



Library podcast

Clarion West presents Karen Joy Fowler

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[00:00:36] Good evening. My name is Misha stone and I am a reader services librarian here at the Central Library. You can stop by anytime on Level 3 for reading suggestions. I have a lucky lucky job doing what I love being a part of the Clarion West summer reading series. I happened to be on the board and you'll hear more from a board member in a moment but I just also love to celebrate the instructors authors editors they bring in to town and the students that they're working with from all over the world. I'm also especially pleased to be here tonight with Karen Joy Fowler as many of you know she was a Seattle reader author and so once you've run the gauntlet of Seattle reads with us you're forever ours and forever in our hearts. So thank you so much for coming back to us. Karen Joy Fowler I hope it's the first of many visits back to Seattle this event is supported by the Seattle Public Library Foundation that makes so many of our free public programs possible. I also want to thank author series sponsor Gary Kunis and media sponsored the Seattle Times and presented in partnership with the university bookstore here tonight. And with that I wanted to turn it over to Rashida. From the Clarion West board.

[00:01:50] Thank you hi everyone. My name is Rashida. I am a member of the Clarion West board of directors. We're halfway through our six week summer workshop series and I know for some of you this you're pretty used to this whole spiel. So I'd like to just tell you a little story about a late July June morning in 2005. That morning I woke up knowing that waiting downstairs was an author I'd admired for the entire time I'd been writing and that I would be studying with her for one week. Any writers in the room you probably know the incredible mix of emotions that goes with knowledge like fact. And needless to say My Week with Octavia Butler was everything you might imagine it to be and more. So I'll commit the double hypergrowth double fin of the hyperbole and the cliché. It quite literally changed my life as to what makes Klarion West special isn't just the world class construction or the community events like this. As a writer it's about learning to see yourself as a professional and the work of storytelling as a career. It's about a cohort of professionals coming together at the start of those careers. It's about networking. Well let's call it what it is. Friendships that are formed that become your future beta readers your writing partners writing groups and even editors. They're exceptionally lucky. Back in 2005 I was single.

[00:03:09] I had no dependents and I had a job. Willing to give me a six week leave of absence so that I could attend the workshop. My job even threw a house party to raise funds to get me to Klarion West and that was pre Kickstarter Dave. So that's how we did it and even then I was a recent college graduate with a whole lot of student loans and I would have been short without the generous support of donors that fund scholarships to assist clearing students. So that's right. Perfect Strangers generously donated to this organization enabling me to have the experience of a lifetime. So thank you. Because simply put people like you changed my life. 12 years later my second book was published in April. I'm the editor of the webzine Gega notice sorest which was a hugot finalist in 2017 for the best of my prose Dean and it was started by my Clarion West classmate and Leckey. You might have heard of her. Our organization survives thanks to sponsorships and donors. Our students are here because of you. Tuition collected from students only covers about a third of the total cost of our workshop and its outreach efforts. Klarion West works hard to make sure that no qualifying student is prevented from attending this workshop because of a lack of funds. Your donations your participation on our annual write a on your willingness to show up again and again in perilous times and recognize the value of the arts and the stories and the people who tell them enable us to keep providing our students with game changing experiences and our community with a chance to hear the work of incredible authors like Karen Joy Fowler for free on behalf of the entire board and staff of Klarion West.

[00:04:44] Thank you for your support. I'd also like to thank the NEA King County for culture Amazon and the Seattle office of arts and culture for their ongoing support of clearing West. We'd like to thank the library and Seattle Public Library Foundation for hosting the event. The university bookstore for coming down to sell books. And this year we have the following sponsors for our write a thon. That's our biggest fundraiser of the year and it's Bill Speidel underground tourers Third Place Books brick and mortar books and Dr Tom Bridgman. However the largest percentage of our funding comes from individual donors. If you are still looking for a way to contribute to Klarion West Please consider supporting a writer and or write a thon sponsored multiple writers or the entire organization. Spread the word about Clarine rest to your friends and other readers of speculative fiction because we are creating a community. We're building a community and that community includes you.

[00:05:35] Thank you hello.

[00:05:42] I am j linebacker. I am the workshop administrator for the Clarion West workshop and I'm here to introduce Karen Joy Fowler challenge your own assumptions concoct the strongest case you can against the things you believe and engage with that case. No one is interested or moved or persuaded by the flattening of straw men. Karen Joy Fowler co-founder of the James Tiptree Jr. award and president of the Clarion Foundation offers this advice to writers taking on the political and their work. And she embraces it in her stories her work investigates the balance of power between men and women as well as the line between human and animal interweaving strangeness and historical fact. She definitely moves between genres revealing the lines between the real and fantastical to be porous and untrustworthy to name a few of her achievements. Fowler's debut novel Sarah canary received the Commonwealth medal for Best First Novel by a Californian. Her novel The Jane Austen Book Club spent 13 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. Both of her short story

collections won World Fantasy Awards and her short fiction has been awarded nebulas and the Shirley Jackson award. Most recently her 2014 novel *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* won the PEN Faulkner Award and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Carmen Maria Machado describes *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* as a masterpiece. It's explorations of identity family grief the minefield of scientific ethics and the nature of storytelling in turn funny and strange clever and dark probing and heartbreaking. Fowler's luminous prose provocative philosophies and attention to the psychology lives and experiences of women are reminiscent of the work of some of our finest living writers. I would follow her mind and voice anywhere she wished to take me. The road ahead is dark in Fowler's tales and the trials her characters face scour away their courage erode their safety and even challenge their identity. Confronting them with the truth of who and what they really are. Are you ready to go with her. I'd like to present Karen joyfull

[00:08:04] Thank you Jay. That was just a beautiful introduction actually did not know that Carmen had said those things about me. How very nice. I have to say sometimes when I'm sitting and I'm listening to myself. Beam introduced.

[00:08:22] It sounds like I've just gone from triumph to triumph and I feel quite detached from that person who won those prizes because my sort of experience of my career has been much more laboris one. So often you know I sit and I listen and I think wow wouldn't it be great to be her. I'm going to read to you today from a novel that I am working on. Although I have been working on it on and off for five years. I am going to tell you honestly that I am probably a third of the way through it. I have said something quite different to my publishing house so I am trusting that you will keep that information to yourself. It's a historical novel and it is not the first historical novel that I have written but it is the first historical novel I have tried to write since reading Hillary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* when I was just completely swept away by *Wolf Hall* last night. I had a sort of experience where I thought oh that's splatter historical novel can do. I'm going to do that tragically. It turns out. That that is what Hillary Mantell can do with a historical novel. I appeared to be writing a historical novel much the same way I have always written the historical novel which I can only hope will be more of a disappointment to me than it is to you. Just one more thing before I start. Well probably that's not true. Probably a couple more things before I start. First of all. I am just so gratified that you all came out. I still never know how many people might show up when I read and and I still have occasions when the number of people who show up are five and three of them are friends I have been invited to dinner afterwards so one of the things I had planned to do if I had one of those evenings tonight was to model to my lovely Klarion West class.

[00:10:47] How graciously you proceed when nobody shows up to hear you read and to share some advice I got very early in my career by a good friend of mine Tim Powers who said every time you go out to read you put 20 dollars in your pocket. Or pocket book. If the number of people who show up to hear you read can be taken out to drinks on 20 dollars you cancel the reading and you take them out to drinks. I have never since then ever showed up at a reading without 20 dollars in my pocket.

[00:11:24] The novel I'm writing is about a family historical family.

[00:11:31] I do not identify them in the pages I am going to read to you but since I have learned only one thing it is that anything I think will be kept secret is actually going to be plastered on the cover of the book.

[00:11:47] I see no reason not to share with you the fact that the family I am writing about is the booth family particularly the brothers and sisters of John Wilkes Booth.

[00:11:57] I had a have had quite a remarkable experience researching this book that the the Booth family is has been pretty heavily researched over the years. And yet New things are being found out about them all the time and things that we thought we knew about them are being challenged and revisited. And so I did. I did a lot of research prior to beginning when I write a novel Usually I spend about a year doing the research before I start to write. And when I had done that here and I thought I was in pretty good shape a few years ago a biography of John Wilkes Booth came out by a man named Terry Alford. Really terrific biography called fortune's fool. So I read that book and there was a story in it that I had never seen in any other book and in a meticulously footnoted text. This one story had no attribution at all.

[00:12:59] So I had no idea where he had found it. I had certainly not found it.

[00:13:03] And I did some sleuthing around and I figured out how to get in touch with him and I emailed him and I asked where he had found this story and he emailed me back and he said that he had been researching the Booth family for about 30 years and would I like his files. So I have spent the summer with the files of somebody who has been working on this family for 30 years. I still cannot quite get over the generosity of offering those to me it's it's just been incredible. Having said that I still can't find the story that I. That I went to him with. So what I am going to do tonight is I'm going to read the prologue and I'm going to read the first chapter of the book and I have reached an age where the question of whether my glasses stay on or off is a very difficult one to answer. There are two epigraphs. The first one. Is from my beloved Ursula Kalakh win and she wrote the election of 2016 was one of the battles of the American Civil War. The Trump voters knew it if we didn't and they won it and the second epigraph is old times. There are not forgotten. So this is the prologue. 1822. The people who live there call it the farm though it's mostly trees woodland merging into deep forest a two storey four room log cabin long abandoned was brought from a nearby acreage on rollers greased with pig lard.

[00:14:51] The walls were whitewashed. The Doors painted red a kitchen and bedroom added There is nothing special about this cabin. With its low ceilings it's cramped and canted staircase and moving it was a costly business. Every local Ox and man hired for the job this left the neighbors with the impression that the new owner was a bit crazy. I thought they never had cause to revise the new location whilst close to a freshwater spring and protected from the wind. But the neighbors suspect that this was the real purpose. It's also a secret cabmen now hidden inside a dense stand of walnut oak Tulip and Beech though since everyone in the neighborhood helped move it. Everyone in the neighborhood knows it's there. Bel Air the closest town is also the county seat with a courthouse hotel and saloon. Baltimore is some 50 miles of rough Coach Road to the south and west three large black

Newfoundland dogs arrive to patrol the grounds. They are changed during the day unloosed at night. The neighbors describe these dogs as savage zigzag. Fences are erected or repaired. The mail is delivered on horseback only once a week thrown over the gate by a post boy who whistles with two fingers as he passes driving the dogs to a frenzy of howling and rattling chains. A secret family moves into the secret cabin 16 years pass.

[00:16:33] The family grows shrinks grows by 1838. The children number nine counting the one about to arrive and the four who are dead. Eventually there will be ten these children have a famous father a Shakespearian actor on tour more often than at home. A paternal grandfather skinny as a stork with white hair worn in a single braid his clothing also 50 years out of fashion breech trousers and buckle shoes. He's come from London to help out during their father's long absences. He was once a lawyer treasonable sympathetic to the American revolutionaries enthusiastic for all things American visitors to his London house were made to bow before a portrait of George Washington now that he lives here he hates it. He likens the farm to Robinson Crusoe Island himself a maroon castaway on its desolate shore. He's rarely sober which makes him less helpful than might have been hoped an indulgent mother as a young woman she'd sold flowers from her family's nursery near the theatre on Drury Lane. She'd seen their father play King Lear and was astonished on median him to find that he was young and handsome he'd had to perform the howl howl howl howl speech right there in the London Street before she'd believe it was the same man.

[00:18:13] When will you spend a day with me. He asked. Within minutes of learning her name to morrow and she'd surprised herself by saying yes during their brief courtship he'd sent her 93 love letters pressing his suit with his fame. His ardor the poems of Lord Byron and the promise of adventure. Soon enough she'd agreed to run away with him to the island of Madeira and from there to America. Perhaps adventure was more implied than promised outright. After they had left their families in England after they'd arrived in Maryland and had their first child after he'd leased the remote acreage of the farm and was arranging to move the cabin to it. Only then did he explain that he'd be touring without her nine months out of every year. For nine months of every year she'd be alone in the cabin with his drunken father. What else could he do. He asked. Leave me no pause in which she might answer. He was a master of timing. He needed to tour if they planned to eat. And clearly she and the baby couldn't come along. There is nothing worse than an unhappy complaining shrew. He finished by way of warning he didn't plan on having one of those so here she's been on the farm for 16 years now for 17 years almost without break. She's been either expecting a baby or nursing one. It will be twenty continuous years before she's done later.

[00:19:53] She'll tell her children it was Lord Byron's poems that tipped the scales. She'll mean this as a caution but she'll know it won't be taken as such. All her children love a good romance. None of the children know that their secret. It will come as quite a shock. They have no cause for suspicion much like the secret cabin. Everyone they know knows they are here. That's the prologue. I am going to start Chapter One now as I promised to my workshop. I am going to move from the omniscient voice into third person limited Rosalee the oldest daughter is sitting on the steps that lead down to the spring. Watching her baby brother and sister make boats out of leaves she is thinking of Ophelia drifting in her sodden gown her hair spread over the water her face surrounded by flowers. She is

dreaming of what it would be like to be beautiful and dead. The month is March the year 1838. In July Rosalie will be 15 years old. She finds love tragic easier to imagine and honestly more satisfying than love triumphant Rosalie is neither dead nor beautiful though the first is easier for her to imagine than the second she resembles her father and her older brother. But in miniature and with little feminizing of their features reclusive reticent stocky she is not witty or graceful like the rest. Nothing is expected of her except that she'd be a good girl and a comfort to her mother.

[00:21:41] She wants little attention and gets less. The most unremarkable child in this remarkable family the long winter is just coming to its end and Rosalie feels the turn in her breath in her bones. She is not quite happy but surprisingly close to it. She feels light. Perhaps the bad times are over. The moment she registers the feeling it slips away. There is a palpable relief whenever father leaps on tour. Mail Day is the exception. By noon mother will be reading a letter from father. The letter will be good or it will be bad. Mother will need her desperately or she won't need her at all. The sky above the trees is pale and bare and schemes and reflection over the flat surface of the water. It's not a warm day but it's a dry one. Rosalie is wearing her shawl her bonnet and a pair of sturdy boots that were bought some years ago for her brother. June June as the oldest child. He's off in the fields this morning because father has read an article on some new fertilizing technique and so it must be tried at once. Father is always impatient for the completion of projects in which he has no part. He often berates his own father for lack of industry. Father thinks grandfather drinks too much grandfather thinks the same of father. They quarrel about this endlessly whenever father is home often from their chairs at the Bel Air saloon where all such arguments can be fueled by the jolly God Rosalie doesn't know where her grandfather is.

[00:23:29] Just now since her little brother Henry Byron died. Grandfather is often hard to find and mostly they don't look. He comes. He goes sometimes he misses a meal but not often. He used to give the children lessons but really this was just for Henry none of the other children are promising enough to interest him not June. Who is more Bromm than brains a handsome genial disappointment they once hoped to be a doctor or lawyer. Certainly not Rosalie upslope. Mother appears at the door of the cabin stands with her two arms curved around her belly holding it up like a great globe. She can't put on her shoes now or hook the laces without Rosalie's help. Her eyes are closed. Someone is having a busy morning she says swimming about in there and then without even opening her eyes. Don't let Asia play so near the water she vanishes back into the dark cabin. As if Rosalie is not watching every move Asia makes as if Asia will do anything Rosalie asks Asia is the youngest. If you don't count the swimmer and mothers belly two years old but only recently named and Rosalie still isn't used to thinking of her as Asia. Her parents had settled on Alishah or maybe Sydney.

[00:24:52] Unable to choose between the two. Then suddenly a letter from father that her be called Asia he wrote because God first walked with man on that continent. With Frigga for a middle name. Since she was born on a Friday mother wasn't entirely pleased. So they secretly call her Asia Sydney now and well until she's grown enough to bear the full weight of Frager in point of fact. Asia was born on a Thursday. Edwin Rosalee's little brother is 4. Edwin is crying when she does the way he does all things quietly. He's been trying to collect pebbles and seed pods to be passengers in his boats. But Asia keeps taking them and throwing them into the spring. Rosalie comes to kneel beside him puts

one arm around him with the other hand she reaches into the cold water. Distracted momentarily by the magic of her fingers elongating and refracting Asia cannot throw well Edwins pebbles are easily rescued. She hands three back to him wiping her cold hand on the hem of her skirt. This makes Asia so angry she can't even speak. She points to the water and sobs she stamps her feet and screams. Mother comes to the door again. We're all fine here Rosalie says but she speaks so softly that only Asia and Edwin hear her what she says makes Asia even louder and angrier. Since it isn't at all true all two year olds have terrible tempers mother says.

[00:26:37] But the others did not like this in the face of her fury. Edward surrenders his boats and his pebbles. Asia has them all now. Her face dries in an instant. Already she has the beauty Rosalie Lack's dark hair dark Shiming eyes. So does that one who comes to lean against Rosalie his bony shoulder cutting sharply into her upper arm. He smells like the biscuits they eat at breakfast. Miss Alijah Rogers their neighbor had to teach mother to make biscuits and cornbread on the kitchens opened fire when she first arrived at the farm. Mrs. Rogers is mother's closest friend so the children all refer to her as Auntie. I don't think your mother had ever cooked before Andy Rogers once told Rosalie either to let her know that mother was a real lady or else that mother had been strangely incompetent by Baltimore standards. Rosalie has never been sure which mother's biscuits are fine now but not as good as Auntie Rogers. The frog is sleeping Edwin says this doesn't sound like a question but is he wants to be told he is right. Edwin only asks questions when he already knows the answers. Old Mr. bullfrogs sleeps through the winter. Rosalie says he only wakes up when summer comes. Old Mr. Bullfrog is very old. Edwin is feeding her her lines very very old. A hundred years bullfrogs don't live a hundred years.

[00:28:16] They are lucky to make eight. Grandfather says so and yet Rosalee cannot remember a summer out of earshot of the enormous bulbous frog on warm evenings when the insects are humming and the birds are calling and the water is rushing and the wind is blowing and the trees are rustling and the cows bawling. Still that deep booming groan can be heard neighbours a mile distant complain of the noise at least a hundred years. He saw the American Revolution with his very own eyes. He drank the tea in the Boston Harbor. Rosalie feels her voice strangling in her throat. Henry Byron had always been the author of old Mr. bullfrogs rich and consequential past some neighbors who once approached father with the request that the frog be killed in the cause of peace and quiet. Father refused. The farm is a sanctuary for all God's creatures. Even the copperhead snakes father doesn't believe in eating meat and once mother says rose up in a saloon to point his finger at a man enjoying a plate of oysters murder or murder or murder. Father said in the same voice he used to play Macbeth sometimes you think father might be joking but mostly he is Asia has finished throwing all of Edwin's boats and stones into the water. She turns in his direction a face shining with triumph but immediately clouds over with the realization that Edwin has not been watching she step steps towards them and Rosalie shifts at one to her other side so that he can't be pushed about his knees soften until he's sitting in her lap Asia comes to do the same crowd and into Rosalie's arms taking up as much room as she can. He pours off her. Rosalie feels Edwin becoming smaller.

[00:30:19] Do you want to hear about you. She asks him. He does. It's his favorite story on the night you were born. She says father was in New York being Richard the Third Rosalie remembers it as a

terrifying night. But that's not the way she tells it. She skips the difficulties of the birth mother's agony the moment the midwife told Jean to ride for the doctor. She skips the icy ground and her fear that Juden was riding too fast and the horse would lose her footing or not fast enough. And the doctor would arrive too late. Mother had had six other children and never needed the doctor before Rosalie tells Edwin instead that there was a shower of stars that night lasted more than an hour. How just as June was leaving a great meteor exploded over Baltimore. Rosalie throws open her hands to show the explosion. She says that Edwin is the family's seventh child and that he arrived with the call over his face. The call has been saved in a small box in her mother's cupboard. It has the feel of a well-worn handkerchief. Edwin has been shown this but he won't be allowed to touch it until he is older.

[00:31:40] All these things Rosalie said. The stars the call the number 7. They mark Edwyn as extraordinary. This child will see ghosts. The midwife had said when the doctor had gone and she was again in charge he will never drown. Men everywhere will know his name. She took Edwin and swaddled him more tightly. There was something reverential ceremonial in the way she handed him back. Before Rosalie has always left out the part about seeing ghosts today she forgets she feels Edwins stiffen at this news. So far he's shown no evidence of greatness. He's an inactive fragile anxious boy the ten year gap between Rosalie and Edwin is where all the dead children are

[00:32:42] Thank you. I should say that much of the work on this book has been done at Hej. So I am enormously grateful for the time and focus and incredible food that you get there. I would love it if you had some questions. I should have warned you first but I am quite capable of standing here with this shame and look on my face until somebody hand goes up yes.

[00:33:14] Lincoln tie as you are asking me sort of what the date of the book will be and kind of what my general plan is my general plan is to spend about two thirds of the book in their childhood. So Rosalie is now 15. She will probably be around 30 when I finish that section. I'm going to switch at the end of this chapter to add one as the point of view character and the next chapter. And then I really should turn to Asia. But I just don't like Asia very much. So I will probably go back to Rosalie but clearly again just between you and me I have not gotten to that part yet. Then I want to do the assassination the war on the assassination actually rather quickly. I'm sort of figuring that that's the part of the book. People will already know and then I will jump to the when they are elderly and are looking back at what the assassination did to their lives. So I think Edwin died in the late 1980s maybe when he was the last of the older set still alive there were there well the 10th child who will not arrive for a few years.

[00:34:43] Jo Ann. And he survived for a while after that but maybe into the 9800 US that is my plan. It may not work.

[00:34:57] There was something yes John was I given the notes because Terry Alford also did not know where that story came from.

[00:35:10] I think there is that there is a possibility that he believed the answer was in his notes but did not have the time to go and look for it. I recently told him that the answer was not in his notes and

he is being I feel strangely guiltless about that that news. But there you know there is I had been. By the time I got those notes I had been researching this family for about five years. And there is a whole lot that I didn't have. So it's been incredible. One of the things that is mysterious is the character Rosalie. Rosalie is as I think I said in the piece the oldest girl she is by far the person about whom there is the least information. She never married. She never left home. She lived with her mother up until her mother's death and then she lived with her younger brother Joe until her death.

[00:36:11] Every time her name comes up in the course of one of her siblings talking about her. She is referred to as my poor sister Rose. There are many websites that suggests that she was perhaps feeble minded in some way. There was something wrong with her. And yet letters that she wrote still exist. She.

[00:36:38] There is nothing in those letters to suggest that she is not a fully competent capable adult. I think again it is clear that something was wrong but I cannot for the life of me figure out what it was. Nor did Terry Alford so you know when I run up against something like that my editor feels you know what a wonderful opportunity.

[00:37:06] Then you can just make up whatever you want but I feel no I have to keep looking. Surely somewhere this information must exist.

[00:37:18] But I am thinking if Terry Alford didn't find it in 30 years I probably won't find it in hopefully not 30 years.

[00:37:27] Yes.

[00:37:29] So the question lays bare just in to questions the difficulty of answering the question did.

[00:37:37] After five years of studying on my own did the notes change the trajectory of anything I was going to write.

[00:37:46] Plus is there a point at which I just feel I have done enough research so it seems to me if that trajectory was changed then clearly I have never done enough research.

[00:38:00] Again you know there has been so much research done on this family and yet there are so many peculiarities so among the dead children two of them died in a cholera epidemic and for years and years and years everybody believed the third child had died in that same cholera epidemic. So as you read the books written about the family this is the information you get three children killed in a cholera epidemic about four years ago. The death certificate for that third child turned up and he did not. He died earlier. There is no cause of death listed on the birth certificate. But there is a birth date listed on the birth certificate. And on the death certificate. So he was about a year and a half when he died. Which means that the date of birth that everyone has been using is not accurate. It's off by a couple of years. This is made even more complicated and upsetting because the birth date for one of the sisters who died in the cholera epidemic is now the same year that he was born. Only you know

like three months apart. So this seems unlikely to me. And so I have been trying just to get the most basic information. You know clearly it's been misunderstood for years. Who actually is the older child. When was the girl born because her birth date now cannot be accurate.

[00:39:47] Everybody but me seems quite willing to just say oh well about the whole thing. And I guess I will have to do that too. No one seems to care in the way I feel. I feel someone should be answering this question for me is what I feel there is also there's a Web site called both the bot or the booth these barn which is all these booth aficionados gathered together and they share you know whatever information they have come up with. It's wonderful it's a wonderful sight. But there is something so weird in the comments section. Several years ago a woman wrote in and she said that her husband was descended from the booth line and she wanted to know more. Genealogical information about the boose because her husband had disappeared just fallen off the face of the earth. She had no idea where he was but she wanted her son to be connected to that lineage. And then about six months later another woman post and she says My husband was your husband's brother and he has also disappeared. And we need to talk and that's as far as I can follow the story. But I think there you know there is a part of me that just wants to dump the booths entirely and try to figure out this other situation.

[00:41:28] I wrote a story several years ago called Standing Room Only my idea for this story was that I was dissatisfied with the way time travel was handled in books because it seemed to me far too often people were able to slip seamlessly into another time and place and pass unnoticed amongst the natives. And I thought it wouldn't be like that at all that if you could time travel that it would basically be a form of tourism and that time travelers would behave the way tourists behave which is they would complain about the food they would be unable to handle the money. And I thought there would be destination vacations if you could time travel. And I thought a lot of people would go to Lincoln's assassination. Tragically. I hope I would not be among them but I might also be unable to resist it. So I wrote a story in which the main character is a young girl named Anna Serrat. Anna Serrat is the daughter of Mary Serrat and Mary Serrat was the woman hanged as part of the conspiracy to kill Abraham Lincoln. The story takes place on the day of Lincoln's assassination. We follow Anna Serrat as she goes around the city. And you know I was just I was moved by thinking that this was the last ordinary day of Anna serrata life although she doesn't know it but DC is filled with people who didn't know it. And so DC is just packed with time travelers. All of whom are pretending to pass. But all of whom are behaving very strangely and so in the course of writing that story I started reading about the Lincoln assassination and in the course of reading about the Lincoln assassination I started reading about the booth family and it just you know the floor just gave way beneath me. I'm actually not terribly interested in John Wilkes Booth. I'm going to go out on a limb and say I think he was probably not a very nice man.

[00:43:40] But I am very interested in his brothers and sisters and what the impact on their lives of the assassination was.

[00:43:48] I think it's quite clear none of them ever recovered from it completely yes.

[00:43:57] How different is the process when you're writing about historical characters who really existed and whose lives are possible to find in some detail as opposed to completely making up figures.

[00:44:12] This is I've done as I told you that I've done historical novels before but this is actually the first historical novel where I have dealt with famous people as a point of view characters in the past. I'm the center of my books has always been a fictional character whose life intersects with actual historical figures but I do not pretend in those books that I know what they were thinking or what their motivations might have been or who they actually were.

[00:44:43] I have to admit that I feel somewhat uncomfortable about making up people who actually I did not make up and at a certain point in spite of the information that I have and the fact that I am trying to be true to what I know of the historical record I do begin to make them up.

[00:45:05] I don't have enough to know to introduce them to a reader with a sort of intimacy that I feel is necessary to care about the books so they become it. It's becomes an exercise in putting together a story using pieces that are there trying not to you know try not to ever include anything I know to be untrue but to render their lives to the best of my ability. But then but then the characters do become fictional characters as I try to imagine what they're feeling. Edwin Booth has been particularly difficult in this regard because he is so famous. And there was so much about him. And yet he seems to have been sort of strangely personality less man that he was a great actor and he seems to have been able to slip into parts quite easily. But to have or at least to display very little of himself when he was out in the world and not on stage he's one of those people I think somebody said about him. He's one of those people who had stage fright everywhere but on stage and so it's been hard for me to get a handle on him.

[00:46:30] It's been hard for me to know how to proceed with him but that is what I'm trying to do. There was someone down here yes.

[00:46:43] Have I ever made up something in writing a historical novel thinking that it was kind of outlandish and then found that it was actually true.

[00:46:51] I have not. What my experience generally is is that the parts I make up are all quite mundane and believable and the parts that I find in the historical record are the out lamb dish completely improbable ones. I will just mention that in the course of looking through the files of Terry Alford I discovered that Rosalie although she never married had an affair with a lion tamer.

[00:47:23] At one point as one does. Yes. Who among us in our past has not had a torrid lion tamer.

[00:47:35] Yes what am I reading for fun man. I've read a lot of books recently that I've really loved Carmen Maria Machado's her body and other parties I thought was quite remarkable.

[00:47:49] I recently read a book by Maggie Shen King called an excess male which I thought was really wonderful. It takes place in China a ways into the future but not a long ways into the future and that it's looking at the problem created by the one child policy where there are now a lot of men and no marriage prospects for them. And what Maggie Sjin King suggests is that the government announces a policy where women now are forced to take more than one husband in order to deal with the men and possibly more than two husbands. Although this is more unusual and it's it's it's really a wonderful book also it turns quite suddenly and persuasively into a thriller. Towards the end I read last Andrew Sean Greer's Pulitzer Prize winning novel. He he talked to me about it while he was writing it and he said he told me he was going to write a book about the generation of gay men who grew up in the shadow of AIDS that you know where an entire generation of people who would have modeled the life for them were just wiped out. And so so this generation had to make it up. And you know sort of live in the shadow of that terrible loss and grief. So I could not have been more shocked to read the book and discover it was hysterically funny and asked him if this was in fact the book that he had told me he was writing and he said it was but that it was just too. GRAHAM The way he had originally conceived it and he had to make it funny instead. I particularly recommend it to writers because it's basically just a sort of Gulliver's Travels of every humiliation a writer can face at events all over the world. So it has particular pleasures for those of us who write it is very very very funny. Elves. What else what else.

[00:50:14] One of my absolute favorite books last year or maybe it's closer to a year and a half now that got almost no attention is a book by David Bird Gerard called the epiphany machine. And I just would so highly recommend that book to you.

[00:50:33] The premise is it takes place in New York City in contemporary New York City. And the only difference is the existence of this machine.

[00:50:45] This is a machine where for a hundred dollars you can go and then it will give you a tattoo but you do not control what the tattoo is going to be and the tattoo will say something true about you. And so the book is sort of about the impact of people believing or not believing that what is now on their arm is in fact true about them and what it does to the shape of their lives in responding to this. I think the protagonist learns about this machine because his father has a tattoo which is mostly kept hidden but he gets a glimpse of one day towards the beginning of the book and that tattoo says should never have children.

[00:51:36] Yes advice I was given that I wished I had that I hear an agenda in that question. I have to say that I don't believe I have ever been given advice.

[00:51:49] I wish I hadn't because I never listen to anybody's advice in any way. So it is impossible to warn me because I am not listening. And that's usually the advice I start with when I teach. I say it really would be best if you didn't listen to anything I say something I believe with all my heart to be true. Why do I do it. I love writing workshops. The way I think writing workshops work is I think you learn what you learn in the critiquing of someone else's piece not when someone is talking to you about your own piece. So I do feel that workshops are tremendously valuable I believe in them with

all my heart. I believe that that is where I learned most of what I learned just not in the way I expected to. And then you add to that the many many pleasures of workshops. I was in a workshop for 30 years in Davis California. There were evenings when we got drunk and threw chairs out of windows. This perhaps helped my writing less than you might think. But it is not something I would have liked to miss. We had this is to trust me that this is a true story. The workshop I was in was a public workshop so anybody could come in and join it and anytime.

[00:53:19] And one night we met on Thursday nights one Thursday night a man came that we had not seen before and he read a piece that was deeply troubling. It involved deeply troubling things and as he read it his his knees were banging against the top of the table so the whole table was shaking while he read. And you know sort of nobody knew how to respond. We were unsettled at least he came back the next week and he read again and it was every bit as upsetting as the first time and we started to talk among ourselves about how we had never asked anyone to leave the workshop before but we didn't really feel that we were going to be able to go on with him. And it was probably time to not be a public workshop anymore where anyone could come. But to close the doors. As luck would have it the problem solved itself when the very next day after we critiqued him he went to Davis lumber bought a rifle went into the BankAmerica and took everyone there hostage. Nobody was hurt. It was about a two hour standoff.

[00:54:37] The connection between that event and the critique he had gotten the day before is never been clear to us and there was a part of the story that was my favorite part of the story that I now realize it's not true.

[00:54:52] So now I'm going to tell you a part of the story that's not true but that I believed for many many years was true which is that when he went into the BankAmerica he made everybody lie down face down on the ground while he negotiated with the police and that our postman for whom whole street in Davis has been named because he was so beloved delivering the mail did not notice the police cordon went into the bank put the mail on the desk did not notice that everybody was lying face down on the on the floor and an exit and unharmed from the bank I was I was so pleased by this story that nothing distresses me more than to google it and find out that it didn't actually happen that way at all.

[00:55:43] Yes Todd No I'm not going to.

[00:55:47] It's not got enough information to be interesting to me. You know if I could find out more about it if I could fill it in I would use it. But with the bare outline of what I have I don't think it's worth including sides. Everybody will be asking me where I got it. I don't want to return Terri Alfreds kindness by exposing him to shame and ridicule.

[00:56:21] Yes the typical writing day.

[00:56:24] Question. It's just so distressing to me what my answer is going to be.

[00:56:33] I often take this question and I ask do you want to know what my typical writing day has looked like. Up until now or do you want to know what it is going to look like starting tomorrow.

[00:56:46] When I first started taking workshops the poet Carolyn Forshay said to all of us you have to be at your desk at the same time every day.

[00:56:59] Don't make the muse track you down at the grocery store because she is not going to bother.

[00:57:04] She is going to come by your desk and you are not there and she is going to go find somebody who is at their desk and I really believe that advice I really believe that a real writer is at their desk at the same time every day. So it pains me more than I can say to tell you that I do not think I have ever managed more than three days in a row where I have been able to do that and that my typical writing day looks like this. I get up in the morning I take the dog for a very long walk. I come back. I eat breakfast while I made him breakfast. I look at my e-mail. I am planning to write so I do not want to get sidetracked by my email I answer only the email that requires an immediate response.

[00:58:01] I then check out somewhere between 7 and 12 political sites to assure myself that yes just as I suspected as I slept. The world has gone to hell in a handbasket. By the time I finished doing that I think to myself I bet I have some answers to those e-mails. Now. I go unluck. Sure enough there are a few that require my immediate attention and I answer those I think to myself well twenty minutes have passed. I bet as bad as the world looked 20 minutes ago it looks worse now. I had better go and see. I do. I am never disappointed. It is just completely possible for me to cycle from my email to my politics to my email to my politics about till about 2:00 in the afternoon when I'm tired and. I quit for the day and. I go to bed filled with self loathing. And that is my as God is my witness. That is my typical writing day. Thank you so much.

[00:59:31] 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.