



Library podcast

Peter Heller discusses 'Celine'

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[00:00:38] Hello everybody. Thanks so much for being here on this rainy evening. I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the Literature and Humanities Program Manager here at Seattle Public Library and I wanted to welcome you to central library and to tonight's event with Peter Heller. Thank you to Elliott Bay Book Company for inviting us to co-present tonight. We would also like to thank the author series sponsor Gary Kunis and our media sponsor The Seattle Times for their generous support for library programs. Finally we're also grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Now let me turn the podium over to Rick Simonson from Elliott Bay Book Company and he will introduce the rest of the program thank you Stesha and thank you very much for being here fairly at bay.

[00:01:21] As we got the chance when we sort of find out about what books and authors are coming out in a given period. One of the things that's been nice is to help bring back to the library writers who have been here as part of Seattle reads that's been the case with Dina and guests too with Chris Cleave with Layla Lalonde and having Peter Heller. Here we have someone who's actually here just two years ago when the salary's choice was his second novel The painter Peter came to Seattle. Actually he came to Seattle in his earlier writing life as a nonfiction writer author of four wonderfully varied nonfiction books more one way or another having something to do with the outdoors. I would say with people's ways outdoors natural forces at work things and then it was in 2013 that he came through for his debut novel The Dog Stars. We came to L.A. Bay and that book received great acclaim as did the painter. And tonight he's here with his newly published third novel book entitled Celine a book which starts out in New York City and very urban environs and actually somewhat elegant there's there's some it's you know some city city life and city things going on but there is also in and around the richly drawn people that are part of this book which have been part of each of his novels there become some intrigue and then the intrigue takes its central characters from New York to the west.

[00:02:56] And again you get great descriptions and narratives set in in the West and in play. So it's writing that's that's strong and rich it's tricky. I'd want to talk about because this book actually has all sorts of elements of things that that shouldn't probably be disclosed until you've read the book

because it's a literary book. But I'd also say it's got the best elements of a mystery and you'll get to hear some of that but I have a feeling Peter knows how much to say it how much. Not to say he'll read and take questions. We have copies of Celine we also have copies of Dog Stars and the painter here as well. And so take questions and no sign at this table here when all is said and done. So again we thank you for being here. Bad weather and all. And now Ashley please join me in welcoming back to settle. The

[00:03:50] Wonderful writer Peter Heller.

[00:03:57] Thank you Rick. Thank you special. Is that too loud. Oh okay.

[00:04:05] It's good to be back here. Wow.

[00:04:06] It's the weather sucks but for us Denverites It's pretty nice actually. I'm going to read you guys if you've heard me before you know I'd like to read it but I won't rub you to death. I'd really like to read the whole book to you tonight huh. Be really fun. Set some kind of Guinness Book record. But I won't. I think what I'll do is I'll read a little section just to set it up and then I'll tell you about it a little bit. I won't read you the prologue because I think you'll probably read it

[00:04:45] But I will read you chapter one from Celine the call had come while she was at her workbench wiring the naked taxidermy form of an ermine onto a rock beside the skull of a crow. The plan was to have the skinless ermine looking down at his own high tack to the rock.

[00:05:07] Her sculpture had a distinctive dark streak when Celine wasn't solving cases she made pieces from anything at hand which often involves skulls. The year before the window washer had been fascinated by her art which was displayed throughout the Open Studio and the next day he brought her a human skull in a bucket.

[00:05:28] Don't ask he said she didn't.

[00:05:31] She covered it immediately in gold leaf and it stood now on a pedestal by the front door looking elegant now she felt like this. Ermine and she felt skin and lost without protection her own fur had been her family she had Hank of course but a son no matter how old was someone to be protected not the other way around. When the phone rang. She almost didn't answer. But then she thought it might be Pete calling from up in the Heights needing grocery shopping help Hi Celine Watkins. Yes this is Gabriella. Gabriella Ambrosio Lamont Gabriella. She whispered trying to place the name you don't know me I went to Sarah Lawrence class of 82 I saw this story about you in the alumni magazine Prada P.I.

[00:06:20] Gabriella laughed, clear, bell like. Celine relaxed. that was silly Celine said I mean the title I've never worn Prada in my life Chanel doesn't alliterate.

[00:06:33] Right. Celine closed her eyes the name was distinctive and it sounded familiar hadn't the girl had her own small story in the magazine about a show of still life photographs in a gallery in San Francisco. Celine seemed to remember a portrait of the woman in bits of biography she was pretty maybe partly Spanish her father had been a photographer too, hadn't he? Famous and very charismatic.

[00:06:55] The story had interested Celine. I remember you from an article.

[00:07:01] Hah! The exclusive club of the alumni magazine profiles Gabriela said yes. Pause. I hope it's okay that I called you out of the blue. Yes of course Celine had been in her business a long time. She she knew that nobody ever just called out of the blue.

[00:07:17] They had been on a certain trajectory for a while. They deliberated. They picked up the phone. They were like the pilots of small planes approaching an airport who call the tower finally for instructions to land what Celine didn't know as if she had the strength.

[00:07:34] It was one year and one day after the twin towers had fallen she could still almost smell the char still see the air gritty with ash and remember how the wind blew bits of charred financial statements and posted notes across the river where they fluttered over the dock like Lost confetti.

[00:07:51] She could not have imagined a sadder finale to a grim year. Her younger sister had died that May. She remembered how bright how tender seemed the cottonwoods along the big wood River in Ketchum Idaho. The morning Mamie left. She had helped her go the handful of pills the long kiss on the cheek how she had walked down the drive how the leaves spun in the wind and how when a gust came through it swept the old trees to a darker green like the hands of a harpist lifting a somber note off the strings and then in July she got word that her older sister Bobby had a brain tumor. It was a flare up of a cancer five years in remission. Celine went to Pennsylvania to visit to help and there was not much to do as Bobby died within three weeks. It was almost as if the youngest sister's death had given the eldest sister permission to take the deep rest she had longed for. And then the first plane hit and Celine went to her window and watched the plume of black smoke rise into a clear sky. She was riveted. She lived 50 feet from the pier in an old brick loft building kitty-corner to the River Cafe.

[00:09:09] It was almost under the Brooklyn Bridge Brooklyn side 30 yards from the East River and with the windows open she could hear the current rip and burble against the pilings of the dock. She pursed her lips and tried to get enough air. She did not move. Pete left her alone. When the second plane tore through the sister tower to the South she shudders as if it were she herself who had been slammed and ripped.

[00:09:33] Lying in bed that night was she cries silently beside him. Pete realized that Bobby was the North Tower and Mimi the South. And of course the collapsing buildings were much more than that too. They were a burning message that a certain world had passed. Her sisters had been the last of the family she'd been born into Celine's inner and outer world mirrored each other. Celine was 68

then. Her body was more frail than it should have been for an active strong willed woman as a result of four packs a day for 30 years. And she thought she and though she had quit ten years ago. The smoke had ravaged her lungs. She usually refused to wear oxygen. She was too elegant or vain and I'll skip ahead a little Celine Watkins was a private eye. She had what many call the underdog bone.

[00:10:23] Celine always rooted for the weak the dispossessed the children for the ones who had no means or power the strays and homeless the hapless and addicted the foreign law and the remorseful the broken one couldn't count the skinny trembling dogs her son ended up loving nor the chaotic families that stayed with them for days. The cases she took were for the lost causes the ones who could never afford a P.I. they were never about leverage leverage or retribution or even justice and they were often perform pro bono. They were usually about reuniting birth families. So she found the missing the ones who could not be found. She gave her mother her lost son a daughter her lost father and her success rate was a staggering 96 percent. Much better than say the FBI.

[00:11:10] She had worked for them too once and she would never do it again. So. I want to read you that just to give a little setup. When we talk about the book you knew sort of how it starts.

[00:11:27] Her partner in investigation and all other things in the book is her husband Pete. And Pete is a seventh generation Maine Islander where reticence is like the state bird and he just doesn't say much in the family they call him The Quiet American. And but despite the fact he doesn't say a lot he has a ton of skills he can build a small boat he can pitch hay cut firewood make a meal for nine siblings when his mother is busy and he's channels these prodigious skills now living there on the dock in Brooklyn. Into making trying to make his wife eat a green vegetable which he never can and writing memoirs about. I own life in Maine and carving unabashedly erotic sculptures which the cleaning lady refuses to dust and the two of them are really they really like the good cop bad cop as investigators. But there's sort of like the quiet cop and then I mean they're there they're like the cop that talks and the one who doesn't say anything.

[00:12:42] So I think I'm going to just read you a scene of sort of what it's like when they're on the road together. They get this call from this young woman. Her father went missing in Yellowstone like over 20 years before and all signs pointed to a bear mauling but they never found the body and this the young woman believes that her father's still alive and she'd like Celine to find him. So Pete and Celine head west they go to Denver. Celine's son Hank. Has a camper truck and Hank is a is a little like me. He's like really a lot like me actually.

[00:13:20] He has the same camper and they borrow it and they head up to Wyoming. So I'm sure I'll just read you a scene of them driving to Wyoming.

[00:13:32] And then I'll pretty much stop reading. But I also I also want to say because I didn't say this before that Seattle is just an awesome place to be a reader and a writer. The Elliott Bay has been supporting me as as an author since my very first book and the Seattle library to stood like this amazing thing two years ago. I don't know if any of you purchased paid it off but it's like it's me. It's amazing. It's like Seattle is almost like being in France where you know like authors are actually get

respect. We were we were in France for a month. My wife and I. The month of September I just couldn't believe it like people were like You know I actually like thought novelists were really awesome. It was sort of like being Justin Bieber.

[00:14:19] You know when you're like 57 Ok here they are driving in Wyoming.

[00:14:28] Celine didn't really relax until they turned up into the Sweetwater Valley and the ranges on either side got close and their flanks were dark with timber and the meadows were green so were the irrigated fields of the ranches lying along the river. The neat white ranch houses peeking out from groves of boisterous cottonwoods. She opened her window and let the late afternoon wind pour in and it smelled of alfalfa and wet fields in the river.

[00:14:55] They drove into land or just as the sun was setting. Settling into the long escarpment of the wind Rivers just three more latitudes north made a difference.

[00:15:05] Here at the end of September the air pouring through the window was chilly with the fall and she could smell wood smoke. The Aspen were already turning on the higher ridges slashing the shoulders of the mountains with ochre and gold glorious. This time of year it was good to be out of the city now. Good to be rolling travelling. Letting her losses toss in her wake the cold currents would bring them around again surely probably tonight as she slept and if she woke up to the strange silences of a new town and lay in the dark listening she would welcome them home and taste without bitterness. The oddly sweet grief of missing those one loves. But now it was wonderful to forget for a few hours to be traveling to hear tires hum and flop on cracks in the pavement to come to a tea in the road above a creek whose Meadow was dotted with horses rose and Apple loses and smell smoke from the wood of fog of trees that didn't even grow in the east. Celine didn't feel like cooking pot offer but she waved him off.

[00:16:09] Let's have ribs she said. Isn't that what they eat in Wyoming. And then let's go find a pull out somewhere to make our new home. I feel a little like a hermit crab carrying his house on his back. We had one as a pet you know Mimi brought it home from Simone's point one day and her glasses case mommy had a fit. You were all suckers for a stray. He was not at all a stray. I'm sure she plucked him from a very fine family where he'd been quite happy. It may be mad kind of a lesson for me and not offering help where it is needed. Did you make her put him back.

[00:16:44] No she was a rashly attach at the end of the summer abducted him and put him right back in a little tidal pool where she'd found him. I'd been with her that day anyway over the summer he'd been quite spoiled. She dropped all manner of food into the pickle jar. One Friday night she brought him to the movies. She swore to me that he crawled to the edge of the jar.

[00:17:02] Came half out of his shell and watched Ginger Rogers. She swore on the Bible that he moved all his little legs like he wanted to dance. She said he was an almond and wasn't allowed to dance.

[00:17:15] I finally figured out that she meant Amish. I learned about them from our nanny and I'd been telling her about how they don't have zippers which she thought was hysterical. She changed Benny Saw water twice a day when it was clear that he was actually growing. She found several empty snail shells and dropped them in he inspected them and found them lacking. I told her that probably they couldn't have holes. She thought he'd like to have windows in his new house. Finally she found a beautiful glossy symmetrical shell all covered in a regular black spots like a paint pony and with no pin holes. Benny took one look and moved right in. Years and years later as an adult she told me she thought of that as one of her proudest moments.

[00:17:57] Isn't that on Pete half smiled it was his way of giving vigorous applause. Finally he said I always thought of ribs as a Texas special to your Louisiana. Though come to think of it Uncle Norwood could barbecue a wicked batch.

[00:18:14] Were you even listening.

[00:18:15] Of course you were his son Norwood junior kept a pet lobster one summer that one didn't end so well huh. How could she have doubted him. Of all the things Pete Beveridge is very good at listening was perhaps the best main ribs. She said.

[00:18:30] You know Pete I've been I've been cutting you slack all afternoon I'm supremely aware that this was how they sparred it was a call and response a little like the cries red tailed hawk scurried across a valley to their mates are you there. Yes I am here. They pass the pronghorn lodge and came down the hill on the main street a straight mile long prospect of mostly late 19th century brick buildings with tall front windows and ornate front doors. They passed the lander grille in the noble hotel and two outdoor sport shops with tents and fleece stuffed mannequins in the windows.

[00:19:05] They passed a loaf and jug in the Safeway and a gas station turned burger joint and two stores featuring Native American crafts. It was this time of day or night that happens only a few weeks a year at a certain hour in certain parts of the American West. The sun sets behind mountains but the cloudless sky that is more than cloudless it is lends clear clear as the clearest water holds the light entirely holds it in a bowl of pale blue as if reluctant to let it go. The light refines the edges of the ridges to something honed in the muted colors of the pines on the slopes. The sage Ruffin fields the houses in the valley the colors pulse with the pleasure of release as if they know that within the hour they too will rest. Maybe Celine thought this way because she was exhausted. She was.

[00:19:55] It had been a long time since she driven that far in a day Main Street curve to the right and they passed the double lot Motel which made them laugh as there were probably patrons doing things there. They doubly ought not to do and Celine abruptly through the wheel over and executed a U-turn that startled PA and squealed the tires practice. She smiled. Twenty seven miles per hour pretty good didn't even think about rolling. She grinned. Never know when we might need one of those.

[00:20:24] I was thinking we ought to head back to the lander grill. They might not have ribs but I bet they serve a mean steak so I'm the secret of this book is that it's about my mom

[00:20:39] And I wrote the book.

[00:20:41] My mom died two and a half years ago and I was very close with her and I wrote her as closely as I could. It's not it's not that Celine is really based on my mom it's that it is my mom. I mean I tried as a writer. I mean Flannery O'Connor said that you know a writer is always trying to capture the sea turtle it's always swimming off into the into the green aqueous distance and they never can get it because it's never good enough for the writer and I felt that way I felt like I missed her essence.

[00:21:12] But other people have read it you know thought it was pretty good in terms of capturing her and I send it to Pete who actually is still alive.

[00:21:26] He lives in that same loft building right there on the dock and he's writing his memoirs about me island life and he's a very interesting dude he and I talk about this in the book. He he went to Harvard he and he was a card carrying communist in 1952 when it could really screw with your prospects and when he got out of school in 1954 he married a black woman and became editor of liberator the Liberator publication in New York City which was the major civil rights publication. And the letters from his parents and his seven uncles and aunts telling him not to come back to North Haven with his negro wife are some of the most compelling letters I've ever read because they're so they they love Pete so much he was sort of like the golden child he was an athlete. He was very caring community minded and everybody loved him.

[00:22:33] But the letters are so convoluted and twisted in that these are smart rhetorically agile people writing these letters search that are saying we don't want you to bring her back or come back again to the island until you've got your head clear.

[00:22:47] But it's not because we're racist it's because we love you so anyway.

[00:22:54] Pete is as written in the book too and I sent the manuscript to Pete and he. Two days later I got a call and he said I read the book

[00:23:11] I said okay.

[00:23:13] And then he said I have two criticisms and I kind of sat up because when he says that you know you listen.

[00:23:19] And he said you know she would have never she would have never gone out to meet the assassin in anything but full face she would put on all her makeup and I didn't you know I just had her like put her Glock under a robe and go wrong.

[00:23:39] And he also said she never took my arm. We always held hands. I was just like Oh wow.

[00:23:50] They were so romantic. I mean he would she would she die would use 80 he was like 85. So anyway my mom grew up in Paris.

[00:24:01] And during the war and she was 7 when the Germans were coming hot you know into Paris. And she and her two sisters and her mother fled. And her father worked for Morgan's bank and his name was Harry Watkins and he he fled. He he left as they were really coming right into the city.

[00:24:21] And my grandmother told me that when my mother got to Manhattan all she talked about was joining the French Resistance. And she was seven. That's what she wanted to do. And she would go around. My grandmother told me that she would go around New York like listening to conversations and trying to decide who is like a Nazi spy. And so. She kind of grew up wanting to be like James Bond. And you know she grew up in you know in the 50s in New York. And she got married right out of college and she had me and I kind of like probably ruined her dreams of a promising career in the CIA or whatever she wanted to do. But once I came along a little bit of my two sisters she started working for a detective agency and she got her P.I. license and almost immediately getting her P.I. license. The FBI called her up and they said ask her if she would help them find a guy who had perpetrated a large bank fraud on the bank in New York. And he was somewhere in southern Connecticut and they wanted someone who could go up there and find him and kind of mingle with the crowd around you know Greenwich and stuff. And they didn't they didn't have anyone. So Mom went up mom made a couple of phone calls and thought she found him. And she she she drove up there and her old Volvo.

[00:25:47] And she found this like horse property at Southern Connecticut. She spied on him with her opera glasses. I'm not making this up. And then he left.

[00:25:56] You know there's a imagine White real fencing in this nice you know. And he got in his sports coupe and you know pulled out and so she chased them. They had this car chase and she was in her old Volvo and I can imagine this high speed chase through like Darian at 40 miles an hour.

[00:26:12] And finally the guy he just pulled over because he was like you know who is this little woman who can barely see over the steering wheel and why she following me in this old car.

[00:26:22] And he pulled over and she like got out. This is true. And this is in the book. Clack clack clack or a little pumps you know on comes over and she says Franklin what you're doing is wrong and it's not good for you it's not good for your family and you need to make this right. And so what we're gonna do is I'm going to follow you back to the house and and then you then we'll drive together back down to the bank in New York and we'll get this thing sorted out. And he did because her moral authority was so strong something that I experienced often as a child

[00:27:07] The what you ought not to do. Kind of thing. And so anyway that's.

[00:27:14] And she said she never did perps again after that because his face when the when the special agents put the cuffs on him she said she'd never want to see that face again.

[00:27:25] And she felt like it wasn't worth it.

[00:27:29] So she she had periods in her life where she would go off and I wouldn't know.

[00:27:38] Nobody really knew what she was up to.

[00:27:40] And later it was sort of it was sort of fun having those things revealed whatever she was doing. Once when we went to say goodbye to my and her youngest sister you know as written in here in Idaho we went up to say goodbye to her and we were both very sad and we were driving down the road and we weren't saying much. And we were driving through Hailey Idaho and she said Hey Pete's.

[00:28:09] Pull over will you.

[00:28:10] And there was a sign it said it said Rupe guns discount guns.

[00:28:18] So we pulled in and mom got out and she went she went in clack clack scarf earrings right.

[00:28:29] And the guy at the counter was cleaning handgun. He had it on a cloth and he was like watching her. She came up to the counter and she started looking and. She said Oh could I see that one please. And it was a hawk and Colt 45 automatic. And the guy said you know you might want to start with something a little smaller. I mean is that a gift. And she goes No it's for me. So I think you might want to start with like a 22. The look she gave him.

[00:29:01] I mean you know only I mean I knew that how arch it was he probably didn't she said but I'd like to see that one please. So he took it out and I could see him you know kind of like probing a tooth you know just like and she took it.

[00:29:15] And she she made a stance at the wall and then it was like a thought bubble over the guy's head I could see he was thinking you know pretty good stance you must watch a lot of cop shows. And then he was so intrigued. He looked at his watch he said hey it's it's twenty five. I was gonna close up in a few minutes anyway. Let's go shoot this thing. So we got into Dick Roof's old Bronco and we drove up above. Haley we went into this like little valley it was like a little gully and there was a clearing there with a fire pit and a bunch of bottles and cans and stuff and a like a mini set up a log and put a like seven bottles and cans on a log and any any and then he went over and he said OK look this is how you racket you know we want to shoot her toes off and you know and it's going to be heavy and it's going to have some kick. And she was like very polite you know and then you know she racked it.

[00:30:08] She lifted it up just about Bam bam bam bam bam. It was like glass and cans why just beautiful like three shots pause two shots you know. And his face. I will never forget like Dorman Rockwell could not have done his face justice I mean he was just like

[00:30:25] He was like and then he was so respectful after that it was like Calder Caro and you know. And he modified the grips for but she had this. She was a real badass. I mean she had this you know she was always revealing herself to me and it and it's it's odd for I think a young man to think of his mother as like leading a more interesting life than he does. It's sort of an inversion of how it should be and it may be one of the reasons that you know maybe it's one of the reasons I became like this adventure writer and everything is like because you know I mean I had this mom

[00:30:57] Doing that stuff. And so anyway so it is about her.

[00:31:03] And and the book is about you know in a lot of ways it's about little girls losing their dads and mothers losing their children.

[00:31:16] But I thought what I do now is I'm going to read one last paragraph at the end. But I. But the funnest thing is to take questions from you guys I know from being here before that you guys aren't.

[00:31:25] It's not like Maine you guys aren't shy. So. If you have any questions I would love to feel them. That's where the best stories come of district district my lunch.

[00:31:37] She was I mean they reunited over Pete and mom reunited over 100 birth families and they did most of it pro bono all of it I think.

[00:31:47] Oh yeah I mean they found a friend of mine when I was living in Pioneer Colorado this little town I didn't know that. I mean you find this stuff out that you know a lot of people don't have very interesting family histories obviously and this is one of my best friends in this whole town.

[00:32:04] I didn't know that he had lost contact with his father when he was like 12 and he asked my mom and Pete to find him and they found him in New Orleans.

[00:32:15] He was an Elvis impersonator in New Orleans and Bill called him up and you know they met.

[00:32:22] I guess it didn't go that well huh.

[00:32:25] I think half the time it goes well and people you know feel like something that was missing. You know they're made whole.

[00:32:31] But the other half of the time it's like not so great so yeah no I think it was a little bit later like.

[00:32:43] So I was bored of 59 and I would have been like I think she started working for the detective agency when I was like 13. So would have been in that it would have been in the early 70s

[00:32:58] Yeah.

[00:32:59] And you know she had this interesting like the thing about my mom was that she could meet anybody where they lived you know. And it was extraordinary. It's an extraordinary graciousness and respect that each that she gave everyone wherever ever she went. And so you know she could you know sometimes the people she was looking for were homeless or you know she could go to a homeless shelter and talk to people and narrow and those people never.

[00:33:31] I mean they they would open up to her because you know she was and you know she could talk to anybody. It's pretty cool.

[00:33:39] So anyway her memorial was really awesome because there were people from all walks of life she'd be so tickled.

[00:33:54] You know I mean I mean I wish you were around for lots of reasons but I so wish you could read this and you know I want to believe you know that she's like out there you know like psyched about it.

[00:34:08] I was really glad that Pete really loved it.

[00:34:09] You know he's he's a savvy person and he you know he really really liked the let's see they haven't read it yet.

[00:34:23] I think they're a little nervous. We'll see how that goes. I'm going back to read in New York in a few days.

[00:34:31] They all live there. We'll see what happens.

[00:34:34] Yeah. Yeah.

[00:34:39] Well my mom was from this patrician family. You know she didn't really have to. You know she she had money and Pete had money. Dad. So Pete is not my father. My parents got separated when I was twenty three. But Pete had worked very hard as an interior architect for Wall Street.

[00:35:00] You know big buildings which is the interesting thing to do as it as a communist. But he did that any any made really good money and you know they were fine. They weren't they weren't well you know was super well-off but they had enough money to get by and they just felt like there was a whole there's a whole bunch of people. I mean it's more probable that someone who gets their kid taken away when they're 15 can't afford an investigator and so she felt like there was a whole bunch of people that really needed this service and they would go into like they would go into county courthouses and stuff where there were sealed records and you know the clerk would meet my mother in the bathroom and slide a file like from from stall to stall you know stuff like that.

[00:35:49] I mean it's like you can't make this stuff up because people were you know they just wanted to help and know there were there were women private detectives but not that many.

[00:36:03] I mean because you think about it I mean the private detective the cliché is the Marlowe thing. You know it's like the tough P.I. with a bottle of whiskey in the drawer and all that. And but when she was working the Detective agency there were more and more women applying because they really needed him. I mean they need needed people who could you know impersonate you know women

[00:36:26] You know stuff. Yeah. The best story that didn't make it into the book was when I was home on a vacation or just visiting and she got a job from the Polish Embassy to track down a little Polish girl that had been kidnapped

[00:36:46] And brought to the states by a member of her family and her mother really wanted her back in the Polish embassy somehow got wind of my mom and hired her. And we were there.

[00:36:58] You know my girlfriend and I were there and so we asked if we could go along and maybe help. So I remember parking. The same old Volvo I and that thing must have like 380000 miles on it parked on this street in Queens.

[00:37:14] And it was a cold day and there was the house was like this two storey brick house and it had a little video camera and everything and that's where we thought that the little girl was. And mom and Pete were like How should we do this maybe let's see if there's. We just need evidence that the kid is there so they gave my girlfriend a plastic. They had a plastic bag in the back in the trunk. Big trash bag. And they said Why don't you guys go pretend that you're collecting clothes for little kids for the winter for you know some church. So we went and we knocked on the door you know is this very thick Polish accent was like you know can I help you sort of skeptical and we said you know we're collecting clothes for St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Brooklyn you know for especially for little kids you were really really looking for you know sizes like you know five six seven years old and. And the woman you could you could hear the pause. And she was like Okay one minute. And she handed out this whole bag full of little girl's clothes you know six year old clothes and this woman you know by the record that they the research didn't have any kids. And that was enough for the judge to

[00:38:30] Order a warrant. And again it's like you know those things you do that you know that keep you up at night. Mom said that when she brought the little girl

[00:38:43] Somehow she she ended up bringing the little girl to the Polish embassy this very handsome Polish man with a big mustache like look like a cavalry officer you know he's he was a one of the attaches you know came out it was a marbled hall and he came out he took the little girl's hand and the little girl it like looking back at mom and you know and it's like you know after that it's like I wonder did we do a service you know.

[00:39:06] I mean here she was in this country who she was probably with her at I don't know.

[00:39:13] I mean that little girl's life changed forever. Maybe that was not the right thing to do.

[00:39:17] I don't know. I didn't put that in the book. So yes.

[00:39:23] Yeah. So he asked Do you know how did we get these stories you know. They're so detailed and stuff. You're close was a dinner conversation or you know sometimes I would come home because I lived in the West right. I was like the remittance man. I mean I was the guy who went west and made a new life and wanted nothing to do with New York City and stuff. And so I would come home and it was very special you know having that reunion and you know mom would

[00:39:46] Say you know tell me very excitedly about a case that you just worked on or or you know or when she was in the airport you know once I came home she said Yeah I was you know he's heading up to Maine on this case you know Penobscot Pete and Paul Penobscot Paul.

[00:40:03] I was a famous case that didn't make it in the book. And I had my Glock

[00:40:08] And I had it and it was in my check in. And I had my roller bag as she was rolling and roller bag a log in LaGuardia and all of a sudden a hand came and grabbed it

[00:40:21] And said allow me ma'am I'll help.

[00:40:23] And it was Bruce Willis and you know.

[00:40:28] And so they got to the counter and you know he asked her what she did and he was very intrigued that she was a detective.

[00:40:35] And then she had to declare her Glock. You know the people that got her Bruce Willis. You know you like just cracked a smile. She said it was like it was like the smile he gives when he you know the nice one not the one before he blows me away. And and and then he gave a card and said you know if you were your husband or ever you know in L.A. you know look me up you know maybe you thought they'd make a good movie. And when she got to Maine the Glock was gone

[00:41:04] Because they'd made such a big issue out. You know there was such a crowd around Bruce Willis and there was the gun and everything so she always told me and this is in the book but she she always said you know fame is a trap.

[00:41:15] And if you do anything really well and you happen to be really really good at it you know just don't let too many people know about it.

[00:41:22] Because you know it's just causes a lot of fuss and bother. And your gun doesn't show up with you in Portland Maine anyway.

[00:41:32] Yeah I'll take a couple more right. I find it very easy just because you know like the dialogue was at hand you know I never had to think about what they would because it's just what they you know what they talked about. It's how they talked. And yeah I found it easy and you know of course I didn't put him you know I mean I think you know I think sometimes that my family was a little rough when I was around 14 my mom stopped drinking right around then and so when there was you know everybody in the house was drinking it wasn't that fun.

[00:42:02] You know I didn't I didn't just allude to that I didn't put that in there but that might be in the next Celine Watkins mystery because we should probably tell it on yeah.

[00:42:11] Yeah.

[00:42:17] Yeah. I use something if I know there are writers in the room and I just I'll just say this one thing before I close with this reading but the greatest thing the biggest help in writing novels which which are like. I mean writing a novel is like running a marathon it's not like writing. I came up writing magazine articles and yeah they're pretty fast writing a novel is day after day after day after day and you know sort of you just

[00:42:44] Aggregate and what I found. I heard that Graham Greene wrote 500 words a day every day of his life and he kept a subtotal in the margin of his notebook. He was so assiduous about it that when there was before work hours when he hit 500 he quit in the middle of a dialogue in the middle of a sentence in the middle of dialogue in the middle of a love scene and ended the affair.

[00:43:13] He would quit. I read that I thought. Wow

[00:43:16] That's not what I do at all you know and none of my author friends do all my author friends and me you know and I we will maybe have we write 500 words a day or a thousand or whatever our quota is that we're comfortable with but if we're on a scene you know and it's exciting we'll write through the scene we'll write two thousand three thousand for that you know we'll write it and then you know go that's done and that was fun. And go on with the rest of our day. But if you think about it when you come back that's a that's a transition right that's a double auteur and that's whitespace. So when you come back to your work the next morning you are looking at whitespace and you might as well start the book over again.

[00:43:54] You've got to get the ball rolling the rock rolling up the hill again. And so I thought well what Graham Greene is doing by having this arbitrary number that he's very disciplined about is not only is he GA he's he's he's nurturing you know he's he's rushing his energy and garner his energy but he's also stopping in the middle because that word 500 is likely to be in the middle of something.

[00:44:17] And so what I did was I modified it to the Heller modified Graham Greene method and what I do is I write a thousand words a day but when I password a thousand I go for a little while time right in the middle of something exciting a middle of a scene if it's an essay it's in the middle of a

thought I'm excited about and then I stop. So it might be a thousand sixty words but what it does for me is that it makes me so excited to get up the next morning and and finish that part and you know other people you know Hemingway used to you know write a few lines for the next day. It's a similar kind of thing. I like having it be right in the middle of something furious. And it changed my relationship with my work like absolutely changes so that you know I would hop out of bed in the morning. So excited to get to work and I got so sort of excited that I proselytize now all my poor writer friends do it too because they got tired of talking about it and it really works. Is there is there one more burning question yet.

[00:45:26] What do you mean. What do you mean by reporting it. The novel

[00:45:34] Yeah.

[00:45:35] Ok. Like research. Ok. So I will confess. I mean the reason that I write fiction now and probably will never write like I got I've been.

[00:45:44] So this novel launched just three days ago and I've just done a couple of readings and one question I got both times was like How come you chose how come you didn't write a memoir about your family and you know write nonfiction and it's simply because I hate doing research.

[00:46:06] I just like to make it. I mean once you make everything up it's like so fun. Why would you go back.

[00:46:11] You know it's like so free because I was a reporter for so many years I mean I was a journalist for so many years and often I was writing about controversial things you know like fracking in Colorado where you know the oil spill in Louisiana or the dolphins in Taiji and and you better get it right because someone will sue your ass and they'll sue the magazine and there goes your reputation all that. And so I was very very careful to get everything right. I always wrote down I never made up what people said like if I was on some you know expedition type thing you know if say was like the raid on Taiji Japan with a dolphin I wouldn't wait till that night to write you know what people said I would write it in my notebook right then I met John McPhee the great great great nonfiction writer and he told me that's what he did while he's hiking he's writing you know. So I did that because I wanted to make sure I got it right. There's nothing worse than seeing yourself quoted and seeing a line that you know you would never say and it's the same thing you know with all the politics or the the details of you know whatever story I was writing I triple fact checked and you know it was always like watertight.

[00:47:19] And it takes a lot of energy and it's like you know I'm not really interested in doing that I'd much rather just make up great stories. And so you know I wanted to write my mom really closely and I used a lot of you know all the family history and her backstory is true. But what I did was I conflated stories between her two sisters and her like there's a sailing scene in here that's kind of crazy and fun that happened to her sister not her.

[00:47:43] Another major thing that happens in the book I want tell you but one of the most major thing actually happened to her sister your older sister not her you know. So in fiction there's all that freedom and it's just so fun and so

[00:47:55] And I write about things that I that I love and attend to know about. So far that's what I've been doing so like with dogs I really didn't have to do much research.

[00:48:05] I mean my research about it going out with a Navy SEAL and shooting a sniper rifle I was like Leigh Cowen that guy could blow someone's head off from a mile away without even sweating it you know I mean that really made an impression on me. But that was the extent of research you know. And so. OK. I'm to read this last paragraph and thanks so much for coming out on this cold rainy night. The saddest part was that parents would keep disappearing. And children would cry themselves to sleep. Night after night for months for years and their mothers would have their babies taken from them before they had a chance to smell the tuft of soft hair their ears before they had a chance to say oh how I love you forever and ever that the baby was taken before she had a chance to kiss her and her properly in her arms he guided her around a deep pothole partly filled with gravel and she gripped his hand more tightly in the wan light from the motel side she could see their truck the only vehicle in the drive.

[00:49:27] The only gas at the end of the street she could see the dark bulk of the baronet rising against the night sky Yes sad how it felt. She thought that one might not make a dent in the great sadness but one could help make another person whole. Thank you

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