



Library podcast

Elan Mastai discusses 'All Our Wrong Todays'

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[00:00:35] Hi everybody I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the literature and humanities program manager here at the library. Welcome to the library. And today's event with Elan Mastai and I want to thank Elliott Bay Book Company for inviting us to co-present this event. I also wanted to thank our authors series sponsor Gary Kunis, the Seattle Times and The Seattle Public Library Foundation for their generous support of library programs. Now let me turn the podium over to Karen M. Kolman from Elliott Bay but company because she gets the fun part and she's gonna introduce the rest of the program.

[00:01:06] Good afternoon. It's wonderful to see so many of you out here on this beautiful day to see Elan Mastai. I'd like to point out that he's an international writer even though he was. He's originally from Vancouver and now lives in Toronto. We actually host many authors from Canada and I always like to kind of point that out because there's always Canadians in the audience and hopefully fans of Canadian literature so we'll call him both Canadian and international. He has a background in screenwriting probably best known for his film 'what is' is also known as the 'f word' and for this he won the Canadian Screen Award for best adapted screen screenplay and also a Writers Guild of Canada award for best screenplay and 'All Our Wrong Today's' is his debut novel and yes it's a novel about time travel and that's something that's been a bit of a preoccupation for me lately. Maybe I'm not alone here in that in it's a novel about love and loss of a mother and I think that has special resonance for those of us who have lost ours and that for me really infused the book with a lot of melancholy and longing and so also is pretty funny as well.

[00:02:20] Independent Booksellers nationwide nominated 'All Our Wrong Today's' for the Indies next list and it's number one this month and it's the love of books and the experience of reading real books on the page and of a certain bookstore in the book. And that's very much linked here to the sense of being transported of layers of knowledge and about the memory of seeing your loved one's connection to books influencing your own capacity and love for reading. Today I think many of us may have seen a lovely interview that Nicole Broder conducted in the Seattle Times. If not I invite you go back and take a look at that and then he shared in that interview that the novel has been option for a screenplay which he is currently writing. So look forward to that as well. So our author will speak

today. He'll do a little reading and take some questions from the audience about his work and then afterwards he'll be signing books at the front table. And I have copies for sale at the back table. So thank you for joining us and please join me in welcoming Alon mistimed to the Seattle Public Library.

[00:03:35] Thank you very much. I just want to say in advance that I flew in from San Francisco and my ears have not popped. So I feel like I'm screaming at you right now. I don't want you to feel that you're in trouble because you're not in trouble. In fact I asked a number of author friends. You know it's my very first book tour. The book only came out on Tuesday. You know what to expect. You know any advice they have and they just said just know that nobody will come to any of your events because your book just came out. You don't have a readership. And so I just want to say thank you so much for coming for proving them wrong. It's a terrific crowd. And I just want to say thank you to the Seattle Public Library and to Elliott Bay Books and to the Seattle Times for the piece they did today and to you for coming. You're reminded by just looking behind me how beautiful it is out there and you're here inside in this gorgeous temple to literature. And so I will say thank you. I love this particular branch of the library. I was here just a few years after the library open and I remember that first breathtaking view just kind of turning the corner and seeing this incredible building. And actually there is a piece of the book and I don't think I've ever mentioned this before that was inspired by that moment when I first saw this building which I can tell.

[00:04:48] I'll talk about in a second. And so it feels it sort of feels a little bit full circle to be here. So thank you very much. I'm going to talk about the book and I want to tell you a little bit about myself and I'm also happy to answer any questions anybody has. I think it's sort of helpful sometimes to kind of talk about a little bit of my family history just to sort of position where I come from. I was born in Vancouver but my my grandfather was born in New York City. He grew up in the Depression. He became a chemist. He'd wanted to be a writer but it was the Great Depression. And you know I mean a chemist seemed like a more kind of you know something that was a little more sustainable his work ended up bringing him to Chicago and he pioneered a way of synthesizing vitamins which proved important for the war effort. So he didn't go off to war because it was very difficult of course to get healthy nutritious meals to the soldiers on the front whose work was considered essential. My grandmother grew up in Vienna and Austria and when she was a teenager her family had to escape you know to escape from the war from the Nazis. She was on one of the Kindertransport to England. And she she became like a teenage au pair in London before she was able to rejoin her family in Chicago and become an American citizen.

[00:06:03] And that's where my grandparents met where my mother was born. Later in life they the family moved to Vancouver and she ended up in England in London in the late 60s doing street theater and working for a working at the Institute for Contemporary Art. Art gallery she ended up running out of money and took it took a job teaching in Israel and one day she was walking down the street and feeling a little peckish and so she walked into a coffee shop and that's where she met my father. My father had been born American cash. His family had to escape as well during the Second World War and ended up in the French Swiss border hiding out until after the war. And then they emigrated to Israel. And so by the time my dad was 10 he'd lived in three different continents. He became a lawyer and there was a coffee shop underneath his office that he did that sometimes. And

just that day my parents met by coincidence you know if she had chosen a different coffee shop if he had left a few minutes earlier they ran into each other in the doorway and struck up a conversation and they ended up moving. He ended up moving with her to Vancouver because her experiences in London although she went there to act she got very into the art world and she came back to Canada to do her Phd.

[00:07:12] And that's where I was born. That's where my sisters were born and I've lived most of my life there. But growing up I was very aware of the fact that every single person around the dinner table was camp you know was there because of these grand sweeps of history that seemed like they had nothing to do with me but also had everything to do with the fact that I even existed. You know my mom and my grandparents on her side were American as I said my father was from a number of different continents and his young age and so I always felt kind of poised between those two between the sort of the sort of North American perspective and the world perspective but also that sense that something as sort of essential and natural as your family could just be the result of all these sort of historical circumstances. Growing up in Vancouver in the 80s. You know my grandfather was a chemistry of this big collection of old 40s and 50s and 60s science fiction. You know there's old pulp anthologies that you know they weren't even made to be kept. They're made to be read and thrown out. But he kept them all and as a kid I was. I loved them I love peeling the magazines off the shelf and staring at these kind of garishly painted covers of futuristic cityscapes and flying cars and robots and you know bases on the moon.

[00:08:23] But as a kid in the 80s you know I was aware that it wasn't turning out the future wasn't turning out the way they thought it would. You know I did not get a jetpack for my tenth birthday and that seemed like a terrible crime. I was fascinated by that. And then the other big thing that happened. For those of you who are you know who are firm grew up in Seattle you might remember Expo 86 that happened when I was a kid in Vancouver. And I loved it and it just blew my mind. You know just you know they built a monorail there was like robots you know zooming around McDonald's built a restaurant on a barge. I don't know why that was part of the future but it was for expertise. And then of course it was part of this continuity of these worlds fairs like the New York World's Fair 64, Expo 67 in Montreal. That's kind of optimistic kind of Techno-Utopian vision of the future that mirrored the vision of the future from my grandfathers kind of science fiction. It's only recently that I discovered when I went back to look at that Expo 86 was actually the last World's Fair ever hosted in North America. We kind of stop doing them here we sort of stop dreaming of the future in the same way.

[00:09:31] And that's something else that I was very interested in. You know that idea that our visions of the future have evolved from the Utopian ideals of the post-war generation to a much more dystopian much more dystopian outlook. And sometimes you can feel dystopian just by looking at Twitter these days. But the book became you know the initial genesis of the book was I was interested in both of those things. What happened to the future we were supposed to have and also what would somebody from my grandfather's generation think landing suddenly in our present if they looked around and so 'All Our Wrong Today' my novel it's about a character who comes from it's set in the present. But it's this alternate version of the present. This Techno-Utopian future that that we were promised by the post-war generation that they were sure was going to happen and through a

series of circumstances he finds himself stranded in our 2016 what we think of as the real world but which to him seems like this dystopia everything has gone wrong. Of course he wants to get back to the version of the world that he comes from. But along the way he discovers these very unexpected versions of the people in his life his family. This woman he has this romantic connection within himself. He's a very different person. And that sort of makes it much more complicated decision. I divided the book into two parts.

[00:10:46] I mean there's three parts to the book and the first part is set in that alternate version of the world. I'm fascinated by technology. But not on its own not just on its own. I'm fascinated by the implications of technology and a concept that I explore in the book is what I call the accident. It's that idea that every time you introduce a new kind of technology you also introduce the accident of that technology. There's no such thing as a car crash until you invent the car. There's no such thing as a plane crash until you invent the plane. There's no such thing as a nuclear meltdown until you invent the nuclear power plant. I've been thinking about that a lot in terms of the Internet lately. I think a lot of us were probably meditating on our order what the internet means to us. You know it's this incredible resource this network where all of human knowledge is available to us at the click of the click of a button. But at the same time it has this effect of making all information equal fact fiction become a matter of choice. You know people can choose the subjective reality they want to live in instead of some of this objective reality of fact that we all you know used to live in. And so that idea of the unintended consequence of the of the Internet is something I'm thinking a lot about.

[00:11:55] And so this book explores not just all this dazzling technology but also the implications of it how it affects people because fundamentally you know all these ideas and theories that are in the book about about technology. It's great. I could write a blog post about it but you read a book because of the characters and how it affects the people and I think of that idea. The accident also applying to the people in our life all of you know any time you meet somebody new you introduce both the positive possibilities but also the unintended consequences the accident of that person. I talk about that in the book that there's no there's no intimacy without consequence. And so the book explores both the consequences of technology both intended and unintended but also the consequences of the people in our lives. And that was important to me and as are as my protagonist comes from his version of the world and its strength our version of the world through a series of circumstances which involve the unintended consequences of a prototype time machine. I wanted to bring him into our virtual world and start stripping away all the things that he thinks are essential to himself. In his version of the world it's it's not just that technology seems to have solved all of humanity's problems war, crime, illness, disease you know these things aren't aren't problems for humanity anymore but it doesn't mean that all of human problems are solved doesn't mean that you're not going to still have conflict with your parents.

[00:13:20] Challenges romantically, difficulty finding your place in the world, in fact sometimes it's harder to find your place in a world where nothing is asked of you where there's no sense of responsibility. You know you don't have to clean up your messes because a robot will do it for you. In our version of the world I mean sometimes I would be very nice. Don't get me wrong in our vision of the world which is incredibly disconcerting for the character at first. His actions have consequences.

Nobody will clean up this mess for him. He has to start learning to take responsibility. And although my protagonist is you know 32 years old when we meet him it's like he hasn't really been required to come of age and that's sort of one of the subtle things that I try to explore as the book progresses. How. Yes there's all the sort of the dazzling effects of technology. You know it seems like this better world. But as the layers of what becomes important to him or peeled away it starts to really interrogate what does give his life meaning we'll give his life purpose and has he really been living the kind of life that he can be proud of and sometimes taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions even though you know no one's gonna rescue you're the only one who's going to save herself.

[00:14:21] Actually give your life meaning and particularly as it pertains to the people in your life as a writer. You know I've been a screenwriter for a number of years as was mentioned and one of the reasons why I wanted to write this book is because I love books and I want to write a book that was very much in love with the experience of reading a book as a screenwriter. You know I've worked in a bunch of different genres but the thing about a screenplay is they're always the writing style is always the same. A screenplay is always written in the third person it's always written in the present tense. It's a very visually dynamic way of writing but it's also a very lean and laconic kind of writing style and it's also a transitional document. You know when you go to see a movie you fortunately do not see what you know the screenplay page is projected onto the wall of the movie theater. I mean I've tried to get them to do that but they insist on putting actors in it. And so I like the collaborative aspect of moviemaking it's one of things I enjoy about it. As a screenwriter if you don't like to find out if you don't like to see what your work evokes and others it's the wrong job for you. And so having spent a number of years collaborating with directors and producers and actors and crew on the movies I found myself feeling like I wanted to stretch different muscles and I had a story to tell and I felt like a book was the way to tell it.

[00:15:33] At the same time I felt very free using all these literary tools and tricks and techniques that I never had access to. It was incredibly it was invigorating for me as a writer at the same time. You do have to still show the same kind of discipline. In fact it's more so because I don't have some pretty actors who will make my dialogue sound wonderful and a director who will have a swooping camera. It's all it's about the words even more so than it normally is and that sense of responsibility to the reader to kind of that that's been the collaboration. The movie that I'm creating the story that I'm telling I'm collaborating with with the reader to kind of created in their imagination as much as that freedom and the fun that I had. Writing the book we're sort of got me through the first draft I realized that the discipline that I required as a screenwriter had to come into full force in some cases even more so writing. Writing a novel because every single word matters in the way that every single image matters in a movie. At the same time like a lot of first time novelists I didn't have a publishing deal when I wrote this book.

[00:16:30] I wrote it on the side you know I had a day job. It's an uncommon day job. I was a screenwriter I know that's not a normal day job but it's still a job with you. You have deadlines and expectations and you deliver things. And so I started writing this book on the side evenings and weekends squirreling a little bit away at a time and that was reflected actually in the structure of the

book the chapters. You'll find a very short which I love because I like the pacing of a chapter of a short chapter. I like that you know you just feel like while you're waiting for your kettle to boil you can read a whole chapter. You know if you're taking the subway to work you could just read you could be a whole chapter. I like the feeling of accomplishment at the same time. It reflected each chapter initially was just what I managed to write that day a little bit at a time. And so initially that's the short chapters were just how much I wrote every day. After seven or eight chapters I realized that I was that I had unintentionally ripped off Kurt Vonnegut - Cat's Cradle. I mean it's a favorite of mine and other those books I discovered on my grandfather's shelf of science fiction. And so when I realized that I was like well I'm going to pick the book up again and start reading it again I don't know those of you who are familiar with that with Cat's Cradle it's a terrific book.

[00:17:39] It's much better than mine you should read that. But I love the short chapters but what I realized was I was rereading it was that a lot of the themes he was talking about were the same themes that I was exploring. No he was writing about it from perspective of 1963. I was writing about it in the perspective of 2016. But you know a lot of the concerns that he had about the effects of technology are the unintended consequences and about the connections between people that provide the sort of lattice of meaning of our lives felt very very much what I was interested in exploring too. So I actually wrote Kurt Vonnegut into the book not in a heavy handed way but what finding that book made me realize was that well if there was an alternate version of the world that sort of spun off from where we are here it's not just that technology would be different. It's not just that society be different art would be different literature would be different the way we tell stories would be different and so that got me thinking about that idea that all of art and entertainment would be different. You know a novelist like Vonnegut for example who was reflecting the society around him might have written a bunch of whole other a whole other kinds of novels and that idea that there could be all these all this music all this literature all these movies that are completely different that we have by some by artists and writers that we know and other ones by ones we won't have even had in this version of the world.

[00:18:57] I had a lot of fun exploring that aspect as well as well as I figured if I'm going to rip off Kurt Vonnegut I might as well acknowledge it as quickly as possible in the book. But you know you're going to rip people off. That's good. That's a good place to start. I think that the idea of influence permeates the book. You know I think that especially with the first novel The book becomes this kind of box full of all the things that you're obsessed about the things that you're that you're compelled by the thoughts that you have rattling around in your mind. And this book is definitely like that. I think if you do you'll take a look at it. There's something very vulnerable. As a screenwriter you're always kind of hiding behind all these other people the director, the actors you know you can kind of conceal yourself. With them novel. It's very much for putting yourself forward and so I tried to embrace that and there is a very sort of there's a lot of autobiography in the book. It's not an autobiography. I myself have not time travel from other dimension just to be clear about that.

[00:19:56] But at the same time I did work a number of things that were sort of from my own life into it. It was mentioned that you know that part of the book the book does as it grapples with the death of the character's mother and I lost my mom in 2001 when I was 26 and it happened very suddenly and I

felt like for me it was a real hinge point in my life. It was a time when you know I was quite young and you know I was reflecting back on that time of my life and how it was a real hinge for me. I mean for some people that hinge point might be historical. You know my from my grandfather, the great depression, from my grandmother, the second world war for, my father, you know in some ways meeting my mother was a hinge point for him because he had a totally different life and a whole other country and a whole other language before he met her. And for my mother you know she her life was when zig and zag based on various hinges of history. I was fortunate to grow up in a very you know the community like Vancouver which was very kind of safe and protective environment but that the death of my mom was a real hinge point for me. And so I wanted to write about that in the book as well because I wanted to kind of have this be a book where yes it's playing around with a lot of fun ideas about technology, time travel alternate reality, there's big very big plot twists swerves of the plot and the story that are very unexpected at the same time I wanted to keep rooting it in what it means to be human because fundamentally technology is just a tool.

[00:21:29] You know it doesn't it's all about who wields it. And for me I wanted to write a story where mortality affects empathy and compassion were still a thread that runs through the human experience otherwise really why tell a story. Because it's the characters their connections between them and the connections we feel with them to make it a story worth telling. So for me you know a novel isn't I don't ever think of it as just me trying to stand on a street corner with a megaphone screaming my opinions of people you know I think of it as a conversation I'm having with the book that inspired me the authors that inspired me and you know the reason to write a book is because I have these stories I want to share and the chance to kind of connect with and have a conversation with readers and book fans like yours. I mean I'm assuming your book fans you might actually be here because you hate books but that's fine we could talk about that too.

[00:22:17] But the chance to kind of connect with folks like yourselves who are coming out on a beautiful sunny Sunday afternoon to talk about literature is what made this worthwhile. I'll read. I'm going to read the first chapter and then I'll read a little bit of a slightly later although because the chapters are so short even like a later chapter is not really that far into the book. So I guess I'll just give you a taste of the tone of the book. And I Vonnegut was a big influence on me as I mentioned both in terms of you know we had such a witty humane compassionate world view. He was never afraid to be critical and disappointed in humanity but it always came from a place of warmth of wanting us to do better. But a big thing that he said you know in his writing advice was just give everybody all the information they need right away you know and people should have as much information as possible so that if cockroaches were to eat the last pages of the book the reader could finish it themselves. I don't know that I follow that part. A lot of stuff happens at the end of the book. But I definitely took that from the beginning. 'All Our Wrong Today's' chapter one. So the thing is I come from the world we were supposed to have. That means nothing to you obviously because you live here in the crappy world we do have.

[00:23:22] But it never should have turned out like this. And it's all my fault. Well me and to a lesser extent my father. And yeah I guess a little bit Penelope it's hard to know how to start telling this story but okay you know the future the people in the 1950s imagined we'd have flying cars, robot maids,

food pills, teleportation jet packs, moving sidewalks, ray guns hoverboard, space vacations and moon bases all that dazzling transformative technology our grandparents were certain was right around the corner. The stuff of World's Fairs and pop plains fiction magazines with titles like fantastic future tales and the amazing world of tomorrow. Can you picture it. Well it happened it all happened more or less exactly as envisioned. I'm not talking about the future. I'm talking about the present today in the year 2016. Humanity lives in a techno-utopian paradise of abundance purpose and wonder. Except we don't. Of course we don't. We live in a world where sure there are iPhones and 3D printers and I don't know drone strikes or whatever but it hardly looks like the Jetsons except it did. Except it should and it did until it didn't but it would have if I hadn't done what I did. No. Hold on. What I will have done. I'm sorry. Despite receiving the best education available to a citizen of the world tomorrow the grammar of the situation is a bit complicated.

[00:24:43] So that's just the first page of the book just to kind of I mean to give you a sense and also you can see even on the first page I talk about all the sort of swarm of influences and the plays out right away. It's not even that veiled. So the character is mentioned as Penelope and she is a crucial character in the story. Tom, my main character and he's the narrator of the book it's written in the first person as you can see and it's written as a sort of a false memoir. And I wanted the story to not just be you know to tell this kind of like you know the sort of page turning yarn but also to position it very specifically in the point of view of the character part of that's a personal taste thing. I like when books acknowledge that they're a book you know. I mean it's obviously there's many wonderful masterpieces of literature that have been written the third person. I'm not taking a stand against a third person. I just want to be clear about that. But I like it when the book acknowledges that it's a point of view because every writer whether they're writing in the first person the third person or the second person or even the fourth person the they are. That was a grammar joke. I apologize. The you know there's people always have their blinders. They have their biases. They don't have to be negative. You know they have both negative and positive things that frame their perspective and I wanted this to be a story about a character who's having who has this perspective in the beginning and his perspective widens, it deepens.

[00:26:08] He gets richer as the story goes on. And I wanted not just to be a narrative journey where all the plot twists and turns are coming at you and you don't know what's going to happen next but where there's an emotional journey as well where the character is growing and changing and the person we leave on the last page of the book is a very different person the one who begins because of his experiences. To me that's again one of the things that makes a story worth telling is that you're on a journey with the character part of this character's journey is Penelope. She's a character who he knows in a certain way in one version of the world she works for his father and she he meets a very different version of her in our world. And this kind of ties into an overarching theme of the book which is that most of the time in my experience the reasons we do things are very personal. You know we all have our ideals or philosophies or careers take a certain ways history the sweep of history moves us this way in that like a you know stick bobbing through a river. But there's a very literary metaphor. You're welcome. But I think most the time the choices that we make are personal choices they're about people and they're particularly about love. For better and for worse I don't know about you but

most of the best decisions I've ever made and most of the worst decisions I've ever made were because of love.

[00:27:21] So Tom has a very complicated relationship with this woman Penelope and it gets more complicated as he finds a totally different version of her one who doesn't know him at all in our version of the world. And part of the fun of the book for me as a writer and hopefully for a reader is as it's not just peeling back the layers of my main character it's all the people in his life. I like to explore this idea of how much of who you are is you. Some essential kind of core and how much of it is a result of circumstances where you were born what area you were born in what your parents did what kind of family dynamic you had you know what your profession turned out to be all of these things how much of that is the accumulation of those things make you who you are and how much of it is some essential core is a part of the story is peeling back those layers on the characters not just Tom but all of the character the main characters in the book and finding out who they are they're out in their assets. Let me read you a chapter which tells us a little bit but again this is very early chapter. It's Chapter 7 but it's like Page 15 so don't worry I'm not giving too much away but this is a little bit about Penelope from Tom's perspective when he gets to know her which of course gradually evolves. But this is when he's just getting to know her.

[00:28:30] Chapter 7 - Penelope Weschler was supposed to be an astronaut in early age evaluation matrices. She indicated the necessary mental aptitude, physical capability and unwavering ambition even as a child. Penelope immediately knew this was the correct path for her and wanted nothing else. She trained nonstop both in and out of school not to walk on the moon anybody could walk on the moon anybody could go for a month long orbital cruise. Penelope would cross the next frontier deep space exploration. It wasn't just the studying, the training, the constant testing. It was social or really anti-social for long term space operations. The recruiting agencies they want you to grow up with parents and siblings so you have empathy models to apply to fellow astronauts on missions that last years sometimes decades. They want you capable of caring about other people but they don't want you to actually miss anyone back home too much so you don't have a breakdown. Six months into a six year mission it's a sliding psychological scale. Self-assured loners whose parents never divorced or good, shark eyed sociopaths less though from junior high on Penelope maintained amicable but purposefully limited personal relationships so she wouldn't have anybody tethering her to Earth. And she was utterly kickass top of her cohort across all categories. Universally recognized as a natural mission leader she'd be a pioneer. She'd see the storms of Jupiter with her own eyes and surf the rings of Saturn on a spacewalk. And that was worth not having close friends or romantic relationships or a loyal dog. Everything was going according to plan until the first time she went to space.

[00:30:07] The launch was flawless. Penelope performed her functions with such precision. They would have used it to teach incoming recruits how gloriously capable an astronaut can be. She was prepared. She was ready. She was perfect until she passed to the top layer of Earth's atmosphere and her mind went completely blank. There's a small subset of people whose cognitive functions get scrambled in outer space. Something about how the pressure change the vacuum affects the bonds between molecules and the neurons of their brain. No one's even sure why it happens but Penelope

was one of that subset. Somehow this fact eluded the years of rigorous screening. One moment she's definitely guiding the launch vehicle to the final atmospheric layers. Seeing the gaping expanse of space for the first time her heart beating and measured but ecstatic bursts the happiest she's ever felt. And then nothing. She doesn't know who she is. She doesn't know where she is. She doesn't know what to do. Something in her basic constitution keeps her from having a panic attack as most people would if they suddenly woke up piloting a god damn spacecraft with the planet receding behind them. But you can't remember anything. The instrument panel she'd spent years mastering means nothing to her inscrutable acronyms perched over lights flashing and seemingly random patterns. She stares at the viewing dome at the radiant vapor of stars smeared across the black canvas of space like the pollen clouds that would rise from the cedar trees in her grandparents backyard. When the squirrels jump from branch to branch. Although she can't understand why she's thinking about something she hasn't seen since she was eight years old.

[00:31:39] When there are these voices in her earpiece getting loud and insistent I'm sorry she said but I'm not really sure where I am right now her co-pilot is just as well trained and keening with tiny flames of envy at how far ahead of them she'd always ranked relieved Penelope of her duties there to abort the mission at no small expense because her unpredictable presence endangered everyone. Just like that Penelope the best of the best of the best became a threat strapped into an observation seat for the abrupt return home. She walks the earth loom below her lacquered blue and swirled meteorological haze. Her eyes burn with tears. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen and she'd never see it again even if she didn't know it yet. Back on Earth. Her mental capacities returned to normal. She understood her career as an astronaut was over. She planned to spend decades off planet. Instead she got to experience less time and space than a tourist who'd splurged for a Sunday afternoon jaunt through the thermo sphere on a discount shuttle. The same brain that made her the perfect astronaut made it impossible for her to do the job. This would have crushed most people. But Penelope wasn't most people. After a few months swimming deep into a gravity well of spiraling depression and refusing any pharmaceutical intervention in case it affected medical qualification for another endeavor she found a new ambition to fuel her talent for punishing rigour.

[00:33:02] If she couldn't be an astronaut she'd be a chrononot and chrononots are what I call these people working on the prototype. Time travel. See in this version of the world the most of the world economy has transition to entertainment. You know because technology is solved most of it there's not a lot of menial manual jobs anymore. Technology takes care of that for you. It's almost everything even scientific discovery has been repackaged as entertainment. So if you want to develop something as cutting edge as time travel you have to find a way to market it. And so Tom's father, Victor Barron who is the sort of cutting edge scientists working in this sort of pioneering field basically he's developing time travel vacations and Penelope is working with him on sort of what will be the first mission of course. That's when things start to go horribly awry as they often do when we introduce time travel into our lives. I want to read a little bit of the book is there any other questions I think to me I spent a lot time thinking about that like how did we get here. You know and I mean there's a lot of obviously there's a lot of reasons it's not one thing it's not there's deficits of ingenuity as well as infrastructure but a lot of it I think comes down to fuel you know. I mean regardless of what I know whatever opinion you have on climate change. I mean again fact and fiction you can choose your

world that you live in fossil fuel the thing about fossil fuels are dependent dependents on them is that they're very inefficient.

[00:34:24] I mean more than anything else whether you think they're changing the environment or whatever I mean they are just so you know but they're not very efficient. They actually they create a lot of waste. They don't produce that much energy for how much effort it takes to actually get them out of the planet and to and to refine them. And so I think fuel has been our biggest problem. And so part of the backstory of this world is that there was a development an invention back in the mid 60s and the discovery of clean fuel which was created this the opportunities for human ingenuity to be unshackled from the limitations of fuel even now. You know as we're trying to shift I mean as much as we can to renewables and solar and wind and all kinds of stuff I mean the limitations we still face are on how much energy we can produce. I'm always fascinated by you know talking about artificial intelligence everybody's super into A.I. right now but I read I thought this was totally interesting. They kind of created a simulation to try it. They wanted to simulate one percent of a human brain. One percent of what our brains can do. And they realized it would take the amount first of all it would take about an acre of processors. It was so hot that they would need like the amount of water they would need to cool it down would be it would be like a lake full of water and they would actually require that the entire output from a nuclear reactor just to get one percent of the human mind.

[00:35:44] And so I mean like I love all people are so enthusiastic about A.I. but a lot of the limitations we have are power. And it's amazing that we so think that that was 1 percent. Our brains are managed to produce obviously 99 percent more than that and our brains only generate 25 watts of energy just as you're sitting well here you and your brain could power twenty five watt light bulb. Congratulations. And so I find that kind of stuff fascinating right. I mean what happened. What happened was power. I mean the answer to my childhood question is I guess so I did a lot of research. I don't put it all in the book. I did a ton of research. I love to go down these sort of warm holes of of quantum physics and engineering and figure out how things work. I try to keep that stuff out of the book except what you need to know to make the story work for you. But I find that stuff very interesting. But you know the answer the very simple answer that I could've told myself is it as a 10 year old why did I not get a jetpack for my birthday is that it's too hot the fuel would be too unstable it would blow up and that would be terrible birthday present.

[00:36:45] Even now you know you talk about you know introspect you know getting like there's a thing called the rocket the rocket equate the ideal rocket equation and what that is it says I mean there's a lot of very complex math but it boils down to get a vehicle from the surface of the planet up into orbit 90 percent of the mass of the vehicle has to be fuel right. So every time you shoot a rocket up that's why they keep blowing up is because 90 percent of it is fuel. That's what requires to escape gravity. And so I find that kind of stuff interesting until we develop better fuel sources that aren't quite so unstable and inefficient. We're going to be shackled our imagination will be shackled by the limitations of our power both figurative and literally. A literary thing I did there. Any other questions. Yeah. So the question is in this sort of you know the book opens in this alternate version of the world where technology has saw a lot of human problems not necessarily personal emotional problems but the big picture stuff. And the question was is that sort of do I believe that philosophically. And so am I

sort of promoting that as technology is the fix and I would say that yes or no. I think that it's more complicated than that. Like most things I think fundamentally utopias our you think about utopia is the way I think about conspiracy theories which is that they're comforting because they tend to reduce things to simple black and white right.

[00:38:06] Why do people like conspiracy theories because it says this is to blame, this person, this group of people, this shadowy organization is to blame for our problems and if we can just excise them like a tumor everything is going to be ok where in fact the world is very messy very complicated it's not black and white it's all kinds of shades of grey. And the reason that sort of generally speaking which is not to say that there are never a shadowy organizations doing things I suppose there probably are possibly watching us right now possibly listening in right now. But I think I tend to be in favor of complexity. And so when it comes down to whether technology can solve our problems I think it can solve many of our problems. I think access to technology. I think access to resources. I mean I think poverty and is you know and disease and class dynamics can be resolved in a great part by wider access to technology. At the same time I don't think it's going to solve everything because technology is a tool and it's all but how it's wielded and who wields it. The version of the word. Part of why it is I just set my version of the world is as rooted in the mid 60s is because I agree right now if somebody would invent some kind of like unlimited clean fuel it probably would be taken over by a corporation and suddenly anybody who wants it would have to pay quite a bit of money for it we don't live in the same world as we did back then.

[00:39:28] I chose 1965 as a kind of a pivot point in history because the early 60s to me seemed very much of a piece of the 50s that kind of post-war mentality as things started to turn into the late 60s the 70s. It wasn't just that you know that music got better. It was that there was skepticism anti authority, anti-authority perspectives a lot of questions about gender and race and rights became much more part of the conversation society got very tumultuous because people were asking a lot of questions and they were no longer willing to not talk. You know there was the same old answers weren't working for them anymore. And so it felt like a time when society was kind of wobbling and then went off in the direction that led to our version of the world. And so yeah I mean part of the book is exploring like why that utopian vision of the future has changed and why it doesn't totally apply to our world now. But we have other you know we have to imagine new futures. You know we live in a world of complexity. We live in a world where it is grey where it is nuanced and any. We all have to take responsibility for that not just the short the come the consequences of our behavior of our choices but to live in the world we want to be living in.

[00:40:46] We all can make the individual choices now more than ever I mean I think that I think that a lot of people right now are more aware of that than ever that how important each individual voices in trying to get us from where we are to the version of the world that we want to live in. And so fundamentally what the book ends up being about nothing like give away the ending but is about personal responsibility and how the concept of taking responsibility for the consequences of your choices. It's not just how we're gonna get ourselves to a better version of the world it's also how your life you find meaning and purpose and happiness in life. That was very inspiring. Are there are any other questions yeah. I mean to say spoiler alert for those listening to the podcast or whoever read

the book I'm not going to give anything to too much away but oh yes. So the question is. Well I was just prefacing that but also there is a shift in perspective it happens later in the book and there is a character who is much more, who's is more of like a sociopath and who certainly has a much kind of like a colder and more aggressive point of view than the mythic mate the narrator. And yeah that was very difficult to write because I like a warm inviting sort of self-effacing complicated perspective and this was this was you know part of what that was was this is the perspective of somebody who is purely narcissistic who only out for themselves who only cares about the world in so far as it pertains to them because it's not like I'm describing anybody we all know.

[00:42:19] But I so I was I was definitely super political. I was definitely you know I like finding that part of me to write that part was was challenging but I also felt like it was important for the story because again what I was trying to do is take this character and start peeling layers away and we all have a sense of who we are you know. And part of our sense of who we are as time travel is a fun idea. I love time travel stories but we kind of I think it's natural to imagine ok if I may you know go back I made some different decision how different my life would be. But we kind of think about we would be the same. Like our circumstances would be maybe we'd be married to somebody else we'd have a different job whatever. You know some bad thing that happened or some terrible decision we made would be wiped out and everything would be great for it. But we think we'd be the same person. But what if we who we are is the accumulation of all those experiences that even our bad decisions lead us to be the person who we are.

[00:43:15] So that idea of like showing up at another time and another version of life why would you think you'd be the same person. You might have an essential core but how many things can be peeled away and have you still be a version of yourself that you recognize. So that part of the book was important to me because I had to peel the character back to like it to the central core and expose some darker things about him that then become what propel him to actually need to change. I think that you have to make. You have to again this is something I got from Kurt Vonnegut. You have to love your characters so much that you're willing to make horrible things happen to them because it's only when bad things happen to character that we discover who they are. You know when I was when I was young I always thought that the most kind of like the lamest and most like dishonest thing about Hollywood movies is that they say that everybody that everybody changes right Hollywood movies are always about how people change right over the course of the experience they change they become a different you know more healthy more grown person that's every Hollywood movie says people change. When I was young I was like That's a lie. Nobody changes nothing ever. Nothing nothing could make you change. But that was the perspective of somebody who hadn't had anything bad happen to them really I was lucky.

[00:44:25] I mean I like nothing bad ever happened but I never I think when I was young you know I grew up in a environment where I had a very protective supportive life. And so when nothing bad has happened to you feel like nobody ever changes. As I grew older particularly after the death of my mother but I've gone through other things in my life as well you I actually realized that I was wrong that in fact the only honest thing about Hollywood movies is they say that nobody changes unless they're forced to unless a crisis happens circumstances happen that do not allow you to stay the way

you were. That push you out of your comfort zone out of your status quo. Only when a crisis happens it's so big that you can't go back. Will you change. And I think that's kind of true. I think the crisis is what defines us you know. And so I wanted to create a situation for my character where I mean you create you know on the one hand yes there's like he causes a break in the timeline the space time continuum is is is rewritten but that's a very like conceptual idea until he goes through a personal crisis about himself you know until he discovers like Penelope did. I mean little literary trek like Penelope did on that spaceship when her mind went blank he discovers he's the threat and when he discovers he's the threat he's forced to change.

[00:45:41] Any other questions from anybody. Yeah.

[00:45:45] Oh so there's a couple of spots in the book again spoiler. So the question was there's a couple of spots of the book where there's these little summary chapters where I recap what's happened. And so why do I do that. Well there's a couple answers you may have gleaned this from me like I never do anything for one reason I do things for like ten different reasons that's sort of how my brain works but no one. Very simply I know that a lot happens in the book. There's a lot of swerves and twists and turns and I kind of like every once in a while to just be like Don't worry. This is what has happened. I know it felt like we were swerving all over the place but like it's actually much more straightforward than it probably felt when you're reading it because on the one hand this is a book that spans utopias and dystopias and timelines and vast spans of this character's life. And at the same time I always kept this as as you know very much as a sort of a North Star. It's also just three weeks in the character's life. It's a crazy three week it's a tumultuous three weeks it's a three weeks full of you know all kinds of twists and turns and big revelations but it's just three weeks.

[00:46:45] And so those little chapter summaries on the one hand were a way to just keep the reader with me. And at the same time as you just go I do want to give it away for the reader but there's also another reason why they're there and you might maybe you haven't got that part of the book yet. So they'll also be explained a little bit so there's actually like a meta fictional reason why they're there. That play into the character's own sort of exploration of his identity. So part of writing a book is it's fun to write a book. And so you can do things like that and you don't really know why they're there. Part of what I want is for you to be like Why are there these chapter summaries here. I mean it was helpful because now I'm sure I know what happened but I like to play with that. I like to make sure that for you as a reader when you're asking those questions there were answers. And so a little bit later in the book you'll find out that there's a very good reason why those chapter summaries were there. A very good reason which makes the narrator question everything that's happened to up until that point sounds good.

[00:47:40] I understood. I mean I read the book only came like four days ago. So I mean first of all let me just say thank you to everybody who's like read it thus far. That's amazing for me question is there is any part of this story that I was that was particularly hard to write that I was dreading writing. I mean the part of the you know the perspective shift that happens at the other gentleman asked. That was the hardest part of the book to write because I do love these characters I love my main character even though I mean when the book begins.

[00:48:04] You know he he's he's irresponsible. He's a bit callow. I mean he's I think he's funny and charming but it's sort of like he's you know he's coasting through life and I'm not like that personally like I you know. But at the same time I was I was very compassionate to him and you hope the reader is as well and he grows as the story goes on. But at that point in the story like I don't like who he becomes. It's you're not supposed to. And so that was hard to write because I'm putting myself in the perspective of now taking a character who I love and making and and turning him inside out. And so that was hard to write. It's also just a very very bad things happen to people that he loves and characters that I love. And I felt that those were important because unless unless bad things happen there's no stakes to the story like you know I want to put the reader in a position where you're like you don't know what's going to happen. And so those were hard chapters to write because they're painful for the people that are experiencing them. The other chapter that was hard to write but in a fun way was so there's there's again I don't wanna spoke too much but there's more than one kind of time travel in the book.

[00:49:04] And this is the second iteration of time travel was very mind bending and because I like to think you know there's because I thought about it in the one version the first time it's a very clean time travel. The second version which is appropriate for our messy world is very messy time travel. And I wanted to try. I wanted to kind of try both ways. And so the second version of it is a lot more complex and a lot more mind bending so it's harder to get my brain there but it's fun. I find challenges as a writer what makes the writing fun. I mean even when you're there sort of the challenges are a little bit painful. That's what makes it for me as a writer you do you want to convey that fun to the reader so when I'm not doing stuff that's kind of stretching my abilities and I'm not you know when I start the chapter I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to end it. That's I mean I hope I like that if the reader feels that way to the like where are we going. And that to me is like I try to have the energy be in the tank so that it's as much a experience for the reader as it was for me as a writer well more perfect question that sums up all the themes of this conversation and we'll send everybody out of this room on a cloud of insight and and and serenity.

[00:50:11] So the question is. Speaking of challenges the writer I sold the movie rights so Paramount Pictures and Amy Pascal have acquired the movie rights and I'm in the process of adapting it right now and it's super hard. You know I wrote this to not write a movie and here I am. No look it's been great. It's very challenging but it's been it's the fun kind of challenge. I wanted to write a book that was very much a book like if you read this book you're not going to be like this is just a movie pretending to be a book. It's very much a book that embraces its literary ness. I wanted the experience of reading it to be something that you could only get in a book. And I'm doing the same thing with the movie. So you do have to kind of like boil it down to its essence Who are these characters what are the themes what are the key elements of the plot. And so sometimes there's some reinvention. So if you see the movie there's going to be stuff that is a little bit different than what's in the book.

[00:50:59] And then other things it's going to be you know as faithful as possible to the essence of it. But I'm trying to write a movie that embraces what a movie does really well as opposed to what a book does well. There certainly are days where I'm at my desk typing the screenplay. I feel like I'm

literally just ripping pages out of the book and throwing it over my shoulder because you can't do everything. But at the same time like it's also kind of like a gift to be able to like rethink how can I tell the same story with the same themes that were so compelling to me that they were worth writing a novel about in a different medium and tell the story in a different way. So it's a good kind of challenge but definitely a challenge. Well thank you all for coming. I hope you get some sunshine Vitamin D super important especially stressful times. Thank you very much for coming. Thank you again to the Seattle Public Library to Elliott Bay Book Company for hosting me here. I grew up in Vancouver just up the road to Seattle many times in my life I love the city and it's it's just so rewarding to have such a warm welcome so thank you very much. We all have a wonderful afternoon.

[00:51:58] Thank you very much.

[00:52:02] 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.