal but I was surprised at just how effective they are in getting you interested in the book because to be honest, you know, four years of working on this book, months now of talking about it, I had to reread it before the paperback came out, and correct, you know, I thought, I really never want to think about this book again [laughter] and yet watching them I was extremely interested in it. You know and really kind of

[00:54:11] laughing and moved and thought, wow, you know, they, they I didn't think that was possible but they really did bring it alive for me again, in a good way. So yeah, I thought it was really good. And also just, you know, I love theater and film and just the way a live human brings another dimension to words that you can never convey on the page. And you know, I was really struck by a number of their portrayals. But I think Claire, the widow, on the jury, in some ways was the most striking because someone last night was asking me, you know, did I consider her sympathetic character? And I think she's difficult in some ways and yet the actor today I felt like humanized her in a way that even for me it was just a different dimension then you get on the page.

[00:55:06] Maybe take a couple more. If Hollywood comes calling, I want to know if David Simon called you? I wish. No, David Simon. But, yes Hollywood. So they you know, they optioned the book that very likely will mean nothing. I mean, they now know they tend to just like Pac-Man come along, well you may be too young for Pac-Man, but you know, they come along just eating up everything that has potential but that doesn't mean anything will come of it. But it's, it's a guy who actually trained as an architect and definitely the book seem to really resonate with him. So we'll see. But it's such a, you know, publishing's a difficult business but Hollywood, the little I've learned is a whole other beast so, you know, don't hold your breath, but I'll keep you posted.


[00:56:02] [unintelligible]

[00:56:07] The question is based on Amy's comment that she had a really good editor who worked with her throughout and getting the book ready for publishing and what in an age where self-publishing is really, very easy becoming a publisher. Oh, yeah and Amazon is it's a big player in the self publishing business. So what, what impact is that having on the process that you described? I think, I think no writer knows the future right now, you know. It's a strange time because you know, I, I have a friend who's also, you know, just finished a novel and as we were working on our books we both were saying we just want to have one physical book, you know, before it all goes away. And, you know, I don't know my next book whether this will exist, you know, paperbacks increasingly are sort of going out the window. They're doing fewer and fewer because of e-books. So I don't know what the business will look like. You know, I was lucky and unusual in that increasingly editors at publishing houses don't do very much editing

[00:57:14] because they don't have time because there's so much involved in marketing and things like that. My publisher is unusual and that's, you know, they really edit and for me that was great. And in fact, it was one reason I went with them was because my agent said they will actually really be there as an editor. I don't know. The whole publishing model is going to change. I do think that I don't know if just because of Amazon but that certainly is a factor. I mean the fact that they are now actually publishing books. And I have a friend who just sold a book to them and the editor is very good, you know. He has a background in other kinds of publishing but in the end, he didn't have time to edit my friends. So I don't know, you know, I guess people will find other ways of getting edited if that's the model but it's, I could talk forever but I know nothing. We all know nothing. [laughter] Well, I think there's two competing impulses. I think if fewer and fewer books have editors, yes that could impede the quality

[00:58:20] of literature. On the other hand, I think more and more work is getting published and that's a really good thing. You know, it's the publishing model we've had was quite a narrow sluice, I guess, and so there is, you know, self-publishing and so on. There will be different kinds of great things that come out of that, that would not have come out of the old model. So I think you may lose something if you don't have editors working with writers, but I think you gain something different by just a wider array of material getting published. So, I tend to be, I don't know if I'm an optimist, but I just kind of been if that's the way it's going to be, you know, at least figure out. You know, nothing is ever universally bad or good, I think so, whatever the changes that come. You know, e-books everybody that was terrified of e-books but I mean, my dad has a Kindle and reads way more than he used to, you know, he just would never get up and go to a bookstore but now, he's buying a lot more books than

[00:59:22] he used to and I know that's true of a lot of people. So just progress is, is always a mixed bag. [applause]



[00:59:39] 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.

